

Time to chair?

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

National Governance Association
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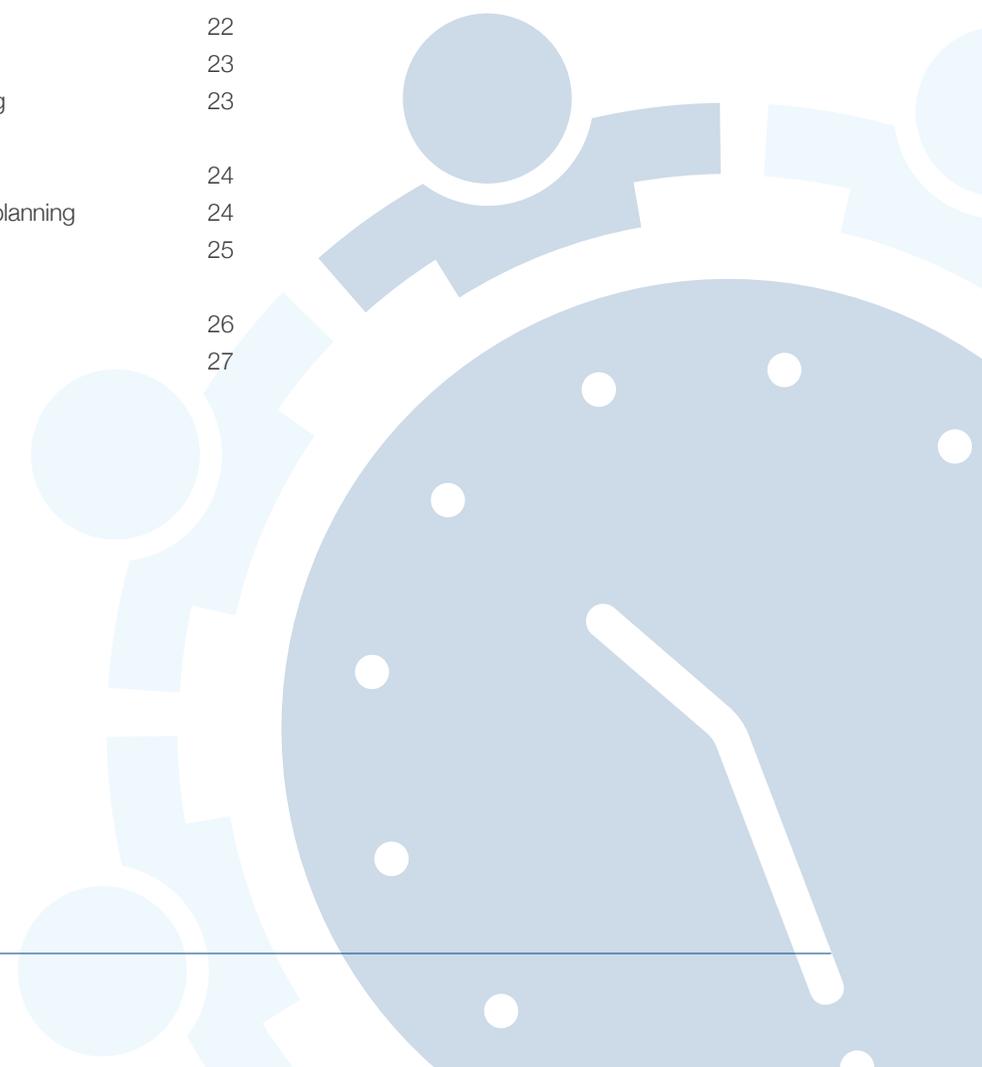
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Foreword



Emma Knights
Chief Executive
National Governance Association

I find myself more and more wanting to take absolutely every opportunity to thank the volunteers who govern our schools. I have now been at the National Governance Association (NGA) for ten years and yet I continue day-in day-out to be impressed by the people who carry out this important role.

NGA's charitable objective is to improve school governance, not to act as the cheerleaders for governors and trustees. However, the more evidence we gather at NGA, the contribution being made becomes more obvious, at least obvious to us who exist to support them. But not yet obvious to all within the education sector and certainly not to those outside its walls, so in 2020 NGA aims to make the work of governing boards more visible. And I hope this report plays a part in that.

Four years ago an NGA research project considered the time to chair, primarily covering single schools, and found considerable variation between individuals. Chairs employed full-time tended to adopt tactics to reduce the time taken by the voluntary role. Those findings helped us to fine-tune the advice we give to chairs and boards, for example in The Chair's Handbook.

But in 2018, after carrying out the first couple of our multi academy trust (MAT) case studies, we decided we needed to explore in more detail the role of chairing a MAT which appeared to be requiring even more time and commitment than other charities. So here we are 18 months later after both a quantitative and a qualitative phase. The numbers tell us that on average the chair of a MAT gives 50 days a year, but that is the middle of a considerable range. This is the equivalent of a day a week apart from Christmas and a week in August, although clearly the time isn't evenly spaced. That required a real pause for reflection.

Although many MAT chairs would prefer their time commitment to be reduced, they continue to give freely as they believe they are contributing positively to the MATs development and in return have a sense of satisfaction in witnessing the MAT's successes and the education its schools provides to pupils. That is the good news angle to this, but there is also a warning to the system in terms of ensuring the sustainability of the role.

We must not take for granted that volunteers will rather miraculously continue to appear. There is a need to be more proactive in this recruitment and NGA aims to play our part in this as well as in emphasising that corporate collective responsibility. Our guidance will continue to emphasise the ways in which the role can be carried out in a reasonable time. This very much includes the delegation of tasks to others on the board, but also to the executive. There are times when chairs are compensating for lack of capacity or knowledge within the executive team, going beyond the role of support and/or acting as a sounding board. It was clear that in some MATs the trust's governance professional had rightly relieved board members of many tasks, but across the sector more can be done to provide the required professional support.

Although the literature tells us that the chair of the board is a hugely important role in any organisation, the chair is actually first amongst equals and has no power as an individual. It is the board which has the authority and makes the decisions. Getting this balance right and ensuring everyone on the board plays their part is an age old challenge and one that the chair should lead. The research has shown that this has sometimes proved difficult to achieve and also that boards generally had not spent much time on their own development, as opposed to the development of the MAT.

This culture needs to be challenged. In its Governance Handbook, the Department for Education (DfE) has a significant section on the importance of board evaluation; indeed it is one of their six features of effective governance. Reflection needs to be a key moment in the activity of a governing board, which includes the chair reflecting on both their own contribution and the contribution of other individuals, putting the needs of the organisation first by being open to the changing needs of the organisation. By harnessing the opportunity to learn from the past, to share and take in feedback while openly assessing the needs of the future, the board takes accountability to the next level. Our researchers when coming to their objective conclusions have not over-emphasised this as NGA clearly has a conflict of interest here. Our Leading Governance programme has the biggest reach of funded governance development programmes. However I have no hesitation in recommending Leading Governance's board programme which is bespoke to each trust as we are well aware that their needs are different; it is a minimum of £2,500 investment from the DfE for each MAT.

The role of vice chairs is under-utilised, and seems a very good place to start making the work of the board more manageable. Some boards didn't have a vice chair at all,

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and having two was unusual. As well as sharing current tasks, two vice chairs also makes it much more likely that there will be a successor. The practice of co-chairs, which is adopted in some single schools, does not seem to have been used by MATs. There may also be a need to embrace the practice, common in the charity sector, of recruiting a chair externally where needs be. Our Future Chairs project funded through Inspiring Governance has begun to change hearts and minds for single schools, and we will be highlighting this possibility for MATs too.

This research emphasises the need for succession planning for the board. Change is healthy and in line with many other sectors, NGA suggests that trustees coming towards the end of their second term of office (eight years) on a board should consider whether a third would actually be best for the organisation. NGA offers succession planning guidance and workshops. At present many chairs have been involved in setting up the MATs and have a very strong attachment to them and understandably do not want that important relationship to end. Becoming a member of the trust on leaving the board of trustees is a way to continue that connection.

Diverse boards bringing together people with different views, background, experience, skills and knowledge make for strong boards with good debate and decision-making. Our Everyone on Board campaign is beginning to pay dividends, although there is more progress needed. MAT boards of trustees are less advanced than other boards in the sector, especially when it comes to women and BAME trustees. Our School Governance in 2019 survey tells us that those trustees are also less likely to become chairs in MATs, so we are missing out on a potential source of talented successors.

Lastly thank you to all our participating chairs; you have contributed to the intelligence in the sector. Thank you not just for the time given to this research, but more importantly to your trusts, with all the thought and the expertise that this represents. I would also like to acknowledge all the 1,206 chairs of MATs across England who are making these contributions quietly under the radar together with their vice chairs and fellow trustees. The system – and most importantly its pupils – could not thrive without you.



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Preparing your board for the future

Ensuring the future leadership of the board is essential to good governance, and to support those governing in planning their future leadership – including the fulfilment of chair, vice chair and committee chair roles – NGA offers a range of resources.

- Read the free [Preparing Your Board For The Future](#) guide which sets out the succession planning cycle and offers practical advice on how to embed a culture of succession planning on your board.
- Take the succession planning module on NGA Learning Link and test your understanding with a series of interactive activities and scenarios.
- Book a free workshop – we can deliver our well-received succession planning workshop to your trust board and local academy committees.
- Use the Future Chairs succession solution to connect with an appropriately experienced and skilled individual who has the potential to lead your board, if you expect to have a requirement for a chair, vice-chair or committee chair within the next 12 to 18 months.

www.nga.org.uk/futurechairs

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.



1.0: Background

In 2016/17, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that the value of voluntary activity in the UK was worth £23.9bn to the UK economy (ONS, 2017). Crucial to this significant contribution were the volunteers carrying out this work, 250,000 of which are estimated to be school governors and trustees who sit on the governing boards of state-maintained schools across the UK (NGA, 2017).

A growing number of these individuals are trustees of multi academy trusts (MATs) who, unlike traditional school governors of local authority maintained schools, sit on a governing board which holds accountability for the performance and financial oversight of two or more schools. These trust boards are the accountable body in law which act collectively to ensure the good conduct of all the schools within the trust and promote high standards of educational achievement across the organisation (NGA, 2019).

Those undertaking these positions do so on a voluntary basis and freely give their time to carry out the roles and responsibilities that these positions hold. Research suggests some governing boards are increasingly struggling to manage an escalating set of duties and in fulfilling the board's functions, the workload for those governing can be high especially for the "core group" of governors/trustees which has typically the chair at the centre (James et al, 2013). This workload can result in a considerable time commitment for these volunteers while the perception of this time commitment can hinder governor/trustee recruitment and affect the diversity of who steps forward to govern (Ellis, 2003). Ultimately, this can set a tension between the role of a governor/trustee being both voluntary and a position holding tremendous accountability.

Previously, the National Governance Association (NGA) has suggested that those governing in all school settings should spend between 10 and 20 days per year on governance. This was primarily based on the understanding that those

spending less than 10 days were unlikely to be fulfilling all of their functions and those spending more than 20 days on governance were likely to be in unsustainable positions and potentially overstepping their governance role. However, research has consistently suggested that, in practice, this recommendation is not being followed. A large scale survey of over 7,500 governors found that 65% of chairs of governing boards were spending more than 17 hours per month on their role on average (James et al, 2014) and a further study quantifying the time commitment found similarly that those chairing school governing boards are completing nearly one calendar-months' worth of work (Cotgrave, 2016). This is markedly different to the time commitment given by other volunteers: a report by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) found that volunteers across the UK reported spending an average of eight hours per month completing their duties (NCVO, 2019). Instead, the time commitment for chairs of governors can be seen to align more closely with trustees within the charity sector who spend around 33.8 days a year on their role (Charity Commission, 2017).

As of December 2019, academies make up 41.9% of state-schools in England (Department for Education, 2019). A natural consequence of this is that a large proportion of those governing now govern in academy trust settings either at trust board level or at academy committee level (sometimes called local governing boards). MATs, unlike federations, are charitable companies limited by guarantee

and therefore are exempt charities and the trust board share the same responsibilities under the Charities Act 2011 and the Companies Act 2016 (NGA, 2019b). While trustees still carry out the same three core functions of governance that governing bodies in maintained schools are charged with, a MAT board holds responsibility for strategic oversight of between two and sixty-plus schools (NCTL, 2014). Trust boards are therefore responsible for larger budgets and more pupils than those in other school settings, as well as overseeing multiple sites, but there has been little research into whether this has constituted an increased time commitment compared with those governing in single school settings.

In this context, NGA and many others in the wider sector (Pain, 2017), agree that further research is needed to ensure that the education sector is clear and transparent about the time commitment associated with chairing a MAT and clarity is provided for those thinking of chairing a MAT board in the future. It is particularly important to ensure sustainability of chairs; only 36% of respondents to the School Governance in 2018 survey who were not currently chairing were considering doing so in the future and many cited the time commitment as a deterrent (NGA, 2018). As a result, there is a legitimate concern that chairing a MAT may be seen as an unmanageable role and this will have an impact on future succession planning, leading some to suggest that the sector may have to resort to other ways in entice individuals to volunteer for these positions.

Speaking at an academies conference in January 2019, academies minister, Lord Agnew, said that despite his preference for the "volunteer army" of trustees currently in place, there should be debate around the payment of chairs of MATs (Tes, 2019). This follows nearly a decade-long debate around trustee pay following a review of the 2006 Charities Act in which Lord Hodgson (2012) recommended that charities with more than £1 million turnover should be



able to pay their trustees without seeking approval. At the time, this was met with mostly disapproval from the charity sector yet the concept of paying trustees continues to be a recurring topic.

1.1: Aim of the research

This research project sought to explore themes outlined above in further depth. Research questions centred on the following lines of enquiry:

- 1 What are the time commitments and responsibilities associated with chairing a MAT?
- 2 What practical steps can chairs of MAT boards put in place to make their role more manageable?

This report follows an interim report based on phase one which takes a deeper look into the quantitative findings and is available to read here: bit.ly/time-to-chair.

1.2: Methodology

This study was carried out in two phases.

Phase one of the study was a survey of 93 chairs of MATs in England. All MATs in England (defined as a formal group of academies with two or more schools, a single accounting officer and a board of trustees) were contacted via email to gather participants and all respondents were required to give informed consent. No incentives were offered or coercion used to recruit participants and answers provided were anonymised. Quantitative analysis software SPSS was used to clean and analyse the survey data and, once cleaned, descriptive statistics were generated. Appropriate statistical tests were also performed on the dataset, as reported on in the interim report.

Phase two was comprised of 18 telephone interviews carried out between April and October 2019. Participants for phase two were selected from those who volunteered from phase one. Potential participants' survey responses were ranked in order of the time they spend on governance to identify a 'purposive' set of cases for follow-up interviews (Bryman, 2012). A semi-structured interview schedule was adapted to allow for flexibility should the interviewer need to probe further. A team of two interviewers carried out the interviews and shadowed each other to ensure consistency of approach. Interview transcripts were produced by a third-party organisation and were subsequently analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to thematic code the data.

Several efforts were made to make this study as robust as possible but there are, however, some limitations that need to be recorded. Both phases of the study relied on voluntary participation and consisted of self-selecting samples and all time commitments recorded were self-reported by participants based on estimations of how long they spend on governance tasks.

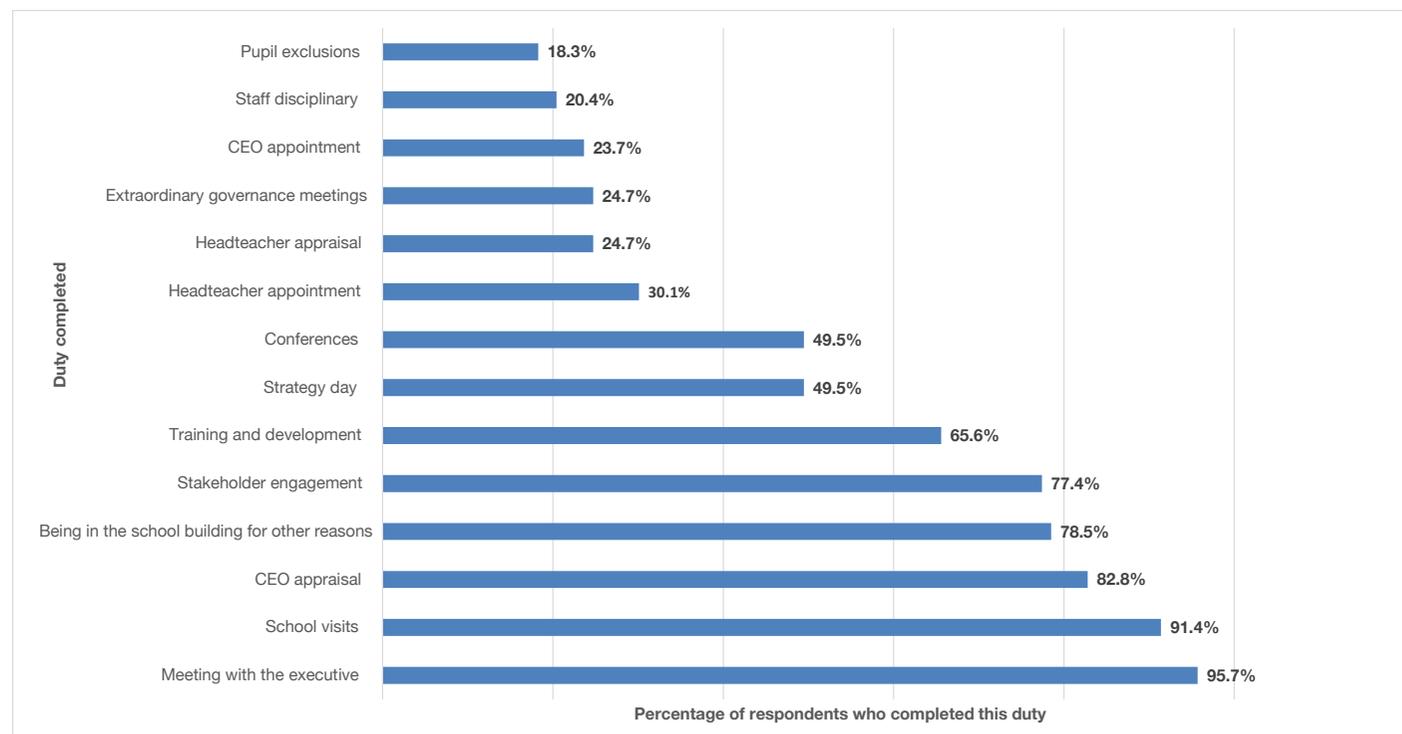
Despite these caveats, it is possible to draw meaningful conclusions from the data and this study undoubtedly should raise questions about the time commitment of the role of chair of a MAT and the sustainability of the role.

2.0: How are MAT chairs spending their time?

Participants in phase one of the study reported enormous variety in the time it took for them to perform their role and in the tasks they performed. On average, participants spent an average of 371.8 hours per year on their duties and the range between the time spent by the chairs spending the least and most amount of time was 1,161 hours, a 154.8 working days difference.¹

Inconsistencies were found between what duties and tasks participants reported carrying out and, aside from attending full trust board meetings, no other duties were universally completed by the chairs suggesting that these tasks had either been delegated elsewhere or had not needed to be completed within the past 12 months.² Figure one shows that the least likely tasks to be completed were circumstantial ('CEO appointment', 'extraordinary meetings') while 'CEO appraisal' (which are commonly conducted annually), 'meetings with the executive' and 'school visits' were much more universally completed. Unsurprisingly, those spending the most time on their governance duties were more likely to undertake a wider range of duties and tasks including training, attending conferences and performing stakeholder engagement activities which were among the least performed duties.

Figure one: Percentage of respondents who undertook the following duties within the past twelve months.



1. This figure has been calculated assuming that one full-working day is 7.5 hours.

2. It is worth noting there was still a significant time variation between the time taken to prepare for, chair and follow-up on these meetings. While the average time was 65 hours per year, the lowest time spent was reported as just 16.5 hours and the most time spent reported as 184.0 hours.

the governance function would come into the fore, whether that be members, [the] trust board, committees, local governors [...] was working as best we could". This could involve reassessing or developing governance structures and developing effective reporting between the layers of governance.

a) Academy committees

Although widely referred to as 'local governing bodies', NGA uses 'academy committee' to differentiate between those at a local level in MATs and the more substantial role of governing bodies of maintained schools. Academies committees are delegated responsibilities by the trust board as opposed to have inherent ones.

On average, the task that respondents reported spending the most amount of time on was attending academy committee (including LGBs/alternative local tier committees) meetings, with 100.6 hours being devoted to this task per annum. This applied to 47.3% of respondents in phase one who spent on average 56.7 days per year performing their role compared with those who did not who spent 43.0 days per year. Those that attended academy committees in any capacity, whether chairing the meeting, attending as a member of the board or just observing spent significantly longer on their governance duties. Of these respondents, 29.3% reported attending at least one academy committee meeting while 28.3% reported sitting on an academy committee and 23.9% chaired an academy committee in addition to chairing the full trust board.

Participants in phase two who performed these additional academy committee duties provided a range of reasons for doing so which included:

- creating and maintaining direct communication links with individual schools;
- understanding further the school's context and seeing first-hand the impact of the MAT on the school;
- opportunities to regularly meet with and gain the trust of other academy committee members;
- ensuring that those governing at a local level felt listened to and acknowledged within their role.

“ It gives me a holistic view of what's going on [...] it gives me a much more rounded evidence of what's happening, of what people are contributing, what people do, the different strands of the organisation... ”

In phase two, some chairs said this was a regular temporary measure taken when a chair of an academy committee had departed without a natural successor or when a school had undergone "significant change" such as a headteacher leaving. Others attended or chaired meetings temporarily for new schools within the MAT where there were "issues and concerns", placing themselves on advisory boards until "a stronger [academy committee was] in place". One chair who had recently stopped monitoring an academy committee emphasised that this was just "a short-term idea to make sure that everyone recognised what they needed to be doing".

Other chairs had separated the layers of governance within the trust, removing overlaps between academy committees and the trust board by no longer continuing to get involved directly in local level governance. Benefits for those that ceased performing these duties were noted to be clearer lines of accountability, a more 'strategic' trust board and allowing more time for performing the role as MAT chair.

b) Members

A trust member is a distinct role in itself, with a different purpose to that of a MAT trustee. While the role is limited, it carries the specific responsibility of being a guardian of the governance of the trust, which means stepping in to intervene if the members judge that the trustees are not fulfilling their own role. While not all chairs are members of their MAT, a large proportion in this research were: 73.1% of respondents were members of their MAT. Less than half (40.9%) reported being both members of their MAT and attending at least one academy committee which meant they were present in the processes of all three layers of governance in their MAT. Many chairs in phase two justified their position as a member as being a link between the trust board and the MAT's membership (10 individuals) and four of these chairs also proposed that to not be a member would prevent them from being part of "decision-making" within the trust which could lead to "uninformed decisions" suggesting that there is some confusion over the role of members. The Governance Handbook states that members of school trusts should "avoid over stepping their powers or undermining the boards' discretion in exercising its responsibilities" and that members are not expected to "contribute to specific decisions in relation to the trusts' business" (p. 50).

“ There is an argument for [not being a member is] that I am in a sense less effective as a member because actually most of the meeting is me explaining what the trust is doing and the other four members kind of grilling me on it. ”

However, most participants who were members of their trust suggested that they would "not lose much" by not being a member and seven chairs said they were primarily members as their MAT's articles of association outlined the chair of the MAT as an "ex-officio" member. One chair suggested it would

be difficult to replace them if they chose not to be a member (“it’s very, very hard to find anybody – it’s like a tail-end Charlie job”). Two chairs who were members also suggested that although being a member was not a necessity, not being a member would not reduce the time commitment as the MAT chair would be present at member meetings and the annual general meeting anyway. On average, the additional time commitment of being a member for MAT chairs was 16.6 hours per year.

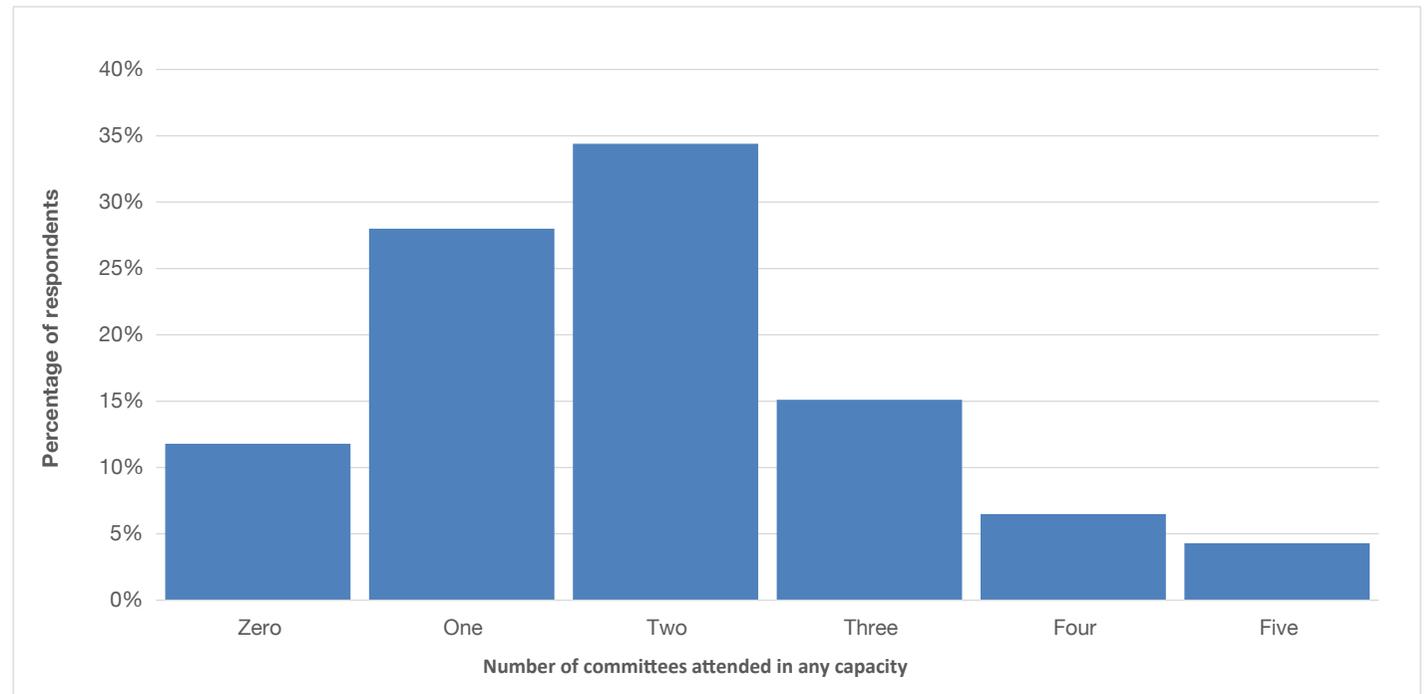
c) Committees

In phase one, 81.7% of respondents reported sitting on at least one committee of the trust board, the most likely being a committee related to finance (46.2%), followed by auditing (29.0%) and educational standards (20.4%). Only a quarter of participants reported chairing at least one committee (24.9%).

Personal interest in the committee’s area was noted in phase two as a reason for attending these meetings alongside it being an opportunity to “listen and absorb what goes on in [...] crucial areas of the management of the organisation”. One participant consciously did not sit on more than one committee as “the workload [...] would go from being busy to being unmanageable”.

Participants reported not only sitting on these committees but also spending time ensuring that committees were appropriately structured and adequately manned by board members.

Figure three: Showing the percentage of respondents who attended 0-5 committees in any capacity.



d) Recruiting to the board

In phase two, trustee recruitment and recruiting the right people to the board was seen as “a demanding task”. Many participants reported leading on trustee appointment and some noted that this duty was particularly time consuming. One chair said that this was the aspect of being chair that “actually has surprised me the most” due to the volume of trustee turnover. Another agreed that this was a constant task and done not only at trust board level but that as MAT chair they also shared the responsibility of recruiting for the local tier as well.

“ I’ve now learnt it’s a constant thing because no sooner have you got a fully populated board... somebody retires, resigns or moves on for whatever reason and then off you go – you’ve got to try and find another trustee. ”

Meanwhile, in phase one, 44.6% of chair’s trust boards had no vacancies at the time they completed the survey. Just over a quarter reported having one vacancy (27.2%) while a similar proportion had two or more vacancies on their board (28.3%).

2.2: Training and development

34.4% of MAT chairs surveyed did not spend any time on training and development within the 12 month period and, in interviews, chairs mentioned being unable to take part due to lack of time. Others that did not undertake training frequently or at all in phase two said that their background in school governance has supported them and that they had “learned on the job” instead. One individual who undertook training regularly said it was “extremely rare that anybody either accompanies me or goes instead of me”. Other forms of development including learning about the wider education sector, with three chairs investing time in this activity along with wider pastoral issues as “the social care system is collapsing around us, and therefore schools are picking up a huge amount of that pastoral agenda”.

In regard to board development, one chair mentioned that they wanted to conduct annual appraisals for their trustees but they “never get around to doing those because they are kind of the most optional meetings I have”. One individual also contributed by delivering governance training and would perform their training “across the board”.

2.3: Interactions with lead executives

a) Appointing the lead executive

23.7% of respondents had been involved in appointing a CEO or equivalent which took an average of 16.6 hours to complete in phase one. When each duty performed by chairs is taken as a standalone occurrence, recruitment of the CEO is the most time consuming activity and chairs said they played a key role or lead on this task, with one participant in phase two saying it was the busiest time they had experienced while chairing their MAT. Doing this well was seen as an important task with a few chairs echoing the sentiment that “if you invest the time in getting the right chief executive [...] in theory you should be able to sit back a bit more and allow a good chief executive to get on with the job”.

Others also recruited heads of school which, for one chair of a larger MAT, was a frequent activity as “things happen – it’s probably in a MAT our size two or three times a year”. In line with this, a higher proportion of respondents in phase one reported being involved in a headteacher’s appointment (30.1%) than in CEO appointment (23.7%).

b) Meetings with the lead executive

In phase one, aside from attending full trust board or academy committee meetings, meeting with the chief executive or members of the central team took, on average, the longest amount of time: chairs reported spending 73.8 hours a year on this activity, just under 10 days a year (9.84 days). 95.7% of chairs undertook this task within the last 12 months and each meeting lasted around four hours.

Most phase two participants defined the chair’s role in the relationship as a “critical friend” and/or “sounding board” which involved supporting and consulting with their lead executive. Two chairs empathised that the role of a MAT CEO was a “lonely” one and identified the chair as the sole “person outside of the school who the head can confide in, can talk to, outside the trust”. A few chairs mentioned that the quality and experience of their CEO determined the amount of time they spent as “the better they are, the less critical I have to be”. One chair mentioned that after their appointment of the chief executive, they became a “sort of guide and mentor”. Others’ roles involved working closely with the CEO and occasionally taking on duties in their absence such as attending meetings or conducting stakeholder engagement activities. However, some chairs were more focused on not straying into these operational tasks, with one chair emphasising that this was “really important because the [chair’s] workload is big enough as it is without adding on additional responsibilities”. Several MAT chairs said that their lead executive influenced the amount of time it took to chair their MAT and the ‘strength’ and ‘experience’ of the executive team could positively and negatively impact the time commitment. Another noted that their time commitment depended “on the neediness of the chief executive” and whether they needed “support and [...] my help and assistance”. Others mentioned that their recently appointed chief executives need additional assistance, with one chair saying that until their chief executive and trust becomes “a little bit stronger” their “commitment as chair in this coming year will probably stay at the same level”.

“ What we found out is that if you have a weak chief executive then actually the trust chair, me, ends up stepping into the breach much more because actually there needs to be someone who is making decisions and has that authority. ”

“ Of course, the better they are at it, the less time I spend. There’s a conflict there, because obviously the more enjoyable my job is, the more value I think I’m adding ... the worse they are. [...] it’s an inverse proportion. If they’re very good, they don’t need me. ”

Several chairs perceived that liaising with their CEO took up a large proportion of their time as chair, although how frequently they engaged varied. Most described weekly or bi-weekly meetings. Mostly characterised as “discussions” as opposed to formal meetings, some chairs opted to conduct “slightly more formal” meetings on a termly or monthly basis. Other members of the executive team sometimes joined these meetings such as the chief finance officer and some chairs reported having separate additional meetings with these individuals. Chief executive meetings were typically cited as strategic ones, looking at issues, reporting systems and trust developments. One chair considered the interactions “an informal system where I meet them as frequently as necessary and we discuss and debate information shared and decisions taken”. A smaller group said that their interactions were daily although these were not in person and were typically on the phone or via email. Even those that did not necessarily have daily exchanges with their chief executive said they frequently spoke on the phone in-between meetings. Who was responsible for initiating these calls differed from chair to chair, with one chair noting that their chief executive was “very good at thinking before involving me” whilst another chair wished their chief executive “rang... up with the solution rather than the problem”.

“ [The CEO and I talk] out of hours and weekends which could go on for well over an hour sometimes. I will pick up if they if they want to meet. I will try and support them at any stage they may need, for whatever reason or whatever they’re going through, whatever their staff are going through... ”

Some chairs also reported supporting the headteachers or heads of school in a similar manner to their chief executives, with one chair defining their role as also being a “critical friend and support for the three principals”.

2.4: Wider collaborations with the system

Wider collaborations with the system outside of the MAT was seen as a key duty by participants in phase two. These collaborations consisted of cross-MAT collaborations such as with working groups of chief executives and chairs from similar sized MATs, or MATs within the local region to learn best practice or share experiences and networking amongst business communities for recruits at trust board and academy committee level.

Other engagements with those in the academies programme included meetings or conversations with the National Schools Commissioner (NSC), the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). A few chairs noted that the relationship with the Department for Education (DfE), NSCs and RSCs was one of accountability; with one chair seeing these meetings as “accountability meetings”. The only chair whose trust had decreased in size also had spent extensive time with their RSC discussing the trust’s future as the two schools they retained were graded “requires improvement” by Ofsted. MAT chairs felt these meetings took up considerable amount of time, with one chair saying that attending these meetings felt at odds with that of an unpaid volunteer (“it doesn’t feel like a volunteer

role when one is sort of summoned to the regulator [...] that relationship needs to be better managed otherwise people will just not want to be chairs or trustees”).

2.5: Financial responsibilities and reporting

The third and final core function of governance is that of “overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent” (Governance Handbook, p. 9) and several participants in phase two identified reviewing the MAT’s spending, receiving regular financial updates from a member of the school’s executive team, certifying accounts are submitted on time and ensuring “financial probity” as key to their role.

Several participants also noted that the board’s financial responsibilities had been exacerbated by times of financial difficulty, with one chair remarking that the trust deals with “eternal financial issues” as a result of “having to juggle relatively small amounts of money to make sure that we are absolutely getting the priorities right in terms of the best possible education for our students, and the best possible treatment for our staff”. Three chairs also said that making staff redundancies had been a direct impact of funding constraints.

2.6: Complaints and exclusions

Often cited as the least enjoyable aspect of governing by chairs in phase two was dealing with parental and staff complaints along with sitting on exclusion panels. One participant noted that as chair of the trust they were the “point of receipt of complaints”. One chair also noted that they spent “probably [...] about two weeks” dealing with a complaint against a senior member of staff which involved “lots of emails, lots of phone calls, lots of meetings, lots of thought – thinking time”. Five chairs mentioned talking part in disciplinary and exclusions panels which took “a huge amount of time”. Another chair also commented that the number of exclusions panels they had been recently involved in had rapidly increased in recent years:

“ I think one of the things I’ve seen having been a governor, or being a chair of governors since 2004, I’ve never known so many – up until two years ago I’d never had to do an appeals panel. I’m now on my third. That takes up time and work. It chews up a huge amount of time for the principal as well, that he just simply doesn’t really have time to do. ”

This chair also expressed concern over completing this task within a reasonable timeframe for the parents and those concerned, noting that they had recently needed to push a request for an appeals panel due to competing tasks.

2.7: Visits to school and stakeholder engagement

School visits accounted for an average of 35.6 hours per year for the chairs sampled in phase one and 91.4% of chairs undertook visits to schools within the 12 month period. This was subject naturally to variation but was not correlated to MAT size. In phase two, many chairs felt this was an important activity to take time to introduce themselves to school staff along with taking their questions and listening to their experiences within the school and learn more about the school. However, one chair with an 18 school MAT branded their attempts to visit each school as “fairly unsuccessful” due to time constraints.

Stakeholder engagement activities were prominently reported by chairs in both phase one and phase two with 77.4% of respondents from phase one saying that they had undertaken some form of stakeholder engagement within the 12 month period prior to taking the survey and spending on average 37.2 hours per year. Phase two MAT chairs readily noted engaging with internal and external stakeholders as a key aspect of their role and some mentioned being a “figurehead”

for the MAT or “public face of the board”, a role shared with their lead executive. Alongside this, one chair wrote and gave speeches for prize days at their schools’ events while other more common examples of stakeholder engagement were engaging with the local business community and parental advisory groups.

Five interviewees also mentioned their role in tackling negative portrayals of MATs in the media. One chair said that the road to being more accepted within the community had been “uphill” and that they felt a responsibility to “bang [...] the drum for the MAT”. Another made reference to their dealings with negative media attention about academisation:

“ Not about our trust particularly, but about the whole academy programme. [...] You’re constantly trying to push against some quite toxic press and media to try and give a really positive story about what really passionate people are doing to make a really good difference to education. ”



3.0: What affects the time commitment associated with chairing a MAT?

3.1: The cycle of the academic year

In phase two, term time was cited as a busier period for MAT chairs and often attributed to the “cycle of meetings”, particularly at the beginning of the year. Phase one shows that the busiest time for respondents was during the autumn term, largely attributable to lead executive and headteacher appraisals, with most respondents appraising their executive in October or November (68.4%). This term and the end of summer was also seen as busier due to the publication of examination results which, dependent on outcomes, could also influence time spent on governance.

3.2: Changing circumstances within the MAT

Phase two respondents identified that their work was not consistent throughout the year and this was largely derived from the current position of the MAT, which is subject to frequent change. One chair summarised:

“ Organisations don’t stand still and there are always changes coming from different directions, both from within and out. We are an organisation that continues to get bigger because the department actually wants it to get bigger because they keep asking us to take on different schools [...] what takes most time [...] depends which year it is or which term it is. ”

Several chairs echoed similar sentiments that an ever-rolling series of projects and changes to the composition of the MAT in the number of schools or its staffing structure meant that

“the time and responsibilities of the chair can vary, depending on where a multi academy trust is at, any one particular time”.

a) Converting to a MAT

Just under 70% of respondents were involved in school governance within one of the schools now part of their MAT (69.9%), while a smaller proportion (34.4%) had been chair of trustees since the MAT was created. MAT chairs who had been involved in the MAT’s origin suggested that this period was exceedingly busy due to time given to embedding both governance and operational structures within the MAT, alongside necessary meetings with RSCs and boards of other schools looking to join the MAT. In phase two, two chairs noted performing operational tasks during this time such as writing reports and functioning as part of the executive team.

b) MATs changing size

83.1% of MAT chairs in phase one agreed or strongly agreed that the role had become more time-consuming due to an increase in the number of schools within their MAT. In phase two, some participants indicated that this was a result of the additional time taken to “know schools well” which encompassed school visits and conversations with school staff. The length of board meetings also increased and one participant concluded, “more pupils, more schools, more issues”. Time was also invested when considering whether to take on new schools as well as performing due diligence to ensure that additional schools did not “create problems for the MAT that it endangers the MAT itself, particularly financially”. Only two participants in phase two had experience of opening a free school and one chair noted that an “informal” decision between the board and the executive team had been that they would not open another free school as “it was just too much hard work”.

Participants that said that the growth of their MAT did not cause a further time commitment for the chair as new schools fitted within an “already established” system and the trust board and the chair had learnt to operate more strategically. Trust and confidence in academy committees could also help ensure that the trust board did not have an over-burgeoning number of tasks as participants felt more confident delegating responsibilities (“we have good local governing boards and we delegate”). Others had decided to “drip feed” in schools slowly to prevent an increase in the workload of trustees and the executive team and some chose only to intake schools within a close proximity to current schools already in the trust.

Nine chairs referred to the additional time commitment which was caused by the introduction of new schools into the MAT, particularly if these schools were “failing” and/or graded as “requires improvement” by Ofsted.

“ Taking over another school [...] is very, very time consuming. We’ve just taken over a failing primary school and I can’t believe the amount of time that gets chewed up doing that... you’re probably doubling the amount of time involved in doing your governance. If you’re not, then obviously, I don’t then re-divert that time into the existing business. ”

A less common scenario for a MAT is to decrease in size which happened with one participant in phase two. The decrease in size from four to two schools involved an increase in workload for the chair and others on the board focused specifically around re-established the trust’s vision

and strategy as a smaller organisation. Difficult financial decisions also had to be made, including staff restructuring, and there were many meetings with the RSC to ensure the trust's viability.

3.3: The influence of others

Four other chairs in phase two said that MAT staff and others involved in school governance, such as the clerk or central staff members, generally had high expectations of the chair to be available either in person or by email or phone. Two of these chairs, one of which was in full-time employment and the other who was semi-retired, expressed frustration that those employed within the trust did not always have a "genuine appreciation that the chair's role is a voluntary role".

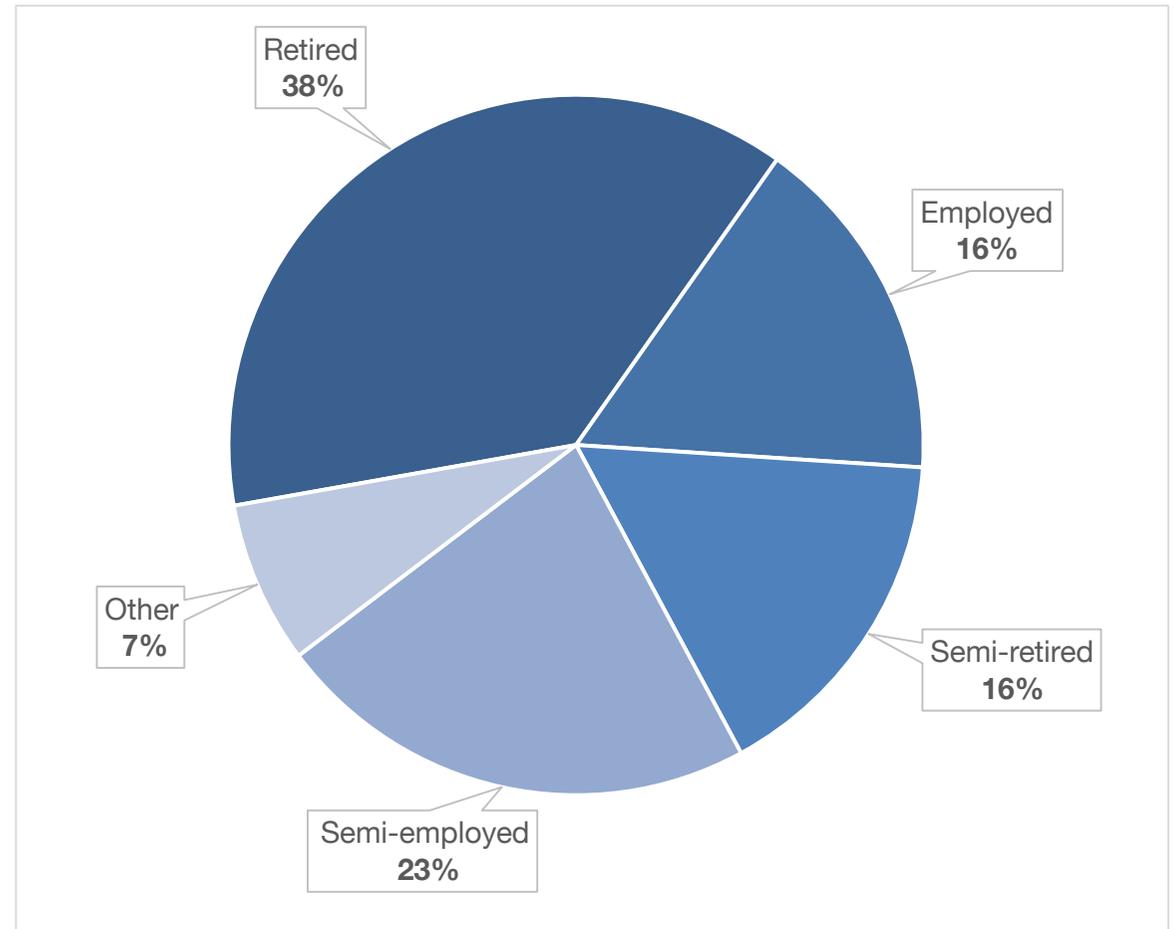
3.4: Employment status

In phase one, over half of MAT chairs were either retired or semi-retired and these individuals spent significantly longer on their chairing duties. Employed or self-employed respondents reported spending 291.3 hours on governance a year (or 5.6 hours per week) compared with retired respondents who spent an average of 419.0 hours per year (or 8.3 hours per week).

In phase two, retirees often mentioned that retirement gave them the freedom to spend their time on MAT duties and said it made the role manageable. One chair even stating that they were hesitant to appoint non-retired trustees to the board as those in employment "cannot give up their time to be at the beck and call of the MAT" whereas "a retiree can probably do that".

When asked how they would manage their commitments to the MAT if they were working full-time, almost all of the retired participants said would not be chairing their MAT if they were in full-time employment, including those that were semi-retired.

Figure four: Breakdown of respondent's work arrangements based on their employment status.



A small group of retirees said they could manage the time commitment if they worked full-time and although it would be “difficult”, they could change the way they chaired by increasing delegation, reducing the time spent in schools, having a more formal relationship and less contact with staff members such as the CEO, stopping stakeholder engagement activities and having meetings solely in the evening as opposed to in the day as they may not be able to get the time off work.

“ There is an element of sacrifice [to chairing my MAT]. But it isn't as great as the sacrifice [made by] ... somebody who is working full-time, where I don't think the sacrifice is sustainable. ”

However, 92.5% of employed MAT chairs in phase one agreed that they had a flexible working pattern which allowed them to work around their governance duties. For employed chairs, 15.0% said that their employer gave them time off for their governance duties, 5.7% that their employer gave them unpaid time off, 11.3% had not asked for time off and 7.5% had not needed to ask for time off. However, it is worth bearing in mind that there are more self-employed MAT chairs (22.6%) than employed ones (16.2%). Most employed MAT chairs believed that their work helped them with governance duties:

- 58.5% agreed or strongly agreed that their work helped them understand education policy and developments
- 77.4% agreed or strongly agreed that their work helped them understand governance
- 86.8% agreed or strongly agreed that their work helped them think strategically

22.2% of employed phase one chairs worked within education and many participants who worked in education in phase two said that this created a synergy between their work and voluntary role which, for one chair, made their “workload more manageable”. In phase two, the only participant in full-time employment who was not self-employed had his chairing contribute towards his company's key performance indicators (KPIs) for “business mentoring” and could complete some of his governance tasks at work.

All self-employed and employed respondents in phase two noted some form of conflict between the commitments within their professional life and their commitments as chair of their MAT. This included delaying working on either role and being unavailable for meetings and extenuating circumstances at the MAT, such as Ofsted inspections.

4.0: What strategies and techniques are MAT chairs deploying to manage their role's time commitment?

When asked whether they had developed any tactics to help manage the time commitment, several phase two chairs suggested that this was something which could not be reduced. The chair with the highest time commitment in this phase said that they “don't actually see how in the current governance environment, with expectations, roles and responsibilities that are placed on chairs, that is possible”. A few individuals mentioned that, although they had considered some approaches, any reduction in their time devoted to the trust may mean “some element of governance would deteriorate”. Three chairs used variations of the phrase “doing the job means doing it properly”. Four mentioned that they had not considered any time management tactics as they had not needed any.

However, a number of chairs in phase two did identify several tactics which they used to reduce the time commitment associated with chairing their MAT or manage their duties and responsibilities effectively.

4.1: Delegation

While it is generally expected that the time commitments of the chair will be greater than others on the board, the chair – along with the trust board as whole – have the ability to delegate these responsibilities to appropriate parties.

Delegation was cited as a frequent tactic used to manage roles and responsibilities and “restructuring” was seen as essential part of managing trustee workload. Three chairs in phase two also identified delegating as a “soft” skill required by those chairing MATs.

“ If I see that the workload on the governance team is going to increase, we take steps to mitigate that, to share it, to restructure. ”

a) Others on the trust board

Many phase two chairs worked closely with other trustees to share out roles and responsibilities, particularly through contributions, when chairing or participating on committees. This was particularly of use when trustees had their own area of responsibilities linked to their background and experience – for example, one chair noted a trustee on their board with vast educationalist knowledge who thereby chaired the education committee. A total of eleven out of eighteen participants in phase two emphasised the importance of having a wide variety of skills and experience around the board – despite one individual saying they did not already have the time to deploy these skills effectively.

Many skills and backgrounds were said to come in useful for trustees on the board such as having board experience, coming from an educationalist background or having skills in finance, HR and marketing. Five chairs also said that one of the most important elements needed for those on the board was the necessary time to invest in the role. On recruiting to the board, one chair said they could identify several individuals who would be “excellent trustees”, however, “they're busy working and making money and all the rest of it”.

“ I think because of the way that we've structured the trust, each trustee has a responsibility. So we've got linked trustees with each of the schools, we have chair of finance, we have two trustees that sit on the school improvement board, the vice chair chairs the chief executive appraisal committee. So I think, because of the way that we've structured the trust and looked at the expertise that we have in the trust and people taking on roles that are aligned to their experience and expertise, that helps. I haven't got a sense of me having responsibility for everything. We work very much as a team. ”

3. As the trust board is ultimately the accountable for governance within the schools in their MAT, inspectors are likely to speak with trustees of the MAT. However, sometimes academy committee members/local governors will be asked to attend as well as, or instead of, trustees were it is clear duties have been delegated appropriately to the local tier.

“ I think we have a huge range of skills and abilities, and competence [on the trust board]. I think what we don't necessarily have, which I think is common with many trust boards, from other chairs of trustees that I've spoken to, is huge capacities in terms of time. ”

Six participants expressed hesitancy over delegating to others either due to the fact that others on the board were apprehensive to get involved with additional duties and responsibilities or because, as one participant put it, they felt guilty “about keeping those people who aren't being paid [...], who've done a day's work, and are coming six o'clock and don't leave until nine, when perhaps they've not been home from work [...] that weighs on me”.

Vice chairs were generally underutilised, although some respondents said their vice chair did participate in activities such as chairing in the chair's absence, chairing a committee, contributing to setting the agenda and being present during some meetings with executives. All said that their vice chair contributed less than the chair and two chairs in phase two, both retired, suggested this was due to the fact their vice chair was employed full-time. For one of these chairs, they were hesitant to ask their vice chair for too much because they feared they might resign.

b) The local tier and committees

A small minority of participants in phase two noted being hesitant in delegating responsibilities down to their local tier committees, with one chair commenting that those serving at the local tier were “not education experts”. Those that did delegate responsibilities such as teaching and learning to academy committee level or equivalent found a “load of responsibility” had been shifted. Others utilised or created committees to delegate and pass decision-making on from the main trust board to broaden capacity.

As covered in section 2.1, a number of those surveyed and interviewed sat on, chaired or attended academy committees as well as being on the trust board. A number of participants in phase two also said that their fellow trustees sat on local academy committees, usually one per school within the MAT, which helped the trust board avoid sitting within an “ivory tower”. It was also said that this came in useful for Ofsted inspections which sometimes require a trustee to attend. This allowed each trustee to demonstrate their knowledge of their link school and did not rely solely on the chair or vice chair.

c) Executive team

Most chairs mentioned delegating responsibilities to executive leaders. One chair also said that their vice chair had previously been looking after the review of “financial procedures” for board meetings but this responsibility had now been taken on by the chief executive and the trust finance manager. Some MAT chairs did this through a conscious effort not to “micromanage the chief executive” and avoiding “the [day-to-day aspects] of executive work”.

For one chair, this made their role “more sustainable” and “improved governance because [...] I was ending up far too personally involved in things that properly belong in the operational sphere”.

Expansion of the leadership team and the appointment of experienced chief executives helped to increase capacity amongst executives which prevented chairs attending events and meetings instead of executives.

4.2: Strategic outlook and MAT growth

Becoming a more strategic chair was also a prominent technique for time management which allowed for “clear blue water” and being able to “take a more high-level approach to the management of the role”. The chair interviewed who had reported spending the least amount of time on their governing duties and responsibilities particularly emphasised this point, noting that they had previously governed within a federation where they were “very much used to dealing with

the operational side of what was going on in schools”. For some, part of being more strategic involved less contact with individual schools as the trust grew (“if you try and work in the same way you did when you were chair, of say a four, five school MAT and you try and replicate that for a 25 school MAT, you're going to go mad”).

4.3: Preparation and reporting

Another method was regulating the length of board meetings and for one chair this involved going into board meetings “aware of what needs to be done, the decisions that need to be taken and ensuring all the directors had the information they require”. Two other chairs suggested that they plan and regulate their commitment through the year by managing the cycle of meetings by planning, structuring and managing things so that “peaks and troughs are minimised”.

“ Good preparation, being efficient in your time, good communication between all of your directors and the CEO helps things to be clear and run smoothly. ”

Improved communication was noted as being one of the key aspects to reduce the time commitment of chairing and this was tackled in a variety of ways. Use of emails and phone calls instead of meetings in person were noted as necessary ways to reduce time travelling to and from the schools and some mentioned using messaging apps and other services to communicate with fellow trustees and to keep updated in a quick and easy manner.

Other more formal forms of reporting were noted as essential for managing the time commitment associated with communication.

- standardised reports for trustees to complete when visiting schools
- reviewing minutes of academy committee meetings instead of attending

- initiating an executive summary for all reports to decrease time needed for reading extensive reports
- forums/executive committees and/or strategy days for all those involved in governance at trust and academy committee level
- group emails set up for chairs of academy committees and executive leaders to get a two-way flow of information

4.4: Effective clerking

Some individuals noted using the MAT's administrative team whilst their clerk/governance professional supported them during preparation for board meetings. Effective communication across the layers of governance was achieved through consistent and effective clerking who could unify communication channels. One chair said that although they did not have one at present they were looking to "provide a central clerk for our local governing bodies to ensure there's clearer communication and understanding of the role of the local governing bodies". Some MAT chairs noted an improvement in their overall effectiveness as chair as a result of hiring or having a "decent clerk".

4.5: Regulating time spent chairing

In phase two, six participants referenced regulating their time commitment in order to make time for other activities in their life and this involved limiting the time that they were contactable or completing their governance duties and tasks such as preparing for board meetings within a set time alongside completing only "necessary" tasks.

One phase two chair that had stepped down since participating in phase one said that, towards the end of their time as chair of trustees, they:

“ [...] decided that I simply wouldn't be available at certain times of the day, so I would manage my time. I would check my email, because I could, first thing in the morning, and then I would check it late afternoon. I think people began to learn that I simply wouldn't respond during other times. ”

Two chairs had also started logging their time commitment of their chairing duties and responsibilities since taking part in phase one of the project and one chair noted that they had noticed a significant fluctuation in their time given per week ("the lowest it's been is two hours and the highest was 42 hours"). Another chair completed timesheets for their work and had begun accounting for their governance duties using this method and identified that their work for the trust had equated to 28 working days.



5.0: The future of the role

Overall, respondents in phase one were mixed on whether they agreed (44.1%) and strongly agreed (10.8%) that they were happy with the amount of time they spent chairing their MAT and these sentiments were broadly mirrored in phase two. Some phase two chairs picked up that 'happy' was not necessarily the term they would use to describe how they felt about their time commitment as it did quantify a large proportion of their time. One chair in full-time employment said that they were not "irritated" by the time commitment and, if they could, they would "like to be able to spend more time on it".

“ Am I completely happy with the time? I don't know. I suppose no, not really. But to do the job properly, which is the principal effort in all of this [...] if that's what it takes, that's what it takes. ”

Those that said they were completely happy with the time commitment said that it was because they felt they could manage their time and if they could not, they would find alternative ways to manage it. These chairs also suggested that they did not mind the time commitment as they obtained vast enjoyment from performing the role even though, at times, it could be demanding. A minority who were unhappy stressed it was due to the tension between chairing and their professional life.

“ I am happy enough with that. At the end of the day, you either give commitment or you don't. You've got to accept that it is a constraint on your time. If it can be managed properly, yes, it can be done. It's very satisfying. ”

Three chairs stressed that new and prospective chairs should not "underestimate" the time commitment of chairing a MAT and another suggested that "it would be good if we could work out a way of it being slightly less time-consuming". For retired chairs, they suggested that their contentment with the time it takes was due to their lack of "opportunity costs" and their availability. One of these chairs also said that although they were happy "personally", "ours is only a small MAT, so the time taken up is quite extensive for somebody who'd be working full-time".

“ I think nobody should underestimate the amount of time, energy, and personal investment [...] that is needed to be an effective chair and to play a full and meaningful part in the development of a trust to ensure that it's delivering what it needs to be deliver for children and young people. ”

5.1: Resignation and succession planning

Most phase two chairs were not planning to resign even if they had considered it for reasons such as wanting to spend more time on family, frustration or falling out with executives, the time impact on their professional career/business and personal reasons such as illness. Many still found enjoyment in the challenge of chairing a MAT and witnessing the success of the trust as a whole in improving outcomes for children. Almost all chairs were involved in the set-up of their MAT and many chairs felt a strong connection with their MAT, with one chair saying they would not look to govern elsewhere once they stepped down due to a deep "personal" involvement with the success of the trust which could not be replicated elsewhere.

“ Sometimes I've thought about resigning because, actually, there is so much work to do and you haven't got time to do it. Most of it is – most of my conversations with myself are about it's time that I drew this to a close. I've told myself that I will give good warning if that happens. ”

Four chairs worried about who would take the chair after they decide to step down, with one participant wondering, "if something happens to me, who has the time to take on the chair?" Others worried more generally, questioning how MATs will continue to "find people who have the capacity and the time to take on these roles effectively?"

One chair who took part in phase one had stepped down prior to taking part in phase two and reasons they gave were an "inability to move things forward" alongside with the workload. Since stepping down as chair of the MAT, they joined a maintained primary school governing board rated 'requires improvement' by Ofsted as "a normal, bog-standard governor".

Despite 29% of phase one chairs saying they had considered resigning because of the amount of time it takes them to chair their MAT, across all responses, only 44.1% had a succession plan in place. Many participants said that others on the board were hesitant to step forward and take on the role due to the time commitments despite attempts by one participant to "coax someone to shadow me and become my successor" and this individual's board currently had no vice chair for the same reason that fellow trustees did not want the additional commitment. Similarly, two chairs indicated that this was a reason for why they got into the role which consisted of "a bit of arm twisting if I'm honest". To combat this, some chairs were looking to recruit trustees to the board in the hope that they "could become chair".

5.2: Should the role be paid?

Thoughts on remuneration from surveyed participants were split: 31.2% agreed or strongly agreed that chairs should be paid whilst 37.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remainder of respondents put a neutral response suggesting indifference.

In telephone interviews, most were inclined to disagree with payment as it would alter the nature of the role and could change the kind of applicants and “not necessarily for the better”. Despite this, many said they could see “logical” arguments for payment particularly when comparing the role with paid non-executives in other industries. Three participants also noted increased diversity as an area which could be improved with remuneration. For one chair, it would also help them justify time spent on the MAT against other competing demands, such as work commitments.

“ I’ve got the time available. What I’m more concerned about is how I make sure that the guys that I’ve got at the present time and other people like them, from different backgrounds, different diversities, how do I make sure that they can be available to do my job? I haven’t come to the example yet of any great ideas except perhaps that it might be extremely useful to be able to pay them. ”

Even with these arguments, participants were reluctant to accept pay for performing their role from school budgets as “to pay someone appropriately for the role would be so impossible within the financial structure of the systems”. Similarly, one MAT chair who admitted that remuneration would “make it easier” to chair, emphasised that they “would not want to detract from tight budgets already”. Three chairs

also resisted claiming expenses for their role, with one chair saying they were “financially out of pocket as a result of taking on the role” and one knew that “none” of their trustees claimed expenses either “even though they’re entitled to”.

“ Morally I can’t really [support remuneration] when school budgets are so horrendous and we’re kind of scrapping for every penny, morally I can’t see anyway of justifying paying me to do what I do, if that’s taking money away that [which] could be spent in the classroom. ”

Only two chairs in the telephone interviews stated that would like to be paid. However, all participants agreed that being pay would not change the inherent reason why and how they chair their MAT.



6.0: Discussion

This research sheds further light on the responsibilities undertaken by MAT chairs across England and the associated time commitment, identifying that the role can be both multi-faceted and subject to variation dependent on the circumstances of the MAT and the chair. While on average, MAT chairs reported spending an average of 371.8 hours per year on their governance duties, equating to just under 50 days per year, there was significant variation in the time each chair gave to the role with a startling 1,161 hours difference between the individuals devoting the least and most amount of time. Apart from attending full trust board meetings, no governance tasks were undertaken universally by MAT chairs highlighting that only core duty shared by all MAT chairs was chairing these meetings. Other widely completed duties were meeting with executives, visiting schools and conducting CEO appraisals whilst training and development, attending conferences and stakeholder engagement activities were less frequently undertaken.

Meanwhile, those performing dual-roles such as attending academy committees or being members of the trust lengthened their time commitment. MAT chairs also undertook duties at academy level as well as trust level such as appraising and appointing heads of school indicating that some were hesitant to delegate these responsibilities down to executive or academy committee level. Employment status was also amongst the factors that had the largest amount of influence over the time it took to chair with retirees devoting nearly a third more time than their employed counterparts. It is interesting that all retired chairs said they would not chair their MAT whilst working full-time and all working chairs that were interviewed did note some form of conflict between their professional life and voluntary role. Many MAT chairs who worked were self-employed and enjoyed a flexible working schedule that allowed them to make time to perform their role.

But the research shows that the role in itself, is not necessarily the only driver of time spent by the individual, but the vast differences in how MATs are being run and how they are adapting to their own evolution. MAT circumstances was found to have impact on the chair's time commitment such as when forming the trust or in-taking new schools although those that said new schools had no impact on the time it took to chair emphasised that their board had created a sustainable model where new schools would fit within an existing system. MAT size was shown to have a limited impact on the time it took to chair despite the vast majority of MAT chairs agreeing that an increase in size had increased the time they spend chairing (83.1%).

This research also had a clear practical aim to identify tactics and strategies that could help MAT chairs reduce the time it took them to chair and in turn find ways of making the role more sustainable amongst concerns that chairing a MAT is a role open to the few individuals with enough time. Delegation was the most widely cited tactic for managing and reducing the time commitment of the chair although some were hesitant to delegate particularly to fellow trustees for fear of exacerbating the time commitment of these individuals. Having a wide range of skills on the trust board was key to delegating but some felt they could not effectively deploy their fellow trustees' skills as they could not give the same time commitment offered by the chair.

In regard to the sustainability of the role, it is perhaps concerning that only 44.1% of MAT chairs had in place a succession plan in phase one while phase two findings emphasised the difficulty MAT chairs encountered in finding a successor who was willing to take on the responsibilities of the chair after their resignation. Payment was a recurring

solution noted to combat recruitment difficulties but few chairs wholeheartedly expressed support for this especially if reimbursement came directly from already stretched school budgets. All MAT chairs in phase two had never received payment for their role, with some noting that taking on the role had had the opposite effect as they never claimed expenses. Instead, all motivations for chairing their MAT were entirely outside of monetary gain. All 18 MAT chairs in phase two, even the two chairs that were positive about remuneration, stressed that payment would not in any way affect the way in which they chair their MAT.

Only a third of survey respondents in phase one indicated that they would support payment for MAT chairs signifying an overall rejection of the notion of trustee payment. Instead, this research emphasises that in essence, all MAT chairs share few common duties aside from chairing and those spending the least amount of time are likely to delegate additional responsibilities elsewhere. This would suggest that the role of a MAT chair, under normal circumstances, can be completed in a comparable timeframe to other trustees in the charity sector when appropriately supported by those at an executive and governance level.

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