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Dear Colleague

Governing boards support and duty during the pandemic to schools

Further to my letter of 22 October 2020, I want to reiterate and express thanks to you all for the huge contribution chairs and governing boards have made to our schools. Thank you.

The Prime Minister announced the introduction of another national lockdown on 4 January 2021 due to the escalation of infections and sadly deaths as a result of the Covid-19 virus. As a result of the lockdown, this means schools will remain closed for all pupils, apart from those who are vulnerable or the children of critical workers.

Although schools will be closed to most pupils, this does not change the role and responsibilities of the governing board in their duty of care and being ambitious for the young people served by our schools, whatever the circumstances.

Governing boards also have a duty of care to those working in their schools, therefore they should continue to show their support in a proportionate fashion, by continuing to meet remotely, being there for senior leaders with regular contact between chairs and headteachers and with guidance when necessary, without adding to the immense pressure of the situation.

This being the case, governing boards, led by their chair and with the advice of their clerk, will continue to revise meeting schedules, agendas and monitoring arrangements to get the balance right between the ongoing strategic role (ie discharging core functions and compliance responsibilities) and focusing on what is important right now.

In these extraordinary times and thinking about what is happening in your schools right now, most of you will be focusing on the following areas, as recommended by the NGA:

- Risk management and safeguarding
- Wellbeing across the school community
- Providing continuity of education
- Managing resources

Down to the heroic efforts of our schools to provide continuity of education for all pupils over the last few months, there is no doubt that disadvantaged pupils and their families will have experienced greater challenges than most of their peers.

With this in mind, school leaders are having to make safeguarding decisions based on the wellbeing of the whole school community which includes pupils, staff (pupil ratios), families and the wider community.

The impact of the pandemic will continue to be felt for some time and as such, governing boards will need to focus on the duty of care they have to school leaders and their staff, to ensure that pupils have access to education and support the wellbeing of wider school community.

It is likely that your headteacher will report on these issues from their operational perspective, but they may be less forthcoming about their own wellbeing. Now is the time for governing boards to reflect on how the culture of your school promotes the wellbeing of everyone involved, including headteachers.

A prime example of this is the handling of complaints. During the previous national lockdown in March 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) were clear that new or existing school complaints could be put on hold. However, the current advice provided by DfE, is that under the current lockdown, concerns/issues/complaints still need to be processed but due to the extreme pressure on schools, schools will not be penalised if timescales as laid out in their complaints policy, are not strictly adhered to. The expectation from DfE is that complainants, should be informed if there is going to be a delay of the process.

As a governing board by addressing school staff wellbeing, this will then filter down to staff feeling supported and securing a level of education for your pupils in these challenging times.

Lastly, I want to say thank you again for all you do and your continual support for our headteachers, staff and families.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dan Barton
Assistant Director – Education & Skills