

To govern for every child: a mid-term manifesto for schools and trusts



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Vision and ambition in the boardroom

Governance sits at the heart of leadership in England's state school system. More than 230,000 volunteer governors and trustees give their time, care and strategic insight to set vision, ensure financial stewardship, support and challenge senior leaders and provide direct accountability to their communities.

As the education system faces falling pupil numbers, persistent funding constraints and acute inclusion pressures, sustainable improvement cannot be achieved without strategic investment in the individuals, structures and standards that govern it.

This mid-term manifesto outlines the necessary conditions to deliver an equitable, inclusive and resilient school system.

Investing in the capacity to govern well

1 Supporting continuous accountability

Challenge

While external inspections and regulatory interventions are periodic, governing boards provide continuous, embedded stewardship informed by local context and community need. Strong governance helps schools and trusts flourish. Where governance is weak, the consequences have been costly for children, communities and the wider system.

Our ask:

The Department for Education (DfE) must formally designate school and trust governance as a foundational component of the national accountability framework. To support this, the government should introduce mandatory requirements for an External Review of Governance every three years.

2 Investing in governance volunteers

Challenge

Schools and trusts do not exist in isolation; they are vital community anchors. High-quality, ethical decision-making depends on diverse boards that reflect the lived experiences and communities they serve. When boards lack local representation or struggle to recruit, schools become detached from the very people they exist to support. The acute volunteer recruitment challenge is therefore a widening civic deficit that weakens community agency.

Our ask:

The government must invest in a sustained, place-sensitive national recruitment campaign that champions school governance as one of the country's most vital forms of civic participation and community leadership. This should be delivered in partnership with regional leaders, mayoral combined authorities and local civic networks.

3 Fully funded induction and development

Challenge

As schools and trusts navigate increasingly complex statutory landscapes, the assumption that volunteers can adequately train themselves without dedicated resource is unsustainable.

Our ask:

The DfE must introduce and fully fund a mandated baseline of high-quality induction and role-specific development for all governors and trustees.

4 Meaningful, empowered local-tier governance

Challenge

Multi academy trust (MAT) governance is a dynamic, four-dimensional system comprised of members, the trust board, the executive leadership, and the local tier. Too often, these dimensions are treated in isolation rather than as an interconnected architecture. While the vast majority of MATs operate a local tier of governance, its remit is too often compliance driven. Community-rooted trust leadership requires empowered local governance that holds decisions to account where they land.

Our ask:

The DfE should anchor the new trust quality standards in the four dimensions of trust governance, requiring trusts to demonstrate an integrated, adaptive system. Crucially, the DfE should establish clear standards for local governance that require trusts to demonstrate meaningful delegation and show how they bring authentic community intelligence and influence into decision making.

Setting conditions for equity, trust and inclusion

5 A national MAT executive pay framework

Challenge

While trusts must be able to attract high-calibre executive leaders and reflect the complexity of leading large organisations, public trust is eroded by unjustifiable executive pay outliers. Sector benchmarking without clear parameters has led to upward spiralling rather than principled remuneration.

Our ask:

The government should introduce a national MAT executive remuneration framework modelled on existing public sector pay structures (such as the NHS Very Senior Managers framework) that builds in a pay ratio with all trust staff and banded ranges linked to trust size, complexity and educational context.

6 Widening the definition of disadvantage

Challenge

- Educational disadvantage has outgrown the narrow metrics historically used to define it. As we have explored over the years through our 'Widening the Lens' campaign, the sector must look beyond the free school meal (FSM) proxy and recognise the range of factors that can shape a child's experience and outcomes, including SEND, ethnicity and whether they are a child in care.
- We welcome the government's proposed move to broader household income measures to improve deprivation funding. This is an important step, however, household income alone will not necessarily provide a complete picture of a family's circumstances.

Our ask:

- The government should adopt a multi-dimensional definition of disadvantage to provide a stronger basis for developing policies that improve outcomes for the most vulnerable pupils.
- The new deprivation funding approach should make better use of information held across government, including Universal Credit eligibility and household income. This should capture income at a point in time as well as the depth and duration of poverty.

7 Making inclusion visible and rewarded

Challenge

Current performance measures account for prior attainment but ignore the additional challenge of admitting and retaining pupils with SEND and complex needs. League tables and inspection frameworks inadvertently penalise inclusive schools while rewarding those with less complex intakes.

Our ask:

The DfE and Ofsted must redesign accountability to actively recognise and reward inclusive practice by developing:

- Inclusion-sensitive metrics that positively recognise schools that successfully support pupils with complex needs.
- Contextual inclusion data, published alongside headline results, that track a school's SEND intake relative to its local area alongside retention, unexplained exits and persistent absence rates.

Strengthening system integrity

8 A collaborative, trust-level inspection framework

Challenge

As MATs become the primary operating model, accountability frameworks must evolve beyond the simple aggregation of individual school results. Inspections must evaluate organisational capacity without penalising individual schools for central deficiencies and promote cross-system collaboration.

Our ask:

Any trust inspection methodology must assess how MAT capacity adds sustained, equitable value across all member schools. The framework must evaluate:

- how the trust dividend is strategically generated
- how impact is experienced across school contexts within the trust
- how the board and executives intervene when impact is absent

9 A national strategy for demographic shifts

Challenge

Falling birth rates and per-pupil funding constraints threaten the viability of primary schools across rural, coastal and urban areas. Without strategic place-planning, fragmented admissions across MATs and local authorities lead to uncoordinated competition and closures driven by financial attrition rather than community need.

Our ask:

The DfE must introduce a national falling rolls strategy and empower region-based authorities to coordinate place-planning and admissions.

10 A long-term education workforce strategy

Challenge

The education workforce – comprising teachers, support staff, business leaders, governance professionals and SENCOs – is the sector's most valuable asset. However, fragmented annual pay settlements, workload pressures and lack of parity with wider graduate markets have led to persistent recruitment and retention crises.

Our ask:

The government should publish a costed, 10-to-15-year national education workforce strategy, comparable to the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan. This must address multi-year pay certainty, career development pathways, recruitment pipelines, role design, and flexible working conditions to secure the profession's long-term sustainability.

11 Reviewing SEND system capacity

Challenge

Boards cannot deliver the government's ambition to support more children with SEND in mainstream settings without sufficient capacity across the system. Shortages in specialist places and support leave mainstream schools struggling to meet increasingly complex needs without the necessary expertise or infrastructure. This directly affects governing boards' ability to ensure effective use of resources, hold leaders to account and secure the best outcomes for pupils.

Our ask:

The government should urgently audit specialist and alternative provision places to establish where shortages exist and whether specialist capacity is reaching those with the most complex needs. This must inform targeted investment and plans to ensure mainstream settings are suitably prepared and resourced.

12 Harnessing AI responsibly

Challenge

Generative AI can reduce administrative workload, but rapid adoption without consistently enforced safeguards creates risks around data privacy, bias and the integrity of the profession. AI cannot be allowed to replace human judgement and ethical oversight.

Our ask:

The DfE must build on its existing guidance and funding commitments to deliver mandatory, universal standards and safeguards for AI adoption across the state sector by:

- Making clear ethical standards on data protection, bias mitigation and procurement mandatory for all schools, not just recommended – closing the gap where guidance exists but nearly half of schools have no AI policy at all.
- Protecting the human core of teaching, leadership and governance, ensuring AI does not replace professional practice or strategic decision-making.
- Preventing digital disadvantage through accelerated and extended funded, equitable access.



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