Effective questioning: a toolkit for governors

This toolkit is for local governing bodies. Its purpose is to:

- Raise awareness of the important role of questioning in challenging the Headteacher

- Provide a framework for questioning that extends that level of challenge

- Identify how governors can further develop the strategic thinking of the Headteacher through the use of effective questioning

- Build the confidence and skills of governors by presenting a range of questioning techniques and examples of questions offering differing perspectives on key issues.

The toolkit is divided into four sections:

- Why do we question?

- Which ways can we do it?

- What might questions look like?

- How can we support each other?

In the spirit of our Trust values, this toolkit appreciates that all schools are different. However all our schools have a common goal which is to achieve the very best for their pupils through collaboration and tailored challenge and support that contributes to school improvement and providing the best possible standard of provision for all. It is recognised that this is achieved through open and honest communication and feedback built on professional relationships characterised by confidence and trust and a strong commitment to doing what we say.   This approach supports schools in their relentless quest for improvement at all levels. This includes using feedback from pupils and parents as well as staff to inform development work.

Above all, the Trust believes that strong Local Governing Boards, acting as part of the Trust's monitoring and evaluation of progress in schools, are key partners to success.

Section one – why do we question?

We ask questions for a desired result and therefore the question needs to be the 'right' one. We therefore need to think before selecting and asking a question – what do I want to achieve from this interaction? Why am I choosing this particular question? Be smart! Questioning is an art and demands a particular level of skill.

To identify the right question, first and foremost, you need to be a good listener … this includes

- *Articulating* – repeating what has been heard and understood – what I hear you saying is …?

- *Clarifying* – checking out whether something heard is correct … trying to achieve a better understanding of the context

- *Being Curious* – waiting for information before drawing conclusions and identifying solutions

- *Silence* – giving time - avoiding answering for others or finishing others' sentences.

The 'right' questions are smart ones and will help you to:

- Make connections and stimulate the flow of conversation
- Build on what has already been identified as working well alongside areas for development and improvement
- Better understand the meaning of the arguments being presented
- Gather more helpful information
- Ask for clarity on validity of evidence and data put forward
- Reduce errors
- Surface key issues behind evidence and data presented
- Test out hypotheses and develop your own ideas
- Focus on solutions
- Allow negotiation to take place, working towards a consensus
- Defuse potentially volatile situations.

Characteristics of powerful and thought-provoking questions are

- Open-ended and not leading questions
- Typically 'what' or 'how' questions
- Requests for information to add clarity – what do you think the problem is?
- Reflective and support exploration, with possible prompts to find solutions
- Based on stimulating collaboration and finding agreed ways forward.

How do I construct an effective question?

Think about your desired result and link to the discussion taking place – when is the appropriate time to intervene?

Stages of discussion in meetings/conversations …

- identifying the issue under discussion, e.g. what concerns you the most …?

- seeking further information, e.g. what do you mean by …?

- agreeing outcomes, e.g. what will the desired result look like?

- taking action, e.g. what will we do next? how will we know we've done it successfully?

Section two - which ways can we do it?

Five types of questions can be used to hold schools to account. They are often used in clusters to drill down into the significance of information in relation to the school's priorities and to explore what the school has done, is doing or intends to do in response to circumstances.
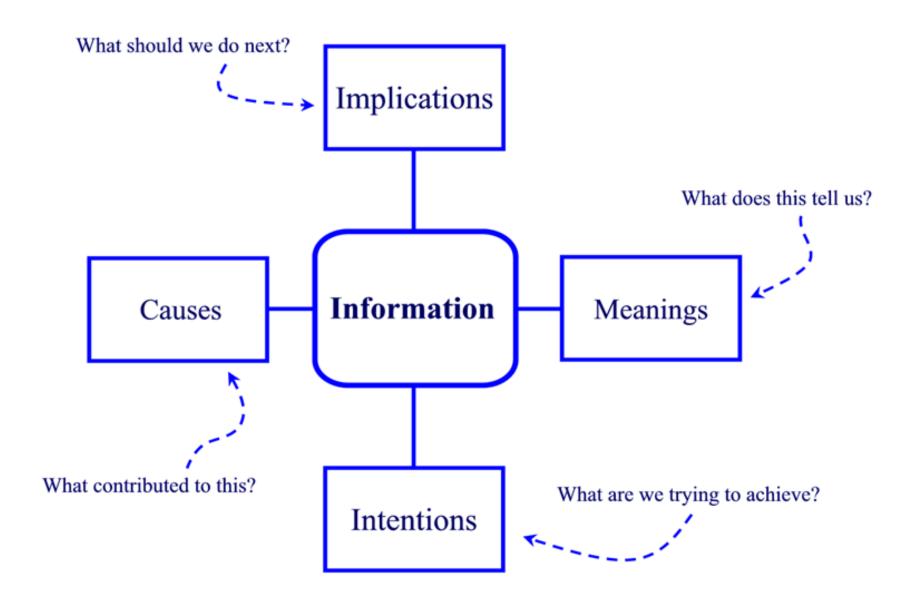
Information questions request information or data that can then be explored through the other types of questions

Intention questions explore how things relate to the school's priorities, aims and values.

Causes questions explore how a situation has arisen; the conditions, events, behaviours and triggers.

Meanings questions explore the meanings, possible interpretations, consequences and significance.

Implications questions explore what happens next; decisions, actions and possibly revised goals.

What should we do next?

Implications

What does this tell us?

Causes   **Information**   Meanings

What contributed to this?

Intentions

What are we trying to achieve?

What else?   What if?   So what?   How do you know?

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Follow-up questions

Depending on the answer to a question, it may require a follow-up question from the same or one of the other 'types'. Four further questions can be used as follow-up questions to almost any answer:

- What else?
- What if…?
- So what?
- How do you know?

Used skilfully, a sequence of questions can support:

- Governors to understand the school's context, its challenges and its potential
- Governors to keep questions relevant and pertinent to the school's vision
- Governors to hold the Headteacher to account by structuring a purposeful interrogation of data, information and plans
- Headteachers to clarify their leadership decisions and focus on priorities
- Headteachers to expand their thinking and enhance their strategic planning.

Section three - what might questions look like?

This section provides examples of some generic question structures and also some specific questions to illustrate what each type of question might look like in practice.

The generic structures can be tailored to explore the current focus; just replace 'X' with something pertinent to the issue.

E.g. **What are the consequences for X?**

This question structure could be focused in a number of ways, including:

- What are the consequences for the staff
- What are the consequences for the pupils
- What are the consequences for the budget
- What are the consequences for curriculum planning
- What are the consequences for recruitment?

It can also be phrased in a way that suits the tenor of the discussion.

- How will this effect staff?
- What will this mean for pupils?
- What will this do to the budget?
- How will this influence curriculum planning?
- How will this help or hinder recruitment?

Generic question structures

The focus and details of questions need to reflect the pertinent context and priorities but the structure of questions will often be similar.

Information	Intentions	Causes	Meanings	Implications
These questions request information or data which can be explored through the other types of questions.	These questions explore how things relate to the school's priorities, aims and values.	These questions explore how a situation has arisen; the conditions, events, behaviours and triggers.	These questions explore the meanings, possible interpretations, consequences and significance.	These questions explore what happens next; decisions, actions and possibly revised goals.
Possible question structures				
How did we do with X? What is X like in the school? What are the X figures? How does the school X? When is X? How much X does the school receive? How many pupils are X?	What are we trying to achieve? How does X relate to our priorities? How does X support our values? How will we know we have succeeded?	What led to X? What helped/hindered? What conditions allowed X to happen? What made this necessary? What did you take into account when deciding X?	Can you explain X to me? What does X mean? Who does this affect? What are the consequences for X? How significant is X? What are the benefits/risks of X? Is X% good enough?	How can X be prevented/increased? What implications does this have for X? What resources are necessary to respond to X? Where should we be aiming next? What are the options? What are your plans in response to X?

Examples of purposeful questions

Information	Intentions	Causes	Meanings	Implications
What progress data do we have?	Where will we find evidence that pupils' progress is the highest priority for teachers?	What has the school done to increase teachers' focus on progress?	How many pupils are on track for age-related expectations? Which subjects are most successful?	How are we going to share the effective practice seen in P.E.?
How did we do in last year's SATs?	What are our targets for the SATs?	How come our maths target is lower than last year?	How well does pupil tracking inform planning for progress?	How are we going to improve the quality of teaching in Y6?
How are we doing with improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils?	What are our priorities for accelerating the progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds?	How does our use of the pupil premium grant support boys' writing?	How could an emphasis on boys' achievement affect girls' outcomes?	What does the school need to do more of?
How did Ofsted judge the school?	What do we need to improve in order to secure a 'good' judgement from Ofsted?	What triggered the increase in low-level disruption in KS1?	What does PDBW stand for? How do we track behaviour?	How can we increase parental partnership to reinforce the school's expectations?
What proportion of pupils have English as an additional language?	How do we show that we live up to our values as an inclusive school?	What changes have we made that have contributed to the increase in attendance amongst pupils with EAL?	How much will it cost to continue the project next year?	What do we need to consider in making the right decision?
What does the leadership structure look like?	Where is middle leadership development a key priority?	What is the Head of English doing that has led to the impressive results for the last two years?	What would that look like in a maths department?	How is the school going to grow leaders?

Section four - how can we support each other?

The Chair of Governors and the Clerk both have key roles in supporting the successful development of purposeful questioning in the local governing body (LGB).

The Chair of Governors has a responsibility to:

- facilitate a professional dialogue amongst the LGB and model effective questioning
- encourage views to be expressed by all members in a supportive and safe environment
- stimulate purposeful questioning either by requesting governors to submit questions to the Head in advance of the meeting or during the meeting itself
- provide the opportunity for governors to challenge the Head by offering constructive, critical feedback as well as reporting on positive developments
- contribute to the development of the school's strategic thinking, in partnership with other governors, as well as hold the Head to account
- align discussion, alongside the Head, to school priorities and improvement planning
- keep discussion on track, process views and agree key actions
- check with the Clerk that key points are understood and correctly recorded
- suggest where additional information from the school might be helpful to clarify a challenge and support decision-making
- promote purposeful questioning as a key feature of all governor interaction with the school eg during meetings and governor visits, attending school events and scrutinising key documents such as data and the school development plan.

The Clerk has a responsibility to:

- record all discussions at the LGB meeting with precision, clarity and rigour
- highlight in the minutes where purposeful questioning has taken place and the school's response, including any subsequent action agreed
- seek clarity where a point made is unclear
- support the Chair in the efficient and effective running of the meeting.

For these responsibilities to be exercised effectively and efficiently, the chair of governors, following the initial Trust briefing at the hub governor events in April 2016, should provide an opportunity for governors to absorb the key learning points from the event and apply to practice at subsequent FGB meetings.

This task can be undertaken by:

- providing reflection time at the next meeting and reaching agreement amongst governors on how purposeful questioning will be achieved
- reviewing key documents in advance such as the Headteacher's report and agreeing the range of questions to be asked by governors via email
- prompting questions from the Chair throughout meetings
- allocating responsibility for question type to individual governors so individuals can become skilled in particular lines of enquiry
- using coaching to explicitly model approaches to questioning and identifying time and opportunity to practise key skills

- giving constructive feedback to governors on what is working well and where improvements can be achieved
- requesting feedback from the Headteacher on level of challenge and contributions to strategic thinking
- facilitating a plenary at the end of meetings to assess progress through gathering views.