

Growing good governance

Exploring the legacy of the NLG programme

June 2024



Insight

A research study by the
National Governance Association

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Foreword

Governance is the first line of accountability for schools and trusts in England. It defines who has the power, how decisions are made, how other players make their voice heard and who is accountable for how an organisation and its people behave and perform.

It is not far off fifteen years since I joined the National Governance Association (NGA) as its chief executive. The charity’s mission is to improve the educational welfare of children and young people in England by promoting high standards in all our state-funded schools and improving the effectiveness of their governing boards. A question we try and answer in our annual report and at our AGM each year: how successful have we been in that?

But here, I want to focus on, not NGA’s role in the improvement, but the bigger question: has school and trust governance been improving? There is no official data. The separate Ofsted score for governance was dropped a long time ago in 2012, and anyway I wouldn’t want to have to rely on Ofsted for the last word on assessments of governance.

When giving oral evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee’s (PAC) enquiry on school oversight and intervention ten years ago, I made the point that we didn’t know enough about the standards on governance across the sector:

“We know that some governing boards are absolutely terrific and that some are pretty woeful, but what we don’t really know is, do we have a bell curve? and where are governing boards in our schools really placed?”

But when pressed by MPs, I gave them my perception based on NGA’s daily contact with governing boards that governance was improving. I probably shouldn’t have been so reticent to commit, as NGA’s experience of school – and that of course includes trust – governance across England was second to none and remains so in 2024. And our perception in the decade since that PAC interrogation is that overall governance practice has continued to improve.

The MPs also asked if we knew what good looked like – and of course NGA does. We have been instrumental in defining this for the sector. I am hugely proud of the success we have had in adding ethical and accountable governance alongside the need for effectiveness. Where we led on this, the Department for Education (DfE) has followed as can be seen in their reworked [2024 governance guides](#).



Not so long after that PAC session, the DfE commissioned National Foundation for Education Research to undertake a feasibility study with NGA into defining and collecting metrics on the quality of school and trust governance. Nine metrics were developed and then scores from surveys of chairs and headteachers compared with external reviews of governance (ERGs).

Sadly, the alignment of those sets of scores with the ERG findings was not strong, suggesting this methodology was probably not feasible. This fits with NGA's own experience of including questions on the quality of governance within our own annual governance survey: we no longer do that as responses did not equate with our professional experience. When NFER delivered the draft to the DfE, this very thorough piece of work hung about inside the DfE before publication in 2017; the conclusions were not as the minister had hoped.

So, attempts to develop scalable and adaptable metrics to assess the quality of governance proved fruitless. Therefore, in-depth ERGs – bespoke explorations of governance at organisational level – continue to be the most reliable methodology for assessing the quality of governance in schools and trusts, but only when conducted by experienced, quality-assured assessors.

The DfE set up an expert advisory group (on which NGA served) to consider reform of the previous National Leaders of Governance (NLG) scheme; the group published recommendations in September 2020.

“The group considered that access to a highly effective cadre of experts in governance was of significant value, particularly for those governing in schools and trusts facing challenges.”

NGA has over its lifetime carried out more than one thousand ERGs, with numbers increasing year on year and many more in trusts than maintained schools. Having established ourselves as a market leader for ERGs, we were delighted when this was confirmed by our appointment, after a competitive tender, to deliver the reformed NLG programme in May 2021. This required us to recruit and train sufficient NLGs to begin work five months later.

A year ago, we published [Charting the course to good governance: common challenges](#), a thematic analysis of the first 200 ERGs carried out by NLGs, and here we follow on with the next 209 reviews right up to the end of the NLG programme in October 2023, along with the progress reports which had been carried out by its termination. During the two-year period between October 2021 and the end of September 2023, NLGs carried out 410 reviews. Unfortunately, the DfE decided it did not have the funds to continue the programme despite its very good results to-date.

So, this report building on last year's now provides a real state of the nation of the governance in England's schools and trusts. Remember also that the NLGs often worked with those schools and trusts where the commissioners had some concerns, so the percentages which follow apply to those who appeared to be in difficulty.

And without giving away the ending, the issues identified almost always correspond with weaknesses in boards' core functions, but all the common themes tally with the rest of NGA's development work. We can highlight the solutions. When you are as steeped in practice as NGA is, none of this is new, although often practitioners are, whether new trustees, governors, governance professionals or leaders. We must not spend valuable time and energy reinventing wheels, but there is such a need to ensure induction for all is carried out well.

Yet despite this exercise not having turned things upside down, it has been a rich source of learning, and its value lies in validating and reinforcing what the sector should already know. It is significant fresh evidence which adds weight to the knowledge bank.

What does the investigation tell us for the future? Some aspects are showing more progress than a few other more stubborn issues. However, overall, we have a sound governance sector where boards take their development seriously. The habit of board self-review is ingrained and the progress that has been made with this becoming custom and practice in the years since the publication of the 20 and 21 questions for review is fabulous. This is now about improving on previous bests, not a sector which is struggling.

How can improvement continue to be made and what exactly will continue to drive progress? We have the resources and insights to equip boards, their leaders and their governance professionals to navigate an increasingly complex and fragile world with skill, confidence and knowledge. We have the keys to success. They simply have to be taken seriously.

The extensive reports underline once again just how difficult governing can be, and I would like to pay tribute to the tireless efforts of the volunteers who serve on governing boards across the nation, persevering through the difficult times. Without you, schools and trusts would lack oversight and accountability.

Emma Knights, NGA co-chief executive

Methodology

This research analysed 209 ERG reports conducted within the second phase of the NLG programme. These ERGs, commissioned by the DfE's regional directors' offices, local authorities, and dioceses, covered each area of England.

Each ERG report's key messages were analysed thematically to identify additional challenges. This study also draws upon wider NGA intelligence, including findings from NGA consultancy ERGs, feedback from NGA consultants, the annual governance survey, events, network meetings, workshops, and anecdotal feedback from our members.

While the initial study identified ten key themes, this second phase delves deeper, uncovering additional challenges and nuances. The resulting report distinguishes between the findings for different types of setting, highlighting the unique challenges faced.

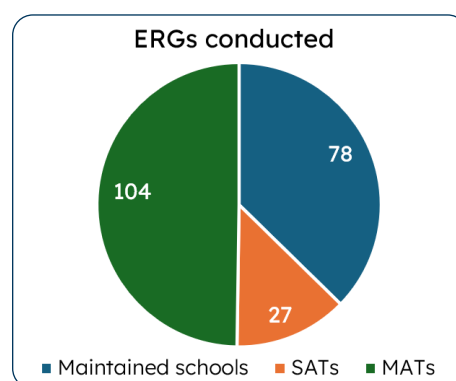


Figure 1: % of ERGs conducted in different settings

Developing good governance: common themes for improvement

1. Establishing a vision and a long-term strategy

A significant proportion of governing boards across all structures (maintained, multi academy trusts, and single academy trusts) struggle with establishing a long-term vision and strategy. This issue was identified as a significant area for improvement in just under half (46%) of ERGs analysed.

Co-creating the organisation's strategy is a core function of the governing board. This ensures long-term focus and lasting success, rather than tackling individual problems as they arise. However, our analysis shows that strategy development practice is not universally developed.

Most boards assess themselves as proficient in strategy development and understand that theirs is a strategic, not an operational, role. However, this has not been entirely borne out by ERGs – instead, the perceived strategic focus can in practice be reactive or operational. The first half of the 2020s brought hurdle after hurdle, from the pandemic to the energy crisis, industrial action, attendance issues and cost of living crisis. Against this backdrop, many boards have been in reactive mode with urgent issues dominating board discussions at the expense of long-term vision and strategy setting.

This was the most prominent theme across the sample: 96 out of 209 ERGs identified vision setting and strategy development as a significant opportunity for improvement.

In almost a third of such cases, boards lacked a three-to-five-year strategy. In a number of reviews, the board had some format of a long term-plan, but that plan was not a major focus of board attention, or the board lacked an accurate differentiation between 'vision' and 'strategic priorities'.

"The school has a set of values and a vision. However, there is no long-term strategy; the board assumed that the annual development plan suffices."

The findings showed that a key barrier to developing a strategy – as distinct from a school or trust improvement plan – can be the headteacher or CEO failing to recognise the need for one. Many ERGs, particularly those in maintained schools, highlighted that the board's focus on 'planning' was not strategic. This approach was often instigated directly by the executive leader or was instead a long-term practice that the board had not recognised as operationally minded.

NGA's well-established [Being Strategic guidance](#), developed in partnership with the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), makes the expectations clear.

Differences by structure

Overall, this was the most significant and consistent issue that impacted all board types. The analysis of ERGs conducted revealed that the degree to which vision and strategy was identified as an area for improvement varied significantly by structure type.

Establishing a vision and long-term strategy was noted as a significant issue, or the board was identified as being too operational or reactive, in:

- **53%** of maintained governing bodies (41 out of 78)
- **41%** of multi academy (MAT) boards (43 out of 104)
- **48%** of single academy trust (SAT) boards (13 out of 27)

Maintained governing bodies

The findings indicate that maintained schools were significantly more likely to be identified as needing improvement in establishing vision and strategy compared to other school structures.

Many maintained school governing bodies reviewed demonstrated their conviction for a strong visionary focus for the organisation. However, the strategy for realising it was frequently missing, and priorities weren't necessarily clearly defined. Ownership of long-term objectives was raised, with a proportion of boards following the head's lead rather than owning the strategy and monitoring how and if implementation is supported and resourced.

NLGs conducting reviews for maintained school governing bodies raised specific questions about what some boards were monitoring against; even when a strategy existed, the monitoring routines in place were sometimes not aligned with strategic priorities.

Opportunities were identified to improve monitoring to ensure that it provided assurance against long-term strategic plans, rather than simply checking solutions to short-term problems were working.

The absence of a long-term strategy was often accompanied by a deficiency in adequate scrutiny of financial sustainability. Improving financial oversight was also more likely to be a recommendation for maintained boards where strategic planning was also found to be lacking.

MAT boards

Over half (59%) of MAT boards had no reported issues focusing on the long term. However, out of the 41% that did, findings showed a pattern where MAT boards were often distracted from a trust-wide vision and strategy by significant barriers faced by schools within the trust.

"They do not have a clear and measurable vision that sets out their aims for the next three to five years and so do not have a long-term strategy, which subsequently informs a programme of governance work for the whole trust and all its schools. The board is not being strategic enough, but largely superficial and distracted in their work."

Again, fewer MATs needed to reduce their focus on operational matters, when compared to maintained school governing bodies. However, where this was identified as a challenge, it was often significantly more problematic given the scale and complexity of the organisation. The size of MATs included within the sample ranged from small trusts to large.

SAT boards

Just under half (48%) of SATs struggled to maintain the right balance between strategic oversight and operational involvement.

Of the SAT boards that statistically fared the best, the focus on the long-term was aided by fewer short-term distractions, compared to both maintained school governing bodies and MAT boards. This finding could be for a number of reasons, but many SAT boards reviewed saw themselves in a more sustainable position. This correlates with anecdotal evidence that many of the SATs still in existence have no intention or perceived reason for joining a larger trust, often being more financially stable and assured of their educational and organisational performance.

2. Clear roles and good use of professional support

While most schools and trusts have established the basics of clear roles and professional support, there remains significant room for improvement in this area. This impacted more than a third (35%) of boards reviewed.

Clarifying roles, ensuring quality chairing and investing in professional support should all now be seen as basic fundamentals for good governance in schools and trusts. On a positive note, findings suggest that in the majority of cases, across all settings, this was not identified as a barrier to good governance.

However, this was still a significant finding and typically, where identified, it was a key factor in supporting sustainable improvement in working practices.

For the vast majority of boards, there was a clear opportunity to unlock greater governance potential, and this was significantly easier than many realised. Findings indicate that clarifying roles and engaging quality professional support can improve board sustainability and volunteer satisfaction. Together with addressing workload imbalances and executive gaps in understanding, making proactive improvements in this area paves the way for impactful and more rewarding board experiences.

At present, governance workload is often concentrated on a few individuals rather than distributed among the whole board, sometimes due to a lack of proper understanding of the role and remit and sometimes due to limited time of other volunteers. There are, however, situations where a chair needs to be more directly involved in providing direction and challenge as a school or trust navigates through a period of challenge, or where additional roles or working parties are created to closely monitor a particular area of the strategy.

An imbalance in workload can be worsened by insufficient governance management, particularly where organisations lack a sufficiently skilled and qualified governance professional(s). Workload for volunteers and governance professionals can also be inadvertently increased by the executive tier, due to their own lack of understanding of governance.

The analysis also revealed that volunteer recruitment and retention challenges are frequently exacerbated by poor induction, where role expectations and an accurate portrayal of time commitments are missing. Findings show that excessive training requirements not rooted in the reality of doing the role are a significant barrier to tackling high volunteer workload. However, often it was where too little training was offered that individuals and boards struggled the most.

The analysis supports the findings of [NGA's 2023 report on governance workload](#), yet the findings show little thought or appreciation is being given to governor and trustee workload.

Boards should ensure that those who want to serve have the opportunity to do so, and that structures support smart working. Conducting one-to-one meetings with governors and trustees to understand their contributions, challenges, and barriers is crucial as a matter of good practice.

Effective chairing

The analysis consistently reinforces that an effective chair has a transformative effect on governance practice. Overall, findings from the NLG programme were consistent with NGA's other intelligence in highlighting the importance of chairs seeking out opportunities to learn from others and bring fresh perspectives to their role. This may involve participating in local and national networks, attending training and development events, and engaging with other sectors to identify best practices that can be adapted to their context.

Findings showed that more attention needs to be paid to what is involved in leading a team of volunteers. Crucially, chairs need to be able to encourage and harness potential in board members, but the role also involves a degree of constructive challenge of other volunteers. The chair needs to be able to support and unite a diverse group of people, being mindful of the different levels of confidence and experience each board member brings.

A committed chair sees succession planning as their responsibility, actively seeking out and developing potential future leaders, providing opportunities for them to take on additional responsibilities and build their skills and experience. NGA's stance has always been that serving as chair in one setting should be kept to a maximum of six years wherever possible, while encouraging retiring chairs to continue to govern and lead, taking their experience to another school or trust.

The chair's leadership role is covered in detail in NGA's [Chair's Handbook](#).

The governance professional role

The role of the governance professional has evolved and is central to ensuring all the other elements of effective governance work efficiently, providing consistency as an expert voice and an anchor for the board.

An outstanding governance professional has deep knowledge and a wide set of skills, including organisation, thoroughness, communication, negotiation, and mediation. They need to be confident enough to call out poor practice when they see it and then signpost and support improvement.

The findings revealed that often it was the governance professional who was the key difference in ensuring that the board maintained a strategic profile. Findings also confirmed that an excellent governance professional is important for alleviating the workload of chairs in particular. Therefore, more focus needs to be applied to developing relationships between these two vital roles. The chair also needs to ensure that both the board and the executive leader understand the value of the profession and are themselves invested in it.

"The chair of trustees is overly burdened by a raft of administrative functions which ordinarily would be performed by a governance professional. It is imperative that a governance professional is appointed to ensure areas of non-compliance are addressed and to enable the chair to focus on the strategic matters in hand."

A frequent flaw addressed in ERGs was poor lines of communication, and where communication channels were found to be effective, the common thread was a skilled governance professional. As the bridge between the board and the executive team, facilitating communication and ensuring that all parties have the information they need to make informed decisions cannot be understated.

Investing in governance development

ERG reports also emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development for governors and trustees. The analysis shows conclusively that boards that benefit most from professional development are the ones that first start by setting development expectations during the recruitment of volunteers.

Development encompasses more than traditional training; yet our findings showed that it can sometimes be approached too rigidly by boards. Proven routes to success included attending NGA and other sector events, peer networking, reading articles and newsletters. Observing other board's practice can also be invaluable but is not common.

"If new trustees are retained and developed through adequate induction and training, the board has the potential to move rapidly towards being effective."

Professional development should be viewed as a continuous process, starting from the moment an individual joins a board and continuing throughout their tenure. Where development is seen as a matter of compliance it will not have the same impact.

Effective professional development requires boards to identify the skills and knowledge required to govern well. This may involve a mix of individual and collective development activities, as well as a focus on board self-evaluation and succession planning to ensure that there is the right mix of skills and experience over time.

Differences by structure

Overall, this area again was most significant for maintained boards, but present across all board types:

- **41%** of maintained governing bodies (32 out of 78)
- **30%** of MAT boards (31 out of 104)
- **29%** of SAT boards (8 out of 27)

Maintained governing bodies

In maintained schools, workload issues – with the chair and often vice-chair shouldering a disproportionate share of the work – were often exacerbated on smaller boards. Maintained boards were also less likely to have formal processes for monitoring and managing workload.

MAT boards

In MATs, workload challenges for trustees were frequently linked to the multiple tiers within the governance structure, and the need to manage relationships and information flows across those tiers. MAT boards that had invested in high quality, trust-wide governance professional support and worked on developing clear schemes of delegation managed workload more effectively. This practice was not consistent across all MATs reviewed.

SAT boards

For SAT boards, workload pressures often stemmed from the need to fulfil all the responsibilities of a standalone entity without the economies of scale available to MATs.

SAT boards that had developed clear role descriptions and expectations for trustees did fare significantly better, while those that prioritised succession planning were even better placed to manage workload sustainably.

3. Holding leadership to account

Holding leadership to account is a significant challenge for a majority of governing boards across all structures. This is a direct barrier to achieving good governance and was identified as problematic in 68% of ERGs.

Boards that focus their scrutiny on clear strategic priorities are more likely to hold leaders to account well. This requires understanding from heads and executives on what information is needed, together with a culture of curiosity and challenge from governors and trustees.

Where holding leaders to account was identified as an issue, over a quarter (27%) specifically noted major weaknesses in leadership engagement with governance, and therefore boards being unable to hold leaders to account. This was often directly linked to how and what was being reported to the board. Good practice was observed where concise information was provided with the expectation that it would be debated and scrutinised. However, in some cases, boards were too ready to accept as facts the information and conclusions being presented by the head or CEO.

Some ERGs highlighted specific areas where boards were not challenging leaders, including educational outcomes, safeguarding, pupil data, staff performance management, and finance.

“Governors need to support and hold the headteacher to account rigorously to ensure that standards of progress and attainment are raised. Effective scrutiny, challenge, and performance management need to be embedded.”

While other ERGs found instances of robust challenge, it was not sustained enough to truly hold schools and trusts accountable. The lack of consistency across the ERGs analysed can be attributed to several factors, including unclear strategic priorities, insufficient training for governors and trustees, and a reluctance to engage in difficult conversations. However, one of the most prominent barriers was the lack of quality, proportionate board reporting.

“There is evidence that trustees were not encouraged to ask questions or hold to account, and the role was largely superficial.”

While some ERGs, across all types of boards, showed a key area of weakness was a lack of respect or appreciation for the role of governance from the executive leadership, the majority, at almost three quarters (73%), found scrutiny and accountability challenges were not directly caused by this. This coincided with the majority of ERGs showing at least a degree of acceptance from the school or trust leadership that governance was valuable and deserved to be invested in.

A common link was identified between weaknesses in providing effective challenge and weaknesses in strategic planning: without clear strategic priorities, deliverables cannot be effectively monitored.

Differences by structure

Having issues related to holding leaders to account, problems with the level of scrutiny focus and accountability, and/or a lack of confidence in challenging leaders was identified as an area for improvement in:

- **69%** of maintained governing bodies (54 out of 78)
- **42%** of MAT boards (44 out of 104)
- **59%** of SAT boards (16 out of 27)

There was variation in severity across the total 138 reviews that found holding leaders to account was a significant barrier to good governance. It is notable that for over half, getting the right balance and approach to the relationship and interaction between the board and the leadership was problematic.

Maintained governing bodies

Some governing bodies were reluctant to question what they had been presented with, instead being overly reliant and trusting in the information presented by the headteacher. In some circumstances, opportunities were identified for the board to be more proactive in seeking independent assurance. There was a greater tendency for challenge to focus on operational details rather than strategic priorities for maintained boards.

MAT boards

For MAT boards, challenges around scrutiny and accountability often related to the need to maintain oversight across multiple schools.

MAT boards sometimes struggled to establish a consistent approach to reporting that would allow them to compare performance and hold leaders to account effectively. One common scenario was where trustees struggled to get a balance of being trust-wide and school-specific. Board reports built on heavy narratives often posed a barrier to boards being able to interpret the trust's position and in turn offer the right level of probing questions.

SAT boards

SAT boards faced similar challenges to maintained boards in terms of understanding their role in scrutiny and challenge, but with the added complexity of needing to oversee all aspects of a standalone entity. SAT boards that had developed clear schemes of delegation and reporting expectations for their committees tended to be more effective in maintaining focus and accountability.

4. Financial oversight

While financial oversight is a common area for improvement, it is not a major weakness for most boards. The majority of boards are making good progress on financial governance despite the increasing number of financial pressures.

While 69% of reviews had some form of financial focus for improvement, only 27 out of 209 reviews listed financial concerns leading to poor governance.

Robust financial challenge can be hampered by poor governance structures, for example, where the finance committee is not being properly utilised. However, most boards were faring well, despite the vast array of financial challenges that schools and trusts were facing.

While a need to improve financial practice was mentioned in some form in 145 out of the 209 reviews, just 13% identified this as an urgent issue and major financial weakness specifically linked to inadequate governance.

A number of boards were told that they must start to ensure that they have the right committees and reporting mechanisms in place to provide the necessary level of oversight. This included recommendations that they reviewed the terms of reference of existing committees or establishing working groups which may be needed to respond to changing school priorities.

| **"Financial oversight is limited by poor governance structures."**

The analysis highlighted the link between financial oversight and long-term strategic planning. Boards that fail to prioritise long-term financial sustainability may find themselves in a reactive position, making short-term decisions that have negative consequences.

| **"There is little evidence of financial scrutiny in the committee minutes or of discussion on the best use of resources to support the vision and strategy or the monitoring and oversight of the impact of pupil premium and other targeted funding streams."**

Occasionally, a need was identified to ensure that all governors and trustees have the skills and knowledge required to provide effective challenge and monitor the impact of spending.

Typically, financial areas for improvement were:

- a) **Financial oversight and scrutiny** – many reviews mentioned the board's role in overseeing finances, scrutinising financial reports, and ensuring financial accountability.
- b) **Financial skills and expertise** – some reviews highlighted the financial skills and expertise of board members, while others identified a need for additional expertise.
- c) **Financial performance and viability** – several reviews discuss financial performance, including budget management, financial planning, and ensuring financial viability.
- d) **Financial procedures and systems** – some reviews mention the effectiveness of financial procedures, systems, and reports.
- e) **Financial challenges and risks** – a few reviews identified breaches of financial regulations or the need for improved financial oversight, particularly for growing trusts.

Differences by structure

Financial oversight was highlighted as an area for future focus in:

- **76%** of maintained governing bodies (59 out of 78)
- **63%** of MAT boards (66 out of 104)
- **74%** of SAT boards (20 out of 27)

As noted, the majority of these issues were minor. Many of the areas for improvement were documented in the context of the financial challenges inflicting the sector as a whole.

However, the above suggests that financial oversight was a more prominent challenge for maintained schools and SATs, which may be due to differences in funding arrangements and financial management processes or the lack of economies of scale. We also know that primary schools (which are more likely to be maintained) are experiencing more acute budget challenges due to falling pupil numbers than other phases currently.

Maintained governing bodies

In maintained schools, financial oversight was sometimes hampered by a lack of specialist expertise on the governing body. Many maintained boards relied heavily on the headteacher and school business manager for financial information and advice, which could limit the scope for independent scrutiny. Maintained governing bodies also tended to have less formal financial reporting and monitoring processes compared to academy trusts.

MAT boards

MAT boards generally had more robust financial oversight arrangements, with dedicated finance committees and standardised reporting templates. However, the effectiveness of these arrangements varied depending on the level of financial expertise on the board and the quality of the information provided by executive leaders. MAT boards also faced the challenge of maintaining oversight of financial performance across multiple schools, which required careful balancing of centralised control and school-level autonomy.

SAT boards

SAT boards shared many of the same challenges as maintained boards in terms of accessing financial expertise and establishing robust monitoring processes. However, as standalone entities, SATs also had to ensure full compliance with the Academy Trust Handbook and other regulatory requirements. This added an additional layer of complexity to financial oversight, particularly for smaller SATs with limited central resources.

5. Ineffective governance structures

Ineffective governance structures were identified as a specific problem in 18% of board reviews across all board types. While a small number of reports highlighted non-compliance or structures hindering effectiveness, the majority identified structures not fit for purpose or need, with some boards acknowledging progress towards improvement.

For MATs, this finding and number six (relationships between tiers of governance) are very much interlinked, but distinct.

While a very small number (9%) of reports highlighted governance structures that no longer support board effectiveness or result in non-compliance, the majority of the reports that identified structural issues simply picked up this issue as the structure of the governance set up not being fit for purpose or need.

One ERG highlighted a board with 17 link roles, acknowledging that:

“Most governors would welcome a change in the approach to link roles, to better align with the school priorities, and be more evenly distributed across the board.”

Another review noted that the committee approach was a ‘free-for-all’ with no consistency. However, while many NLGs identified it as an overall issue, they also acknowledged progress towards improvement:

“This is a passionate and committed governing body ... Effective structures are beginning to be developed which have the potential to serve as a cornerstone for effective governance on condition that new governors commit to training and quickly develop a secure understanding of what good governance looks like ... ”

Differences by structure

The analysis identified several common issues with governance structures, including outdated or unclear schemes of delegation, ineffective committee structures, and a lack of separation between the strategic and operational aspects of governance. Such issues were present in:

- **19%** of maintained governing bodies (15 out of 78)
- **18%** of MAT boards (19 out of 104)
- **11%** of SAT boards (3 out of 27)

Maintained governing boards

In maintained schools, governance structures were often based on historical precedent rather than current needs. Many maintained boards had a large number of committees and working groups, which could lead to duplication of effort and a lack of strategic focus. There was also a tendency for individual governors to take on multiple link roles, which could spread them too thinly and limit their ability to provide effective oversight.

MAT boards

MAT governance structures varied widely, reflecting the diversity of trust sizes and operating models. A common challenge was ensuring that the scheme of delegation provided clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities of the trust board, executive leaders, and local academy committees. MAT boards also had to strike a delicate balance between centralised control and school-level autonomy, which required careful design of reporting and escalation mechanisms.

SAT boards

As standalone entities, SATs have more flexibility to design their governance structures to suit their specific context. However, we saw that this could also lead to a lack of external challenge and perspective. SAT boards needed to ensure that their structures were compliant with legal and regulatory requirements, particularly around the separation of members and trustees.

Some SATs had established advisory bodies or committees to provide additional expertise and perspectives in specific areas such as finance, education, or community engagement. Where these existed, SAT committees needed to ensure that their role and relationship to the main board was clearly defined, and that they were used effectively to support rather than duplicate governance functions.

6. Relationships between tiers of governance in MATs

For MATs, there is an added challenge of the relationship between tiers of governance. Managing the relationship between the trust board and local academy committees was already a key priority for most MATs, with only 5% of reports showing this area needed more attention. Issues included overlap in membership and a lack of clear communication channels between the trust board and local governing bodies.

17% of MAT boards were shown to have issues around relationships or communication between tiers of governance. The key issues identified were:

A lack of clarity around trust board and local academy committee roles and responsibilities.

Insufficient communication and collaboration between the trust board and local tier.

Inconsistency in the effectiveness and impact of academy committees across the trust.

Inadequate reporting and information flow from academy committees to the trust board

Overlap in governance functions between the trust board and academy committees.

Difficulty ensuring the trust board receives adequate assurance from academy committees regarding school performance and compliance.

Standardisation of expectations and outcomes for academy committees lacking.

Challenges in maintaining effective governance at the local level while ensuring strategic oversight at the trust level.

Those MATs identified as being effective in this area had a clear scheme of delegation that set out the respective roles and responsibilities of each tier, and which was regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in the trust's context.

Some MATs had also invested in joint training and development activities to build a shared understanding and ethos across the governance structure. However, challenges remained in ensuring that local governing bodies felt empowered to provide meaningful input and challenge, while avoiding duplication or undermining the authority of the trust board.

“It was evident from the interviews carried out, and the external reports provided, that communication has improved between the trust and its local governing boards; however, as the trust grows it may need to review this still further.”

Boards and their governance professionals must also consider how to achieve effective and regular two-way communication between governance tiers. It is only through robust local governance that the trust board can truly hear from the communities they serve.

Trustees must have a clear line of sight into the performance of individual schools and receive feedback from children, young people, families, and staff to assure themselves that their strategy is making a positive impact. Academy committees must feel empowered to provide meaningful input into the trust's strategic direction and reporting mechanisms. This requires regular opportunities for timely and relevant dialogue and collaboration.

"The next steps to improve the governance of the trust are to improve communication and collaboration between the layers of governance and to focus on the work of the local governing boards."

7. Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement was an area for development for a limited but significant proportion of governing boards across all structures. While it is a key responsibility, 21% of ERGs found it to be lacking. MATs struggled in this area most, marginally more than SATs, while less than one in ten maintained school reviews highlighted this area. Most frequently, stakeholder feedback was not being used effectively in holding senior leaders to account.

Stakeholder engagement is a key governance responsibility and an essential component of accountable governance. Engaging with stakeholders should be at the heart of the culture of a school or trust, underpinning the organisation's work. Information from stakeholders also provides an important source of triangulation to executive reporting.

Excellent practice requires two-way dialogue between the school, pupils, families, staff, and the wider community. It involves more than just reporting to parents or conducting surveys, but requires actively listening to pupils, staff (not just teachers), and considering the community, whether it be local businesses, faith groups, or other charitable agencies.

After actively seeking out the views and perspectives of all stakeholders, feedback must be used to inform decision-making and drive improvement. Information from stakeholders provides a source of triangulation to executive reporting and the importance of stakeholder engagement has now been accepted by the DfE.

Differences by structure

Out of the 209 board reviews across all board types, 21 boards (10%) identified stakeholder engagement as an area of development or need for improvement:

- **8%** of maintained governing bodies (6 out of 78)
- **11%** of MAT boards (11 out of 104)
- **11%** of SAT boards (3 out of 27)

Maintained governing boards

In maintained schools, stakeholder engagement was often more localised and focused on the immediate school community. Effective governing bodies established regular channels of communication with parents, such as newsletters, social media, and face-to-face events. They also prioritised pupil voice, with mechanisms such as school councils and pupil surveys used to gather feedback and involve pupils in decision-making. However, engagement with the wider community and external stakeholders was sometimes more limited, particularly in areas with lower levels of social capital.

Some larger maintained schools had established advisory bodies or parent councils to provide additional stakeholder input and support to the governing body. Where these existed, it was important to ensure that their role and relationship to the governing body was clearly defined to avoid duplication or confusion.

MAT boards

For MAT boards, stakeholder engagement is a more complex challenge, involving multiple schools and communities. Our analysis shows that effective MATs had developed trust-wide communication and engagement strategies, with a clear brand and messaging that resonated across all schools. They also prioritised local engagement, with mechanisms for gathering feedback and involving stakeholders at school level feeding into trust-wide decision-making.

Some MATs had established stakeholder forums or advisory groups to formalise this input, while others relied on strong academy committees to provide a conduit for community voice. Local context cannot be underestimated – engagement with stakeholders is one of [the 4Ss of local governance](#), and mechanisms need to ensure that trustees receive pertinent information.

“The trust board wishes to be seen as innovative in how it engages with the community and stakeholders and will ... ensure that any plans for this are sustainable in the longer term.”

SAT boards

As standalone entities, SATs had the advantage of being able to tailor their stakeholder engagement approach to their specific context and community. Effective SAT boards had developed strong partnerships with local businesses, community groups, and other schools, leveraging these relationships to enhance opportunities for pupils and secure additional resources.

SATs also prioritised regular communication and engagement with parents and pupils, using a range of channels and events to build a strong sense of community and shared purpose. However, as with maintained schools, the depth and breadth of stakeholder engagement could vary depending on the social capital and demographics of the local area.

8. Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is a well-established practice among governing boards, demonstrating a widespread commitment to continuous improvement. While there is room for enhancing the depth, quality, and impact of these evaluations, the fact that they are already being conducted regularly indicates a positive culture of reflection and a desire for growth within the governance structures. This provides a strong foundation for further development and refinement of self-evaluation processes, ultimately leading to even more effective governance practices.

The vast majority of governing boards, 194 of the full 209, were conducting self-evaluation. However, the findings revealed too much variation in boards' approach.

Where boards actively sought to improve their practices and engage in self-evaluation and external reviews, a commitment to continuous improvement was established and good governance was far more likely to be achieved.

A relatively small proportion of ERGs identified a lack of self-evaluation; fewer than one in 10 ERGs noted this as a problem.

The majority of boards conducted self-evaluation annually, while a few had a less frequent cycle. The main challenge in this area was the depth, quality and impact of self-evaluation. In some cases, this amounted to little more than a cursory tick-box exercise, lacking critical reflection or meaningful action planning. Other boards conducted more thorough self-evaluation but struggled to translate the findings into tangible improvements.

A key factor influencing the effectiveness of self-evaluation was the level of engagement and ownership from the entire board. A collaborative approach to self-evaluation, with the board engaging in transparent, meaningful reflection, and with all members contributing their perspectives and committing to the resulting actions, was shown to drive genuine improvement. Where self-evaluation was seen as the responsibility of just the chair or a small group of board members, the process tended to have limited impact.

The ERGs also highlighted the importance of using a structured framework or tool to guide self-evaluation. Boards that used established models, such as NGA's [self-evaluation questions](#) (20/21 questions for governing boards), tended to have more comprehensive and insightful results. However, even then, the quality of application varied, underscoring the need for boards to invest time and effort in using them effectively.

Another common theme was the need for boards to triangulate their self-evaluation findings with external perspectives. While self-evaluation is inherently introspective, the most effective boards also sought input from stakeholders such as staff, parents, and pupils, as well as drawing on external data and benchmarking. This helped to validate or challenge the board's own perceptions and identify blind spots.

Many boards had well-articulated action plans, but implementation was patchy. Common barriers included lack of clear ownership, insufficient resources, and failure to monitor progress. Boards that prioritised regular follow-up, with self-evaluation actions as standing agenda items and clear accountability, were more successful in driving change.

Overall, the reviews paint a picture of self-evaluation as an increasingly embedded feature of governance practice, but one that requires ongoing development and support.

Differences by structure

The highest percentage of boards not conducting self-evaluation was found among maintained school boards:

- **9%** of maintained governing bodies (7 out of 78)
- **6%** of MAT boards (6 out of 104)
- **7%** of SAT boards (2 out of 27)

Maintained governing bodies

In maintained schools, self-evaluation practice was more variable, with some governing bodies not undertaking any formal self-evaluation at all. Where self-evaluation did take place, it was often less structured and more reliant on the chair's initiative. Maintained governing bodies were also less likely to draw on external perspectives or data to inform their self-evaluations.

MAT boards

MAT boards tended to have more established self-evaluation practices, often linked to the trust's wider governance framework and reporting cycles. Many MATs used bespoke self-evaluation tools aligned to their scheme of delegation. However, the reviews found that trust boards in general tended to attempt to 'reinvent the wheel' too frequently, rather than using NGA's established self-evaluation questions. The rigour and impact of self-evaluations varied considerably, with some focusing more on compliance than on a fuller understanding of good governance, indicating a misunderstanding of the purpose of the exercise in some cases.

SAT boards

SAT boards fell somewhere in between, with most undertaking some form of self-evaluation but with varying degrees of formality and follow-through. SAT boards were more likely than maintained governing bodies to use external frameworks and seek stakeholder input, but less so than MAT boards. A common challenge for SAT boards was ensuring that self-evaluation encompassed the full range of the board's responsibilities.

In trusts – both SATs and MATs – the outcome of the ERG or the self-evaluation should be reported to trust members at the AGM; this is not yet standard practice. It also emphasises the need for separation between individuals sitting as trustee and those appointed as members. The board is accountable to the members for its performance, and the members need to be completely without conflicts of interest.

Achieving good governance: making progress

During the NLG programme, 141 schools and trusts benefited from a progress review carried out three months after the initial ERG. Despite the relatively short timeframe, considerable progress was evidenced in 91% of settings.

Progress reviews can have a significant impact on driving improvement in governance practice as boards are held accountable for delivering action plans and are given ongoing support and guidance.

The findings also emphasise the importance of progress reviews being carried out by an experienced and objective external reviewer, who can provide an independent perspective on the board's progress and offer constructive feedback and support where needed.

Barriers to progress

Where little progress was made on action plans, common barriers included:

<p>1. Access to a governance professional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although appointing to this role can take time, the importance of a governance professional in managing the action plan, demonstrating impact, and ensuring impetus cannot be underestimated. 	<p>2. Recruiting volunteers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This can be a problem where boards are already struggling with capacity. Boards should consider different approaches to recruitment, such as partnering with local businesses or community organisations, and should prioritise the development of a diverse pipeline of future talent.
<p>3. Changing from an operational mode to a strategic mindset</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining momentum and changing long-established ways of working can be challenging, particularly where there is resistance to change or a lack of understanding of the benefits. Boards need to openly review their practice and regularly question each activity to see if it is directly linked to the board's strategic priorities, or whether it is an operational matter that can be carried out by school leaders. 	<p>4. Sharing the workload</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The workload of volunteers should be a primary consideration when looking at board capacity, structure and practice. Recommendations need to be owned by the whole board and have realistic timescales. Volunteers' other commitments can prevent immediate change, however, contributions which fit with availability need to be found. These barriers can be particularly challenging where capacity or expertise is limited – improvement can be consolidated by a collective conversation on how to use professional development.

Growing good governance

A summary of themes highlighted by our analysis and where to find resources and support:

<p>Vision and strategy</p> <p>Looking beyond the coming year and planning for long-term success and security</p>	<p>Clear roles and professional support</p> <p>Paving the way for more rewarding governance experiences</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • co-created organisational strategy • board takes ownership of the strategy • operational and reactive focus is avoided • strategic priorities drive monitoring focus <p>NGA strategic planning resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • volunteer satisfaction proactively addressed • evenly distributed workload • strong chairing sets tone and direction • governance professional is well utilised <p>Resources to support chairing, governance workload and the governance professional</p>
<p>Holding leadership to account</p> <p>A shared understanding of what information the board needs and a culture of curiosity</p>	<p>Financial oversight</p> <p>Robust, well-informed and independent scrutiny of spending decisions</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high quality board reports • leaders understand and value governance • clear separation between strategic and operational roles • governors/trustees can engage in difficult conversations <p>NGA resources to support monitoring and executive leader performance management</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • committee structure and reporting routines support effective oversight • strengthened by the board’s overarching strategic plan • governors and trustees have the skills and knowledge required <p>NGA financial oversight resources</p>
<p>Effective governance structures</p> <p>Building and maintaining the right structures for the needs of the organisation</p>	<p>Relationships between tiers in MATs</p> <p>Clear communication and separation between tiers in a MAT</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear delegation and separation • structured based on current needs • avoids duplication and supports efficiency <p>NGA resources on governing board roles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investment in training and development to secure shared understanding • clear scheme of delegation in place <p>NGA local tier resources</p>
<p>Stakeholder engagement</p> <p>An essential component of accountable governance</p>	<p>Self-evaluation</p> <p>Transparent, meaningful and collaborative reflection</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • two-way dialogue between the board and stakeholders • feedback is used to inform decision-making and drive improvement <p>NGA stakeholder engagement resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • well-established evaluation tools are used • the entire board takes ownership • actions are identified and tracked <p>NGA self-evaluation resources</p>

Conclusion

This report, based on the analysis of ERG reports from the NLG programme and NGA's wider sector intelligence, shows us that school and trust governance is moving forwards, for the most part, in the right direction. While some of that movement is slow, practice is improving and we now have a wealth of knowledge to build on and share.

This study has proven to be an exercise of validation – a moment to reflect on a fresh flurry of evidence that supports our longstanding understanding of what makes governance good, or not so good. When NGA first introduced the [Eight elements of effective governance](#), it was a pivotal moment in introducing cross-sector practice and applying it to the education sector. It was a recognition there were significant points of failure that needed to be addressed.

While it has proven to be a timeless tool, NGA then sought to widen the governance narrative, championing a more holistic and principled approach – good governance. Since 2017, NGA's approach to championing school and trust governance has been to widen the understanding of what sets good governance apart from merely being effective. Effective governance is crucial, but so too is ethical and accountable governance.

This report paints a varied, and at times, complex picture of school and trust governance in England. The mixed economy of schools in different types of organisations provides a highly nuanced view, but with some common themes. While many of these themes have been explored before, it is vital they are revisited. Pleasingly, the analysis shows that many boards are doing so much right. There is undeniable evidence of commitment to improvement and a large number of boards have shown us what difference good governance makes.

“Governance practice is firmly established across the trust, working efficiently and described as a well-oiled machine. The systems and processes in place support everyone's understanding of the expectations of them at all levels in governance.”

Yet challenges persist. This report shows that there is still a need to shift from a reactive to a proactive and strategic approach. This includes developing long-term visions and strategies, clarifying roles, and ensuring effective communication between tiers of governance.

The ERG findings have also substantiated all Eight elements of effective governance but, in particular, an effective governance professional was shown to be essential to making progress. While this is a message NGA has repeated many times, the evidence shows us that one of the best ways of equipping good governance is through investing in skilled governance professionals who can identify and facilitate how to improve board functions, particularly in areas like workload management, communication, and strategic focus.

It has been particularly positive to record the high quality of financial oversight across so many boards. There is room for improvement, especially in ensuring all board members have the necessary skills and knowledge to scrutinise financial decisions effectively. There is also a specific challenge for maintained schools and smaller trusts, which may have limited access to financial expertise. But in the face of extraordinary financial challenges that the sector is bracing for, the financial acumen of boards is largely proving solid.

A board that is committed to accountable governance has its collective mind and agenda set on stakeholder engagement. Again, there is a large degree of documented positive progress that now needs to be celebrated. But we also recognise that boards cannot be complacent – this remains an area where many boards could do more to actively seek and incorporate feedback from pupils, staff, parents, and the wider community. This is crucial not only for building trust and transparency but also for ensuring that decisions are well-informed.

The widespread adoption of self-evaluation is a positive sign, but the quality and impact need to be enhanced. Boards should move beyond tick-box exercises and engage in meaningful reflection that leads to concrete actions and improvements.

The findings of this report come together to underscore the importance of continuous learning and development for all involved in governance. By investing in training, resources, and external support, boards can equip themselves with knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of the education landscape and fulfil their responsibilities effectively.

The cancellation of the NLG programme is a setback, but it also presents an opportunity for schools and trusts to take ownership of their governance development. By proactively seeking out support and guidance, boards can continue to strengthen their practices and ensure that they are well-equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Ultimately, the goal of good governance is to ensure that all children and young people have access to a high-quality education. By addressing the areas highlighted in this report, governing boards can play a vital role in achieving this goal.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Prioritise strategic planning:** Develop and implement comprehensive strategies that align with the school or trust's vision, values, and long-term goals, considering the specific challenges and opportunities faced by each board type.
2. **Strengthen governance structures:** Boards should review and refine their governance structures to ensure clarity of roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.
3. **High quality governance support:** Invest sufficiently in both the recruitment and development of governance professionals, seeking the skills to help enhance strategic focus and the confidence to guide and correct where required.
4. **Invest in leadership development:** Provide ongoing training and development opportunities for board members to enhance their leadership skills and knowledge of effective governance practices, financial management and strategic planning.
5. **Review the way the board undertakes its core accountability function:** Ensure the right level of information is received, that it is triangulated, stakeholders voices are heard, and improve the questioning skills of boards, so that informed challenge and debate adds value to decision-making.
6. **Enhance communication and collaboration:** Foster open communication and collaboration among board members, school leaders and stakeholders to ensure shared understanding, effective decision-making and a unified approach.
7. **Address capacity challenges:** Identify and address issues by recruiting and retaining skilled board members, providing adequate resources, and seeking external support when needed – particularly around financial management and strategic planning.

External and self-review packages

In order to realise your board's potential for continuous improvement, NGA recommend having an external review of governance every three years, and an annual self-review. Our online self-evaluation tools and external review packages are here to support with this process.

- Identify your board's strengths and areas for development
- Create a roadmap for improvement
- Bespoke solutions designed for your organisation
- Designed and delivered by sector experts



About us

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning to shape stronger governance. Together, we're raising standards and ensuring every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.



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