



**School
Governance
2020**

www.nga.org.uk/governance2020

September 2020

Foreword

This report contains a good news story. The amount of training and development undertaken by volunteers who are governing is truly impressive. With the huge support of the governance community, we have been making the case to the Government that the role of school governors and academy trustees is important enough to expect those taking up the role to be trained. Magistrates have to do this and so do many others in the voluntary sector from first aiders to CAB advisers. We have not been successful in changing the Government's approach, but the commitment of governance volunteers shines through with nine out of ten of them undertaking training.

There is more work to do to make the case to some and make training manageable and accessible for all, especially for those in full-time work. Three-quarters of all respondents have accessed on-line learning, which in these Covid-19 times is perhaps not quite as surprising as it otherwise would have been.

The survey was open in the first half the summer term, when boards were in the process of moving to remote governance. All NGA's work shows that by and large, with a few teething issues, this transfer from boards meeting in person to virtually has been achieved remarkably well and is a testament to their adaptability.

I remain in awe of the hours given by volunteers to their schools and trust, but it is sobering that one quarter of respondents say that the expectations are not manageable given their professional and personal commitments. This is an issue NGA will not be overlooking in the coming year.

Emma Knights, chief executive
National Governance Association

Introduction

Governing boards provide strategic leadership and accountability in schools and trusts, monitoring and evaluating the progress schools make and providing a source of challenge and support for the executive leader.

All governance roles come with significant responsibilities but despite the substantial nature of the role, induction training is not mandatory. However, governance training and development is heavily encouraged for both new and experienced governors and trustees in the Department for Education's Governance Handbook, as a means of ensuring that governance knowledge and skills on the board are developed on an on-going basis.

Good chairing and good clerking are two of NGA's eight elements of effective governance. In the autumn term, NGA will produce a more detailed report on the role of chairs and the importance of investing in their recruitment and development. Clerks, the governance

professionals who advise and service the board, are key to improving governance practice. In early 2021 NGA will add to this data by carrying out a survey of school clerks and other governance professionals in academy trusts.

The annual school governance survey has been running for ten years and is the largest survey of its kind. This year respondents were asked about the manageability of the role, their views on chairing, and what governance training and development they had undertaken. Several aspects of governance practice which we usually cover were not included this year, since in winter 2019 these had been covered by a National Foundation Educational Research survey commissioned by the Department for Education. We expect this to be published shortly and did not want to duplicate the work, but for the sake of completeness we do refer to our previous findings on page 7.

In this series

- Leadership and staffing
- Finance and funding
- Governance volunteers
- Governance practice
- Multi academy trust governance
- Pupils, communities and accountability

Find the full series of School Governance in 2020 reports at www.nga.org.uk/governance2020

6,864

respondents engaged with the survey



Key findings

Here's what governors and trustees told us about the manageability of the role, recruiting a chair, the role of their clerk and their approach to training and development.



- 01 Three quarters of governors/trustees surveyed agree that their governance role is manageable around their professional and personal commitments. However, chairs and those in full time employment were less likely to report that it is manageable.
- 02 While just over a third of respondents overall say recruiting a chair is difficult, this rises to almost a half of senior executive leaders who said this was the case.
- 03 Part of the difficulty in recruiting good chairs and vice chairs may come from the unwillingness of others on the board to step forward into the role: 57% of governors and trustees without any chairing responsibilities say they would not consider chairing their board in the future while over a third of chairs say that they took on the role as no one else wanted to (36%).
- 04 93% of respondents agreed that relevant high-quality induction training should be mandatory for new governors and trustees, a figure that has remained consistent across the ten years of the annual school governance survey. When first asked in 2011, 90% agreed.
- 05 Over nine in 10 governors/trustees surveyed said they had undertaken some form of training or development for their governance role. This varied by role, with 96% of chairs and vice chairs reporting having undertaken some form of training compared to 88% of those who held no chairing responsibilities.
- 06 A quarter of those who were new to the role, recruited in the past 12 months, had not yet undertaken any training for their role.
- 07 Despite the professional nature and importance of the role, assessing the job performance of clerks is not yet widespread practice. 64% of chairs said that their clerk received an appraisal, while 49% of vice chairs and 37% of other governors and trustees said the same, suggesting that knowledge of appraisals taking place is not consistent within boards themselves.
- 08 How clerks are employed impacted on whether governors and trustees say they receive advice on governance, constitutional and procedural matters. 94% of those with a clerk employed through the LA or another service provider said they did compared to 82% of those whose clerk had another role in school.
- 09 During the national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of governing boards (68%) continued to meet via web-based video conferences, with boards consolidating their way of meeting as the weeks passed. Over the course of the survey there was a consistent weekly rise of participants reporting meetings by video conferences.
- 10 E-Learning is second most popular form of governance training and development, only preceded by face-to-face training with external providers.

Findings

- Manageability of the role
- Chairs recruitment
- Clerks and governing boards
- Training and development
- Governing during Covid-19
- Governance practice over the years



Manageability of the role

Three quarters of governors and trustees surveyed believe that their governance role is manageable around their professional and/or personal commitments (76%). Only 17% said that they disagree.

However, just under a quarter of chairs of governing boards feel that their governance role is unmanageable (24%) compared to 16% of vice chairs and 13% of other governors and trustees. For senior executive leaders (SELs) performing ex-officio governance roles (eg headteachers,

executive heads, CEO), 23% of those surveyed say that their governance role is unmanageable around their professional and personal commitments.

The age profile of respondents also affected their perception on the manageability of the role, as seen in figure 1. The youngest governors and trustees, aged under 30, and the oldest, aged 60 and over, were the most likely to find their role manageable while governors/trustees between 30 and 59 were the least likely to report that they find their governance role manageable.

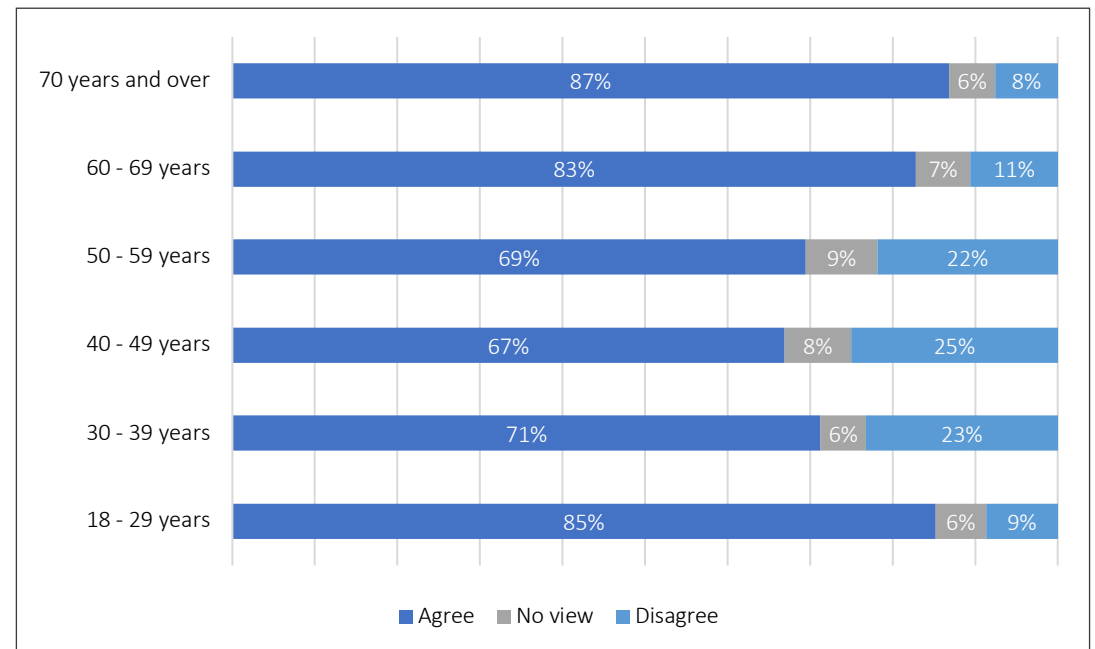


Figure 1, respondents and extent to which they agree or disagree that their governance role is manageable around their professional and/or personal commitments by respondent age



Those who are retired were also more likely to report that their governance role is manageable compared with those in employment which may explain why older governors/trustees also found their role more manageable. 86% of retirees agree that the role is manageable around their personal and/or professional commitments compared to 76% of those employed part-time and only 68% of those who were in full-time employment. A high proportion of those who report that their employment status was looking after home, or family also said the role was manageable (82%).

Over half of those who think that their governance role is unmanageable also say that they have considered or are considering resigning from their post (55%). This applied to only 18% of those who feel their governance role is manageable.

Among the reasons for considering resignation were inadequate time to perform the role (24%), a change in circumstance (14%) and that the role is too demanding (10%). Only 5% of governors/trustees who had considered or were considering resigning reported that this was due to them feeling they do not have the right skillset for the role.

Many respondents who were considering resigning also gave an 'other' response (47%) and those that elaborated on their answer reported that they wanted to give way to refresh the board or that they had served their full term and were looking to step down. A minority also reported that they felt their role was not appreciated or they did not feel they were making a real difference.

Chairs recruitment

Overall, 35% of governors/trustees agreed that their board finds it difficult to attract a good chair and vice chair. However, looking at the responses from current chairs only, 43% say that chair recruitment is difficult and 46% of senior executive leaders (SEs) also said chairs recruitment is difficult.

Meanwhile, a third of other governors/trustees without any chairing responsibilities reported the same (30%).

Despite fewer non-chairing governors/trustees reporting that it is difficult to recruit for the position of chair, 57% of these respondents said they would not consider chairing their board in the future with only a third of governors/trustees reporting that would consider it (28%). Only 2% of those surveyed reported that they had agreed to become chair in the future as part of a succession plan while 13% reported that they are unsure. Though a high proportion of chairs are retired, those who were retired but currently not chairing were less likely to say they would consider become chair compared with those who were employed (27% vs 31%).

A quarter of chairs (25%) were appointed as part of an agreed succession plan however a higher proportion (36%) stepped up 'as no one else wanted to take on the role'. When asked why they had taken on the role, existing chairs commonly reported that:

- 'I felt I had the right skillset for the role' (51%).
- 'I wanted to take on the challenge' (40%).
- 'I had previous experience as a vice chair/committee chair' (40%).
- 'I had been chair of governors/trustees at another school or trust' (15%).

Other reasons given for becoming chair include the previous chair suddenly stepped down (eg due to relocation or personal reasons), to retain skills after retirement or that they were asked to chair either by their SEL, the LA, their clerk or their outgoing chair. Some also stated that they were the most experienced volunteer on the board at the time or that they had an education background from their professional life.

Only 4% of chairs reported that they use a co-chairing model where two individuals share the role of chair, suggesting this model is underutilised.

Clerks and governing boards

Most governing boards obtain the services of a clerk/governance professional through their LA or a similar service provider (42%). Fewer respondents reported that their board's clerk has another role in the school (20%) or that they were employed directly by the trust (15%) while 5% admitted they did not know. Only 1% of respondents said their board did not have a clerk, despite 2013 regulations requiring all LA maintained schools governing boards to have appointed a clerk and the Academies Financial Handbook requiring academy trusts to do the same.

88% of governors/trustees reported that their clerk was able to provide the board with advice on governance, constitutional and procedural matters. This did vary by employment type with a higher proportion of respondents whose clerks employed through the LA or another service provider reporting that they provided this (94%), compared with 89% of freelance clerks, 88% of clerks employed through the trust and only 82% of those whose clerk had another role within the school.

Overall, 37% of respondents said that their clerk receives an annual appraisal with all other respondents either saying they did not (13%) or they were unsure whether they did (40%). Looking at those in board leadership roles, 64% of chairs said that their clerk received an appraisal, while 49% of vice chairs said the same. Despite the professional nature and importance of the role, assessing the job performance of clerks is not yet widespread practice or consistently understood within boards.

Of those that reported that their clerk did receive an annual appraisal, a majority said that this was conducted internally by either the governing board or staff members (57%) compared to externally by the LA or third-party provider (43%).

When asked who conducts the appraisal, there was a mixture of responses with 39% reporting that this is done by the chair or vice chair, 24% reporting that it was conducted by an SEL and 21% reporting that it was both the chair and an SEL.

The factors that were looked at when appraising their clerk, according to governors and trustees, are:

- Objectives (for the past and coming year): 77%
- Progress and development (including CPD): 70%
- Contribution to the wider governance of the school/trust (61%)
- The accuracy of the job description considering the current duties being carried out (59%)
- Pay and remuneration in relation to hours worked (52%)

Training and development

Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (56%) that relevant high-quality induction training should be mandatory for new governors/trustees.

Over nine in 10 governors and trustees reported that they had undertaken some form of training or development for their governance role (93%). This did vary by role, with 96% of chairs and vice chairs reporting having undertaken some form of training compared with 88% of those who held no chairing responsibilities on the board. This does not vary by type of school, so trustees were just as likely as governors to make time for development.

Newer recruits were the least likely to have undertaken training with a quarter of respondents recruited within the past 12 months reporting that they had not undertaken training for their role (25%), seemingly contrary to the consensus that induction training is important, even if not mandatory. Age also affected whether respondents reported undertaking training with 94% of governors/trustees aged over 40 undertaking training compared with 85% of those under 40.

Yes, the clerk has an annual appraisal	Clerk has another role in school	Employed by the trust	Employed through the local authority or other service provider	Freelance (self-employed) clerk
Internal	97%	83%	19%	94%
External	3%	17%	81%	6%

Figure 2, table showing proportion of respondents whose clerks receive an internal or external appraisal by employment type

When asked which forms of governance training or development respondents had accessed, the most to least popular types of training were:

1. External face-to-face training (eg through local authority, NGA, national leader of governance) (85%)
2. Online (eg an e-learning module or webinar) (75%)
3. Internal face-to-face training (eg through clerk/governance professional, school leader or another member of the board) (63%)
4. Attended a conference (45%)
5. Department for Education-funded development programmes for chairs and boards (23%)
6. Mixed methods (a mix of online and face-to-face) (20%)
7. Facilitated external review of governance (ERG) (19%)

Retired governors/trustees surveyed were more likely to report that they had undertaken training than governors/trustees who were employed or self-employed. 93% of part-time employed governors/trustees reported that they had undertaken training or development activities for their role as a governor/trustee which fell to 89% for those in full-time employment.

Age also affected whether respondents reported undertaking training with 94% of governors/trustees aged over 40 undertaking training compared with 85% of those under 40.

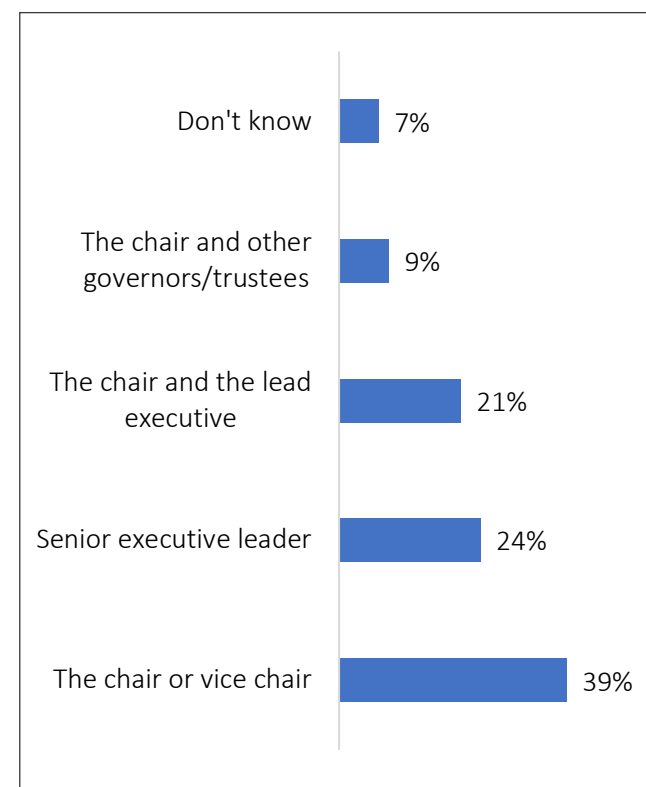


Figure 3, bar chart showing who conducts respondents' clerks' annual appraisals

This may be due to less flexible work commitments as 64% of governors/trustees aged under 40 reported being in full-time employment compared to only 39% of those 40 and over.

Those under 40 were less likely to undertake all of these forms of training compared with those over 40, and most notably, were less likely to attend face-to-face internal training (51% vs 64%), face-to-face external training (78% vs 86%), DfE funded development programmes (15% vs 24%) and conferences (26% vs 47%). Online training saw the smallest variation by age with only a 1% difference between those under and over 40.

Staff governors and ex-officio members of the board (heads and chief executives) were the least likely to have undertaken training and development for their role as a governor or trustee in the last year, but even 77% and 79% respectively had done.

The most popular training topics undertaken were safeguarding, chairing, Ofsted, recruitment, induction training and finance.

Governance practice during the Covid 19 pandemic

The survey took place during the national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent partial closure of schools which began on 23 March 2020. As the survey was open between 21 April and 26 May, it provides a snapshot of governing during the lockdown. Because of this, there is some variation in the responses given by virtue of the date respondents filled it in, with many boards continually reviewing and adapting their practice during those initial months of the pandemic. Our joint research with Ofsted on 'Governing in unprecedented times' also examines this topic in more detail.

When asked how their board was meeting, the majority (68%) said they continued to meet via web-based video conferences while the second most popular response was 'don't know or yet to decide', which is a reflection of the time period during

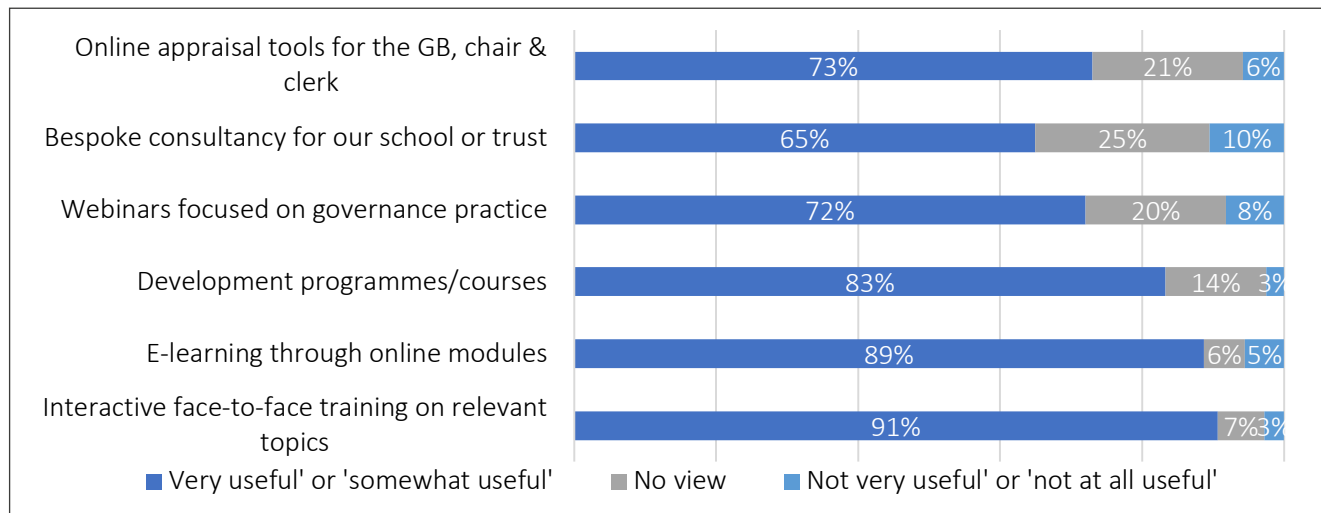


Figure 4, bar chart showing which governance training and development opportunities would be the most useful to respondents

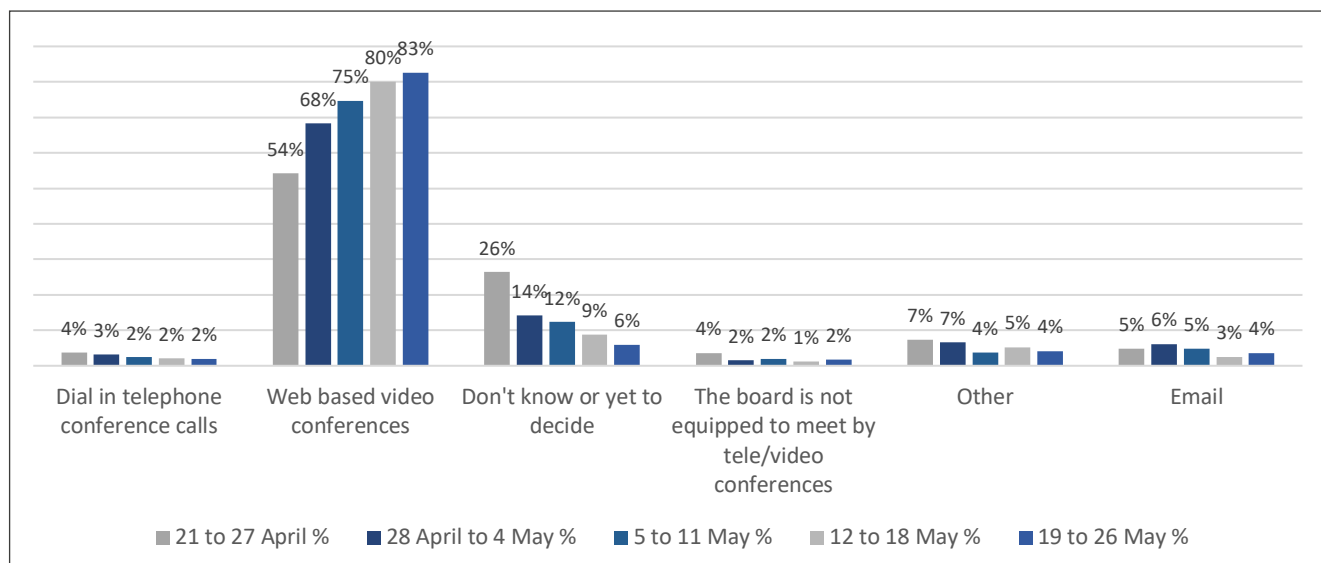


Figure 5, showing how boards continued to meet during lockdown

which this information was collected. A significant number of 'other' responses noted 'email' as the way that their board continued to meet.

In week one of the survey being open from 21 to 27 April, only 54% gave 'web-based video conferences' as their response while 26% said they didn't know or were yet to decide. Over the course of the survey, boards begin to consolidate their way of meeting as shown by the consistent weekly rise of participants reporting meetings by video conferences while the percentage of those who were unsure or yet to decide steadily declines. There is also a slight decrease in all other methods as shown in figure 5.

The four most popular responses detailing how governors and trustees have supported their senior leaders were:

- 1. Emails** – sending emails and messages of support to the SEL predominantly and other staff members in some other cases, most characterised their messages as 'supportive' and when sent to wider staff, these were usually messages of thanks to boost staff morale. Some noted that they limited their engagement with senior leaders to emails mostly to allow SELs to deal with pressing operational matters.
- 2. Telephone calls** – again usually to the head teacher or wider SLT, some phoned other staff members and many of these calls were also noted to be to offer support or praise to staff members.
- 3. Attending online meetings** – this included not only full governing board meetings and committee meetings but also SLT and/or other staff meetings.
- 4. Conducting wellbeing checks or initiatives for staff** – this includes phoning staff members and SELs to check on their wellbeing and/or implementing well-being initiatives such as counselling, employee support assistance programmes and sending gifts.

Governance practice over the years

Governance practice varies from board to board but there is a wealth of shared practice that transpires school structures, phase, type and geographical setting. There has also been significant changes over the years in the way governing boards seek to improve how they operate. A number of themes that have consistently been explored across the lifetime of the annual governance survey were not covered in 2020, but below is a snapshot of how practice has evolved over time.

Skills audit

A consistently popular method of improving practice over the years is the use of a skills audit. This has increased gradually over time, from 72% of respondents in 2012, and is now well embedded in most governing boards' practice with 87% saying they used a skills audit in 2019. The last time we asked respondents about how they use the skills audit in 2018, the top uses were recruitment (56%), assigning governors or trustees to committees (54%), training (45%) and succession planning (45%). While the use has increased, in 2019, 13% of respondents said it wasn't useful, with a further 13% saying they either didn't use one or were not sure.

Code of conduct

In 2019 just 61% said they had agreed a code of conduct that year, while in 2013, 84% answered yes to their governing board having a code of conduct. It is worth noting the slight change of wording, with the decrease in use possibly reflecting the frequency of review, with some schools/trusts simply not going through the process of reviewing their code of conduct every year, but may still have one in place.

Performance management of governors and trustees

Consistently the least commonly pursued initiative over the years has been practice of performance managing governors or trustees in their role. In 2019, 13% of respondents said this was something they did. Although low, this is a considerable increase on the 4% of respondents when we first asked the question in 2012, indicating that this is something that more and more governing boards are beginning to think about.

Internal self-review

While there was a big jump in the number of boards conducting internal self-review in 2019, increasing to 88% from just under 60% in 2017, there was also an increase in those not finding it useful jumping up from 4% in 2017 to 36% in 2019. So there is still a long way to go before the practice seemingly contributes to universally improved practice.

Size of board

Over the years the size of governing boards has reduced. While in 2013, 17% of respondents to the survey reported having ten or less individuals on their board, in 2017 this had risen to 37%, and up to 40% in 2019, showing a consistent upwards shift to smaller boards. Part of the reduction in size of governing boards was driven by the Department for Education regulating the constitution of maintained schools' governing bodies and more recently by the increasing number of multi-academy trusts (MATs), as survey responses indicate that MATs tend to have smaller boards. At the opposite end of the scale, single academy trusts tend to have the largest boards, with 18% having 16 to 19 trustees and a further 6% having 20 or more in 2018.

Committees

An increasing proportion of boards are governing with fewer or no committees, with just 2% of boards having no committees in 2013, compared to 14% in 2019. In 2019 the average number of committees was between two and three per board. This varies a little by type of board; MATs on average have the least trust board committees (two per board) and single academy trusts have the most (three per board). While 21% of respondents said they had five or more committees in 2013, this had dropped to 9% in 2019.

Resources for governing boards

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KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

In the Knowledge Centre, NGA members will find a variety of guidance documents and information on a number of topics relating to governance and education. Resources that will help you navigate the topics covered in this report include:

- [Eight elements of effective governance](#)
- [Chair's role description](#)
- [Co-chairing](#)
- [Preparing your board for the future](#)
- [Clerk's job description and person specification](#)
- [Developing your clerk: annual appraisal](#)
- [The clerk and governing body meetings](#)
- [COVID-19: Ensuring continuity and making plans for recovery](#)

The Knowledge Centre also has two dedicated sections for [clerking](#) and [chairing](#) with articles, guidance and helpful tools for those in these roles.



Methodology

These findings are the results of a survey conducted between Tuesday 21 April and Tuesday 26 May 2020. The survey was open to all governors, trustees, and academy committee members (often also called local governors) of state-funded schools in England and 6,864 individuals engaged with the survey. Participants were self-selecting and therefore this survey is not a representative sample. However, the respondents who filled in the survey broadly match the national picture, being proportional to schools in England by phase, type, school structure and region.



	State-funded schools in England	Survey respondents
LA maintained schools	57%	61%
Academies within trusts	43%	39%

	State-funded schools in England	Survey respondents
East of England	12%	7%
East Midlands	9%	12%
London	12%	9%
North East	5%	4%
North West	15%	20%
South East	15%	19%
South West	11%	12%
West Midlands	11%	8%
Yorkshire and Humber	10%	8%

	State-funded schools in England	Survey respondents
Nursery	2%	10%
Primary	76%	65%
Secondary	16%	21%
Special	5%	4%
Alternative provision or pupil referral unit	2%	1%

About us

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and clerks of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and clerks at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

If you are not already a member of NGA but would like to find out more, please visit www.nga.org.uk/join



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Access at least £1,000 of Department for Education funding to support your governing board's development through NGA's Leading Governance programmes. Programmes include development for chairs, clerks, and boards and provide opportunities to develop skills and confident governance.

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future chairs

The succession solution for school boards

Future Chairs is a free recruitment service designed to help governing boards that will need a chair, vice-chair or committee chair within a year to connect with volunteers who want to take on a leadership role. Utilising the technology behind Inspiring Governance, Future Chairs helps governing boards to connect with volunteers who have the right blend of skills, attributes and willingness to become chair.

To find out more, please visit www.nga.org.uk/futurechairs