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Correspondence

# School governance update March 2020

Updated 25 March 2020

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You will undoubtedly be following closely the government's response to the current imperative to protect the public from the spread of COVID-19. This update reiterates the key messages and guidance published by the department in the last week, especially around school closures, and seeks to provide some clarity on specific issues that will be at the forefront of governors' minds. Department officials are monitoring the situation closely and will provide further information as necessary.

## 1. Key guidance

- The government has asked parents to keep their children at home, wherever possible, and asked schools to remain open only for those children who absolutely need to attend. All schools in England are closed from Monday 23 March until further notice, except for children of critical workers or vulnerable children, where they cannot be safely cared for at home. Further information on exempted groups can be found at [Guidance for schools, childcare providers, colleges and local authorities in England on maintaining educational provision \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision)
- See [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for schools and other educational settings \(https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings?utm\\_source=8eded47e-b590-4422-9b63-565cdb187119&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_content=daily\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings) for full guidance and advice about coronavirus (COVID-19) in educational settings for staff, parents and carers, pupils and students.

## 2. Advice for governing bodies

- In line with Public Health England guidelines, all non-essential contact must be avoided to stop the spread of COVID-19. That is why the government has given clear guidance on self-isolation (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-advice>), household isolation (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>) and social distancing (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people>). The department therefore advises against governing bodies meeting in person, and to instead adopt alternative arrangements, for example by using video or teleconferencing applications. These may include but are not limited to: Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Please remember that all parties will need to agree to these arrangements.
- Boards can agree to hold meetings via telephone or video-conferencing without having to meet first. The chair or clerk/governance professional can contact governors directly to agree to alternative meeting arrangements during this lockdown period.
- Please note: the department will not be making any changes to the statutory governance functions in any upcoming regulations related to COVID-19. The School Governance (Roles, Procedures and Allowances) (England) Regulations 2013 (regulation 14 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2013/1624/regulation/14/made>)) allows for governing bodies in maintained schools to approve alternative arrangements for governors to participate or vote at meetings of the governing body, including by telephone or video conference. The model articles of association for academy trusts (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-model-memorandum-and-articles-of-association>) state that trustees can attend meetings remotely subject to certain stipulations set out in article 126.
- The department urges governing boards to be pragmatic in what they cover in meetings during this time, and to be proportionate in the decisions that they are planning to take. We expect governors to focus on urgent, time-bound decisions. We understand that you are likely to want to defer non-urgent decisions/agenda items until future meetings.

- Boards should prioritise providing support to their school leaders and staff where needed, to allow them to get on with operational matters. School leaders should stay in touch with the governing board in a proportionate way, including providing information on the welfare of staff and pupils, so that they can retain a strategic overview of the situation and the school.
- We urge schools' Get Information About Schools (<https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>) (GIAS) gatekeepers and individuals who have their details on GIAS to keep email addresses up to date. Important information being communicated from the department may require quick and effective action.
- We also recommend governing boards have in place contingency plans in case the chair and/or vice chair become unavailable, so that there is clarity about who will be the conduit of information for the board.
- Finally, we would like to thank you for your understanding and continuing support through this period. The department is very grateful for the way in which schools, trusts, governing boards, clerks and governor services have quickly responded and supported their communities during this unprecedented time.

### **3. Additional useful information**

- If you have a query about coronavirus (COVID-19) relating to schools and other educational establishments in England, contact the DfE coronavirus helpline on 0800 046 8687. Lines are open Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm and weekends 10am to 4pm. If you work in a school, please have your unique reference number (URN or UK PRN) available when calling the hotline.
- The National Governance Association (NGA) have produced useful COVID-19 information sheets for governing bodies (<https://www.nga.org.uk/Knowledge-Centre/Executive-leaders-and-the-governing-boards/The-Coronavirus-Information-for-governing-boards-M.aspx>), as well as additional guidance on business continuity and holding virtual meetings.