



GUIDANCE

Information for school governing bodies: coronavirus

This guidance sets out the information available to school governing bodies during the coronavirus pandemic.

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The Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams AM, announced on 18 March that schools in Wales would have a new purpose as part of efforts to tackle COVID-19. Schools are to remain open for the provision of care, and only for those children who absolutely need to attend, such as children of critical workers or vulnerable children, where they cannot be safely cared for at home.

Information on [how this will work in practice](https://gov.wales/how-schools-will-work-during-coronavirus-pandemic) (<https://gov.wales/how-schools-will-work-during-coronavirus-pandemic>) is available.

This situation is under constant review and more advice and guidance will be issued when this changes.

Governing body meetings

Public Health Wales advises that all non-essential contact must be avoided to stop the spread of COVID-19. We have issued guidance on [staying at home and away from others](https://gov.wales/staying-home-and-away-others-guidance) (<https://gov.wales/staying-home-and-away-others-guidance>). We therefore advise against governing bodies meeting in person, and to instead adopt alternative arrangements.

There is nothing in the Government of Maintained Schools (Wales) Regulations 2005 which prevents a governing body meeting 'virtually'. The Regulations were drafted with the idea that GB members would be physically present. Nonetheless, they do not preclude members being virtually present.

Where possible, video conferencing such as Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams is preferable, as you can see and hear the individual so as to ensure the governing body members present are those expected. Use of such technology is not uniform across governing bodies and so a judgement call would need to be made as to its practicality.

If you are using video conferencing platforms to continue to meet as a governing body, then please consider the security of the platforms that you are using. You should read the privacy terms and conditions and ensure that where possible you enable any security features. If you have any concerns, you might want to consult your IT provider or staff for support.

Clerks to governing bodies will want to be assured that they can maintain a clear communication and audit trail which explains why it was necessary to take an alternative approach to traditional meetings and committees.

Please be assured that if meetings are unable to proceed as a result of coronavirus, school governing bodies will not be penalised.

Keeping records of discussions and decisions

The Regulations currently state that paper records of meetings must be kept, but we don't expect any governing bodies to be taken to task on this issue given the current circumstances.

Given the unprecedented circumstances, if making a decision by e-mail means that a governing body can more easily conduct its core functions, this is acceptable. Clerks must of course keep a record any such decisions and associated discussion and votes.

Please also make contingency plans in case the Chair, Vice Chair or Clerk become unavailable during this time. You may also revisit your agreed delegations of certain functions to enable fewer governors to make business critical decisions. Your local authority can help you with this.

Please consider delaying any business that can wait. The wellbeing of learners, staff and everyone in the school community including governors is of paramount importance.

Governing body functions

What constitutes urgent business for governing bodies at this time?

We anticipate that the following governing body functions can still take place in most cases:

- Business critical decisions (e.g. budget approval, ratifying school leadership appointments).
- Monitoring how the school is continuing to provide care for vulnerable children and children of key workers, and assessing and recording associated risks.
- Supporting the headteacher to manage the day-to-day business of the school and being on hand to discuss any issues.
- Monitoring any issues arising from how the building and school premises are currently being used.
- Supporting the headteacher and teaching staff to provide advice to parents and carers to help them educate their children at home.
- Monitoring the wellbeing and welfare of pupils, staff and stakeholders.
- Reporting any issues with managing this business immediately to the local authority for help and advice.

What general governing body functions should continue?

Most normal school operations will have ceased or will look very different for the time being. That doesn't mean that the governing body's role in monitoring the school has disappeared completely but it will feel necessarily different. Governing bodies will still be required to monitor:

- safeguarding
- health and safety
- headteacher and staff well-being

Governing bodies won't need the same level of detail about their schools as they would expect to get in normal circumstances. It is important to maintain contact with the headteacher though to ensure wellbeing needs are being met.

How can governing bodies support their headteacher at this time?

Chairs should check in on their headteacher to make sure they're coping in this unprecedented situation, and feel supported. You may want to ask questions like:

- How are you feeling? How can the governing body support you?
- Have you been in touch with the local authority for advice?
- How are learners coping? Are distance learning materials available for those who are staying at home?
- What are the main messages coming back from staff? Is the school adequately staffed?
- Do parents understand the advice? Are the right children (vulnerable learners and those whose parents are critical to the coronavirus response) attending?
- What urgent business would you like the governing body to focus on?
- Do you think it is necessary to call an extraordinary governing body meeting?

It will also be very helpful for the rest of the governing body if the Chair can keep everyone updated on the content of these discussions. This may only be through email if meetings are not taking place, but will help keep everyone focused on supporting the school to cope.

How can governing bodies of federated schools uniquely offer support at this time?

Consider the possibility of a specific federation approach to coronavirus. Your local authority can help you think about the possibility of sharing staff, resources and premises across the federation.

How can governing bodies set their school budgets?

We expect that a good deal of the preparation work for setting budgets will have already taken place. With the caveat that the coronavirus pandemic will have derailed some of this, governing bodies should be able to provide a minimum standard with the support of their local authority.

How can governing bodies manage staffing issues?

In managing school staffing issues, governing bodies must ensure they comply with employment law which is non-devolved. Governing bodies should seek their own legal advice where required.

How much of the Governors' Annual Report to Parents should be made available? And by when?

As with the setting of budget, we anticipate that some of the preparation for this report will have already been done. Welsh Government is looking at these requirements. Further advice will be issued as soon as it is available.

What data will be made available to schools this year?

We have cancelled all statutory data collections that would have been due to take place before the school summer holidays and have not yet started. Normal arrangements for reporting of Key Stage 4 and post-16 performance measures will be suspended for this year and we are also actively considering the associated arrangements and statutory requirements that depend on the availability of data.

How can governing bodies publish their school prospectus this year? And by when?

Again, we anticipate that some of the groundwork for the school prospectus will have already been prepared. Welsh Government is looking into the possibility of relaxing some of these requirements. Further advice will be issued as soon as it is available.

How can governors keep up to date with mandatory training when they can't meet face-to-face?

Many local authorities and some regional consortia provide online training for governors. If this is not available in your area, we advise you to think carefully about what is essential training at this time and make allowances that limit the need for suspensions where training has not been possible.

How can governing bodies manage elections of parent, staff and teacher governors?

At this current time it is not practical or possible to conduct elections. To avoid leaving gaps in governing bodies, these governors should remain in post until such time that elections can take place when the situation normalises.

How can governing bodies make changes to school session times?

Changes to school session times require consultation with key stakeholders. This is not currently possible or practical and so we advise that changes to school session times be delayed until such time that a proper consultation can be managed.

How should governing bodies conduct hearings such as formal complaints and exclusion reviews?

It may be possible to do so by holding virtual meetings where virtual meetings can

facilitate the process and all, including parents/carers and learners in the case of exclusion reviews, are in agreement that it is necessary and appropriate.

Remember that complaints should be dealt with as quickly as possible and, where delays are necessary, the complainant should be informed.

How should governing bodies manage the headteacher recruitment process?

The process of recruiting a headteacher for a September 2020 start may be affected by delays. Your local authority will be able to advise on how to proceed in these circumstances.

Non-urgent business

While we advise governing bodies to delay anything that can wait, they will not want to lose sight of their strategic priorities. Governing bodies that are able to keep in touch electronically may already be thinking about how what is happening will impact on how their ability to achieve the school's vision and aims.

Additionally, with normal business suspended, there may be more time to do more strategic thinking than is normal. Please remember though that school leaders must be included in such discussions, and it is unlikely that they will have the time and space to think strategically at this time.

Tips for successful virtual governing body meetings

Decide on a platform for your virtual meeting

The Clerk and the Chair of the governing body will want to discuss options and may need to trial tools such as Skype, Zoom or MS Teams. Issues with internet connectivity may come up and may be addressed by limiting use of video to only the person speaking. In any case, the Clerk will need to be assured that they can keep an accurate record of all business conducted virtually. All parties must be in agreement as to how the meeting will work.

Test the platform and provide instructions

It is good practice to try out the meeting platform before the real meeting takes place. The Clerk and Chair will want to ensure the tool works as well as possible before using for real at the governing body meeting. The Clerk should take responsibility for issuing instructions for using the virtual meeting tool as part of their duty to convene the meeting and to circulate the agenda papers.

Pre-meeting preparation

As with all governing body meetings, the Chair and Clerk will want to make time to discuss what's on the virtual meeting agenda, how much time is needed for each item, likely questions, required decisions and outcomes.

Also think about setting meeting etiquette, such as joining on time, keeping to the agenda and allowing everyone to contribute. This will help the virtual meeting run smoothly and all parties will understand the purpose.

Keep accurate records

The Clerk and Chair, as with normal governing body meetings, will ensure that notes of discussions and decisions are recorded properly.

Other electronic communications such as email discussions and decision making should be included in the record as well and may be helpful in limiting the need for long detailed minute taking.

Evaluate and change tack if necessary

Don't be disconcerted if the first meeting does not go perfectly. Go back to the earlier tips and work out how trying something a little differently may improve the meeting. It may be that something as simple as a shorter, more focused agenda could make all the difference.

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[Education and childcare: coronavirus](https://gov.wales/education-coronavirus) (https://gov.wales/education-coronavirus)

[Roles and responsibilities for school governors](https://gov.wales/roles-and-responsibilities-for-school-governors) (https://gov.wales/roles-and-responsibilities-for-school-governors)
