

## Conducting Virtual Governing Board Meetings

These are challenging times whilst we attempt to keep the work of the governing board functioning and look for ways to best support our schools. Many governors are now having to work from home and may also have younger people at home as well. This can lead to a much busier home situation than is normally the case, with family members competing for space and broadband connection!

Many governing boards are turning to the use of video conferencing applications, such as Zoom/Skype/MS Teams/Google Hangouts to conduct governing board meetings. These are great applications which enable us to continue to work and keep in contact with family and loved ones who are not in the same household. Their use does, however, raise a number of safeguarding and data protection issues when working from home. Governance business is highly confidential, and we can find ourselves dealing with issues that affect individual members of staff and pupils. It's important that we observe the same levels of confidentiality that we would when in school premises. These are not insurmountable, and I have written a few pointers below which, if we all follow them, will give us some assurance that we are complying with legal and safeguarding requirements. These are my personal observations from practice and also reflect guidance released by NGA and other organisations working in the area of school governance.

### Location

**Think about where** you are going to join the video conference from within your home. Ideally this would be an area which is away from the other occupants of the house and behind a closed door. I appreciate that this may be easier said than done and some folks have even resorted to using the garden shed!

### Type of device

The best advice is to **use a modern laptop or desktop computer** with an internal camera. This will enable you to see all of the participants and will give you access to the full range of functions on the application you are using. It is fine to use a mobile phone or tablet device but bear in mind that you will be using a smaller screen and that some of the functions will either not be available or difficult to access.

### Headphones

**Use a pair of headphones or earphones** when on the call. This ensures that the sound from the call is only heard by you and no one else in the household. It also reduces any feedback on the call which can be unpleasant for all participants. These don't need to be expensive or High-Tec. The ones which came with your mobile will fine.

### Mute your microphone

In all video conference applications (Zoom/Skype/Google/MS) there is the ability to switch off your microphone temporarily. **You should do this when you are not speaking.** The microphones are very sensitive and if left unmuted will pick up any background noise from your location. Not only will this give other participants on the call a lot of background noise to deal with (when unmuted) it could also potentially breach data protection if your microphone should pick up background conversations.

### Camera

In the same way that your microphone can pick up unhelpful sound there is the risk that your camera will pick up things that it shouldn't. By this I mean family photographs which are on the wall in your home or written information. **Your camera needs to be near enough to you so that your head and shoulders fill the image.** Not so far away from you that we can see the contents of your room!

### Documents

You will have received copies of documents to read before the meeting and discuss on the call. You may decide to print out paper copies on your home printer. If you decide to do this, **then any paper copies must be disposed of carefully at the end of the call.**

### Recordings of the call

In some applications there is the facility to record the conference call. This can be useful for the clerk when typing up the minutes afterwards **but should only be operated by the clerk with the permission of all participants.** It is good practice for the recording to be deleted after the call and when the minutes have been typed.

### Call etiquette

It is advisable to log onto the call, using the details that the clerk has sent you, **5 minutes before** the call is due to start. This is to give everyone time to adjust their cameras, devices and microphones ready for a prompt start.

**The chair will have agreed with you a means of indicating that you wish to speak** or make a point. Unlike normal face to face conversation, the application won't deal well with lots of people speaking at the same time as it will cut out. Typical means of indication you wish to make a point are raising your hand in view of your camera, using the chat/message facility in the application or (where the app has this) raising a digital hand.

Video conference calls require a higher level of concentration than face to face interactions and therefore many people find them very tiring. For this reason, it is advisable to keep the conversations brief and focussed. An ideal length for a video conference meeting would be less than 1 hour.

### Test calls

Many clerks will offer you the opportunity to join a short test call a day or two before the proper meeting. **This is to give you opportunity to test your connection** and use of your device in a less public arena.

### Governance procedure

**Normal governance procedure applies** in the same way as a face to face meeting. This means that there needs to be an agenda and papers sent out at least 7 days before the meeting. The meeting needs to be minuted and has to be quorate.

These are my initial thoughts and observations and I would be keen to hear of your experiences as we navigate this new way of working together.

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