

Guidance on Alternative Models of Governance – The Circle Model

The **circle model** of governance is a governing body structure that operates without committees. Instead, the governing body works together as a team.

How does the circle model work?

- The governing body meets regularly, such as monthly or every half term
- The board works together to consider tasks and make decisions
- The board may delegate monitoring activities to individuals or pairs, sometimes called "link" or "nominated" trustees or governors
- The board may commission assignments or projects to temporary “task and finish” groups

Benefits of the circle model

- The model can promote better teamwork among governors
- It can streamline decision-making processes
- It can allow the Chair and Head to manage communications more effectively
- It can give governors up-to-date information about the school

Rationale and Implementation of the Circle Governance Model

Nomenclature and Conceptual Framework:

The "circle model" in school governance derives its name from the cyclical nature of its full board meetings, wherein each meeting builds upon the preceding one within an annual calendar. This structure emphasises the retention of all decision-making authority within the full governing body, avoiding delegation to subcommittees. The absence of committees, which would typically fragment authority and create a hierarchical structure resembling a flowchart, maintains a unified and centralised governance process. It is noted that, paradoxically, some institutions refer to this model

as "flat" governance, highlighting the absence of hierarchical delegation and the concentration of power at the full board level.

Operational Procedures:

The circle model necessitates an increased frequency of full board meetings to accommodate the responsibilities previously assigned to committees. These meetings are strategically scheduled to align with critical institutional events, such as budget approvals or policy reviews. Agendas are focused, with headteacher reports tailored to specific meeting themes. Individual or paired governors undertake monitoring activities, including school visits and consultations with staff, to provide comprehensive feedback to the full board.

Annual Planning and Resource Utilisation:

An annual planner facilitates the implementation of the circle model. This planner typically includes:

- A chronological schedule of full board and other relevant meetings.
- Detailed agendas for each meeting.
- A directory of link governors and their designated areas of responsibility.
- Documentation of any ad hoc working groups formed for specific tasks.

Effective implementation requires diligent monitoring by governors, including timely reporting, which may necessitate proactive follow-up by the clerk or chair. Regularly scheduled governor days can enhance monitoring activities and provide opportunities for training.

Advantages of the Circle Model:

- **Enhanced Transparency and Comprehensiveness:** All governors possess a holistic understanding of institutional operations.
- **Streamlined Decision-Making:** Elimination of redundant discussions across committee and full board levels.
- **Integrated Policy Implementation:** Avoidance of conflicting decisions across disparate committees.
- **Expedited Full Board Action:** Potential for more timely decision-making.
- **Suitability for Smaller Governing Bodies:** Mitigation of challenges associated with committee formation in resource-constrained environments.
- **Simplified Agenda Planning:** Centralised agenda management.

- **Flexibility for Governor Monitoring:** Increased autonomy in scheduling monitoring activities.
- **Elimination of Delegation Ambiguity:** Centralised decision-making authority.

Disadvantages and Mitigation Strategies:

- **Potential for Superficial Discussions:** Risk of insufficient in-depth analysis.
 - Mitigation: Increase meeting frequency, utilise working parties, and ensure governors are well-prepared.
- **Increased Monitoring Demands:** Significant commitment to school visits and reporting.
 - Mitigation: Establish clear monitoring plans and provide governor support.
- **Challenges for New Governors:** Potential for feeling overwhelmed.
 - Mitigation: Implement mentoring programs and provide comprehensive training.
- **Reliance on Strong Chairmanship:** Increased responsibility for the chair.
 - Mitigation: Ensure succession planning and provide access to training.
- **Risk of Protracted Meetings:** Potential for excessively long meeting durations.
 - Mitigation: Implement strategic agenda planning and utilise working parties.
- **Potential Inefficiency in Large Boards:** Difficulty in facilitating inclusive discussions.
 - Mitigation: Consider if an alternative model may be more suitable.

Meeting Frequency and Terms of Reference:

A minimum of six full board meetings annually is recommended. Formal terms of reference are recommended; outlining the model's structure and responsibilities is advisable to ensure clarity and consistency. This document should also outline monitoring expectations.