

GOVERNOR HEADLINES

Welcome to issue #35 of Governor Headlines for May 2020.

This is the second Governor Headlines newsletter to be produced during the COVID-19 lockdown and we want to express how grateful we are for your continued hard work and support for your school leaders and other members of staff, especially when so many of you are likely to be dealing with your own worries and challenges. Your role as a school governor continues to be a vital one during this time and your commitment is not going unnoticed.

This newsletter contains advice from Suffolk governors on virtual governance meetings, some suggestions on how a skills audit can contribute to school improvement and information on the new Locality Virtual Schools.

The wellbeing of school leaders, staff and children is of paramount importance and we realise that some will understandably be feeling the strain. This newsletter also includes articles on safety, health and wellbeing for schools during COVID-19, however if you or your school leaders are in need of support, please call the Leadership Wellbeing Support helpline on 01473 260163.

As always, if you have any thoughts or suggestions regarding Governor Headlines please contact governorheadlines@suffolk.gov.uk .

Schools' Choice Governance Briefing Summer 2020

This month's edition of Governor Headlines would usually feature your half-termly edition of The Knowledge, a collaborative document between Suffolk County Council and School's Choice which keeps you up-to-date with all the latest changes in governance policy. However, given the current situation with COVID-19 we thought it would be more beneficial to share with you the Schools' Choice Governance Briefing for Summer 2020, which gathers together a range of information to support your governance during this period of uncertainty. Please find the online document [here](#).

Virtual Governance Meetings

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW

WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

The Department for Education (DfE) have made changes to the “school governance update March 2020: advice for governing bodies” in their [School governance update](#) document. The document contains important news and communications from the DfE relating to governance in both maintained schools and academy trusts and the information updated refers to video or teleconferencing applications.

Not all of you will have held a virtual governance meeting as yet, and some of you may be sceptical or anxious about how this could work. However, the Local Authority School Leadership and Governance team have been receiving some very positive feedback from governing bodies who have already carried out a virtual meeting. Ian Liddell, Chair of Governors at Otley and Witnesham federated primary schools shared the following feedback and advice:

“We carried out a remote FGB with 11 participants and with a bit of patience, so that we were not talking over each other, it worked really well and was a very productive meeting. I would recommend that the Headteacher or Chair shares their screen so that everybody is looking at the same document and to state your name before you speak for the benefit of the clerk and minutes.”

We also asked Chair of Governors Sally Connolly what her experience was like chairing a virtual meeting for Boxford Primary School. You can read her thoughts below:

How did you set up your virtual governance meeting?

- 1. Agreed with Headteacher that this was possible for her to prevent too much pressure at a difficult time.*
- 2. Sent email to governors to say we were going ahead but changing the time. They agreed to attend.*
- 3. Emailed our Clerk who agreed to clerk. We then had a trial meeting to ensure that she was comfortable with the system.*
- 4. Offered to do a trial with any governors worried about the system. (none felt they needed to)*
- 5. Sent out the access codes to all those attending.*

What were the negatives of holding a virtual meeting?

It was hard to not speak over each other to start but we got used to the dynamic very quickly.

How did you/would you overcome any challenges in holding a virtual meeting?

Agreed with the Clerk that she would say if she needed us to stop to clarify. However, this is the case in meetings anyway so not really a challenge.

What would be your advice to other governing bodies who are yet to hold a virtual governance meeting?

Definitely do it. It was great to see everyone. We managed to clear policies, pass the budget and ensure that the school continues to run at the high standards that we expect as a governing body. The Headteacher was able to see that she is supported by her board, that work can continue and that strategic decision making is not being neglected. The challenge and support relationship is vitally important to Headteachers who need to know that they are not operating in a vacuum in these strange times. We are also running remote committee meetings.

Boxford's virtual meeting was clerked by Schools' Choice clerk Sue Fuller, who was also kind enough to give us her perspective on the meeting and the challenges faced by clerks, as well as some advice of how to overcome these:

"The meeting was the first virtual meeting I had ever attended as a Clerk. Because the Chair had never held a virtual meeting either, she invited me to meet with her separately to trial the platform and discuss the agenda and what items were key. The agenda had been drafted before the Covid-19 outbreak/lockdown, so the importance of some of the items had reduced.

As any good clerk knows, I found it had paid off to look at the agenda and previous minutes prior to both my pre-meeting with the Chair and also before the governing body virtual meeting, and to make notes of any issues I wanted to raise beforehand. Due to lockdown, we are having to work paperless which does not come naturally to me. Luckily, although papers were referred to and had been uploaded to GovHub, I did not need to refer to them during the meeting (I'm not sure how I would have been able to do this, whilst also listening to fast moving conversation, watching the screen to see who was talking and taking minutes, all at the same time).

That is my only concern – that governing bodies need to remember that the Clerk would not necessarily have access to the paperwork at the time of a virtual meeting

and so might find the thread of conversation more difficult to follow, compared to having a report in front of them to annotate as they might at a face-to-face meeting.

Apart from that, the meeting worked well. Governors were able to join the meeting late and depart and re-join, depending on their individual lockdown responsibilities at home.

It helped that governors spoke clearly, and as a clerk, I clarified any action points etc.

All in all, a positive, first time virtual governance meeting!”

Wellbeing During COVID-19

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

School leaders and staff have shown themselves to be remarkably flexible and resilient in the current situation, for which we are immensely grateful. However, crisis management takes its toll. It is important for governors to be aware of the wellbeing of their school staff as they bear the burden of this extended period of uncertainty. We would advise you to check that your Headteacher can access professional and personal support from a range of sources. Ideally, this will include:

- someone else senior inside the school, trust, or federation
- someone outside the school from their own network, e.g. a colleague Headteacher in another school, someone from a previous school or their National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) cohort
- someone on the governing board, often the Chair of Governors
- professional bodies such as Suffolk Primary Headteacher's Association (SPHA), Suffolk Association of Secondary Heads (SASH), Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), National Association of Headteachers (NAHT)
- the Local Authority Leadership Wellbeing Support telephone line – 01473 260163.

Here are some other suggestions:

- Check what provision the school has for supporting the wellbeing of staff. Schools often buy into packages for this. Review your school's offer and decide whether it is adequate to support staff through the current situation. Think ahead. When schools re-open they will be communities of more fragile individuals who have experienced collective and individual trauma. Will there be enough support for staff to help children through this? There are already

some resources aimed at supporting the mental health implication of coronavirus, for example those supplied by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families which can be found [here](#).

- Arrange for contact with the wider staff. Whether it was monitoring visits, popping into the staffroom at breaktime, or saying “Hello” at the school gate, your usual method of checking-in with staff beyond the Headteacher, has likely been cut off. Talk to your Headteacher about appropriate ways of making yourself available to the wider staff. This might be through sharing contact details, dialling in to a virtual meeting, or sending out an update. Staff will be pleased to know you are thinking of them and that governance continues in whatever form it can.
- Try to give as much normality as you can. The continued functioning of the governing board in virtual meetings, reviewing policies and maintaining contact, will be reassuring. If you don't have [a Heads and Chairs agreement](#) in place, now may be a good time to consider one. If you do have one in place, now is a good time to review it. This offers a chance to agree a way of working, in changed times, that gives support in the way your Headteacher needs it.

The wellbeing of school leaders, staff and pupils has never been more important. We will keep you up to date with latest advice from the unions, the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted in future bulletins. In the meantime, the British Safety Council have released some [free online resources](#) that your school leaders may like to consider for CPD.

Finally, we can't look after others, if we don't look after ourselves. These are tricky times for everyone, please do get in touch on 01473 260163 if there is anything we can do to support you.

Safety, Health and Wellbeing for Schools

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW
WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

During these unprecedented times we are consistently thinking of ours, our school staff, and our pupils' safety, health and welfare. Nicola Beach, Chief Executive Officer for Suffolk County Council, has reminded us of the need to ensure our own wellbeing in this time of crisis, and in one of her staff mailings the new COVID-19 Emotional Wellbeing Information Hub has been featured. COVID-19 is creating many pressures on individuals, employees and families. With the current and

ongoing government measures urging people to stay at home, it is increasingly clear that people's mental health and emotional wellbeing is of paramount importance.

The Information Hub brings together guidance, tips and support in one place on the Healthy Suffolk website and can be accessed at:

www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/COVIDHub . This page will be continually reviewed and updated as the situation unfolds and more information becomes available.

Please share this link within your networks, including friends and family.

It may be the last thing on your mind at the moment but please give a thought to when your school(s) are fully open and operational again. You might like to have a look at the new Nine Term Plan (9TP) [here](#) which will help Governors (and especially those of you with H&S responsibilities) support their school in health and safety management. The April edition of Governor Headlines featured an article about the need for Planned Preventative Maintenance which is worth revisiting if you haven't already seen it, and you can use that in conjunction with your own 9TP to remind yourself of the frequency and importance of statutory inspections.

Further advice for maintained schools can be sought from nina.bickerton@suffolk.gov.uk , Suffolk (maintained) Schools Health and Safety Advisor.

Locality Virtual Schools Supporting Vulnerable Pupils Across Suffolk

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW
WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

We are continuing the roll-out of Locality Virtual Schools for our vulnerable children. Education settings play a hugely significant part in safeguarding and in wider support for children and families. Because of COVID-19, and now school holidays, only a small proportion of vulnerable children are in school.

The Locality Virtual Schools initiative uses the principles underpinning our Virtual School for Children in Care and applies them to a wider group of children. Each locality will have a Virtual School roll; the rolls for 6 localities are already in place, the other 7 will be shortly. Those children and young people with a designated social worker or Early Help worker are being included, as are those who are known to the Youth Justice Service, and those on the roll of Pupil Referral Unit or not on a school roll. The work combines the risk assessments for all services and settings to help identify those children and young people who require an education plan to support them to be safe. Education Welfare Officers are taking on the role of Locality Virtual School caseworkers, supporting the existing teams around each child to either

encourage engagement or broker an offer from an education setting if one is needed.

Our discussions with multi-disciplinary colleagues and school leaders are very encouraging and we can see wider potential in this approach.

If you would like further information please contact: Matthew.cooke@suffolk.gov.uk

The Skills Audit An Important Part of School Improvement

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW

WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

In past editions of Governor Headlines, the Skills Audit has often been discussed as being a useful tool in both delegation of tasks to governors as well as for succession planning. We can also link governor recruitment into its effective deployment. This article, however, discusses how using the skills matrix can be a key component of school improvement.

School improvement is both simple and challenging. Simple in that its key components are good leadership and good teaching, yet challenging because staying focused and not being distracted by the myriad of other vital and continuous tasks that also need completing can be a genuine challenge.

Just as the School Improvement Plan is central to the delivery of school improvement, the Skills Audit is pivotal in ensuring that governors are able to effectively fulfil their duties. The relationship between school improvement and the Skills Matrix is therefore inter-dependant.

In the 2011 Ofsted publication “school governance - learning from the best” Ofsted stated that outstanding governing bodies “.... consider their own training needs...” click [here](#) to read the full report.

Training and Development for most governing bodies is a standing item on the agenda. Governors report on what training they have done and may be given the opportunity to expand further on how this learning can effectively be deployed to increase the FGB's effectiveness. Whether this happens as part of a committee or at FGB meeting seems to vary board to board.

However, what if the Skills Audit not only meant that governors were deployed into the role where their experience and expertise were fully utilised, but was also used to

develop a training and development plan for each governor ensuring succession planning was a core activity of the board?

This article isn't specifically about succession planning, however the National Governance Association (NGA) recommends that *“governors and trustees serve no more than two terms of office at any one school; that is (usually) eight years and plenty of time to make a difference. Chairs should be limited to six years in post as chair at the same school, except for exceptional circumstances, with regular appraisals and renewals being beneficial to all schools, helping to ensure boards do not become too cosy , while helping to maintain appropriate levels of challenge.”*

Whilst this is of course only a recommendation, there is turnover within governing bodies which means new and less experienced governors need to be developed. It is not uncommon for governing bodies to phone the Local Authority with a vacant Chairs position and not have anyone wishing to take on the role. Effective succession planning, starting with a Skills Audit, would have been the key for these schools.

Similarly, it is always a good idea to consider current training opportunities for governors. As governors you are volunteers and it's always understood and very much appreciated that you undertake your vital governance roles on top of other commitments, whether that be families, careers or other voluntary commitments. However, when you take the role of becoming a school governor there are clear expectations as outlined in the Department for Education's [Governance Handbook](#) which means that training cannot be an after-thought.

Most Suffolk schools buy into the [Schools Choice Training](#) package which has a diverse range of face-to-face courses for individual governors, as well as the option for whole governing body training. There are also online training opportunities through the NGA Learning Link which is also part of the Schools Choice Package. With the current COVID-19 situation meaning that many of us are working from home, online learning for governors is a great option. [Governors for Schools](#) also host regular webinars that are free to participate in. You can join as a live guest or watch back at a more convenient moment.

Depending on the training needs identified, The LA Leadership and Governance team can also help provide opportunities for individual governors, or for the whole board, to undertake shadowing opportunities with other governing bodies. This can open discussions regarding structure of governance, allow governors to see how challenge and support looks and feels for other bodies and result in the shadowing of monitoring visits.

Governors that are well trained and confident in their knowledge and in their role will be more effective at understanding the journey their school is on and holding themselves and leaders to account for the educational outcomes for children. Just

like the School Development Plan (SDP) is the pathway to school improvement, the Skills Matrix holds the key for governors to be the most effective they can be.

The NGA has a Skills Audit which can be found [here](#).

Schools Complaints Procedures

IMPORTANCE: STATUTORY
WHO IT'S FOR: MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

The Department for Education (DfE) have recently published an updated version of their [School complaints procedures: guidance for schools](#) document, which gives guidance for Local Authority maintained schools about setting up or reviewing complaints procedures.

The update has added information to the best practice guidance about handling complaints during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Headteacher Recruitment

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW
WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

Who is this for?

Governing bodies of maintained schools looking to recruit a Headteacher in the next year. A link to Suffolk Council Council's Headteacher Recruitment package for academies can be found at the end of the article.

Early steps

If your Headteacher may be ready to move on to promotion, retirement or may leave for other reasons, it is a good time to start to prepare for Headteacher recruitment. Reading through the links to national guidance below will help you to start your preparations early and attract the very best candidates to your school.

In order to help you identify the qualities you are looking for in a new Headteacher, it is important to have a clear sense of the priorities for school improvement and the vision for the future of the school.

National Guidance on Headteacher Recruitment

You may find [this joint guidance](#) from the Department for Education (DfE) and National Governance Association (NGA) useful.

The NGA have also created [a helpful toolkit](#) that can be accessed here:

Headteacher resignation

As soon as you have written confirmation of your Headteacher's resignation you should inform the School Leadership Development Team at the Local Authority and the relevant Diocesan contact for Church schools. The departure of a Headteacher can feel destabilising in a school and managing the message to staff and parents requires careful consideration. Some recommendations to make the local community feel at ease are:

- a. Speak to the Local Authority about what the next steps in the process are, this will enable you to add this information into your correspondence with staff and parents/carers.
- b. Ensure that staff, parents/carers are told at the same time.
- c. Update regularly, advise staff and parents when the advert is going live and when the interviews are due to take place.

The next stages of the recruitment process are broken down into 6 stages. The first stage is a detailed discussion with the governing body about what they are looking for in a new Headteacher, linked to the priorities for the school and its individual context. While schools are closed and it is not possible to hold face-to-face meetings, we are adapting how we carry out the additional steps of the process to suit each school's situation. To discuss how this can be arranged for your school, please contact headships@suffolk.gov.uk.

Suffolk County Council also offer a Headteacher Recruitment package for Academies, an outline of which can be found [here](#).

Hub4Leaders Governance Newsletter

IMPORTANCE: USEFUL TO KNOW
WHO IT'S FOR: ALL SCHOOLS

Please find [here](#) a link to the Hub4Leaders end-of-term governor newsletter, should you like to read it. The newsletter includes, amongst others, articles on the passing on Jack's Law for bereaved parents, an increase in pupil premium rates and an Ofsted consultation on Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE).



Have a comment to make?

Contact: qualitymattersineducationandlearning@suffolk.gov.uk
to comment, favourably or otherwise, on any aspect of Suffolk County Council's school improvement strategy.