

A matter of time

Exploring the time it takes to govern in schools and trusts

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Insight

A research study by the
National Governance Association

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Foreword

School and trust governance is a cornerstone of our education system, yet it often operates in the shadows, its importance underappreciated. This report sheds crucial light on the time commitment required of dedicated volunteers who play a vital role in shaping the future of our schools and, by extension, our society.

Back in 2023, NGA set out to document the reality of the workload challenge governing boards across the country were dealing with. The result was an eye-opening account of the complex situations boards were facing. Yet it also shone a light on some simplistic truths that, if addressed, could ease the burden. We are pleased to report that the findings of that work were met with at least some interest from those in powerful positions, but we are yet to see the government meaningfully address the situation.

And so, it is part of NGA's mission to persist; not to sit still but to pursue this agenda until everyone is fully informed of the consequences of not taking governance workload seriously. We found it was harder and harder to justify the rationale for the figures previously used, by NGA or anyone else, for the time it takes to govern in 2024 – it was incredibly difficult to put an accurate figure on the time governors and trustees spend carrying out their role.

The findings presented here highlight both the remarkable dedication of those who serve and the mounting challenges they face in balancing their responsibilities with other commitments. As we consider these results, we must ask ourselves: How can we better support and sustain this essential volunteer force? How can we ensure that governance remains both effective and manageable in the years to come?

Writing this report carries an inherent risk; that by placing a number on the finding, a benchmark is created. But that is potentially a dangerous game, and one that we are not ready to play. The main message of this report is that the current time commitment is too high, and we now need to pursue a collaborative agenda to reduce it.

This report, however, is not just a collection of data; it is a call to action. It challenges us to rethink our approach to school and trust governance, to find ways to streamline processes without compromising on quality, and to ensure that those who give so generously of their time are adequately supported and recognised. It equips NGA and others to say the ask is, in many places, and in many ways, simply too high – we need to work together to make it more doable for the masses, if we are to ever deal with the recruitment challenge.

The time has come for a concerted effort from all stakeholders – including government, school leaders, and governance organisations – to address the issues raised in this report. Only by working together can we ensure that school and trust governance remains sustainable and fit for purpose in an increasingly complex educational landscape.

Sam Henson, NGA Deputy Chief Executive

Introduction

This report explores the time commitment attached to governing roles in schools and trusts in England in 2024, forming part two of NGA's Governance Workload Project.

Phase one brought together several strands of primary research (including interviews and NGA member forums) to establish the key factors which contributed to stress and excessive governance workload. Although we identified several issues, the true time commitment (often hinted at in the research) was missing. Therefore, we undertook further research in 2024 to ascertain more clearly the time commitment of governors and trustees.

Following a literature review, phase two was formulated. 'Time-use' diaries were used to record the various tasks and associated time requirements of governors and trustees in different phases, school types and board leadership positions.

Participants recorded a range of tasks, including operational activities (such as supporting school trips and extra-curricular clubs) not normally within the governor or trustee remit. Volunteers undertook these tasks largely because they understood this to be part of their role and were therefore included in the time diaries.

Key findings

- 1. Those in non-chairing roles spent 15.8 hours (or 2.1 working days per month, where a working day is 7.5 hours) on their governance role across four weeks.** This compares to 21.6 hours (or 2.9 days per month) for those in a chairing role. The overall average for all volunteers across the sample was 17.2 hours across four weeks (2.3 days per month).
- 2. Those chairing (both chairs and vice chairs) in maintained schools** spent over double the time that non-chairs did. This equated to chairs spending nearly **6 working days** per month compared to **2.5 for non-chairs** in maintained schools.
- 3. Single academy trust (SAT) trustees spent the most time on their governance role** out of all board types at nearly 3.5 working days per month. Meanwhile, maintained school governors spent just over 3 days. Multi academy trust (MAT) trustees spent 2.7 days and local governors in a MAT the least at 1.8 days.
- 4. Those governing in secondary settings spent more time governing than those in primary settings.** This was especially true for those chairing.
- 5. The average full governing board meeting was 2.25 hours** and an average committee meeting lasted **1.7 hours** – a total of **236 hours** or **16%** of all diary time.
- 6. Exceptional events** like Ofsted, academisation, and headteacher recruitment significantly increased total time in many diaries.
- 7. Administration and reading time were the top two activities** reported overall (in terms of activities recorded by most participants and taking the most time).
- 8. Taking part in training and development features in the top five activities** reported (recorded by most participants and taking the most time).
- 9. Alongside training and development, operational activities were the third most time-consuming** reported in the diaries, adding an average of 1.6 hours' time burden.

The volunteer experience

To formulate phase two, it was essential to scope the volunteering landscape to identify key information and gaps in previous research.

The scale of the problem

Arguably one of the largest volunteer forces in England, governors and trustees play a vital role in the education sector's survival. Volunteering surveys, including the [2023 Time Well Spent report](#) by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), found that just over one in five (23%) of those surveyed volunteered in the public sector. More specifically, 13% of those surveyed formally volunteered in children's education/schools – the sixth most common volunteering area/cause out of 17 options.

[NGA estimates](#) that the current number of school governors and trustees is approximately 250,000, if all boards were full. Quantifying the size of the governance volunteer force is difficult but this estimate helps to shed light on the scale of the risk that high workload and stress poses to this essential workforce, especially as we know this is often cited as a main reason for volunteers resigning from the role.

In 2014, [Balarin et al concluded](#) that school governance was overlooked, overcomplicated and governors overworked, and recommended that the range of governance responsibilities should be reduced, the role simplified, and status enhanced. In 2020, [Kettlewell et al also concluded](#) that there are considerable challenges in the recruitment and retention of governors and trustees with time commitment and workload cited as the biggest barriers. While [NGA argues that practice has improved](#) as well as recognition of the role (as explored in NGA's 2023 [Governance workload report](#)), external factors mean governance workload levels are now at extremely high levels for an increasing number of volunteers.

Worryingly, NGA's 2024 annual governance survey shows that these pressures remain:

- Over three quarters (76%) of respondents agreed that recruiting to the governing board was difficult in 2024, compared to 50% in 2015.
- 22% of respondents did not find their role manageable and 30% were considering resigning.
- Respondents reporting two or more board vacancies has also increased, from 38% in 2022 to 44% in 2024 (the highest figure since we began asking this question in 2016), resulting in an estimate of around 30,000 governor and trustee vacancies.
- Retention in governance is a problem that predates the COVID-19 pandemic and is progressively worsening.

How long does other volunteering take?

Evaluating the average time commitment for volunteering roles beyond schools and trusts provides a useful comparison. The most common formal volunteering roles in NCVO's 2023 report related to:

- the local community or neighbourhood groups (21%)
- health/disability and social welfare (17%)
- hobbies/recreation/arts/social clubs (16%)

Of those that could recall, volunteers in [NCVO's 2019 survey](#) reported spending a median average of eight hours per month completing their duties. Meanwhile the [Charity Commission suggests](#) a charity trustee role can be fulfilled in 30 hours per year, equating to just under four working days per year.

In 2020/21, [the Community Life Survey](#) found that 17% of respondents took part in formal volunteering at least once per month in the past 12 months compared to 23% in 2019/20. This was the lowest recorded participation rate in the survey's history. NCVO's 2023 Time Well Spent report found that the more frequently public sector volunteers gave their time, the more likely they were to report that it was becoming too much like paid work. Almost a quarter (24%) of those volunteering most frequently in the public sector – at least once a week – agreed with this statement compared to 16% of those in civil society (NCVO, 2019).

According to NCVO, since 2019 there has been an increase in the number of volunteers who think their contributions are becoming too much like paid work (19% in 2019 vs 26% in 2023) as well as the number of volunteers who believe their group, club or organisation has unreasonable expectations of them (17% in 2019 vs 24% in 2023).

The most commonly reported negative aspects of volunteering are that it can take up too much time (13%) and that volunteers feel pressured to do more than they would like or to continue their involvement (10%). Moreover, public sector volunteers are less satisfied overall than those volunteering for civil society organisations (87% of public sector volunteers vs 94% of civil society volunteers). In 2019, 80% of recent volunteers said they were likely to continue volunteering in the next 12 months compared to 77% in 2023. Overall, despite a varying time commitment among different types of volunteering, there is a trend of growing dissatisfaction and disengagement.

How long does school/trust governance take?

There are varying approaches to quantifying time spent on school/trust governance. Some sources simply outline the tasks required of governors or trustees. [Governors for Schools](#), for example say, “school governors usually attend around six meetings per year” and some [council websites](#) state similar expectations:

“Volunteers need to be able to attend meetings, usually between three and six a year. They will also be asked to sit on a committee of the governing board that specialises in a particular aspect of the organisation”.

Other approaches include a combination of tasks and time estimates. For example, [one council website states](#):

“... it is difficult to say precisely as each governing board operates in its own way. However, the full governing board must meet once a term and these meetings are of about two hours duration. In addition, governors will be expected to join a committee and the committee will meet each term. Governors will be expected to make a visit to the school at least once a year”.

The most common way of quantifying school and trust governance responsibilities is based on time commitment of days per year/term/month. [Inspiring Governance](#), the governor recruitment service, suggests:

“the average time commitment is 5-8 hours per month, although it will vary depending on the needs of the school and the role. This includes meetings, background reading and school visits”.

In 2016, NGA carried out an in-depth study of [the time it takes to chair](#). This involved analysis of ‘time-use’ diaries completed by 31 governors and trustees to find that it took around four working days per month to chair. Moreover, in 2019, over three quarters of respondents in [our annual governance survey](#) (77%) reported spending more than 20 days a year on governance, with 29% spending over 30 days.

[A major governance study](#) published by the Department for Education (DfE) and the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) in 2020 found that the average governor or trustee spent 4.5 working days per term on governance. This varied widely according to governing board type, phase and role.

Recent estimates come from NGA’s 2024 Annual Governance Survey where most respondents self-reported spending between 10 and 15 hours on governance duties per month (32%). At most (15 hours) this would equate to two full working days per month where a working day is 7.5 hours. Meanwhile a similar proportion reported spending less than 10 hours (31%).

What does this mean for this study?

Overall, the desire to volunteer across society is reducing, with the time commitment being given as one of the predominant reasons. Across voluntary roles – including school and trust governance – the literature shows there is a general and growing dissatisfaction with volunteering, posing a threat that needs to be taken seriously.

This study offers the opportunity to provide an up-to-date, quantitative evaluation of the time commitment of governors and trustees in a variety of settings and roles. By taking this in-depth approach, this research will positively add to phase one's qualitative research base and to an area that is rarely reported on.

Methodology

Following the literature review, time-use diaries were selected as our method of research, with the aim of finding out how much time governors and trustees spend on their governance role and what activities they complete.

Time use diaries were carried out by 56 governors and trustees. Participants represent a mix of school types, phases and governance roles (see tables 1, 2 and 3). The sample was self-selecting and most volunteered to take part in response to NGA newsletter articles – as such, the majority were NGA members. Diaries were kept over a period of four weeks; this was deemed long enough to collect a useful amount of data, without being too onerous on participants, and is in line with previous research conducted in this area.

Participants were provided with a diary document which included instructions for how to complete the diary; examples of what entries might look like; and the diary grid itself. Participants kept diaries for four consecutive weeks during January to March 2024, with some diaries falling over school holidays.

Completed diaries were analysed using Microsoft Excel. Tasks were examined and assigned a description, for example 'preparing for full governing board meetings'. Diaries were also analysed according to board type, phase and role to highlight any differences in these variables.

Throughout most of the report, the median is provided as an average rather than the mean. This decision was taken as several participants reported giving a significant amount of time to operational activities and others significantly less due to school holidays, which skews the mean. Therefore, the median is a more likely reflection of the average time spent on strategic governance. In the few instances where the mean is used, you will see the figures followed by an asterisk (*).

Where we use the term 'in a chairing role' or 'those who chair', this refers to anyone who occupied the following governor/trustee roles: chair, co-chair, and vice-chair.

It should be noted that this is a small-scale study with a relatively small sample. Although the sample characteristics are largely in line with national figures, it is not large enough to draw generalisations and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind. Data was self-reported and was reliant on participants recording their time use accurately. Despite this, it is possible to draw meaningful conclusions from the data.

Participant characteristics

Board type	No.	%
Local authority maintained	17	30%
Multi academy trust	10	18%
Single academy trust	7	13%
Local academy committee	22	39%
Total	56	100%

Table 1: Participants' governing board type

Role	No.	%
Chairs (including co and vice)	23	41%
Governor/Trustee	33	59%
Total	56	100%

Table 2: Participants' role type

School or trust phase	No.	%
Primary	29	52%
Secondary	18	32%
All-through	2	4%
Mixed (within MATs)	7	13%
Total	56	100%

Table 3: Participants' phase

Findings

How much time is spent governing?

The total time spent on governance across the four-week period varied. The lowest figure was three hours and the highest was 82 hours.

The average time spent across the sample was **17.2 hours**, or **2.3 working days per month** (where a working day is 7.5 hours).

Several factors should be acknowledged when evaluating these broad figures, including: a variation in diary detail; role on the board; the occurrence of exceptional governance tasks such as academisation, Ofsted inspections; and time-consuming operational activity. These will be discussed later.

Non-chairing roles

Those in non-chairing roles spent **15.8 hours or 2.1 working days per month** on governance. When examined by board type, MAT trustees spent the most time governing (**2.7** working days per month) closely followed by maintained school governors (**2.5** days).

Chairing roles

The average time it took for those in a chairing role to carry out their governance role across four weeks was **21.6 hours (or 2.9 working days per month)**. This is lower than [previous NGA research](#) that found the average time to chair was 27.5 hours (or 3.6 working days per month).

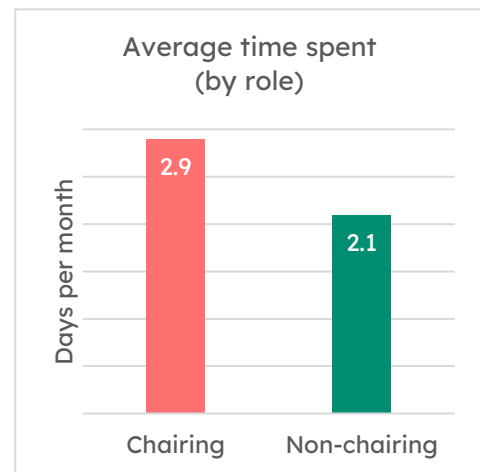


Figure 1: Average time governing, by role

Understandably, chairs spent more time governing on average than those in non-chairing roles. The only exception was primary school chairs (likely driven by a higher number of local academy chairs in this subsample).

The biggest disparity existed in maintained schools where those chairing spent over double the time that non-chairs did (see figure 2). This equated to chairs recording nearly **6 working days** per month, compared to **2.5 for non-chairs** as a result of higher levels of operational activity carried out by chairs in these settings.

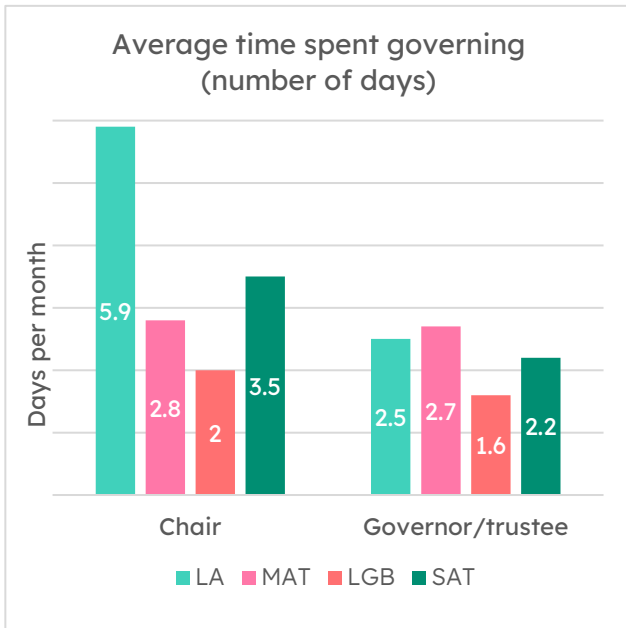


Figure 2: Average time governing, by board type & role

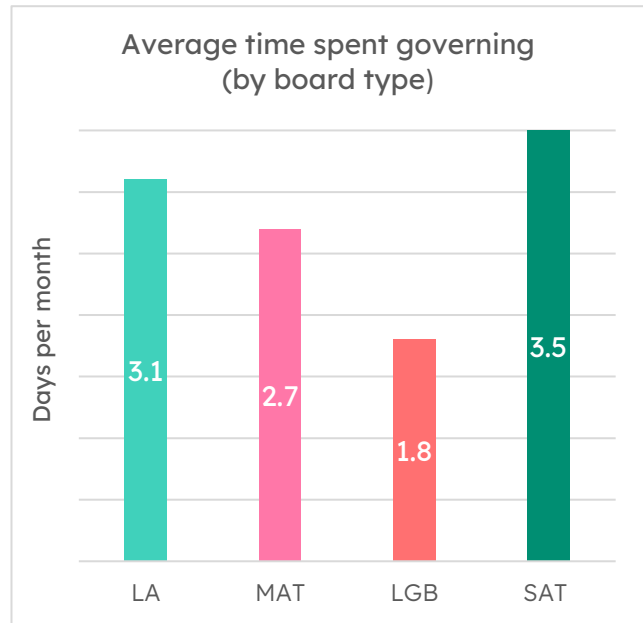


Figure 3: Average time governing, by board type

Board type

It was found that SAT trustees spent the longest on their governance role at nearly **3.5 working days** per month. Meanwhile, maintained school governors spent just over three days. This compares to MAT trustees spending 2.7 days per month and local governors within a MAT the least at 1.8 days.

Local tier responsibilities within a MAT vary significantly from trust to trust. However, local governance does not carry the same statutory weight as other governance roles, and so it is understandable that local governors recorded the least time governing.

Phase

Overall, those governing in primary settings spent on average **18 hours** (or 2.4 working days per month) across the four weeks compared to **25 hours** (or 3.3 working days per month) for those in secondary settings.

In 2016, Cotgrave found that secondary chairs generally spent less time on governance than their primary colleagues (23 vs 28 hours). Conversely, in our research, secondary chairs spent over double the time on governance than their primary colleagues: the average time for secondary chairs across the study was **30 hours (or 4 working days per month)** compared to **12 hours (or 1.6 working days per month)** for primary chairs. This could be explained by a higher number of trustees and maintained governors in our secondary chairing subsample.

What do governors and trustees spend their time on?

Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%
Recorded by most participants:		Accounted for the most diary time:		Recorded most frequently:	
Administration	84%	Reading time	10%	Administration	18%
Reading time	82%	Administration	9%	Reading time	12%
Preparing for full board meetings	66%	Training & development	8%	Communicating with governors/trustees	8%
Training & development	61%	Operational	8%	Thinking time	7%
**Meetings	61%	Recruiting senior leaders	7%	Training & development	5%
Thinking time	54%	**Meetings	6%		

Table 4: Top activities recorded (by most participants, for the most time and most frequently)

**Refers to meetings occurring outside of full board and committee meetings (such as a chair meeting with the headteacher) – see further details under [‘other meetings’](#).

Day-to-day tasks

This study found that the most time spent by the sample overall was on **reading**, accounting for **148 hours**. Reading material included school and governance newsletters, governance publications, government guidance as well as materials read to prepare for meetings other than full board and committee meetings. Those in non-chairing roles spent nearly double their time on reading than chairs did (**13% vs 7%**).

Second to reading was **administration**, amounting to **130 hours** across the sample. Administration covered: routine email correspondence, booking in meetings or onto training. Once again, those in non-chairing roles spent more of their time on this (**10% vs 7%**).

In a similar vein, **communicating with other governors and trustees** accounted for **64 hours** of time in the participant’s diaries. This included phone calls and emails to other governors and trustees. Those in non-chairing roles were slightly more likely to record communication with other governors and trustees than those in chairing roles.

A total of **76 hours** was spent across the diary sample on **thinking time** – significantly less than the other top activities. Thinking time was recorded by **30 of the 56 participants** and is likely to be a conservative estimate of the actual time spent on this activity.

Some participants recorded ‘pure’ thinking time, but the majority of references were linked to another governance-related activity such as attending a meeting or researching a particular issue. Interestingly, a higher percentage of chairs recorded instances of thinking time (**60% vs 40%**), however, non-chairs spent longer on average per instance (**42 minutes vs 25 minutes**).

Board and committee meetings

A total of **236 hours** or **16%** of all time recorded in participant diaries came from governing board or committee meeting preparation and attendance. Those in non-chairing roles spent longer on preparation than those chairing (**10%** of their time vs **8%**). Activities relating to meeting preparation included reading minutes from the last meeting, writing papers, reading reports and liaising with the clerk or headteacher about the agenda. The average full governing board meeting was **2.25 hours** and an average committee meeting **1.7 hours**.

Across four weeks, just over two thirds (**67%**) of participants reported **full governing board meeting** preparation and just under half (**46%**) also **attended a full board meeting**. Similarly, **50% prepared for a committee meeting**, while **45% attended one**.

NGA's 2023 governance workload study also recorded a number of comments about the time needed to prepare for meetings, which was exacerbated by late or lengthy papers.

Other meetings

Attending **meetings** other than a full governing board or committee meeting appeared in the top five most time-consuming activities. **87%** of chairs reported at least one instance of this (compared to **52%** of non-chairs). Chairs in fact spent twice as much of their time as non-chairs in meetings outside of the governing board (**11% vs 4%**).

Examples included meetings with:

- the headteacher/CEO
- other governors/trustees (informally)
- other governors/trustees (for scheduled progress/catch-up discussions)
- other chairs at forums
- members of school/trust staff
- link governors
- a governance professional
- the local authority

Engaging with stakeholders

A total of **8 hours** was spent engaging with parents across participant diaries, with those chairing more likely to do so (**76%** of all time engaging with parents came from chairs). Parental engagement typically involved writing newsletters, holding governor drop-ins and surveys. This activity was evenly spread across phases and board types.

More time was spent on engagement with staff, totaling **12 hours**. This included writing bulletins, meeting with staff, and other written contact. Once again, **88%** of all staff engagement was conducted by those chairing. Activity was weighted more heavily among secondary participants and lacked representation from maintained school governors.

There were limited reports of engagement with the local community; sometimes these took place within broader categories of 'meetings' and possibly within full governing board or committee meetings, the detail of which was not disclosed by participants.

It should be noted that there was no direct mention of engagement with pupils recorded within the diary entries.

Recruitment of senior leaders

98 hours or 7% of all time spent related to recruiting members of the senior leadership team, with 14% of participants involved in this type of activity. This included reviewing applications and shortlisting, interview panels, and deliberation. The majority of participants involved in this activity were non-chairs, who spent **6%** of their time on senior leader recruitment, with each task taking on average **1 hour 15 minutes**.

Recruitment of governors and trustees

Recruiting new governors and trustees accounted for **7 hours** of governance time across the diaries. **13%** of participants reported recruitment activity and spent on average **22 minutes** per activity. As often is the case, chairs were responsible for almost all activity in this area.

Exceptional activities

As well as more routine governance activities, there were a number of additional governance-related activities that contributed significantly to some participant's diary entries. Ofsted, for example, in one instance added **6.5 hours**.

In other cases:

- academisation-related activity added **3.5 hours*** to a participant's diary on average
- dealing with complaints added **3.8 hours***
- staff disciplinaries added **2.75 hours***
- exclusion panels (which were more common) added **5 hours***

75% of exclusion panels were carried out by non-chairs and this accounted for **2%** of their time overall. The majority of panels involved secondary school governors or trustees in academies or SATs.

Certain activities are therefore irregular yet particularly time consuming when they occur.

Training

Taking part in **training and development** features in the top five activities that were reported, in terms of activities recorded by most participants and taking the most time. A total of **119 hours** was spent on training and development with **61%** of participants completing at least one instance of this. Examples include e-learning modules, governor development days, governance reviews, webinars, and in-person courses.

The average time spent per activity was **1 hour 30 minutes**. The same percentage of chairs and non-chairs took part in training but those in non-chairing roles took longer on this on average, spending **1 hour 30 minutes** per activity compared to chairs spending **1 hour**. A similar number of instances of training came from those in primary and secondary settings.

Operational tasks

Alongside training and development, **operational activities** were the third most time-consuming reported in the diaries, accounting for **117 hours (8% of overall time spent)**. This included: hosting staff meals, supporting day/residential trips, creating school displays, supporting extra-curricular clubs, attending school plays, open evenings and parents' evenings, and supporting other school initiatives like second hand uniform provision.

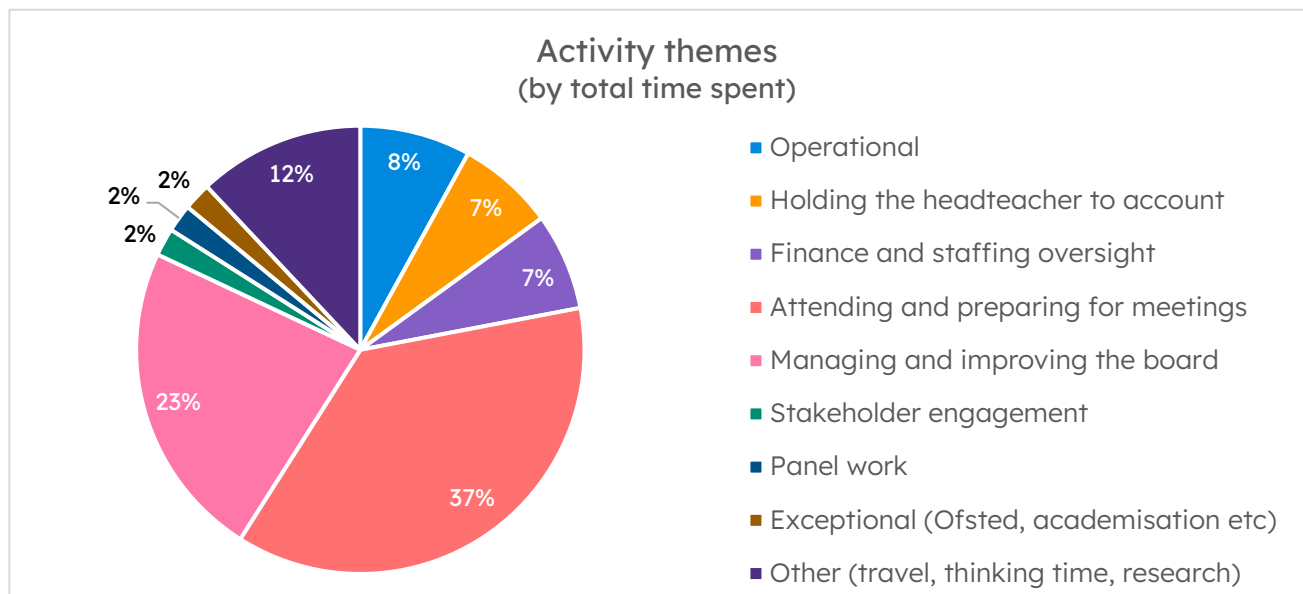


Figure 4: Top activities, grouped by theme

Nearly **one in four** (23%) governors and trustees reported at least one instance of operational activity and they were most likely to be in primary schools. Participants in all types of governing board, except MAT trustees, recorded operational activities. Although those in non-chairing positions were more likely to report carrying out operational tasks, chairs were more likely to spend longer on them, spending **10%** of their time on this versus **6%** for non-chairs. Chairs spent an average of **2 hours** per operational task compared to **1.5 hours** for non-chairs.

Operational activities were carried out by volunteers largely because they understood this to be their role, or sometimes because it was an additional task they had agreed to do. They were therefore included in the time diaries as those individuals recorded these tasks part of their governor/trustee role. However, it is important to understand that these tasks are not the governance role and should not be treated as such.

While it is not necessarily common practice, we have also been told about occasions where individual volunteers appeared to actively seek more of a role than is required of them and sometimes are asked to do this by school leaders. There is a risk that this sets a dangerous precedent or legacy for those who follow. When evaluating the overall time commitment, it is important to differentiate what is 'needed' and what is 'freely given' because some have more time and inclination to do more.

While this will not solve the whole problem, it is clear that governance is more manageable – as well as successful – when it is kept within the confines of a strategic sphere. While reporting on these findings, NGA does not want to discourage additional acts of service where individuals have chosen to do this. However, we must stress these additional roles are pro-bono tasks on top of, not directly part of, governance.

Staying strategic

Most boards assess themselves as proficient in strategy development and understand that theirs is a strategic, not an operational, role. Yet both NGA's 2024 analysis report into the NLG programme - Growing Good Governance, and NGA's 2023 Governance workload report found operational tendencies were widely found in many boards. Many of the NLG reviews found that a significant proportion of governing boards across all structures struggle with establishing a long-term vision and strategy.

Any departure from strategic discussions places boards in a dangerous place, where they can lose sight of their role, and create an industry of unnecessary workload while also stepping on the toes of leaders and staff, straining relationships and causing confusion.

The chair, supported by the vice chair, should cut off operational contributions swiftly with a reminder of the board's role. There may also need to be conversations outside of meetings and a review of governance.

Maintaining momentum and changing long-established ways of working can be challenging, particularly where there is resistance to change or a lack of understanding of the benefits. Boards need to openly review their practice and regularly question each activity to see if it is directly linked to the board's strategic priorities, or whether it is an operational matter that can be carried out by school leaders.

Conclusion

This study reveals that governors and trustees dedicate significantly more time to their roles than previously suggested, with an average of 15.8 hours per month for those in non-chairing roles. At just over two working days' worth of time per month, this level of commitment, while demonstrating remarkable generosity, raises serious questions about the sustainability of volunteer governance in England's schools and trusts.

Key findings highlight that reading, administration and meetings consume the bulk of volunteer time. However, the inclusion of operational tasks in many participant diaries suggests a need for clearer role definition and delineation. NGA's recent work, including the Taking stock of governance workload report and the Growing governance report, indicates that this issue extends beyond simple time management to more fundamental questions of governance culture and practice.

We need to ask the question, honestly and in open conversation with school and trust leaders – is volunteer time being used appropriately, and as efficiently as possible? Are there ways that we can reduce the time required of volunteers, while also making school and trust leaders' workload more manageable?

NGA's view is the answer is yes, probably, at least for a large number of boards. When we look at the findings of recent reports, for example, where holding leaders to account was identified as an issue, over a quarter (27%) specifically noted major weaknesses in leadership engagement with governance, and therefore boards being unable to hold leaders to account. This was often directly linked to how and what was being reported to the board. Good practice was observed where concise information was provided, and with the expectation that it would be debated and scrutinised. It is no coincidence that debate and scrutiny are directly linked to the availability of concise information.

There is board practice that can help to make the role manageable and crucially achievable in less time, ensuring that governing board duties are carried out effectively yet without excessive requirements of volunteers' personal time. While it would be naive to conclude efficiencies in board practice can alleviate all workload pressures for those who govern, there are clearly opportunities to implement better ways of working, which NGA has written about. While it is not necessarily an exciting policy change, the sector needs to embrace what we know to be good governance, while weeding out unnecessary activity. This will be much more achievable if the sector embraces regular external reviews of governance as part of cycle of organisational improvement.

Exceptional events such as Ofsted inspections and leadership recruitment dramatically increase time commitments, emphasising the need for fully staffed boards and flexible governance structures. As the education landscape evolves, so too must our approach to governance. This might also include actively discouraging those volunteering in a governance capacity to take on further operational volunteering duties, unless there is a very specific rationale to do so.

NGA firmly believes that the path forward involves collaborative review of practices between leaders and boards, but also between the sector and the government. Yes, refining executive reporting, agenda setting, and policy reviews will all help. Creating safe spaces for volunteers to honestly discuss time pressures is crucial and will also be hugely beneficial.

But as this study highlights, the dedication of school and trust governors cannot be questioned, yet the government to date has shown less and less interest in doing its bit to support it. To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of volunteer governance, a concerted effort that includes NGA, our key sector partners, and crucially senior civil servants and ministers, is needed without delay. We can maintain and even enhance the vital contribution of governance to England's education system in an increasingly complex landscape, if it is given the respect and recognition it deserves.

Key recommendations

- 1. Streamline administrative processes** – develop and implement more efficient systems for document management, communication and meeting preparation to reduce the administrative burden on governors and trustees.
- 2. Enhance training and support** – provide targeted, yet not excessive, training and resources to help governors and trustees manage their time more effectively and focus on strategic priorities.
- 3. Clarify roles and responsibilities** – invest initial time to establish clear guidelines distinguishing between governance and operational activities to prevent mission creep and excessive time requirements going forwards.
- 4. For the sector, and most importantly the government, to take seriously the importance of maintaining full governing boards** to distribute workload more evenly, especially during periods of increased activity (such as Ofsted inspections, and recruitment of senior leaders).
- 5. Implement time management tools** – encourage the use of time-use diaries, open door policies between board members and board chairs or similar tools to help governors and trustees reflect on, be honest and optimise their time allocation.
- 6. Review meeting structures** – assess the frequency, duration, and content of meetings to ensure they are necessary and productive.
- 7. Enhance stakeholder engagement strategies** – develop more efficient and purposeful methods for governors to engage with staff, parents, and pupils without increasing workload.
- 8. Regular workload reviews** – implement annual reviews of governance workload and effectiveness to identify areas for improvement and ensure the sustainability of volunteer governance.
- 9. NGA and others to lead the way in saying what is strategic governance, and what is operational activity.**

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External and self-review packages

In order to realise your board's potential for continuous improvement, NGA recommend having an external review of governance every three years, and an annual self-review. Our online self-evaluation tools and external review packages are here to support with this process.

- Identify your board's strengths and areas for development
- Create a roadmap for improvement
- Bespoke solutions designed for your organisation
- Designed and delivered by sector experts



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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