School and Trust Governance Survey 2024 Key findings

Funding

Financial sustainability under threat

Only 19% of schools and trusts perceive themselves as financially sustainable in the medium to long term, with deep-seated concerns about future financial viability growing more severe.

Budget pressures intensify

An alarming 60% of governing boards now cite balancing the budget as their top challenge, up from 52% in the previous year and 40% in 2020 – the highest ever recorded, highlighting the growing financial strain on schools and trusts.

Falling pupil numbers

39% of respondents overall report that their finances have been impacted by falling pupil numbers. This is more of a concern for primary schools (45%) than secondary schools (23%). A further 23% have not yet been impacted but are worried about this in the near future.

Curriculum breadth at risk

A concerning 59% of respondents report having to reduce teaching or cut certain subjects due to budget constraints, compromising the breadth and quality of education offered.

SEND funding crisis deepens

Access to funding is the top SEND challenge, reported by 74% of governing boards – up from 66% last year.

Pupil, family and community needs

SEND support demands surge

The proportion of boards identifying support for children with special educational needs as a top challenge has risen dramatically to 37%, from 25% in 2022, reflecting the increasing complexity of needs in classrooms.

Attendance is high priority

Attendance features prominently as both a top challenge (32%) and a key strategic priority (33%) for governing boards, underscoring its critical importance in the current educational landscape.

Expanding school services

Half of respondents (51%) said there has been an increase in the support provided by their school or trust in response to wider societal needs in the past 12 months.

Safeguarding issues growing

Nearly half (49%) of respondents report an increase in safeguarding concerns in the past 12 months, with bullying, neglect, and domestic abuse topping the list, indicating a growing need for robust safeguarding measures.

Staffing, resources and accountability

Staffing challenges

Secondary schools grapple with acute recruitment (66%) and retention (43%) challenges, with rates more than double those of primary schools. In contrast, almost half of primary schools (45%) face a struggle to maintain staff structures amid falling enrolment, a challenge cited twice as frequently as in secondary phases.
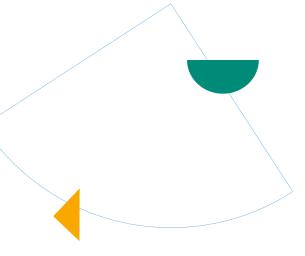
Staff CPD needs greater focus

Only 54% of respondents reported regularly reviewing and assessing the effectiveness of their organisation's CPD programmes and initiatives for staff. 39% said they do this infrequently and worryingly, 7% said they never do this.

Declining school building conditions

Nearly half (49%) of respondents agree that the condition of their school buildings negatively impacts the learning environment, underscoring the need for significant investment in educational infrastructure.

Ofsted's pervasive influence

51% of respondents identify Ofsted as the single most significant factor shaping practice within their school or trust, raising questions about the balance between accountability, local needs and drivers in education.

Governance volunteers and recruitment challenges

Underrepresentation persists

Respondents aged 60 and over has reached its highest levels since the survey began, with over half now sitting in this category (52%). Only 9% of governance volunteers are under 40, with a mere 1% under 30, continuing the significant underrepresentation of younger perspectives in school and trust governance.

More volunteers looking to resign

There has been a 4% increase in respondents who are considering resigning from their governance role (30%) compared to 2023. Concerningly, the majority of the rise comes from an increase in those who strongly agree (9%).

Ethnic diversity deficit

Of those surveyed who disclosed their ethnicity, a stark 95% identify as white, underscoring the stubborn lack of ethnic diversity in governance roles and the risk that boards are often not reflective of the communities they serve.

Recruitment challenges widespread

76% of respondents report difficulty in recruiting new governors and trustees, with regional variations highlighting the uneven distribution of this challenge across the country.

Employer support lacking

Only 29% of respondents now receive paid time off for governance duties, down from 43% in 2015, potentially affecting the ability to attract and retain volunteers from diverse professional backgrounds.

Workload concerns are growing

While 76% of respondents agree their governance role is manageable, this represents a 4% decrease from the previous year, with those strongly disagreeing doubling, signalling increasing workload pressures.