Clerking: Tips for facilitating an effective first meeting

Being well prepared for your first meeting as a new clerk to governors is crucial because this will be the first time you meet the majority of the governing body members. The first impression you make will be long lasting so creating a positive one from the outset will help you build a good working relationship with governors.

How much preparation you will need to do will depend on how experienced you are with clerking meetings in general, and governing body meetings specifically. You also need to decide how you will manage interacting with between 6 to 16 new people.

Here are some tips for handling your first meeting. Referring to the GSS Guidance ‘Key tasks in managing governing body meetings’ is also necessary.

1. Familiarise yourself with the governing body and how it operates by:
   - Attending a meeting which the outgoing clerk is servicing.
   - Organising a handover session with the outgoing clerk so you can:
     - get familiarised with how governing body information is managed, both electronically and in hard copy;
     - get copies of key governing body documents;
     - find out how information is made available to governors;
     - learn about your role in the induction process of new governors;
     - find out if any governors need any specific support to enable them to participate in the meetings and
     - get access to the governing body’s electronic filing system.
   - Meeting with the Chair of Governors and Headteacher well in advance of your first meeting so you can be briefed on any current key priorities / issues.
   - Reviewing:
     - minutes of the meetings which have taken place during the last year so you are familiar with what has been discussed.
     - the latest ‘Clerks’ Briefing Notes’ and ‘Governors’ Newsletter’ supplied by Governors’ Support Services.
   - Reading key governing body documents, in particular:
     - Standing Orders
     - Code of Conduct
     - Terms of References
   - Making an acronym list or updating one currently in circulation for governors.

2. Be well prepared for your first meeting by:
   - Referring to ‘Guidance ‘Key tasks in managing governing body meetings’.’
   - Using existing governing body templates to produce the agenda and draft minutes for your meeting so governors are familiar with the format. (If you want to make changes to these templates discuss them first with the Chair of Governors.)
   - Reading the supporting reports for your first meeting and, if necessary, doing some research or asking for clarification.
   - Anticipating potential issues that might arise in the meeting – you may need to seek advice and guidance from Governor Support Services.
Deciding what strategies you will use to help you know who’s who at the meeting, e.g.
- Nameplates for all attendees (but only practical if everyone is sitting at a table)
- Reviewing ‘Who’s who’ photographs on the governing body noticeboard/website
- Make sure the first item on the agenda is ‘Welcome and introductions’
- Draw a map showing who is sitting where at the meeting for your own reference purposes.

Checking out the meeting venue in advance and thinking about the following points:
- The seating plan and where you will be sitting in relation to the Chair of the meeting;
- Where will you layout nameplates for governors to collect (if you are using nameplates)?
- Where are refreshments set up and do you have to help set up / clear away?
- How well ventilated is the room?
- How comfortable are the chairs?
- What are the audio-visual / teleconferencing facilities like if these are being used? Who operates them? This cannot be performed by you as your role is to take minutes and provide advice and guidance to governors.
- How do latecomers access the venue?

3. Be prepared to provide advice and guidance at the appropriate time during the meeting by:
   - Being alert to anticipated issues (tip 2 above) arising during the meeting and ready to advise governors accordingly.
   - Ensuring the meeting remains quorate as governors may leave early.
   - Listening out for ‘triggers’ which mean the discussion is straying into confidential matters, e.g.
     - personal information about pupils or staff
     - information referred to governors that is not yet in the public domain
     - topics that might affect the position of the governing body in legal proceedings
   - Advising how to handle confidential matters at the meeting.
   - Ensuring only attendees eligible to vote on specific matters do so, e.g. associate members will not have the same voting rights as governors.
   - Understanding what powers the governing body can and cannot delegate to individuals or committees and the procedure to follow when delegating governing body powers.
4. **Produce minutes of the meeting which provide an easy to follow, succinct record of discussions, decisions made and agreed action to be taken by:**
   - Taking good notes during the meeting which involves:
     - listening carefully during the meeting;
     - summarising in note form key points being made;
     - capturing governors’ challenging questions and the school’s response;
     - noting when the governing body is being supportive of the school; and
     - seeking clarification where necessary and especially when you are uncertain about what decision or action is being agreed.
   - Drafting minutes of the meeting as soon as possible and no later than two weeks after the meeting which:
     - give the reader a clear understanding of the business conducted at the meeting without providing a verbatim record of the meeting;
     - easily identify:
       - decisions taken
       - agreed action
       - responsibility for action
       - challenging questions;
     - do not presume knowledge of educational acronyms; and
     - are depersonalised, free of spelling mistakes and grammatical error.
   - Using a ‘minutes checklist’ to see how well your minutes show evidence of the governing body meeting its key functions (NB this may in part depend on how effective the governing body is.)

5. **Tie up ‘loose ends’ after the meeting by:**
   - Following up on any actions arising from the meeting assigned to the clerk.
   - Updating any governing body records as necessary.
   - Refer to ‘Guidance ‘Key tasks in managing governing body meetings’ to guide you.

6. **Reflect on how well you performed during the meeting and act on it by:**
   - Getting feedback from the Chair/Headteacher.
   - Reviewing what happened before, during and after the meeting and the impact your actions had on this.
   - Noting three things that went well and three things you want to improve on.

*Written by Frank Clerk, July 2015.*