

Coronavirus /Covid19

Governing Board Meetings

March 2020

Octavo Governance

Providing all school governors with professional development and consultancy, enabling them to jointly lead and manage their schools and achieve the best outcomes for their pupils



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Trust our knowledge and expertise

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Context

The increasing threat presented to the UK by the Covid-19 virus and the evolving advice from central government, has resulted in Octavo Governance receiving queries from Governing Boards. These questions, in the main, relate to what Governing Boards should do in terms of continuing to meet and how Boards will ensure schools continue to function effectively, with appropriate decision making.

This advice has therefore been developed to assist Governing Boards in making their decisions.

Government advice

The latest and most up to date government advice, including the stay at home guidance, can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

Considerations:

Some of the key considerations are:

1. The health and well-being of all school staff and the children
2. The health and well-being of Governors, taking account of age, health, maternity and Governors' families' health.
3. The need to protect school communities as far as possible.
4. Do Governors have access to technology that will facilitate virtual meetings?
5. Are Chair's Actions understood by all?

Our advice:

All Governing Boards in academy trusts and maintained schools should question if meetings need to go ahead at this point in time: if a meeting is required, as key decisions must be discussed and made, Boards should then reflect on:

- Does the Board need to meet face-to-face?
- Can a quorate, virtual meeting be held as an alternative?
- Is it possible to conduct business via email /remotely?
- Can Chair's Actions be used as an alternative to meeting?

If your Board has previously decided not to permit virtual participation in meetings, given the seriousness of the current situation, we believe moving to virtual meetings in the short term is a responsible, sensible and reasonable response. It is important though, that this decision is minuted, with the rationale as to why this decision has been changed. Whilst some Governors may not have access to the appropriate technology, provided a virtual meeting is quorate it can proceed. Please see appendix A for guidance on participating and voting in virtual Board meetings.

If the decision is to meet face to face, remind Governors they must only attend if they are well; do keep an eye on quorum, postpone and take appropriate alternative action if necessary. Ensure hand washing facilities are close by, and/or the use of hand sanitiser,

so Governors can wash their hand before and after the meeting. Keep the meetings as short as possible, dealing with business that must be dealt with.

Chair's Actions should only be used to make decisions in situations where failure to do so could be detrimental, to the school, pupils, staff or the wider community. If Chairs take any actions, on behalf of the Governing Board, these must be recorded and reported back to the Board as soon as possible.

Q & A

1. Who can decide to cancel/postpone a meeting?

In the circumstances common sense should prevail and if there is any risk arising from proceeding with a meeting, this falls under Chair's Actions. It would, of course, be sensible for the Chair, Headteacher and Clerk to work closely on the decision.

2. What sort of things could be agreed under Chair's Actions?

There are many examples, but the general rule relates to urgency. e.g. emergency expenditure on IT infrastructure to meet a deadline for the start of term; emergency school closure as a result of Covid-19, and approval of documents prior to submission in order to meet statutory deadlines.

3. What governance business can be conducted via email?

Whilst it is not ideal for business to be conducted via email, reviewing of policies, approval of School Development Plan, Self-Evaluation documents etc are all examples. Good practice would always be to circulate draft documents via e-mail, on-line groups such as Google docs or a governor portal, for example, ask for questions and comments, redraft, where appropriate and ask for email approval. Sensitive documents containing personal data should not be shared this way.

If you have any questions or would like further guidance and support on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us via octavogovernance@octavopartnership.org

Appendix A - Alternative Arrangements for Participating and Voting in Virtual Board Meetings

- Governors attending the meeting either by telephone or video conference will be entitled to vote on any issue providing they have been 'present' for the whole agenda item which the vote relates to, not just the vote itself.
- When attending a conference call, the governor must state his/her name before speaking to ensure the clerk can minute the meeting accurately.
- If multiple governors speak at the same time, the Chair of the meeting shall determine who will speak first.
- Where a secret ballot is required this will be facilitated where possible (e.g. by taking a telephone call off speaker phone and the governor sharing their vote verbally with the Clerk).
- Where this is not possible the governor will be required either to vote publicly or abstain.
- Governors attending the meeting virtually will contribute to the quorum for the meeting.
- If the technological link is lost, they will cease to contribute to the quorum, but this will not prevent the meeting continuing in their absence, unless it has become inquorate.
- If possible, the meeting will be chaired by a governor who is present in person.
- If, after all reasonable efforts, it does not prove possible for a governor to participate by telephone or video conference the meeting may still proceed with its business provided it is quorate.
- In exceptional circumstances eg extraordinary meetings, meetings can take place virtually as long as:
 - Quorum of governors is adhered to.
 - Every effort has been made to enable all governors to participate.
 - Papers have been circulated at least 24 hours in advance.
 - The meeting is minuted in the same way as other meetings.
 - The meeting is not recorded without the consent of the board for a specific reason.