School and Trust Governance during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Findings from investigative research

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Contents

Executive Summary

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020-2021 has presented extensive challenges to the education system including the leadership and governance of schools and trusts. This research investigated how governing boards responded to these challenges, drawing out implications for governance in the future. The Department for Education (DfE) originally commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake a larger-scale qualitative study but because of COVID-19 we agreed with DfE that the work would be scaled back and that we would produce a paper, rather than a fuller report, on how governors and trustees addressed the particular challenges to schools and trusts emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. The research comprised four (virtual) case studies[1] conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 in England which included interviews with individuals fulfilling the roles of chair, governor, trustee, clerk and executive leader in trusts and schools and observations of governing board meetings.

What follows are the key findings from the four case studies.

Ways of working

Governing boards adapted their ways of working to the conditions imposed by COVID-19-related restrictions which severely reduced in-person contact and communication between their members. Their swift response involved instigating remote governance through using online technology to hold virtual governing board and committee meetings. Despite some initial technical hitches, this approach enabled the continuance of meetings with minimum disruption. The benefits of meeting virtually included increased attendance, less travel for many attendees and more focused meetings. However, virtual meetings sometimes limited interaction and stifled nuanced debate in meetings.

Roles and responsibilities of governing boards

Broadly, there were no changes to roles and responsibilities and no restructuring of governing boards or their sub-committees. Schemes of delegation remained the same. They continued to fulfil their strategic responsibilities for recruitment, safeguarding and exclusions. Challenge and support were provided to executive leaders as they developed new strategies for the delivery of remote learning, learning recovery activities, and pupil safeguarding and support. Risk assessments were more frequently updated by school leaders and signed off by governing boards. Governing boards were spending a substantial amount of time on reading and interpreting COVID-19-related information, including Government guidance, and supporting its application in their schools.

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[1] Two multi-academy trusts; one single academy trust; and one maintained school (supported by a federation).

Perceived effectiveness of governing boards

Perceptions of the effectiveness of how governing boards were operating compared with pre-COVID-19 were mixed. Some chairs, governors, trustees and clerks considered that governing boards were now operating more efficiently and using technology to facilitate access to, and attendance at, meetings by experts such as school improvement advisers. In contrast, others thought that they were less effective because the quality of discussion was lower than at face-to-face meetings and the lack of in-person visits reduced opportunities for governors and trustees to have visibility in school. This inhibited their ability to take a longer-term perspective of schools' development. Whilst there were reports of more and less effective operation of the boards, others felt that there was no change and governing boards were operating at a similar level to that experienced pre-COVID-19.

Support

Overall, interviewees considered that they had received sufficient support to carry out their governance roles during the pandemic. The main sources of support which helped them to manage the fast-moving flow of information relating to COVID-19 and education were: local authorities, the Confederation of School Trusts (CST), the National Governance Association (NGA), and local governance services suppliers, all of which provided useful briefings and regular updates. Other sources and types of support were received from colleagues within a trust (such as from a clerk), local headteacher networks, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the Key for School Leaders (an information service for school leaders).

The majority of interviewees believed they were working more hours than before the pandemic largely due to keeping up-to-date with information on the changing COVID-19 situation, wanting to support the executive leader and school, and ensuring that policies and procedures were updated.

Implications and lessons learned

Future meeting arrangements were one of the main implications for school and trust governance emerging from the case studies. On the whole, interviewees recognised the potential of including virtual meetings in future ways of working in some capacity. Looking ahead, they indicated that there was a place for online meetings in future and that it is likely that they would use a hybrid model of online and face-to-face meetings. The majority of interviewees believed that face-to-face meetings remained vital, especially for developing strategy, and were generally viewed to elicit more in-depth, nuanced discussions.

Two other implications for school and trust governance identified by two of the case studies focused on questions that the governing boards were considering in light of

changes to education brought about by COVID-19. The first question was how to exercise oversight and ensure scrutiny of schools' use of technology to provide a range of appropriate learning opportunities for all pupils in the future. The second question was how to take into consideration the implications of changes to ways of learning, the assessment of educational outcomes and use of different outcome measures in holding schools to account in the future.

Lessons learned from governing boards in schools and trusts during the pandemic included: the relevance and significance of having well-considered, up-to-date policies and procedures such as risk assessments and continuity plans; the importance of having an existing effective governing board in place that can respond quickly to changing circumstances and related challenges; and understanding that virtual meetings can improve the level of communication with all governors, and offer increased flexibility in terms of the timing of meetings and efficiently managing the business on the agenda.

The main priorities for governance looking ahead over the next year identified by case-study interviewees are to ensure that students have access to the full learning experience again; helping them to recover in terms of academic and social progress; ensuring stable leadership within the school or trust, including governors and trustees; and improving or restoring well-being for staff and pupils.

Key messages

The key messages from this case-study research are as follows:

Governing boards have adapted well to operating in the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic but the need to be highly responsive to the ever-changing situation has impacted on their ability to take a long-term strategic perspective.

COVID-19 has provided a learning opportunity for governing boards. For example, it has forced them to consider the role technology could play in governance practice in the future and how this could benefit them moving forwards. The value of particular policies and procedures has also been made apparent.

Looking ahead, governing boards are concerned with supporting schools to recover and re-engage pupils in learning. The pandemic has highlighted some opportunities such as the potential of technology to support learning opportunities in future. It has also put the spotlight on some challenges, for example how to hold schools to account in a fair way that appropriately scrutinises educational outcomes in the context of COVID-19's disruption of schools and the external examination system.

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a small-scale research study based on case studies that investigated how school and trust governing boards in England responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. The Department for Education (DfE) originally commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake a larger-scale qualitative study. Due to COVID-19, and the national lockdown announced on 4th January 2021, it was agreed with the DfE not to overburden schools and trusts so the research was scaled back from 15 to four case studies. This provided data for writing a paper rather than a fuller report.

The four (virtual) case studies[2] were conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 in England. They included interviews with individuals fulfilling the roles of chair, governor, trustee, clerk and executive leader in trusts and schools and observations of governing board meetings. The study combined an investigation into current governance challenges with a forward-looking focus on the implications and lessons learned for future governance practice. It should be noted that although the findings and insights presented here provide illustrations of school and trust governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, they should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the bigger picture of how governance has responded to COVID-19 across England.

COVID-19: a challenging context

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an extremely challenging context for schools and trusts to educate pupils. This observation by Montacute and Cullinane (2021) captures the magnitude: 'The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a level of disruption to young people's educations at a scale previously unimaginable in modern times'. It is important to understand the scope, range and depth of the challenges facing schools and trusts in this environment, which make far-reaching demands on leadership and governance.

During the first national lockdown implemented in March 2020, schools were closed to the majority of learners but remained open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils and only reopened in June to some year groups. DfE guidance stated that schools 'should allow only vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers to attend … All other pupils and students should not attend and should learn remotely' (DfE, 2021). There was a legal requirement that schools updated their COVID-19 risk assessments and adopted measures that enabled them to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum for the pupils attending (DfE, 2021). Between September and December 2020, schools were open to all pupils, including during the November lockdown. When the winter 2021 lockdown came in force from 5th January, schools were

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[2] Two multi-academy trusts; one single academy trust; and one maintained school (supported by a federation).

closed to the majority of pupils for a second time. Schools had a duty to provide remote education for pupils not allowed to attend school because of the lockdown regulations and take action to support pupil wellbeing drawing on external expert services, as appropriate (DfE, 2021).

Research on schools' responses to COVID-19 undertaken by Sharp *et al.* (2020) reported that senior leaders' top priorities for September 2020 were to provide support for pupils' emotional and mental health and wellbeing (81 per cent), to re-engage pupils with learning (64 per cent), and to settle them into school (63 per cent). Sharp *et al.* (2020) concluded: 'It is understandable that senior leaders feel the need to focus on these 'basics' following, in many cases, almost six months out of school. The catch-up effort in schools is therefore likely to start later in the autumn term and will be a 'long game' rather than a 'quick fix'. Further research evidence (Montacute and Cullinane (2021), Rose *et al.* (2021) and Cattan *et al.* (2021)) also suggests that COVID-19-related learning recovery will be a long-term process. In response the government has put in place an Education Recovery Commissioner to oversee education catch-up.

The disruption to education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has created leadership and governance challenges for schools and trusts. These are illuminated by a study conducted by Ofsted and the National Governance Association (NGA) between April and July 2020 which examined the issues encountered and addressed by school governors and trustees in the initial months of lockdown and partial closure of schools (Ofsted/NGA, 2020). Drawing on the experiences and views of 28 governors and trustees gathered through focus groups, the research showed how they provided remote governance by using different online tools for communication and meetings and by making changes to governance practice.

Another perspective on the use of virtual governing meetings during the pandemic lockdown was provided by Hill and Forrest (2020) drawing on 311 survey responses from college governors, governance professionals and principals in England and Scotland in July 2020. They found that while a majority of survey respondents considered that the use of virtual meetings had been a constructive and positive development to support governing, there was a view that 'face to face governing meetings can be better at achieving a stronger governing performance … and there is a case for utilising 'blended methods' in the future'. Recommendations included 'appreciating the potential of the selected technology, making sure all meeting participants can use the technology, and shaping the governing event to get the best from the virtual meeting arrangements'.

The Ofsted/NGA (2020) research reported that governors and trustees had supported headteachers in dealing with a variety of COVID-19–related pressures and demands, including managing the reopening of their schools. The report concluded that:

> …governing boards report having adapted to challenging
> circumstances and continued the work of governance while schools
> were closed to most children. Governors and trustees report having

continued to perform their strategic function, focusing on support and challenge while at the same time supporting schools and headteachers. They have shown themselves to be resilient and have quickly adapted to new situations and governance challenges, and their relationships with school and trust leaders have strengthened during the pandemic.

Background to the NFER school and trust governance research during the COVID-19 pandemic

The case-study research reported in this paper was part of a larger project on school and trust governance commissioned by the DfE in 2019. The purpose of the Governance Investigative Research project was to provide independent evidence to inform future policy development and enable evidence-based prioritisation of resources to support school and trust governance throughout England. The first strand of the project was an online survey of 2,751 individuals (chairs of governing boards, governors, trustees, Members of a trust, clerks and executive leaders) from 1,207 schools and trusts in England, and 30 follow-up telephone interviews. The research was undertaken between November 2019 and March 2020, and the report was published in autumn 2020 (Kettlewell *et al*., 2020).

As originally commissioned, the qualitative second strand of the project was going to comprise 15 case studies exploring school and trust governance in practice including how governors and trustees perform their roles and responsibilities in line with the six key features of effective governance published in the DfE's Handbook (DfE, 2020). The plan for this part of the project was revised in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures and the second strand was repurposed on a smaller scale (four case studies) with a focus on how governors and trustees addressed the challenges to schools and trusts emerging from COVID-19. The aims of the case studies are set out below.

Aims and focus of case studies

The aims of the case studies were to explore the following aspects of school and trust governance:

- How governing boards are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Whether COVID-19 has affected how school and trust governing boards work and fulfil their governance roles, including how they have worked with school leaders.

- Any challenges that COVID-19 has created for school and trust governance.

- How governing boards have responded to and addressed COVID-19-related challenges.

The key focus of the case-study research was to examine the functioning of school and trust governing boards during the COVID-19 lockdown and how governance roles and responsibilities have been performed. The research also aimed to identify lessons learned and draw out the implications for governing schools and trusts in the future.

Case-study method and timeline

Four case studies were carried out with one maintained school, one single academy trust (SAT) and two multi-academy trusts (MATs). Sixteen interviews with chairs, governors, trustees, clerks and executive leaders/heads were conducted by telephone. Two board meetings were observed virtually. The fieldwork took place between 7th December 2020 and 18th January 2021. Further details and brief characteristics of the four case studies are provided in Appendix 1. Governance definitions are presented in Appendix 2.

Roles and responsibilities for Governing Boards during the COVID-19 pandemic

This section discusses the ways in which school and trust governance has been operating during COVID-19 and identifies changes to roles and responsibilities; new ways of working; what the focus of governance has been during lockdown; potential skills gaps; and whether the new ways of working have impacted on the perceived effectiveness of governing boards.

Ways of working

Interviewees reported that governing board and committee meetings were taking place virtually using online meetings forums. This was generally perceived to be working well albeit '*different*' to face-to-face meetings. These differences suggest subtle communication challenges experienced with online meetings. For example, one trustee felt that virtual meetings work better if there are pre-existing relationships between attendees; a governor in another case study commented that it was more challenging to interject or make a point in a virtual meeting; while a Local Governing Body (LGB) chair from a third case study observed that '*meetings are very different when held virtually, you do not have the same level of connection as you do in person….it is not as intuitive as sitting down face-to-face'.* Some interviewees noted that nuanced communication virtually was not straightforward as illustrated by one chair: '*Virtual meetings miss the soft side of human interaction. Online it is difficult to encourage governors to interact. Do they feel included? Do they 'get it'?'*

Technology was recognised to have caused some initial challenges*,* such as setting up school (in contrast to home) email addresses for attendees to comply with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) and providing training in the use of the technology for the online meetings. Apart from some reports of ongoing issues with poor broadband, interviewees reported no other concerns with technology.

As well as the considerable benefit that virtual meetings offer by enabling the continuance of board meetings with minimum disruption, there were broadly two further benefits cited by interviewees. Firstly, attendance was observed to be better because attendees did not have to drive to the meetings and access was easy from home including for people who were shielding or self-isolating due to COVID-19. In addition, it was possible for 'experts', such as school improvement experts or subject specialists, to attend meetings for short periods of time very easily. Secondly, as noted in the observations of virtual board meetings, many interviewees felt more meetings were running on time and that they were more focussed. This comment from a clerk illustrates the point: '*There are no little conversations on the side…the meetings are more productive and they run on time'.*

The evidence was mixed on whether virtual meetings elicit more engagement and contributions from different types of governors. For example, one chair felt that quieter governors appeared to be more confident and ask more questions, whereas a governor in another case study observed that more forceful governors seemed to dominate the meetings. The observations of virtual meetings by researchers also provided mixed evidence of different scenarios; in one meeting not all attendees contributed whereas in the other they all engaged in discussions. It must be noted that this could also be a reflection of previous practice in face-to-face meetings with the same attendees. It is possible that holding meetings virtually changes the dynamics of a group. A few interviewees commented that moving to virtual meetings was easier for well-established boards than for less well-established boards – in some cases with new governors attending for the first time.

On the whole, chairs and executive leaders said they were in contact with each other more than pre-COVID-19, for example in order to discuss challenges such as staff or pupil well-being or to provide updates on the COVID-19 situation or for chairs to offer their support to executive leaders.

Most interviewees described using a virtual meeting protocol outlining expected behaviour as described by one clerk:

> Do not talk across each other, press the yellow hands up or wave to talk, find somewhere quiet, if you're in danger of being overheard use headphones to ensure confidentiality, make sure others cannot see your screen.

In one case study some interviewees said they had adopted their county council's protocol, in another some thought they followed their MAT protocol. Other interviewees described verbal protocols outlined by their clerks.

Interviewees noted that business as usual was continuing despite COVID-19 and the move to virtual meetings. For example, interviewees from one trust described a new expert educational guidance group, planned before the pandemic, being set up during the pandemic. In another trust, interviewees discussed ongoing developments within the trust and in a third case study, interviewees explained how three imminent consultations were continuing to be a priority for them.

Roles and responsibilities during the pandemic

Although COVID-19 was a regular item on board meeting agendas, interviewees reported that there were no changes to the roles and responsibilities of their governing boards during the pandemic and there had been no restructuring of governing boards or their sub-committees. However, while some interviewees described business as usual, they demonstrated how they were providing support and challenge on new policy and

practice issues that emerged as a result of the pandemic, as illustrated by the case-study outline below.

> **Case-study D: Roles and responsibilities during the pandemic with adaptations to business as usual**
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> This federation of two small primary schools had a considerable amount of ongoing activity when the pandemic emerged. For example, the executive leader was leaving and there were three impending consultations, so COVID-19 was described by one interviewee as '*just another layer*' of complication. They carried on with business as usual but adapted their approaches in light of COVID-19. For instance:
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> - They delayed the consultations while implementing additional ways to enhance their communication with parents and ensure increased transparency. They added a question-and-answer slot on their website, organised virtual meetings with parents and provided additional newsletters in order to 'drip feed' information to parents so that they felt informed and included at all times.
>
> - Although they felt their roles and responsibilities were the same as normal (such as continuing to recruit, carry out exclusions panels and conduct safeguarding activities), the newly emerging areas on the agenda, such as attendance, remote learning, catch-up activities and safeguarding children during the pandemic also required support and challenge.

On the whole, interviewees believed that during the pandemic operational decisions were still being made by schools and trusts. One clerk commented: '*Governors are very mindful that they are strategic and they leave the school to get on with the operational stuff*', while a MAT executive leader concurred: '*Schools make decisions, we check and make sure they are well-thought through*'. Interviewees from within the two MAT case studies reported that roles and responsibilities between the trust and the LGBs had remained unaltered through the pandemic with schemes of delegation remaining the same. One interviewee described how the LGBs on the ground and the trust senior leaders had worked hard to prevent any impact on strategic direction. Another reported that their governors' conference had taken place virtually with all their LGB governors and board trustees attending.

Although some interviewees said they were able to continue taking a strategic approach, there was concern about the impact that dealing with the current fast-changing situation, and lack of face-to-face discussion and visibility in school were having on taking a long-term strategic view. An executive leader in another case study described extensive debates among the governing board about how to mitigate the negative impact of lockdown on children and how to strike a balance between keeping the school safe and getting the best outcomes for children. The case study below illustrates perceived challenges to developing long-term strategy.

Case-study C: Challenges of developing long-term strategy/planning

Interviewees in this SAT described a situation where as the pandemic continued to impact on education, the governing board and school leaders were spending considerably more time managing the current ever-changing situation rather than formulating a long-term strategy. At the beginning of the first lockdown there was minimum virtual learning as the schools did not expect to be closed for long.

However, as time progressed different approaches to learning and teaching emerged as they began to understand what parents were achieving at home and what they were struggling with as disruptions to pupils' education continued. So, the board asked questions about how the school was going to deliver quality education while pupils were learning remotely. Their approach became more strategic as they scrutinised plans and challenged senior leaders on how they were adapting the curriculum, how much content could be delivered at home and how they were supporting children, for example.

Another strategic challenge was identified by a governor who expressed concerns about future educational outcomes and how the governing board was going to examine and analyse results due to disrupted exams and grade allocations.

Interviewees reported that they were updating risk assessments more frequently during the pandemic. While all governing boards were responsible for checking updated risk assessments, where academies were part of a MAT, the executive leaders were reported to be responsible for the final sign off.

Sharing of information and documents pre-meetings and during virtual meetings was not hindered and business as usual continued in a virtual rather than actual environment. Continuity plans and recovery plans were considered to be easy to share prior to board meetings, and during meetings through sharing screens, and were regularly used to inform meetings.

Interviewees reported continuing with activities such as recruitment, safeguarding and exclusions but the in-person dimension of governance was widely reported to have stopped, increasing the reliance on school reporting and making it hard to triangulate this information with observations in school. Lack of face-to-face discussion was seen to be a limiting factor on effectiveness and one chair, in the context of recruitment, said: '*Time will tell if it is effective'.* While a governor in another case study commented that it is difficult to show concern and empathy when the attendees of exclusion panels cannot see your body language.

While interviewees noted that a considerable amount of governance time is normally spent on deliberation and decision-making, they said they were currently spending a substantial amount of additional time on processing information. One chair observed that there had been a large increase in the amount of documentation and the time spent on

discussing it. Additionally, he noted that the constant Government guidance updates had required flexibility to accommodate the changes. A clerk explained that normally governing boards can anticipate which documents are released and at what time of year, but that during the pandemic: '*There had been a rolling amount of information on top of the normal level*'. She described '*information coming out almost daily at one point. I have had to do a hell of a lot more reading than normal. I will read everything that comes in because if I don't understand it how can I minute it?*'.

We asked clerks what impact COVID-19 has had on their role and responsibilities. While the impact on their role was not perceived to have changed other than keeping up-to-date with and distributing increased information, some clerks believed that holding virtual meetings was a more efficient way of working. They felt it was easier to organise online meetings and described more focus with '*governors concentrating and paying more attention'.* However, one clerk in a MAT felt it was more difficult to keep people on task in a virtual meeting as you can't '*just nudge the chair or stare*' at the person in order to bring them back to the agenda. She was an experienced, professional clerk who line-managed other clerks within the MAT and said that other less experienced clerks found it difficult to keep people on task, '*having the confidence to speak up* [online] *is an issue*'.

The majority of interviewees believed that boards have not developed new ways of supporting and challenging the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) during the pandemic. However, there were some notable observations:

- a governor who prepared more in advance of board meetings

- a MAT chair who phoned all the executive leaders and asked 'deeper' questions including how they felt

- an executive leader at trust level who asked additional challenging questions of the school SLT such as '*Was the quality of the children's home learning good enough?*', '*Was the children's access to IT sufficient?*' and '*Was there adequate staff training on offer*?'

Interviewees in two case studies said that the additional activities as a result of COVID-19 had not identified any skills gaps in the board. There were perceived skills gaps in one LGB in terms of governors not questioning and challenging the executive leader sufficiently. This was apparent before COVID-19 but was felt more acutely by the executive leader and new chair since the onset of COVID-19 as governors were not forthcoming with support during the COVID-19 challenges. Interviewees in the final case study explained that one trustee had resigned due to the demands of his day job which had increased during the pandemic and they were debating whether it would be better for the replacement to have health-related or educational knowledge.

Perceived effectiveness of governing boards

Perceptions of effectiveness of how governing boards are operating, in contrast to pre-COVID-19, were mixed within all four case studies. Some interviewees felt that governance was operating at a similar level to pre-COVID-19 as boards were up-to-date with their meetings and they were operating to the same professional standard. One clerk observed that the board was operating *'just as effectively as before, I haven't noticed any changes whatsoever'.*

Reasons for feeling that boards were operating more effectively included: improved meeting attendance; being able to more easily invite experts such as school improvement advisers or subject leaders into meetings for limited time slots/single agenda items; and meetings perceived to be more efficient and focussed on the agenda items. One MAT clerk felt that the board was '*probably'* operating more effectively because COVID-19 had helped the trustees understand each school in the trust better and in more detail as they had engaged in how each school was operating in more detail. The clerk felt this had been '*a real eye-opener for the board'.*

The main reasons that interviewees felt that their governing boards were operating less effectively were that the quality of discussion was not as high as it would be face-to-face, and secondly that the role of governors is not limited to meetings. For example, link governors and those responsible for monitoring progress need to visit schools and directly observe activities and talk to staff which is currently not possible. Additionally, there was some concern expressed about how delicate activities such as exclusion panels can be carried out online.

These findings are broadly in line with those evidenced in the NGA/Ofsted report (2020) where governors and trustees said there were 'advantages and disadvantages to meeting online'*,* and Hill and Forrest's (2020) observation that: *'*Questions of governance effectiveness using virtual meetings remain a concern in the longer term'.

Support

This section discusses the main sources and types of support received by chairs, governors, executive leaders, trustees and clerks. It reports on whether school and trust governing boards have worked more hours since the pandemic outbreak, and if so, what accounts for this increase. Finally, it explores whether COVID-19 has brought to light existing and future training needs for governing boards.

Sources and types of support received during the pandemic

Overall, interviewees considered that they had sufficient support to carry out their governance roles during the pandemic. Several explained that it was not so much support that was needed but up-to-date information. While acknowledging the challenge

of '*constantly changing*' guidance from central government, interviewees described strategies and information sources that enabled them to keep on top of a fast-moving situation. Sources included:

- Trustees, chairs, executive leaders and clerks described briefings and weekly updates from their local authorities (LAs) to be very helpful. An interviewee from a federation of two maintained schools described receiving '*quite a lot of support from the LA, they have been given a surprisingly large role in coordinating schools' efforts i.e. more visible than normal*'. An experienced clerk, who provided clerking services for a range of schools/academies described a LA contacting academies and saying '*we know you are not a maintained school but is there anything you need?*'

- Executive leaders in MATs appeared to value support from the Confederation of School Trusts (CST). One felt '*the CST has been very active and their briefings have been invaluable*', while another explained '*the CST has a close working relationship with the Department for Education so information is hot off the press*'.

- Some interviewees described the website and the information received by email from the National Governance Association (NGA) as useful. For example, one interviewee said she could find information quickly and easily from the NGA.

- Two interviewees valued support from their governance services supplier. For example, one clerk described how she found it '*very helpful and reassuring*' that they delivered extra briefings on topics such as what was statutory and what was not and on the catch-up funding. She also valued the opportunity, facilitated by the governance services supplier, to meet up virtually with other clerks and ask questions as she felt clerking can be '*a lonely role*' so networking was beneficial. The value of networking was observed in the NGA/Ofsted (2020) finding that trustees and governors would '*like more opportunities to talk to those governing from outside their own area*'.

Interviewees mentioned other sources and types of support such as: internal support from within the MAT; clerks (one chair described their clerk as '*excellent*' and explained how she filtered information for the board); local headteacher networks; the Association of School and College Leaders; and the Key for School Leaders (an information service for school leaders).

Executive leaders were asked whether the pandemic had highlighted the need for more support or training for their governing board. They outlined how they had experienced a few technical issues at the outset but that these had fairly easily been overcome. There were, however, two interesting illustrations of scenarios going forward as described below.

As mentioned above, in one case study the executive leader said that the pandemic had '*put the spotlight*' on the fact that the governors were not supporting and challenging as they should be. He felt the pandemic had highlighted the need for the governors to undergo more training as he was finding it '*frustrating*' that they were not holding him to account and this had been very apparent during the pandemic as governors rarely asked any questions during board meetings.

In another case study the executive leader felt that COVID-19 had possibly disrupted normal governors' training as they had not accessed as much as they would have. He explained that '*maybe the long-term consequences of all this is that our governors may be a little less well trained. We have had no whole-governors' training sessions since the pandemic and we would normally have had some*'.

These examples suggest a need to identify, prioritise and address gaps in governors' training moving on from the pandemic as outlined, for example, in the NGA guidance on skills audits (NGA, 2020).

Changes in hours spent on governance activities

While a few interviewees felt that they or their colleagues were working the same or fewer hours than pre-COVID-19 possibly due to reduced school visits, the vast majority believed they were working more hours than before the pandemic. One chair explained: '*I am definitely working more hours as a day does not go by when I am not interacting with the school. The main reason is to make sure the school and the head are feeling supported. Schools are feeling isolated and I want to support*'. A clerk felt that she was working more hours because '*the number of queries from governors has shot up….I have to make sure I have covered all bases and have answered all queries*'. Some queries were about IT (in connection with virtual meetings) but she provided other examples of the nature of the queries such as governors asking if they could visit schools and if not how they do their monitoring, if protocols have changed and how, or reassuring governors that they have done what they are supposed to have done. She also described how '*senior governors (i.e. the holy trinity of the safeguarding governor, the chair and the vice chair) have seen their work rate rise*' because of safeguarding concerns as so many children were missing from school and were hard to reach.

Other reasons for working more hours included: making sure policies and procedures such as risk assessments and business continuity plans were COVID-19-secure and up-to-date; reading and understanding government guidance; extra communication and emails; and more safeguarding and monitoring activities.

One governor and one trustee were reported to have resigned since the pandemic outbreak due to their day-time job role increasing and being unable to devote sufficient time to their voluntary governance role.

Implications and lessons learned

This section draws out the implications of governing schools and trusts in the COVID-19 context for governance in the future, both short term and longer term. It presents the main lessons learned and what changes, if any, governing boards are planning to make and why. The section concludes by reporting what governing boards consider to be their main priorities over the next year.

Future changes to ways of working

In general, interviewees recognised the potential of including virtual meetings in future ways of working in some capacity, although some interviewees had not yet fully considered these and others acknowledged that virtual meetings were a necessity caused by the pandemic.

Most interviewees valued virtual meetings as a new way of communication which saved travel time and offered benefits. Looking ahead, they indicated that there was a place for virtual meetings in future and that it is likely that they will use a mix of online and face-to-face meetings. For example, one chair felt that: '*Maybe they would use a hybrid model for the future'.* Similarly, a clerk explained that there had been discussions about having a proportion of meetings virtually and a proportion in school: *'Thinking across my schools that is fairly standard that some meetings can be held virtually…there will be a mix of both* [online and face-to-face] *in future.'* These findings are consistent with those of Hill and Forrest (2020) who observed that 'there is a case for using 'blended methods' in the future' and the Ofsted/NGA research (2020) findings, 'several of the chairs told us they were considering a blend of online and face-to-face meetings for the future. Most commonly, full governing board meetings would be face to face while committee meetings would be online.'

Although interviewees reported that they had no plans in place yet, some indicated possibly using online meetings for shorter meetings and sub-committees where it was likely that there would be fewer attendees. In one case study they had recently convened an expert education sub-committee and recognised the potential of recruiting experts from a wider geographical area and having mainly online meetings going forward. A chair, from another case study, also recognised the possibility of more online training in future.

There was also the suggestion that while board meetings could be held face-to-face, albeit possibly less frequently, there was more scope for some governors to join virtually if their working or personal lives made physical attendance not possible or they only needed to attend for some agenda items. Similarly, some experts or staff members could attend virtually for selected slots. However, as one interviewee pointed out, if this was to become routine practice, the technology at the host establishment needed to be of good quality to enable the meeting to run smoothly.

The majority of interviewees in our case studies believed that face-to-face meetings remained vital. For example, a chair thought these meetings were valuable for '*developing deeper relationships and a sense of community*', while an executive leader said simply '*it is great to be together sometimes*'. Indeed, virtual meetings were reported to work better if previous relationships had been established in person. Face-to face meetings were also viewed by some interviewees to elicit more in-depth, nuanced discussions. This reflects the observations made by Hill and Forrest (2020) who reported that, 'it is appreciated that online governing meetings of, for example, 15 governors plus senior staff and a governance professional, do not necessarily easily convert from former face to-face-meetings [to online meetings]'.

There were a number of observations that strategy meetings were unmanageable online and meeting physically was necessary for developing strategy in particular and it was likely that, as soon as the COVID-19 restrictions allowed, these meetings would reconvene as face-to-face. Three main reasons accounted for this. First, it is likely that there are more attendees at strategy meetings and certainly this is the case for the majority of MATs where trustees, LGB governors, chairs and executive leaders from multiple schools could be attending. Second, these meetings are likely to be longer meetings lasting in some cases for several hours. Third, developing strategy was viewed as needing comprehensive, detailed discussion only possible in person as one trustee explained: '*Strategic meetings are better physically, you can bounce ideas off people, it's useful to get reactions physically rather than across a screen*'.

On the whole, interviewees were not considering any changes to current virtual meeting protocols, apart from a clerk who said she would formalise their verbal agreement to a written protocol and an executive leader who observed that in the future '*our protocol will cater for both eventualities* [online and face-to-face meetings]'.

Clerks generally believed there will be no changes to their role and responsibilities in future. However, one clerk felt the experience of governance during the pandemic will instigate a subtle change to the role:

> Governors will come to rely on clerks more as they realise the range of things we can do….I always thought governors were more likely to ask the head or chair, now governors are more inclined to ask the clerk. There has been a breakdown in barriers, maybe they thought I was just there to minute before. They come to me more now.

Implications for governance in future

While some interviewees commented that there will be no changes to the way in which they update their school development strategy due to COVID-19 and others pointed out that they are constantly updating plans, there were a couple of interesting observations

on the implications of COVID-19 on education more broadly and potentially, therefore, the implications on governors' monitoring roles as illustrated below.

Case-study C: Assessment of educational outcomes

The exam challenges of 2020 and 2021 have made this case-study school take a new look at assessment approaches and how the governing board and the senior leadership team review the outcomes data that emerged in summer 2020. One interviewee explained: *'It* [COVID-19] *has made the school re-assess the whole of their assessment approach'.*

Some of the exam data at schools in their area were considered to be *'concerningly different'* from results in previous years which drew this query from one interviewee: *'What kind of validity can we put on them* [results]*?'.*

Another interviewee reflected that educational performance monitoring will be challenging in the future and their governing board will need to consider how to scrutinise the data effectively and with appropriate caveats.

Case-study A: Learning opportunities extended by technology

Two interviewees in this case study observed that the necessary use of technology within education as a result of COVID-19 has *'shone a light'* on how learning happens. One interviewee felt that distance and remote learning have been '*given a new lease of life'.* There has been a realisation that teachers do not need to be in the same room as all the learners. His perception was that this is something to be exploited particularly in shortage subjects such as physics. In their MAT they had an excellent physics teacher and he felt technology should enable the maximum number of pupils to benefit from him.

Some of the other COVID-19-related lessons learned about governance, which interviewees regarded as important, included:

- **The relevance and significance of having well-considered, up-to-date policies and procedures such as risk assessments and continuity plans.** One interviewee from a maintained school commented: *'Governors have felt the responsibility of signing off risk assessments and being the employers of the school staff so it has focussed their minds a bit'.* Additionally, a chair observed that this experience has brought contingency planning, risk assessments and emergency protocols to life, in future they will be grounded in experience and will not be just theoretical.

- **The importance of having an effective governing board in place that fully understands the value of support and challenge and is considered fit-for-purpose.** In one case-study school the LGB was not thought to be operating at optimum level leading the executive leader and chair to comment that they have not felt fully supported through the pandemic. Conversely, a clerk to a board she considered to be highly effective before COVID-19 noted that: *'No one has had to step up as they were already stepping up'*. Another interviewee from the same case study felt that they had trustees who absolutely understood governance and *'it has held us in good stead in* COVID-*19'*.

- **How virtual meetings have improved the level of communication with all governors**. For example, one clerk felt that: '*Previously there was a danger that governors could fall off the radar and we're not having that now so governors are more on the ball'*. This clerk also noted that she was more aware of governor roles due to the enhanced communication.

- **How virtual meetings have increased flexibility in terms of the timing of meetings and the business content.** For example, flexibility as to when board meetings can be held, their frequency, duration and whether attendees join for the whole meeting or parts thereof. Additionally, one interviewee believed that they have managed to complete a lot of business virtually, with strategic development being the notable exception.

Governance priorities for the next year

We asked interviewees what they considered to be the most important priorities for governance of their school or trust over the next year. They indicated that it will be imperative to ensure that students have access to the full learning experience again, helping them to recover in terms of academic and social progress and identifying and *'bridging the gaps in their learning'.* One interviewee noted that this is ultimately what governors are accountable for and should be the priority for the next year.

Another foremost action, in line with business as usual, was considered to be securing stable leadership, including governors, trustees and senior school leaders, within the school or trust. Examples of how leadership could be strengthened and secured included: the board stabilising the school through the imminent change of executive leader; recruiting the right trustees and school senior staff; and ensuring governors and trustees undergo appropriate training so they support and challenge and strengthen governance capacity.

Other priorities identified by this case-study research were:

- managing and leading the strategic decision as to whether to join an academy chain or not

- driving through school improvement

- income pooling where funding is amalgamated centrally and reallocated to academies as required.

Case-study interviewees also pointed out that they were going to be pre-occupied with the following COVID-19-related activities:

- safeguarding, including the COVID-19 threat

- monitoring assessment and educational performance post-COVID-19

- ensuring procedures and processes are kept up-to-date (the importance of which has been highlighted by COVID-19).

An overarching concern to be addressed over the next year and specific to the COVID-19 pandemic focused on improving and restoring wellbeing for staff and students. This trustee expressed the importance of this commitment: '*Making sure all young people including the gifted and disadvantaged get back to the levels of education pre*-COVID-*19 and the welfare of teachers recovers'.*

Overall, these priorities are largely consistent with those identified by the NGA/Ofsted research (2020) which reported that the 'main priorities included pupils' performance and catching up on missed learning, and pupils' mental health and well-being'.

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Appendix 1 – Case-study method

A sample of 15 schools was drawn from schools who participated in the online survey administered between November 2019 and March 2020 and agreed to be contacted for this strand of the research project. The sample was stratified to include a range of school types, trust sizes, school phases, and regions. The case studies were carried out virtually between 7th December 2020 and 18th January 2021. Due to the school closures announced on the 4th January and subsequent agreement with the DfE not to overburden schools, data collection was limited to four case studies. The key characteristics of the case-study schools and trusts are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The characteristics of the achieved case-study schools and trusts.

Case Study	Trust/School Type	Interviews completed	Trust Size	School Phase	Region
A	Multi-academy trust	Four trust board interviews with the executive leader, chair of trustees, a trustee and the clerk	National (16-30 academies)	Primary and secondary	National
B	Multi-academy trust	Five interviews across the trust board and a local governing body, including two executive leaders, the chair of trustees and two clerks.	National (16-30 academies)	Primary	National
C	Single-academy trust	Four interviews with the executive leader, chair of trustees, a governor and the clerk.	N/A	Secondary	North
D	Maintained (supported by a federation)	Three interviews with the executive leader, chair of governing board and the clerk.	N/A	Primary	Midlands

A virtual board meeting was observed at case study D. A second meeting observation was conducted for a fifth school, however the accompanying interviews were unable to go ahead following the school closures.

Appendix 2 – Governance definitions

Trust: An academy trust is a charitable company limited by guarantee. It is an independent legal entity with whom the Secretary of State has decided to enter into a funding agreement on the basis of agreeing their articles of association with the Department for Education. Academy trusts have members and trustees, whose roles are defined below. Catholic and Church of England academy trusts are referred to as Academy Companies. In church schools the term "trust" is reserved for the separate trust that owns the land.

Multi-academy trust (MAT): a trust which is set up to run a number of academies.

Single-academy trust (SAT): a trust which is set up to run a single academy.

Maintained school: receives funding through its local authority (LA). There are four different types of maintained school: community schools, voluntary-controlled (VC) schools, voluntary-aided (VA) schools, and foundation schools.

Structures of governance

The governing board: a collective term for the accountable body for a school or trust.

Maintained school governing body: this is the accountable body for an LA maintained school.

Trust board: this is the accountable body for an academy or academies within the academy trust.

Local governing bodies (LGBs): a sub-committee of the board to whom certain functions have been delegated. They are a formal part of the governance structure of a MAT as determined in the trusts' articles of association. Trustees decide which, if any, governance functions are delegated to the LGBs. Therefore, LGBs can be wholly advisory or have differing levels of delegated responsibility, depending on the scheme of delegation set out by the trust.

Roles within school and trust governance

Chair of Trust board/ Chair of Governors: an individual elected by the board to lead the board. Within this paper, and when talking about roles within governance, chairs have been treated as a separate group to all other governors/trustees, as it may be the case that chairs have a different perspective to those governors/trustees who are not chairs.

Trustees: those who sit on the board of an academy trust. They are both charity trustees and company directors of the academy trust. In Catholic and Church of England Academy Companies trustees are referred to as Directors, the term 'trustees' is reserved for those on the board of the separate trust that owns the land. Trustees collectively

undertake the three core functions of governance: ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction of the school, holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils and the effective and efficient performance management of the staff, and overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent.

Governors: those who sit on a maintained school governing body. Governors collectively undertake the three core functions of governance: ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction of the school, holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils and the effective and efficient performance management of the staff, and overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent.

Local governors: those who sit on a Trust's LGB(s) may be referred to as 'local governors'. The Trust board will decide what, if any, governance functions they will delegate to LGBs. They may set up LGBs as wholly advisory bodies. LGBs of academies with a religious designation must uphold the designated religious character of their academy.

Executive Leaders: those being held to account by the governing body for the performance of the school or trust. This would include CEOs, executive leaders, headteachers, executive principals and principals. This might also include other senior employees of the school or trust.

Clerks: the governing body's clerk or 'governance professional' who enables the board to understand its role, functions and legal duties through providing a range of professional support, advice and expertise to the board. This definition also includes governance professionals, heads of governance and company secretaries who undertake a clerking role.

Link Governors/Trustees: those members of the governing board who have been given specific oversight of a particular area and which enables a board to deepen its knowledge of a particular area specifically where the board has specific legal duties, within the school or trust. However, accountability remains at board level.

Members: Academy trusts are founded by members who have a general duty to exercise their powers, to further the academy trust's charitable purpose.

Definitions taken from gov.uk doc [Structure and Roles](#)