Governing in unprecedented times

This report presents findings of a small-scale research project to investigate the challenges for school governance during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. The research was carried out with the National Governance Association (NGA) and sought to understand the decisions and actions of governors and trustees in response to the short- and longer-term challenges presented by lockdown measures in England.

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Executive summary

In March 2020, schools in England closed to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable children. This was a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the wider lockdown of society and business. Although schools were closed to most pupils, school leaders were still expected to make vital decisions about pupils' education in the interim and to plan for a return to opening for all pupils.

Throughout the lockdown period, school leaders responded to a series of government announcements and ensuing guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) as they prepared to open schools to more pupils. Governors and trustees are an integral part of school leadership, so we wanted to explore how governing boards had responded in the short- and longer-term to the challenges presented to schools by COVID-19.

This research explores the views of governors and trustees in the months during lockdown when schools were closed to most pupils. We carried out a small-scale qualitative research project with the National Governance Association (NGA) to investigate the actions and decisions of governing boards and to understand how governing boards responded to the challenges of COVID-19. We carried out focus groups with governors and trustees in different types of schools and phases of education across England.

The report does not necessarily represent the views of Ofsted or NGA with regards to what governors or trustees should give attention to. As the research relied on a series of focus groups, we were unable to externally verify what governors or trustees told us about how they worked. Similarly, we were we not able to critically discuss whether their priorities, decisions and actions were right for their context, as Ofsted would ordinarily do during inspection.

The key findings from the nine focus groups Ofsted and NGA carried out with governors and trustees in June and July are presented below. The findings are organised into three phases:

- short-term: responding to a crisis
- medium-term: getting back to normal
- long-term: planning for uncertainty.

These correspond to the different phases of governing boards' decision-making during the months of lockdown and partial closure of schools.

Those governing told us that the work of governance in the immediate response to the crisis involved rapidly adapting to new challenges using web-based video conferencing. Some reported more frequent contact with senior leaders and changes to committees.

With regards to the medium-term challenges, governors and trustees reported different levels of support in planning the reopening of schools. They reported varied

responses and levels of guidance from multi-academy trusts (MATs) and local authorities (LAs). There was also much criticism from governors and trustees of the support and guidance from central government.

In the longer-term, governing boards were particularly concerned about mental well-being and digital learning platforms for remote education. They expressed concern for all children getting back to normal schooling, in addition to those disadvantaged children most likely to have fallen more behind.

Governing in the face of a crisis

The governors and trustees we spoke to presented as resilient and reported quickly adapting to new situations and challenges presented by COVID-19. Governing boards continued the work of governance by meeting remotely using different online tools and apps. They continued to hold governors' panels and recruit senior leaders.

Governing boards reported changing some decision-making procedures and processes in order to respond quickly to rapidly changing circumstances and key government announcements about schools. Changes to governance practice included delegating decisions to chairs, setting up committees for COVID-19-related topics and covering essential agenda items only, although these were not universal.

Governors and trustees told us there were advantages and disadvantages to meeting online. They liked that meetings were more focused but felt that face-to-face meetings helped them to get to know their schools better. There was also a tendency for online meetings to make informal discussion harder. This lack of informality may make relationship-building harder.

Some believed that online meetings may also help recruit a greater diversity of governors and trustees who might not otherwise be able to travel to meetings. 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.

Beginning to 'get back to normal'

As schools began to plan for reopening to more pupils after the Easter holiday, governors and trustees were involved in decisions about what this would look like in different settings. They felt responsible for making sure that any plans for reopening kept pupils and staff safe and followed government guidelines. However, there was widespread frustration among those we spoke to at a perceived lack of clarity in the guidance from many LAs and central government. Several governors also described how some teacher unions created additional pressure on leaders in the run-up to schools reopening from 1 June.

Those who were part of governance in MATs often felt better supported in this decision-making process than those in schools not in a MAT, given the trust structure. When this support was absent, governors and trustees often relied on

informal networks of schools. In some cases, however, local governing boards and academy committees did not meet.

During this period, governors and trustees specified that they were still able to support headteachers and often acted as a sounding board. Those governing were still able to perform the role of 'critical friend', no matter the difficult circumstances. Governors and trustees told us they had found a balance between challenging and supporting headteachers. They were also involved in reviewing and signing-off risk assessments for schools' reopening.

Longer-term planning and strategic thinking

Governors and trustees were beginning to think about, and prioritise, areas to focus on from September onwards. Main priorities included pupils' performance and catching up on missed learning, and pupils' mental health and well-being. There was a strong sense from the governors and trustees we spoke to that school leaders need the confidence to 'write our own narrative' in response to these priorities. Schools faced similar issues to each other around staff's and pupils' mental well-being and pupils' loss of learning, but governors and trustees indicated they need to find individual ways to address these issues and in accordance with a school's own ethos and values.

Some governors and trustees suggested that they have confidence in the processes and procedures they have put in place to monitor pupils' outcomes and hold headteachers to account in the absence of national exam and test data. They highlighted that governing boards were beginning to consider the learning needs of pupils returning to school and, in particular, how to address the loss in learning of all pupils, as well as those most at risk of falling further behind following their absence from school. They reported that the challenge longer-term will be for governing boards to focus on the educational outcomes of children who were not identified as being in need before school closures. However, the governors and trustees we spoke to about the government's £1 billion catch-up funding were concerned about how much of it would reach individual schools.

When we spoke to governors and trustees in June, they were pessimistic about how long it might take for pupils to catch up on their missed learning. They were uncertain what the long-term impact of school closure would be on different categories of pupils and those at different stages of education.

Governors and trustees have begun to consider how they may need to revise school development plans and long-term strategies to take into account the impact of school closures. There were different responses as to how to approach this but a strong view that, whatever governing boards decided to do, it was going to look different next year. They said there will need to be 'some kind of adjustment' but had little sense yet what that adjustment might look like and the potential impact on the curriculum.

The rapid move to home and online remote learning while pupils were not in school has forced governors and trustees to begin thinking about children's experiences of learning remotely. Inequality of access to digital media and the quality of online teaching and activities were key concerns. Governors and trustees showed a greater awareness of the disparity between and within schools than they had before lockdown, and the need to address this disparity in the future. They suggested that developing the technical knowledge of staff and developing procedures for governing boards to monitor remote learning were priorities. However, they may not have begun to monitor the quality of remote and online education in the same way they do in schools.

There was a variable picture provided about the impact of COVID-19 on schools' financial management. Although some governors and trustees anticipated savings, others were predicting a negative impact on their school budget. There were suggestions that this may depend on schools' existing financial situations, the assessment of pupils' needs when they return to school and the availability of additional funding.

Sharing concerns and challenges

An unexpected finding of this research was that the chairs we spoke to told us how helpful they found the opportunity the focus groups gave them to talk to others governing. They found sharing experiences and learning how others were dealing with similar situations very useful.

Governors and trustees said they would like more opportunities to talk to those governing from outside their own area and to get feedback on shared concerns and challenges.

Introduction

Context for researching governance continuity

1. This research project took place between March and July 2020, when schools in England were closed to all but vulnerable children and children of key workers because of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] During this period, many children lost up to 15 weeks of face-to-face schooling.

2. It is too soon to measure the impact of this 'learning loss', but a picture is beginning to emerge from recent literature. The lack of face-to-face learning is likely to have had a 'significant' impact on pupils and this will be greater for younger children.[2]

3. Some recent studies suggest that school closures are likely to have widened the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.[3]

4. It is not only disadvantaged children who are likely to be underachieving following the loss of face-to-face education. For many children, the level of educational achievement will not be where it should be. Variable levels of motivation and parental support will have an impact on the achievement of many children, in addition to those who are in disadvantaged categories.

5. Some of the loss of learning will have been mitigated by home learning and online remote schooling. However, there is wide variation in the quality and quantity of remote learning.[4]

6. In April 2020, primary-school-age children spent on average 2.4 hours a day on offline lessons and online activities. Children in secondary schools spent on average three hours a day doing schoolwork.[5] Children in the most advantaged families, who have their own computer and parental support at home, spent longer on remote learning than children from more disadvantaged families.[6]

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[1] 'Critical workers who can access schools or educational settings', Cabinet Office and Department for Education, March 2020; www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision.

[2] 'Balancing the risks of pupils returning to schools', Royal Society, July 2020; https://rs-delve.github.io/reports/2020/07/24/balancing-the-risk-of-pupils-returning-to-schools.html.

[3] 'Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: rapid evidence assessment', Education Endowment Foundation, June 2020; https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/evidence-reviews/school-closures-rapid-evidence-assessment.

[4] 'Balancing the risks of pupils returning to schools', Royal Society, July 2020; https://rs-delve.github.io/reports/2020/07/24/balancing-the-risk-of-pupils-returning-to-schools.html#recommendations.

[5] Nicola Pensiero, Anthony Kelly and Christian Bokhove, 'Learning inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic: how families cope with home-schooling', Southampton Education School, July 2020; www.southampton.ac.uk/publicpolicy/covid19/learning-inequalities-covid-19.page.

[6] Nicola Pensiero, Anthony Kelly and Christian Bokhove, 'Learning inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic: how families cope with home-schooling', Southampton Education School, July 2020; www.southampton.ac.uk/publicpolicy/covid19/learning-inequalities-covid-19.page.

Research from the Sutton Trust showed that 30% of pupils from middle-class homes took part in online lessons once a day, compared with 16% of working-class pupils.[7]

7. The effectiveness of online learning is also dependent on pupils' ability to access online materials and/or teaching. Pupils need access to digital devices and fast internet, as well as high-quality materials from their schools.

8. Disadvantaged children are less likely to have access to internet platforms and dedicated devices to access online learning. Up to 20% of pupils eligible for free school meals have no access to a computer at home, compared with 7% of all other children.[8] According to the Sutton Trust, in the most deprived schools 15% of teachers suggest more than one third of pupils may not have adequate access to a digital device for learning at home.[9] In the same research brief, 12% of teachers in the most deprived schools felt that more than a third of their students would not have adequate internet access.

9. Just having access to devices is not, however, a sufficient solution in itself; for example, having an appropriate place to work in is important too. The quality of remote education provided by schools will also have an impact on learning outcomes.[10] Recent literature suggests that schools may not be prepared to deliver remote learning,[11] and that schools have been pushed into online education without the necessary conditions to use it effectively.[12]

10. The impact of lockdown and loss of schooling on children's physical and mental health is not clear and still limited. Generally speaking, there is less evidence and research interest about the impact on children's physical health. However,

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[7] Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute, 'COVID-19 and social mobility impact brief #1: school shutdown', The Sutton Trust, April 2020; www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief.

[8] Francis Green, LLAKES research paper 67: 'Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty', Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances, June 2020; www.llakes.ac.uk/research-papers.

[9] Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute, 'COVID-19 and social mobility impact brief #1: school shutdown', The Sutton Trust, April 2020; www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief.

[10] 'Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: rapid evidence assessment', Education Endowment Foundation, June 2020; https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/evidence-reviews/school-closures-rapid-evidence-assessment.

[11] Lisa-Maria Müller and Gemma Goldenberg, 'Education in times of crisis: the potential implications of school closures for teachers and students', Chartered College of Teaching, May 2020; https://chartered.college/2020/05/07/chartered-college-publishes-report-into-potential-implications-of-school-closures-and-global-approaches-to-education.

[12] Meredith Kier and Kelly Clark, 'The rapid response of William & Mary's School of Education to support preservice teachers and equitably provide mentoring to elementary learners in a culture of an international pandemic', in 'Journal of Technology and Teacher Education', Volume 28, Issue 2, 2020, pages 321–27; www.learntechlib.org/p/216153.

there is some evidence to suggest that children out of school were less physically active, had longer screen time and had more sleep.[13]

11. With regards to children's mental health, some international evidence suggests no impact on the well-being of children,[14] while other research points to a negative impact. The World Health Organisation identified that children are likely to experience worry, anxiety and fear.[15] School closures specifically could also have an exacerbating effect on children and young people with mental health issues.[16] Children no longer have the sense of structure and stimulation that is provided by the school environment and have less opportunity to be with their friends and get the social support that is essential for good mental well-being.[17]

Objectives of the research

12. Since March, when schools closed to most pupils, governors and trustees have had to change the way they operate and continue the work of governance. In addition to the short-term challenge of finding ways to meet remotely, there are longer-term implications that will affect governance when pupils return to school.

13. This research will improve Ofsted and NGA's understanding of the challenges that governors and trustees faced during school closures, and those they face in the future as schools reopen to all pupils. The findings will help NGA provide information and advice to governing boards.

14. The research will give an alternative perspective on education during and after school closures. In particular, it will help inspectors understand governance challenges and how school leaders have responded. There may be a long-term impact of school closures on educational achievement, but this is currently uncertain. This research will help Ofsted's understanding of the strategic actions and decisions that governors and trustees make within the context of

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[13] Sarah A Moore and others, 'Impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak on movement and play behaviours of Canadian children and youth: a national survey', in 'International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity', Volume 17, Issue 1, 2020; https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-020-00987-8.

[14] Pieter J Hoekstra, 'Suicidality in children and adolescents: lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 crisis', in 'European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry', Volume 29, Issue 6, 2020, pages 737–38; https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01570-z.

[15] 'Mental health and psychological resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic', World Health Organisation, 2020; www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-COVID-19/news/news/2020/3/mental-health-and-psychological-resilience-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.

[16] 'Coronavirus: impact on young people with mental health needs', YoungMinds, July 2020; https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs.

[17] Lisa-Maria Müller and Gemma Goldenberg, 'Education in times of crisis: the potential implications of school closures for teachers and students', Chartered College of Teaching, May 2020; https://chartered.college/2020/05/07/chartered-college-publishes-report-into-potential-implications-of-school-closures-and-global-approaches-to-education.

different schools and how these decisions respond to the needs of those schools.

Research methods

15. A brief outline of the methods we used to collect data is given below. Full details are available in Appendix 1.

16. This was a rapid, small-scale qualitative research project carried out between April and July 2020.

17. The research questions guiding this research were:

   ■ What are the current/most pressing issues governors and trustees are facing since schools closed?

   ■ What actions and decisions have they taken in response to these problems?

   ■ What problems do governors and trustees think they may need to address when schools reopen?

   ■ What actions and decisions have governors and trustees taken following any announcements from the DfE about schools reopening?

   We developed the research questions and focus group topic guides with input from NGA. Both NGA and Ofsted approved final versions of the research questions and topic guides.

18. We only spoke to governors and trustees for this research. What they told us was not externally verified by other methods, such as discussions with headteachers, parents or pupils. However, the aim of this research was to understand schools from a governance perspective. We wanted to understand how the work of governance was continuing and the longer-term implications for schools' strategic planning, rather than operational decision-making by headteachers.

19. The evidence in this research is the views of governors and trustees at a particular moment at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings can only reflect what they told us and their responses to the challenges presented by school closures. It helps Ofsted and NGA understand what was happening in schools without endorsing any of their views.

20. It is possible that, because governors and trustees were self-selecting, we only spoke to those with strong views. Focus groups can also make it more difficult for dissenting views to be heard. Reviewing the videos and transcripts of the focus groups showed that although participants were vocal, they did not always agree with each other. We heard a range of views and experiences.

21. It is also important to note that what governors and trustees told us was in relation to the most recent changes in government advice and guidance. Participants were often talking to us soon after particular announcements that

had a direct impact on schools and without the chance to reflect. This is indicated by the timeline shown in Appendix 1.

Research findings

22. We identified three distinct phases during which governing boards responded to different challenges. The three phases were:

   ■ short-term: responding to a crisis

   ■ medium-term: returning to normality

   ■ long-term: planning for uncertainty.

   Each of these phases related to particular government announcements and the DfE's guidance between 19 March and 1 July (see the timeline in Figure 1 in Appendix 1).

23. We also identified governing boards' involvement in two broader areas that were less time-sensitive and have longer-term implications for governing boards. These were:

   ■ access to remote education

   ■ financial management.

Short-term: responding to a crisis

24. The weeks immediately after the announcement that schools were to close to most children were a period of adaptation and resilience for governors and trustees. Governing boards faced the challenge of finding ways to meet and continue their work remotely.

Remote governance

25. All the governors and trustees we spoke to had used web-based video-conferencing tools and apps, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom, to hold governing board meetings remotely. Three chairs told us that they had policies for remote meetings in place before lockdown and had been quickly able to put these into action, rather than having to agree a new policy at short notice.

26. The situation around local governance within MATs was more variable. Although trustees frequently told us that meetings continued at Trust level, local governing body meetings did not always continue. One chair told us that these meetings were for each school to decide, while another mentioned that they had been suspended because they had a mainly educational focus. At one MAT, trust meetings continued as scheduled but local governance was suspended while schools were closed. Meetings were reinstated when schools reopened.

27. Governing boards used additional ways to keep in contact, such as WhatsApp groups, local governor hubs and increased use of email. This kind of contact was necessitated by a fast-moving situation and chairs having to make decisions rapidly and maintain a link between governors/trustees and school leaders.

28. Governing boards often changed some of their decision-making procedures and processes in order to respond to government announcements and the DfE's guidance, and so that they 'can make decisions more fluidly'.

29. One common response to having to make decisions quickly was to increase delegation to chairs, and sometimes a new committee made up of the chair of governors plus chairs of individual committees. Decisions were delegated to this smaller committee and then fed back to the full governing board. As one governor commented:

> 'You can't get everybody together each time you need to make one of these far-reaching decisions.'

30. Governing boards developed other ways to respond to the challenges of remote governance and needing to make important decisions at short notice. Examples of changes to governance practice included:

   ■ committees, particularly focused on curriculum and/or pupils' achievement, being stopped or moved to full governing board meetings

   ■ two chairs setting up a new 'return to normal' group

   ■ meeting dates changing to respond to new government guidance

   ■ making greater use of 'chair's action',[18] or decisions being delegated to chairs, working closely with the senior leader

   ■ meetings being kept to a minimum with shortened agendas to focus on essential business and urgent items

   ■ holding update meetings instead of full governing board meetings.

31. Several chairs told us they had had more frequent contact with the headteacher and that, as a result, this relationship had grown stronger.

Continuing the work of governance

32. The current crisis has not prevented governing boards from continuing to carry out key functions of governance. Several chairs told us they had remotely recruited headteachers, deputy headteachers and an executive headteacher rather than appoint interim staff.

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[18] 'Chair's action' is the procedure by which the chair of the board can take unilateral decisions, bypassing usual processes, in specific circumstances of urgency.

33. Two chairs reported completing complaints procedures online. This was despite the DfE's guidance that this was not necessary. Another chair reported completing two disciplinary panels. Each of these chairs told us they thought it was important to complete these procedures rather than expecting staff and headteachers to wait for a decision. Two chairs felt it was not appropriate to make long-term decisions about staffing in the current situation. In one school, the decision not to continue with a staff restructure was in part due to not knowing what the school might need in September. In both these schools, the decision not to proceed with pre-COVID-19 changes to staff would have a negative impact on the school's financial situation.

34. The governors and trustees we spoke to recognised that they had to continue with the day-to-day work of governance but still with an eye on the longer-term strategic decisions and actions that would impact their schools in the future. This was challenging for governing boards. Although not preventing that decision-making process, they suggested that COVID-19 had placed an additional layer of responsibility on their shoulders. One middle school chair going through a school restructure told us:

> 'I think this [COVID-19] puts another sort layer of focus to it. It probably just demands a little bit more… urgent thinking. We've got to become a secondary school in 15 months' time so we can't lose that from focus. But at the same time, we as a board must be sure that the senior leadership team are in the right place. For example, we know that we're going to have some maternity cover to try and work through. So those things don't stop.'

Lessons for the future

35. We asked governors and trustees whether there were any lessons to be learned from moving to online meetings and if they were intending to make any changes to governing board meetings in the future. The consensus was that although they would consider more online meetings in the future, there was still a need for some face-to-face meetings. The majority of those we spoke to were considering some form of hybrid approach to meetings in the future.

36. Governors said that online meetings had the potential to improve recruitment of governors. Not having to travel to meetings meant governing boards were less restricted to local governors within easy travelling distance. It was suggested that recruiting from a wider geographical area may provide governing boards with a larger and more diverse pool from which to recruit governors to fill particular skills gaps.

37. A few participants mentioned that not having to travel to meetings had improved the attendance of some governors who struggled to attend meetings regularly due to work or childcare commitments.

38. Generally, governors and trustees told us that online meetings allowed more effective decision-making. Several chairs said meetings were more focused. Chairs were quite forthright in their views about how online meetings had been an improvement. They told us there was 'less waffle' and that they had 'cut the crap' and stuck to the agenda and main business of the meeting. Chairs told us 'it's really focused people' and prevented meetings 'just wandering off'.

39. This greater focus could be because governors and trustees had to make important decisions and focus on urgent COVID-19-related business. However, the fact that governors are considering some form of hybrid-meeting format in the future suggests this was not the only reason for meetings being more effective.

40. Although chairs felt there were many advantages to meeting remotely, there were also some reservations specified. For instance, while it was often easier to include all governors in more structured meetings online, this formality was viewed as something that could also stifle valuable informal discussions. Face-to-face meetings were considered better for this, hence a need for some to continue.

41. A few chairs also highlighted that they thought online meetings encouraged less dynamic discussion than face-to-face meetings. They expressed concern that conversation could be 'a bit stilted' and that meetings could feel like 'me having a conversation with the headteacher with other people present' rather than a dynamic interaction when people are together in a room.

42. Governors and trustees also told us an important aspect of meeting face to face was getting to know others on the board, particularly if they were new. Coming into school for meetings is also an important part of them getting to know a school and the senior leader. It may be harder to build those relationships remotely.

43. If online governing board meetings continue, chairs may need to find ways to ensure that governors and trustees have the chance to engage in discussion. This would mitigate for these meetings becoming what one chair described as 'a question and answer session with the headteacher'.

Medium-term: getting back to normal

44. These findings focus on May to June, when primary schools were reopening to Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 and secondary schools were planning to have some Year 10 and Year 12 pupils in school. This was a period of rapid decision-making for governing boards in response to government announcements and guidance.

45. The need to digest large amounts of information and make important decisions at short notice put a lot of responsibility on governing boards and chairs, who were frequently frustrated by a lack of support from central and local government.

Guidance and support

46. Governors and trustees described a lack of clarity about where the decision lay to reopen schools, making the decision-making process harder. School leaders received varying levels of guidance and support about reopening, depending on the type and location of schools.

47. There was frequently a difference in the support schools received as part of a MAT compared with maintained schools, although this could also vary between trusts. Local governing bodies often received direct support and guidance from the trust about reopening schools to more children. One local governor told us that that the chief executive of the MAT had been in contact with the LA, unions, the DfE and lawyers. This governor at two schools in the MAT told us he had relied on the chief executive for decisions about opening. In another trust, local governing bodies were able to take any concerns to the chief executive so that the trust could provide support and guidance and answer individual concerns.

48. Schools in a trust that were allowed to make their own decisions about opening did so in consultation with the trust, so that those governing and headteachers felt they had the backing and support of the trust whatever they decided. This took much of the pressure off school leaders, as the following comment shows:

    'We gave the heads kind of relief that the decision was taken above them by a group of people that had listened to their concerns.'

49. The support most chairs received from the MAT contrasted with the guidance from some LAs in terms of a reopening strategy. Although chairs appreciated that LAs were themselves under pressure, they would have welcomed more support early on in the weeks before schools were able to open to more pupils. This again placed additional pressure on those governing and particularly chairs.

    'The MATs were able to say right in our schools this is what's going to happen. The LA, I think with the best intention in the world, didn't give a clear strategy for how to open. It was down to heads to make the choice in the end.'

    In the absence of clear guidance from some LAs, many governors told us they had relied on information from other organisations, particularly NGA.

50. Not all LAs were equally criticised for a lack of guidance. A few governors mentioned that their LAs had produced skeleton risk assessments for schools to adapt to their own circumstances. One chair told us their LA had offered to review school risk assessments to make sure that they had incorporated everything that they would consider necessary. This provided an additional level of assurance for governors as well as their own scrutiny of the risk assessment.

51. In each focus group, governors and trustees were critical of the amount of information and guidance from central and local government, and the responsibility on them to read lots of paperwork at short notice before making key decisions.

> 'Trying to put risk assessments in place which take into account the legal requirement, the DfE requirement, the trade union requirement and the PHE [Public Health England] requirement has just been nonsensical.'

52. Governors and trustees particularly mentioned how the government made critical announcements about schools in the evening or during school holidays. Several mentioned that it was unhelpful that the DfE's guidance was often released a few days after announcements from the Prime Minister. The fact that guidance frequently changed placed added pressure on those governing to have oversight of changes to risk assessments and plans for schools reopening at short notice.

53. Chairs generally felt strongly that the lack of clear advice and guidance from central and local government added to the workload of governing during COVID-19 and the responsibility that came with it. One chair told us that: 'I would certainly not sign up knowing what I know now'. This governor went on to say that that she believed the increased responsibility placed on governing boards would have a negative impact on recruitment of governors.

54. Chairs told us about the increased responsibility they felt making decisions around schools reopening. A few governors told us their involvement in decisions to partially reopen schools and in creating the risk assessments to make sure children, staff and parents were safe weighed heavily on them. They told us how 'the consequences of making the wrong decisions means that's been difficult', and how 'the responsibility on governors has been massive to make these decisions that affect peoples' lives and their well-being'.

Acting as a critical friend

55. Several governors and trustees emphasised the additional support they had been giving school leaders during this time. Supporting senior leaders to make those choices while at the same time acting as a critical friend was a big challenge for governors and trustees. We wanted to know if those governing felt they had been able to challenge the decisions of headteachers in difficult circumstances. They told us that they had found a balance between support and challenge. Chairs felt able to challenge headteachers when needed but in a supportive way:

> 'I have challenged some decisions but not aggressively. I've questions, but supportive questions.'

56. Governors and trustees told us that, as a governing board, their priority at the moment was to give as much support as possible to headteachers and staff. One participant commented:

> 'without too much challenge because they have enough challenge on their hands without us doing our governance bit and being the critical friend. I think we've got to be more friends than critical at the moment.'

57. An important role for chairs and governing boards in this period was oversight of school risk assessments. The chairs we spoke to were closely involved with approving schools' risk assessments and discussing them with headteachers. Some chairs had approved the risk assessment with the headteacher and then shared it at a governing board meeting. Others told us the full risk assessment had gone to the governing board for approval. This may reflect the line between operational and strategic decisions being blurred around risk assessments and the timing of governing board meetings.

58. Several chairs have also performed an important role as a sounding board for senior leaders' decisions around schools reopening.

> '… it's just being there to be able to listen and provide that support as well as obviously being able to scrutinise plans and proposals.'

59. This allowed governors and trustees to challenge and have oversight of risk assessments without becoming involved in operational decisions. The governors and trustees we spoke to were confident in their ability to maintain the distinction between operational and strategic decisions, and keep the balance between the two in the light of the difficult decisions they needed to take.

60. When governors and trustees spoke to us about staffing challenges in the run up to schools reopening, several mentioned challenges from teaching unions.

> 'Obviously with the union involvement as well, we were very heavily impacted by that and not only our teaching staff, but our support staff as well.'

61. Governors and trustees did not mention any unions by name, but as they referred to unions' involvement when talking about staff we inferred they were referring to teaching and support staff unions.

62. Governors and trustees understood unions' concerns but felt that unions' announcements advising staff not to engage in planning for a return to work had added a layer of uncertainty in an already difficult situation. Not knowing if, or how many, staff might choose not to return to work was just 'back-loading the pressure' already felt by schools and those governing.

63. On the other hand, other governors and trustees did tell us about the good support and information that headteachers had received from leadership associations.

Long-term: planning for uncertainty

64. In June, talk of a second spike of COVID-19 cases in Leicester was only just beginning. When we spoke to governors and trustees, one or two said they were keeping an eye on their local situation and the impact of a possible winter spike in COVID-19 cases. However, this was not an overriding concern for those governing, who were focused on reopening schools and the challenges and workload this represented.

65. The final focus group at the beginning of July, however, took place soon after the announcement of a local lockdown in Leicester. Those at this meeting told us they were beginning to think about contingency plans for local spikes in their own areas. They believed that their experience to date meant they could respond quickly to future school closures. They particularly mentioned that having online remote learning in place would help a 'seamless' transition back to home learning.

66. When we spoke to governors and trustees in early June, the government had not announced that all schools would be opening in September. Most did not expect all children to be back in school full time by this date. Despite this uncertainty, and the chance to really reflect on the longer-term impact of lockdown on staff and pupils, governors and trustees were clear in what they believed should be the priorities for next term.

67. They identified two priorities when schools opened for all pupils in September:

- well-being, and the need for this to come before the focus on pupils' outcomes
- pupils' outcomes, including the learning loss of disadvantaged pupils.

We did not discuss whether these were the right priorities for schools, as that was not the purpose of the research. A number of topics were not discussed, such as physical health and non-digital methods of delivering remote education. We did not evaluate whether these topics should have been priorities. This reflects the challenges governors and trustees faced at the time of the research.

68. The governors and trustees we spoke to still felt considerable uncertainty about what reopening schools to more pupils might look like. However, there was a strong sense among them that schools need to be able to determine for themselves how best to meet their priorities and 'write our own narrative'.

'Writing our own narrative'

69. Participants in the final focus group on 1 July told us that schools needed confidence in their ability to plan for the future, depending on what that future might look like for individual schools rather than assuming 'we're all the same' and adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to pupils returning in September. They

said issues around pupils' mental well-being and loss of learning may be the same, but schools will need different ways to address these issues and in accordance with the schools' ethos and values.

70. Governors and trustees thought that until pupils are settled back in school, leaders will not be able to assess pupils' mental health and their loss of learning. At that stage, governing boards will be in a stronger position to fully understand the challenges and to plan an effective response rather than implementing 'quick fixes'.

> 'We need to map and understand our own problems with our own evidence before we rush into just doing something that we're told is best practice without giving it any real consideration.'

71. Governors and trustees were already thinking about actions that might be needed to meet some of the challenges they were anticipating. One governor told us the governing board had approved changes to the behaviour policy. This included an amendment to say that each exclusion would be considered to see if there were any COVID-19-related effects on behaviour.

72. Governors and trustees we spoke to had begun to discuss what curriculum changes might be needed to address loss of learning. While at least one governor described how the curriculum had been 'ripped up and restarted', others talked about how they believed their school needed a 'curriculum for recovery'.

73. Although decisions about the detail of the curriculum are operational rather than strategic, it is the business of governance to consider what pupils should leave the school having learned and experienced and how they are being prepared for the next stage. Several of the governors and trustees we spoke to had discussed the curriculum in governing board meetings, knowing that it is important for them to understand and challenge the decisions that school leaders are having to make. Governing boards are beginning to have these conversations and think about how the curriculum may need to adapt to pupils' needs and to mitigate any issues when they return to school.

Monitoring pupils' outcomes

74. We wanted to understand how those governing would continue to challenge and hold headteachers to account for pupils' outcomes and make sure all pupils get to where they would have done had schools not closed.

75. They were keen to point out that, although the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils was likely to have increased, it is important for governing boards to consider the impact on all pupils. The loss of education in schools may have affected the achievement of other pupils, in addition to those eligible for pupil premium funding and those with special educational needs and disabilities. There will be differences between where individual children would have been and where they are when they return to school.

76. The challenge longer-term will be to focus on the learning loss generally, including for children who have not previously been identified as disadvantaged. One chair told us:

> 'It isn't just going to be pupil premium anymore, is it? It's going to be those who actually fall outside of the pupil premium criteria, but actually they will have knowledge gaps and it's identifying gaps through the whole school.'

77. Several governors and trustees were concerned about how long it might take for pupils to catch up. They were uncertain about the long-term impact of partial school closure on different categories of pupils and those at different stages of education. Some felt it could take several years for pupils to 'get back to where they were in March' and for schools to address the learning loss. Nevertheless, schools had not fully reopened when these views were expressed, and so governors and trustees had limited information with which to make these judgements. Uncertainty about possible changes to GCSEs, phonics screening and Year 6 national curriculum assessments (commonly referred to as SATs) was adding to the challenges for those governing.

78. Governors and trustees were confident in existing systems and procedures to monitor pupils' outcomes in the absence of any national data, such as national curriculum assessments and GCSE exam results. When governing boards had effective structures to monitor pupils' outcomes, they said they would continue to use schools' internal data and assurance systems to monitor pupils' performance in the absence of national data points. Although mindful of the challenges facing teachers in assessing what children have learned from remote learning, governors would continue to use internal assessments and headteachers' reports to be assured that schools had strategies to help pupils catch up.

79. When we spoke to governors and trustees as schools were preparing to reopen to some pupils, they were pessimistic about the impact of being out of school and lockdown on pupils' well-being. They agreed with the view of one governor that:

> 'Even before we look at the education, it's back to the well-being of the children.'

Several told us they would focus on the mental health and well-being of pupils returning to school in September before learning.

Revising strategic plans

80. Governors and trustees recognised that they should start thinking about how they may need to revise the school development plan and governing boards' long-term strategies in response to the impact of school closures. There were different responses to reviewing strategies and improvement plans but a strong

view that, whatever governors decided to do, it was going to look different next year. There will need to be 'some kind of adjustment' but they had little sense yet what that might look like and its potential impact on the curriculum.

81. The governors and trustees we spoke to were at different stages in thinking about planning for the future. One told us that the governing board had 'ripped up' its existing strategic plan and their focus on the curriculum because:

> 'We're not going to be able to monitor outcomes in data… certainly for the rest of this year, and in my opinion… next year, the well-being of children and their emotional resilience is what needs to be built upon to make sure they're ready to learn now. So, we have literally ripped up our strategic plan and have said we will start again.'

82. One governor talked about the need to 'turn our attention to how our schools can thrive again'. Until June, schools had very much been in crisis mode and surviving the initial phase of lockdown. Governors and trustees told us the challenge now, and in the longer-term, was to adjust school development plans and consider the support children may need and what central support may be available.[19] They needed to think about what parts of their strategic plan were essential and what could be postponed. Above all, they needed to consider what is achievable given the context and needs of individual schools, ongoing uncertainty about schools reopening and the impact on schools of local outbreaks of COVID-19.

83. Several governors and trustees told us that although their three-year plan and its long-term goals were unlikely to change substantially, the focus might shift next year. Long-term school improvement priorities were the same, but governors agreed there were now far more unknowns to take into account when thinking about short- and medium-term plans to achieve those goals. At this stage of uncertainty, strategic planning may need to be what one governor described as 'a moveable feast' so that governing boards can think ahead but at the same time be flexible and respond to change. Governors and trustees have responded to this challenge by:

- creating a next-steps group
- revising the school development plan so that all priorities consider COVID-19
- viewing their strategy as a 'rolling document' that can be adapted as needed.

Reactions to the announcement on catch-up funding

84. We spoke to a focus group of five governors and trustees soon after the government announcement of £1 billion catch-up funding for schools. They were concerned about how this money might be used and how much schools

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[19] This focus group took place before the government announced its catch-up funding.

would receive. 'I don't think we're going to see anything realistically anyway', one governor of a maintained primary school told us. Another governor told us that the existing Year 7 catch-up funding would become part of the money announced by the government on 19 July.

85. There were concerns about how much input schools would have into how the money would be used. Governors and trustees felt they needed to assess and understand the problems their school was facing. They wanted to develop their own approach to catch up based on internal assessments of what children needed, rather than 'some external scheme that doesn't necessarily understand that and meet our needs'.

86. In all the focus groups, some governors and trustees told us that catching up in their schools would not just focus on the curriculum, exams and tests. It would also be about catching up in terms of pupils' well-being, readiness to learn and ability to learn. Although we were only able to speak to governors very soon after government catch-up funding had been announced, their comments reflect their wish to 'write their own narrative'.

Access to remote education

87. The rapid move to remote home learning has forced governors to begin to think about children's experiences of learning remotely, particularly the equity of access to online provision and the quality of learning as well as alternatives to online activities.

88. Several governors and trustees were concerned about children's lack of access to online remote education. The reasons behind this varied, but included a lack of availability of both adequate internet access and devices. One governor told us that their school was aware of the disparity of devices among children. This governor was already considering how the leadership and governing board would need to start looking at equity across the school with regard to the different types of technology children were using for remote learning. Others talked about concerns over the internet quality that children had at home, as well as children not having access to their own device.

89. The number of children accessing remote learning was a concern for one MAT trustee. He told us that only 46% of children able to access the learning provided were actually engaging in all the work. At least 15% of this group of children were lower attainers. Another governor in a school with 44% of children eligible for pupil premium funding described a high number of children without broadband at home.

90. Schools were at different stages of developing remote learning for pupils, depending on the quality of their online learning platforms and the equipment and technical support for staff. There was a variety of facilities available across schools. Some were quickly using Google Classrooms and providing online teaching and materials straightaway. Others were only delivering handwritten

worksheets. There were also differences between MATs and small primary schools, as described by one participant who governed in three different types of settings:

> 'With the multi-academy trust, it almost felt like business as usual. They had so much stuff being whacked online straight away… whereas the primaries were slower, and with my little primary we did have to give them [staff] quite a lot of encouragement before it felt like they had the confidence to do things.'

91. Governors and trustees did not talk about the quality, or lack of quality, of remote education provided by their own schools. They talked to us more generally about the quality of remote and online learning and the role of those governing to be assured about the quality of remote learning. Two governors we spoke to told us they believed there was a need to look at home learning on a national level as a way to address potential disparities between children's experience of remote education in different geographic areas.

> 'Nationally, there needs to be an understanding of what home learning quality is going to look like... so that we've got schools that aren't disadvantaged because one school is doing this and then two miles up the road, another school is doing that.'

92. Governing boards may need a way to understand what quality in remote learning looks like before they can monitor and challenge what schools are doing effectively. As one governor told us: 'it is an issue across the country, but it's something we have to look at'.

Financial management

93. We wanted to know whether governors and trustees thought COVID-19 would have an impact on school budgets and financial management. The picture was variable and seemed to relate to schools' existing financial position.

94. Some governors and trustees expected savings, while others were predicting a negative impact on their budget. Schools may have made savings on electricity and water bills as well as supply teaching costs. On the other hand, some may have lost additional revenue from lettings, after-school clubs and providing catering to other schools. Schools have also had to pay for additional cleaning.

95. The impact of COVID-19 seems to have amplified the pre-existing financial situation of a school, whatever it was. Governors in schools with less healthy finances, including budget deficits, talked about the costs associated with COVID-19, while those in schools with healthy finances were less likely to be affected by COVID-19-related expenditure.

96. Although governing boards are beginning to count the cost of COVID-19 and expect additional expenditure on supporting mental health, the picture is still uncertain.

Conclusions

97. The findings from this research show 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.

98. There may be some ways that governing boards might consider learning from the experiences of the governors and trustees we spoke to for this research, including:

   ■ considering a hybrid approach to governing board meetings, which may allow them to benefit from the advantages of meeting online while not losing sight of what face-to-face meetings offer

   ■ creating a remote meetings policy

   ■ considering whether to reassess the trust's/school's strategy to take into account the impact of COVID-19 now and in the future, remembering it might not be necessary

   ■ keeping hold of the good, and considering whether there are any lessons to be learned from governing board's experiences in the past few months

   ■ developing robust procedures to monitor the quality and impact of remote learning

   ■ evaluating existing internal systems for monitoring pupils' progress and attainment in the absence of external data, without adding unnecessary workload for school staff

   ■ joining a network for governors and trustees to share experiences and learning.

Appendix 1: detailed methodology

This appendix gives details of the methods of data collection and the sample included in the research.

We carried out nine focus groups with governors and trustees who were members of NGA. Eight of the focus groups took place between 1 June and 9 June.

We held an additional focus group on 1 July to explore in greater depth the longer-term problems for governing boards. This focus group also provided an opportunity to talk to governors and trustees about the government's recent announcements, such as catch-up funding.

Figure 1 shows a timeline of the main announcements and guidance for schools as context for the focus group discussions and participants' comments.

Figure 1: Key government announcements for schools and focus group dates

Date	Announcement
March	18 – A-level and GCSE exams cancelled 20 – PM announces schools to close for all but 'priority groups'
April	3 – A-level and GCSE grades to be based on teacher predictions
May	10 – Schools may reopen to Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 from 1 June 13 – National Education Union (NEU) and Unison tell members not to engage with planning for reopening 22 – Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advises 1 June reopening is too soon 24 – PM announces secondary schools can open to Year 10 and Year 12 27 – PM says reopening is safe from 15 June if secondary schools follow precautions
June (focus groups 1 to 9 June)	1 – Schools in some areas to remain closed 4 – DfE publishes first guidance for governing boards on their role during COVID-19 9 – DfE scraps plan to bring back all primary school children for a month in the summer term 19 – £1 billion catch-up funding announced 29 – DfE announces pupils not in school in September could be fined
July (focus group 1 July)	2 – DfE announces all schools will open to all pupils in September and publishes guidance

We held focus groups of up to six participants on Microsoft Teams video calls, recording each discussion. The conversations were then transcribed for analysis using qualitative data analysis software. Each 90-minute focus group was facilitated by researchers from Ofsted and NGA.

The research followed Ofsted's ethical research policy,[20] and participants were given an information sheet and consent form before agreeing to take part in the research.

All NGA members were invited to volunteer to take part in the research and we received nearly 400 expressions of interest. We divided this list into seven groups according to school type and phase. Each of these groups was randomised to encourage roughly equal groups of approximately eight to 10 participants. All participants across the groups with randomisation 1 were compiled into group 1, which was the primary invite list. This list was reviewed to exclude any senior leaders. All governors and trustees allocated to group 1 were invited to take part in a focus group. When there were not enough participants signed up to groups, we sent an invitation to all governors and trustees in group 2.

The final sample of 28 governors and trustees represented different phases and types of schools across all Ofsted's regions.[21] Table 1 and Table 2 show the final sample of participants according to school phase and type respectively. Ten participants were part of governance in more than one school and/or a MAT.

Table 1: Number of focus group participants by school phase

School phase or type	Primary school	Infant school	Alternative provision	Special school	Secondary school	Middle school
Number of participants	47	2	2	2	16	2

Table 2: Number of focus group participants by school type

School phase or type	Church school	Grammar school	LA-maintained school	Single academy trust	MAT
Number of participants	4	1	9	4	10

The number of participants from each Ofsted region is shown in Table 3.

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[20] 'Ofsted's ethical research policy', Ofsted, December 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsteds-ethical-research-policy.
[21] Ofsted's eight regions across England are listed at: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about#who-we-are.

Table 3: Focus group participants by Ofsted region

Ofsted region	Number of participants
North East, Yorkshire and Humber	4
South East	8
South West	4
East of England	2
West Midlands	3
North West	3
East Midlands	2
London	2
Total	28

Appendix 2: topic guide for focus groups

Focus groups 1 June to 9 June

1. How have you been managing remote board meetings?

- What online platforms have you used?
- Are there any changes to the way governing board meetings take place?
- Any changes to how you conduct committee meetings?
- What are the main challenges doing business as usual? Aspects that could come up: handling complaints, exclusions, recruitment
- Are there any lessons to take to future meetings?
- How have you/are you handled/ing making any urgent decisions?

2. Thinking about the short-term during school closures, what are the main challenges and most pressing issues you have faced?

(For MATs only – what support have you had from the Trust?)

Aspects that could come up:

- staff's and pupils' well-being
- holding leaders to account while at the same time understanding the extenuating circumstances
- supporting headteachers
- safeguarding vulnerable pupils when absent from school
- meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils
- accommodating the needs of key worker and vulnerable children
- school budget and any impact on financial management.

The next question is about schools reopening. We know that some schools will reopen from this week/have already opened and some (mainly secondary) have yet to reopen.

3. We would like to understand the decisions and actions that governors and trustees have taken to allow schools to reopen or in preparation for reopening.

(For primary schools only: what specific actions and decisions have you made to enable your school to reopen for some pupils in June?)

(For AP/special schools: what are some of the specific challenges you have faced in remaining open for a larger number of pupils?)

(For secondary schools: what is governors' role in preparing to reopen secondary schools for Years 10 and 12 from 15 June?)

- What part did governors play in schools reopening?
- How did governors support/challenge the headteachers' decisions and actions?
- How has your board supported your school with stakeholder communications (for example, parents, staff)?
- How have you as governors responded to the DfE's guidelines and proposals around schools reopening?
- What support was there for governors from the LA/Trust?

4. What do you anticipate will be the main challenges and issues for governing boards when schools reopen?

(This may have been covered in the previous question, do reiterate if appropriate to see if anyone wants to add anything and to call on the quieter participants.)

Could include:

- their involvement in any risk assessment
- how to address widening gap between disadvantaged pupils and others
- the challenges of making up for time lost for those pupils in exam years in primary and secondary schools
- mental health of pupils and staff
- performance management
- shielding staff
- absenteeism (for example, parents' resistance to sending children back).

5. …And the challenges governors will face in the next two to three years? What issues do you think you may need to address in the longer-term as part of strategic planning?

Conversation to try and cover:

- impact on budget planning and financial management
- impact on strategic plans and schools' development plans
- data and accountability and how to mitigate for the quality/absence of these and still hold headteachers to account
- the longer-term impact on disadvantaged pupils and how to address this.

6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Focus group 1 July

We held a series of focus groups in June to explore the actions and decisions governors and trustees have made since schools partially closed in March. Since then, things have moved on and we would like to explore in more detail some of the longer-term issues governing boards will have to deal with next term, as well as in the coming academic year or maybe for longer.

1. What do you anticipate will be the main challenges for governing boards when schools reopen in September?

Could include:

- their involvement in any risk assessment
- how to address widening gap between disadvantaged pupils and others
- the challenges of making up for time lost for those pupils in exam years in primary and secondary schools
- mental health of pupils and staff
- performance management
- shielding staff
- absenteeism (for example, parents' resistance to sending children back).

2. ...And the challenges governors and trustees will face in the next two to three years? What issues do you think you may need to address in the longer-term as part of strategic planning?

Conversation to try and cover:

- impact on budget planning and financial management
- impact on strategic plans and school development plans
- data and accountability and how to mitigate for the quality/absence of these and still hold headteachers to account
- the longer-term impact on not only disadvantaged pupils and how to address this
- contingency planning for local spikes in COVID-19 cases.

3. The DfE announced there will be catch-up funding for schools. Have governors had any conversations about how this could be used in schools?

- funding summer schools
- intervention groups
- 1:1 tuition.

4. Is there anything else you would like to add?