

Time to chair?

Exploring the time commitments of chairs of multi academy trusts (MATs)

National Governance Association
January 2020

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Part funded by the British Educational Leadership
and Management Association (BELMAS).



Summary

Background and overview of the research

Research has shown that being a chair of a school governing board is a significant time commitment and chairing, on average, takes around one calendar month per year (Cotgrave, 2016 and James et al, 2014). The perceived time commitment for those governing has also been noted to deter individuals from governing more generally and has been cited as a leading cause of the lack of diversity amongst those who can offer their time to govern our schools (Ellis, 2003).

With these ideas in mind and the lack of research into the time commitments of those governing in MATs, who carry additional duties to those governing in standalone school settings, this study by the National Governance Association (NGA) partly funded by BELMAS, explores how much time chairs of multi academy trusts (MATs) spend performing their role, what responsibilities and duties they undertake and why, and how and if the role can be made sustainable and manageable for those who feel they would struggle with the time commitment.

To gather both rich qualitative and quantitative data, this study was conducted in two phases:

- **Phase one** consisted of a survey of 93 chairs of MATs in England which examined their estimated time commitments and outlined their duties, identifying what MAT chairs were spending their time on as well as gathering demographical data to find out the make-up of MAT chairs along with their opinions on the role.
- **Phase two** consisted of 18 semi-structured telephone interviews with chairs sampled from phase one's participants. A 'purposive' set of cases were identified to further explore variations between groups of MAT chairs. These questions focused primarily on identifying why and how MAT chairs spent the time on the role and took a more in-depth look at the strategies used for time management.

Findings and recommendations

1. **Chairing a MAT, on average, takes just under 50 days a year and represents a significant time commitment for the volunteers undertaking this task.**

However, there is significant variation in the time MAT chairs take to perform their role and the difference in time taken to chair between the individuals giving the most and least amount of time was over 1,100 hours.

What tasks MAT chairs undertake also varies with attending full trust board meetings being the only task performed universally by all chairs which suggests that either these chairs had delegated these tasks elsewhere or the circumstances of the MAT had meant these activities had not needed to be completed. In phase two, many MAT chairs struggled to outline all of their roles and responsibilities and many indicated that their role adapted depending on the MAT's circumstances at any given time.

2. **MAT chairs were mixed on whether they were content with the time it took them to chair their MAT however, few were considering resigning as a result of this sacrifice.**

In phase one, 29.0% of MAT chairs said they had considered resigning as a result of the amount of time it takes them to chair but the majority of respondents said they were happy with the time they committed to their MAT (54.9%).

In phase two, many MAT chairs emphasised that even though they wished the time commitment could be reduced, they still found much enjoyment in witnessing the MAT's successes and its role in school improvement, ultimately feeling that they had 'something to give' to the role.

3. While the vast majority of chairs had put strategies in place to manage their time more effectively, over a quarter reported having not put any strategies in place to manage their time more effectively despite their hefty workload (28.3%). Additionally, some chairs noted a reluctance from others on the board to step forward into the chairing role in the future while 56% did not have a succession plan.

In phase two, MAT chairs noted that efforts to try and 'coax' others on the board to consider being chair in the future had limited success and registered concern over either who would take over the role following their resignation or the sustainability of the role in general or for some both.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- The commitment and dedication MAT chairs give to their MATs is admirable, however, those chairing should look at their workload and identify whether they are promising too much time to the role and promoting an unsustainable workload that puts off future successors.
- As the time taken to chair MATs varies significantly, this suggests that it is possible to reduce the time commitment and MAT chairs should consider ways they can ensure the role remains manageable such as utilising their clerk/governance professional more efficiently and ensuring that the trust board's roles and responsibilities are equally divided amongst all trustees.
- Chairs may wish to review [The Chair's Handbook](#) which considers several innovative ways chairs can manage their time including co-chairing which was not a tactic used by participants in either phase of this study.

For the sector and government:

- MAT governance and the work of MAT chairs needs to be more widely promoted within the sector to recognise the immense contribution made by these individuals volunteering their time.

4. Over half of MAT chairs are retired or semi-retired and spend significantly longer on their governance roles and responsibilities, devoting just under a third more time to their role than those in full-time employment. The diversity of MAT chairs is also limited, underrepresented by females and individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds.

53.7% of respondents reported being either retired or semi-retired and spent an average of 8.1 hours a week on their role while employed chairs spent 5.6 hours a week. In phase two, most retired MAT chairs said they would not chair their MAT if they were in full-time employment while others emphasised it would be challenging. 63.4% of MAT chairs felt it was not possible to chair a MAT whilst working full-time and a significant proportion of those working while chairing were self-employed (58.2%) and had the benefit of determining their work schedule or worked within education, meaning there was a 'synergy' between their professional life and governance role.

The mean age of MAT chairs in this project was 60.7 years old compared to the average MAT trustee (59 years old) and average governor/ trustee (55 years old) as identified in NGA's annual governance survey of 5,900 governors and trustees (NGA, 2019).

The majority of MAT chairs in this project also identified as male (66.7%) which differs from the whole governance community in which 60% of chairs identified as female (NGA, 2019).

Only 1% of the sample did not identify as coming from a white background. This, again, is different to the 5% of respondents across the school governance community who identified as non-white (NGA, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- Diversity is important within school governance for several reasons and having individuals from different places with different skills and experiences can help avoid 'group-think' or cliques. Having a wide variety of individuals represented can ensure diversity of thought and bring fresh ideas to board discussions. MAT trust boards should consider how they encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds and those in full-time employment to take on leadership roles in the board and become trustees more generally.

For the sector and government:

- Private and public sector businesses need to help empower their employees become governors and trustees, allowing them the time and support to step into these leadership roles. Ultimately, this has the potential to support the sustainability of this service and encourage a more diverse range of MAT chairs.

5. Most MAT chairs are present on more than one tier of governance and just under half (40.9%) are both members of their MAT and attend academy committee meetings in some capacity and this contributed significantly to their workload.

Over half of respondents in phase one (50.5%) either chaired, attended or sat on an academy committee and 73.1% were members of their trust. These additional duties accounted for 100.6 and 16.6 additional hours of governance work on average.

The reasons for direct involvement in both these tiers of governance were similar and in phase two, several MAT chairs said that attending the meetings of these groups helped communication and prevented both trustees and members sitting within an “ivory tower”, helping them to ‘know their schools’. Some attending academy committee meetings were doing so on a temporary basis until governance at this level was stronger.

Those that did not attend academy committee meetings used different reporting mechanisms and forums to communicate with their local tier. This level of separation created clearer lines of accountability. This was also important for MAT chairs that were not members of their trust and even those that were had generally felt that it would not make a difference if they were not. The minority who felt it would make a difference emphasised that this would cut them out of the decision-making line.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- MAT chairs currently also serving as members should reconsider this position in line with current best practice.
- Feedback and lessons from other trusts that sitting on academy committees as well as the trust board can contribute to blurred lines of accountability and confuse roles should be considered alongside the increasing time commitment of taking on dual-roles within the governance structure.
- Instead of attending academy committee meetings, MAT chairs should explore alternative ways of communicating with their local tier such as by reviewing meeting minutes as opposed to directly attending, utilising email and/or apps to communicate with academy committee chairs and members allowing for effective decision-making.
- MAT chairs should also be wary of acting as a member of an IEB style academy committee for new or struggling schools within the trust. While the dedication to ensuring good governance at all levels is commendable, MAT chairs should resist being seen as ‘stop-gap’ individuals who can be deployed instead of proper IEBs who can fulfil this role if necessary.
- Consider increasing investment in an effective clerk/governance professional where currently not in place, to help assist with the management and communication of governance trust-wide and reduce the time required on this by the chair.

For the sector and government:

- The Department for Education needs to set a firm expectation that there will be complete separation between those at a local level, trustees, executives and members.

6. Apart from attending academy committee meetings, the most time consuming activity for MAT chairs was meeting their CEO and other members of the executive team.

In phase one, 73.8 hours on average were spent by MAT chairs meeting with their executive and these meetings typically happened seven times per term for an average of four hours per meeting (this includes travel time).

A number of respondents in phase two reported meeting their lead executive on at least a fortnightly basis if not more frequently and many kept in contact with their CEO in between these meetings via emails and phone calls. MAT chairs sometimes characterised the CEO's role as a "lonely" and chairs frequently stepped in to help even if this meant veering into operational tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- To create an effective relationship, MAT chairs need to be given time to develop an agreed understanding of roles and responsibilities with their CEO which is then reflected in the MAT's scheme of delegation. This will help ensure that MAT chairs do not over-step the mark and undertake operational tasks.
- It is imperative that MAT boards ensure that the relevant CPD and external support is available for new or inexperienced CEOs.
- Regular contact between MAT chairs and CEOs is important but meeting too regularly can lead to conversations too focused on the operational and day-to-day rather than the strategic. While the circumstances of the MAT will indicate and alter these arrangements, diarised formal meetings once a month should suffice for MAT chairs with all contact in-between done via email or under exceptional circumstances.

For the sector and government:

- Promote resources for CEO development and CPD in order to ensure that those leading our schools are adequately equipped and supported to take on these roles.
- Central teams in MATs should not over-rely on the support of trustees, particularly the MAT chair, and should recognise and appreciate these individuals are unpaid volunteers dedicating their time.

What governing boards and school leaders should expect from each other

NGA alongside the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Institute of School Business Leaders (ISBL) have produced guidance on the respective roles of governance and management available for those governing called 'What governing boards and school leaders should expect from each other' available on NGA's website.

7. Over 80% of MAT chairs felt that the time commitment of chairing their MAT had increased as a result of their MAT growing in size despite limited evidence that the size of a chair's MAT affected their reported time commitment while many implemented strategies to help manage the additional commitment of new schools.

83.1% of MAT chairs in phase one reported that the role had become more time consuming as their MAT had grown, which some chairs in phase two said was a result of new schools joining the trust. This increased responsibility involved arranging and ensuring good governance at the local tier and performing due diligence, and it was generally thought that more schools meant more issues which translated into longer meetings for the trust board.

Those that disagreed that the time commitment had increased felt this was due to additional schools fitting within an "already established" system that did not result in a further time commitment, and their trust boards maintained a purely strategic outlook which also assisted with managing the time commitment of chairing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- MAT boards should ensure that the governance structure in place has the capacity and breath to fully manage current and future academies within the trust.

For the sector and government:

- Those in the sector and government should encourage MATs to increase their number of academies at a sustainable and manageable rate that does not exhaust resources and capacity both at an operational and governance level.
- MAT governance is different to single school governance and more emphasis should be placed on key learning points regarding chairing from the wider third sector.

8. Delegation was the most cited strategy used for reducing and managing the time it takes to chair a MAT, but varying practices surrounding Scheme of Delegations (SoDs) have meant that MAT chairs are undertaking a wide variety of tasks that could be delegated elsewhere.

Several MAT chairs who participated in phase two were hesitant to delegate to their fellow trustees, especially those in full-time employment, although those that did said this was a useful strategy. 81.7% of respondents reported sitting on at least one subcommittee of the trust board and a quarter of respondents reported chairing at least one committee (24.9%) despite it being noted that delegating these responsibilities to fellow trustees helped them manage and reduced their time commitment.

Other respondents noted delegating responsibilities to academy committees and the CEO/executive team, the latter of which helped reinforce the chair and board's strategic role within the MAT. The role of the clerk and/or governance professional was also cited as a key aspect in managing the time commitment of chairing, especially in regard to improving and maintaining communications channels through layers of governance within the trust.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- Boards must be made up of equally active participants willing to offer time to share duties and trust boards should be transparent on the time commitments required by future and current trustees. Trustees, instead of the chair, can take leading roles in committees and powers and responsibilities can be divided accordingly to trustees' areas of expertise so the widest range of skills and experience on boards is fully utilised.
- Similarly, MAT chairs can manage their workload effectively by working closely with a clerk/governance professional. Alongside ensuring the board fully understands its role, functions and legal duties, a governance manager and/or consistent clerking service can ensure effective communication between all those involved in governance in the MAT.

9. While MAT chairs seem aware of the arguments for remuneration, the vast majority are against paying those performing their role.

MAT chairs still express reluctance towards the idea of payment for the role – with only one third (31.2%) of phase one participants supporting the payment of MAT chairs and 30.1% giving a neutral response. However, those that were in full-time employment were more likely to support this with 36.1% of those employed (including those who were self-employed) saying they felt the role should be remunerated, compared with 28.0% of retired or semi-retired chairs.

MAT chairs do seem aware of the potential benefits of remuneration, such as increased diversity, but regardless of whether they supported payment or not, many felt that school budgets should not be used for this purpose at a time of financial strain and noted that payment would not alter the way they performed or approached the role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the sector and government:

- In spite of the vast contributions of those governing, the majority of MAT chairs are indifferent or against remuneration thereby signalling that there is insufficient support for remunerating this role at this time.

10. 34.4% of MAT chairs had not undertaken any governance training within the last 12 month period and many cited time constraints as the reason for this.

Amongst the tasks that MAT chairs were least likely to undertake was training and development and many chairs saw these activities as 'optional' and instead relied on the skills and experienced gained from their professional careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For MAT chairs and boards:

- Training and board development activities should be seen as an essential part of governance and can vastly increase board efficiency and in turn assist with reducing the time commitment.

For the sector and government:

- Easily accessible governance training should be available for all those governing and board development should be treated as an ongoing exercise in supporting MATs to fulfill strategic goals and manage their time.



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