

A question of time

How chairs of governing boards spend and manage their time

Ellie Cotgrave

September 2016





National Governors' Association

The National Governors' Association (NGA) is an independent charity representing and supporting governors, trustees and clerks in maintained schools and academies in England. The NGA's goal is to improve the well-being of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. It does this by providing information, guidance, research, advice and training. It also works closely with, and lobbies, UK government and educational bodies, and is the leading campaigning national membership organisation for school governors and trustees.

T: 0121 237 3780 | E: governorhq@nga.org.uk | www.nga.org.uk



Introduction

School governors and trustees arguably have more responsibility now than ever before, with Lord Nash, parliamentary undersecretary of state for the school system, having said that “as we move towards an increasingly school-led system, the importance of boards’ role will only continue to grow”. Governing boards are ultimately accountable for the education of thousands of children, yet school governance is undertaken by unpaid volunteers in their spare time. This presents a conflict between the time required to effectively govern and the amount of time governors and trustees are able to give, an issue that has been recognised for over twenty years. In 1992 Johnson questioned whether “governor burnout” was imminent following the 1986 and 1988 Education Acts which increased the responsibilities held by governing boards. It’s striking how many of the factors Johnson (1992) identified as contributing to the issue are still relevant today: indeed, much of the article would not look out of place in the latest edition of NGA’s magazine *Governing Matters*. Notably, Johnson (1992) identified lack of time as a barrier to governing, particularly when taking on the role of the chair. She proposed that one coping strategy used to overcome the problem was for governing boards to rely on a core group of retired professionals with the time and motivation to contribute significantly to the governing board. Although there are many benefits to having skilled retirees on governing boards, Johnson (1992) highlighted the potential difficulties of relying too much on this strategy. Firstly, the experience on offer is rapidly outdated by current developments in educational policy and practice, and these more experienced members of the governing board may be less willing to undergo training. Secondly, the “*éminence grise*” exuded by this group may lead to those from other backgrounds and with less expertise to feel side-lined and less able to contribute. This is supported by Ellis (2003), who found that the way people from under-represented groups (including lone parents, disabled people and black and other minority ethnic groups) perceived existing members of the governing board could prevent them from volunteering to govern. Ellis (2003) identified that the time commitment was also a barrier for these under-represented groups, which has clear implications for governing boards seeking to recruit members from a diverse range of backgrounds.

In addition, the time issue can be problematic for those in paid work, which undermines the government’s drive for schools to recruit governors and trustees from professional backgrounds (see for example Morgan, 2015). Johnson (1992) cites a chair of governors whose employer did not allow him time off work for governance duties, so he had to use his annual leave to visit the school and undertake other governance duties. At the time the article was written, workers were not legally entitled to time off for governance, but the Employment Rights Act 1996 introduced a duty on employers to allow employees reasonable time off for public duties, including school governance. This time off does not have to be paid, and the amount of time which constitutes as ‘reasonable’ is not specified. However it appears that many governors and trustees still do not get time off work for governance. A 2016 survey of 5,000 governors and trustees found that 32% of participants who were employed hadn’t asked for time off work, and 4% had asked for time off but their request had been refused (Cotgrave, 2016). Furthermore, despite a legal entitlement to time off work, for many people regularly missing work just isn’t practicable. This is likely to be particularly pertinent to the high-flying professionals that the government wants to recruit to governing boards. Indeed, Ellis (2003) found that lack of available time – particularly during the school day – prevented business people from governing, and Balarin *et al.* (2008) concluded that the inability to get time off from work was a particular problem when recruiting governing board members from the business community.



The evidence suggests that the time issue is becoming increasingly problematic, but there is limited research on how much time governors and trustees spend on their governance duties, and what they actually spend this time on. A large scale survey of over 7,500 governors (James *et al.*, 2014) went some way to answering this question: it found that 36% of participants spent more than 17 hours per month on governance, with the figure rising to 65% for chairs. The survey data provided some information about what chairs are spending their time on, but this was very high level and there remains a lack of understanding about the strategies used by chairs to manage their time. This research seeks to address this knowledge gap, with the goal of providing practical advice to chairs of governing boards about how they can use their time most efficiently.

Methodology

This study focussed on chairs of governing boards and draws on findings from two strands of research: telephone interviews and time use diaries.

Interviews

Telephone interviews were carried out with 19 chairs in March–May 2015. The sample was drawn from Ofsted's *Maintained schools and academies: inspections and outcomes September 2013 to August 2014* spreadsheet. The data was stratified based on school phase, location and most recent Ofsted grade. Schools were randomly selected from within each strata and a total of 93 chairs of governing boards were contacted to take part in a telephone interview. In recognition of their contribution participants were offered a discount off NGA membership.

Cognitive piloting¹ (Collins, 2003) of the interview questions was carried out before the telephone interviews took place with three chairs of governors. The interview schedule was structured so that all participants were asked the same questions in the same order, although there was flexibility for the interviewer to probe further if needed. The interviews themselves were carried out by three interviewers, all of whom sat in on the first few interviews to ensure consistency in approach.

Interview transcripts were analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo).

Diaries

Participants from the first phase of the research were invited to undertake time use diaries as part of the second phase, and five agreed to take part. Other participants volunteered to take part in response to an article in the NGA newsletter, and as such the majority of participants were NGA members. Time use diaries were completed by 31 chairs, one of whom chaired two governing boards. Participants represented a good mix of schools in terms of school type, phase and Ofsted grade.

The diary document (see appendix 1) was piloted by four chairs who kept a time use diary over two weeks. Feedback from the pilot was used to refine the diary document and to inform the overall period chairs were asked to keep a diary. A four week period was chosen as it was deemed long enough to collect a useful amount of data, without being too onerous on participants.

¹ Cognitive piloting is a process by which test participants are asked to provide feedback on a questionnaire, for example in relation to issues they have with any of the items, wording, response categories or whether anything is missing. The questionnaire is then amended on the basis of this feedback (Collins, 2003).



Participants were provided with the diary document which included instructions for how to complete the diary; examples of what entries might look like; the list of task codes and descriptions; and the diary grid itself. This was piloted with four chairs of governors over two weeks prior to the main study period, and feedback was used to refine and improve the document. Following this, diaries were kept over a period of four weeks in February and March 2016, one of which fell within school holidays. This was done intentionally, to allow comparison between how much time chairs spent during term time and school holidays.

Completed diaries² were analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo). The predefined task codes were used as a starting point for this analysis, with new codes being introduced to pull together additional tasks identified by participants. For example, the code 'reading and research' was created during analysis to describe the various ways chairs keep up to date with education policy and practice. During this process the notes provided by participants were compared against the task codes. Amendments were made where codes were missing or tasks were miscoded. Basic descriptive statistical analysis was also carried out using Microsoft Excel.

Data limitations

This is a small scale study with a small sample. Although the sample characteristics are largely in line with national figures, it is not large enough to draw generalisations and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind. Data from both phases of the research was self-reported, and the diary phase in particular was reliant on participants recording their time use accurately. Indeed, a number of respondents reported difficulty in doing this. In some cases this related to specific tasks, notably thinking time, whereas in others participants had forgotten to record tasks or had done so a while after the activity took place. Therefore it can be assumed that in some cases time spent was under-reported. There is also some evidence that the task of keeping the diary itself influenced participants' behaviour. For example, one participant commented that she purposefully didn't send emails on days when she didn't have other governing activity, so that she didn't have to record it in the diary. It's also worth noting that participants volunteered to take part in the diary phase, and therefore it's possible that those who took part are more engaged than other chairs.

Despite these caveats, it is possible to draw meaningful conclusions from the data, especially in terms of the qualitative analysis.

Findings

Why take the chair?

During the phone interviews participants were asked about their motivations for standing for election as chair. Five participants talked about being the best person for the job, or wanting to replace an existing chair who was not effective. In one case the chair had previously been a member of the school's interim executive board (IEB) and felt that he wanted to "see things through". He cited his passion for education as a key

² Due to difficult personal circumstances one participant spent considerably less time on governing during this period, but nevertheless persevered to complete the diary. As the data for this participant is not reflective of his/her normal governing activity, it has been excluded from the quantitative analysis, but has been included in the qualitative analysis.



motivation. Another participant had stood for election because of his affection for the school and its ethos. These were some of the few examples where the incumbent chair had proactively sought to take on the role.

Eight chairs said that they had been asked to stand for election. Most of them had been encouraged by other members of the governing board, with one specifying that the former headteacher had also asked him to stand. One participant was asked by the local authority (LA) because the governing board was “archaic” and needed fresh thinking. Two mentioned that they had been asked to stand on the basis of their leadership skills and other experience.

Less positively, eight participants said they had stood for election because no-one else would:

“It was one of those really uncomfortable silences because we knew that - you knew that it couldn't carry on as it was and you knew you got to have somebody in place but nobody - anyway I couldn't stand the silence anymore so I said I'd do it.”

Another chair said that she had actually been intending to resign as a governor, but because no one else volunteered she offered to become chair.

Finally, one participant said that a motivation to stand was that he believed becoming chair would help his professional career, something he thinks has indeed been the case.

How much time do chairs spend on governance?

The total time spent on governance across the diary keeping period varied considerably. The lowest figure was 7 hours 10 minutes, the highest 59 hours 20 minutes (around two working days a week, where a working day is seven hours). The median total time spent across the sample was 27 hours 30 minutes, which equates to around one working day per week. Context goes some way to explaining why there is such a large range. The three chairs who spent the most time on governing had all researched academy status or joining a MAT during the study period, and the fourth had spent a considerable amount of time recruiting new members of the governing board. However, the chairs fifth and sixth down the list did not undertake any exceptional tasks during the diary period, but rather the activities they spent most time on were routine tasks such as communicating with governors and trustees or visiting the school for monitoring purposes.

Secondary chairs generally spent less time on governance than their primary³ colleagues: the median total time for primary chairs across the study period was 28 hours compared to 23 hours 10 minutes for secondary chairs. The range for secondary chairs was also less, at 34 hours 10 minutes compared to 45 hours 20 minutes for primary participants (see figure 1).

³ Throughout, ‘primary’ includes infant and junior schools.

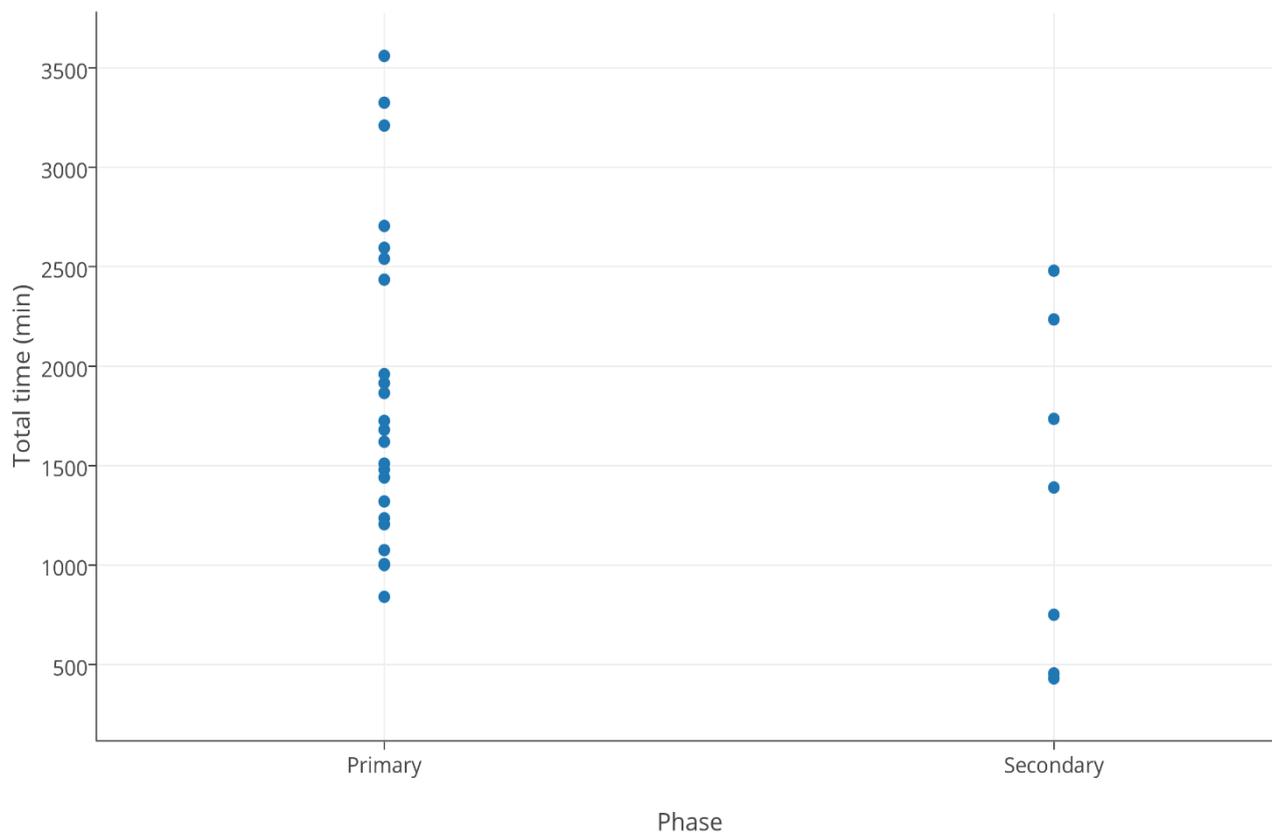


Figure 1. Overall time spent on governance by school phase



Participants who worked full time in general spent less time on governing than those who were retired or were self-employed on a part time basis (see figure 2). However, it's worth noting that the sample sizes here were very small, so are not necessarily representative.

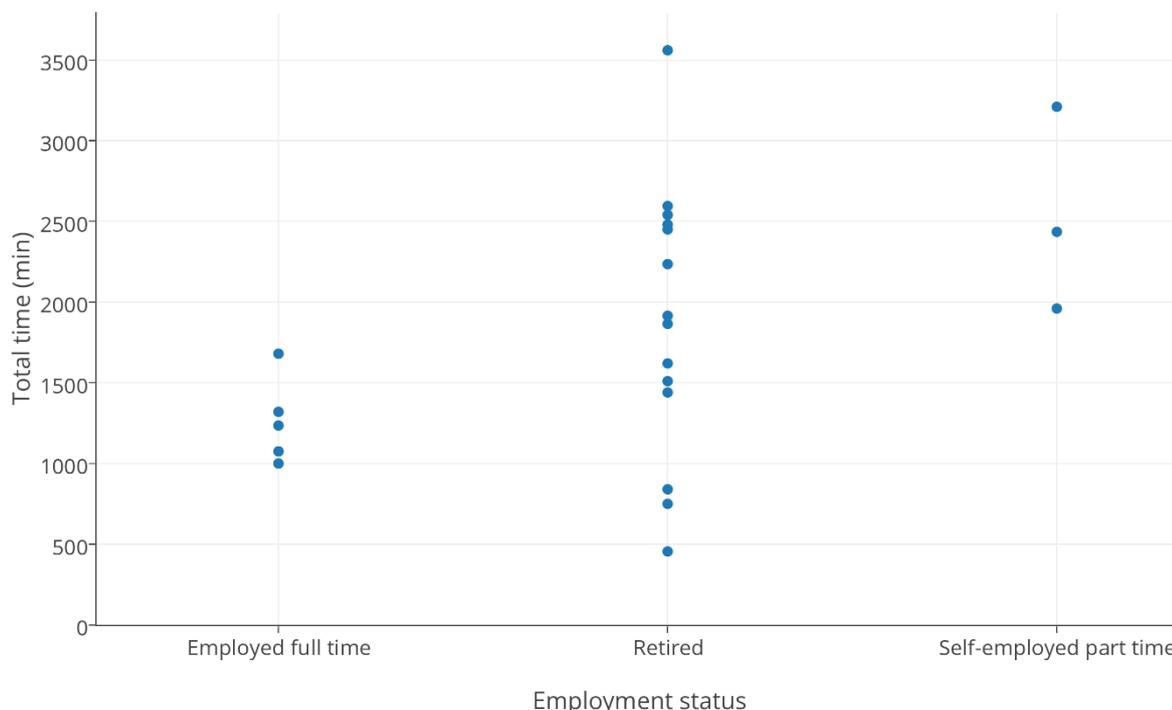


Figure 2. Overall time spent on governance by employment status

A key theme emerging from the telephone interviews was that the time requirement varied considerably throughout the school year, with certain periods of intensity and others of relative calm:

“...there are chunks of time where there's actually very little going on. There are other weeks when it feels that I'm in school virtually full time.”

Analysis of the time spent by participants week-to-week suggests that there is variability even at this level, with some chairs spending considerably more time one week than the next. In some cases a period of calm was linked to the school holidays, as most schools were on half term during the first study week. Two thirds of participants spent considerably less time on governance during half term, with three spending no time at all. Of the remaining participants, most spent around the same amount of time on governance during half term, although one chair spent more than usual. In addition, the diaries reveal that the tasks occupying chairs' time during the school holidays were often different to those during term-time:

“It would be wrong to say that governance is a term-time only activity, but active work is obviously focussed on these periods of time. Holiday time is often used for catching up on the more mundane tasks and organisational activities.”

Even during term-time most diaries showed that the demands on chairs' time varied week on week, quite considerably in some cases. For example, one chair of a primary school recorded 10 hours during the first



term-time week, 7 hours 45 minutes during the second and 4 hours 30 minutes during the last week, and commented that it got busier again after the diary period ended. Several participants commented that the time commitment came in peaks and troughs, particularly regarding tasks which were not 'business as usual' such as structural change. However in a couple of cases the diaries showed that time commitment varied relatively little. Here, the governing boards were not going through any major changes and the schools were doing well, suggesting that there were no external factors influencing time spent.

What do chairs spend their time on?

Day-to-day tasks

Across the diary sample the most time by far was spent on 'thinking time'. A total of 117 hours and 15 minutes was spent on this, significantly more than the second highest figure of 88 hours 25 minutes for 'communicating with governors/trustees'. However several participants commented that they had underreported thinking time and only 20 of the 31 diaries contained references to it, suggesting that even this high figure is likely to be a conservative estimate of the actual time spent on this task. The majority of references to thinking time were linked to another governance related activity such as attending a meeting or researching a particular issue. Some participants recorded 'pure' thinking time, for example one chair recording spending 20 minutes thinking about changing the structure of full governing board (FGB) meetings whilst walking her dog. Several participants acknowledged the importance of thinking time, but had found it difficult to record:

"I feel that thinking time is probably some of the most valuable, but is rarely quantifiable or consciously recognisable as it may arise in conversation with others, or while doing 'mundane' tasks."

'Communicating with governors/trustees' had the most references across the sample, but the average amount of time spent per instance was relatively low. This suggests that although chairs frequently communicated with other members of the governing board, they weren't spending large stretches of time doing so. The vast majority of this communication appears to have been done via email, although there were also references to telephone conversations and face-to-face discussions, with many participants using a combination of communication methods. Email was often used to deal with routine matters, whereas face-to-face meetings tended to be used in situations which required a more personal touch, such as meeting with a governor wishing to resign and meeting with new governors.

Nine chairs reported that they had spent time keeping up to date with education policy and practice. This wasn't given as a code in the original diary document, but these participants added it as a separate category. The sources of information mentioned include NGA publications and communications, government guidance and communications, and updates from local governance networks. In addition, fourteen chairs reported having engaged with local education groups. This included formal networking such as attending local events and meetings (e.g. Schools Forum and chairs groups) and informal networking such as talking to chairs of local schools on the phone. Three chairs also reported using social media to network with other governors.

Two thirds of participants recorded travelling time. The majority of journeys were to and from school, and lasted 10-30 minutes. Although many trips were relatively short, for chairs who made regular trips to school this time added up. For example, one chair spent 9 hours 20 minutes travelling to and from school over the study period, with each individual trip lasting 25-30 minutes. Several participants also spent time travelling to and from training or non-routine meetings (such as an employment tribunal) and these trips tended to take



longer. For example, one participant spent 3 hours travelling to and from a NGA regional conference, and another spent 2 hours on a return journey to a local authority briefing on funding.

Meetings

Given that the diaries were completed over 4 weeks, not all participants had attended governing board meetings in that time. Indeed, only two thirds of participants reported either preparing or attending FGB meetings during the study period, with 10 actually attending meetings. Activities relating to preparing for meetings included reading the minutes from the last meeting, writing papers, reading reports and liaising with the clerk/head about the agenda. Chairs spent on average 2 hours 50 minutes preparing for FGB meetings, and the most common length of the meetings themselves was 2 hours.

Just under two thirds of participants had spent time attending committee meetings, with 26 having spent time preparing for these. Several chairs attended multiple committee meetings during the study period – three attended three different ones in this time and five attended two separate meetings. Compared to preparation for FGB meetings, chairs generally spent less time on the agenda and focused more on reading and preparing papers. Despite involving different activities, chairs spent a similar amount of time preparing for committee meetings as they did FGB meetings, with the average figure being 2 hours 45 minutes.

The three core functions

The three core functions of the governing board are:

1. Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction;
2. Holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and the performance management of staff; and
3. Overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent.

(DfE, 2015)

These form the basis of the board's work and consequently a significant amount of meeting time is likely to be devoted to them. This makes it difficult to establish exactly how much time chairs spent on the core functions, as detailing the content of FGB and committee meetings wasn't part of the study. However, there are specific tasks which align with the three core functions and these give an idea of how much time was spent in these areas.

Vision, ethos and strategy

Twelve chairs reported spending time developing and/or reviewing the school strategy. The activities associated with this varied. There were several references to reviewing or amending the school strategy or school improvement plan (SIP). In some cases the school strategy was reviewed in response to either a recent or forthcoming Ofsted inspection. For example, one chair whose school had recently been upgraded to 'Good' met with the local authority to discuss the governing board's strategy to take the school on to 'Outstanding', and another chair whose school was due an inspection attended an Ofsted and strategy group meeting. There were also examples of chairs engaging with parents to discuss vision and ethos and undertaking self-assessment, presumably to inform the school strategy. However, there were also a couple of instances where chairs coded an activity as 'developing and/or reviewing the school strategy' but their notes refer to reviewing policies rather than the strategy or SIP.



Half of the participants had considered or undertaken structural change during the study period. Most of these changes related to converting to academy status or joining/expanding a MAT. Participants were at different stages of the process, from doing initial research into academy status to expanding an established MAT. However, there was also an example of a school which was looking into co-operative trusts. Activities associated with this task included researching options, preparing and attending meetings, and communicating with the headteacher and other governors. For a minority of chairs, considering structural change took up a considerable amount of time. For example, one chair recorded fourteen separate instances, which collectively took just over 23 hours. This chair's school was in the early stages of considering academy conversion as it was likely to be required to convert under the new 'coasting schools' definition. A lot of the chair's time was therefore spent researching academy conversion, discussing academisation with the headteacher and other governors and, later on, communicating with parents about the governing board's plans.

Fourteen participants had discussed strategic issues with their headteacher during the diary period. A number of these conversations related to structural change, but there were also several examples of conversations about admissions, school places and business management strategy. Other examples include discussing the future of a school's sixth form and changing the school staffing structure.

Holding the headteacher to account

All but one participant had communicated with their headteacher at some point during the study period. The chair who had not done this commented that his regular meeting with the headteacher had been cancelled during the study period. Of those who had communicated with their headteacher, 23 had met with the head in person. A lot of these were regular meetings with the headteacher and lasted between 30 and 130 minutes, with most taking 60-90 minutes. The most common frequency for these meetings was once a fortnight, although some were weekly and one participant commented that he and the head met at least once every three weeks. Another reflected that, as the head was relatively new, these meetings were weekly, although in time they may become fortnightly. Although it appears that these regular catch-ups provided an opportunity to discuss strategic and day-to-day issues, a degree of flexibility was needed in some cases. For example one chair noted that her weekly meeting with her head had been cancelled because other tasks had taken priority.

Other participants did not meet regularly with the headteacher in person, but did catch up regularly by phone. Chairs who spent more time communicating with the head often also reported that the school was considering or undergoing other significant changes. For example, two participants were in discussions to join MATs and one was recruiting a member of senior leadership team (SLT).

Fourteen participants had visited the school for monitoring purposes, with a greater proportion of primary chairs reporting having done this. The visit purposes include several references to monitoring a particular curriculum area or issue (often as a link governor) or undertaking a learning walk. Some visits involved meeting with particular members of staff, such as a visit to engage with staff regarding future leadership arrangements. There were also multiple references to taking part in a governors' in school morning/afternoon/day, although the focus of these wasn't always clear. In addition, one chair reported spending either a morning or afternoon in school every week visiting children in the classroom. The purpose of these visits wasn't clear, although given the frequency of visits it seems unlikely that they are linked to strategic priorities, but rather are likely to be part of another volunteering role in the school.



Thirteen chairs reported having spent time analysing school performance data. There were a couple of references to external data sources such as RAISEonline but, as might be expected given the timing of the diary, this mainly involved in-school data. Much of the data analysis appears to have been related to governing board, committee or headteacher meetings, and one chair had reviewed performance data in preparation for the headteacher's mid-year appraisal.

Ten participants had performance managed the head during the diary period. Due to the timing of the diary period, most of these were interim or mid-year reviews, although there was an example of a chair setting objectives for a new headteacher. The time spent on this activity varied and in some cases the whole process didn't fall into the diary period: only six participants actually carried out the review meeting in this time. Participants spent between 45 minutes to two hours on the actual performance review meeting, and there was even greater variation in the amount of time spent preparing for the review. One participant recorded spending 10 minutes preparing for the meeting, whereas another chair spent just over four hours. The former reported that she had spent the time re-reading the head's performance management targets in preparation for the meeting. The latter met with the headteacher performance management panel and communicated with them several times prior to the meeting. This chair also spent 55 minutes following up on the review meeting, including reviewing and circulating the meeting notes. Five chairs reported having reviewed the performance management of staff other than the head, although two of these related to disciplinary or grievance procedures rather than actual performance management.

Overseeing the financial performance of the school

Thirteen participants had reviewed financial information during the study period. In contrast to visiting the school for monitoring purposes, a greater proportion of secondary school chairs had done this compared to primary chairs: six out of the seven secondary chairs had reviewed financial information, compared to only eight of the seventeen primary chairs. The most common activity related to this task was attending or receiving updates on finance related committees, with eight chairs mentioning this. Other activities undertaken included planning for the school financial value standard (SFVS), looking at financial benchmarking data, discussing finances with senior leaders, and monitoring finance.

Training

Twelve chairs undertook training during the diary period. There were several references to safeguarding and Prevent training, which is perhaps unsurprising given the high profile of these topics in recent months. Other topics mentioned include data protection, finance, pupil premium, data analysis and being a link governor. Most sessions lasted around two hours, although two sessions lasted three and a half hours. Almost all sessions were attended in person, although one chair undertook Prevent training online.

Four chairs reported having trained other members of the governing board. One chair had delivered Prevent training during a FGB meeting, another had provided CPD to the clerk on agenda setting and a third had assisted a committee chair with data analysis. The fourth hadn't mentored members of his own governing board, but as a local leader of governance was mentoring the governing board of a nearby school. He spent a total of three hours 35 minutes on this, which was mainly spent communicating via email, preparing for and attending meetings.



Recruitment

Half of the diary participants had spent time recruiting governors/trustees. The time spent on this task varied considerably, with most chairs spending fewer than 45 minutes overall. However, one chair spent over 12 hours recruiting a co-opted governor. The recruitment process was clearly very thorough and activities involved planning the recruitment strategy (including referring to NGA's recruitment guide); writing copy for the local community newsletter; informal chats with potential candidates; formally interviewing candidates; and sending emails relating to the recruitment.

Three chairs had been involved in recruiting a senior leader. One chair spent two hours on this, which involved interviewing the interim deputy headteacher with a view to permanent employment and subsequently writing a letter confirming the appointment. The chair of an academy level committee was in the process of recruiting a headteacher and deputy headteacher, and recorded spending time communicating with the academy trust about interview arrangements, reading applications for the headship post and liaising with the executive headteacher about the deputy headteacher appointment. The third chair was recruiting an assistant head, and much of the process fell within the diary period. Overall this chair spent just over eight hours on the recruitment, with five of these devoted to the interview day. Another two hours were spent shortlisting, with the remaining time being spent reviewing the recruitment pack, checking the job advert online and planning the interview day. There was one example of recruiting staff other than senior leaders, with one chair interviewing applicants for a school office position.

Engaging with stakeholders

Only one chair recorded having engaged with pupils other than during monitoring visits to the school. This involved a primary school chair meeting with the student council and writing a section for the governing board's newsletter for pupils. This chair reported that both of these activities took place on a termly basis.

Four chairs had engaged with the local community in some way. One had written an article about the school for the local village magazine, and another had attended a community event to celebrate the school's bicentenary. The other two chairs had engaged with local sports organisations, one to set up a joint football academy at the school and the other to set up a leasing arrangement with an athletics group.

More participants had engaged with parents, with thirteen chairs having done this during the diary period. In several cases this involved formal engagement such as attending parent forum meetings, parents' evening or consulting parents on a particular issue such as the school's vision or a new approach to homework. Other engagement was less formal, for example "information gathering" in the playground or leading a parents' coffee morning. Three chairs had written to parents either as part of a regular newsletter or about a particular issue, and one had looked at the results of a parent survey. Most chairs recorded only a single instance of engaging with parents, although one reported having done this on four separate occasions. This chair had undertaken a combination of activities, including attending a parent forum meeting, reading the results of a parent survey and writing a newsletter for parents.

Seven chairs had dealt with parental complaints, and for some this placed a considerable demand on their time. For example, one chair spent six hours in one day attending a tribunal related to a parental complaint, whereas another recorded seven separate instances of dealing with a complaint which totaled nearly four hours. A third chair had spent two hours dealing with a long term complaint which had been ongoing for over 18 months, and was now been dealt with by the local authority's legal team.



Four chairs had engaged with staff during the diary period. This was usually in the form of email communication about a particular issue or a request for information, although there was one instance of a chair sending congratulatory emails to staff. One chair reported spending over 14 hours communicating with staff, but this included a school trip. The other chairs spent, on average, 50 minutes on this task.

Five chairs had dealt with staffing issues, including a disability discrimination tribunal, staff grievances and staff restructuring. Although relatively uncommon, such tasks could be time consuming, with the median amount of time spent just over 3 hours. One chair had spent nearly nine hours conducting an investigation into allegations made against a senior member of staff for another governing board, as the board was unable to be impartial.

Reviewing governance

Seven participants had been involved in reviewing governance during the study period. One of these was an external review of governance, which took five hours overall including a three hour session in school. Another participant's governing board was working towards Governor Mark⁴ and the chair spent time preparing for and participating in the external assessment. A third chair had spent time preparing for a peer review, which was conducted after the end of the diary period. Two chairs had reviewed the governing board with a particular focus on training needs, and one had prepared a report considering how to improve functions of the governing board. The final chair had reviewed the governing board as part of the school's wider self-assessment, which overall took five and a half hours.

Three chairs had appraised other governor and trustees. One explained that she was carrying out one-to-ones with all governors, and one of these meetings fell within the diary period. This took two hours in all, which included the meeting itself, travel time and providing a written report. A second chair had undertaken a more informal discussion with a governor about her role and end of term of office, which lasted 30 minutes. The third chair had spent one hour and 45 minutes meeting with a trustee to discuss his involvement with the governing board, but highlighted that performance managing the whole governing board can be very time consuming:

“...annual appraisal of other governors is extremely time consuming. To do it properly including travel, preparation and some socialising time, at least two hours per governor is needed and I've got 10 of them!”

Four participants had reviewed their clerk's performance. The activities and consequently the time spent on this varied. Only one chair had undertaken an actual performance management meeting, which lasted just over an hour. Another chair had spent 20 minutes on a “clerk's annual review questionnaire”, whilst the third had discussed the clerk's performance as part of a meeting with the headteacher. The final chair had spent a quarter of an hour making arrangements for induction training to be attended by the clerk as part of her continuing personal development.

Operational tasks

A small number of participants from both the diary phase and phone interviews spent time on tasks which were outside the strategic remit of the governing board. In some cases these tasks constituted a separate volunteering role, such as listening to children read and attending school trips as a parent. In other cases,

⁴ Governor Mark is a quality standard for governing boards, in which they work towards accreditation using a framework of standards. Assessment against the criteria is externally verified by Newport Educational.



chairs were simply overstepping the line between strategic and operational, for example by providing IT support in school, undertaking health and safety checks, undertaking book scrutinies and observing lessons. Another prime example is a chair who spent over five hours on safeguarding, which involved interviewing the safeguarding deputy and office manager, interviewing children, looking at the single central register and touring the school. Although it is important for the governing board to ensure safeguarding is done well, some of these tasks would be better delegated to the school's safeguarding lead, in particular interviewing children as this raises confidentiality issues. This chair was a senior leader at another school, which suggests that she may be confused about the boundaries between what senior leaders and the governing board should be doing. It appears that chairs often carried out these activities because they either had expertise in a certain area, or simply because they enjoyed doing them:

“I have also helped them on a couple of school trips and events externally because we had a particular focus on trips and events and I wanted to attend and make sure how they were going plus they're huge fun”.

What factors affect chairs' time commitment?

A third of participants from the phone interviews said that work commitments affected the amount of time they spent on governance. The two key challenges were the amount of free time available to govern and flexibility to govern during the working day:

“Basically my work schedule [is the main factor], and we've got a couple of kids so it's the time. I try to fit it in around work. Work are very good and very flexible because I don't start at the same time every day. So that moves around so I can try and get some done at work or before...work really affects my [governance] work schedule.”

One chair worked as a clerk and therefore was sometimes unable to attend events or extra meetings which clashed with meetings at the schools she worked at. Another chair was a teacher and part of the senior leadership team (SLT) at another school and commented that this sometimes made it difficult for her to attend governing board meetings. For example, recently the school at which she taught was inspected by Ofsted, during which time she could not devote any time to her role as chair. She also felt the burden of attending meetings at both schools:

“I can sit in my own school with a trillion jobs to do there and then have to walk out and within 15 minutes I'm up the road at the second school, doing it all again. That, I found, very hard this year. I'm now expected to attend my own school's governing body's meetings as well. So I could spend my life sitting on committees at this rate.”

In addition to work pressure, a number of participants cited their family life as a factor. For example one participant has a young family so found it difficult to spend time on governance in the evenings or at weekends. Several participants spoke about getting the right balance between work, family life and governing, which was often difficult to achieve.

Six participants said that the needs of the school were a key factor affecting time spent:



“It's demand, supply doesn't seem to come into it. There obviously are peaks and troughs, Ofsted inspections - they are inspecting in September. Headteacher recruitment, as I've just said. There isn't much supply about it. As much as I try to take the lead, there's a question of time.”

A second chair talked about “what [the school] asks us to do”, and a third referred to how much time he *wanted* to spend, but went on to say that it also depended on the amount of time he *needed* to spend to help improve the school. Again, the idea of balancing personal circumstances with the school's needs emerged as a theme.

A number of participants talked about factors relating to the capacity of the governing board. A chair at a voluntary aided (VA) school said that he was seeking reconstitution because foundation governor posts were very difficult to fill, and ongoing vacancies meant the governing board couldn't work as effectively as it should be. Even where the governing board was full, time capacity could be an issue. Two participants commented that many of their board members worked full time, and that this left few people available to take on ad-hoc tasks such as disciplinary panels or those which take place during the day. Here, it was the chair who picked up the slack.

In addition to time-related governance capacity, participants highlighted the skills of governors and trustees as being a factor. One described how a high turnover of governors meant that she hadn't felt able to delegate as many tasks as she'd wanted to, because she felt newer governors didn't have the skills or experience to do them. She linked this to what she perceived to be a lack of high quality induction training. Another participant cited poor clerking as an issue, and described how she had needed to spend a lot of time with the clerk going through minute keeping.

Three participants talked about the impact external factors had on how much time they spent on governance. One participant chaired the governing board of a school in Birmingham and she described the impact that Trojan Horse had had on her school. Although the school was not directly involved in the events, the governing board had had to respond quickly to changes in the wake of the scandal. The other two participants talked about the impact government changes had on their time commitment. One felt that the pace of reforms was difficult to keep up with, and he had considered resigning due to this.

Finally, chairs' own enjoyment of the role was a factor. A number of participants commented that although chairing could be hard work, they enjoyed the role so they didn't mind giving up their free time to do it:

“Another factor that affects the amount of time I think is the fact that I find it fun. You know if you do something and you're actually enjoying it, it doesn't feel like hard work at all, it feels like having a great time. The passion and the enjoyment are also factors that actually mean I do give more than I might otherwise do if I weren't really enjoying and just doing it from a sense of obligation.”

How manageable do chairs find their time commitment?

Given that work was identified as a key factor affecting how much time chairs could spare for governance, it is unsurprising that this was mentioned by many interviewees when asked about the manageability of the time commitment. A number of participants said that they thought the role was manageable with a full time job. One said that this was because he took a hands-off approach to the role, delegating a lot to the SLT. However two others said that they thought it was manageable because they enjoyed hard work – so although they spent a similar amount of time to chairs who felt the time commitment was unmanageable,



the fact that they enjoyed being busy meant they thought the time commitment was manageable. One participant talked about how the role had become more manageable over time. He was a relatively new chair, and reflected that initially it had been difficult but that over time he had developed a greater understanding of how precious time is, and therefore the role had become more manageable. Another chair reported that she only felt that the time commitment was manageable because her employer encouraged employees to govern, and gave her time within the working day to undertake governance tasks. Indeed, as discussed previously, demands on chairs' time aren't constant but rather comes in peaks and troughs, which can make juggling paid work with governance challenging as this chair explained:

“Day to day [the time commitment] is manageable. Exceptional tasks (current co-head on long term sick, managing the absence policy, recruiting another co-head) become very difficult to manage sensibly in conjunction with a full time demanding job.”

However, several participants commented that they thought time commitment was not at all manageable with work. It's worth noting that some of these were retired and were therefore not making the judgement based on their current work situation. One chair who worked part time commented that she found it more difficult to manage her time whilst working than when she had not been. Another participant, a teacher who worked full time, commented that some weeks the time commitment was manageable, but others it was nearly impossible. This was influenced by the fact that the school had recently amalgamated with another school, which had created a lot of extra work. A third chair was self-employed, and said he found that balancing work and family life with governing was sometimes difficult.

Conversely, two other participants who were self-employed (one of whom was semi-retired) felt that their governance role was manageable with work. The participant who worked full time commented that his employment status meant that he could manage his time flexibly. This view was shared by the other participant, who said that being semi-retired and self-employed meant he could plan his time as needed. In addition, a participant from the diary phase commented:

“It is manageable for me at the moment, but only because my work is very flexible and I have a lot of control about which days and how many hours I work. I don't see how I could be in full-time employment (or even part-time with rigid hours) and be able to be chair of governors. Both our previous chairs were retired, and the chair in my other school is also retired.”

Several participants commented that they only found the role manageable because they were retired, and again this view was echoed by many of the diary participants. For example, one chair of a standalone secondary academy commented:

“Being retired the time commitment is manageable but I have to resist the temptation of letting it take over my life. Frankly there would be a useful full time role to fill if one wanted to make it that. That said I think the more important observation is that no-one could have done the role at the stage it was when I took over ... who is employed full time. It might be worth mentioning that I became chair so early on in my governance career because the person who was succession planned into the role actually left after a year because he couldn't cope with the workload in addition to his (full time) job.”

Of particular note is the participant who chaired two governing boards. This individual was retired, and felt that she was only able to give the required time commitment to one of her governing boards (Board A) because of this. This governing board was in a challenging state when the chair first joined, and had a



number of new members. In contrast, her other governing board (Board B) was more established and the chair described her time commitment as “entirely manageable and enjoyable”. Her perceptions of manageability were reflected in the time devoted to each board: she spent nearly 17 more hours chairing Board A than Board B during the diary keeping period.

Two participants talked about how the availability of other members of the governing board influenced the manageability of their own time commitment. One described this in terms of others not pulling their weight, whilst the other felt the problem was that only two members of the governing board were not employed. In both cases the participants felt that it fell to them as the chair to pick up the slack, and therefore they felt they were spending disproportionately more time than other people.

One of the diary participants commented that the time commitment was totally unmanageable. This was the chair of a MAT which was in the process of expanding and he spent on average ten hours per week on governance. He was concerned about how as chair he was going to keep on top of his workload and commented that:

“It is very difficult to run a professional governing body as an unpaid volunteer.”

What strategies do chairs use to manage their time?

Delegation

The most common time management strategy used was delegation, both to other members of the governing board and the senior leadership team (SLT). Chairs generally talked about this in terms of delegation being part of how the governing board works. For example, one participant commented that he found the time commitment manageable because his governing board took a hands-off approach, delegating a lot to senior leaders. Personally, as chair he focused his time on doing high level tasks, delegating “the detail” to other governors.

Other chairs felt that delegating tasks to the appropriate committee was an important way to spread the workload:

“Committees should be the engine room of the governing body...and we've taken that one to heart so we do try to ensure that that the three committees are the beginning, if not the end of every piece of action so that the governing body and in particular the poor old chair is not saddled with large amounts of work.”

Some participants talked about using delegation to empower other members of the governing board as well as reduce the burden on the chair:

“I think the prime [strategy] is looking at every task that comes and asking where I can delegate and empower others to do it. Delegation and empowerment is critical to drive the activity down to the level in the organisation where it can be done best.”

Several participants talked about delegating based on skills:

“We are great believers in saying ‘if you ask me a question about the work of our school I might say I don't know that particular detail but I know a man or a woman who does’. We're quite proud of the fact that around the governing body, which is large, there is somebody who's got his or her finger on everything that's necessary.”



This chair went on to say that the governing board working as a team was an important part of managing her workload. She felt her governors could be trusted to get on with the job, but also described how she had worked to ensure that this was the case. In contrast, another chair described how he tried to allocate tasks based on skills, but in his experience some governors did not do things they said they would and he felt he couldn't do anything about this:

“Where I can, I delegate...you have to look at the capability or the enthusiasm of the person you can delegate it to. If they can't do it, you can't delegate to them - that's abdication. So I end up doing stuff that I really don't think I should be doing from time to time. Simply because I can't find anybody else to do it. The other problem you've got with governors, at the end of the day you can't tell them to do stuff. If you ask them to do stuff and they don't do it, you can't even shout at them ... That's why delegation is dangerous in governing bodies. It ... largely doesn't work because people actually don't do stuff.”

When making decisions about what and how to delegate, chairs considered several factors. Many delegated tasks based on skills, with several participants mentioning using skills audits to identify which governors would do well at certain tasks. One also described how she felt it was important to delegate in order to develop governors' skills so that they can take on chairing roles, and she felt delegation was important for succession planning:

“There's a need to bring new people on and give them the opportunity to develop their skills so that they can take on chairing roles and so on, I do try very hard to give different people different tasks according to their abilities.”

Three participants also took into account the availability of governors when making decisions about delegation. One talked about taking into account governors' personal circumstances in terms of work and family life when delegating. Another specifically said that parent governors were asked to represent the governing board at parent events, as they'd be there anyway and would save the chair having to attend. The third participant commented that she tended to take on tasks which took place during the day, as other governors were not available at that time.

Two respondents said that delegation was based on governors volunteering for tasks on an *ad hoc* basis. One commented that, by taking this approach, governors took on particular tasks willingly and were therefore more likely to actually do them. The other said that if no-one wanted to do a particular task, she as chair would take it on.

Three participants did not have a delegation strategy, or found delegation challenging. One participant acknowledged that he was bad at delegation because he liked to be hands-on, and he only delegated because others asked him to. Another chair described how her governing board had “lead governors”, who would be responsible for liaising with a certain department, but that this had not evolved as far as she'd like. She went on to say that this was in part hampered by the fact that many of her governors were new, but that she believed the situation would improve as they became more experienced. The third chair commented that many of his governors were not willing to take on tasks, which meant that he felt obliged to do them. His was a VA school and he felt that some of his foundation governors were there out of a sense of obligation but weren't willing to do their fair share of the work:

“A couple of weeks ago there was a conference where different people I'd speak to had the same view. Millions of them had stories of where they are struggling to maintain the tasks that are at hand because



whilst they may have the bodies, they just don't have the people who are willing to do the work and put the time in ... You're meant to lead your team as a chair, but trying to lead a team of people who are not willing to do the job makes leading that team really difficult.”

This chair was seeking to reconstitute his governing board to increase the number of parent governor places in order to recruit more “doers” to the board.

Delegation to the vice chair

Seven participants felt their vice chair spent a considerable amount of time on governance, in some cases equal to the chair. There were a number of comments about how the two roles work together, for example one chair observed that his vice chair had a different skillset to him, and that meant that they complemented each other well. Personal circumstances could also make a difference, for example one chair mentioned that because his vice chair was semi-retired, she was able to visit school more than he was, so focussed more time on that. It appears that effective delegation to the vice chair can therefore significantly reduce the burden on the chair:

“My vice chair is very hot on data management and performance indicators and things which make my eyes water. She's really good at that and I'm not, so I delegate all that stuff and she's in charge of performance management and she briefs the rest of us on it.”

However, it appears that the vice chair was often underutilised. Eleven of the phone interview participants felt that their vice-chair spent considerably less (<50%) time than them on governance. Clearly this is subjective, and the vice-chair may perceive this differently, so this finding should be treated with caution. However, it is useful to know about the chair's perception of his/her deputy's time commitment, in particular whether the chair perceives this to be sufficient or whether s/he thinks the vice chair should commit more time. Participants' views on the latter point varied, and didn't necessarily correlate to how much time the chair thought the vice chair spent on governance. For example, one participant estimated that his vice chair spent 20-25% of his time, but went on to say that:

“I use her quite heavily because she's good compared to other vice chairs I know.”

In contrast, another respondent said her vice chair spent about a quarter of the time she does, but that the vice chair would be attending a chairs' training course which would mean she could do more. One chair commented that being chair is a lonely job – he felt his vice chair spent about a quarter of the time he does although he did delegate certain tasks to the vice chair based on her skillset.

Meetings

Four participants had limited the length of meetings as a strategy to reduce their time commitment. One chair said that the first thing she did when she became chair was to set a time limit on FGB meetings, which would last for no longer than two hours regardless of whether all agenda items had been covered (she ensured priority items were at the top of the agenda). Others talked about the importance of good chairing in keeping meetings to time, such as ensuring that governors don't spend too long discussing a particular agenda item. One participant described how this was also the case in committee meetings, with committee chairs working hard to ensure meetings ran to time.

Changing committee structure was another strategy used to reduce the chair's time commitment. One participant had reduced the number of committees because he attended all of them and was the main



communication conduit between the committees. In contrast, two participants had increased the number of committees in order to reduce their own time commitment, as more could be delegated to committee level. One also said that he had given the chairs of these committees more responsibility.

Other strategies

Two participants said that using email to communicate saved them a lot of time. One described how her governing board now signed off all policies via email. The other commented that email allowed people to respond to urgent matters more efficiently. He suggested that conducting whole meetings over the internet would save even more time, although the rest of the governing board weren't keen on that idea. However, one of the diary participants commented:

“Keeping in touch with the governors takes more time than I had realised. It's not possible to have a quick chat whenever we need it, as everyone has different schedules and responsibilities, so emails are the most reliable method. However, these end up taking more time to manage”.

This chair spent just over three hours in total emailing members of the governing board on thirteen separate occasions, with many of these instances lasting five minutes. However, she also sent weekly email updates to the governing board, which took 20-35 minutes to produce. Understandably, other chairs didn't appear to do this, but sent emails with updates on specific topics rather than regular general updates.

A further two participants said that their professional experiences helped them use their time more efficiently. One ran a charity so had comparable experience of governance, which he felt meant that he could undertake tasks like reading through finance papers quicker. The other participant was a manager who had experience of using time management techniques, and applied these to his role as chair.

There were also examples of two governors sharing the role of chair or vice chair, with the aim being to reduce the burden on a single person. One participant described how having two vice chairs reduced the amount of time she spent on governance, with the three of them acting as a “core team” who worked together to lead the governing board. For example, the two vice chairs attended the chair's regular meetings with the headteacher. There were also two examples where the chair had a co-chair. In one case the chair said his co-chair spent around the same amount of time as him on governance, and described how they split tasks between them based on their skillset. For example he led on finance because he had an accountancy qualification, whereas his co-chair led on curriculum and standards as she was a former teacher. Developing effective relationships and working arrangements was a vital part of making this work.

Another strategy was to be selective about which tasks the chair does. One participant said that if he was asked to do something he didn't deem to be worthwhile he just didn't do it. When asked about any inappropriate tasks he'd been asked to do, he mentioned having to read “irrelevant and badly written” documents from various sources including the DfE. This participant commented that he was a “ruthless manager” of his time, and indeed he spent the least amount of time on governance at 7 hours 10 minutes in total.

One participant said that she did not have any specific strategies to manage her time commitment. She was a relatively new chair and said that the fact that the school was due to amalgamate with another school meant that she had to respond to issues as and when.



Views on paying chairs

During the phone interviews participants were asked about their views on remuneration for chairs. This has been a topic of debate for several years, with notable proponents including Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw (see, for example, Wilshaw, 2016).

Ten participants said they were against the introduction of remuneration for chairs. The most common argument against payment was that it would change the nature of the role for the worse. Several respondents talked about being motivated by wanting the best for children in the school and giving something back, and were concerned that payment would attract people who were only in it for the money - who were in it for the “wrong reasons”.

A number of respondents also commented that they didn't think potential payments would be sufficient to make any real difference, and that at best schools would only be able to afford a “token payment”. One chair said that he thought the role was so demanding that payment wouldn't make a difference.

Other arguments against paying chairs of governors were:

- It would be difficult to ensure value for money – people may sign up to role to get money but not actually put in any effort.
- It would alter the relationship between the chair and the headteacher, this would become difficult to manage.
- It would lead to an inappropriate level of governor involvement in the day to day running of the school.
- It would encourage chairs to stay in post for too long.
- It would deprive children of resources.
- It would encourage people to game the system and go on to dishonestly claim expenses – comparison to LA councillors.

Only one respondent supported the introduction of remuneration for chairs. He felt that a small payment might be suitable for chairs of secondary schools or for schools requiring improvement because he believed the workload had increased. He explained that he sometimes felt exploited by the LA and indirectly by the DfE, and that by offering an honorarium they would encourage greater professionalism among governors and trustees.

Six participants were undecided, and offered arguments both for and against remunerating chairs of governors. The arguments against payment are summarised above, and the following arguments were given for payment:

- It would attract more people to the role.
- It would attract a more diverse range of people, for example those who are paid by the hour or who are not as financially well off.
- It would make the role more professional.
- It would make chairs feel more appreciated.

One participant confused expenses with remuneration – he said he supported remuneration for chairs but went on to talk about paying governors' travel expenses. There was wider support for payment of expenses, with a couple of participants saying that they don't currently claim these.



There was also some support for incentivising employers to allow chairs time off work for governance, with one participant suggesting that instead of paying chairs the money could go to the employer to subsidise loss of staff time. This chair explained that her employer was generous with allowing her time off to govern, but that this wasn't the case for others and could be a barrier to taking the chair.

Discussion

This research sought to gain a better understanding of how much time chairs of governing boards spend on governance and what this time was spent on. Addressing the first aim, it is clear that the time commitment varies enormously. For some chairs, governance is the equivalent of a part-time job, whereas for others it only takes up a couple of hours a week. Furthermore, the diaries suggest that the demands on chairs' time vary throughout the year, even on a weekly basis. In some cases, chairs were spending twice the amount of time one week compared to the next.

For many chairs, their paid work was the main factor affecting their time commitment, although most of the participants who were employed found the time commitment manageable. Several commented that they had developed ways to make it work, for example by planning their diary carefully and delegating to others. Consequently, it appears that where conflicts arose it was in response to exceptional or unexpected tasks. In addition to having limited time available to deal with such issues, employed chairs often had limited flexibility in terms of when they could spend time on governing tasks. There were several comments that having an understanding employer was an important part of making the role manageable, particularly in terms of taking time off for governance during the working day.

Interestingly, many participants who were retired commented that although they found the role manageable, they did not think this would be the case if they were working full time. As shown in figure 2 (page 6) participants who were retired tended to spend more time on governance than those who were employed full time, which is not surprising given that they are likely to have more time available to undertake the role. It's therefore reasonable to assume that if retired chairs were suddenly to start working again but continued to approach their chairing role in the same way, they would find it difficult to manage the conflicting demands on their time. They would need to develop different ways of working, such as those used by the participants who do juggle chairing with employment. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule and it is worth noting that the two chairs who spent the least amount of time on governance were retired or semi-retired, with the former commenting that he was "a ruthless manager" of his time.

A number of participants commented that the needs of the school was the overriding factor affecting how much time they spent on governance, and spoke about this in terms of "demand rather than supply" being the main driver. Although the needs of the school will inevitably feed into the governing board's work, these need to be balanced against its members' capacity to devote time to governance. The reference to doing "what [the school] asks us to do" is concerning, as it suggests that the work of the governing board is being dictated by school staff rather than the board itself. The governing board should be taking ownership of its work programme, not bowing to the will of school staff.

Chairs' own enjoyment of the role was another common factor affecting the time they spent on governance. Although several commented that chairing could be stressful and time-consuming, the fact that they found it enjoyable and rewarding made it manageable. The importance of this should not be understated; chairing a governing board is a demanding voluntary role, and if the chair doesn't find it worthwhile or enjoyable it's likely to be incredibly hard work. Furthermore, a number of participants voiced concerns that the time



commitment could put prospective chairs off standing for election. However it appears that although the role can be challenging, it can also be incredibly rewarding and even good fun.

The second aim of the research was to gain an understanding of what chairs spent their time on. Governance is a thinking, not a doing, role and it's therefore unsurprisingly that overall the greatest amount of time was spent thinking about governance. Time spent reflecting on governance was deemed to be some of the most valuable but participants understandably found this difficult to measure, so the figure of 117 hours and 15 minutes across 20 diaries is likely to be a conservative estimate. This is likely to be because, although some chairs did seem to set aside specific periods for reflection, often thinking time wasn't planned for. Instead it happened naturally when doing something else such as preparing for a meeting, or even walking the dog.

It seems that much of chairs' time is spent undertaking routine tasks such as communicating with other members of the governing board and the headteacher, preparing for meetings and attending meetings. These are things the chair needs to do to keep the governing board ticking along and represent an important part of the chair's role. However, this doesn't mean that chairs have to spend excessive time doing these tasks, and there were examples of how efficiencies could be made. In terms of communication, although on some occasions meeting in person was deemed more appropriate, in many situations using email or phone saved a lot of time. For example, signing off policies via email saved time in meetings, and a regular catch up phone call with the headteacher was less time consuming than meeting face-to-face.

Streamlining the committee structure was another time saving strategy. This reduced duplication and the amount of time the chair spent in meetings. Few participants attended all committee meetings, and fewer still chaired all committee meetings. Indeed, some chairs made a proactive decision not to chair committees in order to build up the skills of other governors or trustees. In a well-established board it may not be necessary for the chair to attend all committees, and in some cases it may be appropriate to take an *ex-officio* role which entitles the chair to attend all committees and receive papers, but not require his/her attendance at every meeting.

It is positive that the most common time management strategy was delegation, and that many chairs do this based on individuals' skills and the remit of committees. In some cases this was done specifically with the goal of developing governors' leadership skills and capacity to take on tasks, an important part of succession planning. Less positively, several participants commented that some of their governors and trustees were unwilling to take on or complete tasks, and that it was often up to them as chair to pick up the slack. This is a difficult situation for any chair, but making expectations clear to new governors and having in place a code of conduct which all governing board members sign up to may help avoid such problems. In addition, performance managing individual governors and trustees may help identify and address any underlying issues. Although, as one participant identified, such appraisals can be time-consuming, in the long run they can lead to a more efficient and effective governing board.

In some cases chairs were spending time on tasks which could be delegated to others, a prime example being writing policies. Some chairs spent a considerable amount of time doing this, when it might be better delegated to the headteacher or a committee. Another example is interviewing junior members of staff. Unlike recruiting members of the SLT, these are not strategic appointments and therefore are better delegated to members of the school staff.

Indeed, there were several examples of chairs overstepping the line between operational and strategic, spending time on activities such as helping on school trips, listening to children read, providing IT support in



schools, undertaking book scrutinies and carrying out health and safety checks. In some cases, these tasks constituted a separate voluntary role and it is vital that chairs separate these from their work as part of the governing board. In other cases, chairs were simply doing things that they shouldn't be, which suggests that they did not understand the strategic remit of the governing board. Even though chairs may enjoy doing these things, they set an example to other members of the governing board (in particular those who may be considering taking the chair) who shouldn't feel that these tasks are expected of them.

One underutilised resource appears to be the vice chair. As the chair's deputy, the vice chair should share some of the responsibility for leadership of the governing board, but in practice it appears that this is often not the case. Many participants felt that their vice chair spent significantly less time than them on governance, and one commented that as a result being chair was a "lonely job". As well as leading to the chair taking on the bulk of the work leading the board, this is also likely to have an impact on succession planning. Most of the phone interviewees had not proactively sought to take the chair – they had either stood for election because no one else would or because they had been asked to. Although being vice chair doesn't automatically precede taking the chair, the vice chair should be able to step into the chair if needed with minimal disruption. This is unlikely to be the case if the vice chair does little beyond that of the other governors and trustees. There were a number of examples demonstrating how effective the relationship between the chair and vice chair can be when they work together as a team. Being clear about the role of the vice chair and delegating to his/her strengths appears to be an important part of making this relationship work.

There were also examples of innovative approaches such as co-chairing or co-vice chairing. Sharing the chair reduced the workload for each individual, and had the benefit of pooling the skills of two people. It also had potential benefits for succession planning, as less experienced governors and trustees could gain leadership expertise by sharing the chair with a more experienced person. However, there are potential pitfalls and the success of co-chairing hinges on good relationships and a shared understanding of roles⁵. It therefore may not be appropriate for all governing boards, but is worth consideration by those which are struggling to appoint a chair.

Due to the small scale nature of this study it isn't possible to draw conclusions about the impact of governance structures on the chairs' time commitment. However it is worth noting that the chair of a MAT raised concerns about chairing a governing board of a growing number of schools. Given that an increasing number of schools are governed as part of a group, additional research into how chairing a MAT or federation differs from a standalone school would be useful to shed further light on this issue.

There appears to be little appetite among chairs to introduce remuneration for the role. Although some chairs offered arguments for payment, only one fully supported the idea. The most common argument against remuneration for chairs was that it would change the nature of the role, and would attract people to the role for the "wrong reasons". The importance of governing for the "right reasons" – giving something back and wanting the best for pupils – came across strongly.

Finally, many of the participants who kept time diaries commented that the experience had helped them to reflect on their own practice, and in particular identify areas on which they may be spending an excessive amount of time or neglecting. Some chairs were surprised about the amount of time they spent on

⁵ NGA members can access guidance on co-chairing at <http://www.nga.org.uk/Guidance/Workings-Of-The-Governing-Body/Chairs-of-Governors/Sharing-the-chair.aspx>



governance, with one commenting that he initially estimated spending about 8-9 hours a week, but in practice he spent about 15 hours a week. Keeping a time use diary can therefore help chairs evaluate and improve their time management, and as such a simplified template diary is included in appendix 2.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all the chairs who gave up their time to take part in this research.

References

Balarin, M., Brammer, S., James, CR. & McCormack, M. (2008) *The School Governance Study*. London: Business in the Community

Collins, D. (2003) *Pretesting survey instruments: An overview of cognitive methods*. *Quality of Life Research* 12: 229-238.

Cotgrave, E. (2016) *Governing Matters September/October*. Birmingham: National Governors' Association

Ellis, A. (2003) *Barriers to Participation for Under-represented Groups in School Governance*. DfES Research Report RR500. London: DfES

James, C., Goodall, J., Howarth, E. & Knights, E. (2014) *The State of School Governing in England 2014*. Available at: <http://www.nga.org.uk/Guidance/Research/The-State-of-School-Governing-in-England-2014.aspx> (accessed 01/08/2016)

Johnson, D. (1992) *Governor Burnout?* *Management in Education* 6: 26-27

Morgan, N (2015) *Nicky Morgan speaks about the importance of school governance*. 27 June, National Governors' Association Summer Conference, Manchester. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-speaks-about-the-importance-of-school-governance> (accessed 01/08/2016)

National Governors' Association (2015) *Not enough time off work for school governors*. Available at: <http://www.nga.org.uk/News/NGA-News/Pre-2016/Not-enough-time-off-work-for-school-governors.aspx> (accessed 01/08/2016)

Wilshaw, M (2015) *HMCI's monthly commentary: November 2015* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-monthly-commentary-november-2015> (accessed 01/08/2016)



Appendix 1 - Time spent on governance diary document

Instructions on completing this diary

This diary is designed to enable you to accurately record the time you spend on governance tasks over a period of four weeks. We understand that you are unlikely to have completed a diary in this way before, so please read the following instructions carefully. We have also included a sample diary excerpt on page 2 to give you an idea of what your diary might look like.

- We don't want participation in this research to create an extra burden in your already busy life, so the diary is designed to be quick and easy to complete. Each governance task we have identified has been assigned a code, and we have provided a brief description explaining what each task covers in the table on pages 3-5. When you make an entry you just need to include the task code, you don't need to write out the task itself. However, please do include any extra details you think are relevant in the 'Notes' box. It is your choice whether you complete the diary electronically or by hand.
- If you do something governance related that isn't covered by the predefined codes, please add it to one of the empty boxes at the bottom of the table on pages 3-5 and provide a brief description of what it involves. Please then use the associated code whenever you undertake that task.
- Sometimes something you've done may be best described by more than one task code, in which case please write all relevant task codes in the same box. For example, you may have visited the school to meet with the student council as part of your monitoring of pupil behaviour. This would fall under both 'Visiting the school for monitoring purposes' (B3) and 'Engaging with pupils' (G3). In this situation, you would write both B3 and G3 in the 'Task code(s)' box.
- Please record how long you spent on each task in hours and minutes, to the nearest 5 minutes.
- Please make an entry in the diary as soon as possible after each activity. It may not always be possible to do this straight away, but it is important that entries are made promptly to ensure they are recorded accurately. This is particularly the case when recording how long an activity lasted.
- Please be completely honest when recording your diary, otherwise it isn't worth filling in. For instance, if you aren't spending a lot of time on governing at the moment, please don't invent activity. From our point of view a diary with little in it is as significant as a full one. Furthermore, these diaries will be treated confidentially and your identity will be kept anonymous in any resulting reports. Therefore please do include any negative reflections as well as positive ones.
- Governance is often more about thinking than doing, and we know that many chairs spend much time thinking about governance outside of meetings and other planned activities. Therefore we have included a code for 'Thinking time', and would like you to record this in the diary alongside any other task codes relating to what you were thinking about. We appreciate that it may not always be possible to record exactly how much time was spent, but please include as close an estimate as possible.
- The diary-keeping period will be from Monday 15th February to Sunday 13th March. Once you've completed your diary, please either email it to ellie.cotgrave@nga.org.uk or post it to: Ellie Cotgrave, National Governors' Association, 36 Great Charles Street, Birmingham, B3 3JY. If you decide you don't want to do a diary or are unable to complete it for any reason, please return whatever part you have completed.



If you have any questions during the diary-keeping period please contact Ellie by emailing ellie.cotgrave@nga.org.uk or calling 01212 623843.

School context

School/group name	
If your school is part of a multi academy trust or maintained federation, how many schools is your governing board responsible for?	
School phase(s)	
Number of pupils	
Ofsted grade(s) – overall effectiveness	
Ofsted grade(s) – leadership and management	

Sample diary excerpt

Date	Task code(s)	Time spent (hours and minutes)	Notes
23/2/16	B1	1 hour	This was my fortnightly meeting with the headteacher.
23/2/16	H1, E1	30 minutes	Reflected on meeting with head, particularly about how to solve the problem of recruiting a parent governor with the skills we need.
25/2/16	B4, D4	40 minutes	Read through unvalidated KS4 RAISEonline data in preparation for standards committee meeting.
26/2/16	E11	10 minutes	Responding to emailed question from vice-chair.
2/3/16	H1, B4, D4	20 minutes	Reflected on points I will make at tonight's standards committee meeting, particularly concerns about poor progress of pupil premium children.
2/3/16	D3	1 hour 15 minutes	Standards committee meeting.



Task codes

Task group	Task	Description	Code
Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction	Developing and/or reviewing the school strategy	Time spent defining a new strategy for the school or reviewing an existing strategy.	A1
	Considering/undertaking structural change	Time spent considering or going through the process of changing the school's status or governance structure (e.g. amalgamation, joining a federation or MAT, becoming an academy).	A2
	Discussing strategic issues with the headteacher	Any discussion with the headteacher about strategic issues e.g. acting as a sounding board for thoughts on potential partners for creating a federation or MAT.	A3
Holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils	Meeting with the headteacher	Meeting with the headteacher and/or other senior leaders in person outside of governing board meetings.	B1
	Other communication with the headteacher	Any other communication with the headteacher and/or other senior leaders e.g. by phone, Skype, email.	B2
	Visiting the school for monitoring purposes	Any visit to the school in a governance capacity to monitor a specific matter. This does not include visiting the school to meet with the headteacher (which is covered in B1) or in another capacity e.g. as a parent picking up a child.	B3
	Analysing school performance data	Analysing data about pupils' educational performance, attendance, behaviour or wellbeing. This may be external data, e.g. RAISEonline, or internal data, e.g. from ongoing teacher assessment. This does not include financial information.	B4
	Performance managing the headteacher	Time spent on activities related to the headteacher's appraisal or six month review such as appointing an external adviser, reviewing evidence, meeting with the panel and headteacher.	B5
Strategic oversight of finance and staffing	Recruiting members of the senior leadership team	Time spent on the recruitment of members of the senior leadership team, including the headteacher.	C1
	Reviewing performance management of other staff.	Time spent reviewing and discussing evidence regarding the performance management of any staff member(s) other than the headteacher.	C2
	Reviewing financial information	Time spent reviewing and discussing the school's finances.	C3
Attending and preparing for meetings	Attending full governing board meetings	Time spent at meetings of the full governing board, including any extraordinary meetings.	D1
	Preparing for full governing board meetings	Time spent prior to a full governing board meeting on activities such as liaising with the clerk about agenda items and reading papers.	D2
	Attending committee meetings	Time spent at committee meetings. This does not include ad hoc working groups or panels (e.g. exclusion panels).	D3
	Preparing for committee meetings	Time spent prior to a committee meeting on activities such as preparing and reading papers. This does not include ad hoc working groups or panels (e.g. exclusion panels).	D4
	Following up on actions from meetings	Time spent following up on action points from full governing board or committee meetings, including monitoring tasks assigned to other governors/trustees.	D5



Managing and improving the governing board	Recruiting new governors/trustees	Any activity related to the recruitment of new governors, such as advertising vacancies, interviewing applicants, time spent on elections etc.	E1
	Inducting new governors/trustees	Time spent inducting new governors once they have been appointed or elected to the governing board.	E2
	Reconstituting governing board	Time spent planning for and/or undertaking the legal process of reconstituting the governing board.	E3
	Reviewing/changing committee structure	Time spent considering, planning and undertaking changes in the number or remit of the governing board's committees.	E4
	Undertaking and reviewing skills audits	Time spent devising, distributing, completing and analysing skills audits undertaken by individuals in the governing board.	E5
	Undertaking review of whole governing board	Time spent on reviewing the governing board as a whole. This might be an internal review (e.g. using the APPG 20 Questions or Governor Mark) or an externally commissioned review.	E6
	Performance managing other governors/trustees	Any form of reviewing the contribution and general performance of individual governors/trustees. This may be an informal chat or something more formal.	E7
	Performance managing the clerk	Where the clerk is employed directly by the governing board, this is likely to be a formal performance review. Where the clerk is employed by the local authority, this may be a less formal feedback session.	E8
	Mentoring/training other members of the governing board	Any form of continuing professional development (CPD) led by yourself, such as mentoring an individual member of your governing board or delivering training to a group of your governors/trustees.	E9
	Undertaking training	Participation in any training /CPD led by someone else.	E10
	Communicating with governors/trustees	Any other communication with members of the governing board outside of meetings or arranged visits to school, whether initiated by yourself or the other party e.g. responding to a governor's query via phone or email.	E11
Working with external partners and networking	Meeting or communicating with school improvement partner (SIP)	Time spent meeting or otherwise communicating with an external partner who is helping the school improve. For example this could be someone from the local authority, HMI, another school, or elsewhere.	F1
	Engaging with local education groups	Attending events or otherwise communicating with a local education group, for example your local association or schools forum.	F2
	Engaging with other governors on a national level	Attending events or otherwise communicating with other governors on a national level e.g. attending a national conference.	F3
Engaging with pupils, parents and the wider community	Engaging with parents	Any form of engagement with parents in a governance capacity. For example attending parents' evening, carrying out parental surveys, consulting parents on a specific issue.	G1
	Engaging with the local community	Any form of engagement with the local community in a governance capacity.	G2
	Engaging with pupils	Any form of engagement with pupils in a governance capacity. For example undertaking pupil surveys or meeting with the school council. This does not include engagement	G3



		with pupils in a non-governance capacity, e.g. volunteering to read with pupils.	
	Dealing with parental complaints	Time spent on dealing with formal parental complaints, i.e. those which have been dealt with via the school's complaints procedure.	G4
	Attending school functions	Time spent attending school functions in a governance capacity, e.g. representing the governing board at the school play.	G5
Miscellaneous	Thinking time	Any time spent thinking about governance on your own outside of meetings, visits etc.	H1
	Travelling time	Any time spent travelling on governing board business.	H2
Additional tasks – add any tasks not covered above here. Please include a brief description of each task.			I1
			I2
			I3
			I4
			I5
			I6
			I7
			I8

Diary

Date	Task code(s)	Time spent (hours and minutes)	Notes



Date	Task code(s)	Time spent (hours and minutes)	Notes



Appendix 2 – Time log template

This time log template is designed to help chairs of governors – or indeed any governor or trustee – review the amount of time they’re spending on governance. It is adapted from the diary document used in this study, but simplified for ease of use as a self-evaluation tool. The grid can be expanded to include extra tasks. It is up to individuals to carry this exercise out as they see fit, but the following tips might be useful:

- This exercise will be most helpful if carried out over a few weeks, to take into account any peaks and troughs.
- Printing off the form or downloading it onto a smartphone or tablet will make it easier to fill in on the go.
- It’s best to record activities as soon as possible after they take place, while they’re fresh in the mind.
- If you’re a chair, consider encouraging your colleagues (in particular your vice chair) to keep a time log. This could form the basis for discussions about how governance tasks are distributed across the board.

Once the time log is completed, chairs might want to consider the following questions:

- How is your time distributed between high, medium and low value tasks?
- Are there areas which you’re spending more time on than others? If so, why?
- Are there any areas that you’re neglecting, in particular in relation to the three core functions?
- Are you spending time on things that might be better delegated to a committee, another governor/trustee or the headteacher?
- Are there any other ways you could streamline the time you spend on governance, particularly in relation to low value tasks?

Date	Task	Time spent	Value (High, Medium, Low)	Notes