Companies close doors to investors at annual meetings

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Barclays, based at Canary Wharf, has scrapped plans to hold its annual general meeting in Glasgow next month and will now do it behind closed doors in London

Investors will be denied the opportunity to hold chief executives and boards publicly to account as a host of companies ban shareholders from annual meetings and refuse to allow live questioning at virtual meetings.

Barclays has scrapped plans to hold its annual meeting in Glasgow next month and will stage the event behind closed doors in London. The change has been made because of the government's restrictions on large gatherings and its social distancing rules.

Companies need to comply with regulations by holding the annual meeting within six months of the year-end.

The move may anger Barclays' shareholders who planned to question its board about a series of awkward issues, including executive pay and the City regulator's investigation into the relationship between Jes Staley, its chief executive, and Jeffrey Epstein, the sex offender.

Shareholders are due to vote on the bank's remuneration policy for 2019, which has awarded Mr Staley £5.9 million, including a £1.65 million bonus.

Sam Woods, chief executive of the Prudential Regulation Authority, wrote to Barclays and other big banks on Tuesday to say that the regulator "expects" them not to pay cash bonuses this year.

Shareholders can still ask questions of Barclays' directors in advance of the meeting on May 7 and can send them to the company secretary. They also can vote on the resolutions electronically.

Investors are due to vote on the measures the bank announced in response to a shareholder motion, which sets it an "ambition" to have net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Standard Life Aberdeen, the FTSE 100 asset manager, said that it was banning investors from its meeting, which would be run by one director. It urged shareholders to vote electronically or to appoint the chairman as their proxy. There would be no live question and answer session, it said, but shareholders could put questions in writing.

Hunting, the energy services provider, has taken the same approach and banned shareholders from its annual meeting on April 15. It said that it was withdrawing a resolution to pay a final dividend of six cents per share as it seeks to preserve cash "in light of current global economic conditions, including the fall in the price of oil". It will pay shareholders an interim dividend of three cents per share.