National Governance Association
FOR SCHOOLS & TRUSTS

future chairs
The succession solution for school boards

Visible Governance in schools

Chairing a board:
developing governance, sharing leadership

National Governance Association
October 2020

The expert organisation for school governors, trustees and clerks

1. Introduction and overview

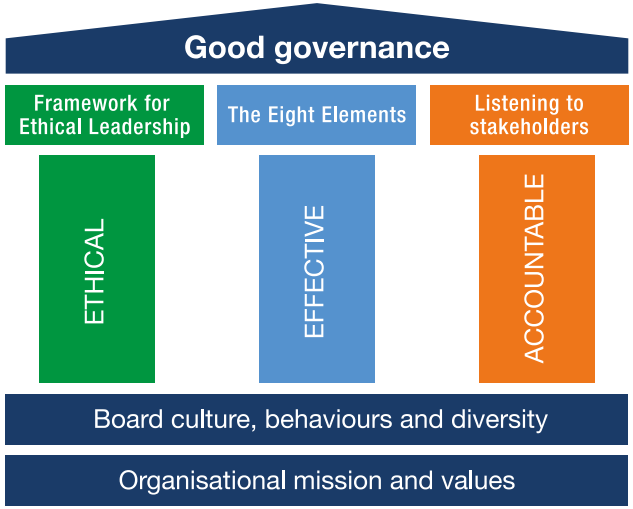
Author: Emma Knights, Chief Executive

Good governance is vital to any successful organisation fulfilling its purpose. In the state-funded sector, there is the added task of accountability for not only pupils receiving the education they need and deserve, but ensuring that public money is used well. Governing boards are central to the effective accountability of schools and ensuring children and young people reach their potential.

> "Governance determines who has the power, who makes the decisions, how other players make their voice heard, and how account is rendered."
> Institute on Governance, Canada

As in so many sectors, in state-funded schools in England governing boards are responsible for considerable decision-making; it is in their power to delegate decision-making to others but they retain responsibility. This model of collective decision-making with collective responsibility is common across the globe, devised to prevent poor governance by an all-powerful individual.

Each governing board must have a chair. That chair is the first among equals and, while expected to ensure the various governance functions of the board are conducted, that person is not solely responsible for any. Although the chair has no individual power, they play an absolutely crucial role in setting the culture of the governing board. This is not a position of decision-making, but one of considerable influence and one harnessed often to achieve good governance. The chair may need to take chair's action in an emergency, but any such action should be rare and must be reported to the whole governing board as soon as possible. The governing board is the corporate entity, power and authority rests with the board as a whole.



Good governance must be ethical, effective and accountable. Good chairing is one of NGA's eight elements of effective governance. A good chair will help put those other seven elements in place. By its very nature, almost all of the work of this critical role happens behind closed doors. A good chair does not seek the limelight.

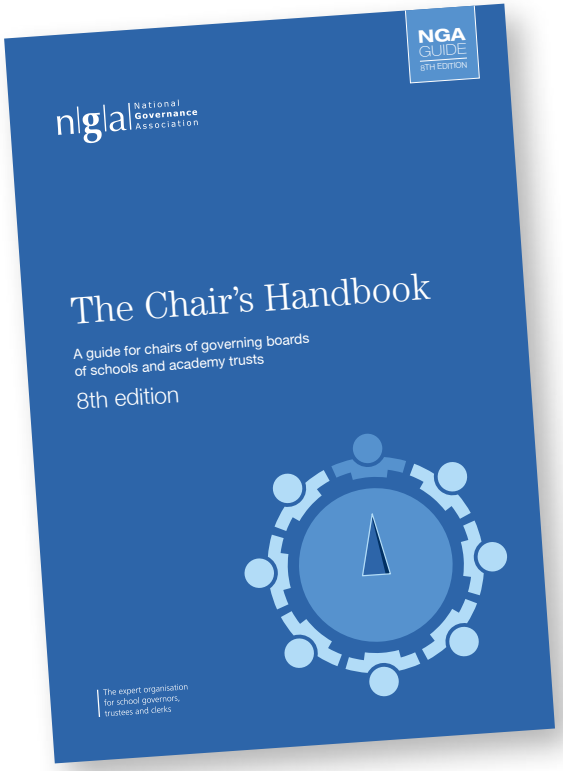
> "This Leading governors resource captures all the key messages. I am delighted, but not surprised, that since it was first published in September 2012 it has remained among the most highly sought after NCTL resources. I am sure this updated edition will continue to be of great value to chairs and those that work with and support them."
>
> Lord Nash, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools in the foreword of Leading Governors, published jointly by the National College of Teaching and Leadership and NGA, 2014

There was quiet celebration a decade ago when board leadership was accepted as part of school leadership, and another eight years ago as the National College's Chairs Development programme was being put into place, there was much dialogue across the sector about the importance and nature of this board leadership role. Although of course mentioned in the Department for Education's (DfE) Governance Handbook, this discourse has now subsided. One might argue that this relative lack of emphasis is because the debate is well-trodden and role is now widely understood and valued; however we do not think this is the case. Leadership and how to lead well needs constant discussion, reflection and refinement.

NGA's eight elements of effective governance

"The chair, with support from the vice chair and the clerk/governance professional, is responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of the board and has a vital role in setting the highest of expectations for professional standards of governance. It is the chair's role to give the board clear leadership and direction, keeping it focused on its core strategic functions. A chair should encourage the board to work together as an effective team, building their skills, knowledge and experience."

DfE Governance Handbook, October 2020



This report aims to raise the issues of leading school and trust boards once again in the discourse, to keep these absolutely crucial roles visible, without creating hero chairs. This is not a how to guide: that role is fulfilled by the NGA's Chairs Handbook which is updated every two years. Although the art of chairing does not change that much, the educational context school and trust governing boards are operating within can do.

The NGA handbook comprehensively covers the five components of the chair's role:

- leading and developing the team of governors/trustees,
- building the relationship with the headteacher/CEO and ensuring their accountability,
- leading school improvement,
- leading the business of the governing board, including working with the clerk, and
- ensuring a succession plan.

We draw from both the extensive literature on board activity in other sectors as well as NGA's own research, and also our experience of working with many governing boards of both academy trusts and local authority-maintained (LA) schools. This has led to a little more emphasis in the 2020 edition of the Chair's Handbook on:

- the three mindsets of governance: generative, strategic and fiduciary
- managing the dynamics in the boardroom, and
- building trust with the rest of the board and school leaders.

We hope that this report also acts as a celebration of those who step forward to lead governing boards and acts as reminder to others in the sector of the considerable ask of volunteers. In all our dealings with chairs we are reminded just how engaged, informed and reflective they are, and the information summarised here bears this out. The commitment is huge, and it is one we have estimated (using our data on time and salaries) to be worth in the range of £145 million a year.

The system is taking these leaders too much for granted. Recent research commissioned by the DfE from National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that before COVID-19 nine out of ten school leaders felt adequately supported and challenged by their governing boards. Clearly this is not a perfect score, but one to be proud of nonetheless. The volunteers tell us they do not do it for thanks, but to give back. However, NGA was also disappointed by this lack of recognition for them and what they do in the most recent Birthday Honours list too.

COVID-19 has tested – and continues to test – the whole country and never has it been a more difficult time to be a professional school leader. During this period, board leaders have been supporting headteachers, chief executives and other senior leaders with more care and diligence than ever before: if the relationship is working well, as the NFER research shows it is in most trusts and schools, no one will understand the pressure that a headteacher or chief executive is under as much as the chair. That does not mean the chair is able to control the context which is causing the challenges, far from it in these times of COVID-19. But it does mean there is someone to call on when times are tough, to share concerns, act as a sounding board, look to for support and to give permission (not that permission should be needed) to look after themselves and encourage them to take a break to ensure balance and that all important good judgement remains. Board leaders have also themselves felt pressures, and as well as those relating to their chairing role, there will be personal repercussions of COVID-19, whether financial, with health and with family. Yet their generosity to their schools and trusts, staff, parents, pupils and communities remained shining through locally, and it is NGA's role to make this light visible nationally.

We also need to recognise the strains on the role and act to reduce them. First, there is a fragility built into a system which relies on quarter of a million volunteers at any time. Healthy governance requires boards to plan their turnover and their future leadership. If we consider that volunteers spend an average of eight years (two terms of office) on

a board – and this is currently likely to be a slight over-estimate – that means we need 30,000 new volunteers every year. It is no wonder that the system struggles to find those people. This is far more than other voluntary services, for example magistrates.

The general public do not have much awareness of the opportunity to volunteer to govern schools, and we suggest here that central government needs to be more proactive in promoting this civic leadership opportunity. Not all new volunteers have the time or initially the confidence to step into the chair, but if chairs serve four years on any one board, then that means we need about 5,000 new chairs each school year. Putting a number on this may help focus the collective minds to the scale of the issue, just as our Future Chairs pilot has tried to focus individual boards on succession planning.

Second, the workload has increased for most board leaders over the past decade. We used to repeat the figure, borrowed from the charity sector at the time, that generally being chair should take up no more than 20 days a year, equal to about half a day for each week of term-time. However, as we spell out, this is not the common experience of chairs in schools and academy trusts. For some, especially those in full-time employment, volunteering becomes unsustainable. To create a system which prevents those in full-time employment from leading boards would not be healthy.

Research has demonstrated the great variability with which the role is approached which points to a continuing need for sharing of good practice. Chairs employed full-time tended to adopt tactics to reduce the time taken by the voluntary role. The sharing of leadership across the board becomes not just desirable, but a necessity. Co-chairs are an important option, often overlooked with only 4% of chairs reported they were a co-chair in the annual school governance survey 2020, suggesting this model needs more consideration.

Vice chairs are sometimes not given enough of a role, with some people thinking of it almost as an honorary title. This should not be the case. Indeed NGA commends the appointment of two vice chairs to share leadership more widely and as not every vice chair wants to become the chair. NGA's role description should help governing boards embrace vice chairs in a meaningful way.

All governance research over time has shown that there is a group of leaders within the board, those who commit more time to the role, perhaps also chairing committees. The skill is for those not to become an inner circle, who appear to be making decisions outside board meetings, but for them to enable the board as a whole to function more effectively and to develop their fellow governors and trustees. Great leaders share knowledge and empower those around them, and chairs and vice chairs who work closely together and share workloads support the growth of the whole board, who in turn need to rely on the board leaders less. If other members of the board are more involved from the beginning the role of chair or vice chair might not seem so daunting a step in future.

Thirdly, as covered in detail in The Chair's Handbook, the role is demanding, complex and multifaceted, and can be even more so when chairing the board of trustees of a multi academy trust (MAT), with responsibilities for many schools and large numbers of pupils. The DfE's Competency Framework has 61 competencies particularly for chairs, over and above all the rest for other governors and trustees. Without trivialising the challenges, the Handbook contains many practical pointers about how to manage it well in practice. One very important change we urge of chairs of MAT boards is to make sure that they are not doubling up as a trust member or serving on academy committees: this is not good governance practice.

Developing good board leadership requires specific continuing professional development (CPD). The DfE has for the past eight years funded free development programmes for chairs, vice chairs and future chairs. Although not at the level of subsidy for professional leaders, this has been hugely welcome and without this subsidy, far fewer volunteers would have been able to take up opportunities. Despite NGA's protestations, governing boards are slow to provide reasonable budgets for their own development. However the good news is that all the data available shows that those leading boards do avail themselves of many training and other learning opportunities.

Networking opportunities are also very much valued by those governing, but especially board leaders. There are many local options, which take many forms, including more formal local governance associations. In some places networks relying again on voluntary input to coordinate them have been struggling, although being able to meet remotely has made it easier and less expensive for a great number of chairs and others to get together to share practice. NGA has listened to requests from members and in 2021 will be setting up chairs' networks. Our Leading Governance development programmes have used action learning sets successfully for years, some going onto be self-sustaining, and that practice has much wider implications.

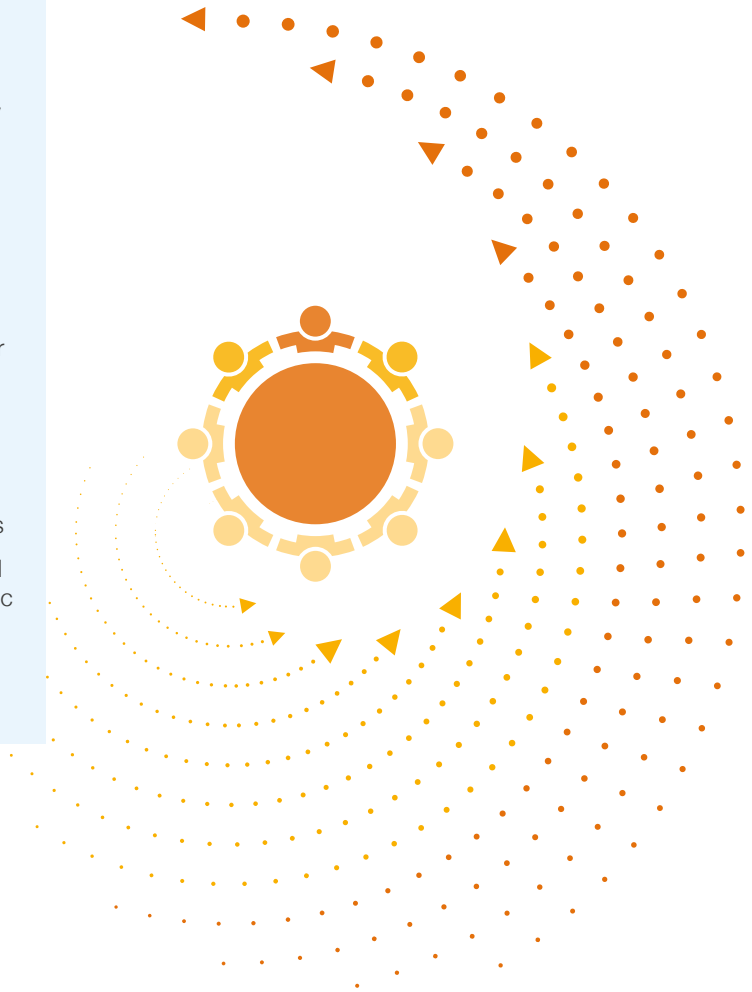
> "The cluster groups were extremely useful, and this is something we have continued since. I have had some very difficult challenges to deal with since becoming chair, and this group has been instrumental in providing not only moral support, but high quality impartial advice and guidance, where we have been able to pool our collective knowledge to support each other."
>
> Chair participating in the Leading Governance development programme

A quarter of chairs tell us the role is unmanageable and more would prefer their time commitment to be reduced; yet they continue to give freely to the school or trust, and in return have a sense of satisfaction in witnessing its successes and those of its 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. Often at this point in the discussion, the notion of paying those governing – or at least chairs – will be raised. However, in spite of the vast contributions of those governing, the research shows that a significant majority of chairs are indifferent or against remuneration. There is insufficient support or evidence to show that remuneration is the solution, or the best value of what would be a substantial investment.

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, the contribution being made becomes more obvious, at least obvious to us who exist to support board leaders. Perhaps not yet obvious to all within the education sector and certainly not to those outside its walls. The primary focus of governors and trustees is on improving pupil outcomes, and effective leadership of governing boards is instrumental in achieving this.

Board leadership: where we are now

1. We require approximately 5,000 new chairs a year for the state school system in England
2. Chairs contribute the equivalent of about £145 million a year to the school system and this greatly outweighs the contribution the system makes to their development
3. The workload is substantial: it is common for a chair to be giving the equivalent of a working day a week during school term
4. Although the core activities are similar, the way in which the role is carried out by individuals is very different with the time committed varying enormously
5. The time commitment is a major contributing factor to others not being able to step up to chair
6. Vice chairs are not utilised as much or as well as they could be
7. The research shows those leading boards are generally committed to their own development both in governance knowledge and chairing skills
8. The lack of recognition for the role and for school governorship/trusteeship more generally as a civic contribution adds to the difficulty of recruiting to boards from the general public, who are often unaware of the opportunity



2. Who leads governing boards

Author: Kirstie Ebbs, Public Relations Manager

Drawn from NGA's school governance in 2020 survey, compared with earlier years, the following information details the demographic of chairs of governing boards, why people take on the role and who wants to lead a board in the future.

Age

Chairs are predominately older with only 5% aged under 40. The majority (57%) are aged in their fifties and sixties. Vice chairs are slightly younger overall with half aged between 50 and 69 years, while 7% are aged under 40. Looking at all other governors and trustees (excluding those in a chairing role), 44% of volunteers are aged between 50 and 69 years and 17% are aged under 40 years.

A third of chairs who are aged under 40 said that feeling they had the right skillset (33%) was a contributing factor to their decision to take on the role, compared to half of chairs aged 40 and over (52%). A higher proportion of chairs 40 and under, however, reported that they took on the role because they wanted to take on the challenge compared to those 40 and over (52% vs 40%).

Almost half (48%) of those aged between 18 and 29 years and 39% of those aged 30 and 39 would consider or plan to become chair. This compares to around a third of those aged between 40 and 49 (30%) and aged between 60 and 69 years (31%).

Gender and LGBTQ+

55% of chairs identify as female and 44% identify as male. However, across all governors and trustees, 60% identify as female and 39% as male. This indicates that although more women volunteer, they are slightly less likely to be chair. Of vice chairs, 60% are female and 39% male while committee chairs are equally split at 50% females and 49% male.

There is disparity across school type and phase. 58% of chairs of LA maintained schools are women, compared to 55% of local academy committee chairs and 50% of chairs of both single and multi academy trusts. This difference may be largely explained by the fact that more maintained schools are primaries and women are even more in the majority on primary school boards (61%). The phases with the highest proportion of female chairs are nursery schools (61%), special schools (58%) and alternative provision (AP)/ pupil referral units (59%) while in secondary schools 51% are women.

Overall 3% of school governance volunteers identify as LGBTQ+, and looking at those in chairing roles 3% also identify this way.

A higher proportion of men said they took on the chairing role because they felt they had the right skills for the role (56%) compared with women (46%) but a higher proportion of women chairs reported that no one else wanted to take on the role (41%) compared to men (30%).

While there are currently more women chairs, 23% of women say that they would consider or plan to become chair compared to 36% of men.

Ethnicity

Most chairs (96%) and vice chairs (94%) are white. Black volunteers make up 0.5% of chairs while 1.3% of chairs are Asian, 0.8% are of mixed heritage and 0.3% from another ethnic backgrounds. When looking at governors and trustees who are not in any chairing role, 91% of governors and trustees are white, 1.4% are Black, 2.7% are Asian, 1.8% are mixed heritage and 0.7% from another ethnic background.

Despite the very high proportion of white chairs, governors and trustees from ethnic minorities are significantly more willing and positioned to take on the role of chair.

6% of Black governors and trustees are due to be a future chair as part of a succession plan, while 48% would consider taking on a chairing role. 2% of Asian governors/ trustees are lined up to be chair which is equal to volunteers from mixed/multiple ethnic groups (2%) and white volunteers (2%). However, 40% of Asian governors and trustees would consider a chairing role in future compared to 32% of volunteers from multiple/mixed ethnic groups and 27% of white volunteers.

Employment

41% of chairs are retired, 30% are employed and 23% are self-employed with only 6% having different work circumstances (looking after home and family, studying or unemployed). Vice chairs are more likely than chairs to be employed (43%) and 39% of vice chairs are retired and 12% self-employed. By comparison, 32% of governors and trustees overall are retired, 45% are employed, 18% are self-employed and 8% have different work circumstances. Those in employment are therefore less likely to be in chairing roles than other governance volunteers, with the gap filled by those with more time or flexibility: retirees and the self-employed.

In the 2019 school governance survey, of those governors and trustees in employment, 32% of respondents said they were given paid time off by their employer for school governance duties and a further 12% received unpaid time off. 3% respondents were refused time off while 30% said that it was not applicable to their work arrangement.

The current practice of virtual governance, some of which may remain in the long term, has had the benefit of requiring less time off work for volunteer duties, including saving travel time. Although not all governance can be carried out

remotely, familiarity with technical solutions by all concerned has the potential to support the sustainability of the role and potentially encourage a more diverse range of chairs.

Motivation

There are many reasons people want to lead their board. Half of chairs said that they have taken on the role as they felt they had the right skillset and 40% said that they stepped up because they wanted to take on the challenge. 57% of other governors and trustees do not want to become chair, and even among vice chairs, the 39% who do not wish to step up is concerning.

> "I think the most enjoyable aspects are working in a sector that I love and feel very passionate about, in a strategic position where I can continue to develop my skills and knowledge of how we as an education system and leaders in the education system can make the biggest difference to children and young people, and us, society as a whole in the future. Being chair in the trust has enabled me to have that that kind of role."
>
> MAT chair in 2020 time to chair research

> "Top of all is seeing our schools thrive. We take on schools that often have problems and – through the skills of the leadership team, the executive team, we seem to improve the schools. There's an enormous satisfaction in feeling that the trust that you are chair of, due to the efforts of the leaders rather than anybody else, through the executive's efforts – that children's lives are improving. It really is – that does really give you a good feeling. Purely personally though, it's also always good to work with good people and we've got a great board and the leadership team are great people too in their different ways and it's a pleasure to work with them. There's a lot of personal satisfaction too."
>
> MAT chair in 2020 time to chair research

Experience

The length of time someone has been governing influences whether they are chair. Most chairs (64%) have governed for at least five years while 12% have governed for one or two years. Just 2% of chairs responding took their position within their first 12 months of governing.

Only 40% have previously been vice chairs or committee chairs within their own governing board, and 15% had previously been chair elsewhere. Chairs of MATs (25%) and single academy trusts (21%) are more likely to have been chair of a school or trust board previously compared to LA schools (12%) and academy committees (16%). This suggests that chairs within trusts are likely to have remained in place after the conversion process or have been drawn from a school within the trust. Secondary school chairs (23%), special school chairs (25%) and especially AP chairs (44%) are more likely to have previous experience chairing at another school/trust compared with 14% of primary chairs and 16% of nursery chairs. This may be in part because parents governing in primaries often continue to govern when their children go to secondary school; 41% of chairs began as parent governors.

Skills and stepping up

Chairs in MATs and maintained schools were most likely to say that feeling confident that they have the right skills for the role (52% in maintained and 53% MATs) was one of their reasons for stepping up, but chairs in single academy trusts (44%) were less likely to say this. Secondary chairs, also slightly more likely to be male, were the most likely to report having the right skillset for the role as a reason for stepping up (57%) compared with 50% of primary chairs, 48% of nursery chairs, 48% of AP chairs and 38% of special school chairs. It is notable that in any type or phase of school only up to half of chairs stepped up because they felt they had the necessary skills for the role, showing the importance of high-quality development training.

Those who hold some form of chairing responsibility (eg vice chairs and committee chairs) are more likely to report that they would consider becoming chair than those who held no chairing roles highlighting the importance of encouraging others to build on their chairing skills.

Where next?

To create a strong pipeline of future leaders and to improve the diversity of board leadership,

NGA will:

- Through the Young Governors' Network and BAME network governors hub (in conjunction with the BAMEed network) encourage and equip governors and trustees from underrepresented groups to take on chairing positions
- Support more governors and trustees, and especially board leaders, in employment to highlight the value of their role to their employer, and to ask for time off to carry out their governance duties.

Policymakers, the wider education sector and employers can:

- Build on the enthusiasm shown in particular by young governors and trustees and those from ethnic minorities by targeting them for support and leadership development opportunities
- Support more employed governors and trustees to take on chairing roles by providing flexibility, paid time off and recognition for their staff who govern.

3. Experiences of being a board leader

Author: Hannah Garrington, Research Officer

Research confirms that chairing is a considerable undertaking. In 2014, a large-scale survey of over 7,500 governors and trustees by James et al. found that 65% of chairs spent more than 17 hours per month on governance. The recent research from NFER shows that "chairs spend almost double the amount of time a term on governance activities compared to governors/trustees (equivalent to approximately 9 days per term, and even more so for chairs of MAT trust boards)".

NGA has delved into this role in much more detail with two projects. In NGA's 2016 study of the time it takes to chair, the median total time spent across the sample was 27 hours 30 minutes a month, which equates to 44 days a year or a little under one working day per week (where a working day is seven hours). The lowest figure was 7 hours 10 minutes a month and the highest 59 hours 20 minutes, around two working days a week.

NGA's 2020 study on the time it takes to chair a MAT found that on average chairing a trust board takes just under 50 days a year. However, again there is significant variation in the time MAT chairs take to perform their role. The difference in time taken to chair between the individuals giving the most and least amount of time was approximately over 1,100 hours a year (about 150 working days).

The annual governance survey 2020 asked about the manageability of the role: 17% of governors and trustees felt their role is unmanageable around their professional and/or personal commitments increasing to a quarter of chairs (24%) of governing boards saying the same. Given the time being spent, it is perhaps surprising that this figure is not higher, especially given the informal feedback and conversations chairs have with NGA.

How do chairs spend their time?

All governing boards of state schools in England and its committees must meet at least three times a year and naturally, attending board meetings constituted a large proportion of time across the 'time to chair' studies. In our 2016 study, participants outlined the numerous activities that are associated with preparing for meetings including reading past meeting minutes, writing papers, reading reports and liaising with clerk or the head about the agenda and on average this took just under three hours of preparation with the meetings themselves taking an additional two hours. In our 2020 study of MAT chairs (carried out pre-COVID), trust board meetings accounted for 65 hours of respondent's time per year, which including time spent preparing and chairing meetings accounted of 12.1 hours per meeting. This was over double that of the chairs of the first study, the vast majority of whom governed single schools. This did not include time spent on attending committee meetings which over 80% of respondents said they did and which accounted for 7.2 hours.

> "Another factor that affects the amount of time I think is the fact that I find it fun. You know if you do something and you're actually enjoying it, it doesn't feel like hard work at all, it feels like having a great time. The passion and the enjoyment are also factors that actually mean I do give more than I might otherwise do if I weren't really enjoying and just doing it from a sense of obligation".
> Chair in NGA's a question of time (2016)

Considerable time was also spent by the chair meeting with their organisation's senior executive leader (SEL). There is no blueprint to how many meetings chairs should have with their lead executive and this varied considerably. Chairs in the 2016 study most commonly reported meeting their SEL once a fortnight for between 90 and 130 minutes, although with some chairs met leaders once a week and others did not meet with their SEL face-to-face at all during the course of the one-month study. Those who were retired tended to spend more time meeting with executives. Similarly, in the 2020 study, most chairs reported meeting with the CEO weekly or fortnightly, but said these could vary in their formality, with some meetings being conducted over phone to keep updated on the goings on in the trust. However the average time per meeting for MAT chairs was double that of the 2016 study, taking on average four hours per meeting and accounting for nearly ten working days across a year.

As the leader of the board, organising governance and communicating with fellow governors or trustees was also a commonly reported task but for the most part this took less time and could be done through the use of technology.

A much lengthier activity was recruiting new governors or trustees to the board. In 2016's study, half of the participants had spent time recruiting governors/trustees, which considering the diarists were documenting only one month of their governance duties, demonstrates that recruitment is an ongoing task. These sentiments were echoed in by participants in 2020's study with one respondent commenting that "no sooner have you got a fully populated board [then] someone retires, resigns and moves on".

Stakeholder engagement was also noted as a large part of the chair's role in both studies with engagement being conducted across a variety of groups, including pupils, the community and in 2016's study, most commonly, parents.

This was found to be less true in 2020's study of MAT chairs whose engagement time was taken up instead with officials such as from the Department for Education, including Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs).

Challenges of the role

In the annual school governance survey 2020, chairs were asked which aspects of the role they found most challenging. The most common aspects mentioned were 'workload', 'time', 'expectations' and 'responsibility' volunteer management such as getting others on the board to 'play their part', managing relationships with others such as the executive leader and agencies as well as keeping on top of and understanding issues such as education policy, technical information and regulations. The actual chairing of meetings was mentioned by far fewer respondents demonstrating that chairing a board is a much wider role than simply managing meetings.

What influences the time commitment?

The individual's school or trust's circumstances were shown to influence time spent governing by the chairs in both studies. In research from 2016, a small minority of chairs had spent time researching academy status while a larger proportion had invested time into keeping updated with education news. The latter was also true for participants in the 2020 study where the time commitment was impacted when increasing the number of schools within the MAT.

The time spent on the role fluctuates by time of year with autumn term cited as the busiest period in both studies, largely due in part to an increased number of meetings, monitoring outcomes from summer results and appraisal of the lead executive.

Even more influential was the individual's own circumstances, most notably their employment status. In 2016, it was found that those who worked full time, in general, spent less time on governing than those who were retired or were self-employed on a part-time basis. There were similar findings in 2020 with MAT chairs who were retired or semi-retired spending a fourth more time on their governance role per year. Many retirees also reported that they believed that they would find it extremely difficult to manage the role if they were still in full-time employment.

Making the role manageable

There are tactics deployed by chairs in the studies to reduce the time needed to a manageable level. One of the most important aspects of this was ensuring that in their governance role maintained a strategic focus. This was done by ensuring that responsibilities were delegated to the senior leadership team (SLT) and that the relationship with the SEL was one which did not involve micromanagement. Ensuring that the SLT has the right composition with the necessary skills was key to ensuring sufficient capacity among executives, including to carry out full range of business management.

Delegation was the most widely cited tactic by chairs, and support from the rest of the governing board was key to increasing the capacity of the chair and reducing their time commitment. Participants emphasised the importance of a skilled board which allowed them to delegate based on skills and professional background and experiences. In both studies, the vice chair appeared underutilised, and some chairs in the 2020 study seemed hesitant to delegate their responsibilities to others on the board. However, those that delegated noted that that the act of delegating meant they did not have the 'sense of me having responsibility of everything: we work very much as a team'.

Another advantage of making changes to ensure the role is manageable is the creation of a more sustainable expectation for future board leaders, whereas an unrealistic amount of time being spent may put others on the board off stepping up.

Where next?

To make the role more manageable for chairs and more attractive to future chairs,

NGA will continue to:

- Continue to improve our services specific to clerks and governance professionals
- Support chairs to manage their workload through the provision of information and guidance, encouraging them to be open to delegation, highlighting what can be delegated and how to do so effectively
- Advocate for co-chairing and the role of vice chairs
- Through its communications and guidance, encourage other volunteers on the board to step up and take on their fair share of the work

Policymakers can:

- Commission and/or conduct further research into the workload and manageability of the role and look at what changes can be made to ensure sustainability of the model
- Through official sources eg the Governance Handbook encourage the chair to spread out the roles and responsibilities to the full board, and encourage models such as co-chairing.
- Promote the value of having an effective clerk who can provide expert advice and guidance to ensure the board runs efficiently, and ensure that clerks and other governance professionals have access to affordable, quality career development

4. Recruiting board leaders

Author: Simon Richards, Chairs Development Manager

Difficulty of recruitment

Over time the task of finding a good chair and vice chair has been getting more difficult, with NGA's survey results showing an 8% increase in perceived difficulty over the past seven years. In the school governance 2020 survey, 35% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is difficult to attract a good chair and vice chair. However, looking at the responses from current chairs only, 43% say that chair recruitment is difficult and 46% of SELs said the same.

There is little variation between school structures with trust boards perceiving recruitment as more difficult (38%) than LA maintained federations (32%). There was however quite a significant regional variation with finding a good chair or vice chair perceived as easiest in the North East (22%) and hardest in the South East (40%). This differential needs further exploration to understand the reasons behind these differences.

In addition, when asked whether they had considered resigning from their board in the next 12 months, chairs were slightly more likely to say yes (29%) compared to governors and trustees without any chairing responsibilities (22%). The main reasons cited were the time commitment or a change in personal circumstances. 12% of chairs aged under 40 report that they are or have considered resigning as a result of inadequate time to fulfil the role compared to just 5% of chairs 40 and over.

Barriers to recruitment and succession

Overwhelmingly the most frequently given reason NGA has heard (through the many succession planning workshops it has run) for existing governors/trustees not putting themselves forward to chair their board is the time commitment, either actual or perceived. Some chairs unwittingly create the perception that the role takes more time than it really has to by failing to delegate to others or even occasionally involving themselves in operational matters. Holders of chairing roles have a responsibility to facilitate succession by being a role model of effectiveness. The current chair as a tough act to follow is too often cited as the barrier to finding a successor. On the other end of the scale, weak and ineffective chairs can also be a barrier as skilled successors recognise the scale of the task ahead in bringing board leadership and effectiveness up to a suitably professional level.

Other reasons that governors/trustees commonly give for not putting themselves forward to chair are personal factors like a lack of self-confidence or lack of the right skillset, while others are due to the nature of role itself including the level of responsibility and accountability and a fear of Ofsted. Others are practical matters like not understanding the role, the workload and building a relationship with the lead executive.

Length of service and moving around

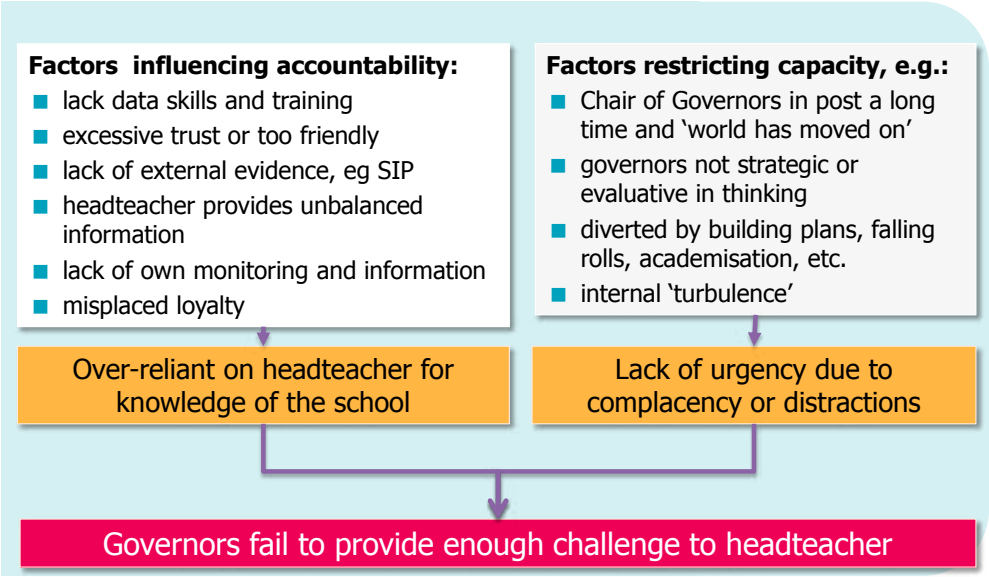
Other sectors tend to have a limit to the number of terms of office at one organisation. NGA recommends that any governor or trustee should not chair the same governing board for more than six years. The most recent survey data on this subject reveals that almost a fifth of chairs have been in post for longer than that. It is therefore encouraging that over 80% of chairs have been in post for less than six years, although this statistic has not changed significantly in recent years. The reasons for this are varied and anecdotal at best, and while the barriers to finding a suitable successor are inevitably a factor, there are still too many chairs that believe the role is theirs until they choose to step down and that length of service is an indicator of success and effectiveness.

Research was carried out by Ofsted a few years ago on declining schools and why good governance was not carrying out its expected function of identifying and turning round the decline. They identified 10 factors, one of which was long service of the chair.

This is not to say by any means that all long serving individuals are ineffective, but that a healthy system would not be structured in this way. Instead successful chairs can move to other schools and trusts before they reach the six year point. This has the added advantage of moving expertise and experience around the system, rather than every new governor or trustee joining a board starting from scratch. This may not appeal to everyone as volunteers develop an affection for a particular school or trust, but that can lend itself to another of Ofsted's findings of misplaced loyalty. Governance literature (explained in more detail in the Chair's Handbook) points out that those serving on boards need to be close enough to understand the organisation's aims, operations and cultures, yet far enough removed to have some perspective, distance, and detachment. They need to embrace the institution's mission and values, but with little at risk personally or professionally. From this vantage point, governing boards should be able to see the larger picture, overall patterns and tell-tale anomalies. Simply taking on board uncritically what is reported by senior leaders is poor practice, and SELs who understand governance will respect and appreciate the added value of that.

> Succession planning arrangements should be in place so that any change in the chair does not impede the board's effectiveness. Although the regulations do not place any restrictions on this, boards should consider carefully how many times they re-elect their chair to a new term of office. In some circumstances, a change of chair may be necessary for the board to remain invigorated and forward looking.
>
> DfE Governance Handbook 2020

A model of what goes wrong in declining schools: problems start when processes to ensure accountability or drive change start to falter



Influential factors

Board dynamics are complex and influenced by a range of objective and subjective factors, sometimes resulting in the most suitable candidate not being elected chair. Ideally the next chair identified by existing board members should have the skills, experience and aptitude to perform the role competently to a high standard and be elected unanimously to the position. However, there are known to be occasions when the best candidate for chair does not accept the role often due to a perceived lack of time availability, even though there are a wide range of approaches to performing the role that accommodate the chair's capacity. A contested election between two candidates is sometimes considered to be a positive situation because there is more than one governor/trustee willing to step up. However, this situation can derive from a power struggle between factions within the board, indicating a dysfunctional board rather than an effective one with chairing strength in depth. Other governors/trustees dislike a contested election, even with a closed ballot, as they can be faced with the dilemma of making the right choice or the expected choice.

Recruiting volunteers onto a board with the specific intention that they move into a chairing role soon after joining the board is a different approach that has been proven to be successful. It allows a board to recruit the right blend of skills and experience it requires at that point in its development, to avoid the conflict that some feel about voting in a contested election and overcome the stalemate created by existing governors'/trustees' reluctance to step up. It is important to provide support and development opportunities for such chairs to facilitate the rapid transition of their existing leadership skills into a school governance context.

Future chairs

Over the past four years, NGA has piloted a DfE-funded recruitment service to support governing boards in target areas to recruit their next chair from outside the board and develop expertise in leadership succession planning. We have established the concept of the future chair – a governor or trustee appointed to the board and elected to a chairing role at a pre-determined future date. The transition period between appointment and taking up the chairing role has been used to conduct training and professional development, generally preparing for a smooth and orderly handover from one chair to the next.

A future chair (or chair-elect) can also be selected from existing board members, with the time to prepare to take on the role. This is a subtle but distinct concept to that of aspiring chair, a governor or trustee who hopes to become chair at some point in the future, but it is not part of a formal plan.

What we have learnt is that candidates with leadership experience and expertise in fields such as senior management, strategic planning, transformative leadership, stakeholder management and corporate/charity governance often have the capacity to quickly transfer their skills into an education governance leadership context and have a positive impact. Such candidates often relish a challenge and are not disenfranchised by the prospect of chairing the board early in their term of office. We have learnt that transparency and honesty about the timescale of ascension to the chair position and the challenges facing the school and board in the first dialogue is essential to gaining commitment, and that flexible interim leadership may be necessary to bridge the gap until the future chair can assume board leadership. We have also proven that these appointments require appropriate support including training, professional development, guidance and access to an experienced independent mentor.

In a limited number of cases, the impact of future chairs recruited through NGA has been sufficiently visible for Ofsted to warrant a reference in their inspection report:

> "The chair of the governing body, although relatively new, is an experienced governor and has a clear vision for the direction of the governing body and the school. She has already had a positive impact on raising the level of challenge to senior leaders."

> "New co-vice chairs of the governing body are discharging their roles with zeal and are determined to raise the profile and expertise of governors through training and partnership links."

Thank you to the people who are volunteering as future chairs and to the mentors who are supporting them in their role.

Succession planning

The challenge of electing or recruiting to chairing roles can be alleviated by planning ahead to ensure that the tenure of the current role-holder is clear and at least one successor is lined up to take over. Succession planning is the process of identifying and developing individuals to equip them with the skills to step into a role when others step down and is about ensuring continuity within an organisation by having the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time. There needs to be the right board culture for successful succession planning, and at its most basic it means starting the recruitment of a successor at least a year before the incumbent leaves the post, and not waiting until they announce their wish to step down. This may require bringing another individual onto the board if there is no interest from serving governors or trustees to take the chair even with support and preparation. Some chairs noted in the time to chair research that their 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.

In the annual governance survey 2020, of the respondents who indicated they would consider taking on a chairing role in the future, only 8% stated that it had agreed that they would take the chair in the future as part of a succession plan. Almost 60% of respondents gave a definite "no" to the question and 30% said yes, indicating the level of reluctance in the system with a 6% decrease in the proportion of respondents who said they would consider becoming chair when the question was first and last asked in 2018.

Positively, a quarter of chairs in the annual governance survey became appointed as part of an agreed succession plan; however more (36%) took on the role 'as no one else wanted to'. Despite the perceived additional responsibilities and expectations of chairing a MAT, chairs of MATs were least likely to say that they became chair 'because no one else wanted the role' (28%) compared to 40% of those chairing single academy trusts, 38% of those chairing maintained schools and 41% of those chairing maintained federations.

The recent report from NFER highlights the value of succession planning to "ensure changes in leadership do not impede the governing body's effectiveness" and said that it "allows governing bodies to create a pipeline of future chairs and vice chairs, and, when linked with appropriate training, ensures those coming through have the right skills".

> "It seems a natural process to have a smooth and seamless transition of leadership, yet this rarely appears to be the case. The course addressed all the relevant issues."
> Delegate feedback on NGA succession planning workshop

Stuck schools

Ofsted defines stuck schools as those that have not been judged to be good since September 2006 and have been inspected at least four times since then, including predecessor school inspection outcomes as part of the history of the school. In August 2019 there were 415 stuck schools (2% of all schools), a reduction of 70 from the previous year, but it is estimated there are still 210,000 pupils being educated in stuck schools. There are several reasons and causes for schools failing to achieve a good inspection outcome across multiple inspections, but one of them must be considered to be the chair. The chair is an influential and important role-holder in every school, but in a stuck or failing school the role can be in practice more crucial than in a good or outstanding school. Anyone who has chaired at a stuck school and not had the capacity to drive rapid improvement should be considered as part of the problem. While an effective chair in isolation cannot improve a school, the status of the role as the most important of the eight elements of effective governance means that an effective chair must be in place to lead the governing board in driving rapid improvement.

Where next?

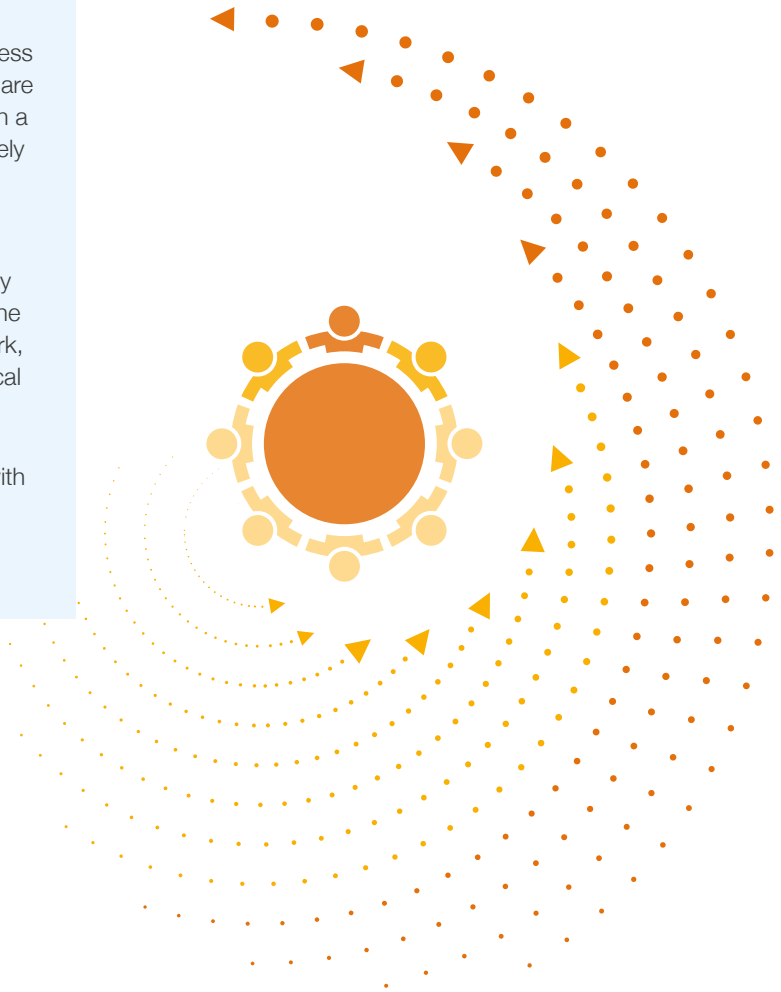
To create a pipeline of volunteers who are willing and skilled to step up to the chair,

NGA will continue to:

- Encourage experienced chairs to move around the system and share their governance knowledge and experience with other schools or trusts that could benefit from it, so boards benefit from appropriate turnover and others have the chance to step up
- Advocate that the role of chair is a professional one which should be filled by a person with the necessary skills, attributes and ethics to carry it out
- Continue to provide guidance, e-learning and interactive workshops on succession planning to support governing boards and trust boards with developing their practice.

Policymakers can:

- Consider introducing a statutory maximum term of office for chairing roles of six years on any one board (and a maximum of two terms of four years for serving on the same board).
- Create an intervention that enables schools that need them (such as those 'stuck' schools or those identified by RSCs as needing so) to access a pool of experienced and effective chairs who are willing to go and chair at a weak school/trust on a long term basis, that such schools are proactively required to use.
- Reinforce that chairing roles should always be filled by governors/trustees who possess the necessary skills to perform the role effectively by strengthening the link between recruitment to the role and the governance competency framework, the role description and the Framework of Ethical Leadership.
- Create a national recruitment campaign for volunteers with emphasis on attracting those with the skills and experience required for chairing, giving similar profile as to other public service roles such as magistrates.



5. Developing and supporting board leaders

Author: Charlotte Harding, Training Programme Manager

Need for training and development

When elected to take the chair for the first time, very few individuals have all the knowledge, skills and experience to do the role well immediately. It is important that chairs can access high-quality professional development not only on subject-specific governance topics but on the skills and knowledge to efficiently manage the board and work effectively with their schools' senior leaders. To carry out these roles well, chairs and vice chairs must be trusted and empowered to have courageous conversations with those around them, both inside and outside board meetings.

This is true for any role undertaken, but particularly important when our actions as governors and trustees directly impact the outcomes of the children and young people that those governing are there to champion.

In an analysis of 84 chairs' 360-degree reviews of their performance, conducted by NGA in 2019, chairs were scored most consistently by others for setting high expectations for conduct and behaviour and creating an atmosphere of open, honest discussion and debate. Those chairs undertaking the appraisal often viewed themselves as less confident, particularly on stakeholder engagement and partnership working. Risk management was another area often identified for development, and most chairs recognised the need for further support with SEL appraisals and making decisions about pay awards. Many chairs said they were not confident in their knowledge of legal, regulatory and financial requirements or statutory guidance and government advice.

Despite undertaking the 360-degree appraisal, many chairs felt they were not well equipped to lead on evidencing the impact of governance and overall board evaluation.

The performance review of board members is seen as a challenge, when open and honest conversations about skills, commitment or tenure are necessary.

Accessing training and development

In the annual school governance survey 2020, 98% of chairs and vice chairs and 96% of committee chairs reported having undertaken some form of training compared with 88% of those who held no chairing responsibilities on the board. This does not vary by type of school, so trustees were just as likely as governors to make time for development.

On NGA's longstanding policy position that high-quality induction training should be mandatory for all governors and trustees, chairs of governing boards were the most likely to support this (97%), followed by vice chairs (94%) and committee chairs and other governors and trustees (92%).

Face-to-face training and online training (eg e-learning and webinars) were the most popular types of training undertaken, but given this data was gathered in April and May, it is likely that the attitudes to e-learning may have changed since then. Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents said that they had taken part in a DfE funded development programme which could include NGA's Leading Governance development for chairs programme.

When NGA re-launched this programme after the re-award of the contract in late 2017, the programme outcomes were clear and that as a result of this CPD, chairs, vice chairs and those aspiring to chair would be able to:

- manage and build a team, build relationships with senior leaders, succession plan, manage change and influence and lead
- be knowledgeable about governance structures and effective delegation and how to work effectively with the clerk
- understand the governance role in school improvement and provide effective challenge on school performance
- be confident when having courageous conversations
- problem solve, network and asses their own effectiveness

Impact of training and development

Around 1,500 chairs have completed, or are currently completing, the Leading Governance development for chairs programme. A recent survey of some of those chairs, vice chairs and future chairs showed that an overwhelming 96% of respondents reported their board has become more effective after taking part in leadership development training with positive impacts being felt across all stakeholder groups. It was clear from our evaluation that development for those that chair impacts many areas of school improvement and when asked which areas had seen the most positive effect, 58% said that performance management had strengthened, 50% said the pupil mobility had stabilised, 42% said that parental engagement had improved and 32% said retention of staff had improved.

Considering the long-lasting influence that such training programmes can have, the development for chairs programme includes elements of networking and peer-to-peer support which are designed to outlast the training programme itself. Chairs often report that the position they hold can be both isolating and challenging, and many have found that having a peer group to draw upon for advice and support has been invaluable. Peer-to-peer collaboration is an integral part of leadership development, allowing an

outward-facing approach that encourages challenging the norm and demonstrating alternative approaches to issues. 99% of leaders who completed the course reported that they have kept in touch with at least one of their peers from the programme.

> "The programme was perfectly timed at a stage when we were beginning to expand further and wanted to look at governance across the Trust. The NGA mentor was an excellent support for the Chair of Trustees."
>
> Chair providing feedback on NGA development for boards programme

On the importance of networks, joint research earlier in 2020 by NGA and Ofsted, 'Governing in unprecedented times', found that "the chairs we spoke to told us how helpful they found the opportunity the focus groups gave them to talk to others governing. They found sharing experiences and learning how others were dealing with similar situations very useful".

All aspects of governance are shown to improve as a result of training. Those that have completed the programme are asked to consider where the programme has had the biggest impact. 73% said it had helped to improve the leadership of their board, 67% said that it had improved the effectiveness of their board, 55% said that it had helped to better hold the SEL to account and 55% said that it had helped with strategy development. To a lesser extent, 35% of participants said it had supported compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements, 29% said it had helped with safeguarding and 27% with financial oversight.

Having the opportunity to access funded leadership training ensures this opportunity is available to all and is not dependent on budget. Interestingly, when asked whether they would have been able to complete the development for chairs programme if it had not been funded by the DfE, 73% reported that they would not have had the opportunity to do so.

> I have felt more confident supporting the other governors… one of the first things I arranged was a SWOT session for all stakeholders to look at the vision, aims and ethos of the school.The governors appreciated this and wanted to know what else they could do to develop themselves as governors and further support the school. This was brilliant because there was an eagerness to move forward by the governors which enabled me to develop further in my role as Chair as I supported them.
>
> Chair participating in the Leading Governance development programme

Other support for chairs

In the annual school governance survey 2020, current chairs were asked about the resources and support they need or changes that could be made to help them in their role. The biggest factor that would help them personally was cited as networking opportunities with varying views on how this could work such as buddy with a chair in another school, a chairs forum or access to more experienced chairs. In terms of relationships with others, a better partnership with the vice chair, a high-quality clerk and greater support from the LA or academy trust were suggested. On the role itself, clarity of expectations and requirements, more recognition for the role of governance and having time dedicated for training and development were among the top answers. Several chairs also cited a specific requirement for tools to support agenda planning with a model governance calendar, checklist for chairs by phase and a single list of statutory requirements among the suggestions.

The DfE has recently published the report of the advisory group on reform of the National Leaders for Governance (NLGs), on which NGA's chief executive served. These changes will in the fullness of time (most probably in late 2021) provide support for governing boards in schools requiring improvement, and the role is no longer considered to be primarily a mentor for chairs. This will leave that important role of mentor without official status in the system.

Where next?

To ensure that chairs are well supported and equipped to carry out their role,

NGA will continue to:

- Set up and host networks for chairs of boards to facilitate sharing of experience and best practice, and as a forum for problem solving, and support local networks where invited to do so

Policymakers and the wider education sector can:

- Continue to invest in training and development for current and aspiring chairs, ensuring equality of opportunity for all schools and trusts
- Ensure that mentoring and support is available for chairs who need it after the changes to the NLG scheme
- Ensure the volunteer time given by many current NLGs over the past seven years is celebrated
- Recognise the contribution and commitment of chairs by nominating them for honours

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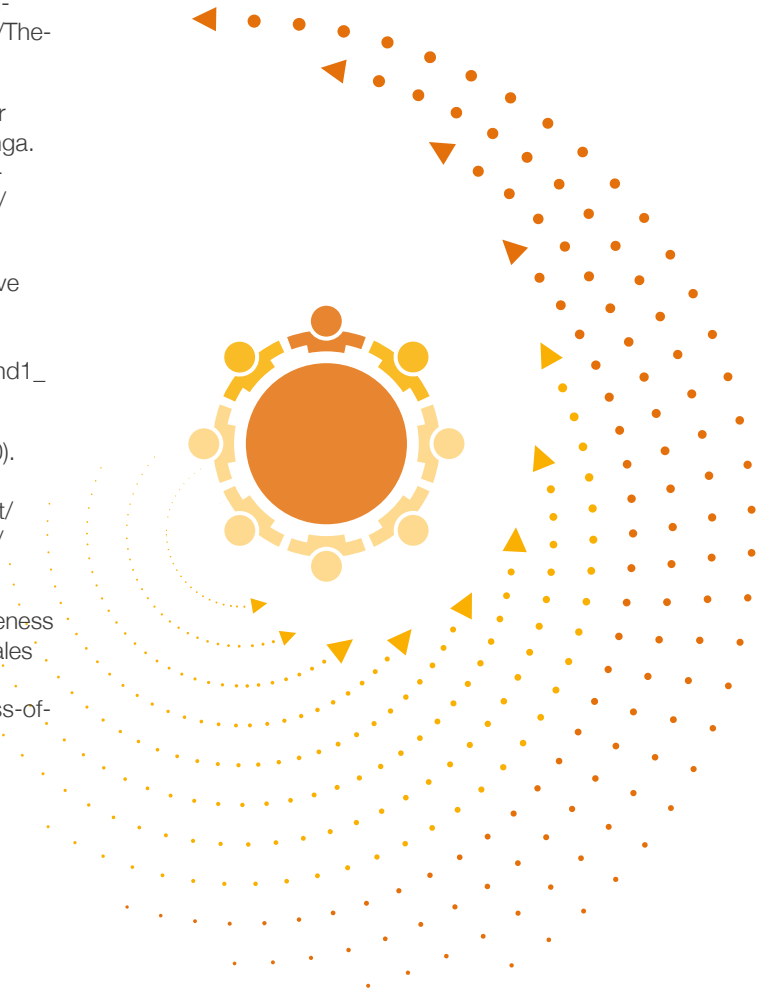
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