

## The Elbow's Guide to Governor Visits

Here we look at the governor (and trustee) visits and discuss what constitutes a governor visit, why they matter, what are they not, who does governor visits and what behaviours one should exhibit when undertaking a visit. There is a lot to think about so this is not an exhaustive list merely a *servicing suggestion* as The Elbow's governance leadership tutor used to say.

The Governance Handbook<sup>1</sup> states *Boards need to know their school if accountability is going to be robust and their vision for the school is to be achieved.*

It is important to remember that there are some responsibilities which cannot be delegated to an individual. For example, you cannot give an individual governor responsibility for approving the first formal budget plan of the year even the chair.

### Visits with a Purpose

You should not just drop in and think that you can do a visit. They have to be planned in advance, have a **key purpose**, relate to the needs of the school and/or board and be timely.

Lots of boards have a clear plan for what governors will focus their visits on which is clearly related to the **school development or improvement plan**.

Governors who undertake visits with a purpose are often called link governors. But what is a link governor?

### A link governor is ...

Not necessarily an expert in the area that they are doing a visit in so it's okay if you don't know theoretical maths to PhD level or the contents of the English Literature GCSE curriculum or all the early learning goals for EYFS. In fact it can be an advantage not to know if we are being really honest. This means you can ask observational but important questions.

Link governors should be conduits between the board and the area in and to which they are linking.

Governors should also be monitoring how well relevant policies adopted by the board are operating within the school and understand any specific barriers to their implementation where the solution is within the remit of the board. These can include through observation for example the behaviour policy, work load, well being and marking. The best way to monitor a marking policy is by asking the pupils not by looking at books. There may be a very good reason as to why books appear not to have been marked.

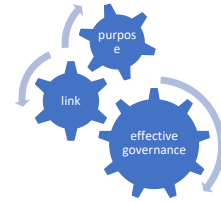
### Before the Visit

It is important that all governor visits

- Are agreed in advance (ensure the date is convenient)
- Have a clear purpose or focus
- Adhere to your governor visits policy – if you haven't got one it might be worthwhile to think about drafting one. There are lots of good

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<sup>1</sup> Page 25 para 3.3.2 – January 2017 version



examples on the internet. No point in reinventing the wheel.

The key purpose of a link visit is to find things, to corroborate information that you have gathered from elsewhere – often called triangulation. Some boards agree the link governor questions in advance so that staff and leaders know the main areas of focus. This is a good idea as governors are not there to trip up staff. There are of course exceptions to every rule. The key thing to remember is that the knowledge you gather must be shared collectively.

### During the visit

Always remember you are a guest in school. You may well be a long-standing governor or the chair or the safeguarding governor but you are still a guest. This means that you should

- ✓ Always sign in and wear ID,,
- ✓ Have a DBS
- ✓ Ensure you are not alone with pupil(s),
- ✓ Be respectful,
- ✓ Report any safeguarding concerns to the headteacher as soon as possible/appropriate. You should already know who the designated safeguarding lead is.

On the other hand you should not

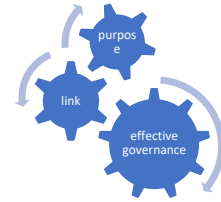
- x wander around the school nosing about and '*just checking*' unless specifically asked to do so of course, though this would be rare,
- x wear your invisibility cloak – it's perfectly acceptable to talk to pupils and join in the lessons if invited to do so by the class teacher,

The Elbow once joined in a Y2 science class and learnt all about the life cycle of a frog. She knelt on the floor and everything. It was a highlight,

- x interrupt lessons if you disagree with the teacher,
- x think that you are doing lesson observations – you categorically are **not**. The Elbow appreciates that this is very hard for governors who happen to be senior leaders in other settings but they must try not to do lesson observations. This is really important,
- x Discuss your own child – this is not parents evening. Mind you do not discuss other people's children either. This is contrary to GDPR irrespective of everything else,
- x Pursue a personal agenda in any way,
- x Discuss what you saw in class in the playground. There are rules around confidentiality which are really important,
- x Try to make too many notes when in the classroom as it can be off putting.

### After the visit

- ✓ Always report back to the headteacher/senior leader before leaving the school to discuss impressions and to ask questions arising from the visit. You should also report any concerns before you leave,
- ✓ Write a report preferably using a pre-agreed template. This should not be War and Peace nor should



they just say *'I had a nice time in Y7, everyone was lovely'* as this does not show impact merely that you are observant,

- ✓ This report should be shared with the head and chair in the first instance. It will then be sent to the staff member and the rest of the board. It is not advisable to send reports directly to the staff member although this is a matter of opinion,
- ✓ If possible it should include pupil voice and comments,
- ✓ Make a note to follow up any questions which were not answered during the visit,
- ✓ Think about what your and the boards' next steps will be. Link visits are not an end in themselves and should form part of an iterative and dynamic process.

### At the Board Meeting

The clerk should ensure that

- ✓ There is an opportunity to discuss the outcomes of you link visits. This could be at a committee or at the full board depending on how your meetings are organised. This will require a specific agenda item – under for example 'knowing our school' or link governor reports or committees,
- ✓ That copies of the link reports are circulated well in advance so that the other governors can read and digest in good time to discuss the outcomes. They should also be kept

on file for inspection purposes. Sometimes important visitors want to have a look. This shows the evidence that governors are active,

- ✓ That the impact of the visit is minuted and that a discussion took place. This can be at the full board or at a committee depending on how your board is organised.

### What type of link governors are there?

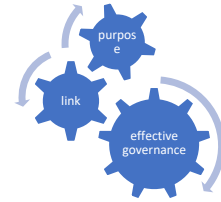
How long is a piece of string? Seriously there are few mandatory requirements for link governors but the overwhelming majority of settings have a Safeguarding<sup>2</sup> Governor and someone who is the SEN governor. You should also have a governor looking at careers at a strategic level; even at primary and asking relevant questions.

Most have someone looking at Pupil Premium/disadvantaged pupils (not a term The Elbow is particularly fond of but we are where we are).

There are two or three schools of thought on the types of link governor

- Some boards have a governor responsible for visiting every subject. Sometimes they work in teams and sometimes they have several subjects,
- Some link governors are assigned to classes, departments or year group.,
- Many now align to school development plan targets.

<sup>2</sup> Do read [www.safeguardinginschools.co.uk](http://www.safeguardinginschools.co.uk) for further advice and support.



Some schools have governors for specific areas such as

- Mental health and well being
- Health and safety
- Finance eg sports premium
- Governor training and development
- 6<sup>th</sup> form
- Early Years

It all depends on what the needs of your setting are. No point in having someone visit something which is not there after all.

Some boards all visit at once perhaps over a week of organised visits and others do regular learning walks with senior leaders. Whichever way you do the link visits always be aware of the potential disruption that your visit may cause and do not visit in assessment week for example.

Remember Ofsted will not ask to speak to governors on the basis of their link roles. They are interested in the collective knowledge of the board, although they may ask what link roles there are. They will most certainly ask to speak to the safeguarding and pupil premium governor; and depending on the cohort characteristics the SEN governor.

The link roles should be reviewed annually and any training needs identified. Link roles can be assigned to associate members but probably not safeguarding, but again this depends on the skills around your board.

### And finally

There are a whole range of other governor visits which take place up and down the country which are valuable and interesting

and give governors real insight but which are not governance per se. This includes

- assemblies, meetings and special events
- reading with children
- attending school trips

Carrying out visits for a few hours a couple of times a year brings governance to life and is an excellent way to know your school and The Elbow strongly recommends that you try and fit a visit (or three) in during the academic year!

### 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.

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

If you are so inclined, please follow her on Twitter @thesarkyclerk or @dogpaws23

**Thank you for reading...**

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