

Annual governance survey 2023

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Foreword

The voice of governors and trustees is a powerful thing. As architects of vision and strategy and key decision makers for schools and trusts, governing boards occupy a unique vantage point. They present a perspective on the local educational context that has often been overlooked in sector debates.



Sam Henson,
Director of Policy
and Communications

The record provided of views and experiences of governors and trustees in England, spanning a 13-year period, is unparalleled by any other survey or dataset. Over this extended timeframe, NGA's annual school governance survey has consistently stood as a surrogate for official data, delving far deeper into the evolution of governance and the prevailing issues within boardrooms. Consequently, the triumphs and trials encountered by governing boards have come to the fore more prominently than ever before.

Let me start with a simple thank you to everyone who has ever spent time engaging with the annual governance survey. Every respondent has a unique voice to bring to our findings. Collectively, these voices furnish us with a comprehensive, ever-evolving panorama of sector-wide priorities. Despite the distinctiveness of each school and trust, and their roots in specific geographical contexts, the findings underscore the sector-wide nature of many challenges encountered. This portrayal of the current landscape of school and trust governance yields a tapestry of insights and wisdom that NGA leverages to enlighten and influence central policymaking.

The survey identifies the challenges schools and trusts across England face and the strategic priorities governing boards set. While three years ago, we grappled with the unprecedented tribulations of a global pandemic, only a naive observer would suggest that these pressures now only reside in the history books. The truth is, this year's findings spotlight how schools and trusts continue to contend with a series of aftershocks, compounded by emergent obstacles.

In 2022 and 2023 a whole new tranche of tensions emerged for schools and trusts – economic hurdles including the cost-of-living crisis and the impact both

directly on schools, through energy and food prices, and then the impact on pupils and their families, to the huge issues facing the workforce including industrial action and recruitment challenges.

We know all too well about the considerable crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, but this year's survey revealed that support staff recruitment and retention was for the first time a bigger concern overall. Comments from respondents backed up anecdotal evidence we have picked up over the last year that it is getting harder to hang on to these staff as pay rates are no longer competitive against other lower skilled and easier roles in other sectors.

It probably won't come as a surprise that school funding dominates concerns more than ever. Balancing the budget was marked the biggest overall challenge facing schools and trusts across all regions and school types. Despite some very welcome additional funding over the last couple of years, that overall picture is still bleak. Despite recent and even unexpected injections of funding, 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 this comes as schools are increasingly relied upon not just by pupils, but by families and by the community.

Pupil attendance is the only issue to appear on both the top three challenges and top three strategic priorities while at the same time being the first year to have appeared in either. This is for good reason – school attendance is now of national concern at all levels of the system up to the Secretary of State for Education. Since the pandemic, attitudes, whether that be from pupils or parents or both, to turning up at the school gates everyday have changed. School

attendance is no longer prioritised in the same way it once was by some families. In addition, there are other challenges facing some families which could also impact on their ability to attend, such as increasing poverty, mental illness and insecure housing as well as post-pandemic illnesses.

Boards know how much of a challenge this is and are very much coordinating their efforts with strategies to engage parents as the key mechanism for improving the situation. At the same time the increasingly complicated field of safeguarding concerns is dominating more board discussions.

One of the most significant findings in last year's report was a 71% increase in reported safeguarding concerns following the pandemic. This year, one of the most noteworthy findings is that only 3% reported a decrease, while over half mentioned a further increase in the last year. Our aim was to delve deeper into the issue and establish the core reasons behind safeguarding concerns, including bullying, cyberbullying, neglect, and domestic abuse, all of which are prevalent and highlight the complexity of the broader increase in concerns. However, we acknowledge that this list isn't exhaustive, and since publishing our interim report, a few individuals have pointed out that self-harm is the primary issue they have observed increasing. What is evident is that safeguarding is becoming a matter that keeps more and more of us awake at night.

As ever, we have also once again looked to establish a clear picture of experience of governing. Over the years we have heard of what drives you to govern, what motivates you to commit, and what tempts you to resign. Last year we saw worrying results with more people not seeking a second four-year term of office. In 2023 NGA embarked on a quest to unveil the truth behind the challenge of governor and trustee workload, so this year's survey has perhaps been more important than ever as we look to influence the DfE and others to make the role both sustainable and fit for purpose for the changing needs of schools and trusts in the future. We were pleased the majority said the role was manageable, but the survey findings reveal a slightly more complicated picture when we break this data down and we will be following this with a report on this topic later in the year.

However, this report provides conclusive evidence that the challenges of volunteer recruitment are growing and an urgent, proactive approach for governor and trustee recruitment is now needed more than ever to support governing boards to fill their vacancies. Yet the feedback from governors and trustees is remarkably solution focused the majority of the time. The generosity of these individuals giving up so much free time as volunteers is inspiring. Their commitment to the potential the future holds for pupils is immense and without question.

None of the above changes the fact that governance in schools and trusts can be very rewarding. Yet NGA's role is also to emphasise to government, national policy makers, influential partners and anyone that works alongside boards, that the governing challenge is being heightened by the challenges the sector faces. The increasingly complicated backdrop to schools adds to the complexity of the decision making by boards.

The voices of governing boards in 2023 reflect a largely consistent picture across regions and school types and they are all pretty clear on one thing – the situation isn't good enough for children, families and staff. Satisfaction with the government's performance on education among governing boards is now at an all-time low since the survey began in 2011. Fewer than one in ten being satisfied sends a stark message that should be taken seriously right now, and not just by whoever assumes power in the forthcoming general election. What pupils are being offered in 2023 needs to improve say the people who see the whole picture in schools and trust.

The voices of boards cannot and must not be sidelined – this is compelling evidence of what is happening and what needs to change; NGA remains committed to amplifying these concerns of our invaluable governance volunteers in the hope of contributing to real change in national education policymaking.

Methodology and terminology

Methodology

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 (local governors) from state-funded schools in England. The survey was disseminated predominantly through NGA's channels. Respondents do not need to be members of NGA, but 76% reported that they are.

This year, the survey, conducted from 25 April 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.

Representativeness

Survey respondents from different school structures are similar to that of state schools in England. Trustees are slightly overrepresented in the sample, with MAT trustees in particular taking the time to respond.

Governing board type	Survey respondents	State schools in England
Local authority maintained	50%	53%
Academy trust	50%	47%

Figure 1, annual survey respondents versus data for schools in England.

In 2023, a record 50% of respondents governed in trusts.

Governing board type	Survey respondents
LA maintained	50%
SAT	11%
MAT trustees	24%
Local governors	15%

Figure 2, annual survey respondent percentages.

Trust size	Trustee respondents	Academy committee respondents	Single and multi academy trusts in England
1 academy	29%	X	48%
2 to 5 academies	22%	30%	28%
6 to 10 academies	24%	30%	14%
11 to 20 academies	14%	22%	7%
21 to 30 academies	6%	11%	1%
31 plus academies	4%	7%	1%

Figure 3, annual survey respondents versus national data on SATs and MATs.

Figure 4 shows respondents to the survey have a mostly proportional distribution across different phases. However, those governing in secondary settings are overrepresented and a slightly lower proportion of respondents governing in primaries compared to school distribution nationally.

	Survey respondents	State schools in England
Nursery	1%	2%
Primary	65%	76%
Secondary	23%	16%
Special	4%	5%
Alternative provision or pupil referral unit	1%	2%

Figure 4, annual survey respondents versus state schools in England.

Survey respondents span across all nine English regions and are predominantly in line with the regional spread with the exception of the South East which is overrepresented.

Region	Survey respondents	State schools in England
North East	5%	5%
North West	15%	15%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8%	10%
East Midlands	8%	9%
West Midlands	11%	11%
East of England	9%	12%
London	10%	12%
South East	20%	15%
South West	12%	11%
I govern in a group of schools which spans multiple regions	1%	X

Figure 5, geographical comparison of annual survey respondents versus state schools in England.

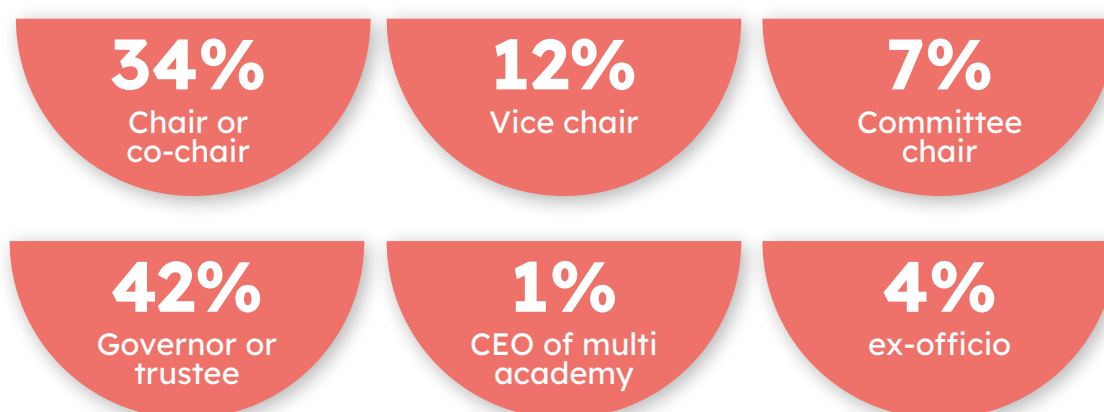


Figure 6, percentage of respondents in different governing roles.

Survey questions



Certain questions in the annual survey appear every other year. This is so that we can explore these topics longitudinally whilst also leaving room for more in detail questions on other topical issues to keep the survey relevant to current affairs but manageable for respondents. Should you wish to explore last year's topics, for example, ethnicity and board size, please see our report from 2022 at www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/school-governance-in-2022/.

There was a broad range of perspectives offered from those new to school and trust governance with 23% of respondents having governed for under two years to more experienced governors and trustees with almost half (47%) had been governing for over eight years. The majority of respondents (91%) were aged of 40 or over likely: we return to the issue of age of those governing in section 1.1 below.

Terminology

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

- **Ex-officio:** A governor or trustee who is on the board due to another role they hold in the school/trust eg Head teacher, CEO.
- **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.

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.

NGA would also like to thank the respondents that took the time to complete the survey and share their views and experiences of school and trust governance. The valuable data joins a collection of longitudinal data and guides NGA's work to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards.



Governance volunteers and board practice

Key findings

- The challenge of recruiting and retaining governors and trustees has reached an all time high with over three quarters (77%) of respondents sharing this as a challenge.
- The majority of those surveyed were positive about their role on the board and how they felt as a member on the board.
- The percentage of respondents sharing the view that the governance role should be paid is steadily increasing, reaching 40%, its highest level since first asking the question in 2011.
- The percentage of governors and trustees reporting that their governance role is manageable alongside their personal and professional commitments remains broadly similar to previous years, however, there is an increasingly common view that the expectations of the governance role is impacting manageability.
- Over a quarter of those surveyed (26%) are considering resigning from their governance role.
- Over half of those responsible for governance (60%) are employed (including those who are self-employed or working part-time).
- The longitudinal data reveals a shift in employer attitudes towards paying for the time off to conduct governance duties with less than a third of respondents being provided paid time off to conduct their governance duties.
- Young people continue to be underrepresented in school and trust governance, with 91% of respondents aged over 40.

1.1 Demographics

Age

This year's findings on the age of respondents continues to show that people aged under 40 are underrepresented in school and trust governance with only 9% of respondents reporting that they are under the age of 40.

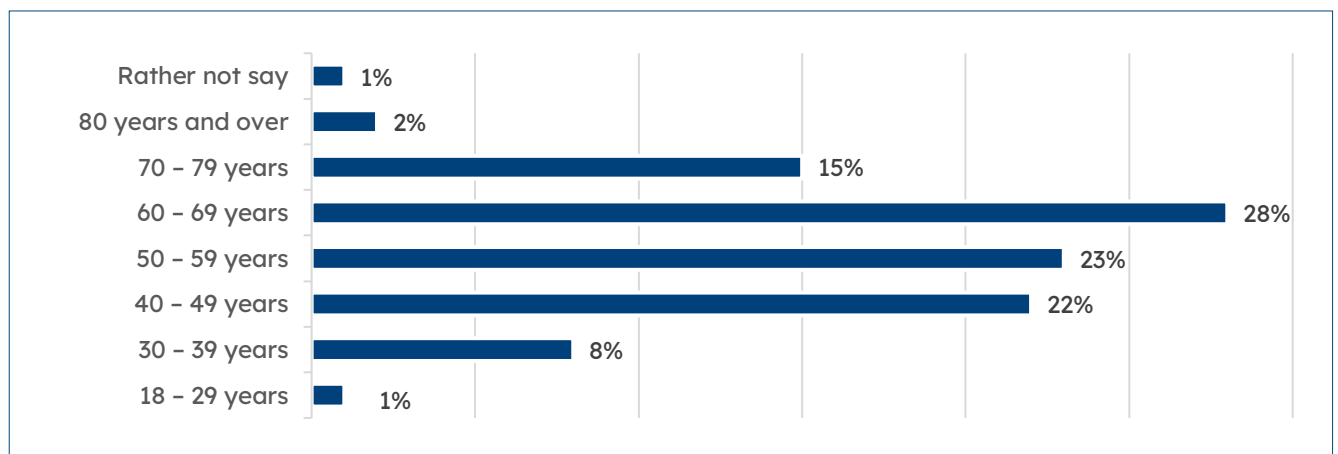


Figure 7, the age demographic of annual survey respondents.

An even smaller proportion of respondents (1%) reported being under the age of 30 which remains mostly unchanged since 2015.

37% of respondents over the age of 50 reported that they sat on their governing boards as a chair and another 37% sat as a governor or trustee while 52% of those aged under 50 sat as a governor or trustee compared to 23% who have taken the chair.

Employment

Just over a third (35%) of respondents report that they are retired, and this figure has increased slightly over the years compared to 2017 when it was 28%. This year, half of respondents were employed (including 16% in part-time employment and 35% of volunteers in full-time work) with a further 10% self-employed. This totals 60% employed compared with 65% in 2017. Meanwhile, 4% of respondents reported that they are looking after family or home, 1% are studying and 1% are unemployed.

47% of respondents in chairing positions on their own reported that they are retired compared with a third of those co-chairing and a quarter in non-chairing positions. Although respondents who were employed (either full-time or part-time) were more likely than others groups to sit on the governing board in non-chairing positions, self-employed people took up the chair much more often: 43% of self-employed respondents were chairs meaning that overall 13% of chairs were self-employed, compared with 8% of other governors.

When identifying the main pressure points for governors and trustees already on the governing board, respondents in the free text often highlighted the difficulties around recruiting and retaining individuals that were also employed due to the expectations of the governance role.

“Organising the governing body in such a way that we can retain governors who also work [is a challenge].”

Time off for governance

Those that decide to govern have the right to take reasonable time off to carry out their governance duties; however, employers can choose whether they provide paid time off. The survey revealed that one in 10 of the employed respondents said that their employer does not give them paid time off to carry out their governance role and 29% said they do receive paid time off for their governance role. A fifth of respondents have not asked for time off for their governance role and 11% reported that they have not needed time off. Only two percent of respondents said that when they asked for time off for their governance role, it was refused by their employer. Slightly under a third (29%) said that requesting time off for their governance duties is not applicable to their work arrangements.

The longitudinal data reveals a shift in employer attitudes towards paying for the time off to conduct governance duties. Data from 2015 revealed that 43% of respondent’s employers offered paid time off for governance duties, while this year’s findings showed only 29% of respondent’s employers offered paid time off for governance duties.

“My employer is generally supportive of my governance activities, but I tend to use annual leave to cover most of my activities.”

“My hours can be flexible. My employers support my governance role but I try not to lessen my ‘work’ hours.”

“Not been notified what the situation regarding time off is yet for my role.”

Governing on multiple boards

This year's survey found that a fifth of respondents (20%) currently sit on more than one board, a decline of nine percentage points since 2019. There are multiple factors that may have contributed to the decline such as the pandemic stretching capacity and need for support and the manageability of the role which will be explored further within this report.

Governance experience

There is a slight increase in newer governors and trustees responding this year with 12% of respondents having governed for under 12 months, up from 8% in 2022 but in line with 2021 figures of 11%. It will take time to determine whether this actually represents more new governors/trustees governing as this year's findings also show record in challenges of recruiting to the board.

Almost half of respondents to the survey (48%) have sat on their current governing board for over four years, the standard term of office for those governing on schools and trusts. While this figure varies slightly year on year, it has broadly remained consistently just under half since 2017. However, there has been a change from last year when 69% had been governing for over four years, compared with 62% this year.

It is NGA's recommendation that members should only sit on the same board for two four-year terms. However, nearly a third (29%) of respondents report that they have served on the same board for longer than the recommended length of time.

1.2 Recruitment and retention of governors and trustees

Challenges in recruiting governors and trustees are at their highest reported level since the survey began in 2011. Over three quarters (77%) of respondents said it was difficult to recruit new governors and trustees to their governing board, up from 63% in 2022.

The severity around the challenges of governor and trustee recruitment exists across all governing board types (Figure 9). Respondents sitting on local governing bodies/academy committees were most likely report issues recruiting to the board (81%). Although most SAT boards are also experiencing challenges with trustee recruitment (71%), they are more likely to report that recruitment is not a challenge for them (19%).

While this is a familiar story that we have reported on for a number of years, the situation is worsening. The comparison between 2011 and 2023 shows a 27% rise in recruitment challenges. This finding builds on a vast amount of anecdotal evidence that NGA now hears almost daily.

“There is more time commitment needed by individual governors to ensure our duties are carried out effectively. Trying to fit additional commitments (e.g., taking on new responsibilities when other governors leave) in to my full time working week is really difficult”

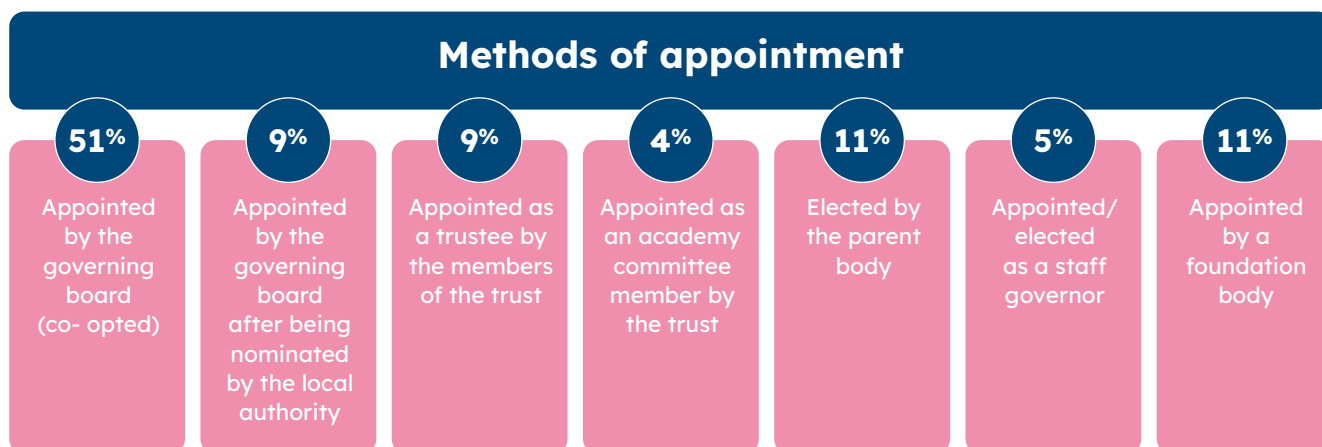


Figure 8, respondents sharing how they were appointed to their current governing board.

Implementing targeted recruitment campaigns, providing comprehensive induction, and training programs, and highlighting the value and impact of governance roles can help attract a diverse and skilled pool of individuals.

“The lack of governors and everything falling to me. Hence my answer that I am considering resigning”.

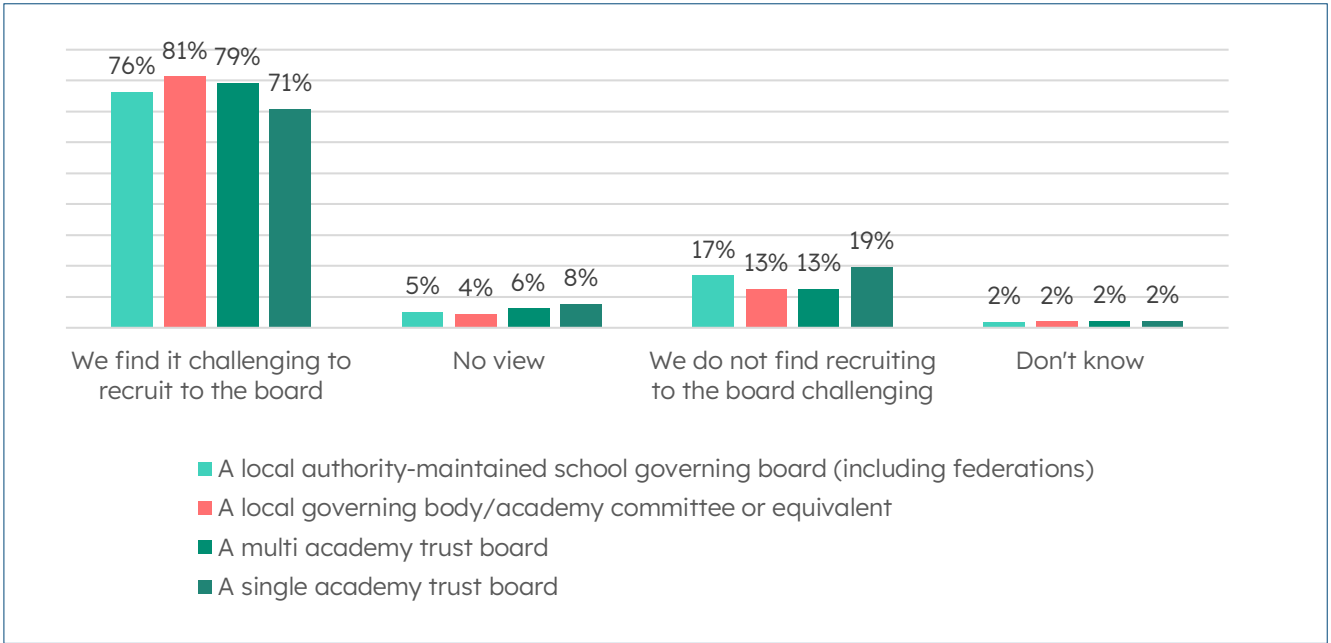


Figure 9, a breakdown of board types and the extent to which they have challenges recruiting to their board.

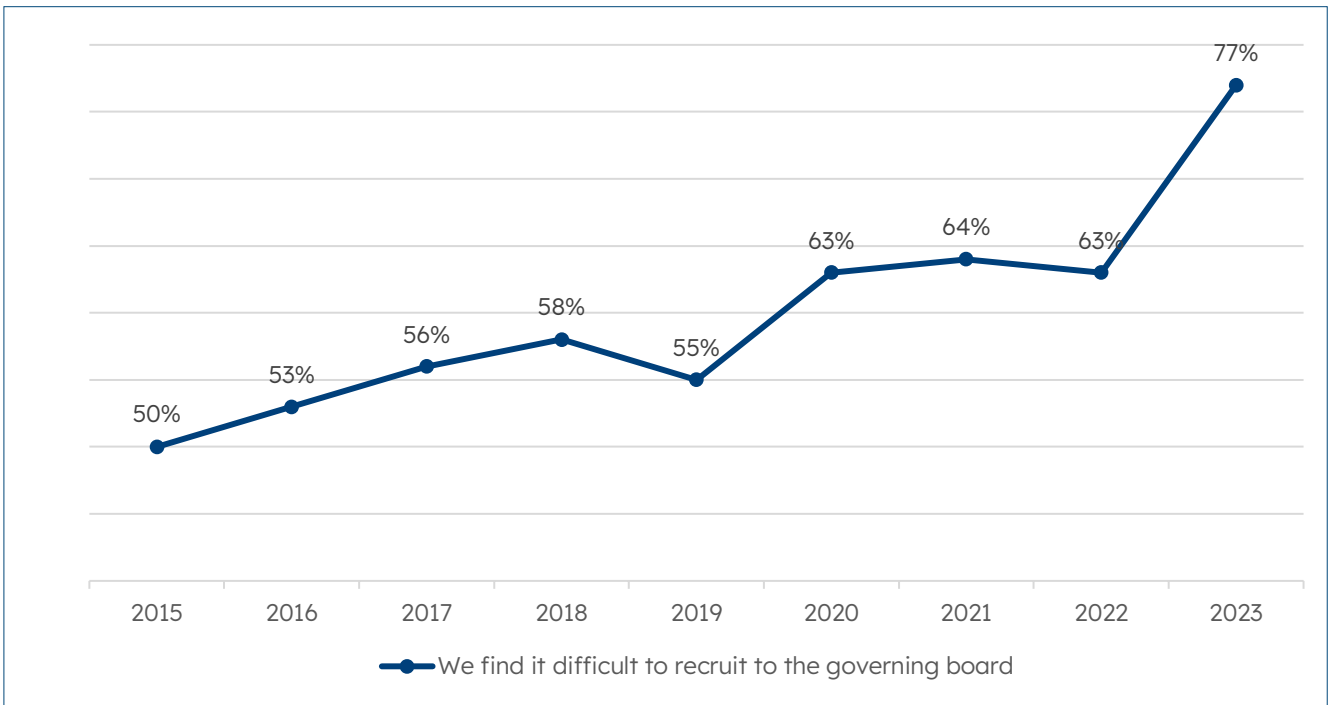


Figure 10, percentage of respondents reporting difficulties in governor/ trustee recruitment (2015- 2023).

There was a strong link between governing boards reporting challenges around governor or trustee recruitment and the factors that caused respondents stress in their role. Boards that had vacancies often resulted additional responsibilities falling on individuals and workload being unevenly distributed.



“As we have governor vacancies, there is more time commitment needed by individual governors to ensure our duties are carried out effectively.”

Recruiting foundation governors was also considered to be challenging for governing boards with 79% of respondents who knew or had a view stating this as a challenge.

Leaving the governance role

The survey has shown that those governing in our schools and trusts do so with commitment and dedication, often serving the schools in their local communities for many years. However, NGA recognise that there will be individuals along the way that decide to leave school and trust governance for an array of reasons. This year, broadly in line with previous years, slightly over a quarter of governors and trustees (26%) surveyed shared that they are considering resigning

from their governance role, while the majority of respondents (62%) are not considering resigning from their governance role.

Almost a third (31%) of chairs said that they were thinking about leaving their role, compared to less than a quarter (22%) of those who are not chairs. Co-chairs were the highest group of respondents that reported that they were considering leaving their role with just under two-fifths of co-chairs sharing this.

Payment for the governance role

This year, views in support of the remuneration of the governance role has reached the highest level since we first asked the question in 2011, steadily increasing to 40% this year (figure 11).

By role, over half (56%) of those in chairing or vice chair positions held the view that there should be an option to pay all governors and trustees, compared to 40% governors and trustees.

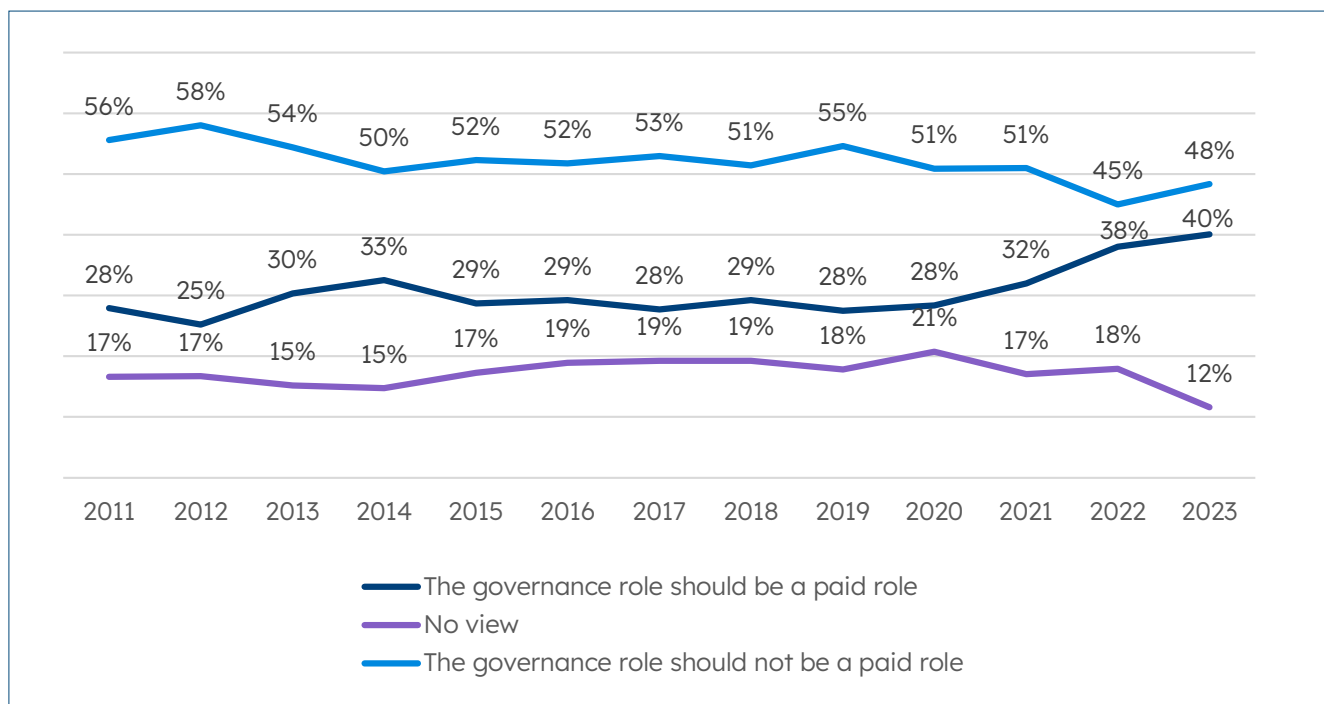


Figure 11, respondent views on payment and expenses for the governance role.

1.3 Governor workload and wellbeing

Overall, eight out of ten respondents reported they could manage their governance workload alongside their other responsibilities. While this is a positive outcome, we are approaching it with some caution as those who remain governing and, in addition those who chose to answer the survey, are likely to have fewer time pressures as a group than those who do not. The survey also received a huge number of comments about the stresses of governing, which tallies with the conversations staff at NGA have during the course of our everyday work.

The survey findings uncovered disparities between those affected by workload of the governance role, in particular those of working age. Over one in four (27%) of governors and trustees under 50 reported that their governance workload was unmanageable alongside other commitments. It was not the youngest age group who were most likely to say this, but the 40-49 age bracket where 28% indicated workload was a problem. This may be for a variety of reasons, but it is likely it is linked to this age group being more likely to be in full-time employment alongside parental responsibilities.

There was a clear difference between those sitting on different types of boards. Those governing on MAT boards as trustees were more likely to agree that their role is manageable (83%) followed by those on local governing boards (83%). Governors on maintained governing boards and trustees of single academy trusts were equally likely to report that their governance role is manageable (78%).

Those who have been governing for 8 to 10 years are the most likely group to disagree that the role is manageable (25%). Similarly, and unsurprisingly given the degree of overlap with longer standing members of the board, a quarter of chairs did not find their role to be manageable, compared to fewer than 14% of other governors and trustees who said the same thing. This coincided with 31% of chairs telling us they were potentially considering resigning, while this figure reduced to 22% for other trustees and governors. However, chairs and vice chairs were more likely to say they were confident in their ability to govern and that their opinion was valued by the board.

This indicates that the group governing in a volunteer capacity (disregarding headteachers and CEO's) most likely to be feeling pressure to no longer do the role, are the ones who are more assured in their capability for the role and contributing the most. This potentially indicates that some boards are at risk of losing key people at a time when governing boards are dealing with more and more complex situations.

“It isn’t what I thought I was signing on for: I have had to read hundreds of pages of policies, because so much of the role is pro forma box-ticking. I am deluged with suggestions for training and haven’t time for even a fraction of it”.

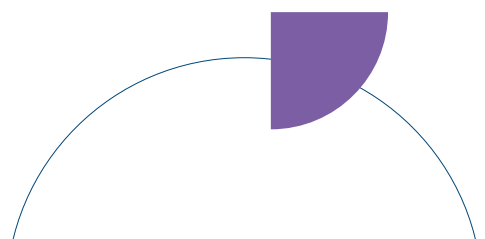
There is a lot more to unpick through the survey findings on this topic, and NGA will be publishing a separate report on this area for NGA's AGM in November.

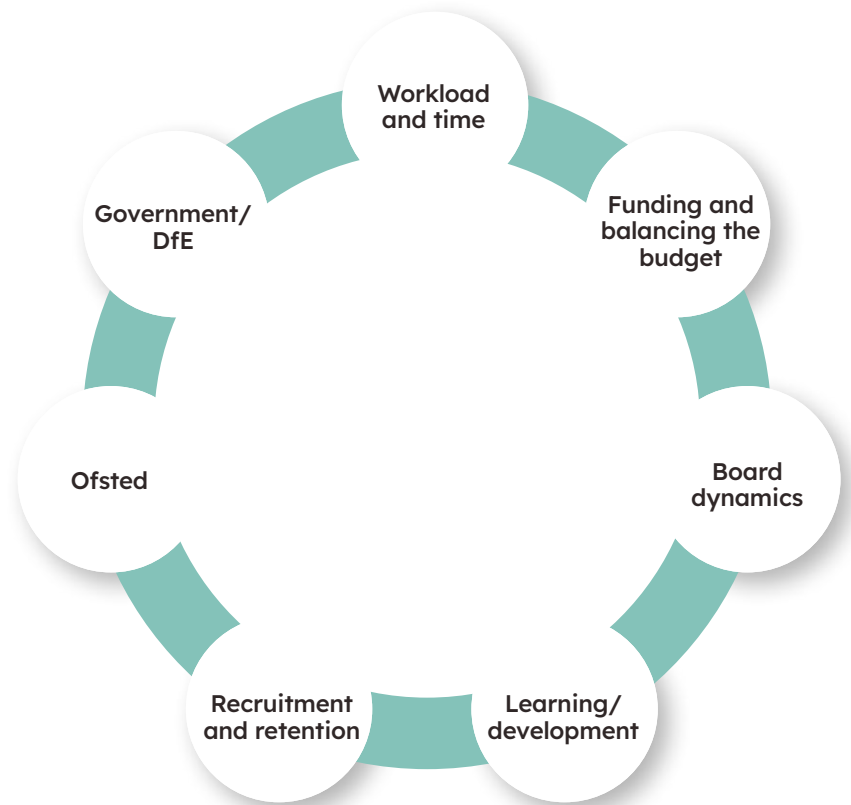
“Trying to fit all of this into family life and achieve a work/life balance is impossible.”

“Time management for meetings, paperwork reviewing, monitoring, complaints, exclusions on top of my job and own two children with additional needs.”

“The time to get on calls after a full-time job and a mum to young children.”

This highlights the importance of establishing support mechanisms, mentoring programs, and flexible governance structures to accommodate commitments for all age brackets and ensure diverse boards drive governance practices.





“It is cutting into my time with my family and making me irritable... I’m staying only because I’m looking for the best moment to resign honourably. I already have a high-stress job; I don’t need another”.

Figure 12, themes that emerged through the analysis of the factors causing stress in their governance role.

Volunteer confidence

Overall, those responsible for school and trust governance feel positive about their role and the part they have on their governing board. Those not feeling as confident in their role or do not feel a part of their governing board were more likely to be under the age of 40, hold less experience in governance and be in non-chairing positions. These factors all intertwine, and it is expected that as experience is built upon, confidence and understanding of the governance role will too. It is important however, to promote training and development as well as encourage networking opportunities amongst other governors and trustees. This opens the gateway to shared practice and relationship management.

95% feel that their opinion is valued by their board when it is offered.

93% feel confident in their ability as a governor/ trustee.

94% feel that they are invited to participate in board discussions equally to others.



Board development

Developing knowledge and skills within the governance role is an important aspect to ensure that members on the board can carry out their core functions effectively. As seen in figure 13, governors and trustees engaging in an array of development opportunities and resources is highly relied upon to stay up-to date and informed.

The survey found that 97% of respondents have engaged in training and development of some form over the past 12 months. Engaging in e-learning was found to be the most popular method of development (76%) along with attending webinars (67%) and collaborating with other governor and trustees (52%).

“There are lots of great resources and people out there who have helped me find great solutions to ultimately secure better outcomes for pupils.”

In addition to e-learning, respondents in chairing positions were also likely to read guidance and support resources regularly to support them in their role. 4% of respondents who have governed for less than 12 months had not engaged in any of the methods listed

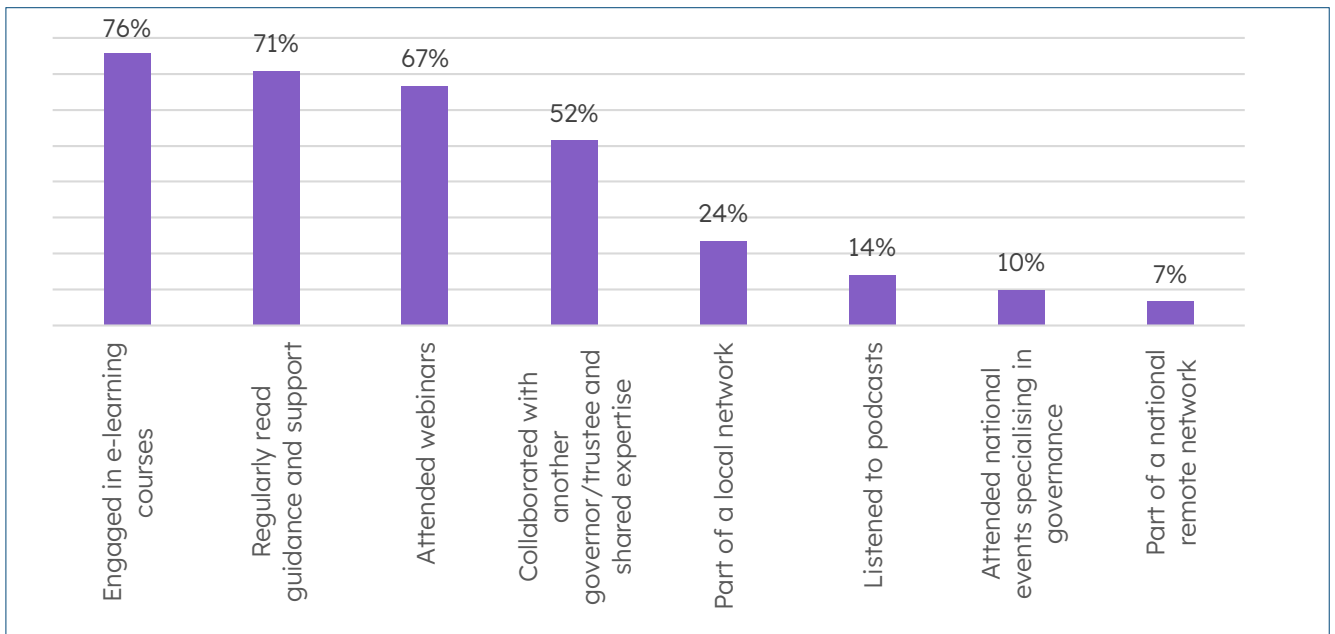


Figure 13, types of development respondents have engaged with over the past 12 months.

in figure 13. Newly recruited governors and trustees should be provided with information on how to develop their knowledge and engage in various methods of development to support them in their new role.

Board reviews

Overall, the practice of undertaking board reviews is not increasing, despite the DfE recommending regular reviews. 2021 saw a dip in the number of governing boards carrying out reviews of governance, which was a likely consequence of the pandemic. Over the past two years, the survey has seen the number of boards reporting undertaking reviews increase back to the previous rate of around half of boards.

NGA's self-review 20/21 questions were the most popular method used to conduct a review of governing boards with a quarter (25%) of boards – i.e. 60% of those conducting internal reviews - using this to evaluate their effectiveness and inform actions moving forward.

Although externally facilitated reviews are languishing at one in 10 boards compared with the good practice recommendation of one in three, the practice was more common in trusts with 17% of MAT and 18% of SAT respondents having been part of one this year compared with only 7% of maintained governing bodies. Local governing boards were also less likely to say that their board had conducted a review of governance compared to other board types; this is to be expected as usually local governance would be considered as part of a full MAT governance review and not all academy committees would generally be involved.

	2016	2021	2022	2023
Yes, an internal self-review	37%	23%	43%	40%
Yes, an externally facilitated review	14%	6%	8%	10%
No, but we did one last year	19%	17%	12%	11%
No, but we are planning to do this next year	12%	19%	16%	11%
No, it has not been discussed	10%	22%	12%	13%
Unsure	8%	12%	9%	15%

Figure 14, longitudinal data of boards that have carried out a governance review from 2016- 2023.

Challenges and priorities facing schools and trusts

Key findings

- 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.
- Balancing the budget remains the top challenge overall for school and trust boards (52%) with staff pay costs being the biggest challenge for boards in setting a balanced budget.
- Access to funding was the biggest challenge for schools and trusts in relation to pupils with SEND with 66% reporting this as their biggest challenge.
- 97% of respondents who knew, agreed that the energy price rises have had a negative impact on their school/trust budget position.
- Over a third of respondents disagreed that their school buildings were in good condition.
- 64% of respondents said that following board discussions, school leaders and staff have taken practical action in their school or trust on environmental sustainability.
- Safeguarding concerns have increased for 56% of schools and trusts over the past 12 months with bullying, neglect and domestic abuse being the most common concerns.
- Over half of MAT secondary respondents said there had been an increase in exclusions (56%) compared to 38% for maintained secondary respondents. Likewise, 22% of MAT primary respondents reported an increase, compared to just 12% in maintained primaries.
- Methods that schools and trusts are engaging in to support pupil mental health and wellbeing have declined since 2022, with almost all methods of support dropping by at least 6%.
- 60% of governors and trustees agree that a form of graded school inspection is needed.
- The rate of academisation has seen significant growth since last year as well as the desire to academise but not finding a MAT that suited their school.

2.1 Challenges and priorities

Challenges for schools and trusts

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 (52%) placing this at the top, an increase of 8 percentage points.

Overall, attendance is the second biggest challenge, followed by support for children with special educational needs. However, the picture is significantly different in secondary schools where SEND falls out of the top three and behaviour and exclusions takes its place.

Primaries	
Challenges	Strategic priorities
Balancing budget	Improving attainment
SEND	Broad and balanced curriculum
Attendance	Attendance

Secondaries	
Challenges	Strategic priorities
Balancing budget	Attendance
Attendance	Improving attainment
Behaviour and exclusions	Behaviour and exclusions

Special	
Challenges	Strategic priorities
Balancing budget	Attendance
Staff wellbeing including workload	Staff wellbeing including workload
Developing and retraining staff	Support for pupils with special educational needs



There are some distinct differences between the strategic priorities and challenges of different phases of education. The priorities of special schools have more of an emphasis on staff development, well-being and retention. The overall slip in staff wellbeing including workload from third last year to fourth position is a decrease of five percentage points to 22%. Given the rest of NGA's work, we can surmise that this is more likely to reflect the growing prominence of attendance rather than any indication that this is an area boards are finding less of a challenge or less important.

Notably, attracting high-quality teaching staff as a challenge has seen a significant increase. In 2022, only 6% of respondents reported this as a challenge. This year's survey saw a jump of 15 percentage points to 18% of respondents reporting challenges around attracting high quality teaching staff making it the fifth most challenging issue impacting schools and trusts.

The attainment of disadvantaged pupils and improving attainment dropped out of the top five challenges to seventh and tenth place respectively. Energy costs, a new entry for 2023, ranked sixth.

These findings underline 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 when ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum, improving attainment and support for pupils with special educational needs were the top three priorities. This 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%.

This year's shift is even more pronounced in secondary settings with behaviour and exclusions makes the top three for the first time. Special schools emphasise, staff wellbeing and support for pupils with special educational needs.

Differences also emerge across board types, with maintained boards prioritising support for pupils with special educational needs more than attendance. This is likely to be due to maintained schools largely being primary schools which were more likely to have identified SEND as one of their three top challenges. Meanwhile MAT trustees rank staff wellbeing including workload lower than other board types, including local academy committees.

Regional differences

The survey considers the findings through a regional lens, exploring how challenges, priorities and experiences can be weighted differently across the nine regions of England. Although regional differences were minimal for most questions, the challenges faced by schools and trusts are not entirely the same across the country. For example, balancing the budget and attendance did not emerge as a top challenge for respondents in the East of England. Staff wellbeing was a top three challenge for respondents in the East of England, East Midlands and the South West.

The third highest challenge showed more variation, with falling pupil numbers a top three challenge for respondents in London. While financial pressures largely don't appear to vary as a result of geographic location, respondents in the South West were more likely to say that projected pupil numbers were one of their top three challenges in setting a balanced budget.

Safeguarding concerns meanwhile are on the rise across the board with respondents in the West Midlands region most likely to report they had significantly increased (32%) compared to Yorkshire and Humber (17%).

2.2 Finance

The last year has presented governing boards 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 for school places, there is no sense of one size fits all approach to driving financial strategies, with boards having to respond to the unique needs and changing context such as falling pupil numbers.. Yet responses show a common goal in ensuring pupil needs are met remain at the heart of their spending decisions.

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.

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. Similarly, 45% of SATs reported balancing the budget as a top three challenge. Budget is especially a challenge for those maintained by local authorities (LAs), 60% compared to the overall figure of 52%, but this also coincides with more maintained schools being primary.

When broken down by phase, 57% of primaries had balancing the budget as their top challenge compared to 39% of secondaries. Findings also confirm the fact

that falling pupil numbers is more of a significant challenge for primary schools with 18% reporting it as a challenge compared with only 3% of secondaries.

As ever there is a wide range of experiences as regards finances, but for the first time in three years, those able to balance their income and expenditure falls below 60%. When broken down by school structure, the one exception is SAT respondents, with 73% saying they could balance income and expenditure with or without maintaining a healthy surplus. This compares to 68% of MAT board respondents and just 52% of maintained school respondents. While the fact that the majority of SATs are secondary schools will be a key reason, it is still a significant finding.

Overall there has been a twelve percentage point increase – to almost one third of boards that are unable to balance their budget without drawing on surpluses.

“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.”

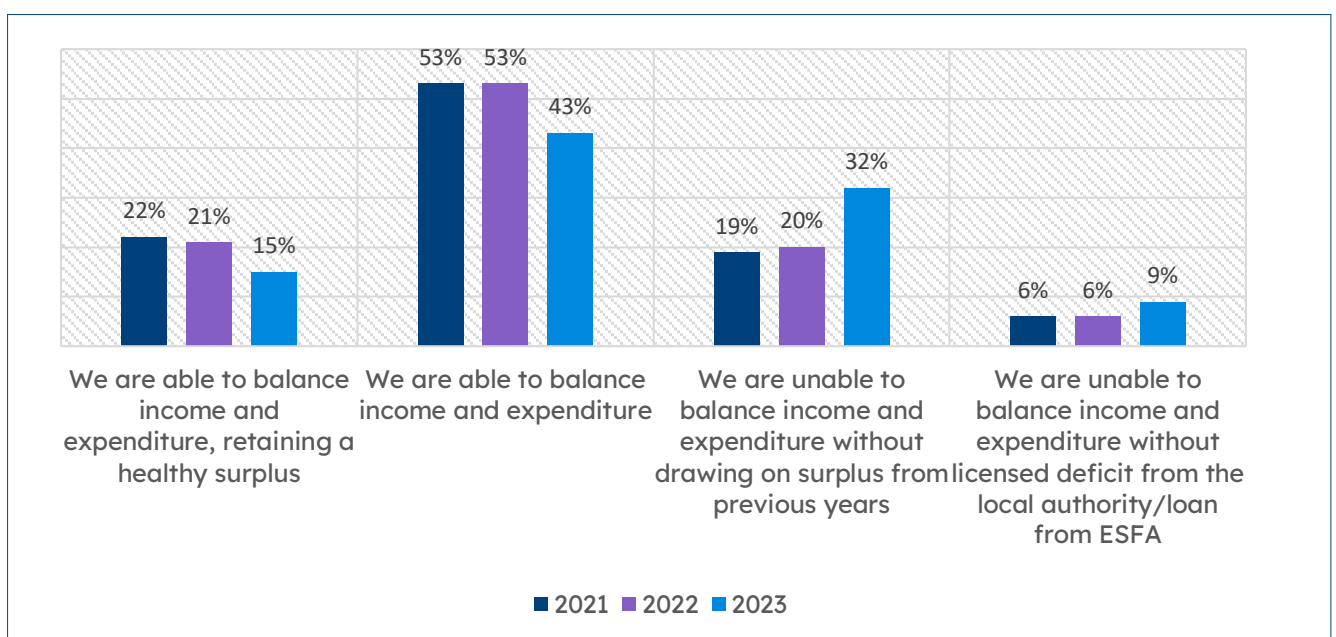


Figure 15: which of the following best describes the current financial position of your school/trust? From 2021 to 2023

The energy crisis had 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 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 over pay demands. 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. This is a nine-percentage point decrease from 2022 and the biggest year on year decrease since the introduction of the question in 2021.

2.3 School campus

Condition of school buildings

As outlined in the National Audit Office's June report the condition of school buildings is declining with several now needing major rebuilding or refurbishment. For the first time we asked governors and trustees what they thought about this topic.

Over a third of respondents (37%) said that their school buildings were not in good condition. A further 60% agreed they were in good condition and 4% didn't know. Free text responses shed more insight into the duality that exists within school estates. Respondents that agreed that their buildings were in good condition often commented that some buildings were sufficient whereas others needed great attention. Therefore, the figures from this question may shield the true extent to which governors and trustees deem the school estate inadequate.

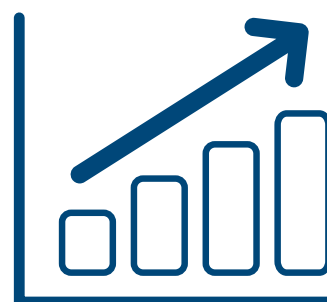
“Those that have already been invested in are now fine, but makes remainder look awful and includes buildings that are already derelict on site.”

Environmental sustainability

64% of respondents said that following board discussions, school leaders and staff have taken practical action in their school or trust on environmental sustainability. This is up a massive 23 percentage points from 2022 and is a real celebratory figure. It may reflect the impact of the DfE 2022 strategy for education, NGA's Greener Governance campaign and the rise in charities/organisations offering support to schools and trusts. Respondents most often cited progress involving campus related improvements in the free text responses. Other action taken included solar panels, energy saving measures, embedding environmental sustainability into the curriculum/ learning and regularly included it as an agenda item for governing board meetings.

It was also clear from these however that respondents are still seeing a financial barrier to progressing and/or commencing action on environmental sustainability as well as old buildings adding to this as a financial burden.

23%



“We have discussed environmental sustainability and delegated a governor to explore further ideas and possibilities. Board discussion also talked of purchasing a professional audit of our sustainability status.”

In comparison to the survey findings in 2022, the percentage of schools and trusts engaging in methods to support pupil mental health and wellbeing has decreased by at least 6%. For example, the percentage of those with access to in-school early intervention support has decreased by eight percentage points from 64% in 2022 to 56% in 2023. Those with access to external support services has decreased by 14 percentage points, from 60% in 2022 to 46% in 2023. In addition, the percentage of schools and trusts (47%) accessing whole staff training on mental health and wellbeing has reduced by 15% from 2022. The increasing concerns around pupil mental health and wellbeing have placed a strain on external services which continues to be felt in schools and trusts across the country. Respondents reported that their pupils are often faced with long waiting times and their school/trust has insufficient access to resources.

2.4 Pupil success and wellbeing

Supporting pupil mental health and wellbeing

This year’s governance survey joins the array of research which reports a growing concern around the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, with the pandemic further exacerbating the support that they require. Schools have acted as the net to support pupils experiencing issues with mental health and wellbeing, causing a strain on the education system to provide services to pupils and their families.

Over half of respondents (54%) said that their school collects data on pupil mental health and wellbeing and that they monitor the data they receive. Other ways in which schools and trusts are supporting pupil mental health and wellbeing include having a senior mental health lead (47%), whole school staff training on mental health and wellbeing (47%) and access to external/ community mental health services and organisations (46%).

“Our school TRIES to access external community mental health services but they are not sufficiently resourced.”



Figure 16, the percentage of schools and trusts employing methods to support pupil mental health and wellbeing.

Other respondents reported the different ways that their school or trust supported pupil mental health and wellbeing, including members of the board sitting as wellbeing governors and trustees to develop the support available for pupils and staff.

“We have a wellbeing lead and wellbeing trustee who are available for consultation and regularly visit the schools. The feedback is very positive from children and staff.”

Training and development for staff and the governing board was a key theme that ran through the open text responses whereby, there was an emphasis on staff being specifically trained to be able to support pupils as quickly as possible.

Respondents reported that the school or trust relied on access to webinars and online support which would be available to staff, students and in some cases, parents.

“We subscribe to an online support & advice service called Tooled Up which is available to all staff, students and parents to help support pupil wellbeing/ anxiety/stress”

Safeguarding

Worryingly, 55% of respondents reported a rise in safeguarding concerns in the past year. This figure builds on the concerning figures found in 2022 where 71% of respondents said there had been a rise in safeguarding concerns following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Less than half of respondents (41%) said that levels remained broadly the same in the last 12 months, with just 3% reporting a decrease.

When exploring this in depth, bullying and cyberbullying, neglect and domestic abuse were the top three areas of concern identified.

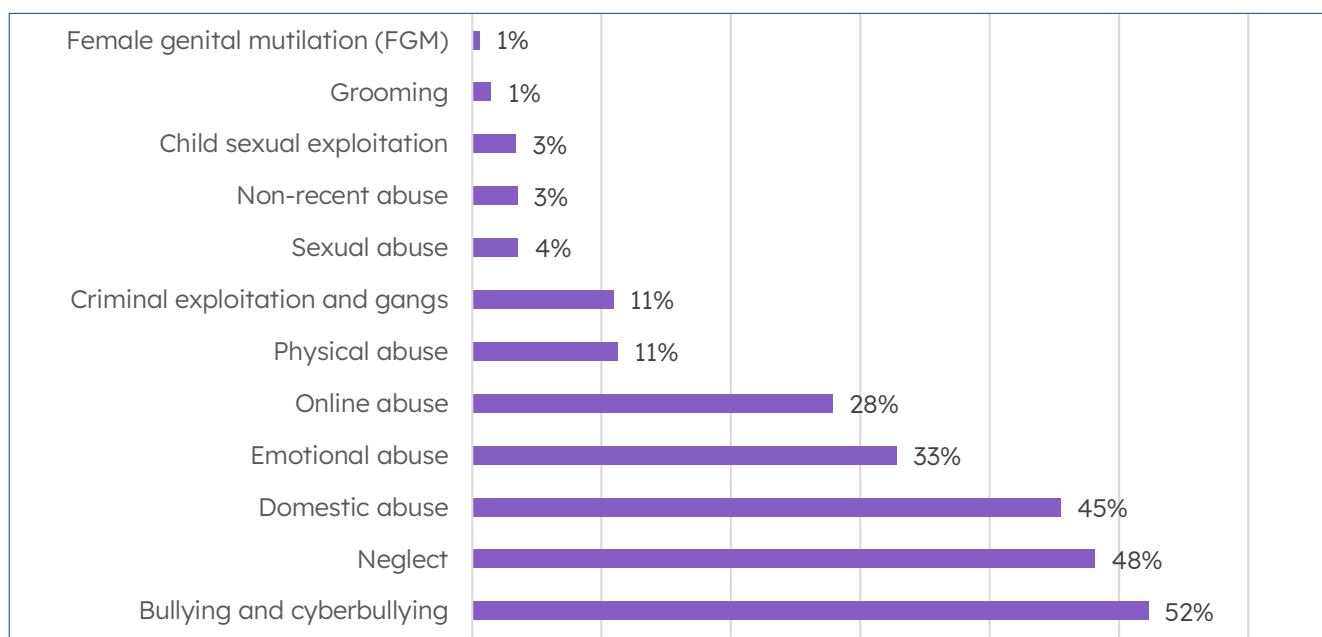


Figure 17, the top three most common safeguarding concerns that respondents have seen a rise in at their school or trust.

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

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.

The concerns in safeguarding differed by school phase however bullying and cyberbullying featured in the top three safeguarding concerns for both primary (46%) and secondary (71%). 58% of those governing in a primary phase said that neglect was a key concern followed by domestic abuse (56%). Meanwhile, online abuse was a key concern for 42% of those governing in secondary phases followed by emotional abuse (27%).

Self-harm was a common theme that respondents highlighted through open text responses. 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.”

2.5 Stakeholder engagement

Methods of engagement

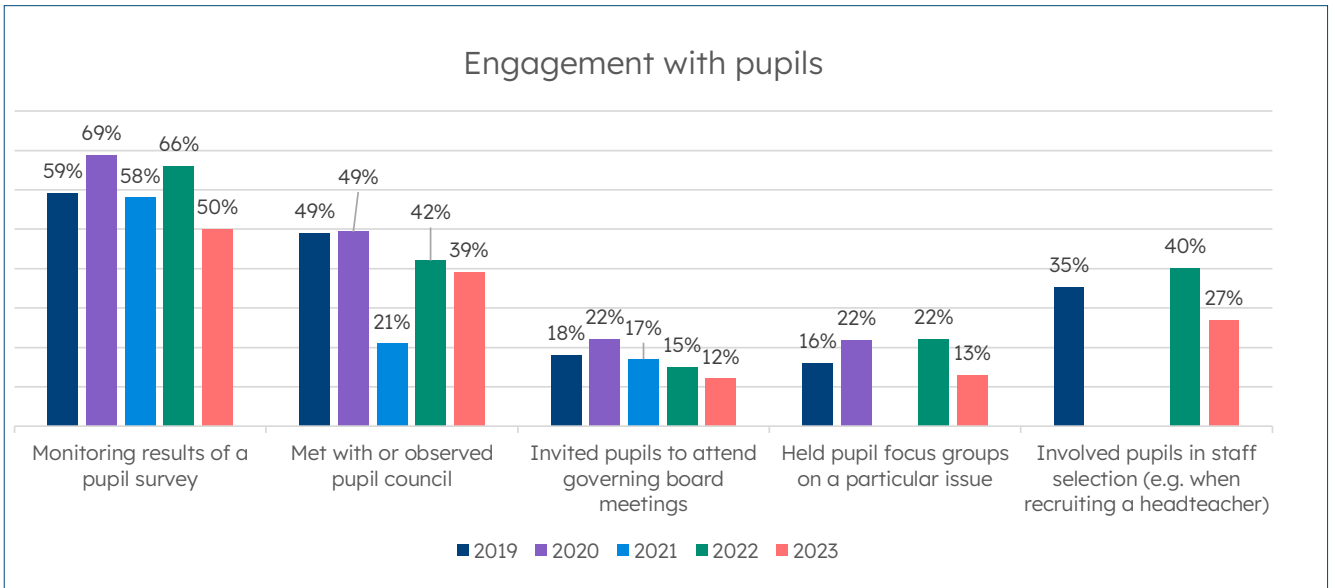
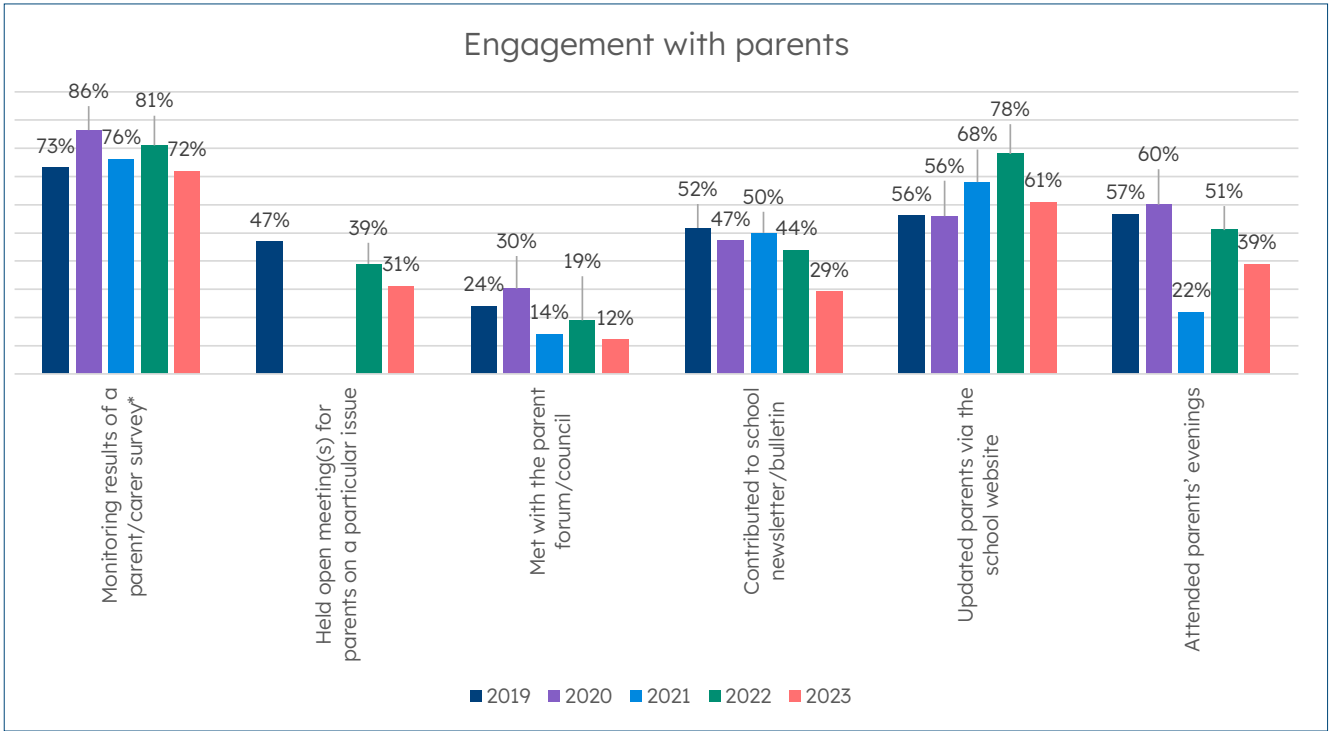
Governing boards engaging with stakeholders has declined compared to previous years. 2019 saw the highest levels of the engagement with pupils, staff, parents and the local community. 2020 also saw high levels of engagement with stakeholders as a strategy to ensure communication and relationships remained strong as the pandemic struck.

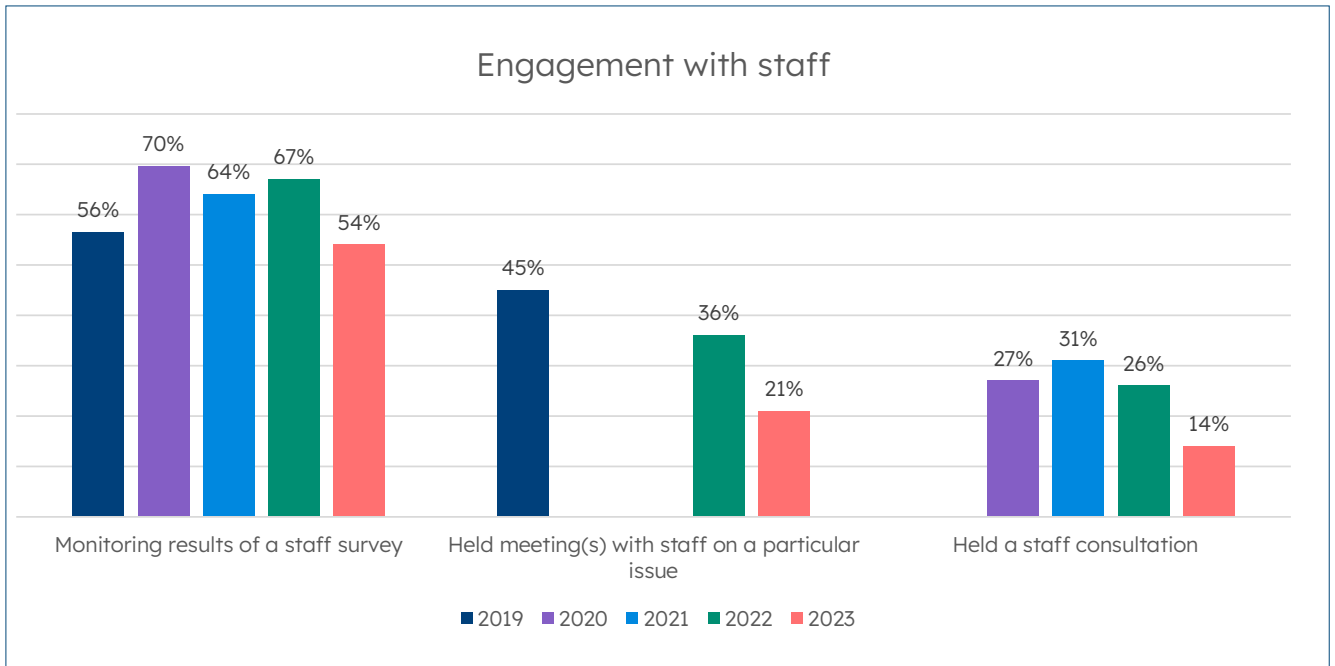
This year, parents were the most common stakeholder group that governing boards engaged with and took place in various forms. For example, 72% of respondents monitored the results of a parent/ carer survey, 61% provided updates to parents through the school website, 39% attended parents evening and 12% met with the parent forum/ council.

Monitoring results of a pupil survey, meeting with the pupil council and involving pupils in staff recruitment were the top three methods that governing boards used to engage with pupils.

Engaging with staff is crucial for boards to fulfil their employer responsibilities. While it also makes the board visible, it enables space for a positive culture in which the governing board and staff see themselves as part of the same team. The findings from the survey indicate that boards are commonly resorting to engagement that entails one- way communication. For example, over half (54%) of boards conducted a staff survey as a method of engagement compared to only 21% holding a meeting with staff on particular issues and only 14% consulting with staff on various issues. This year marks the first year that engagement (which enables two- way communication with staff) is at its lowest.

Governing boards reporting facing the greatest challenge when engaging with parents (57%), followed by nearly a third (31%) struggling to engage with the local community. More positively, governing boards found it less of a challenge to engage with staff (8%) and pupils (5%).





2.6 Services for families

Schools and trusts have been found to regularly provide support to pupils and their families to enable pupils to have a positive start to the school day and aid their learning experience. The pandemic and rising costs of living has further exacerbated the support that families require, with schools often stepping in and alleviating the pressure.

Second-hand uniform provision, wrap around care and breakfast for pupils were found to be the top three services that schools provided to families in 2023 which is largely unchanged from 2022. This year, findings show the implementation of the DfE’s statutory guidance taking effect, for either the provision of second-hand uniform, or clear sign-posting to an external provider. The number of schools offering this service has increased by 7 percentage points. Those providing pupils with breakfast has also increased by 2 percentage points.

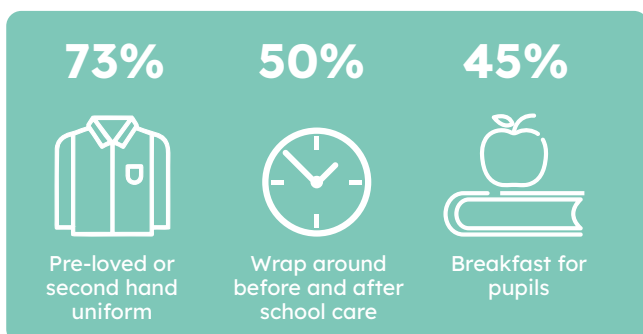


Figure 18, the top three services provided to pupils and their families.

Other services include:

- 31%** Financial support with purchasing uniforms .
- 27%** Meals outside of term time.
- 22%** Foodbank.
- 17%** Family learning .
- 15%** Advice about income and benefits.
- 6%** Washing school uniforms.
- 2%** Emergency loans.

Over a fifth of schools (22%) and trusts provide a food bank for children and their families, a slight increase of one percentage point from 2022.

The findings highlighted the support that schools and trusts put into place to ensure that pupils are able to take advantage of the education they provide, but also support learning outside of the school day, such as financial support for trips and extra-curricular activities (e.g. music lessons, sports and tuition).

“Help finance school trips for parents of children who otherwise wouldn’t be able to go on the trips - in particular residential trips which take place every year for Years 5 and 6. We like to ensure that every child who wishes to go on trips gets to do so irrespective of family finances”

The services provided for families differed depending on the school type/ phase, in particular those governing in primary schools (65%) were more likely to offer wrap around care as an additional service than secondary schools (15%). As seen in figure 19, the top three services provided to families sit in line with the expectations of the DfE and the context of the school itself.

Supporting pupils with SEND

Given that SEND has been one of the top challenges identified by governing boards for some years, this survey sought to identify the current and pressing issues facing schools and trusts supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. A prominent finding from the survey found that access to funding was the biggest challenge for schools and trusts in relation to pupils with SEND with 66% reporting this as their biggest challenge. Over half of respondents (58%) reported that obtaining an EHC plan was a top three challenge followed by 53% of respondents perceiving engagement with the local authority and support services to be a challenge. Although access to funding sat as a big challenge for all school phases and types, engagement with the local authority and local services was a bigger challenge for special schools (66%).

Behaviour and exclusions

68% of respondents reported that challenging behaviour has increased in the past 12 months and just under a fifth (19%) reported that this was not the case. While challenging pupil behaviour was found mostly among secondary schools (84%), all through schools (77%) and alternative provisions (78%), over half of all school phases reported an increase.

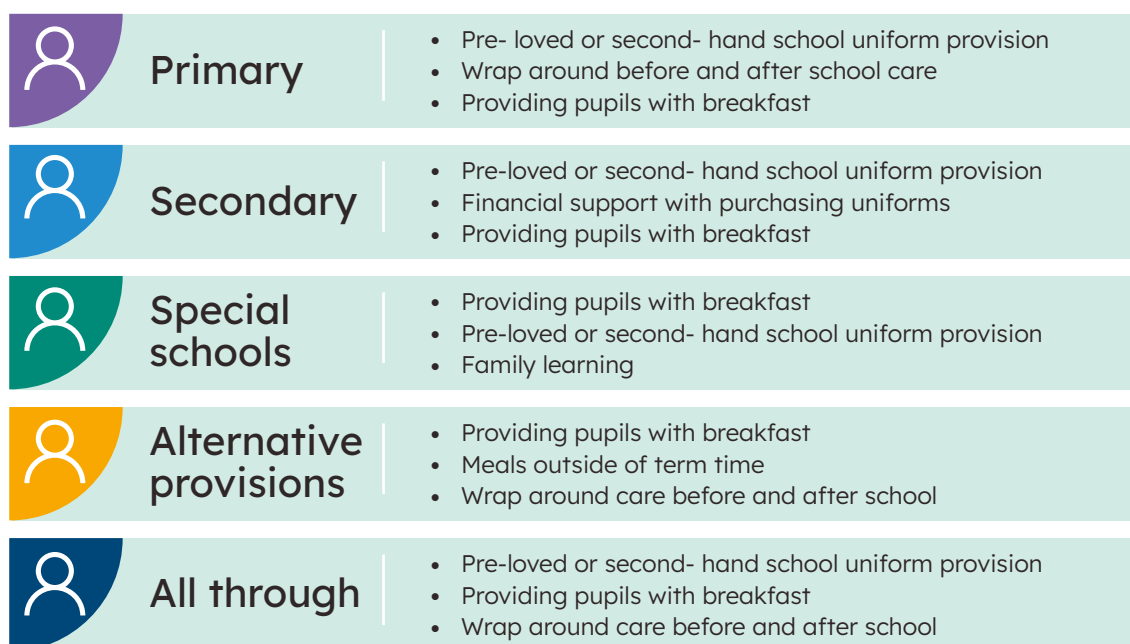


Figure 19, the top three services provided to families by school type/phase.



Figure 20, the percentage of respondents reporting the biggest challenges for their school/ trust in relation to SEND.

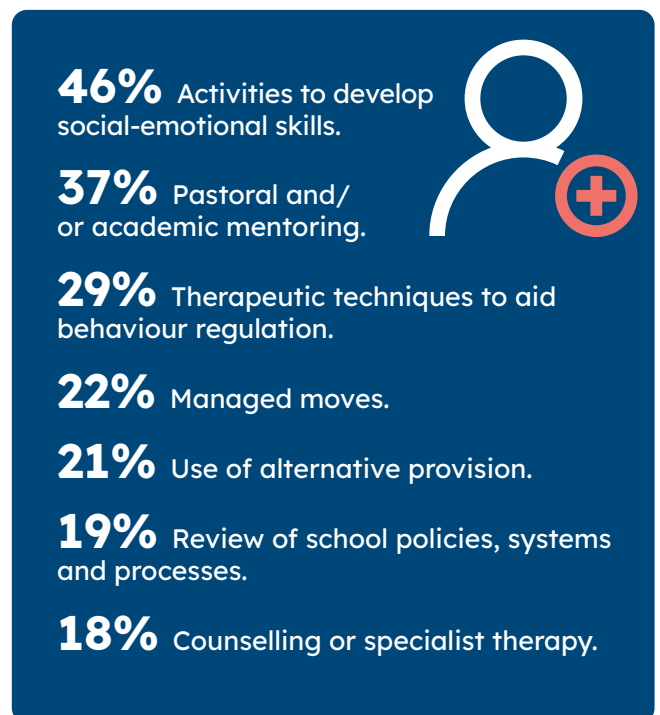
Overall, 13% of governors and trustees surveyed reported that behaviour and exclusions were a top challenge for their school or trust this year, an increase of five percentage points from 2022. This rose to one third of secondary schools, correlating with national data on permanent exclusions. Behaviour and exclusions were among the top five challenges for MAT's, which correlates with the number of secondary schools within MATs.

23% of respondents agreed that they had seen an increase in permanent exclusions in the past 12 months while 61% reported that they had not seen an increase. When explored by structure, MATs and SATs respondents were far more likely to report an increase (33% and 31% respectively) compared to those in maintained schools (15%).

All MAT respondents picked a phase, based on whether their trust consisted of just one phase or the majority. Over half of MAT secondary respondents said there had been an increase in exclusions (56%) compared to 40% for maintained secondary respondents. Likewise, 22% of MAT primary respondents reported an increase, compared to just 12% in maintained primaries.

While there is no evidenced connection, findings showed that while 23% overall saw an increase in permanent exclusions in the past 12 months, for respondents who also reported a significant increase in safeguarding concerns over the last year, this went up to 38%.

Introducing activities to develop social-emotional skills was a common method used to reduce the number of permanent exclusions as well as methods such as pastoral and/ or academic mentoring and therapeutic techniques to aid behaviour regulation.



The use of methods differed depending on the school type/ phase. Over half of primary schools (53%) and alternative provisions (52%) engaged in activities to develop social- emotional skills, while 55% of secondary schools utilised pastoral or academic monitoring methods to reduce the level of suspensions and exclusions.

Attendance

Attendance featured as the second top challenge as well as the third top strategic priority for governing boards. Attending school is 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.

Communication and providing advice to parents was the most successful method used to improve attendance for 76% of governing boards. Other successful strategies included:

- Targeted support meetings 48%
- Attendance awards 36%
- Multi agency support for families 35%
- Breakfast clubs 27%

Respondents governing in secondary schools also reported that employing attendance officers/ increasing the number of attendance officers (11%) was a successful method in comparison to other school types/phases.

“Home visiting. System for contacting parents. Provision of transport.”

Complaints

Student on student bullying, attendance and teacher interactions are the top three most common complaints that schools and trusts are seeing.

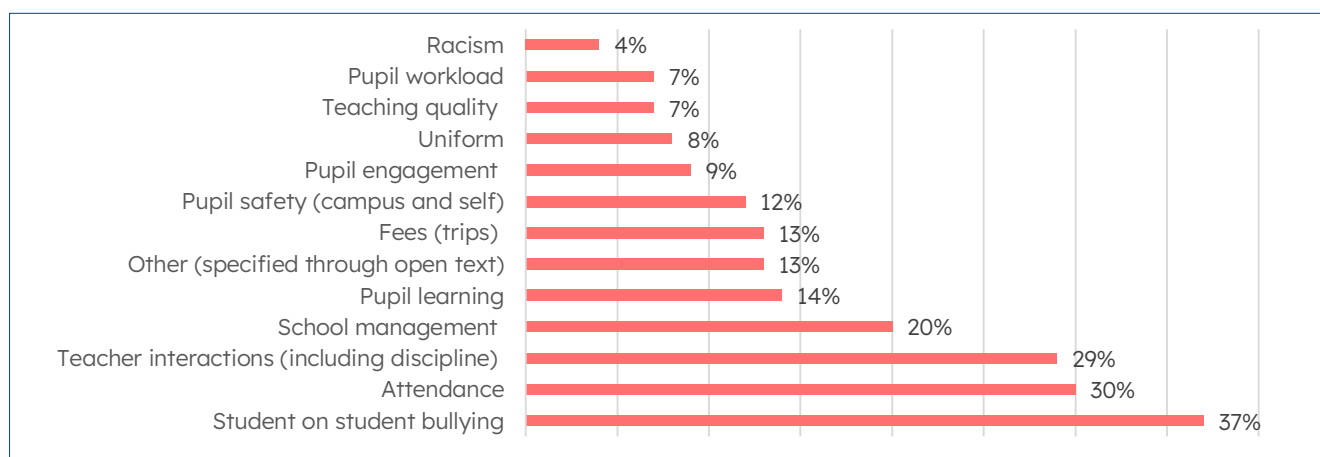
“At the heart of complaints in all cases is the parents’ frustration with the systems they have had to navigate.”

The analysis of the open text responses showed significant number of schools and trusts receiving complaints around support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

While attendance is proven to be a challenge for many schools and trusts, it is surprising that it was also one of the most common complaints that is received from parents to schools. The open text analysis indicates that the approaches taken to monitor attendance and mitigate absence often cause parents to be dissatisfied with the school.

“Some parents don’t like being challenged on punctuality and attendance.”

“Support for SEND pupils. Parents expectation is for a much higher level of 1 to 1 support than funding or need allows.”



2.7 Accountability

Ofsted

Discussions around the role of Ofsted as an inspectorate intensified as the impact of inspections on school leaders and staff had been placed in the spotlight. NGA has collected the views and experiences of governors and trustees since the inception of the Education Inspection framework and generally Ofsted's role in the sector is accepted as important. Although generally governing boards are perhaps less against inspection and Ofsted compared to leaders, teachers and other school or trust staff, there is a range of opinion in the governance community.

This year 60% of respondents agree that a form of graded school inspection is needed while just over a third (34%) opposed this view (6% did not have a view). This data builds on the collection of views over the years and continues to demonstrate that this is not a one-sided debate. 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 agree that schools should be inspected but disagree with a one word judgement.”

“I think trying to summarise a school in one word is reductive beyond belief. I think grading has a role, but I'd like to see it applied to a number of metrics and not just summarised in one word. That doesn't really help anyone.”

Government performance

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.

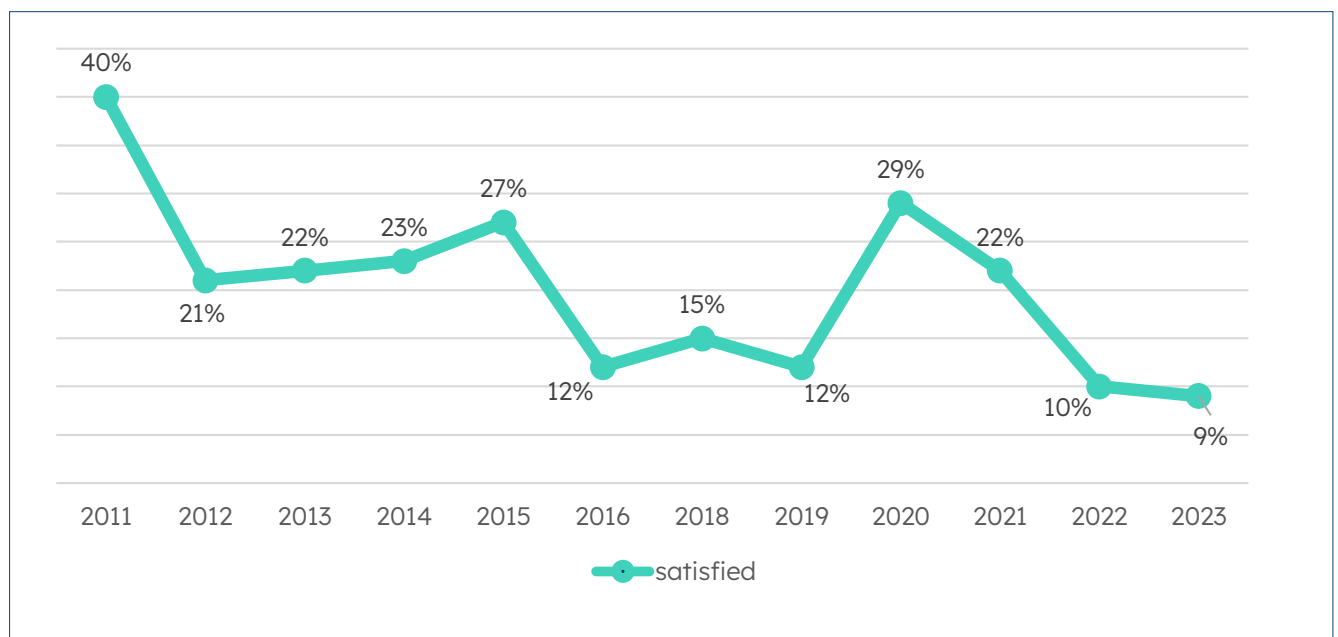


Figure 21, give your verdict on how the government has performed in education for the past year.



2.8 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.

The workload and wellbeing of staff was considered the greatest staffing challenge (46%) by those governing in maintained schools, followed by pay (34%). While academy trusts, cited recruitment (47%) as their biggest staffing issue, followed by workload and wellbeing (41%).

The challenges around staffing differed between different phases and types of schools. Addressing workload and wellbeing issues was the top challenge for 47% of primary schools however secondary schools (63%), alternative provisions (44%) and special schools (58%) were more likely to report that recruitment was the biggest challenge they were facing. This is likely to be due to the specialist nature of teachers within these types of schools.

There was also a notable difference in the staffing challenges encountered by trustees and local governors. Respondents governing on local governing boards were more likely to say that addressing workload and wellbeing issues was their top challenge, whereas for trustees (governing in MATs and SATs) it was recruitment.

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.

Staff recruitment and retention

Many boards have observed the huge pressures on their school leaders, teaching staff and support, caused by external demands - often presenting 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.”

Workload and wellbeing

Over the past 12 months, there has been much concern around the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and support staff. As an employer, it is the responsibility of the governing board to support the wellbeing of all staff employed in their school or trust, including their work-life balance. A healthy working environment contributes towards attracting and retaining staff who are the school's most important resource.

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 with senior leader in greater detail to ascertain that they are 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.”

Industrial action

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%).

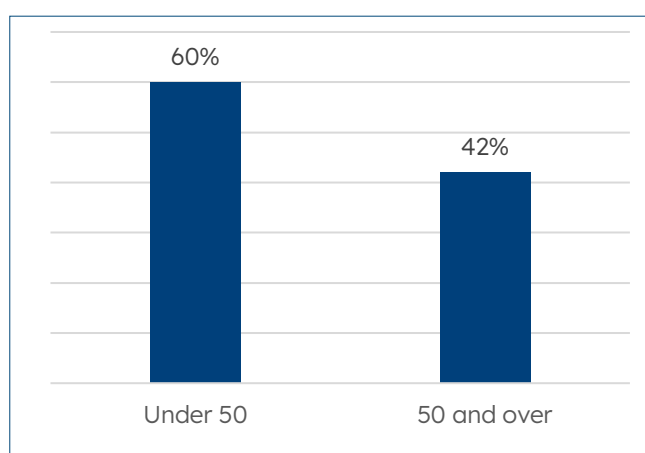


Figure 22, “I support the strike action and the principle behind it” via respondent age.

“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.”

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 recognise 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.”

Multi academy trust governance

Key findings

- Progress on improving communication between layers has stalled with trustees more positive about the communication between tiers of governance than local governors.
- Over half of those governing within a MAT shared the view that Ofsted should carry out graded inspections of MATs.
- MAT respondents reported rapid growth both in the past year and planned for the near future.
- Financially, MATs are more likely than local authority maintained schools to have a healthy surplus and feel positive about their future. Despite this, these figures are in decline.

Most respondents were part of a MAT with 6 to 10 academies (34%), closely followed by those with 2 to 5 (31%) and 11 to 20 (20%). Other respondents were from MATs with 21 to 30 academies (9%) and 31 plus (6%). The biggest shift in respondents comes from the MATs with 21 to 30 academies which has seen respondent numbers nearly double compared to last year.

3.1 Academisation

The appetite to academise has risen in comparison to 2022. Those who are not considering joining a trust has decreased by six percentage points, while those deciding to academise has risen by two percentage points and those wanting to join a MAT but not finding one that suits their school has broadly remained consistent. 15% of local authority-maintained schools (15% compared to 12% in 2022) in those deciding to join a MAT in the near future, while 23% of SATs slightly reduced from 25% in 2022 to 23% this year.

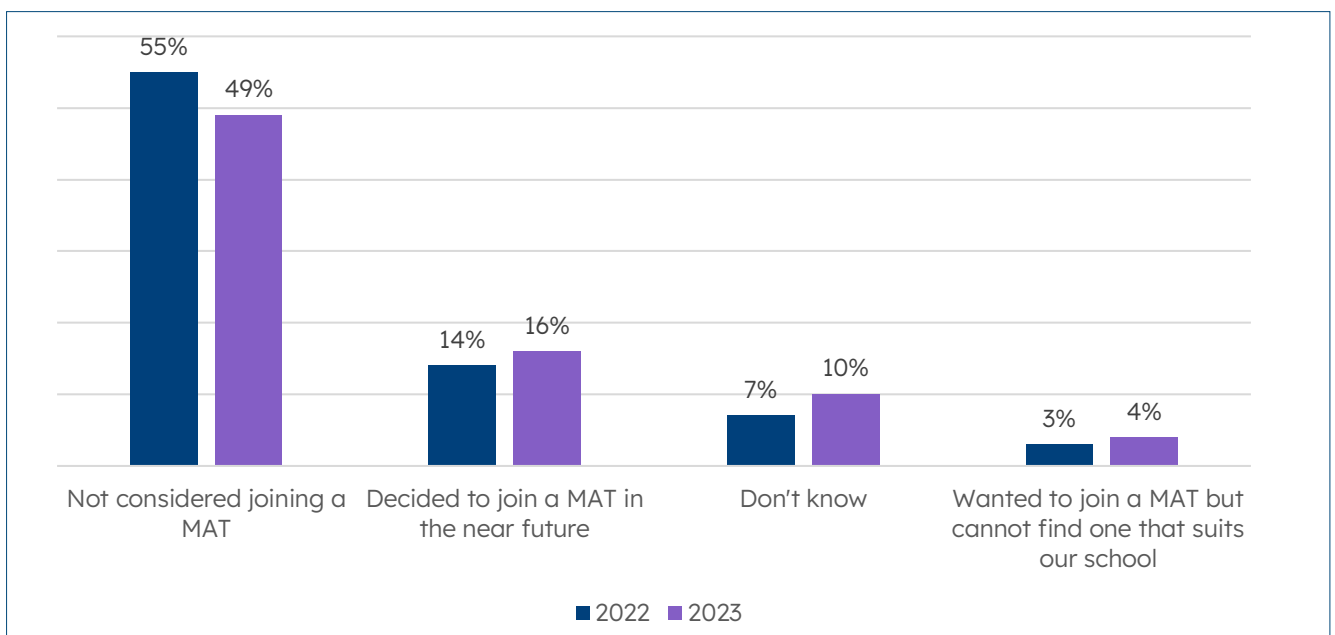


Figure 23, opinions on academisation from 2022 to 2023.

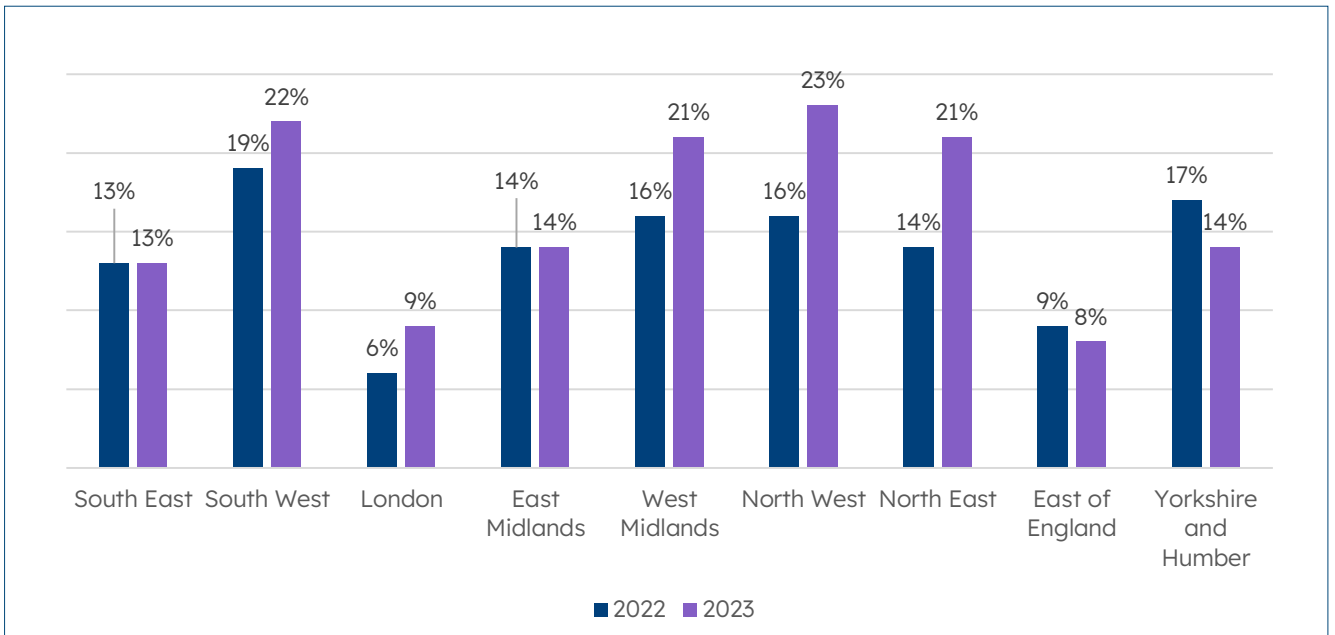


Figure 24, decided to join a trust in the near future via region (2022-2023).

Most regions have seen an increase in respondents deciding to join a trust in the near future with those in the North West and North East seeing the biggest rise (seven percentage points). Only the East of England and Yorkshire and Humber respondents have seen a decrease.

a local level said their voice is heard by trustees and executive leaders, painting a consistent picture in comparison to recent years. and trustees.

And while over half (58%) feel that communication between the local tier and the trust board is effective and well managed, this is a reversal of the upward trend demonstrated in the last few years. This stagnation in positive perceptions shows that while there overall there are more positive attitudes than negative between the tiers of trusts, there is still work to be done to ensure those governing locally remain engaged and on board. There also has not been progress on the percentage of local governors who believe resources should be shared across the trust.

3.2 Perceptions of being in a MAT

Communication and resources

Similarly, to previous years, the survey sought the views of local governors about their experiences of governing within a MAT. 72% of those governing at

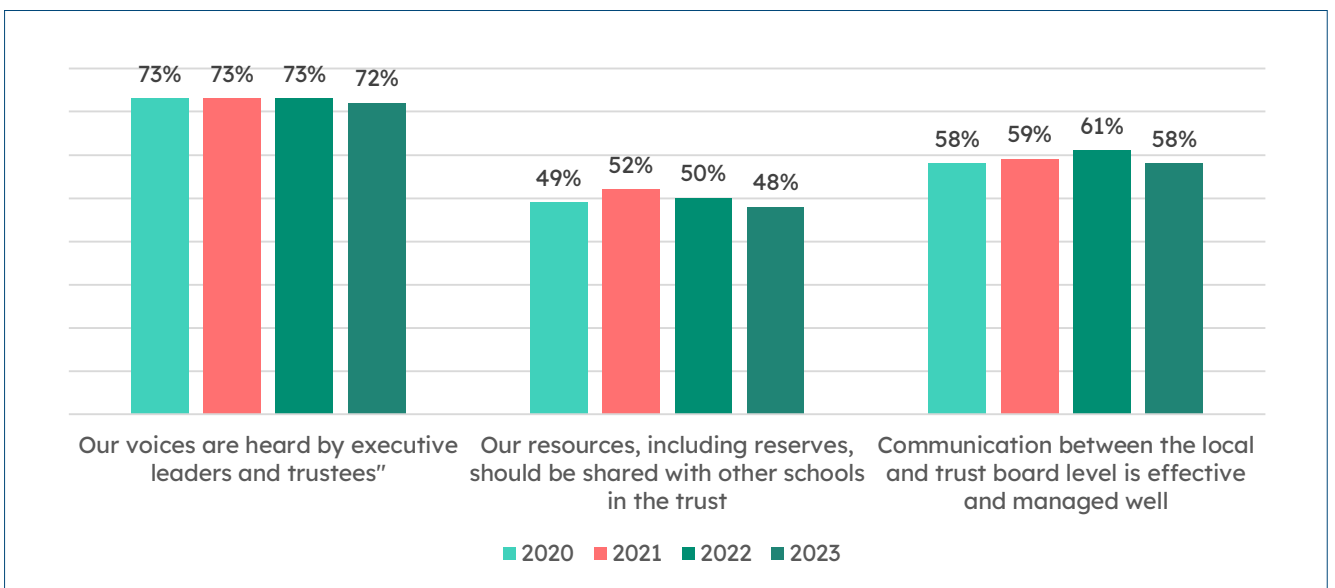
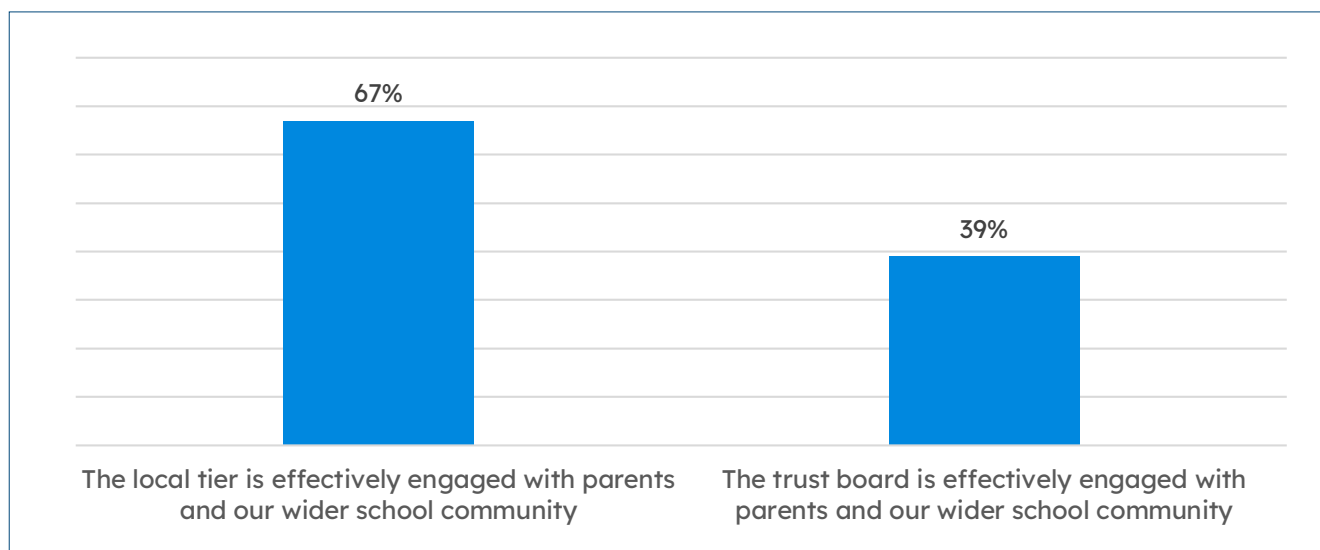


Figure 25, Opinion statements answered by local governor respondents.

To identify whether the views and perspectives of MAT trustees and those at the local level aligned, this year’s also asked MAT trustees for their opinions on this and found that trustees felt eight percentage points more positive than local governors (66% versus 58%). This suggests some trust boards needs to be listening to their local governors more.

In 2022, only 55% of local governors felt that their MAT was effectively engaged with parents and wider school community. This is understandable given local governors are locally based and by and large delegated with parental engagement as especially as MATs get larger, it becomes increasingly difficult for trustees to engage parents effectively themselves. This year we were more explicit and asked about their opinions on both local and trust board approaches. We found that confidence in the trust board was significantly lower (28 percentage points).

When asking both local governors and trustees about their trust boards stakeholder engagement it again showed a lower satisfaction rating from local governors. Over half of trustees (52%) felt that their trust board was effectively engaged with parents and the wider school community compared to (39%) of local governors. Again while even 39% at trust board level is high by virtue of the MAT structure and local engagement usually being delegated locally to those who know more about the local picture, it does suggest some trustees may be over-inflating this response as trust boards themselves shouldn’t be expected to engage directly to the same extent as local governors.



3.3 Growth

The past 12 months

This year’s results have provided the highest year-on-year increase in MAT growth since we started asking this question in 2020.

MAT growth in the past year has seen a six-percentage point increase compared to last year with half of respondents now saying they have expanded. Whereas a few years ago the aspirations one year to grow were not matched by the growth report the next year, this was no longer demonstrably the case this year given that 52% reported aspiring to grow in 2022.

Exploring in more depth the responses from both trustees and LGB respondents, worryingly a similar percentage of trustees (11%) were unsure if their trust had grown in the past year compared to LGB respondents (10%).

Economies of scale moves from 5th to 3rd most picked reason as to why trusts have expanded. Having the capacity moves from 2nd to 4th.

Free text responses often mentioned a lack of knowledge as a local governor or decisions by the relevant diocese.

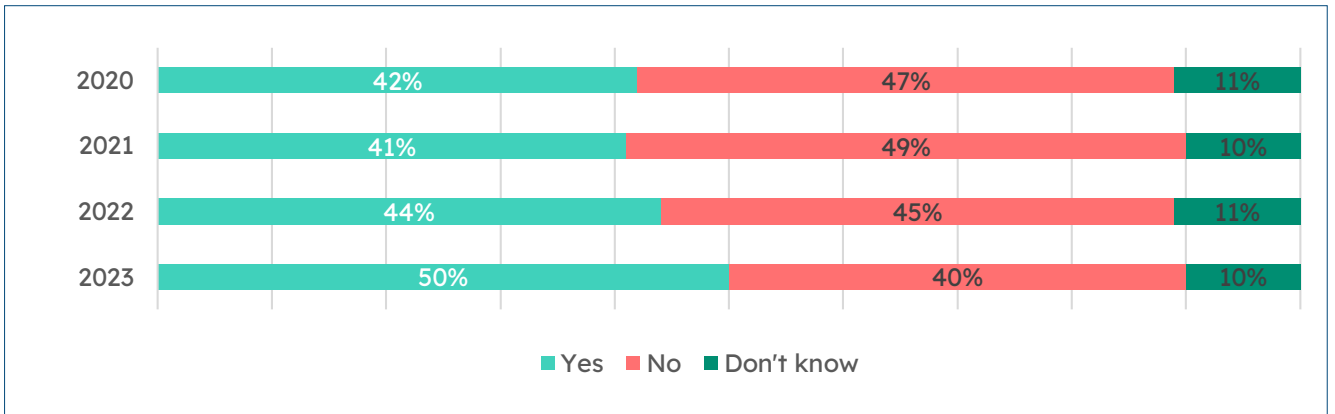


Figure 27, Have you increased the number of schools within your MAT in the past 12 months from 2020 to 2023.

2022	2023
There were suitable schools who wished to join	It was part of our strategy to increase the academies within the trust
It was part of our strategy to increase the academies within the trust	There were suitable schools who wished to join
We had the capacity to support more schools	Economies of scale

Figure 28, reasons for growth in the past year from 2022 and 2023.

In the future

Last year 52% of respondents said they were planning on expanding the number of schools in their MAT in the future while 8% said no and 41% said they were unsure. This year, only 12% were uncertain and those deciding to grow their MAT has risen by 10 percentage points to 62%. However, one in four MAT trustees did not know if

their trust was planning to grow in the future. This compares to 29% of local governors.

The increase in respondents saying their trust would look to grow is the highest year-on-year increase since we started to ask the question in 2020.

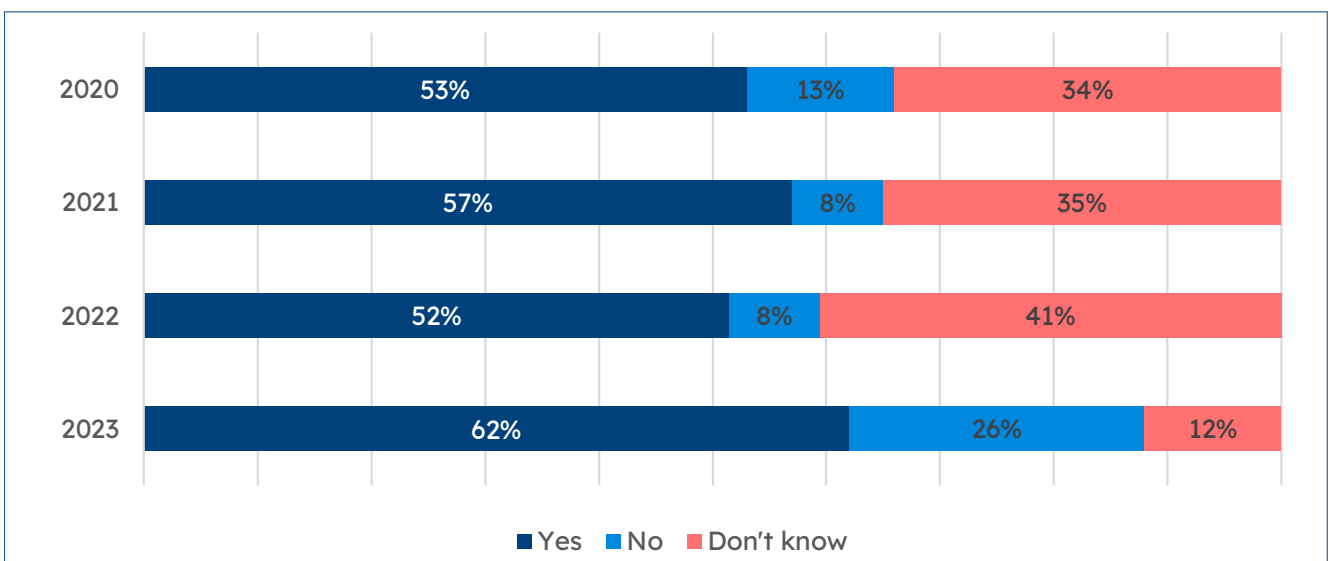


Figure 29, Do you plan to expand the number of schools within your MAT in the future? From 2020 and 2023?

2022	2023
It is part of our strategy to increase the academies within the trust	Economies of scale
We want to improve outcomes for more pupils	It is part of our strategy to increase the academies within the trust
Economies of scale	We want to improve outcomes for more pupils

Figure 30, reasons for growth in the future from 2022 and 2023.

Reasons for growth in the future have shifted since last year with higher emphasis placed on economies of scale:

Free text responses included keeping the decision within their own control and having special educational needs capacity in mainstream schools:

“To keep it in our own hands, i.e. merge with another MAT of our choosing, rather than being absorbed into another MAT that may not be our preferred option.”

“Special needs is massively oversubscribed and we need to get more mainstream schools able to support pupils rather than passing them on.”

Regional differences

With the exception of the South West, respondents from all regions reported that they were more likely to grow in the next year rather than in the past year. London (22 percentage points), the East Midlands and the West Midlands (23 percentage points) had the biggest difference in growth in the past year versus growth in the near future.

Differences via size

All sized MATs had seen a higher amount of growth in the past year compared to 2022. This was especially true of MATs with 6 to 10 academies and 21 to 30 academies, this latter group having had the most growth with 75% expanding in the year running up to the survey. Trusts with 11 to 20 academies saw the highest intent to grow in the future with 68% wanting to expand further. The only exception is MATs of 31+ academies that are planning to grow 19 percentage points less than in 2022.



Figure 31, Have you increased the number of schools within your MAT in the past 12 months? And Do you plan to expand the number of schools within your MAT in the future?

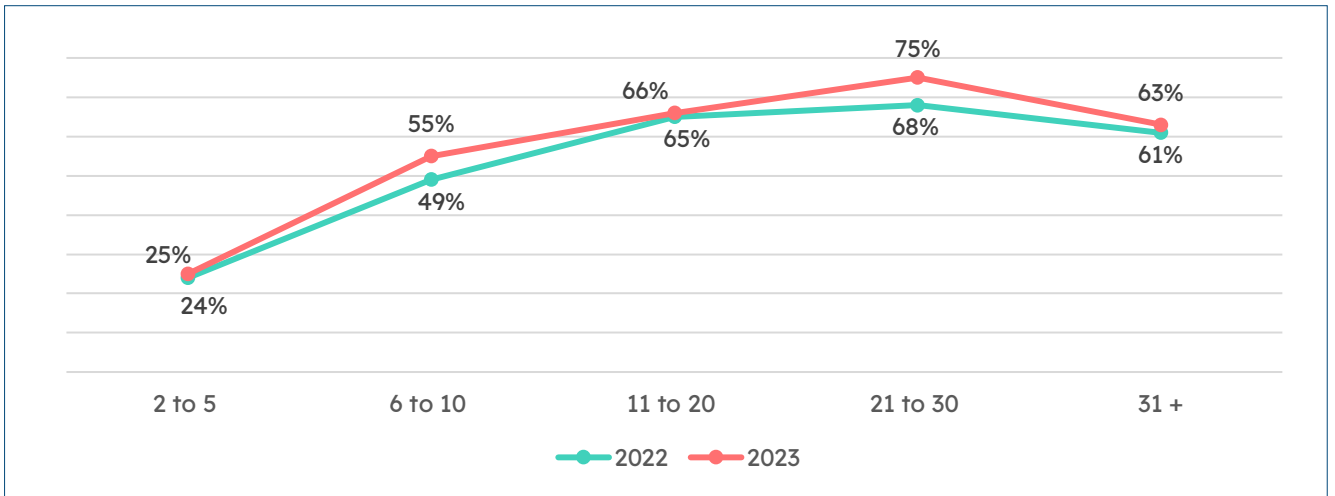


Figure 32, Have you increased the number of schools within your MAT in the last year via trust size?

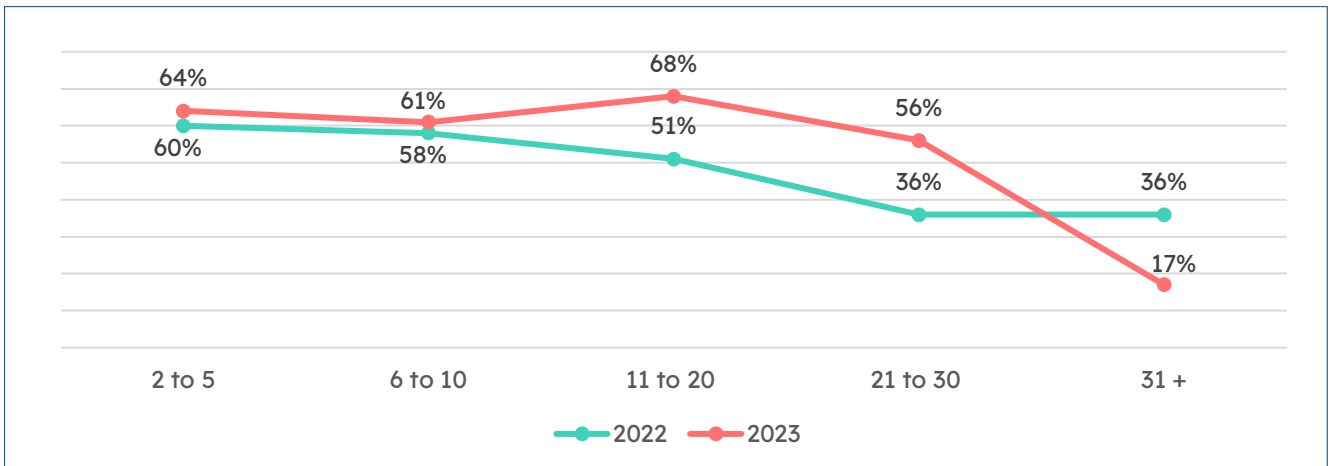
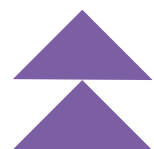


Figure 33, Do you plan to expand the number of schools within your MAT in the future via trust size?

3.4 Inspection of MATs

Over the years there has been a big debate on whether Ofsted should be inspecting MATs, as opposed to just their schools individually. Currently no mechanism exists for MAT inspections, although Ofsted’s summary evaluations will look at a group of schools within a MAT and take account of the support and role of the trust in their performance. Over half (63%) of those governing within a trust (at trust board level or local level) shared the view that Ofsted should carry out graded inspections of MATs while less than a quarter actually opposed this view (24%).

5% fewer respondents sitting on local governing bodies felt that trusts should be subject to inspection compared to trust board members.



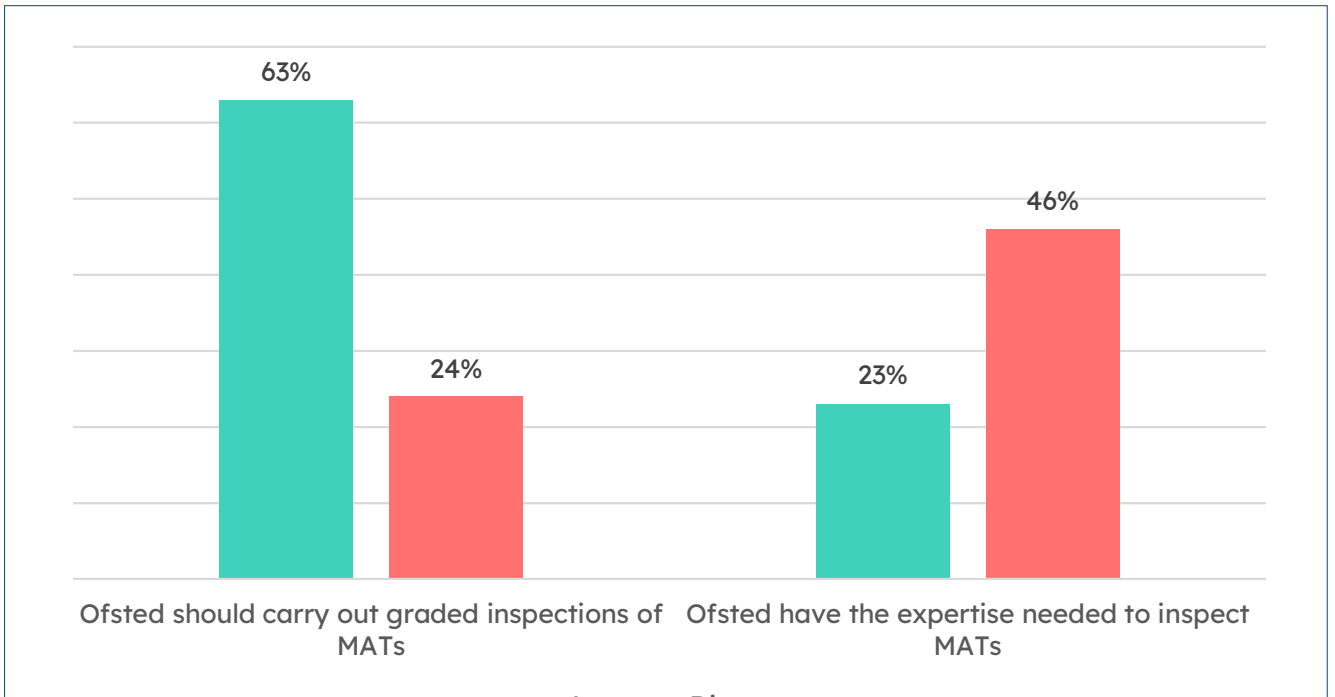


Figure 26, “Ofsted should carry out graded inspections of MATs” and “Ofsted have the expertise needed to inspect MATs”.

3.5 Finance

Once again MATs are more likely than local authority-maintained schools to have a healthy surplus and feel positive about their future outlook. Despite this, these figures are in decline. There has been a seven-percentage point decrease in MAT respondents who report being able to retain a healthy surplus and a 15-percentage point decrease in those that feel financially sustainable in the next 3 to 5 years compared to results from 2022.

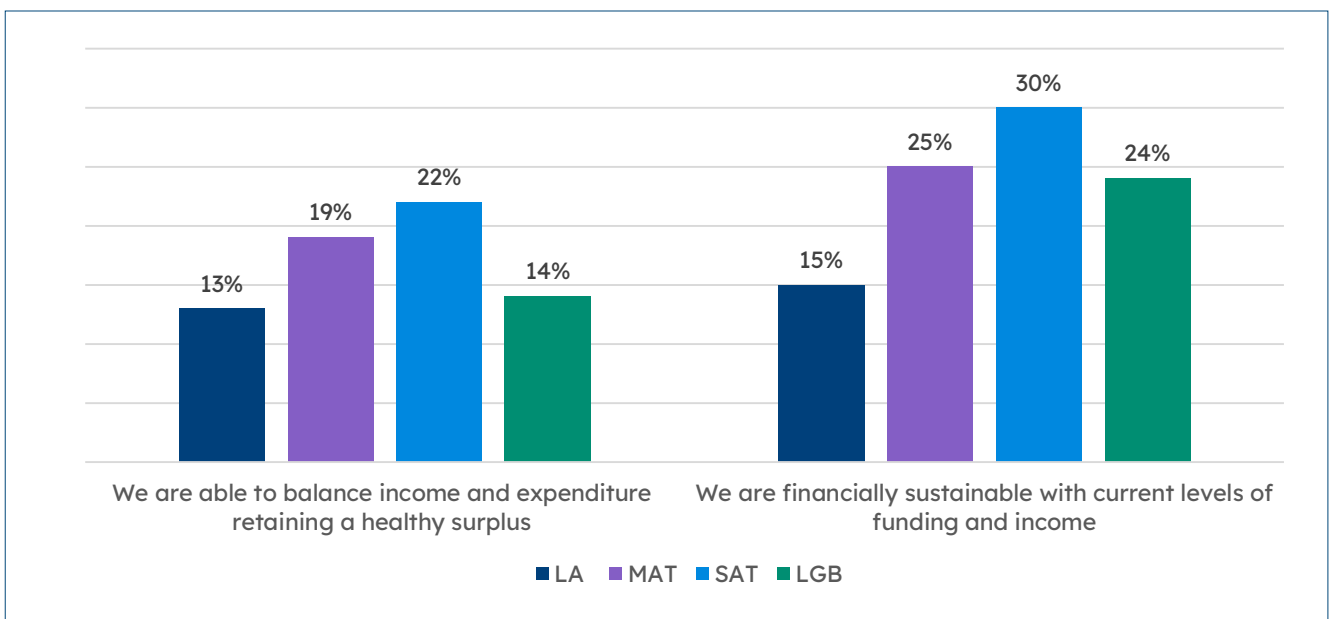


Figure 34, “we are able to balance income and expenditure retaining a healthy surplus and we are financially sustainable with current levels of funding and income via governing board type.”



Similarly to other board types the biggest challenges to MATs balanced budgets are:

- Staff pay costs
- Cost of supporting SEND and high needs pupils
- Infrastructure costs e.g. catering, ICT, estates management, business administration, energy and supplies

Similarly to other board types the methods to ensure financial sustainability are:

This differs from last year with the contracts for goods and services moving from fourth to first most picked for MAT respondents.

2022	2023
Collaborate with other schools	Review contracts for the supply of goods and services
Income generation strategy	Staff restructure
Staff re-structure	Collaborate with other schools

Recommendations

NGA will shortly be publishing an election manifesto which will comprehensively cover the range of issues faced by governing boards and their schools. The below recommendations convey the most significant issues uncovered by the 2023 annual governance survey.

Governance practice: recruitment

- The increasing difficulty in recruiting governors and trustees demands urgent action from all corners of the sector, from local authorities, diocese, trusts, governing boards themselves, and relevant stakeholders as well as key sector voices to address this challenge. But chiefly a more proactive drive is required centrally from the Department for Education. NGA welcomes the recent announcement of a DfE tender for supporting trustee recruitment for the most challenges trusts and its ongoing support for Inspiring Governance however the volunteer workforce is approx 250,000 and therefore a much wider approach is required.

Funding and staffing

- With 72% of respondents citing the affordability of staff pay costs as a challenge, which covers all staff and not just teachers, more action is needed to drive a unified approach to addressing pay holistically. It is crucial to address remuneration structures covering all school and trust roles in order to attract and retain talented educators, innovators and support staff.

Attendance, behaviour and safeguarding

- Our findings confirm the alarming scale of the attendance crisis and increasing levels of behaviour and safeguarding challenges impacting schools across the country. The DfE should commission a pupil attendance taskforce in order to rapidly respond to support both boards and leaders in tackling this issue and to include cross sector representatives to address broader family and societal issues.

Governing a multi academy trust

- The development of local governance in trusts has been well documented by NGA but the findings of this survey shows that overall progress has slowed. NGA urges the DfE to build on the 2022 white paper proposals by promoting both the importance of local governance and the evidenced practice on how to make it meaningful.
- MAT's should be inspected as single organisations to help ensure that large-scale collaboration works for their pupils and communities they serve and it is clear how trusts improve. The government should consider how Ofsted in its present form needs to be strengthened in order to build capacity and expertise to carry out meaningful inspections of MATs, given Ofsted's current role is so heavily based on assessing the quality of education and leadership in a single school.