



**GOVERNING GOVERNORS' GUIDANCE  
FOR GOVERNING GOVERNORS  
ON MANAGING THE PRESSURES OF GOVERNING**

## INTRODUCTION

Forty-one Governing Governors, and their colleagues from private sector prisons and IRCs, took part in a two-day symposium convened by the Butler Trust in December 2022. Among the issues they examined was how to manage the pressures of the role.

## FINDINGS

Delegates agreed governing is a high pressure role – and a number intimated that their mental health, and family relationships, were being affected. They described a heavy workload, with many saying they worked more than 48 hours a week, and some reporting working 54 hours or more; feelings that the workload was unmanageable were common; and many had difficulty “switching off” even when they were not working. They had a strong sense that they were ultimately, and singularly, responsible for whatever happened in their establishments; worried in particular about the wellbeing of residents and staff; and found self-inflicted deaths especially hard to bear.

Although many delegates worked very long hours, a small number reported being able to keep to their contracted hours only. A number of strategies were identified to help reduce their workload / manage it more effectively, including:

- setting a limit on working hours, and avoiding working out of hours (inc. answering emails);
- delegating to senior colleagues where possible;
- attending meetings only where the Governor’s presence is actually required;
- restricting the time set aside for meetings, and managing agendas to minimise overruns;
- encouraging colleagues to email them only when necessary (rather than routinely copying them in on correspondence) and making it clear where action by the Governor is required.

Delegates were clear on the need for them to be “visible” to staff and residents, and to see for themselves what is going on in their establishments. However, many found it hard to find the time to do so. Suggestions on this included:

- blocking out a set time each week to go “out and about”;
- drawing up a schedule to ensure they visit each area once a month (for example), if they were unable to do so more often;
- placing themselves in areas, such as on the free-flow route and in the gate/centre, where they can be seen by, and speak to, many people at once.

Although lunch-breaks can make a positive difference to mental health and productivity, few delegates took one each day. Those who did, confirmed the benefits of doing so, and recommended blocking out the time in their diaries and switching off their phone and computer. One Governor left the establishment over lunch each day and suggested others might consider doing likewise.

A number of delegates said they had found the support services offered through their HQs, including mentoring, coaching, and counselling, helpful in dealing with the pressures of the role. Some also spoke of the support that fellow Governors can offer to one another – and several had set up networks of support, meeting by phone/online, which they continued to find very useful.

The importance of focusing on the things Governors can affect, rather than those which are outside their control, was stressed too, as was the value of visiting other establishments to find out about examples of best practice going on elsewhere.

Nine key recommendations, based on the symposium’s findings on what Governing Governors can do to help manage the pressures of the role, are set out below, together with some suggestions on the management of emails within establishments.

## **Managing the Pressures of Governing: Governing Governors' Guidance for Governing Governors**

### 1. Limit your hours

While many Governing Governors work very long hours, not all do. As well as adding to stress and impacting on family life, more in does not always mean more out. Try setting a ceiling on the number of hours you work, and avoid working outside office hours as much as possible.

### 2. Reduce your workload

Governors can't do everything, and don't need to – delegate where you can. Only attend meetings you need to be at, and manage any meetings you do attend so they don't take longer than necessary.

### 3. Get a grip on emails

You can't control what gets sent out from the centre, but you can control how email is used within your establishment, such as ensuring you are only copied on in emails you really need to see (see, for example, the adapted version of guidance produced by Heathrow IRC below).

### 4. Be visible, but be smart about it

Governors need to see and be seen – block out time each week to do so, draw up a schedule to visit each area once a month (for example) if you can't do more often, and between times, station yourself periodically in places you can see and be seen by as many people as possible.

### 5. Take a proper lunchbreak

Taking a proper break at lunchtime – away from the office, and ideally away from the establishment entirely – matters. Not doing so adds to stress and impacts productivity. Try blocking the time out in your diary every day, and stick to it!

### 6. Make use of available support

While there may be waiting lists for some of them, there are a range of support services available to Governing Governors including professional coaching and mentoring, as well as counselling through PAM Assist.

### 7. Join a Governing Governors network

Fellow Governing Governors understand the role and the pressures involved. A number of Governors have set up professional support networks, meeting online to talk about their work and support one another. Consider joining one of them, or set one up yourself.

### 8. Find out what others are doing

You don't have to keep reinventing the wheel – there are many examples of good practice across the estate. Visit other establishments to find out what they are doing, and [TheKnowledgeExchange.UK](http://TheKnowledgeExchange.UK) includes lots of ideas you might want to explore further.

### 9. Focus on what you can do, not what you can't

“Some things are in our control and others not... The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control” - Epictetus (Stoic philosopher)

## Suggestions for a local email policy

(based on the approach at Heathrow IRC)

1. Ensure your email is clearly categorised in the “Subject” line, e.g.:
  - a) INFO: email is for information only (no action or response required)
  - b) ACTION: email requires specific actions by those on the To: list (cc: list for reading only)
  - c) REQUEST: email contains a request for a response or information
  - d) APPROVAL REQUEST: the email requires a formal approval in response
  - e) URGENT: email requires urgent attention (include a date/time when a response is required)
2. Do not send emails where it is inappropriate to do so:
  - a) Email is not the place for a general discussion or a substitute for meeting face-to-face
  - b) It is not an appropriate medium when the matter is sensitive, emotional, or complex
  - c) If you have a meeting coming up with the recipient(s), save items until then
3. Do not send or cc emails unless recipients really need to see it:
  - a) Do not blindly hit "reply to all" - choose your recipients carefully
  - b) Avoid pointless emails (eg. "Ta" or "Will do") especially on large “reply to all”s
  - c) Think before you copy your boss – email is not for blame protection or to prove productivity
4. Avoid sending emails “out of hours” – if you are working “out of hours” yourself:
  - a) [schedule emails through Outlook on a PC/laptop](#)
  - b) [schedule emails through Outlook online](#)
5. Use To: and cc: appropriately:
  - a) All, but only, those from whom some action is required should be on the “To:” line
  - b) Any, but only, other people who need to be aware of its contents should be on the “cc:” line
6. Ensure your emails are easy to follow:
  - a) Make content clear, concise and well laid out for ease of reading
  - b) Stick to one subject per email
7. Take care with email chains:
  - a) Avoid adding new people to an email chain where possible
  - b) If you do forward a chain, explain why you are sending it to them and what it’s about
  - c) Do not allow an email chain to switch subjects mid-stream – treat it as a separate subject

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## Tips for managing your inbox

A: Set up a “rule” to [move ‘cc’ emails to a subfolder](#) (how to [set up a subfolder](#)). You can also forward them to your secretary to check (just in case) by selecting the “forward it to...” option too.

B: [Set up an “out of office” auto-reply](#) saying you are away from your desk and how to contact you if it’s truly urgent. [Don’t forget to set it on, and switch it off again when you’re back!]