Covid-19 - Update for governors

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Chairs, clerks, schools and trust leaders will be at the forefront of the discussions about how governing boards continue to provide support and function during this time.

All schools closed on 23rd March 2020 and following guidance from the government, schools have been asked to continue to provide 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. Cumbria County Council have co-ordinated Childcare Hubs to operate across the county. Whether your school is currently closed or operating as a Hub, governance will still need to continue in some format.

Governing boards (GBs) still have a responsibility to fulfil the strategic overview of their schools. It is essential for governors to have regard to their safeguarding policy at all times. In the current situation GB’s need to recognise the additional pressure that school leaders are under and should be realistic about the level of liaison that head teachers and school leaders will be able to provide.

The Department for Education have provided some key points as listed below;

* 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/uksi/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.

Further detail can be found via the [School Governance Update March 2020.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-governance-update/school-governance-update-march-2020)

In addition, the National Governance Association have produced information sheets in relation to Covid-19 as well as guidance for governing boards and clerks called [Governing in challenging circumstances Business continuity and holding virtual meetings.](https://www.nga.org.uk/Knowledge-Centre/Executive-leaders-and-the-governing-boards/The-Coronavirus-Information-for-governing-boards-M.aspx)

If you are a GB of a church school, additional information/support may be available on your Diocesan website.

For Church of England Schools visit [The Diocese of Carlisle](https://www.carlislediocese.org.uk/).

For Catholic Schools visit [The Diocese of Lancaster.](http://www.lancasterdiocese.org.uk/)

If any governors have any questions or queries, although we are unavailable on our landlines, you may send an email to GST@cumbria.gov.uk and someone will respond to you as soon as possible.