

Governing in challenging circumstances Business continuity and holding virtual meetings

Guidance for governing boards and clerks
March 2020





The National Governance Association (NGA) is an independent charity that aims to improve the educational standards and welfare of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards of state schools in England. We are the experts in school and academy trust governance, providing information, advice, guidance, and professional development, including e-learning.

We also represent the views of governors, trustees, clerks and governance professionals at a national level, working closely with and lobbying government and educational bodies.

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Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on the 11 March 2020. It has resulted in the [government deciding to close schools until further notice](#).

Schools and trusts serving their communities are coming to terms with the challenges of ensuring continuity of education for all pupils whilst maintaining reduced provision for vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers. Those governing will want to support them the best way that they can, first and foremost by ensuring that their governing boards continue to function, carry out their urgent business and make necessary decisions.

Chairs, clerks and school and trust leaders will be at the forefront of the discussions about how governing boards continue to function at this time, and the logistics of making it work. This is a good example of where an expert professional clerk/governance advisor can not only contribute to the efficient conduct of governing boards but can relieve the pressure on headteachers, CEOs and chairs.

Whilst we urge governing boards not to allow the COVID-19 issue to create an environment which allows for a lack of care and due diligence, we also recognise that it could lead to circumstances that make it impossible to make a decision or discharge a function operating strictly by the rules. In such circumstances doing the right thing by schools, pupils, staff and communities should come first. However, there should at the very least be a clear communication and audit trail that explains why it was necessary to take an alternative approach.

Further information and support

NGA is committed to supporting you at this difficult time and to helping you navigate rules, procedures and practicalities you may not have engaged with before. We have therefore made our GOLDline advice service available to all governing boards that have questions about maintaining their business in the current circumstances. You can contact GOLDline by email to gold@nga.org.uk or by calling 0121 237 3782.

GOLDline is supported by leading education law firm Browne Jacobson, the approved legal partner of NGA, who have also provided [answers to some of the most commonly asked questions](#).

NGA has also produced [information sheets](#) containing key messages about the Coronavirus, schools and governing boards taking into account the evolving situation and the implications for school governance.



Business priorities

Governing boards are acutely aware of the enormous task that schools and their staff have in ensuring continuity of education and making the reduced provision work on the ground. It is therefore appropriate for all non-urgent business to be delayed and governing board meetings to be restricted to the following:

1. Business critical decisions (e.g. budget approval, ratifying school leadership appointments etc.)
2. Monitoring how the school is continuing to provide care for children who are vulnerable, children with ECHP plans the children of key workers, associated risks, issues etc.
3. Any issues arising from how the building is currently being used and remote working for staff
4. Support being given to parents and carers to help them educate their children at home
5. Monitoring the wellbeing and welfare of pupils, staff and stakeholders

It follows that boards will take a pragmatic and considerate approach to the reporting of these matters, relying on oral feedback and scaled down paperwork. It might also require governing boards to review and amend their levels of delegation to enable fewer governors/trustees to make business critical decisions and thereby minimising the risk of being unable to take these decisions.

Other business

Being strategic should involve flexible thinking thus enabling boards to respond to unexpected changes in context. Governing boards may not wish to lose sight of their strategic priorities but will need to review them in the light of the current circumstances. Boards which are able to keep in touch electronically may already be thinking about how what is happening will impact on how the to achieve their vision and aims, and indeed, with normal business suspended, there may be uncustomary time to do more strategic thinking than is normal. NGA would encourage this – but with the caveat that all boards should remember that school leaders should be included in such discussions, and that now might not be the right time for them to be giving time to this function.

The work undertaken by panels

Although many schools will be providing care for a limited number of children (children who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response and cannot be safely cared for at home) and staff will be working (remotely in many cases), schools are effectively closed from Friday 20 March 2020 until further notice. This means that the work undertaken by most panels is technically on hold as it would be during a school holiday period.

Hearings such as formal complaints and exclusion reviews

Where the opportunity exists to complete the process during the period that the school is closed, and there is the unanimous agreement between all concerned that the process should be completed, then it may be possible to do so by holding virtual meetings. However, this requires careful consideration, co-ordination and full co-operation. In all likelihood it is not something that governing boards and school leaders will be considering at this time.



Head teacher recruitment process

School closure has implications for governing boards which are currently undertaking the process of recruiting a head teacher for a September 2020 start (which requires the process to be completed before the scheduled end of the spring term). The extent of the risk that this poses to schools and their contingency options will vary. A risk assessment led by the chair carried out in consultation with board members and in maintained schools, the local authority will determine what arrangements should be made. This might involve completing the (suitably adjusted) process by holding virtual meetings or the option of making an interim appointment, therefore buying the governing board some time.

Taking urgent decisions

Clearly it is best for all decisions to be taken collectively by the governing board. This should be possible if appropriate plans are put in place for the board to hold virtual meetings, perhaps at short notice as deemed necessary by the chair.

There may however be circumstances where an urgent decision needs to be taken but it is not possible to convene a meeting of the governing board, or hold a quorate meeting. This is more likely in the current climate when personal and family circumstances may be extremely challenging.

Maintained school governing boards

In cases of urgency where a delay would be likely to be seriously detrimental to the interests of the school, a pupil, a parent or member of staff, maintained school governance [procedures regulations](#) and covered in the Governance Handbook para 4.3.39, set out the provision for the delegation of functions to the chair or vice chair (if the chair is unable to act). These functions do not extend to approving the budget, the suspension of governors and excluding pupils except in cases of urgency.

Academy trust boards

Whether chairs and vice chairs of academy trusts and academy committees (LGBs) can be delegated functions in cases of urgency will depend on the provision made in schemes of delegation or by trustee resolution. If no such provision currently exists then it may be advisable to call an urgent trustees meeting to approve the principle and circumstances in which decisions can be made by individuals in cases of urgency.

As always governing boards should refer to their clerk for advice.

Holding virtual meetings

The COVID-19 crisis has required many of us to use unfamiliar technologies for the first time so that we can continue to work from home, communicate and meet with colleagues and clients. For most governing boards it will also be the first time they have had to consider holding virtual meetings.

The key point here is that with a small amount of preparation it is relatively easy to provide an alternative to meeting face-to-face. Once governors and trustees realise how easy and efficient the alternatives are, it may be that this will have a profound and positive effect on how business is conducted in the future.



The obvious alternatives to meeting face to face are:

- governors/trustees dialling in to a telephone conference call;
- governors/trustees signing in to an online video conference using a platform like [Zoom](#), [Skype](#) or [Microsoft Teams](#);
- governors/trustees using a unified communication and collaboration platform like Microsoft Teams or [Governor Hub](#) to hold a simultaneous electronic conversation, and
- governors/trustees conducting business and voting by email correspondence.

NGA recommends that governing boards arrange virtual meetings by telephone, video conference or through an online platform, rather than conducting business and voting by email correspondence. The exchange of numerous emails lacks immediacy, restricts the opportunity for the governing board to interact in real time, can result in some governors/trustees losing track of others' contributions, and can make recording problematic for the clerk/governance professional. All governing boards should refer to their clerk for advice.

The government has given clear guidance on [self-isolation](#), [household isolation](#) and [social distancing](#) and the Department for Education has advised that **during this isolation period governing boards can agree to hold meetings via telephone or video-conferencing without having to meet first**. The Chair or clerk can contact governors directly to agree to alternative meeting arrangements.

Maintained school governing boards

Maintained school governance [procedures regulations](#) allow governing boards to approve alternative arrangements for governors to participate in or vote at meetings, including, but not limited to, via telephone or video conference. This can extend to their committees.

Academy trust boards

Academy trusts and academy committees will almost certainly have provision to meet by telephone or video conference. This is subject to certain rules being followed, which ensure that reasonable notice is given and individuals are not excluded because they don't have the means/equipment required in order to participate.

Another option for academy trusts does not involve the trustees meeting at all. Instead decisions can be taken by passing a written board resolution provided that the written resolution is signed by all the trustees entitled to receive notice of a meeting of trustees (or of a committee of trustees).

Making virtual meetings work

Governing boards do not need to adopt a substantial, stand-alone policy document that covers virtual meetings. A simple protocol or set of ground rules which are agreed by the board and documented by the clerk/governance professional will suffice. These could acknowledge existing policies relating to data protection, appropriate use of ICT, maintaining confidentiality etc.

An example protocol for virtual meetings is included as an appendix to this guidance.

Governor Hub have published [a series of articles on setting up online meetings](#).



NGA advises that boards take the following steps to introduce virtual meetings to the governing board and to make them work.

1. Decide what form the virtual meeting will take

An initial conversation between the chair, head teacher/CEO and clerk will help identify what form of virtual meeting (conference call, video conference or online platform) is likely to work best for the governing board. In all probability the school or trust and some governors/trustees will have experience of remote working so canvassing them for suggestions is a good idea. It also highlights any presenting issues like internet connectivity.

2. Provide clear instructions and offer support where necessary

Once the form of virtual meeting has been decided then it is important that participants are provided with clear instructions on how they will join the meeting e.g. the weblink, phone number, PIN codes that participants need to either dial in or connect to join the meeting. These instructions are best provided by the clerk as part of their duty to convene the meeting and to circulate the agenda papers. The clerk/governance professional may want to draw on experience and expertise from within the school or trust and the board itself to help them and any governors/trustees who require additional support to access the meeting.

3. Test the system platform

Particularly if it's the first time the governing board has held a virtual meeting then it is worth someone testing that the platform or system being used works in practice, thus avoiding finding out just prior to the meeting starting that it doesn't.

4. Pre-meeting preparation by the chair and clerk/governance professional

The preparation carried by the chair and the clerk prior to any meeting makes a difference to the way that the business is conducted. Virtual meetings are no different. Make time to discuss what's on the agenda, how much time is needed for each item, likely questions, required decisions and outcomes.

Chairs and clerks should be particularly alert to governors/trustees for whom electronic communication presents challenges. Arranging a one-to-one session whereby one person can be on the phone talking the other through how to connect and join a meeting can serve to raise levels of confidence and thus maintain inclusivity.

5. Set the tone and explain the rules of engagement for the meeting

With any new way of working, being clear about expectations helps ensure success. Consider making clear the importance of:

- Joining on time
- Signing a digital attendance sheet
- Keeping to the agenda
- Saying your name before speaking
- Using your mute button as appropriate for minimising background noises
- Allowing additional time for participants to refer to documents that they may have open in another application



Many people are surprised that being able to see other meeting participants on screen makes remote communication easier and it keeps everyone more engaged, so it is worth encouraging everyone to use their webcams if at all possible.

6. Evaluate and learn from experience

The more the governing board practices virtual meetings then the more efficient the meetings will become. Don't be deterred by things that don't work perfectly the first time around. Take a note of what worked well and what could work better and apply this this experience at your next virtual meeting.

Use e-learning to support effective governance

NGA has teamed up with Virtual College, one of the UK's top e-learning providers, to deliver accessible, engaging and convenient [e-learning](#). With 24/7 multi-device access to [modules](#), learning can be completed anytime, anywhere and at any place that suits the learner.



Coming soon: e-learning module on managing virtual meetings.

You can ensure your governing board has all the training it needs by purchasing Learning Link for just £165 per year for your entire board. If you already have an NGA membership then you can purchase Learning Link at a discounted rate.

Discounts are available for multiple purchases for multi academy trusts and local authority governor services. [Please contact us to find out more.](#)

Sharing your experience and practice

NGA knows that most boards are doing their very best to balance keeping their need to continue core governance business with supporting their schools and trusts. We will continue to keep members up to date with developments; however we also want to celebrate how boards are adapting to these unprecedented circumstances. Over the coming weeks we aim to share these both to enable others to learn from these experiences, and to applaud the creativity and adaptability of the nation's biggest team of volunteers.

To share your experience and practice please email gold@nga.org.uk or call us on 0121 237 3782.



Appendix

(Example) protocol to be followed when using alternative arrangements to participate and vote in meetings of the governing board

The protocol that applies to governors/trustees using alternative arrangements to participate and vote in meetings

Where the governing board has approved and has in place alternative arrangements for governors/trustees to participate and vote in meetings (e.g. by telephone or video conference) and a governor/trustee wishes to use these alternative arrangements they should:

- restrict themselves to using the arrangements agreed by the governing board;
- inform the clerk to the governing board that this is their intention as soon as possible but no later than 72 hours before the meeting is due to take place (subject to the meeting being convened giving the normal notice period);
- communicate and co-operate with the clerk to the governing board, school or trust as necessary to ensure that the alternative arrangements can be put in place and work well for all concerned, and
- abide by the normal rules, procedures and code of conduct adopted by the governing board and give particular regard to the duty to maintain confidentiality.

The protocol that applies to the governing board when using alternative arrangements to hold their meetings

Where the governing board decides that a meeting should take place using alternative arrangements (e.g. by telephone or video conference) that have been previously agreed then following will apply:

- the usual (statutory) notice and arrangements for issuing papers except where the chair has exercised their right to waive the usual notice;
- all participants to receive clear instructions regarding how to access the meeting including where they can access support if they experience difficulty;
- all participants will note and follow any instructions given on how to manage their participation at the meeting. For example confirming attendance, speaking through the chair of the meeting, voting on matters etc;
- the governing board will abide by their normal rules, procedures and code of conduct adopted by the governing board and give particular regard to the duty to maintain confidentiality;
- governors/trustees will contribute towards a safe and secure environment for the meeting by giving due regard to the school's policies relating to data protection and the appropriate use of ICT, and
- the minutes of the meeting will be taken by the clerk to the governing board and the meeting should not be recorded by any governor/trustee or the clerk without the approval of the governing board and for a specified purpose.