

## **Newham Community Learning - guidance re effective questioning**

Last updated: November 2022

Applies to: Newham Community Learning

Approved by: CEO, November 2022



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# 1. Guidance re effective questioning - for trustees and governors

- ▶ The function of a governing body is to provide a school with strategic advice, oversee financial performance and hold senior leaders to account. In order to do this effectively, governors need to know how to ask effective questions, to gain an understanding of the school and to support the decision making process.

The purpose of this guidance is to:

- support governors to provide effective and appropriate challenge;
- enable governors to reflect on what they know about the school and the gaps in their knowledge;
- highlight some of the questions that governors might ask about their schools.

## ▶ The importance of asking the right questions

Effective questioning is a vital part of the role of governors in school. Questioning fulfils a range of functions:

- Building a deeper knowledge of the school and its context
- Building relationships
- Providing a starting point for discussion
- Keeping discussions on track
- Supporting the decision-making processes
- Achieving a deeper understanding of the reasons behind decisions
- Seeking clarification
- Facilitating negotiation
- Encouraging people to express their thoughts, perspectives and opinions
- Supporting others to question their own thinking
- Identifying where there are evidential gaps in knowledge
- Reducing the chances of inaccurate assumptions
- Finding out the reasons behind the data
- Testing out ideas and hypotheses

## ▶ Creating the right conditions for success

School leaders' time is valuable and governors should be clear, concise and specific when asking questions. This will help to ensure that the governing body adds value, rather than acting as a distraction or adding unnecessarily to workload.

By putting a little time and thought into planning the interactions between governors and school leaders, these sessions can be more informative and productive.

### Be clear about what you want to achieve

Governors should be clear about what they are trying to achieve from the outset. They should ask themselves the following questions:

- What do we need to know/find out?
- What do we know about this already?
- How can we find out more?
- How can we be certain that the information that we have is reliable and accurate?
- What further questions does this raise?



### **Choose the time and place carefully**

Governors should try to ask questions in the right physical environment. A meeting is more likely to be productive when it is planned in advance and the person being questioned has all the information to hand. On the other hand, catching someone unexpectedly on a busy playground is unlikely to offer the ideal conditions for professional dialogue.

Governors should refer to the school calendar and choose relevant times in the year to ask certain questions. For example, it makes sense to ask questions about how a particular group is achieving shortly after an assessment cycle, or ask questions about spending decisions after the school is aware of its budget but before these decisions have been finalised.

### **Allow them time to prepare their responses where appropriate**

Governors should be asking questions to gain a better understanding of the school and its effectiveness, rather than to catch school leaders out. Sometimes it is better to give advance warning about the aspects of school life that you are going to be asking about. This will enable leaders to prepare the information and evidence they need to answer the questions properly.

Sometimes, there will be occasions where it is appropriate to ask people questions on the spot. You might be having an interesting discussion or an important question might come to mind. Governors should be mindful that even the most capable people can fail to answer an unexpected question properly if they are caught unawares. Allow them time to think before responding and give them the opportunity to come back to you at a later date, with further information if this would be helpful.

### **Try not to put words in their mouths**

Open-ended questions can feel less confrontational and also give the person responding the scope to answer fully. Closed questions, requiring 'yes' or 'no' as an answer, limit the possible responses.

Here is an example of a possible closed question:

*Are we stretching our most able pupils?*

An example of asking for similar information as a good open-ended question is:

*How are we stretching our most able pupils?*

This is not to say that governors should never ask closed questions. Sometimes a quick response is all that is needed. However, open-ended questions encourage a more in-depth discussion.

Governors should also be careful to avoid leading questions. A leading question is one that encourages or manipulates the person responding to provide a certain response.

A leading question would be:

*Are you doing checks to ensure that new staff are suitable to work with children?*

Very few school leaders are likely to answer 'no' to this question as it is obvious that the governor wants the answer to be 'yes'. Instead, a governor should ask a series of questions about the school's safer recruitment practices and look for evidence that these are being followed.

Carefully planning how questions are presented can transform the response from a defensive, single-word answer into a detailed professional dialogue.



## Create psychological safety

The best professional discussions are likely to take place when there is a trusting relationship between school leaders and the governing body. School leaders need to feel comfortable sharing areas for development with governors without the fear of unreasonable repercussions.

Honest discussions are more likely to take place when governors and school leaders trust each other. Governors should be aware of this and spend an appropriate amount of time building positive relationships. Governors need to deal with difficult situations sensitively and respectfully as trust can take a long time to build but can be broken down very quickly.

If you have a question that is particularly sensitive or is likely to expose weaknesses, think carefully about asking this question in private so that you can discuss it in a manner that is not likely to trigger a defensive response. If a school leader feels that they have to defend their actions in front of colleagues or a large group of governors, this could damage the trusting relationship that you are seeking to build with them.

## ► Be an effective listener

As well as being able to ask the right questions, governors also need to be effective listeners.

**Mind your body language** - show you are interested by ensuring that you look engaged in the conversation. Use non-verbal cues, such as nods, where appropriate, to show that you are listening.

**Allow the person time to think and talk** - it can be tempting for governors to jump in with possible answers when there is an awkward silence but school leaders should be allowed the opportunity to think for themselves and respond in their own time.

**Stay interested and curious** - strong relationships are built when school leaders feel that they are being heard and that governors have the school's best interests at heart. One way of demonstrating this is by listening carefully to what they say and asking follow-up questions, to show that you have heard their point and that you are interested in understanding more.

**Check your understanding** - repeat what you have heard to ensure that you have understood properly. If you need further clarification, ask them to expand on their explanation or ask clarification questions.

Remember, sometimes you can find out valuable information from what a person does not say.

