

The Elbow's Guide to Matters

What are Matters?

This **short guide** is an opinion piece and could help generate some of the questions you need to be asking about matters in respect of your minutes but don't take too long about it otherwise they have more 'air time' than they deserve. It's a matter of balance. We shouldn't overlook matters because quite they're important. Matters matter and so it's time we talked about them, aired them out and double checked them. Some things are so obvious no one ever says them.

For the purposes of this guide matters are

1. Arising
2. Outstanding
3. Procedural

Let's start however with the all-important minutes of the last meeting for without them we have no matters.

Minutes and Matters Arising

It is a truth universally acknowledged that not everybody likes minutes; finds them fascinating or even bothers to read them properly. This way lies trouble. Minutes must be factual, accurate and to the point. The art of paraphrasing is the clerk's secret weapon and tool in the crafting armoury. Paraphrase well and the rest falls into place. Minutes need to make sense to the people not present at the meeting without them being narrative; they need to be chronological, grammatically correct and iterative. In other words they need to be fit for purpose. Therefore, to help matters

move swiftly and efficiently along in relation to dealing with matters arising it helps enormously if

- actions are clearly attributed and have a timescale. Things cannot go on for ever and we all need to be a bit more task and finish orientated, and crucially
- decisions are recorded as unambiguously as possible

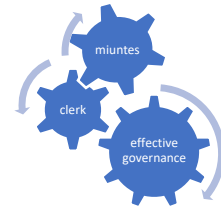
The matters arising element of the meeting gives opportunity for

- clarification and clarity
- updates on key matters which are not on the substantive agenda – if they are that important they should be agenda items in their own right.

A phrase you may often see in minutes is '*there were no matters arising*'. What does this actually mean...

- that all matters had been resolved, were ends in themselves or that there was no update?
- people really hadn't read the minutes before meeting?
- that all of the important matters were on the agenda?

It is not advisable to use AOB to cover gaps in the agenda and some chairs have banned it. It is perfectly acceptable to use AOB for properly urgent matters but not to cover up the fact you forgot to plan the meeting in advance. AOB is often at the end of the meeting and by then you might not be quorate which leads to a whole host of



other issues. Neither is it good chairing to be spend 2/3 of the meeting on matters arising. If your agenda is well prepared using the minutes from the last meeting as a guide you will have the iteration so beloved of audit, external reviews of governance and possibly Ofsted and the ESFA. Remember minutes are your shop window to good governance. Keep them open.

Quick rule of thumb – if the matter is a quick verbal update arising from something in the minutes it's a matter arising; anything which requires a decision or relates to a paper or report it should be an agenda item. It is up to the chair to decide. Some do not allow tabled papers.

If you want to be really brave you could put matters arising at the end of your agenda.

Minutes and Matters Outstanding

Some clerks prepare action sheets within a few days of the meeting; these are a useful aide memoire. These action sheets help you work out quite easily what hasn't been done at the next meeting and is an indication of the extent, or otherwise, of governor involvement and engagement (rather than exposing them in the minutes so to speak). Others write their minutes in a format from which it is really easy to identify the difference between a decision and an action. If the clerk is preparing the agenda in isolation (this happens) then they might not know what you have done or haven't done. **Remember an agenda is a joint endeavour.** If there are no matters outstanding, then presumably everyone has done what they said they were going to do?

Some tips

- ✓ Some outstanding matters are in fact standing/ongoing items and should therefore be a separate agenda item,
- ✓ Clearly set out what are actually actions and what is requiring of a decision,
- ✓ Clearly attribute actions – otherwise there is a temptation not to do anything. Happens.
- ✓ Try and identify the impact of not doing an action. If it has no discernible impact it is probably (possibly?) not worth doing anyway.

Procedural Matters

Every agenda needs at least these three things;

1. Apologies – so you can check quorum,
2. Declarations of interest – so these can be recorded,
3. A purpose – why are we meeting and what do we aim to get out of the meeting. **It's sometimes easy to forget the why.**

Thank you for reading

About The Elbow

The Clerk's Elbow is a National Leader of Governance, academy trustee, and independent clerk in the primary sector and has over 15 years of governance experience. She [blogs](#) and writes regularly on clerking and governance and all points in between. She tweets a lot mostly as @dogpaw23.