



Confederation
of School Trusts

IMPROVEMENT CAPACITY FRAMEWORK FOR TRUST GOVERNANCE

The [Competency Framework for Governance](#) (DfE 2017) sets out the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to be a governor or trustee. However, trustees are more than a loose group of knowledgeable, skilled and capable people working together. They also form a corporate entity – the trust board. CST’s improvement capacity framework adapts the sixteen core competencies in the Competency Framework as a basis for trust boards to assess their corporate capacity and effectiveness. The framework also draws on CST’s work around trusts as new civic structures with responsibilities to work with partners and other civic actors to advance education in the public interest in a locality or region.

This framework is intended to support and complement the IMPROVEMENT CAPACITY FRAMEWORK for school improvement developed in the South West by the RSC office, trust leaders, ISOS and Robert Hill Consulting.

How to use the framework

For each of the 16 elements of improvement capacity, the framework includes guiding questions to consider, as well as descriptors of what strong and weak improvement capacity would look like in a trust at board level.

- Use the questions and descriptors to rate your trust against each element along a four-point scale:
- Red (weak capacity)
- Amber Red (AR)
- Amber Green (AG)
- Green (strong capacity)

Descriptors have deliberately not been provided for the “Amber Red” and “Amber Green” ratings. If you think that your trust matches neither the “Red” nor the “Green” descriptor, think about which end of the scale it is closer to, and choose the appropriate rating. The right-hand column of the framework has space for you to mark your rating and make some brief notes about your rationale for choosing that rating. You should note evidence that supports your rationale.

The framework is diagnostic, not evaluative or judgemental. The aim is to identify your trust board’s most significant areas of strength and challenge, so that you can build your capacity for governance improvement. A “Green” rating does not mean that an element is currently perfect, just that it is an area of strength upon which to build. Likewise, a “Red” rating does not imply failure, it simply highlights an area where capacity building or improvement should be a priority.

The framework can be used for the purposes of self-assessment or peer review. CST is launching governance ‘learning sets’ for chairs of trust boards in Lancashire and West Yorkshire. If you would like to set up a governance learning set, please contact the CST office admin@cstuk.org.uk. A governance learning set is comprised of a small group of chairs (typically four or five) and the learning set would typically identify three or four elements of the framework to focus on across the group of trusts. This may start with a self-assessment by each chair in order to identify elements of mutual interest across the learning set.

Capturing the output from self-assessment

We suggest you might want to capture the outcomes from your self-assessment in a ‘heat map’ like the one shown below so that you can easily identify from your self-assessment the priority areas where most capacity building work may be needed. You can edit the boxes below to capture judgements for your trust board. The six ‘domains’ or headings of the heatmap are taken from the [Competency Framework for Governance](#).

Areas that you judged amber red or red are likely to have the most important priorities where capacity needs to be built most urgently.

Strategic leadership

1. Setting direction

2. Culture, values and ethos

3. Decision making

4. Collaborative working/ civic responsibilities

5. Risk management

Accountability

6. Educational improvement

7. Analysis of data

8. Financial frameworks

9. Financial management

10. Staffing and performance management

11. External accountability

People

12. Building an effective team

Structures

13. Structures of governance

Compliance

14. Statutory/ contractual requirements

Evaluation

15. Self-review

16. Board effectiveness

Priorities for improvement

As well as capturing the overall scores from your self-assessment you may also find it helpful to make a note of the key issues you identified for each of the priority areas and start to identify the actions you plan to take as a trust board to address these issues.

The table below has been partially completed with examples from the sample heat map (above) to give you a sense of the type of evidence you might have identified and captured from the self-assessment. You can add rows to the table if needed.

Focus Area	What were the key issues identified?	What do we need to do about it as a trust board?	What progress do we want to see in the next 12 months?
Culture, values and ethos (AR)	<p>The board has no evidence about what staff think about whether or how the board sets the tone from the top.</p> <p>Some feedback from senior staff that they don't understand the added value of the trust board.</p> <p>There is a statement of values but the board has not considered what it considers to be acceptable operational practices that aligns with values and the development of a 'One Trust' culture.</p>		
Collaborative working and	<p>The board is has not given attention to how it relates to and</p>		

<p>civic responsibilities (AR)</p>	<p>communicates with the parent body, other than regular communication to parents through our individual schools</p> <p>The board has up until now focused on the schools in our own trust – we have not yet developed strong partnerships in our locality with other trusts, schools and/or with other civic partners.</p>		
<p>Risk management (Red)</p>	<p>The board treats the risk register as a static document to be reviewed once a year.</p> <p>We have not routinely built conversations about risk and risk-mitigation into our decision-making.</p> <p>Our approach to risk is under-developed.</p>		
<p>Board effectiveness (AR)</p>	<p>We have never had an independent evaluation.</p> <p>The board needs to test whether we truly focus on impact, or whether we are in fact too focused on processes. We need to develop an approach to impact governance.</p>		

THE IMPROVEMENT CAPACITY FRAMEWORK FOR GOVERNANCE

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
1. Setting direction	<p>Does the board have a strategy?</p> <p>How consistent is the trust's strategy with the organisation's purpose and values, and responsibilities for long-term success?</p> <p>Does the strategy include an ambition to contribute to wider system capacity and the common good?</p> <p>Is there a balance between the focus on immediate issues and long-term success?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is too involved and/or lost in the operational detail • Has no strategy • Is led by the executive • Has an undue focus on short-term time horizons 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinks strategically • Sets direction • Agrees a strategy • Plans, prioritises, monitors progress • Focuses on sustainability with a long-term orientation 	<p>R AR AG G</p>
2. Culture, values and ethos	<p>Does the board have a clear and shared understanding of the behaviours it expects from others?</p> <p>To what extent is the board's own way of operating a reflection of the values the organisation is promoting?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions and behaviours do not align with the organisation's stated values and ethos • Does not test the alignment between culture, values and operational processes 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determines organisational values and culture • Ensures conduct and operation of the Board and wider organisation embodies culture, values, ethos 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
	<p>Can we give good and bad examples?</p> <p>How does the board articulate and communicate what it considers to be acceptable operational practices?</p> <p>What behaviours are being driven when setting strategy and financial targets?</p> <p>What does the workforce say about the 'tone from the top?'</p>	<p>AND/OR does not know what the workforce thinks about tone from the top.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fails to recognise the consequences of running the organisation based on self-interest and other poor ethical standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures that policy and practice align with the organisation's culture, values and ethos • Has evidence from the workforce 	
<p>3. Decision-making</p>	<p>Have relevant members of the executive team been invited to explain the issues at the earlier stages, enabling all trustees/ directors to share concerns or challenge assumptions well before the point of decision?</p> <p>Does the board have a well-established process for identifying, and does it understand the reporting arrangements for related party transactions?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes decisions that result in financial or other material benefits for members/ trustees/ directors, their family or friends • Fails to put aside vested or personal interests to make decisions that are in the best interests of all pupils/students 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes decisions in an open and transparent manner and in the public interest • Takes decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias • Knows when to seek advice • Is comfortable submitting itself to external scrutiny 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempts to avoid external scrutiny or reporting Fails to listen to and act upon concerns that are raised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is truthful in its actions, decision and reporting and demonstrates the highest standards of public life 	
4. Collaborative working and civic responsibility	<p>Has the board sought input from stakeholders to be comfortable that it has a rounded view on decisions?</p> <p>Can the board explain how the impact on key stakeholders has been taken into account?</p> <p>Does the board understand its wider civic responsibilities and work in partnership to build relations across the local education community?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is disconnected from the parent body and the community Is isolationist Is reticent and/or secretive 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands views/ needs of parents, carers and the community Enables productive relationships Builds trust and shared ownership Works in partnership with other civic actors to advance education for the public good Is credible, open and honest 	
5. Risk management	Does the board have a clear idea of the key risks the organisation faces and is it	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treats the risk register as a static document to 	The Board:	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
	<p>satisfied that enough mitigation is in place?</p> <p>Is risk discussed as a core part of every decision?</p>	<p>be reviewed perhaps once a year</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses excessively on risk mitigation OR gives insufficient attention to risk • Has a compliance mindset and fails to treat risk as part of the decision-making process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows the principles and processes of risk management • Identifies, evaluates and monitors risk • Ensures risks are aligned with strategic priorities • Avoids conflicts of interest 	
<p>6. Educational improvement</p>	<p>Does the board understand the importance and impact of high-quality teaching to improving outcomes?</p> <p>Does the board know and understand the organisation's curriculum philosophy, the rationale for this and the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has insufficient knowledge and ability to test underlying assumptions about the process of improvement and is unable to challenge effectively • Has insufficient knowledge and ability to test underlying assumptions about the curriculum and is unable to challenge 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sets clear expectations re the process of improvement and intended outcomes • Defines the range and format of information and data needed in order to hold executive leaders to account • Understands the curriculum design and intent and can rigorously 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fails to challenge a lack of openness by the executive 	question implementation and impact	
7. Analysis of data	<p>Does the board know and understand how pupil attainment and progress data are collected, quality assured and monitored across the organisation?</p> <p>Is the board monitoring the impact on workload?</p> <p>Does the board know the performance of the schools in the trust compare with similar schools locally and nationally?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has insufficient knowledge about published data and/or assessment data to test underlying assumptions and is unable to challenge effectively • Has inadequate information or analysis/ poor quality papers/ insufficient notice 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses published data to understand which areas of performance need improvement • Questions the executive on whether they are collecting the right data • Challenges leaders re purposeful, efficient and valid assessment data 	
8. Financial frameworks/ accountability	<p>Does the board have in place financial policies and procedures including mechanisms for ensuring financial accountability?</p> <p>Does the board have strong internal control processes to ensure propriety and value for public money?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has insufficient knowledge about financial framework or accountability to test underlying assumptions and is unable to challenge effectively 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures integrity of financial information received by the board • Establishes robust financial controls • Is rigorous in questioning whether enough is being done to drive efficiency 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
	Does the board know how the financial health and efficiency of the organisation compares with similar organisations locally and nationally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has insufficient or no financial controls in place • Has inadequate information or analysis/ poor quality papers/ insufficient notice 	and align budgets to educational priorities	
9. Financial management	<p>Does the board have a process for resource allocation focussing allocations on impact and outcomes?</p> <p>Does the board have a viable financial strategy and plan which ensure sustainability and solvency?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has no process for, or attention to resource allocation • Has insufficient financial knowledge and is unable to challenge effectively • Has inadequate information or analysis/ poor quality papers/ insufficient notice 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assimilates financial implications of priorities and use this to make decisions about funding • Interprets financial data and asks informed questions about income, expenditure and resource allocation and alignment with the strategic plan priorities 	
10. Staffing and performance management	Does the board know the organisation's annual expenditure on staff and is benchmarked?	The Board:	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures that the staffing and leadership structures 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
	<p>Does the board know how staff are recruited to the organisation and how this compares to good recruitment and retention practice?</p> <p>Does the board set or sign off the performance management framework in line with strategic goals and priorities and how this links to the criteria for staff pay, progression, objective setting and development planning?</p> <p>Is there a robust process for setting executive pay and is it benchmarked and evidence-based?</p> <p>Does the board treat people as a strategic asset?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has not considered staffing and leadership structures • Has not ensured human resource policies are in place • Does not link pay considerations to funding or the spending plan • Does not have a robust process for setting executive pay and/or the executive is involved in consideration of their own pay 	<p>are fit for purpose and benchmarked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes responsibility for pay policy • Considers implication of pay decisions in the context of the spending plan • Takes responsibility for a robust and evidence-based process for setting executive pay 	
11. External accountability	Does the board know and understand the purpose, nature and processes of formal accountability and scrutiny (e.g. DfE, Ofsted, ESFA etc.) and what is required by way of evidence?	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids accountability and/or blames someone else (government or regulators) 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures systems are in place to meet the demands of scrutiny • Ensures the board is accessible and answerable 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ducks responsibility to challenge leaders on counter-productive behaviours which sets low standards 	<p>to parents, carers and the community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses relevant data/information to present verbal and written responses to external scrutiny 	
<p>12. Building an effective team</p>	<p>Does the board foster a culture where constructive challenge is welcomed; thinking is diverse; a variety of experiences and perspectives are welcomed; and continuous improvement is the norm?</p> <p>Does the board understand the role of the governance professional as in-house counsel and advisor?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is characterised by absence of trust— factions, cliques, personal attacks, dominant personality or group OR is characterised by fear of conflict— seeks artificial harmony rather constructive debate OR Is dominated by complacent or intransigent attitudes • The board does not have an accredited clerk or governance 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is honest, reflective and self-critical • Demonstrates professional ethics, values and sound judgement • Recognises the importance and status of the clerk/governance professional role in advising the board 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
		<p>professional – may use the executive’s PA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OR the clerk/ governance professional has no status or value other than as the minute-taker 		
<p>13. Structures of governance</p>	<p>Does the board understand its role, responsibilities and accountabilities, particularly in relation to being the employer and duties under Company Law and Charity Law?</p> <p>Is there significant separation across the governance structure?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not understand its roles and responsibilities and operates as if it were the governing body in a maintained system • Encroaches into operational activity and transgresses the boundary between executive and non-executive roles • Has no separation between Members and Trustees/ Directors or between Trustees/ Directors and academy committees 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands its roles and responsibilities, particularly as the employer and under Company Law, Charity Law and the regulatory environment. • Designs a governance and committee structure that is fit for purpose and appropriate to the scale and complexity of the organisation • Understands the role of the executive • Has clear separation at all tiers of governance 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has no scheme of delegation and/or does not understand where decisions are made 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a robust scheme of delegation 	
14. Statutory/contractual requirements	Does the board understand the legal frameworks and context in which the organisation operates and the requirements with which it must comply?	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not know or understand its legal responsibilities and accountabilities Is non-compliant in one or more ways Fails to seek specialist help and advice 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows its legal responsibilities and accountabilities Identifies when specialist advice may be required Identifies non-compliance 	
15. Self-review	<p>Does the board understand its corporate strengths and weaknesses?</p> <p>Does it take action to address weaknesses through recruitment, support and/or training?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is inward facing Has no process for self-review Does not evaluate the impact of individual contributions to effective governance 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is outward-facing and focused on learning from others to improve practice Demonstrates the agreed values and culture of the organisation and what impact individual contribution is making to effective governance 	

Element (board competence)	Questions to consider	(Red) Weak looks like:	(Green) Strong looks like:	Current rating and evidence
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertakes annual self-review including individual evaluation to ensure each trustee/ director continues to contribute effectively. 	
<p>16. Board effectiveness</p>	<p>Has the board undertaken independent external evaluation?</p> <p>Does the board encourage a culture of external/ peer review to open the organisation up to independent scrutiny as part of continuous improvement?</p> <p>How does the board assess and measure the <i>impact</i> of its decisions on financial performance and the <i>impact</i> on outcomes for children, young people and communities (impact governance)?</p>	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focuses on process not outcomes Is suspicious of external evaluation or scrutiny Is defensive and/or rejects feedback from external scrutiny 	<p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluates the impact of its decisions on pupil outcomes Utilises feedback from external scrutiny to inform decisions about its development Undertakes annual evaluation taking into consideration composition, diversity and how effectively members work together corporately to achieve objectives.¹ 	

¹ The Financial Reporting Council's UK Corporate Governance Code recommends independent board evaluation once every three years. CST provides this service in association with Stone King LLP.