

Governing in 4D

Setting the standards for trust governance in a community-rooted system

May 2026

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A policy paper by the
National Governance Association



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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the many colleagues across NGA who have supported this paper. We are grateful to our policy team and to those in delivery roles who work closely with our members, listening to their experiences, understanding their challenges and successes, and ensuring their voices are represented authentically in our work.

We also extend our sincere thanks to the wider governance community and our 80,000 members who engage with us through surveys, networks, forums and our Gold Advice service. Their openness and contributions have been essential in informing the perspectives and conclusions set out here.

Foreword

The government’s ambition for every school to be part of a strong group, rooted in the communities it serves, marks a decisive moment for the school system in England. It is an ambition we at the National Governance Association (NGA) welcome, but one we can only hope to realise if careful consideration is given to how these groups are governed.

At a time when it is most needed, this policy paper provides recommendations and lays out the conditions required to guide policy decisions and support trusts to achieve governance excellence. It sets out NGA’s evidence-based view of the four critical dimensions of effective governance in a trust-based school system; what we describe as 4D Governance. It is grounded in years of direct work with trusts of all sizes and stages, and in what we have seen go right, and go wrong, as the system has evolved.

At its heart, 4D Governance responds to a simple but often overlooked truth: structure alone does not deliver improvement. It is the quality, clarity and coherence of governance, working across multiple critical dimensions, that enables groups of schools to flourish, remain accountable, and stay connected to the communities and children they serve.

Evidence across the sector consistently points to governance and leadership as critical enabling factors in school effectiveness. Ofsted’s inspection framework recognises governance alongside leadership in determining judgements, on the basis that even strong structural models fail where oversight, accountability and strategic direction are weak. From the National Audit Office’s reviews (2018) of the academy sector and research from the National Foundation for Educational Research (2020), to successive Education Select Committee inquiries – all have identified how weaknesses in trust governance and oversight directly affect sustainability, accountability and educational outcomes.

This paper asks those shaping policy and planning the implementation of the government’s recent white paper to consider being bolder about minimum standards and requirements in trust governance. We set out the key governance components for a successful trust led system and the standards that must underpin all four dimensions if ambition is to translate into reality. It also offers a source of support to the thousands of trustees, governors, governance professionals and executive leaders across trusts and schools, who can learn from what has already been tried, tested and lived.

The idea of 4D Governance is both practical and exciting. It offers a shared language, a clearer framework, and, crucially, a route to governance that is strong enough to sustain growth, flexible enough to respect local context, and ambitious enough to help every school succeed. Done well, it has the power to shape not only better governance, but better policy and better outcomes for children and young people. To the school system, we offer this report in the spirit of partnership and continuous improvement. We hope it supports you to achieve governance excellence which, in turn, leads to great educational experiences and outcomes for the children and young people we are all here to serve.

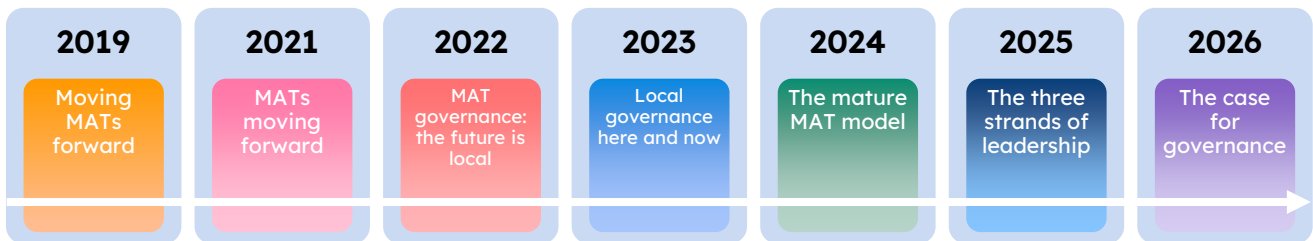
Emma Balchin, NGA Chief Executive

Introduction

The strong governance that exists in many trusts should be celebrated and built upon. As the government moves to make the multi academy trust (MAT) model universal, it becomes more important to amplify this established good governance practice. The challenge is that currently it is unevenly distributed, present in the best-run MATs, absent or underdeveloped in others. The resulting tensions between governance, leadership and accountability are well-documented in the academic literature (Greany and Higham, 2018), but they are not insurmountable. They find resolution in a trust's governance architecture that is deliberately designed; connecting the dimensions of a trust into a coherent whole rather than leaving them to operate in parallel.

Uneven distribution is a systemic risk that needs to be addressed before the potential of a trust-based system can be fully realised. NGA has spent the last 16 years carefully tracking how trust governance has evolved. What follows in this paper is an argument for what needs to happen next.

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This paper sets out the evidence on successful governance practice. It also outlines why and how the sector needs to embrace trust governance as a four-dimensional system — the trust board, the members, the local tier and trust executives — and in doing so, embed minimum expectations for all four. It builds on the work set out in the reports above and other strands of NGA's rich evidence base, including the largest national collection of MAT-specific external reviews of governance (ERG) reports, 15 years of annual governance survey data and day-to-day interactions through NGA's advice line.

Through this we can confidently establish the unique contribution that governance makes to the English education system. What follows applies that contribution specifically to the MAT model and sets out what the non-negotiables look like in practice. The core advocacy ask of this paper is that the new trust standards embed these non-negotiables in full, establishing the governance foundations upon which a new era of the trust-based system can thrive.

The case we put forward has a particular focus on the local tier, because this is the dimension where the gap between rhetoric and reality remains widest, and where the government's 2026 *Every child achieving and thriving* white paper's ambition of community-rooted trusts will be won or lost. This paper acknowledges a key tension at the heart of every trust's development: not whether to centralise or localise, but how to do both at once.

1. The policy gap

The white paper rightly argues that “high-quality trusts must be rooted in their communities”. It carries a definitive commitment to embed “community collaboration”, held together by new trust standards, and with a leaning towards mandating local governance. This chimes with NGA’s long-standing asks, from the initiation of our community MAT network and narrative over a decade ago, toward a continual campaign of trusts utilising locality within their governance structure to establish a strong root system into their communities. The sector now recognises that governance is crucial to achieving this.

Indeed, the white paper places strong governance among the most important criteria for determining trust quality, through an assertion that “our best school trusts use their scale, governance and high-quality leadership to innovate and drive excellence in standards and inclusion.” The stakes for getting trust governance right have also been elevated by the white paper’s desire for every English school to become part of a quality trust. NGA’s 2024 report *The mature MAT model*, concluded that further maturity and expansion of the system is dependent on building the “right groups in the right places” through three core conditions, as an interconnected system for success:



The white paper’s approach to trust formation and development – built on scale, geographical coherence and community engagement – now conclusively adopts the very conditions NGA has advocated for. Its realisation will see a system where trusts are centred on place(s), shaped by local voices, and of sufficient size to capture the benefits of centralisation.

Moving to mandate best practice

While the government's commitment to local governance in MATs is a significant step forward, simply mandating its existence is not a solution but a baseline. NGA's Annual Governance Survey (AGS) data shows that 97% of trusts already operate some form of local governance. This is a powerful testament to the value trusts place on local connection but also suggests the current proposal to simply mandate local governance offers the sector little, even if it remains necessary to safeguard what trusts have already chosen to embrace. The real systemic risk lies in the box-ticking minority, where presence does not equate to substance or efficacy. To achieve the government's goal of community-rooted trusts, the conversation must move away from whether a local tier exists and towards whether it has the agency and influence to harness and apply community knowledge.

Our proposal is for minimum governance standards, embedded within this paper, to be incorporated within the new trust standards that build on the previous iteration of the DfE's *Trust Quality Descriptions (2023)*. The trust standards are due to be agreed later this year and will act, among other things, as the basis for Ofsted's MAT inspections, while also informing the DfE's regions groups' commissioning decisions.

The Department has up to now been reluctant to set governance expectations beyond basic compliance rules set out in the Academy Trust Handbook. The reasons for this are understandable: the trust model was built on the importance of local autonomy rather than top-down prescription, and the huge diversity of trusts means there must be room for local flexibility and nuance. Any attempt to incorporate governance within the trust standards must recognise this diversity.

The introduction of minimum standards for governance would mirror the government's wider approach to the trust system, for example on pay, curriculum and qualified teacher status. In governance, an organic evolution of 'minimum standards' has already been embraced by many trusts that leave space for innovation while ensuring no community is let down.

Trust governance has matured and is increasingly distinct and successful (The Mature MAT Model). We now have enough lessons learnt to set out the non-negotiables which any successful trust must adhere to.

This matters now more than ever. The neglect of governance in the current trust quality descriptors was a mistake because it excluded an element which really matters to understanding trust quality. The Department has a chance to rectify that with the new trust standards, recognising the unique value delivered by governance, as set out in our *Case for Governance* paper. Strong governance allows trusts to meet the constant, underlying test of trust quality – whether they can simultaneously harness the benefits of localisation and centralisation so the trust model can realise its full potential. Naming local governance specifically within the standards would give the Department concrete means of realising its own vision of community-rooted trusts as the mechanism through which scale, geographical coherence and community engagement transfers from policy aspiration to lived practice.

2. The four dimensions

The Department is right: a precondition for a quality trust is being community-rooted, which intuitively drives us to the local level of trust governance. The effectiveness of a trust's governance machinery depends not just on the theoretical role of delegation, but the extent to which the local tier's community knowledge, representation and connection influences the governance of the trust. But the local tier cannot be separated from the trust's wider governance architecture.

We must begin with an understanding of each dimension as distinct but complementary:



This offers a template for incorporating governance within the trust standards and builds a picture of trust governance where all elements must work effectively.

The four dimensions ensure the vital role of trust executives is explicit and, crucially, placed within the context of the other dimensions of trust governance. Our recent *Three Strands of Leadership* report identified governance as a distinct leadership strand, operating together with the educational and business leadership of executives to form an interconnected model. Having made the case in that report that governance should be recognised as a key aspect of school and trust leadership, 4D governance also recognises the role that executives play in enabling governance.

Incorporating trust executives is necessary to reflect how trust governance operates in reality. While trust executives carry out many managerial responsibilities which are not governance, they also often carry out strategic and scrutinising functions which sit directly within the purview of trust governance. Here they bring a form of professional accountability that does not exist in a maintained context, through educational executives who line-manage headteachers.

Our report on *Central Leadership Teams in MATs* documented how increased scale fundamentally alters the nature and extent of trust central teams, and by extension the local tier. Governance is not only what boards do; it is also shaped by the trust executives and governance professionals who enable the systems through which it functions. Any serious account of trust governance and any standards must re-clarify this.

The four dimensions of trust governance must therefore be simultaneously separate, complementary and transparent (Charity Governance Code 2025).

- **Sufficient separation** to avoid group think, ensure clear lines of accountability and the space for each dimension to specialise its approach for its specific remit.
- **Complementary** so that the insights from each dimension inform the others, and their remits collectively cover everything which matters whilst avoiding duplication.

The varied scope of trust executives has direct implications for the role of the local tier and, to a lesser extent, the trustees.

If changes in the strategic and scrutinising functions of executives are not accompanied by changes to the role of the local tier, either duplication or gaps in the trust's accountability and assurance framework are likely.

For example, if a trust increasingly centralises its SEND strategy and resource allocation through its executive team, the local tier's role must also evolve. This could mean a move from making SEND resource decisions for individual schools to giving a voice to how centralised provision is experienced by families and communities. Where this evolution doesn't happen, the trust ends up with either parallel processes scrutinising the same decisions, or a gap where community-rooted insight into SEND experience should sit.

Outside of limited, time-bound scenarios such as an interim executive board (IEB)-based model, stable trust governance requires the roles of executives and the local tier to be separate and complementary, where each provides a unique value the other cannot. A central part of the trustees' role is to hold the balance between the two, ensuring that both centralisation and localisation are harnessed to maximise the trust dividend (David Carter, *Leading Academy Trusts*, 2020).

In *The Case for Governance* (2026), we positioned governance as unique in the English education system in delivering interlocking capacities: leadership, responsiveness, answerability and stewardship. The test for trust governance is whether it successfully delivers those capacities. To do so, all four dimensions of trust governance must be present, operating separately but through deep connection. Taken together, the dimensions provide a framework for understanding and embedding trust governance within the new trust standards and accountability framework.

3. Centralisation and localisation in a mature system

There is a key tension at the heart of every trust's development. MAT progress should not be viewed through the lens of centralisation as the destination, with localisation a concession to be managed. Trusts getting this right are not choosing between scale and place (The Mature MAT model, 2025); they are building governance architecture that makes both possible at once. Local governance is not a relic of the maintained era preserved out of sentiment. It is the right structural answer to a genuine and ongoing leadership and governance challenge.

This chapter makes the case in three movements:

1. **The debate about centralisation has matured** and the benefits of scale and place are better understood as complementary, rather than as trade-offs.
2. **The integration between tiers is nonetheless under strain** – data on communication and resource sharing points to a system where the connections between local and central are weaker than the architecture assumes.
3. **The root of this strain is an unresolved question about the identity and purpose of the local tier itself.** The government's proposal to explore mandating local governance offers the opportunity to identify what an empowered local tier looks like.

Earlier concerns about centralisation have become more nuanced while the overall pattern towards centralisation is increasing (Kreston Academies Benchmark Report 2026). Financial oversight is a notable example. Where once its centralisation was seen as a loss of autonomy, many local boards now recognise the benefits of this approach. The streamlining of financial responsibilities has, in many cases, created capacity for local governors to focus more fully on the pupil experience. The benefits of centralisation and localisation can be understood as complementary instead of at odds with one another.

“our local governance committees are the guardians of ethos and community.”

Nexus MAT – NGA Outstanding Governance Award finalist 2025.

A question of integration

And yet maturation has exposed a harder question – whether connections between governance tiers are working as well as they could. NGA's 2025 AGS found that only 60% of local governors consider communication between the local tier and the trust board to be effective and well managed. This figure has remained broadly static since we first asked and represents a slight reversal of earlier gains. Together this suggests the answer to the question posed is “not yet”.

In trusts where these connections are strong, the local tier shapes trust-wide decision-making as a genuine governance partner, and strategic direction from the board is understood, tested and enacted in the context of each school and community. But this relies on robust communication channels. Where the connections are weak, the two parts of the system operate out of sync and the promised benefits of the trust model, combining scale while remaining rooted in the communities served, are not delivered.

With 99% of trusts now operating some form of local governance, the question is not whether local tiers are present, but how effectively they are integrated within the trust's wider governance framework. Last year's AGS data suggests this integration is under some strain. Only 47% of local governors agreed that their school's resources, including reserves, should be shared across the trust – a ten percentage point drop on the previous year, and one that reverses several years of gradual increase. The scale of the shift is modest, but the direction of travel is notable. Attitudes to resource sharing are often a useful indicator of organisational cohesion: a willingness to pool resources tends to reflect a stronger sense of collective identity across the trust. Seen this way, the dip highlights the ongoing work required to ensure that the different dimensions of governance operate not only with clarity of role but with a shared sense of organisational purpose.

Our report on *Central Leadership Teams in MATs* found that the effective integration of all governance dimensions into a complementary framework is not automatic. As trusts centralise functions such as school improvement and financial oversight, the role of the local tier does not always evolve in response. Instead, its remit can remain largely unchanged even as responsibility shifts upward, quietly undermining local governance and leaving confusion about who is accountable for what.

These issues are rooted in earlier misconceptions about the identity of the local tier. As a result, some trusts have been reluctant to redesign it, wary of creating tension between local and executive roles. In practice, this has allowed the ambiguity to persist rather than resolving it.

The unresolved identity of the local tier

Aside from the obvious inefficiency, this lack of governance clarity means the system becomes less purposeful about where decisions are made and where challenge happens. An example is how strategic support and challenge are organised around academy headteachers. There is a shared interest in ensuring this is both robust and proportionate, but without it becoming burdensome, especially as line management increasingly sits with central executives. Without clear delineation, support can blur into duplication, with challenge becoming misplaced.

81% of trusts now operate central or shared school improvement functions (CST, 2025), and a growing proportion of services such as finance and estates are also being coordinated at trust level. This reflects a clear direction of travel towards greater consistency and professionalism, particularly as trusts expand in size and complexity. As central teams develop, the governance question is whether the system remains coherent as responsibilities shift.

The government's proposal to explore mandating local governance should be seen against this backdrop. Its significance will lie in bringing local governance more explicitly into the national policy framework, particularly in relation to trust quality and accountability. In NGA's view, this would represent the next logical step for the sector if it is to realise the government's ambition for a fully trust-based system.

The case for an empowered local tier rests on more than convention. It reflects the principle of subsidiarity, a long-established principle of social and political organisation that argues decisions should be taken as close to those affected as possible, with higher tiers taking on only what cannot be handled effectively below (Evans and Zimmermann, 2014). Applied to trust governance, subsidiarity positions the local tier as the eyes and ears of the trust board within each school's community, and as the level at which questions of community responsiveness, accountability and ethos are most effectively held.

The focus should now be on what an empowered and meaningful local tier looks like in practice, and how it is fully integrated into the wider trust structure. This requires alignment across inspection frameworks, commissioning decisions and sector guidance, ensuring that expectations are clear and consistent.

The diversity of contexts in which trusts operate means that local governance must retain an ability to flex, capable of adapting to different communities and circumstances. Establishing minimum expectations should not therefore require total uniformity of approach, but a foundational baseline that can accommodate the diversity of trust contexts. An empowered local tier is one that knows what it's for, has the agency to do it, and comprises the people best placed to do it well.

4. The local tier: connecting communities

The local tier is the governance dimension closest to the communities a trust serves. Its role within the trust architecture is well established: committees of the trust board, exercising a specific remit delegated to them, and anchored within the community each school serves. As the MAT model has matured, so too has the understanding of what this dimension contributes and why it remains essential.

Over the past decade, the sector has moved through distinct phases in its understanding of local governance. In the earlier stages of MAT development, debate centred on purpose and identity. Concerns about "broken promises" of autonomy reflected a wider uncertainty about how local governing bodies should operate within a multi-school structure.

Local tiers were navigating, and often still do, the legacy of maintained school governance while adapting to the emerging realities of trust-wide accountability. NGA ERG analysis clearly shows the local tier can be prevented from finding its potential where there is unresolved or undiagnosed tension between executive control and local oversight. But where this has been tackled and where trusts have grown in governance maturity, these more fundamental questions have given way to a clearer articulation of functions. The sector has increasingly developed an understanding that the local tier's contribution lies in those areas where proximity, context and responsiveness are most critical.

This is reflected in NGA's now widely recognised 4Ss framework – **SEND**, **s**afeguarding, **s**takeholder engagement and **s**tandards – which successive AGS findings have shown are most commonly delegated to the local tier. These are the functions that require detailed knowledge of a whole school community and the ability to interpret what policy and performance mean in practice for children, families and staff. The evolution has been supported by the increasing use of robust and accessible schemes of delegation. The scheme is where the trust's philosophy of local governance is made visible. Two trusts with identical rhetoric about "community-rooted governance" can have radically different schemes, but the reality is found in the scheme and the way it is implemented.

Schemes as diagnostics

NGA's ERG findings show us that you can often tell more about a trust's view of its local tier from reading its scheme of delegation than from any amount of strategic plans or values statements. If the scheme delegates nothing of consequence, no amount of warm language about community partnership compensates. If it delegates meaningfully, the trust is doing something real in terms of local accountability. The scheme is therefore a test and a practical tool. The scheme is the floor, not the ceiling, and one marker of maturity is whether the trust board actively monitors the gap between what the scheme says and what actually happens.

One ongoing challenge is ascertaining if a trust's scheme of delegation is built from first principles, not just asking what should sit where, but why? The scheme is a manifestation of trust character and identity; it shouldn't just reflect sector convention.

What good looks like: the standard for an effective local tier

Our proposed standard for the local tier demands deep community knowledge that is genuinely empowered and rooted in the community it serves. The local tier holds trust-wide decisions to account where they land, brings community insight into trust-level decision-making and is the visible face of governance for the families and staff the trust exists to serve. This is the dimension on which the community-rooted trust stands or falls.

In practice, this means the local tier delivers across the four governance capacities set out in the Case for Governance:

- **Leadership** — The local tier exercises real agency within its remit. Local governors have genuine influence, regardless of whether formal decision-making sits with them or with the trust board. Challenge happens, is appropriate, targeted, and welcomed. Where scrutiny surfaces something serious, there is a route to escalate — and people use it.
- **Responsiveness** — Composition reflects the community the school serves. Skills, experience and lived understanding are aligned to the community's actual needs, not a generic skills-based framework. Diversity of perspective is treated as a governance asset, not a compliance exercise. Governors are known to the school community — visible to parents, staff and pupils — and understand what makes this school this school.
- **Answerability** — The local tier is formed of local volunteers, with clear separation from the executive. Governors are not trust executives wearing a different hat. The local chair plays a meaningful role in headteacher performance management and appointment, providing a genuine accountability relationship distinct from the executive line management the headteacher holds upwards.
- **Stewardship** — Local governors bring their community knowledge into trust-wide decision-making and can show how it has shaped both local decisions and trust-level thinking. They understand their school's resourcing needs, including its financial position, and are not excluded from school improvement discussions. Centralisation has not removed them from these conversations but freed them to focus on what the money is achieving.

These four capacities set out what an effective local tier looks like in operation. But operational effectiveness depends on something prior — who is serving on these boards, and whether they can credibly claim to represent the communities their schools serve. That question sits at the heart of the responsiveness capacity above and is where this paper now turns.

5. Composition and community: who governs the local tier?

NGA's ERG evidence suggests that composition is the element of effective governance trusts find hardest to meet and arguably the one that matters most. A local tier that doesn't reflect the community it serves lacks legitimacy to operate as that community's voice within the trust, no matter how clear its scheme of delegation or how well-run its meetings. But the local tier also needs the capacity to exercise real judgement on what is delegated to it, including the ability to challenge well-prepared executives on complex matters. Both are non-negotiable. The question is how a trust gets both.

The deeper issue is that the sector has not, until now, made a conscious choice about what the local tier is for. The introduction of the MAT-based system coincided with a wider shift away from stakeholder governance toward a skills-based model. That shift was not wrong. Volunteers at every tier need the capacity to make informed decisions, and a governance culture that took skills seriously was needed. The problem is not that governance became skills-based, it is that the sector adopted a narrow conception of what counts as a skill and has recruited accordingly.

That narrow conception tends to privilege forms of expertise that are visible on a CV — finance, law, education sector experience and senior management. To overlook others that are just as consequential for the work of a local tier fundamentally limits its full potential. The ability to represent a community, to convene across difference, to bring lived insight into how a school's decisions land in the lives of families. These are skills. While they are often held by people who are also accountants, lawyers, teachers, or senior managers, they are also often held by people who don't relate to these professions. Skills and community are not separate populations. But many skills and life experiences that can enrich the overall trust governance impact are often held by those who don't meet this current narrow vision.

The distinction matters because strong community-rooted governance depends not just on the bonding social capital that skills-based recruitment tends to generate through the connections among people who already share governance fluency and professional background. But it also depends on bridging the social capital that connects governance spaces to the wider community (Putnam, 2000). The current model systematically privileges the first and undersupplies the second.

Building authentic connection to community

The task, then, is not to choose between skills and community presence. It is to widen the sector's understanding of what counts as a skill, and to recruit from the much larger pool of people who are genuinely skilled but have not, until now, been seen that way.

Skills must be seen as no more important than connection to place and lived experience. This is not a new position for NGA; we have long advocated for greater board diversity across all governance types. This is diversity not only of skill sets but of demographics and lived experience.

The case that diverse perspectives strengthens governance is well-established beyond education. The Parker Review (2017, updated annually) and McGregor-Smith Review (2017) document the under-representation of ethnic minorities in corporate governance and senior leadership across the UK economy, and identify the structural barriers that produce it: recruitment networks that recycle existing contacts, an unwritten standard of "fit" that favours those already comfortable in boardrooms.

These are not patterns specific to corporate boards. The same dynamics shape who is recruited into trust governance, and with the same effect: governance spaces that look and think more like one another than like the communities they serve.

The primary qualification is an authentic connection to the community the school serves, knowing what it feels like to be a parent, a resident, a neighbour to that school. This is a significant shift from how governance composition has been thought about, and it requires us to unpick an assumption that has gone largely unchallenged.

For the local tier to fulfil its potential as a distinct governance dimension, its composition has to be built around what it is there to do. For every local tier, that includes an authentic community connection. This is itself a form of governance capacity, not a soft supplement to it. And because communities themselves differ in terms of demographics, in skill profiles, in how they understand their own community identity and connection to it – what authentic connection looks like varies from place to place. The local tier should reflect the community as that community understands itself, not as a centrally-defined expectation imagines it.

A fully skills-based model of recruitment makes sense for trust boards, given the scale, legal weight and strategic autonomy of a MAT. It also arguably makes sense in maintained schools, where governors carry direct legislative and employment responsibilities. But carrying the same expectations across into MAT local governance, on the inherited and largely unexamined assumption that the local tier should resemble either, is the assumption we need to unpick.

In order to approach local tier composition through its purpose within the trust's governance architecture, we need to again look to the spirit of the white paper's direction toward community-anchored trusts. This means local governance should not default to a form inherited from the maintained sector, nor operate as a carbon copy of the trust board. Composition instead needs to reflect what makes the local tier distinct and meaningful.

Composition, though, is only half the issue. The other half is what happens once people are in the room. A new governor presented at their first meeting with a hundred-page headteacher report dense with data and jargon is perhaps unlikely to come back for a second. NGA's 2024 Governance workload report also found that meetings themselves need to be more accessible: early-evening meetings in school buildings sound inclusive until you consider who is working shifts or caring for young children. This leaves an ongoing question for every trust: are we setting recruitment and meeting standards that reflect who we are and what we want to achieve for our communities, or are we defaulting to assumed understandings of what 'effective' should look like?

The strength of the MAT model is precisely that it is multi-tiered – the trust board's focus on strategic, trust-wide matters shares the traits of governance of large, multi-site commercial organisations, with similar levels of multi-million-pound turnover.

But the same approaches do not need to be replicated at local level. The networks through which vacancies are advertised, for example: governor recruitment websites, LinkedIn, existing governor contacts are potentially the networks least likely to reach the people within certain communities. Here then the success of MAT governance points to a wider issue of societal inequity, where opportunity favours class and perpetuates social polarisation. Alternatively, the blanket assertion of what community looks like renders some far less likely to engage or be invited to engage. But community by definition brings people together based on social ties and a sense of shared purpose and location.

None of this is accidental. Governance processes have been designed, over decades, by and for people who are already comfortable in governance spaces. That comfort is invisible to those who have it and insurmountable to those who don't. When we say the literacy expectations are too high, or the meeting times are wrong, or the application forms are intimidating, we are really saying that the whole apparatus has been built for a particular kind of person, and that building it differently requires deliberate, sustained work.

What would purposeful recruitment look like?

It would start with a clear answer to the question of what the local tier purpose is and let the answer drive the process. If the role is community influenced accountability, and not an attempt to recreate maintained governing bodies or form mini trust boards, then the specification should exploit the freedoms and opportunities of this model. This points to existing recruitment routes remaining valid but can and should be added to with other more local channels.

Lived experience, connection to the community, and the capacity to ask "how does this feel from where I sit" rather than "does this meet the strategic framework" should be driving recruitment activity. It would use routes to reach people who would never apply through conventional channels, working through community organisations, faith groups, parent networks, and local employers, for example. It would invest in support, induction and ongoing training that assumes no prior governance experience and treats the acquisition of governance fluency as part of the role, not a prerequisite for it. And it would redesign the meeting, paperwork and decision-making experience so that the people who bring the most valuable perspective aren't the ones who find participation hardest.

This is not about lowering the bar. It is about recognising that the current bar has been set in a way that screens out the people whose presence would make local governance do what we say it's for. A local board drawn from and reflecting its community is not a concession to inclusion but is the basic condition of being able to perform the function. Without it, the local tier is doing something else, something that might look more like other existing forms of governance, but something that misses out on the full potential of multi-tiered MAT governance model, with an authentic governance mechanism for delivering accountability to the community.

The standards and composition argument cumulatively lead to a single question trusts should be willing to ask themselves: **If the local tier in your trust was removed tomorrow, what would the trust lose or miss?**

6. Trust executives: professional expertise

If one precondition for strong trust governance is empowering the deep community knowledge of the local tier to influence decision-making, another is harnessing the professional expertise of trust executives. This is not an isolated question, but one inherently tied to the role of the local tier. As we demonstrated in our *Central Leadership Teams in MATs* paper, "the evolution of the central team as the trust matures and grows ... alters the responsibilities at the local level."

Executives carrying out governance functions

Many of the roles carried out by trust executives are operational or managerial and so explicitly are not in themselves governance. However other functions do fall within the core functions of governance and are often carried out at board level in maintained schools or the smallest trusts where central capacity has not developed.

An example is the role of the trust governance professional. Many of their day-to-day responsibilities are inherently operational – managing a team of clerks, filing returns to companies house, delivering training, and communicating governance information across a trust. Increasingly though, lead governance professionals are taking on a wider remit which falls within governance's accountability and assurance remit, for example oversight of risk management, or scrutinising compliance across the trust on issues like data protection, policies and websites. This is not to say that the lead governance professional has ultimate accountability for these functions, in the same way that the local tier does not. Instead, the trust board, as the accountable body, is delegating responsibility for elements of its core functions, some to the local tier and others to trust executives.

A similar approach is seen in a range of trust executive roles, with operational and managerial tasks accompanied by strategic and assurance responsibilities. Again, the extent of the central team role differs between trusts, heavily influenced by size and maturity.

A prominent example of executives carrying out governance functions is financial scrutiny and even budget setting at the academy level. Trust executives can also play a significant strategic role in school improvement, curriculum alignment and the management of academy executives. To look at this through the lens of *The Case for Governance* and its unique value proposition, but also the *Three Strands of Leadership*, it is clear that trust executives are delivering elements of all four core governance capacities. As we wrote in 2022, this "alters the focus and demands on the local tier but does not make it irrelevant". The challenge for trusts is finding the right balance between central alignment and local expression.

It's worth reflecting on the consequences of this expanded role for trust executives. Is the departure from the approaches in maintained schools desirable? Opinions will differ, but anyone who has governed or worked in a trust will appreciate the potential benefits of harnessing the specialist, professional expertise of trust executives – skilled practitioners who have the experience to know what works.

What is unique in the mature MAT is the strengthening of governance oversight, accountability and strategy functions with the consistent involvement of trust executives. In a report exploring the value of executive governance, PwC explains the importance of:

"Agile governance and accountability: Maintaining a robust governance and control environment that enables business growth and agility"

How executive governance shapes organisational success – PwC

The executive dimension of trust governance adds unique and vital value, but this opportunity also comes with a risk. If the expanded role of trust executive comes at the expense of the value delivered by local governance, then any benefits are undermined. Just as no other governance dimension can deliver the professional expertise of executives to the same extent, no other governance dimension can deliver the detailed local knowledge of the local tier that is essential for creating a truly community-rooted trust. We raise this here because there remain examples of executives undermining local governance – running boards themselves or controlling their composition, often based on a flawed understanding of the local tier as seeking power or resources at the expense of the trust's wider needs.

What good looks like: the standard for trust executives

The executive dimension strengthens the trust's governance system when it supports and complements the other dimensions. It undermines the system when executive capacity is used to crowd out local challenge or substitute for volunteer governance rather than enable it.

In practice, this means executives deliver across three functions:

- **Enabling volunteer governance** – Executive governance functions complement the work of volunteer governors and trustees who are equipped and expected to exercise their independence. Where executives interact with boards – including in the provision of data – they do so in a way that supports and welcomes meaningful volunteer scrutiny. Where executives run local boards, that independence is lost and the trust has traded community voice for operational convenience.
- **Enhancing scrutiny** – Where executives carry out oversight functions that previously sat within the governance remit (headteacher performance management, financial and risk oversight, compliance assurance), this adds professional expertise and trust-wide perspective to the system. It is acknowledged, expertly communicated and does not invalidate local tier challenge and local accountability.
- **Building governance capacity** – Investment in governor and trustee recruitment, induction and development is treated as a core executive responsibility. Executive support to local boards is consistent across the trust: variation is deliberate and justified by context, not a reflection of which headteachers are most assertive or which schools are most convenient.

The focus must therefore stay on ensuring the governance dimensions are complementary. This is a particularly relevant issue for trustees as the extent and remits of both the local tier and trust executives are ultimately at their discretion. In our recent report, *The Three Strands of Leadership*, we made the case for joined-up leadership within the education sector. Many of the steps proposed in the Three Strands are relevant:

- clear roles for each dimension, with a holistic identity
- collaboration between the dimensions in strategic planning and decision-making
- building mutual understanding through shared training for each dimension
- shared language and communication reinforcing the shared nature of governance

The next chapter in this paper details specific mechanisms for balancing localisation and centralisation. For now, it is worth reflecting on the role of trust executives and the wider central team in enabling effective governance by ensuring the four dimensions are complementary.

Governance professionals acting as architects

In many MATs, this finds form in the work of the governance professional, many of whom now have a senior executive standing themselves. The lead governance professional is more than a coordination role and can be seen as an architect of a governance system – designing information flows across multiple tiers, managing the interfaces between them, and making active judgements about what reaches whom and when. Trusts are increasingly exploring innovative ways of bringing governance dimensions together, organised by the lead governance professional. Networks of local chairs, the trust chair and relevant executives are common. Buy-in from the wider trust executive is vital to ensure that sufficient information is shared promptly and insights from governance volunteers are taken seriously.

The governance professional should be properly resourced and have the standing, independence and access to senior leadership needed to design and maintain the trust's governance infrastructure. Information flows linked to governance should not be accidental: local boards should not be deprived of meaningful data, trustees should not be overwhelmed with operational detail, and the right information should reach the right tier at the right time. These cross-cutting expectations about how the dimensions work together are taken up in the final chapter of this paper.

A precondition for effective trust governance is that the professional expertise of executives is harnessed, but in a manner which complements the other dimensions of governance. Executives – in fulfilling their function as enablers – while not doing the governing, take on some aspects of governing the organisation. The new trust standards could easily incorporate an expectation that trust executives enable effective governance and contribute to the delivery of core governance functions, without being overly prescriptive about how this takes place. In order to support executives in achieving this, it is important that professional development, for example National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), incorporates an understanding of governance and executives' role in enabling it.

7. The trust board: strategically led, locally grounded

The trust sector continues to grow; predominantly through the expansion of existing trusts. Scale can drive improvement, build capacity and strengthen resilience. It can also create distance between decision-makers and communities. The emphasis on community-rooted trusts recognises that tension. So too does the move towards trust-level inspection, which will aim to deliver an organisation-wide evaluation.

The trust board is the dimension in which the organisation's direction is set, its coherence secured and its long-term sustainability protected. Within the 4D framework, trustees provide the strategic leadership that binds the system together.

What good looks like: the standard for trustees

Our proposed standard for trustees sees them deliver strategic leadership while delegating intelligently, so that the benefits of centralisation (economies of scale, specialist practitioners, targeted support) and the benefits of localisation (adaptation to the unique identity, challenges and stakeholders of every school and community) are harnessed. What the board chooses to delegate, and what it chooses to retain, is the clearest statement of how seriously it takes community accountability.

In practice, this means the trust board delivers across four areas:

- **Strategic direction and challenge** — Trustees develop and own the trust's long-term vision, grounded in the lived reality of the communities the trust serves. Strategy is not delegated to the executive and ratified upwards. The board holds executives to account with rigour and respect: challenge is substantive and regular, and trustees form independent judgement rather than being led by the executive.
- **Balancing centralisation and localisation** — Through its scheme of delegation, the board names and manages the tension between scale and place rather than assuming it has resolved itself. Trustees demonstrate how they have secured the benefits of centralisation, without eroding local responsiveness, and can point to specific instances where local tier insight has informed trust-wide decisions.
- **Purposeful composition** — The board's composition is purposeful: skills, experience and diversity of perspective are mapped against the trust's strategic needs and reviewed regularly. Recruitment is proactive. No single voice or background dominates.
- **Risk, purpose and stewardship** — The board understands the trust's risk landscape, including community-facing risks (erosion of trust with parents, loss of local legitimacy, divergence between central decisions and local reality) which rarely appear on a standard risk register but often matter most. When difficult decisions are made, trustees can explain to the community how the trust's educational mission drove the outcome. Stewardship is not just financial – it is the care owed to institutions that are publicly funded and community-rooted in equal measure.

The Kreston Academies Benchmark report 2026 indicates that 95% of trusts now undertake an annual evaluation of local governance practice. Their findings, much like our ERG findings, show that trusts are increasingly refining delegation frameworks so that local committees operate with clearer boundaries.

Where central capacity meets local insight

Trustees are responsible for ensuring that centralisation and localisation are treated as interdependent parts of a single governance system. This means designing and maintaining the conditions in which both can operate effectively: where central capacity strengthens consistency and quality, while local insight continues to shape decision-making. Boards should celebrate local identity and not approach localisation as a friction to be minimised.

A number of more mature trusts are increasingly focused on retaining local intelligence and oversight alongside centralised decision-making. An example from the East Midlands Academy Trust demonstrates how, even with functions like finances centralised, local governance can still shape trust-wide investment decisions through structured intelligence sharing. In this case, the local tier identified a growing cohort of pupils unable to access mainstream provision due to escalating mental health and anxiety-related barriers.

This local insight was critical in identifying and evidencing the scale of need which shaped trust-level decision-making and informed the subsequent decision to establish an additional resource provision. This example illustrates the value of centralised financial control within MATs, enabling the trust to direct resources strategically and at scale. The value of centralisation was amplified by the influential voice of the local tier ensuring those financial decisions remain grounded in lived experience and community need. This example is not an exception but a model. It shows what happens when the board actively uses local intelligence in its decision-making and when the flow of information from community to boardroom is structured, not incidental.

The value of the local tier comes as much from the non-delegated decisions it is facilitated to inform and improve than the delegated decisions it takes itself. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that the willingness of trustees to ensure real agency to the local board (through formal delegation) is an important indicator of whether the local tier is trusted.

While the trust standards should leave significant space to refine and flex governance models in line with community needs and executive capacity, the absence of certain minimum functions should require justification. Examples include involvement in the academy headteacher's performance management cycle and space to scrutinise and challenge academy-level data on issues like SEND, safeguarding, stakeholder engagement and standards including attendance. These are opportunities for the local tier to use their community knowledge to complement trust-wide and specialist professional oversight. None of these necessarily requires formal delegation of decision-making powers, but all require clear expectations. Without giving agency of this kind to the local tier, it will be difficult for trustees to claim they are truly adapting to the unique identity, challenges and stakeholders of every school and community.

Effective boards also understand that investment in board capability is what enables the governance of a community-rooted trust to function. Ongoing development for the board itself and the local tier, honest review of individual and collective performance, and a chair who models this culture are all part of what it means to deliver strategic leadership over time.

8. Members: guardians of the governance and charitable purpose

The role of trust members is the least clearly articulated dimension of trust governance. This is understandable. Unlike other governance dimensions, members sit outside week-in, week-out core governance, with responsibilities narrowly defined through the Companies Act and trust articles of association. These typically include appointing or removing trustees where necessary, appointing auditors, approving changes to the trust's articles or name and, most visibly, receiving the annual accounts and holding an AGM.

Fundamentally, members exist to safeguard the trust's charitable objective which is typically to "advance education for the public benefit". This deliberately places them at a constitutional distance from operational and even strategic decision-making. In theory, this creates a clear separation between governance and guardianship. However, in practice, it has left the role under-specified and poorly understood.

For some trusts, members are largely absent from the governance conversation beyond formal requirements. For others that are more actively engaged, there are sometimes risks of blurring lines of accountability and overstepping intended boundaries of the role. In many cases, this ambiguity is compounded by the composition of membership itself. The lack of clarity can result in trustees misunderstanding the member role. Mutual misunderstanding can and does lead to mutual mistrust.

What good looks like: the standard for members

Our proposed standard for members is that they understand and act on their constitutional role as guardians of the trust's charitable purpose. Members are the final safeguard when governance goes wrong. They are the least visibly supported dimension of trust governance today, and the standards the sector adopts for them will shape whether the guardianship role is real or nominal.

In practice, members deliver across three functions:

- **Understanding the role and its limits** — Members can articulate why they exist as guardians of community-centred governance and probe whether the trust's educational mission is being fulfilled, whether resources are deployed in line with charitable objectives, and whether its culture and values reflect what it exists to do. The boundary between guardianship and governance is respected in both directions.
- **Maintaining genuine independence and engagement** — The composition of the membership is not so overlapping with the trustee body that independent oversight becomes impossible. Members stay sufficiently engaged and informed through regular, purposeful touchpoints with trustees beyond the formal AGM and through appropriate induction, training and information to form their own view.
- **Exercising powers when it matters** — Members have a thorough understanding of trust governance and recognise good governance from poor. The willingness to appoint or remove trustees where necessary is not theoretical.

How to support members in an evolving system

Members consistently point to the same underlying challenge: they want clarity on what good practice looks like on the ground. Two questions arise repeatedly for NGA:

- how to maintain a sufficiently informed overview without drifting into trustee territory
- how to act when that oversight identifies a concern

These ongoing issues are seen in survey responses and in the conversations MATs have with our advice line, where uncertainty centres on frequency of engagement with trustees, depth of information required, and how concerns should be escalated. The consistency of the question across different routes into NGA points to a deeper structural gap.

Members hold some of the most significant constitutional powers within the trust system, yet they are the least visibly supported and least consistently engaged governance dimension. In effect, they are expected to act as guardians of the trust's purpose without a clearly developed framework for how that guardianship operates. The absence of clarity about how they exercise that function is a material weakness in the governance architecture. For example, as a basic principle, it should be explicit that members are sufficiently knowledgeable about trust governance such that they know when it is in trouble.

Questions about the role of members have become more pressing when set against the evolving MAT system. In a legal sense, the position of members stems from the role of company shareholders and charity memberships. But both charities and companies do not receive anything like the same degree of external oversight as MATs are increasingly subject to. Questions arise around how members fit within this evolving regulatory environment, and at what point the potential value added by members is outweighed by the risks of them getting it wrong; a case therefore emerges for removing them entirely.

Another radical option would be a widening of the members group to something more akin to the charity membership model. This could bring more stakeholders directly inside the trust governance architecture, potentially as part of named constituencies in a model akin to the current cooperative trust articles. However, there would be significant risks here in increasing the danger of overstep; "wasting" valuable volunteers on a role which only adds value in times of crisis; and imposing additional burdens on trusts in filling the new vacancies.

Ultimately, this is a complex debate, with legitimate concerns that reducing or reshaping the role of members may be perceived as concentrating power within the trustee and executive dimensions, even if external accountability is simultaneously strengthening. For policymakers, the legislative and contractual hoops of reevaluating the member role will be highly relevant.

The question over whether members should exist, be removed, or their role expanded is a significant constitutional challenge that the sector needs to tackle. The answer touches on legal architecture, regulatory design and political feasibility in ways that go beyond governance practice. NGA's view is that the current position, where the member role is legally significant but operationally underused, is unlikely to be sustainable as the system matures. What replaces it should be worked through deliberately and collaboratively with the sector, in line with the direction of travel on community accountability and external regulation, rather than left to drift.

Today, the most pressing question is how the role of members might be better supported within a maturing system. At a minimum, this requires moving beyond signposting Companies Act passages to guidance on how the role is enacted. This might include case studies produced by the Department, model role descriptions or minimum expectations for suitability for the role and in discharging the role. It also requires more structured support for members within Regions Group when MATs are under strain, particularly given that legal and advisory routes are often limited to the trust board itself. Ensuring members are properly supported – with clear induction and training, access to appropriate advice, and support from beyond the trust itself when internal routes are compromised – is an essential part of making the guardianship role real rather than nominal.

9. The governance architecture: making the dimensions work together

Community-rooted governance is achieved through the connections that run between the four dimensions: flow of information, clarity of remit, investment in capacity and the ongoing evaluation that keeps the system honest and reflective as the trust matures. A trust can have an empowered local tier, capable executives, a strategic board and engaged members, and still fail to deliver community-rooted governance if the architecture connecting them fails.

What good looks like: the governance architecture standard

Our proposed standard is that a trust's governance architecture is designed to make the four dimensions work together, and to evolve with the trust. In practice, this means three cross-cutting expectations:

- **Clarity of remit across all dimensions** — The remit of each dimension is clear, simple and streamlined, and everyone knows what it is. Local governors, trustees, executives and members can all articulate what each dimension is responsible for and why. The governance professional is properly resourced and has the standing, independence and access to senior leadership needed to design and maintain the trust's governance infrastructure.
- **Structured communication between dimensions** — Clear, regular mechanisms exist for local intelligence to reach trustees and executives, and for central decisions to be explained back to local boards. These go beyond minutes — chairs' forums, shared development, direct access to the trust board. Local chairs are part of a trust-wide or regional network, not operating in isolation.
- **Ongoing capacity and evaluation** — Volunteers and executives receive proper governance induction, development and ongoing support, held within a whole-trust governance development plan. The effectiveness of each dimension is reviewed as part of whole-trust governance evaluation, which involves self-evaluation and external review. Findings are reported to school communities annually.

Together with the standards for each of the four dimensions, these cross-cutting expectations form the set of non-negotiables this paper proposes the Department embed within the new trust standards. They are derived from existing practice and analysis of what happens when governance goes wrong or is demonstrated to be exceptional. They are intended to be observable, testable and adaptable to the diversity of trusts in the system.

10. Conclusion

The diagnosis of the English education system by the Secretary of State is clear. Many schools, trusts and children are achieving and thriving, but it is not happening everywhere. The white paper's vision is to raise the floor with "Every Child Achieving and Thriving", focusing on supporting specific left-behind groups and raising standards across the board to achieve a broader, more inclusive system. In order to arrive there, schools and trusts have to be rooted in their communities and serving every corner of them. There is real ambition here, but as the founder of Oasis charitable trust, Steve Chalke has said, "we need to move the fence." The boundaries of society need have shifted and so to has role of schools. Society demands more. Communities demand more. This can only be achieved if the existing fence around governance is shifted too.

At the heart of good governance is the demand for equity, ambition and sustainability. Locally-minded, community-responsive governance is integral to deliver the high-quality trusts the Secretary of State wants to deliver – not just standards on a dashboard, but a better quality of community existence that lets local people flourish. The nation faces societal fragmentation and a lack of belonging. Schools embedded in their communities bring belonging, connection, and inclusion – values which are more important than ever in this era of insecurity.

The parallel with the government's wider diagnosis of the system is not coincidental. Just as the white paper identifies pockets of excellence alongside communities being left behind, the governance landscape shows the same pattern: trust governance has matured and become more distinct, but its quality is not consistent, and the gap is widest precisely where it matters most – at the local tier that anchors a trust in its community. Mandating local governance is welcome, but mandating existence without mandating substance will not deliver the community-rooted trusts the white paper aspires to. What is needed is a framework that harnesses the learnings that have emerged organically over the last two decades of trust governance, identifying the non-negotiables for effective governance across all four dimensions and holding the system to it. In doing so, we can work together towards the white paper's central ambition that no child or community is left behind.

That is what this paper has set out. Community-rooted quality is not an outcome that good strategy alone produces. It is a function of whether the governance architecture can simultaneously achieve the benefits of localisation and centralisation, place and scale, and therefore lay the groundwork for each trust to deliver for its young people. Raising the system's baseline must therefore include raising the minimum expectations of governance. The maturity of the MAT system now makes this possible: non-negotiables can be named without eliminating space for flexibility and freedom. The government's reforms to pay, curriculum, and teaching qualifications fit with this vision of raising the baseline; the promised new trust standards and MAT inspections provide the mechanism to embed it.

The five non-negotiables

The new trust standards must begin from an understanding of quality trust governance as a four-dimensional process, with each element separate but complementary, and with a fifth set of expectations covering how the dimensions work together. Across these five areas, the non-negotiables we propose the Department embed within the new trust standards require:

- 1. A local tier with deep community knowledge, genuinely empowered and rooted in the community it serves** — Its function is to hold trust-wide decisions to account where they land, to bring community insight into trust-level decision-making, and to be the visible face of governance for the families and staff the trust exists to serve. This is the dimension on which the community-rooted trust stands or falls.
- 2. Trust executives with specialist professional expertise who enable effective governance** — The executive dimension strengthens the system when it supports and complements the other dimensions. It undermines the system when executive capacity is used to crowd out local challenge or substitute for volunteer governance rather than enable it.
- 3. Trustees who deliver strategic leadership while delegating intelligently** — The benefits of centralisation (economies of scale, specialist practitioners, targeted support) and the benefits of localisation (adaptation to the unique identity, challenges and stakeholders of every school and community) are harnessed together, not traded off against each other. What the board chooses to delegate, and what it chooses to retain, is the clearest statement of how seriously it takes community accountability.
- 4. Members who understand and act on their constitutional role as guardians of the trust's charitable purpose** — Members are the final safeguard when governance goes wrong. They are the least visibly supported dimension of trust governance today, and the standards the sector adopts for them will shape whether the guardianship role is real or nominal.
- 5. A governance architecture designed to make the four dimensions work together, and to evolve with the trust** — The four dimensions do not deliver community-rooted governance by existing in parallel. They deliver it through the connections between them — the flows of information, the clarity of remit, the investment in capacity, and the ongoing evaluation that keeps the system honest as the trust matures.

Community-rooted schooling is not a slogan. It is a claim about where accountability in the publicly funded education system ultimately lies. The answer has to be with the children, families and communities whose schools these are. The new trust standards are the mechanism through which that claim becomes real — or fails to.

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About us

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning to shape stronger governance. Together, we're raising standards and ensuring every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.



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