

Busy Governance and Clerk's Guide to Virtual Governance

COVID launched many governing boards into unfamiliar virtual territory. It was a different approach for many boards and some element of virtual governance remains as hybrid or blended meetings to include those online and those in the room. Hybrid meetings ensure that meetings are accessible for everyone who needs to be there – whether they join from home or another country. This also helps increase participation for those who may experience travel restrictions due to ill health, financial reasons, or impaired mobility. There is plenty of guidance and support to work virtually, but DAG has combined theory and practice to come up with a guide to support Devon governing boards.

1. All virtual meeting options require either a conference call or a video conference, or indeed both. Which of these options best suits your board will be down to what equipment your board members have and the nature of connectivity in their area. It is worth noting that individuals should not be excluded from virtual governance just because they don't have the equipment. [The School Governance Regulations](#) allow for maintained school boards to meet virtually as it still enables discussion, however, email is not an effective option as it does not allow real time discussion and therefore timely decision making involving the whole board. Academy boards will have provision to do the same and whether the board is maintained or academy a simple protocol for meeting virtually needs to be agreed by the board. See the [Devon Education Services](#) website, governance consultancy section for a protocol example, or the [NGA website](#).

2. Decide what form the meeting will take. The chair, the clerk/governance professional and the headteacher would be a useful group to decide this but options already experienced by members of the board are a good place to start. There are many platforms for video conferencing, but some names will be more familiar than others, along with positives and negatives. Microsoft Teams or Zoom, are the most popular. It is likely that boards may wish to try a few options and then decide what works best for them. Many of the options are free from subscription cost, but may carry other restrictions around time limits or limits to the number of participants, but always do your homework and read the terms and conditions carefully. It is worth noting in the case of Zoom that the time limit for its free service was lifted if the service user has a school email. Your choice will need to balance ease of use against security. Boards are not dealing with government secrets, but are dealing with public money and the public's children, if the platform is easy to use because it bypasses the need for password protection, or it is set it up so that it does, then consider it carefully. There may also be additional costs, consider where these are generated, how they are identified and who is paying them, remembering that where landlines join conference platforms sometimes additional costs are generated. Hybrid meetings will require a meeting room that has sufficient connectivity to enable those joining remotely to participate fully with those in the room, to see and to hear what is happening.

3. Clerking. Just as the board requires the clerk/governance professional to facilitate best practice for face to face meetings, it will do the same for virtual ones. It is likely that the clerk will be the one facilitating virtual governance and will need to work closely with the chair to provide support and clear instructions on how the virtual meeting will work.

4. Joining instructions: Governors require very clear guidance on what they will need to be provided with to join a virtual meeting, such as web link, phone number and pin codes/passwords and clear information on whether they may need to download anything to their own device. It is also important

to make clear when governors will need to do certain things. The clerk can set up a practice session with individuals and/or small groups of governors to ensure everyone is confident to proceed. This is best done well before the meeting to allow time to iron out any difficulties. All meetings can then consider allowing an additional few minutes joining time before the start of the actual meeting for all participants to be 'present' and ready to start on time. Remind governors that they will require a quiet place for the meeting and it would be good to have everything they will need to hand at the start of the meeting.

5. Documents: It is more important when meeting virtually to ensure that documents are circulated before the meeting allowing the same timings as with face to face meetings, 7 days in advance for maintained schools and up to 14 days for academies. It will be more difficult to 'table' documents during a meeting especially if you have governors dialing in. As much thought as possible to be given to the agenda identifying who will be speaking against each item and what governors are required to do, receive information only, discuss or vote along with strict well considered timings for each agenda item allowing time for governors to access online documents they may need to open in another application. Consider asking for questions to be sent to the clerk/governance professional in advance of the meeting for any significant reports being discussed. Ensure that the agendas and minutes identify that the meeting is being held virtually.

6. Time Management: It is vital for a successful virtual meeting that all governors join on time, stay for the whole meeting and stick to the agenda timings. Be realistic about how long the meeting should be, one hour should be sufficient, connectivity, interruptions and the strain of chairing virtual meetings will all take their toll if meetings are longer. Remember to take into account that governors may need to refer to documents via a different application, so time will be required to allow for this.

7. Be seen and heard: Video does make it easier to manage a virtual meeting, so ask if all governors who can, turn on their cameras. Being able to see who is present and who is speaking or wishes to speak by raising their hand will help the chairing and the clerking. Be aware however, that internet problems may result in the need to switch cameras off to enable connections to be held. Because of this even with the use of video it is still helpful for everyone to identify themselves before speaking also recognizing that minutes are much more difficult to take when meetings are virtual. Ensure all participants understand and can make use of the digital tools available within virtual meetings for example to 'raise a hand' or to use the 'chat' function.

8. Mute: Participants will need to remain muted unless speaking, this will cut down background noise and help everyone to hear discussions. Headphones can help too to keep the meeting private, using the microphone option with them to mute as well. Remember that not all governors will have access to a separate room for the meeting but confidentiality is still required. If hybrid meetings include those online and those in a meeting room then consideration will need to be given to ensure that those online can see who is in the room and most importantly hear them. Speaker devices are available to boost the sound of those physically present for those online.

9. Recording: Many platforms will enable a meeting to be recorded. If this function is being used to help with minute taking, it would be wise to check with all those participating that they agree before the meeting starts and to check with your data protection officer (DPO) as any names included will count as personal data and how this is handled and then disposed of will need to be carefully considered in line with GDPR.

10. Who is present: Some boards will use a digital attendance sheet, others will ask all those present to state their names, or the chair can read out a list of those present. Ensure that the rules around quorum still apply and remember that if a governor loses their connection they are not

'present' but this is only really going to be a problem when a vote is required, so confirm who is voting at that time visually or audibly. Take measures where you can to ensure that no one who is not invited can attend the meeting, see security below. If a participant has declared an interest and has to leave the meeting then ensure that they do physically leave the meeting, they can then be invited back by email, text or phone or invitation from the waiting room if this is used. Use the 'waiting room' or 'lobby' function that platforms offer to ensure people are who they say they are before being allowed to join, this type of security function prevents anyone else who may have found the link joining the meeting without some questions being asked.

11. Minutes: Draft minutes will need to be produced as usual, but consider options for how the chair signs the minutes at the next meeting, either signed electronically or signed manually and scanned. Minutes are a legal document so the board still needs to ensure that they are an accurate record of the meeting and it is the board's approval that the next meeting requires, so even if there is a delay in the date of the next meeting it would be wise to wait for the next meeting to allow the board to approve them. They can still be used for actions and reference in their draft form while waiting for legal approval at the next meeting.

12. Learn as you go: Consider lessons learned and how to change your approach to improve the effectiveness of future virtual and hybrid meetings. Consider additional support for any member that may be struggling before the next meeting.

13. Security: Some of the criticisms of virtual meetings and different options will be around security. Some platforms are undeniably more secure than others, but a secure platform for governance business is only as secure as the way it is used. Consider password protection at every stage possible, never post a link publicly, consider encryption where you can and remember that links and passwords should not be in the same email. Whatever option you choose, check the privacy settings and terms and conditions to understand what if any data the service will access during use and remember to opt out where you can. Remember that as an organisation you have access to a Data Protection Officer (DPO) and if there are concerns these can be raised with them.