

## THE GOVERNING BODY OF ALMA PRIMARY

### MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL MEETING HELD BY ZOOM ON TUESDAY 2 JUNE 2020

#### **Present:**

Ilan Jacobs (Chair and chairing this meeting)  
Deborah Brooks (Vice Chair)  
David Steadman  
Emma Davies  
Sophie Fenton  
Jean Linsky  
Samantha Rosehill

Natalie Grazin  
David Grunwald  
Andrew Sutcliffe  
Marc Shoffren (Headteacher)  
James Burns  
Ed Lewin  
Katie Abrams

#### In attendance:

Colin Grazin - Clerk to the Governors

#### **1. WELCOME**

The Chair welcomed all members of the Governing Body. He acknowledged that levels of emotion were running high over the last week but reminded all Governors of the importance of maintaining a professional approach and a level of courtesy to others. He apologised for the events of the prior week and but highlighted the fact that there was now a fully worked plan for the reopening of the school. Guidance from the National Governors Association had been circulated and the role of the governors was now to review the school's risk assessment and sign off the reopening plan, if they approved it. Notwithstanding emails sent to parents, due to operational reasons, any decision to reopen the school was for the Governing Body. Operational decisions thereafter were for Alma's Senior Leadership Team. **Governors approved that course of action.**

#### **2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Rina Wolfson.

#### **3. DECLARATION OF ANY DIRECT OR INDIRECT PERSONAL INTEREST (INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO ANY PERSONAL FINANCIAL INTEREST) , CONFIRMATION OF ANY CHANGES TO REGISTER OF BUSINESS INTERESTS AND RELATED PARTIES**

There were no such changes declared by any member of the Governing Body.

#### **4. RESOLUTION TO CALL THIS EXTRAORDINARY GOVERNORS' MEETING WITHOUT THE USUAL SEVEN DAYS NOTICE AND TO ALLOW THE MEETING TO TAKE PLACE REMOTELY BY ZOOM**

The Chairman of the Governors, having given notice of this meeting by email on 1 June 2020, i.e. less than seven clear days before the date of this meeting, explained to the Governors that, in his opinion, there are matters to be discussed in this meeting requiring urgent consideration and that 24 hours written notice was both appropriate and necessary. Accordingly, there had not been compliance with the provisions of Articles 108a) and 108b) of Alma's Articles of Association.

He requested agreement from the Governors that there were, in their opinion, matters on the agenda for this meeting demanding urgent consideration. **The Governors agreed that that was the case and ratified the actions of the Chair of Governors in calling this meeting with less than seven clear days' notice and with notice of only 24 hours and**

**accordingly determined to proceed to discuss the substantive business of the meeting.**

**The Governors further validated and ratified the notice of the meeting** notwithstanding that it was signed by the Chair of Governors rather than the Clerk.

The Clerk further advised that, under the terms of the Articles, there was no entitlement to hold a meeting of the Governing Body other than by there being a quorum of Governors present in person. However, the provisions of Schedule 14 of the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill presently before Parliament were likely to validate this meeting because the Act, when passed, will be retrospective. He therefore advised it was proper to proceed with this remote meeting.

## **5. REOPENING CONTEXT AND VALUES DRIVING**

The Head introduced this item. He referred to the history since the last GB meeting in April. Following the announcement that schools could reopen, the SLT had spent a considerable amount of time deciding how the school should operate. There had been much guidance from the DfE, but the actual decision was one for the school. While a GB meeting had been planned to review and give approval to the plan last week, it was not sufficiently worked up at that stage and therefore the meeting had to be postponed until today, later than he would have liked.

He accepted there had been two errors:

- allowing a number of issues to get in the way of the Risk Assessment being finished, so there was insufficient time before the proposed GB meeting;
- sending a letter to parents last week, which did not say that reopening was subject to the approval of the GB.

He apologised for both of those errors.

The Head set out the three key principles behind the current reopening proposal

1. the safety and welfare of the children and the staff;
2. making the best provision for the children;
3. the need to respond flexibly and appropriately to any changes in the situation.

The Head acknowledged that the working relationship between the Governing Body and the SLT had suffered over the last few weeks but it was important, and he hoped there would now be an improvement in that relationship. The Chair suggested that there would be a closer relationship between the GB and the school in the future.

## **6. CONSIDERATION OF THE RISK ASSESSMENT**

The Head referred to the Executive Summary of the document. There had been a number of versions before the current document. It was based upon a framework from London Borough of Barnet. He had identified four areas where there were more than minor risks

1. risk of transmission due to movement around the school.
2. children not practising social distancing
3. staff not following systems
4. risk of infection on surfaces

Items 1 to 3 were about human conduct. The SLT had spent very many hours discussing these issues with staff and more time would be required.

In addition, there were two areas of greater concern:

- the site was difficult and lacked space for children to keep apart. It was difficult to operate a one-way system

- there are a high number of staff members who are also school parents, which created a challenge

He summarised the conclusions of the Risk Assessment. Taking account of all the relevant factors and DfE guidance, he believed the realistic size for groups of children (referred to as bubbles) at the initial return to school was no more than 10. These factors were:

- 1) Classroom sizes do not allow for 2m social distancing with 15 in class;
- 2) Pinchpoints in school access routes do not allow for 2m social distancing at all times;
- 3) There are children within this cohort who are exuberant and therefore will be harder to ensure 2m social distancing within larger bubbles.

It was appropriate to move “painfully slowly”, while nonetheless seeking to provide a good education for the children. However, there was potential to increase that number as staff and children gain experience of social distancing at school and in the light of changes in Government guidance.

Each bubble requires two members of staff, which limits the number of children who are able to attend the school. The Head set out the issues with the staff, a number of whom were vulnerable and/or live with clinically extremely vulnerable family members. He was working with staff to put in an appropriate system. Many members of staff are part time and the two teachers of the target year groups of children were not available to attend. Efforts were in hand to resolve those issues.

A Governor sought more information on the data leading to the size of the bubble, and referred to the layout of the school, classroom size and the cohort of children. He asked whether the bubbles might pass each other while moving around the school. A second Governor referred to the “painfully slowly” concept and asked how changes would be made in the future and what criteria would be used to make any such changes. A third Governor queried what would happen if the bubble size was increased from 10 to 12 or 15 and what would then happen in the school, with particular reference to the teaching staff.

The Head responded to those questions. At this point in time, the SLT have assessed that the shape of the rooms was not conducive to any greater number of children, due to the difficulties in keeping them more than 2m apart. There are a number of pinch points around the school which were impossible to avoid. Having looked at the movement of children in the school, his conclusion, at the present time, was that no more than 10 children in a bubble was appropriate. However, it would be appropriate to increase the number from 10 to 15 if there was evidence that it was safe for both children and adults. He referred briefly to the lack of evidence as to transmission of the virus from children to adults.

There would be three drivers to move the size of the bubble to 15

- how the children had adapted to being socially distanced in class bubbles of 10;
- whether there were a sufficient number of staff to manage bubbles of 15.
- whether the school had been successful in teaching children to move appropriately around the school,

It would then be appropriate to look at local and national infection rates and national guidance before approaching the GB to suggest revised proposals at that time.

Governors raised further questions;

- Did the guidance allow for children to be closer than 2m, thereby increasing the bubble size? Was it not practically impossible to keep children 2m apart. Three year groups would be in the school at the same time. Could their movements around the school be staggered?

- Would it not be practicable, in the case of year six, comprising 26 children, to divide them into two groups? Further, were the staff happy with the current proposals given the opposition of some trade unions?
- Was it agreed that it was necessary to keep the individual bubbles 2m apart, because children in reception and year one could not be kept apart within bubbles? What is the capacity of the school for groups of 10? It may be practical for year six children to be kept apart but should the same guidance apply throughout the school, for the much younger years? Given that rates of infection were going down and were very low in Barnet, how long would the current guidance last?

The Chair suggested that while Government guidance was contradictory, smaller bubbles have the advantage that, if there was a problem, fewer families and children were affected. He believed the plan was realistic for older children, which is why year six was a good target group to start with.

The Head responded to the questions. Although significant work had been done to reassure the staff that their concerns have been taken into account, there was initially a high level of fear and apprehension. They now accepted that the school was doing all that it could to protect them.

The Head explained that, with bubbles of ten, the capacity of the school was approximately 70 children, and the school had to take into account provision for vulnerable and key worker (VKW) children. Expectation, based on parent surveys, was that about 30 such children will attend school each day.

The school's intention was to start introducing children slowly, while teaching staff also used other remote teaching methods at the same time. He was aware that some parents have commented that other schools were providing more teaching provision but he did not accept those criticisms. He believed the methods being adopted were the best for this particular cohort of children.

The Head highlighted that although there was a low rate of infection at the moment, there might be a spike, so he thought a very cautious approach was appropriate and that matters should be taken slowly in terms of training both children and staff. He noted that one third of parents had said they were not prepared to send the children back to school at present. He wanted to reassure those parents that the best provision was being made. He wanted the children to return as soon as possible but the school would provide learning in the interim period.

A group of governors made further challenges:

- Was it really practicable to keep children 2m apart? What had been the experience within the school? Was it not inevitable that children would not stay apart? Apart from the Senior Leadership Team, had anybody else been involved in preparation of the Risk Assessment?
- The Risk Assessment dealt with what would happen within the school but there was very little about the risk of not returning to school. Should that not been included in the document?
- Did the risk assessment take account of the fact that there were very low levels of infection now in London and there was unlikely to be another spike until the end of July. Had there been consideration of potential segregation of the workforce? Many groups were at very low risk, so a generic approach is not necessarily appropriate. This had been discussed at the HR group recently

The Head responded to these questions. VKW children had been taught every day. Recently the weather had been good so they had been outside. The older children had been very good about distancing. There had been a great deal of training and they eventually understood what they had to do. It was obviously harder with younger children. It was also necessary to consider children with SEN requirements. He did not believe it was practicable to segment the Alma workforce because of the small size of the staff. Not all staff were able to come into work but he was working hard with those who did and they were in small consistent groups to reduce risk. The Staff Governor raised her concern about the need to avoid stress on those staff who were at work.

A Governor queried whether there were further factors driving the small class sizes, namely to reduce the risk to staff and to reduce the demands on the staff. The Head agreed that these were factors, but said that the primary driver was the actual site.

A Governor was concerned about the effect on mental health of those children who are not in school. The Governor believed that, for certain children, not being in school constituted a mental health risk to that child. She wanted to get the maximum number of children into school as soon as possible. In particular, she would like to have all of the children back in September 2020. She believed the school was being too cautious. It was necessary to consider appropriate criteria by which the school could be reopened in full.

## **7. CONSIDERATION OF THE RETURN TO SCHOOL PLAN**

The Head introduced the Return to School plan. He explained the school's working assumption that some form of alternative arrangements will need to be continued into the autumn term due to Covid 19 and therefore flexibility would be very important.

He explained the arrangements for year six children and highlighted a number of practical steps the school had taken to reduce risks:

- one way system for parents;
- clear pickup arrangements;
- quick response if illness was found, to include closedown where necessary;
- cleanliness of the school;
- hand washing by children.

A Governor enquired what input the school would use to decide if the number of children in school could increase. Another Governor asked about prioritisation of the VKW children. How many days provision would be available for those children? London Borough of Barnet suggested five days per week for the children who did attend school, and would Alma be providing this suggested normal teaching? A Governor suggested that an alternative model of one staff member per bubble and a replacement might be appropriate.

The Head replied to these various questions. He stressed how hard he and the SLT had worked on preparing the Risk Assessment and Return to School plan. He would continue to talk to Chair and Vice Chair of Governors on a regular basis to keep the plan under review and a GB meeting would be called to approve any proposed changes.

The Vice Chair thanked the Governors for their input on the criteria for review. The plan specifies that the Governing Body would be kept informed of developments on a weekly basis.

The Head explained how he had prioritised different groups of VKW children. He had adopted a flexible approach, had identified some additional children who required further

support, including some outside school. He did not accept that a five-day week attendance rule was appropriate, unless necessary for safeguarding purposes.

Alma's Inclusion leader Rachel Clarke had recently returned to the school and her involvement would increase cover to SEN children and families. The school is working to increase the curriculum support for vulnerable children and would attempt to group children by reference to age, to do more teaching. The intent was to provide more online support as well as teach children in school.

The arrangement for two staff per bubble was the correct one. The advice was to keep each bubble as isolated as possible. There were large number of part-time staff so that made arrangements more difficult at Alma. He had also allocated a "floating" member of staff which made it easier to follow the guidance. The school had sought outside specialists where that was thought advisable but the level of support had been patchy at best.

Other Governors who had not contributed were asked for any views. One felt that the amount of work involved in remote teaching was very large, so teachers were working harder than ever.

A Governor believed there had been a huge amount of work done by Alma in the last few weeks. The ideal situation would be to bring people into the school as soon as possible. A bubble of 10 was small compared to other schools but it was dangerous to make those comparisons. It was important to concentrate on what Alma could properly provide, looking at specific facts relevant to the school. She would support a bubble size of 10 children but would only increase that when further information was available that it could be increased safely and when the well-being of staff had been considered and taken seriously. It was probably right to go with the present proposal and then reassess their position when the children had become comfortable with the proposed arrangements and the whole concept.

The Chair summarised the discussion so far. He noted the concerns within the GB about the bubble size of 10 and how that might be increased. He further noted that no Governor had suggested the school should not reopen. The choice before the Governing Body was to agree the plan, so the school could reopen on Monday, or not. If it was not agreed, the school would not reopen. He wished to emphasise that no earlier actions pre-empted the views of the Governing Body. Planned reopening would not go ahead if the plan was rejected. He appreciated that there was a view within the GB that the current approach was too cautious.

A Governor suggested this was not a correct assessment of the views of the GB. There was a view that relatively small bubbles could actually create more and greater risk and bubbles of 15 are in line with Government guidance.

A Governor emphasised the need to be aware of frustration amongst parents. A large percentage of parents wanted their children to return to school and it was necessary to manage their expectations.

In response, the Chair accepted the need for a flexible plan with more communication with parents. There were medical professionals on the Back to School working group whose advice went into the creation of the plan to start with classes of 10.

A Governor suggested that the school's duty of care was the same as that of any other employer but one other governor did not agree with that approach. The Vice Chair pointed out that the school was following DfE guidance on that issue.

A Governor believed that there was presently a very low level of risk because of local conditions. The Head believed that schools were different from other workplaces. He had

had to persuade staff to return to work. He did not wish to force them. DFE guidance was that 15 was the maximum size of a bubble, but not necessarily the number that should be in a bubble. He summarised the discussions he had had the staff to ensure that they were willing to return to work.

The Chair called a formal vote on the acceptance of the Risk Assessment and adoption of the Return to School Plan. The Clerk conducted a roll call vote. Twelve Governors voted in favour of the Plan. One Governor voted against the proposal. **The proposal was approved and the school will accordingly reopen on the following Monday.**

The Chair reassured Governors that the school plan would be kept under review, and that a GB meeting currently fixed for 17 June would proceed, when a report on how the school had operated over the intervening two weeks would be presented with recommendations for changes, if appropriate.

### **8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

A Governor suggested that the GB should, in due course look back at the Governance process in the context of recent events. The Chair and Vice Chair committed to holding a Lessons Learned review.

Another Governor expressed her thanks to the Senior Leadership Team and particular thanks to the Head for his work during the lockdown.

The meeting concluded 10:12 PM.