

# School and trust governance – the here and now

An interim report from NGA's 2023  
annual governance survey



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# Introduction

**“It seems that governance is becoming more and more complex, and the responsibilities are growing.”**

Governance in schools and trusts can be very rewarding, but it is also increasingly characterised by the challenges boards face and the need to prioritise accordingly. NGA has been conducting a survey of school governors and trustees since 2011, aiming to gather their views and shape education policy while providing an overview of school governance in England in the absence of official data. The survey highlights the specific challenges and priorities faced by schools and trusts across the country from the perspective of governing boards.

In recent years, the sector has faced unparalleled tensions, from economic challenges and the cost-of-living crisis, the lingering impact of school closures throughout the pandemic, to the increasing concerns regarding both pupil and staff mental health and wellbeing, and the recruitment and retention of school staff. The 2023 survey reflects a largely consistent picture across regions and school types. While there are some positive aspects in specific areas, the majority of respondents express that schools and trusts are struggling against national and local pressures. Their voices provide compelling evidence; NGA remains committed to amplifying these concerns in the hope of bringing about real change in national education policymaking.

**This interim report provides a snapshot of some of the key findings in figure one; a full report will be published in September 2023.**



Figure one, an outline of the key findings from the 2023 annual governance survey.

## Terminology

This report uses the following terms to describe school governance structures:

- **Maintained schools:** Schools that receive support and oversight from local authorities including those within federations.
- **MATs (Multi academy trusts):** Governance structures where two or more academies are governed by a single board of trustees.
- **SATs (Single academy trusts):** Governance structures where a single academy operates under its own trust.
- **Academy committees:** Committees within a trust board responsible for governing an individual school, also known as local governing bodies.

## Methodology and approach

The annual governance survey (AGS) is an annual self-selecting online survey that has been conducted by NGA for thirteen consecutive years. It provides a comprehensive overview of school and trust governance, involving governors, trustees, and academy committee members from state-funded schools in England.

The survey, conducted from 25 April 2023, to 2 June 2023 utilised Edurio's research-based survey instruments, with 2,695 participants. It was distributed through various channels to ensure respondent anonymity and demographic representation. Data analysis was performed using Edurio's software, identifying trends and variations based on region, school type, phase, and other respondent demographics. This interim report presents key findings from the AGS 2023 study, with a comprehensive final report scheduled for September.

## Acknowledgements

NGA would like to acknowledge our sincere appreciation to Edurio, the leading survey experts in the sector, for their invaluable support and guidance. Their collaboration in formulating survey questions and analysing results has made a huge contribution to the ongoing high quality of NGA's longitudinal governance research.

# Key findings

1. Balancing the budget remains the top challenge for all school and trust boards (52%). Less than 2 in 10 said they were financially sustainable in the medium to long term.



2. Attendance was the only area to feature in both the top three challenges and top three priorities with parental communication the most successful tool in tackling it.



3. Support staff recruitment and retention was overall the most picked staffing challenge, being especially true for maintained schools.



4. Less than half support both the strike action and its underlying principles, with respondents aged 30-39 showing the highest level of support.



5. Safeguarding concerns are rising, with over half (55%) reporting a rise in safeguarding concerns in the past year alone and just 3% reporting a decrease.









6. Views on inspections among those governing remain diverse. A majority (60%) support a graded school inspection system while 34% don't.



7. Satisfaction with the government's performance on education is at an all-time low among governing boards (9%).

# Exploring the issues

Challenges	Strategic priorities
 <p>Balancing budget</p>	 <p>Improving attainment</p>
 <p>Attendance</p>	 <p>Broad &amp; balanced curriculum</p>
 <p>SEND</p>	 <p>Attendance</p>

## Priorities and challenges

### Challenges

In the arena of school and trust governance, certain challenges have gained prominence over the last year while others have shifted slightly in significance, as revealed by this year’s survey findings.

Respondents were asked to tell us the top three challenges facing the school or trust they governed, picking three options from a list of 16. Bar 2021, when we did not specifically ask about challenges, balancing the budget has been the top challenge identified by governing boards since we first asked the question in 2018, and this year we see even more respondents placing this at the top. Balancing the budget remained the top challenge for governing boards, with an increase of 8 percentage points (52%).

Attendance is the second biggest challenge, followed by support for children with special educational needs. The slip in staff wellbeing including workload from third to fourth position, is a decrease of five percentage points (22%). This is more likely to reflect the growing prominence of attendance rather than any indication that this is an area boards feel slightly less positive about.

Notably, attracting high-quality teaching staff saw a significant increase, while the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and improving attainment moved out of the top five to seventh and 10<sup>th</sup> place respectively. Energy costs, a new entry for 2023, ranked sixth.

Variations across board types reveal differences in budgetary concerns and challenges related to behaviour, exclusions, and attainment. Primary schools prioritise budget balancing, while secondary schools face challenges in behaviour, exclusions, and pupil mental health and wellbeing. SEND schools emphasise services for pupils and staff development.

These findings underscore the ongoing financial pressures faced by all state schools and highlight the need for attention to attendance, special educational needs, staff wellbeing, teacher recruitment, and budget management.

## Strategic Priorities

Governing boards' strategic priorities have witnessed notable shifts compared to last year. Improving attainment takes the top spot at 34%, followed closely by ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum at 32%. Attendance, a new entry, ranks third at 29%. The best use of resources rises to the fourth position with 25% whilst pupil mental health and wellbeing slips to eighth place with 16%.

Differences also emerge across board types, with maintained boards prioritising support for pupils with special educational needs instead of attendance. Meanwhile MAT trustees rank staff wellbeing including workload lower than others.

School phase variations reveal primary schools aligning with the overall figures. Secondary schools however prioritised attendance, followed by improving attainment and behaviour and exclusions. SEND schools emphasize a broad curriculum, staff wellbeing, support for pupils with special educational needs, along with staff development and recruitment.

By understanding challenges and priorities via the variations based on board type and school category, targeted strategies can be implemented to address these challenges effectively and promote positive educational outcomes.

## Funding:

### Balancing the budget remains the top challenge for all school and trust boards (52%)

- a. Local authority maintained boards were the most likely to select this option (60%) and MATs the least likely (43%).
- b. 57% of primaries had balancing the budget as their top challenge compared to 39% of secondaries.
- c. The energy crisis has had a significant impact on school budgets, overall, 89% said it had a negative impact, however, 97% of those who knew whether the crisis had a negative impact saying it did.
- d. Staff pay costs remains the biggest challenge to setting a balanced budget, with 72% of respondents citing this as a major concern.
- e. Only 18% of schools and trusts perceive themselves as financially sustainable in the medium to long term given their current funding levels, despite increased funding announced in the 2022 autumn budget.

f. London and the East of England are the most pessimistic about the medium to long term financial position, while the East Midlands is least pessimistic. This finding underscores a growing sense of concern regarding the future financial outlook within the sector.

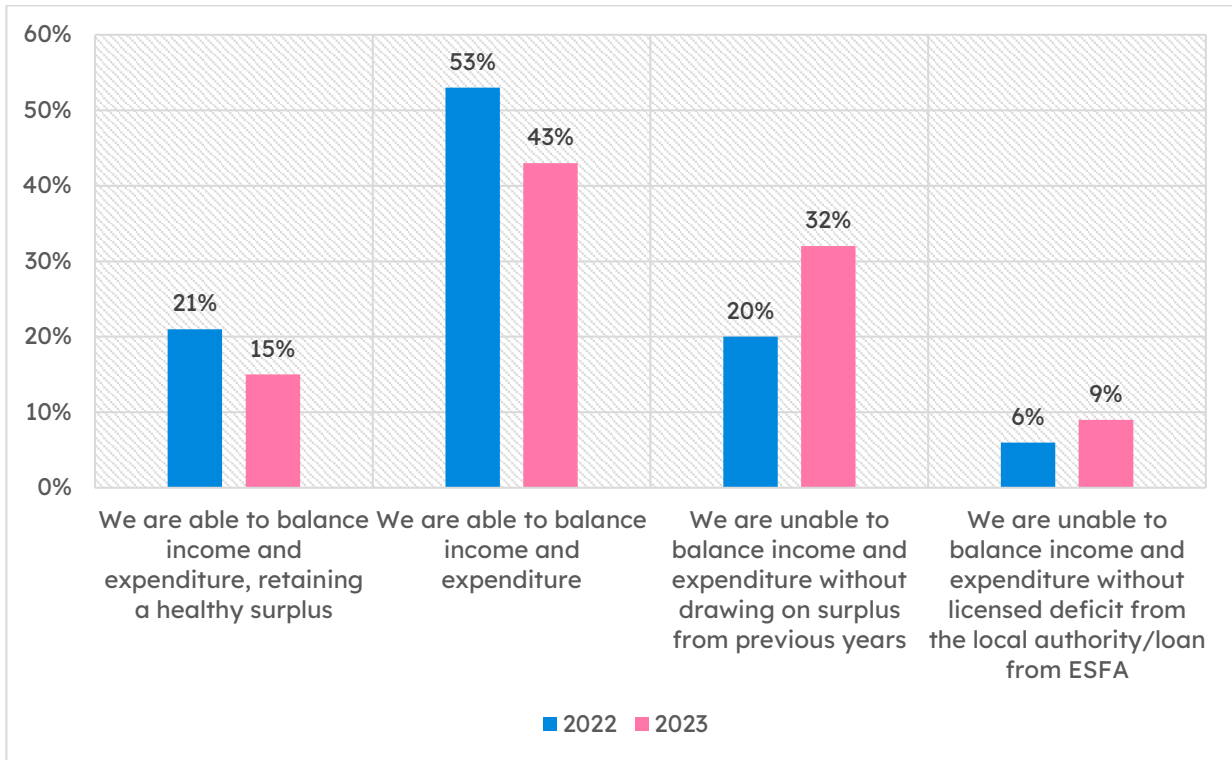


Figure two: which of the following best describes the current financial position of your school/trust?

All boards hold the responsibility for the financial oversight of their school or trust and the last year has presented them with some of the biggest challenges to their budgets in memory. The energy crisis, cost of living crisis and inflationary pressures on resources and goods have had a direct impact on every school or trust without exception.

**“Staffing costs are dramatically the largest element of our overhead and therefore considerable thought is given to this issue.”**

However, given the huge variety of circumstances within the sector, from structures, geography to local demand to school places, more than ever it is harder to apply any sense of one size fits all approach to driving financial strategies, with boards increasingly having to respond to the unique needs and priorities for how funding is spent. Yet a common goal in ensuring pupil needs are met remain at the heart of their spending decisions. School funding per pupil has fallen in real terms over the last decade and despite an unexpected boost in the autumn 2022 budget for school

finance, most schools and trusts have reported this to be little more than a life jacket as opposed to equipping improved sustainability in the long term.

It is not surprising therefore that balancing the budget was marked the biggest overall challenge facing schools and trusts across all regions and school types.

Despite increased funding announced in the 2022 autumn budget, concerns on the levels of funding are actually growing more prevalent. The impact of the lack of funding and investment into schools can be seen throughout the survey as respondents repeatedly identify a need for additional funding to address other major issues including SEND, school buildings and attendance.

Budget is especially a challenge for those still controlled by local authorities (LAs) compared to the overall figure (60% vs 52%), While **MATs were the least likely to pick balancing the budget as a challenge, carrying on a trend formally identified in the survey in 2021, 43% still identified it as a top 3 challenge. When broken down by phase, 57% of primaries had balancing the budget as their top challenge compared to 39% of secondaries.** Survey findings also suggest this is linked to falling pupil numbers being more of a significant challenge for primary schools.

**“The significant increase in energy costs has massively impacted the school's ability to provide the support that is required to our pupils. This in turn has had (and continues to have) a detrimental impact on the school's performance and the wellbeing of both staff and students.”**

The energy crisis has dominated much of the headlines during the last year, and while its impact might not be a surprise to most, the vastness of the issue is clear to see with 89% of respondents saying it had a negative impact. However, it is worth pointing out that this figure increases to 97% when we removing those who didn't know and those who had no view. In what may be interpreted as a demonstration of the other ingrained and persistent financial challenges in the sector, energy costs, which were a new entry for 2023, ranked just outside of the top five in terms of overall challenges, in sixth place (14%).

Another story that has gripped not just the education sector, but national headlines, is the industrial action overpay demands. Whatever the eventual outcome, the survey shows that this is an issue that dictates many board discussions, with staff pay costs remaining the biggest challenge to setting a balanced budget, with 72% of respondents citing this as a major concern.

While there was some difference by structure, the overall message is clear – there is a growing sense of pessimism among schools and trusts. Just 18% of schools and trusts perceive themselves as financially sustainable in the medium to long term given their current funding levels, despite increased funding announced in the 2022 autumn budget.



## Attendance:

**Overall, attendance featured in both the top three challenges and top three priorities.** Three quarters of respondents (76%) said parental communication was their most successful tool in tackling this challenge.

Attending school is clearly a critically important issue for children's life chances, including their attainment, wellbeing, wider development and safeguarding. This is an area that has gained widespread coverage and attention over the last year, so much so that the Department for Education (DfE) has initiated a trial of a live attendance tracker using school registers to offer real-time absence information. The DfE aims to replace current data collection methods with this system, with the program's voluntary basis likely to move to mandatory in the future.

**“Attendance has declined significantly since Covid with families happy to pay fines to take children out of school during term time - this is a major concern at the moment.”**

While in recent years, the discussion around pupil mental health and wellbeing has been growing, this year the most stand out area in relation to pupil experience is the high number of children no longer turning up at the school gates. This data is likely to be showing us the longer-term impact of the pandemic as well, with attitudes towards attendance shifting in some places, both among pupils and parents.

The findings show there is a clear route for driving maximum impact – engagement with parents themselves.

## Staffing:

**“Rates of pay are not able to compete with other local employers such as supermarkets. The role of the TA has become much more complex and demanding.”**

**The biggest staffing challenges show some variance by school type and structure.**

- a. For maintained schools, the biggest staffing challenge is workload and wellbeing (46%), followed by pay (34%). For academy trusts, the biggest staffing challenge is recruitment (47%), followed by workload and wellbeing (41%).
- b. Respondents reported similar challenges in retaining and recruiting support staff as with teaching staff. However, support staff recruitment and retention are marginally more of a challenge. This was especially true for maintained schools and those respondents who expressed concerns regarding the medium- to long-term finances of their organisation.

Over the last year, concern in relation to staffing challenges have grown significantly. Many boards have observed the huge pressures caused by external demands on their school leaders, teaching staff and support, present challenges beyond their control. The issue of inflation and salary increases in other sectors has also contributed to an increasing feeling that recruitment and retention within the sector is more fragile than before. In particular, this year's results show that many schools are struggling to keep hold of support staff, with leaders pointing to the fact they can often get better paid jobs, for less responsibility in other sectors including retail.

**“Here is a massive issue with secondary schools recruiting in shortage subjects such as maths, geography, physics and computer science.”**

### **Addressing workload and wellbeing for maintained schools:**

For maintained schools, there appears to be a growing sense that they are grappling with workload and wellbeing challenges which are in some places becoming overwhelming. This is necessitating governing boards to explore the role in greater detail of comprehensive support systems, including workload management strategies, staff well-being initiatives, and work-life balance considerations.

**“Pressure of continued ranges of paperwork that often conflict with actual teaching time.”**

### **Recruitment and retention strategies for academy trusts:**

The recruitment challenge for academy trusts is slightly more prevalent primarily in terms of teaching staff. This emphasises the importance of implementing robust recruitment strategies for trusts, with many looking at the flexibilities within their structure, from offering in house CPD opportunities and progression through other schools within the trust. MATs in particular are enhancing their own professional development opportunities, with the aim of creating attractive working environments to attract and retain high-quality educators.

**“There has been significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of good Learning Support Assistants. They are leaving for better paid jobs in retail.”**

## Strikes:

The vast majority of those governing (84%) reported being kept informed about decisions to close or restrict attendance due to strike action.

- However, only 47% expressed support for both the strike action and its underlying principles.
- Respondents aged 30-39 showed the highest level of support (71%), while those aged 60-69 were the least likely to do so (45%).

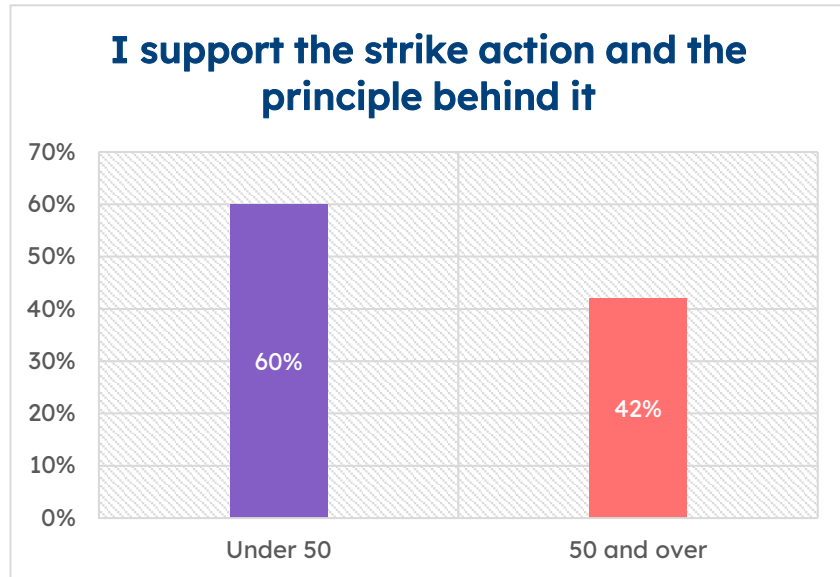


Figure three, which of these statements best reflects your views on recent industrial action.

**“I support the principal. I accept the strike action but am concerned for the pupils.”**

This indicates that effective communication between governing boards has been prioritised regardless of a governing boards actual support for strike action or otherwise.

However, it is noteworthy that only 47% of respondents expressed support for both the strike action itself and its underlying principles suggesting a divergence of opinion among governing boards regarding their stance and sheds more light on the mixed feelings that have dominated thinking on this.

**“I understand perfectly the frustration of staff about lack of respect for their professional expertise, erosion of income and especially underfunding of schools. I supported the first couple of strikes as a way of raising awareness of the strength of feeling. I do not support ongoing action that impinges on pupils’ right to and need for a high quality and consistent education.”**

Interestingly, when analysing the data by age groups, respondents aged 30-39 exhibited the highest level of support for strike action and its principles, with 71% expressing their endorsement.

On the other hand, those aged 60-69 were the least likely to support such strikes, with only 45% expressing their agreement.

These findings highlight the nuanced perspectives and potentially the generational differences in attitudes towards appropriate action in industrial level pay disputes. It is crucial to recognize that differing viewpoints do not equate to governing boards necessarily thinking pay levels are acceptable, but that alternative action to improve it would be a better option.

**“I absolutely support the teachers in their strikes even though it means children are missing even more education after Covid. We cannot pay our teachers such rubbish salaries as well as keeping on piling on more work and expect them to continue.”**

### Safeguarding concerns are continuing to rise:

- a. In 2022, 71% of respondents said there had been a rise in safeguarding concerns following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. Worryingly, 55% of respondents reported a rise in safeguarding concerns in the past year alone.
- c. 41% said levels remained broadly the same in the last 12 months, with just 3% reporting a decrease.
- d. The top areas of concern identified were bullying, cyberbullying, neglect, and domestic abuse.

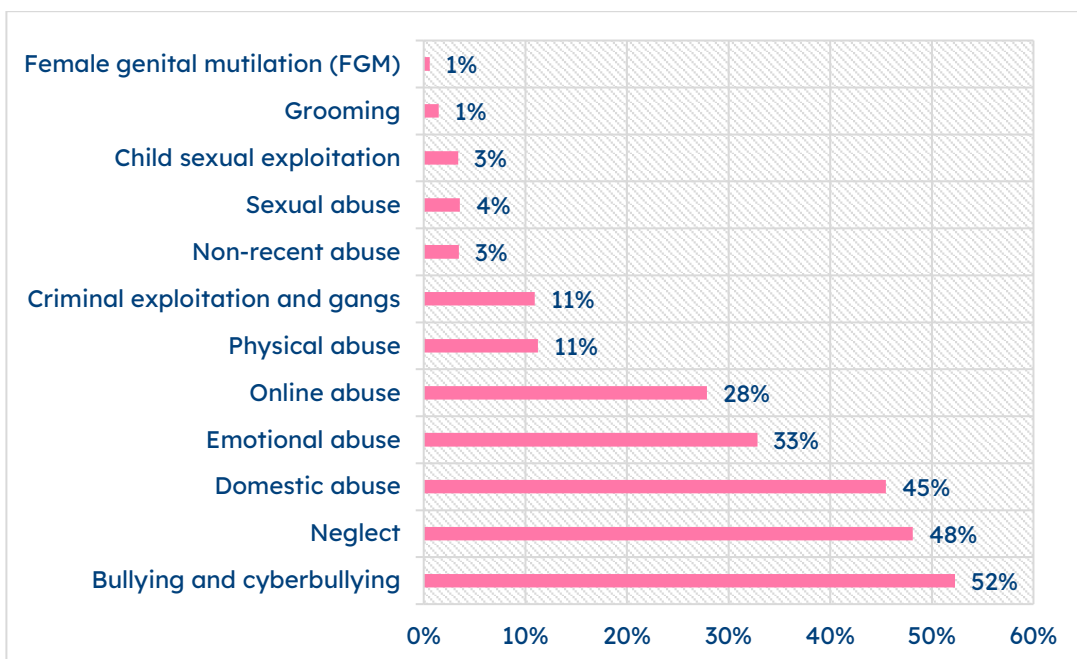


Figure four, the top three most common safeguarding concerns that respondents have seen a rise in at their school or trust.

In 2022, one of the biggest findings was that 71% of boards reported an increase in safeguarding concerns following the pandemic, among wider possible factors. This reflects the impact of the partial school closures on pupils' safety and wellbeing across the country.

| **“There is also a high rate of students self-harming.”**

During the following year, strengthening safeguarding practices and establishing a culture that places safeguarding at the heart of school and trust ethos is something governing boards have been having to approach through a post-pandemic lens and with renewed vigour.

This year, as well as asking for an update on the last 12 months, we also wanted to go more in depth and establish what the core reasons for safeguarding concern were and where specifically rising concerns existed. The finding that bullying, cyberbullying, neglect, and domestic abuse are all so prevalent show the complexity of the wider increase in concerns.

Self-harm was a common theme that appeared through open text responses from respondents. These findings shine a light on the increasing complexities schools and trusts are dealing with in terms of both the variety and magnitude of safeguarding concerns.

They also call for boards pursuing continuous training and professional development opportunities for school staff, ensuring robust safeguarding policies, and promoting open channels of communication for reporting concerns.

**“Sexualised behaviour is rising among pupils.”** |

## Ofsted

**Despite the increase in scrutiny of Ofsted's role during 2023, views on inspections among those governing remain diverse.** A majority (60%) support a graded school inspection system, while 34% hold an opposing view. School type and phase has no significant impact, with over half of all respondents across categories favouring graded inspections. Staff governors stand out as the most likely to oppose graded inspections, 58% in contrast to the 38% who support it.

| **“I 100% agree that inspections are necessary. But it is the gradings I disagree with. Safeguarding is a pass/fail thing, everything else should be a nuanced narrative, it is impossible to describe a school in one word.”**

This finding is significant as it demonstrates that generally governing boards are perhaps less anti-inspection and Ofsted compared to leaders, teachers and other school or trust staff. This finding is in keeping with NGA's longitudinal data which has always pointed to boards generally being accepting of Ofsted playing an important sector role.

The diversity of views on graded inspections by Ofsted does however show a divide and validates further NGA’s own calls for an independent review of inspection, with the aim of making it a more effective tool for school improvement.

The data does also reveal it is not a one-sided debate, and governing boards should be a key voice in engaging in constructive sector dialogue and gathering feedback, as well as school leaders, and education professionals and other stakeholders, in order to inform any potential reforms and improvements to the inspection framework.

**“I do not have a problem with a process that results in a grade. However, the focus being the grade rather than the potential areas and actions for further improvement seems a waste of effort.”**

### Government performance:

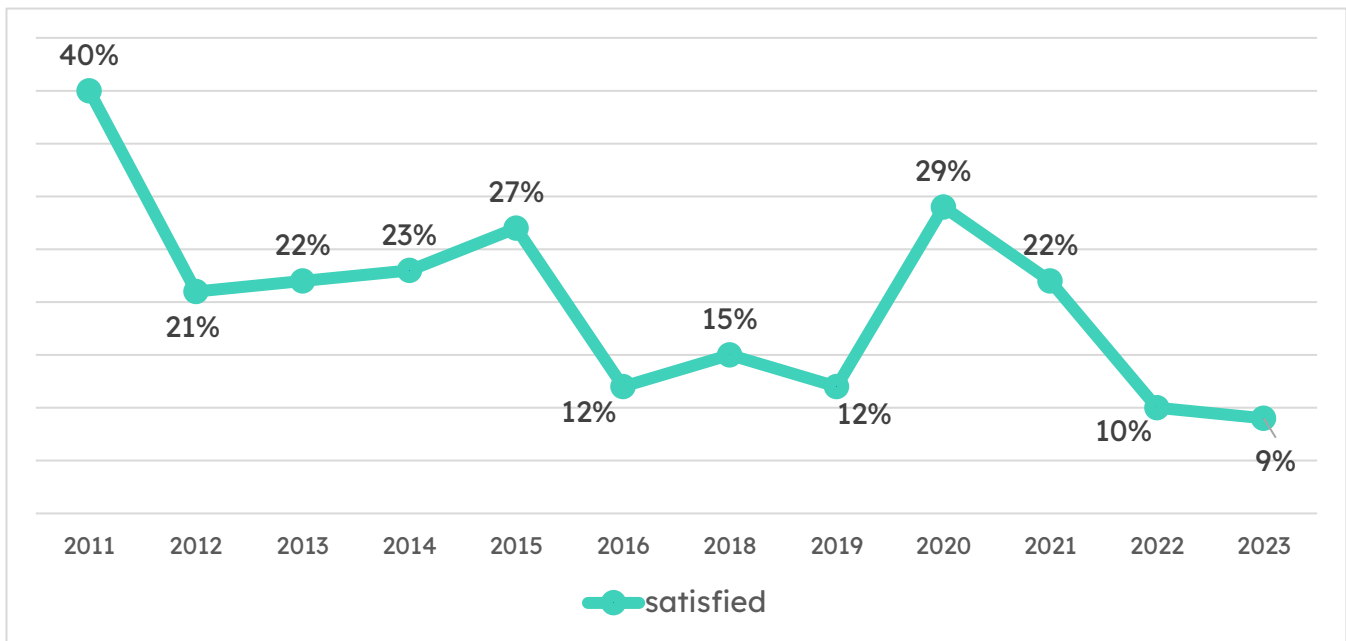


Figure five, give your verdict on how the government has performed in education for the past year.

Each year we ask respondents to give their verdict on how the government has performed in education for that particular academic year. Satisfaction with the government’s performance on education is now at an all-time low among governing boards. Only 9% of respondents were satisfied with how the government has performed in the last 12 months. This is the lowest rating since NGA began asking this question in 2011.

# Recommendations & actions

## Funding

- The persistent challenge of balancing the budget underscores the need for collaborative efforts between governing boards, school leadership, and government bodies to explore innovative solutions and secure adequate funding.
- With 72% of respondents citing staff pay costs as a major concern, it is crucial to address remuneration structures to attract and retain talented educators.
- The energy crisis has had a significant negative impact on school budgets, necessitating a re-evaluation of energy procurement strategies and exploring energy-efficient solutions.
- The financial strain caused by rising energy costs further emphasizes the need for sustainable funding models and proactive measures to mitigate future energy-related challenges.

## Attendance

- As attendance remains a key concern, governing boards should prioritise personalised strategies tailored to the specific needs of their schools and engage in effective communication with parents and the wider school community.
- Sharing best practices and implementing targeted interventions can contribute to improving overall attendance rates and ensuring every student has access to quality education.

## Staffing

- In order to address ongoing workload and well-being challenges, governing boards need to prioritise comprehensive support systems, including effective workload management, staff well-being initiatives, and work-life balance considerations, to tackle overwhelming challenges faced by staff.
- To enhance recruitment and retention strategies within trusts, organisations should proactively share and implement robust strategies including in-house CPD opportunities, progression pathways within the trust, and exploring cross-organisation professional development programs to attract and retain high-quality educators.

## Safeguarding

- Governing boards should ensure that a safeguarding CPD programme is in place that is relevant to the school/trust and takes account of the rapidly changing context. The CPD

should result in staff developing the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding of child protection and safeguarding and focus on addressing prevalent concerns like bullying, cyberbullying, neglect, and domestic abuse.

- Governing boards should explore allocating additional resources for targeted interventions in relation to the above areas and asking leaders what they are doing regarding awareness campaigns, and preventive measures. Collaborate with external agencies and support staff training to effectively tackle these issues.

## **Governor and trustee recruitment**

- In order to help spread the message on the crucial role of governance, share NGA's Visible Governance film with others in the community and beyond. It's for anyone who wants to spread the word about the importance and value of school and trust governance - whether you're a governor or trustee wanting to shout about what you do or are looking to recruit new volunteers to your board.
- Individual volunteers should consider sharing their governance story on social media, at the workplace and with family and friends. Use #VisibleGovernance and comment on why you choose to be a governor/trustee, how proud you are to do the role, your favourite part of the role or give encouragement to others to volunteer.