

Federation Chairs

Using ‘Assurance Governance’ across your Federation

Strategic Assurance, Stewardship and System Leadership

Built Around the ‘Ten Characteristics of Strong Stewardship’ (see appendix A)

(see <https://governor.org.uk>)

Stewardship: *“The careful & responsible management and handing-on of something entrusted to one’s care.”*

Governance: *“The organised collective execution of stewardship through practical actions and oversight”*

Assurances: *“Asking questions that provide supportive challenge to the leaders and staff of a school or trust”*

Purpose of This Document

A chair of a formally structured federation is responsible for the **strategic leadership and oversight effectiveness of the federation as a whole**. This is a demanding role. This document supports those seeking to ensure that a federation’s board:

- Focuses on the **right strategic issues and asks the right oversight questions**
- Receives **robust, reliable assurance in appropriate areas**
- Holds executive **leaders to account** effectively
- **Understands risk** and compliance across the federation
- **Improves outcomes** for children across all schools

The chairs’ role is best described as ‘System-level oversight, informed curiosity, and seeker of assurances in the short, medium and long term.’

Assurance Governance

This document connects a chair's core leadership responsibilities with the ten core areas of trust governance covered by the Assurance Governance scheme, thus helping any chair to strengthen the breadth and depth of the strategic challenge offered by all board members.

The Assurance Governance resources provide [multi-format briefings](#) and [downloadable templates](#) across the ten core areas to help develop governor capacity, with additional guidance for [diocesan nominated governors](#) and [those chairing sub-committees](#).

Under this *Assurance Governance* approach, a chair is responsible for ensuring that:

- Each assurance area is covered by all governor activity across the year
- Assurance in each area flows clearly from **schools** → **executive head** → **board**
- Weak assurance is challenged and evidence is triangulated
- The Board retains a good understanding of operational practices BUT remains strategic in its oversight and guidance.

Using the Assurance Questions

Importantly, no-one should expect every question (typically 20) in each of the ten assurance areas to be asked at every meeting or by specific individuals(!), but it should be expected that through the way the board is organised and conducts its due diligence, **over time** (typically over an academic year) every area is scrutinised.

The areas and the questions are designed to support the principle that meetings:

- Are focused on the **system, not just the symptoms**.
- Insist on **evidence-based** assurance, not well-meant generalities.
- Encourage **challenge** without conflict, whilst avoiding unproductive empathy.
- Maintain absolute **clarity** of role.
- Never lose sight of the **young people** and communities served by the federation.

This document exists to support the use of the scheme, enabling you as chair to ensure - through a collegiate process - that all members of the your Board can contribute to offering strategic challenge to the federations leadership.

The Ten Areas of Governance Assurance

The areas below do not replace the critical importance of being familiar with and adhering to the DfE guidance (such as the Academies Handbook), Ofsted and SIAMS Frameworks and all other statutory requirements and non-statutory government requirements. The ten areas are however, deliberately designed to complement, support and map onto such guidance and requirements. They are:

- **Area 1:** Christian Distinctiveness across the federation
- **Area 2:** Federation Vision, Strategy, Growth & Risk
- **Area 3:** Safeguarding across the federation
- **Area 4:** Overall Achievement across the federation
- **Area 5:** Inclusive Achievement across the federation
- **Area 6:** Early Years, Post-16 and Transitions across the federation
- **Area 7:** Attendance and Behaviour across the federation
- **Area 8:** Personal Development and Wellbeing across the federation
- **Area 9:** Leadership, Stewardship and Governance across the federation
- **Area 10:** Finance, Estates and Sustainability across the federation

The remainder of this document sets out the main board activity and oversight assurances. In each case these are linked to the corresponding more detailed ‘deeper’ assurances which are also downloadable by-area from the *Assurance Governance* resource site (governor.org.uk).

Area 1: Christian Distinctiveness across the Federation

The Board's Role:

The Board ensures:

- The ethos and Christian character is authentic and inclusive
- It shapes practice, not just language
- Distinctiveness is evident across all the schools

Main Board Assurances:

- How consistently is the federation's ethos and Christian character lived?
- How does it improve pupils' experience?
- How is this assured across the federation?
- How do the SIAMS 'IQs' reflect strong practice?

Sub-Committee & Individual Governor Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant *20 Assurance Questions* in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear school-wide expectations
- Evidence from all stakeholders
- Continuous readiness for inspection

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 2: Federation Vision, Strategy, Growth & Risk

The Board's Strategic Responsibility:

The Board ensures the federation has:

- A clear, compelling vision understood across the organisation
- A coherent strategy aligned to that vision
- A sustainable approach to growth (where applicable)
- A realistic understanding of capacity and risk

Main Board Assurances:

- Is the federation's vision clear, lived and decision-shaping?
- How does the strategy translate into improvement across every school?
- How does the federation decide when and how to grow?
- What risks threaten delivery of the strategy?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federation Assurance Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear strategic plan
- Evidence of progress against priorities
- Honest discussion of risk and capacity
- Alignment between vision, finance and operations

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 3: Safeguarding across the Federation

Please remember, this guidance and any other interpreted from the contents of this document is not a substitute for reading and being familiar with the latest version of '[Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)' (KCSIE). The below is offered on the presumption that every Governor has completed their annual mandatory update training which will normally include re-reading the stipulated sections of KCSIE.

The Board's Non-Negotiable Duty:

Safeguarding is the Board's **most critical responsibility**.

The Board ensures:

- Safeguarding systems are consistent and compliant across the federation
- Safeguarding culture is strong, not assumed and receives clear, timely assurance
- Weaknesses are escalated and addressed immediately

Main Board Assurances:

- How does the Board know safeguarding is effective in the federation?
- How are patterns and systemic risks identified?
- How does the federation test compliance rather than rely on self-report?
- How does the Board assure itself of safeguarding culture?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federationee Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Federation-wide safeguarding reporting
- Regular audit and testing
- Clear escalation routes
- Evidence of learning and improvement

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 4: Overall Achievement across the Federation

The Board's Strategic Lens:

The board understands:

- Overall performance across the federation
- Variation across groups of learners
- Progress from starting points
- Trends over time, not isolated results

Main Board Assurances:

- How strong are outcomes across the schools?
- Where is performance weakest and strongest?
- How does the federation respond when outcomes are weak?
- How does the Board know improvement strategies are working?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federationee Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear, comparable data
- Honest evaluation
- Evidence of intervention impact
- Reduced variation over time

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 5: Inclusive Achievement across the Federation

The Board's Responsibility:

Inclusion is an federation-level strategic issue, not a local add-on.

The Board ensures:

- High expectations for all pupils and groups across the federation
- SEND systems are effective and sustainable
- Funding is used appropriately
- Inclusion is reflected in outcomes and experience

Main Board Assurances:

- How consistent is inclusive practice across the federation?
- How does the federation know provision is effective for all vulnerable groups (such as disadvantage) and SEND?
- Where are pressures emerging?
- How does the Board assure value for money?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federationee Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Federation-wide oversight of provision for vulnerable groups and SEND
- Clear reporting on impact and evidence of improved access and outcomes
- Strategic planning for sustainability, including links with external agencies

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 6: Early Years, Post-16 and Transitions across the Federation

The Board's Oversight Role:

Transitions are points of risk and opportunity.

The Board ensures:

- Early foundations are strong where applicable
- All transition points, particularly Post-16 at secondary are ambitious & appropriate
- Transition points are carefully managed

Main Board Assurances:

- How effective are early foundations across the federation?
- How well do pupils transition between phases?
- What do destinations data tell us?
- Are the youngest developing confident phonics skills, and leavers reading well?

Sub-Committee & Individual Governance Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear transition planning
- Positive destination outcomes
- Evidence of continuity and support

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 7: Attendance and Behaviour Transitions across the Federation

The Board's Strategic Focus:

The Board understands:

- Attendance patterns across the federation
- Behaviour trends and consistency (including permanent and time limited exclusions)
- The relationship between culture and learning

Main Board Assurances:

- Where are attendance and behaviour weakest?
- What patterns are emerging across the federation?
- What is the federation doing differently as a result?
- What does stakeholder voice tell us about the lived experience?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federationee Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear school-wide data
- Evidence of intervention
- Improved consistency
- Reduced persistent absence and exclusion risk

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 8: Personal Development and Wellbeing across the Federation

The Board's Strategic Interest:

Personal development is central to making values a lived reality.

The Board ensures:

- Pupils' wider development is intentional
- Wellbeing is monitored and supported
- Preparation for life beyond school is explicit

Main Board Assurances:

- How does the federation know pupils are developing well?
- How is pupil voice captured and acted upon?
- How are wellbeing pressures identified?
- How do Christian values and beliefs contribute to a sense of wellbeing?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federation Assurance Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear school expectations
- Evidence of impact
- Positive feedback from pupils and families

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 9: Leadership, Workforce, Stewardship & Governance

'Stewardship' can be thought of as the responsible care of human and physical resources with an obligation to protect, maintain, and improve these assets for the benefit of current and future generations. 'Governance' is the exercising of day-to-day stewardship.

The Board's Own Domain:

This area includes **your leadership of governance**.

The Board ensures:

- Strong executive leadership capacity
- Effective succession planning
- Clear governance structures where local governance adds value where delegated

Main Board Assurances:

- Do we have the leadership capacity to deliver strategy?
- Is governance effective at all levels and are roles and responsibilities clear?
- How do we know governance is improving?
- Does function lead form? i.e. does the structural context still effectively meet the specific needs of each school?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federation Assurance:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Strong executive headteacher performance
- Clear schemes of delegation
- Effective local governance assurance
- Regular governance self-review

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Area 10: Finance, Estates and Sustainability across the Federation

The Board's Strategic Assurance:

The Board ensures:

- Financial sustainability
- Strong internal controls & compliance
- Value for money
- Safe, compliant, learning environments (property & estates)
- Long-term planning

Main Board Assurances:

- Is the federation financially resilient and reporting compliantly at school level?
- Where are the key financial risks and how are they audited?
- Does spending align with strategy?
- Are estates safe, improving and fit for purpose?

Sub-Committee & Individual Federationee Assurances:

- How are the main board assurances serviced through the coverage of the relevant 20 Assurance Questions in the Assurance Governance Scheme (see questions, briefings, and self-review resources at governor.org.uk)

Scope of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- Clear and compliant financial and property and estates reporting
- Robust audit and risk management
- Evidence of strategic planning and investment
- Sustainable reserves planning

Locus of Questioning and Deeper Assurances:

- In terms of board structure, where are these areas covered?
- Are there any link governors assigned to any particular theme or aspect?
- Is any external perspective sought or benchmarked against?

Appendix A: 'The Ten Characteristics of Strong Stewardship'

Purpose

These characteristics underpin and map across to a framework for good governance practice, used by the *Assurance Governance Scheme*. Every contextualised version of the *Assurance Scheme* (whether for maintained church academies, federations or single or multi academy trusts) uses a framework of ten core areas of governance foci relatable to these characteristics.

- Characteristic 1:** There is a strong and collectively held *Vision*
- Characteristic 2:** *Christian Distinctiveness* pervades provision serving those of all faiths & none
- Characteristic 3:** A culture of strong *Safeguarding* is made a lived experience
- Characteristic 4:** Ambitious expectations are held for *Achievement* for all learners
- Characteristic 5:** All aspects of provision will be fully *Inclusive* regardless of learner context
- Characteristic 6:** Learners will start *childhood* well and transition as young adults successfully
- Characteristic 7:** All learners will *attend regularly and behave well*
- Characteristic 8:** *Personal Development* and Wellbeing is a core focus
- Characteristic 9:** Leadership, Stewardship and Governance will be constantly self-evaluated
- Characteristic 10:** Strong *Financial* and *Estates* management will maintain a stable and sustainable position now and for future generations.