



Co-ordinators of Governor Services

Online participation: Guidance for school governors

Introduction

The way people communicate is starting to change, with use of the internet increasing throughout society. Easy to use tools such as social networking sites like Facebook make it a simple task to have conversations online and for people to share information, experiences and knowledge. Of course, most of us are very used to emailing, which continues to be a common form of communication for governors. These present an incredible opportunity for school governors to communicate and collaborate more effectively – however it is one that comes with risks and governors must be aware of the implications of participating online in their official capacity.

This document sets out the considerations governors should bear in mind when using the web, to ensure risks are mitigated and opportunities achieved.

The opportunity

Participating online offers a number of opportunities for school governors. For example:

- **Communicating between governors:** using trusted online spaces, governors can have discussion online and share information with one another between face to face meetings, increasing efficiency. Governors can also communicate with other governors in their local authority and nationally.
- **Listening to what people are saying:** like it or not, people will be talking about your school online, and they may be being critical. Unless you are active digitally yourself, you won't know what people are saying, nor will you be able to respond
- **Engaging with parents and students:** greater involvement from school stakeholders such as parents and students can be achieved by talking to them online, especially when using spaces they already visit regularly, such as Facebook
- **Promoting the work of the governors:** by using digital channels to talk about the work governors are doing, more people will get to hear about and understand it
- **Encouraging new people to become governors:** the visibility provided by participating online means that more people will be aware of the role and inspire them to get involved themselves

By not being active online, governors cannot make the most of these opportunities.

The risks

As well as an incredible opportunity, digital participation is not without risk. Some of the risks include:

A governor publishes something regrettable: the ease of publishing online means it is easy to write something that brings the school into disrepute. The governor might be writing in his/her capacity as a governor or as an individual. Even as an individual, his/her actions could be criticized as bringing a school into disrepute, especially if other users know of his/her governor status. Sometimes people write comments which they would never dare say to another person's face. Also problems have often arisen from trails of emails being copied/forwarded inappropriately, containing sensitive information, or written in an unprofessional manner

- **Confidential information is released to the public:** again, the fact that it is so easy to put information on the web means data security policy can be easily breached
- **An online discussion between some but not all members of a governing body undermines collective knowledge and responsibility:** there is a danger of a two-tier governing body resulting from online discussions that exclude those governors not online or engaged

None of these risks are a reason for governors not to be active online. However, they are risks that need to be managed, and this guidance forms a key part of that mitigation.

Guiding principles

The guiding principles for online participation really are no different to communicating in any other medium. The seven principles of public life are a very good starting point:

- **Selflessness:** holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.
- **Integrity:** holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.
- **Objectivity:** in carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

- **Accountability:** holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.
- **Openness:** holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands this.
- **Honesty:** holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.
- **Leadership:** holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

To add some specific digital context, the Civil Service guidelines on online participation¹ are very useful. They follow, with some minor edits to ensure relevance to the governor context:

- Disclose your position as a representative of your school unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a potential threat to personal security. Of course, individual governors may not intentionally communicate as an "accredited" representative but must always be aware that what they say and write as an individual could reflect negatively on them as a governor, their fellow governors or their school. Never give out personal details like home address and phone numbers.
 - Always remember that participation online results in your comments being permanently available and open to being republished in other media. Stay within the legal framework and be aware that libel, defamation, copyright and data protection laws apply. This means that you should not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activities on behalf of the school unless you are authorised to do so. This authority may already be delegated or may be explicitly granted depending on your organisation.
 - Also be aware that this may attract media interest in you as an individual, so proceed with care whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity. If you have any doubts, take advice from a colleague.
1. **Be credible**
 - Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
 2. **Be consistent**
 - Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Be cordial, honest and professional at all times.
 3. **Be responsive**
 - When you gain insight, share it where appropriate.

¹ <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/resources/participation-online.aspx>

4. **Be integrated**

- Wherever possible, align online participation with other offline communications.

5. **Be a governor**

- Remember that you are an ambassador for your organisation. Wherever possible, disclose your position as a representative of your school.

Digital participation sites

The following covers the main sites used for online interaction and is intended as a guide to how they are used.

Facebook

Facebook is the world's largest social network and is continuing to grow. Users create profiles with personal information, and connect to their friends online. They can also create and join groups around common interests and causes. Facebook is widely used by young and old, and it is very likely that the site is being used by parents to discuss their childrens' school.

Twitter

Twitter is a website where users create a much less detailed profile than in Facebook, and publish short (limited to 140 characters) messages. These are published publicly, and users 'follow' one another to receive their updates. Twitter has a smaller user base than Facebook but this is growing. It is notable for creating a platform where messages can spread very quickly.

Blogging

A blog is a website where an individual or group of authors publish short articles, which are displayed in reverse chronological order, with the newest at the top of the home page. The articles, or posts, often allow readers to leave comments and enter into dialogue with the blogger. Blogs are a good way to publicize the activity at a school, and as an informal method of finding out people's views.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is another social network, similar to Facebook, although its focus is very much on people's professional rather than personal lives. Users create a profile with their CV information on it, and create and join groups relating to professional interests.

YouTube

YouTube is the most popular video website in the world. It allows users to upload short videos for other people to view. Videos uploaded to YouTube can be added to any web page or other social networking site, meaning they can often spread 'virally'

with many millions of people viewing the most popular ones. Creating videos doesn't have to be a costly exercise and using everyday digital cameras or mobile phones can produce some great results.

Things to do

There are a number of activities that a school governor can undertake to start to participate online.

1. **Register with Twitter:** Twitter provides a really quick way to get active online. There are also a number of school governors active on there who you can connect with. Post short messages about the issues facing your school and what you are doing to tackle them. Also, ask other users questions to find out what they think.
2. **Listen to others:** spend some time searching the web for mentions of your school online. You might find that a local blogger has been writing about you, or perhaps parents have started a Facebook group. Bookmark anything you find, or subscribe to automatic updates from them if you can. If people are expressing concerns, or perhaps are misinformed, then consider leaving a response explaining who you are and setting out your message – but make sure that what you write has the approval of the whole governing body. If in doubt, don't respond or comment. Governing bodies should consider establishing protocols for individual governors to alert fellow governors to any concerns arising from what may have been published online by other people
3. **Create your own social networking groups:** there are two obvious types of group a school governor might create on a site like Facebook or LinkedIn. Firstly, if one doesn't already exist, a Facebook group for your school might be a great way to get governors, teachers and parents talking to one another regularly in an informal, constructive way. Secondly, why not create a group for just governors to use, to discuss issues in between formal meetings, share information and work together on reports and other documents?

As a governing body, use these guidelines as the basis for a discussion as part of a governing body meeting, in order to clarify common expectations and standards.

Review your governing body's Code of Conduct and consider adding a section on online participation.

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