



The case for governance

Sustainability and resilience in education

Sam Henson, Deputy Chief Executive

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Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to the dedicated governance community of more than 230,000 governors and trustees who generously give their time to schools and trusts. As this report shows, their contribution delivers not only civic value to local communities, but significant economic value to the country.

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Governance as national infrastructure

A reflection from NGA's Chief Executive

There is a striking contrast between how governance is understood in education and how it is treated across many other sectors. In financial services, healthcare, charities and FTSE companies, governance sits firmly at the heart of organisational life. It is routinely invested in and respected as a critical leadership function that is fundamental to aligning resources and ambition.

Whether led by charitable purpose, mission-oriented aspiration, or driven by profit, governance is the crucial linchpin keeping the work of the business aligned to the needs of the communities or customers they exist to serve. While some other sectors carry a more universal understanding that their very survival depends on good governance, this does not mean they always excel at it; indeed, some evidence suggests otherwise.

In recent years, it has been promising to see some examples of governance within schools and trusts held up as cross-sector best practice. The challenge now is to be more explicit and confident in making that case – and to develop a system-wide understanding of governance as something to be acknowledged, celebrated, scrutinised, invested in, and kept firmly on the agenda.

To date, education has too often maintained an ambiguous relationship with governance, viewed as insurance and as secondary rather than central to organisational life.

Governance has frequently been framed primarily as a compliance function, regarded as something to be managed rather than actively valued and nurtured. And yet, the education system depends profoundly on governance and on those who step forward to govern.

Around 230,000 people currently serve as governors and trustees of schools and trusts in England. Together, they contribute more than 35 million hours each year, representing one of the most significant civic leadership communities in the country. Their contribution is not symbolic: it is practical, strategic and sustained. A 2014 report estimated the economic value of school governance at over £1 billion per year, a figure that remains conservative when inflation and the complexity of modern governance roles are taken into account. More importantly, this contribution safeguards public value, strengthens accountability and supports better decision-making for children and communities.

Governance is, by its nature, often unseen. Like the foundations of a building, it provides strength and stability without demanding attention. But foundations matter. When governance is strong, organisations are more resilient, leadership is better supported, and improvement is more likely to be sustained. When governance is weak or poorly understood, risk accumulates and public trust is harder to maintain.

This report moves beyond structural debates to make a holistic case for governance as a vital part of a sustainable and ambitious education system. It recognises that governance looks different across a diverse landscape – from maintained schools to large MATs – but argues that shared principles underpin all effective governance. It also makes clear that governance is not a substitute for leadership, policy or funding, but a necessary complement to all three.

The future of England’s education system depends not only on strong central policy, talented leaders and committed staff, but also on a confident, capable and supported governance community. As Gerrard and Savage (2023) argue, local oversight in education is fundamental “to the social contract between communities and their schools.”



Emma Balchin,
Chief Executive,
National Governance
Association

The case for governance has never been stronger. No other accountability mechanism offers the same combination of continuous oversight, contextual understanding and collective responsibility. The challenge now is not whether governance matters, but whether the system will recognise, support and invest in it in ways that reflect its true value.

In closing, I wish to offer heartfelt thanks to the writer, Deputy CEO Sam Henson and his policy team, whose dedication and expertise have shaped this report and strengthened our collective voice. We are deeply grateful to the thousands of people volunteering to govern and to the governance professionals who support them. Together, they join with us in making the case for governance every single day. Your unwavering commitment ensures that our schools and trusts are not only held to account but are empowered to deliver for our children, communities, and the nation as a whole.

Executive summary



Governance in the English education system is successful, but not yet fully enabled.

This report sets out a clear and compelling case for governance as a foundational pillar of a sustainable, resilient and high-performing education system. At its best, governance provides strategic leadership, local accountability and continuous oversight that no other part of the system can replicate. At a time of growing complexity, financial pressure and system reform, the contribution of governance has never been more important.

Yet understanding of governance remains inconsistent and too often overlooked. While many other sectors place governance firmly at the heart of organisational life, education has tended to treat it as a technical or compliance-focused function rather than as a distinct and essential form of leadership. This report argues that such an approach significantly underestimates what governance already delivers, and what it can deliver if properly supported and enabled.

Governance delivers demonstrable value

Evidence from education and other sectors consistently shows that strong governance is associated with better organisational performance, reduced risk, improved outcomes and greater institutional resilience. In education, research from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), NGA and international studies highlights the role of governing boards in shaping strategic direction, strengthening accountability and supporting sustained improvement. Where governance is effective, organisations are better placed to navigate complexity, manage risk and maintain focus on long-term goals.

This is not simply about avoiding failure. Well-governed schools and trusts are more resilient during periods of challenge, more confident in decision-making, and better able to steward limited resources responsibly.

They also generate wider benefits for the system as a whole, sharing learning, modelling good practice and contributing to collective improvement.

Good governance is leadership, not administration

A central finding of this report is that governance is a form of leadership in its own right. Governing boards are legally responsible for the strategic direction, financial sustainability and accountability of schools and trusts. When governance is effective, it operates as a distinct strand of leadership: setting vision, providing challenge and support to executive leaders, and maintaining a long-term perspective that is difficult to sustain elsewhere in the system.

Crucially, effective governance is not about operational involvement or bureaucratic control. Evidence consistently shows that boards add most value when they focus on strategy, oversight and accountability, rather than day-to-day management. This strategic role becomes increasingly important as schools and trusts grow in scale and complexity, and as leadership roles become more demanding and isolated.

Governance fills a critical accountability gap

One of governance's most important contributions is that it provides continuous, localised oversight. Unlike inspections or central interventions, which are necessarily episodic, governance is embedded in the life of the organisation. Boards bring sustained scrutiny, informed by deep knowledge of local context, organisational history and community need.

This enables accountability to be lived and ongoing, rather than something that happens intermittently or from a distance. Governance balances national expectations with local realities, ensuring that schools and trusts remain accountable not only to regulators,

but also to the communities they serve. In an increasingly centralised and standardised system, this local democratic function matters more, not less.

System pressures amplify the importance of governance

The context in which schools and trusts now operate has significantly amplified the need for strong governance. Economic constraints, workforce instability, evolving accountability frameworks and declining public trust all place greater demands on educational organisations and those who lead them.

Most school and trust leaders come directly from teaching backgrounds, bringing deep professional expertise in education and pedagogy. At the same time, schools and trusts increasingly depend on a wider range of skills – including finance, HR, estates, legal and organisational leadership – to remain sustainable. Governing boards provide access to this broader expertise, strengthening collective decision-making and reducing reliance on any single individual or role.

Evidence also shows that governance plays a stabilising role during leadership transitions and periods of crisis, providing continuity, institutional memory and reassurance at times when organisations are most vulnerable. In doing so, governance supports leaders to lead more confidently and sustainably.

Governance failure carries significant risk

While this report seeks to celebrate governance, it also recognises that failure of governance carries significant risk. High-profile academy trust collapses and financial scandals demonstrate that weak governance can lead to mismanagement, loss of public trust and direct harm to pupils. These failures are rarely sudden; they are typically preceded by weak challenge, unclear roles and inadequate oversight.

In particular, the development of the multi academy trust (MAT) system has brought both opportunity and risk. Where governance has been strong, trusts have flourished and supported improvement at scale. Where governance has been weak, the consequences have been costly for children, communities and the wider system. This reinforces a central message of the report: governance should not be taken for granted.

Taken together, the evidence in this report points to several clear messages:

- Governance is not optional or auxiliary; it is essential system infrastructure.
- Volunteer status does not diminish professional responsibility; governance is a skilled, complex endeavour that requires investment and development.
- Local democratic oversight matters, particularly in a system that is becoming more centralised and standardised.
- The key question is no longer whether governance matters, but whether the system enables governance to succeed.

To realise the full potential of governance, the report sets out clear recommendations for action:

Recommendations

For government and policymakers

- Formally recognise governance as a core component of the national accountability framework.
- Invest in governance training, development and research, including governance impact assessments for new policy.
- Align inspection, leadership development and system reform with a clear understanding of governance's strategic role.

For schools and trusts

- Treat governance as an overarching strategic priority, ensuring it is adequately resourced and visible.
- Commit to regular external reviews and internal self-evaluation of governance.
- Strengthen succession planning and invest in the governance professional role.

For sector bodies and partners

- Develop a shared narrative that positions governance as a strand of system leadership.
- Promote cross-sector learning and increase awareness of governance's contribution and potential.



What governance enables: the core value proposition

Governance is often described in terms of structures, roles or compliance requirements. While these elements matter, they do not capture governance's true value. A recent systematic review of school governance literature – Goldsmiths systematic review on defining school governance (2000–2023) – highlights the lack of conceptual clarity and consistency in how governance is defined and evaluated across studies, reinforcing the need for a clearer and more coherent articulation of what governance enables and why it matters. Further research has also suggested that even when we look more widely, there are limitations in “both the way governance has been conceptualised and the ways in which it has been researched” (Cornforth, 2021).

This points to why governance has often been misunderstood or underplayed. But governance is significantly more than a structural shield, an administrative layer or a safeguard against failure; it is a generator of organisational ambition, innovation, resilience and long-term success.

And while the existing literature is perhaps limited, specifically that related to governance in education, a substantial body of cross-sector governance literature demonstrates a simple, conclusive principle: good governance shapes organisational health and sustainability, even where direct causal pathways are complex (e.g. OECD, 2020; Tricker, 2019).

Across the English education system, governance enables four interlocking capacities: leadership, responsiveness, answerability and stewardship. Together, these explain what governance uniquely contributes, and why no other part of the system can replace it.

Governance as leadership

Governance enables strategic leadership. Governing boards are legally responsible for setting direction, stewarding resources and holding executive leaders to account. This places governance firmly within the leadership of schools and trusts, rather than outside or above it. Effective governance provides long-term focus in a system shaped by short-term pressures, policy change and accountability cycles. Evidence

from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and NGA shows that boards add greatest value when they maintain strategic clarity and resist operational drift. By focusing on vision, priorities and sustainability, governance creates the conditions in which educational leadership can flourish.

Governance also strengthens leadership by sharing responsibility. By distributing oversight across a board rather than concentrating it in a single role, governance supports healthier, more sustainable leadership models. This becomes particularly important during leadership transitions or periods of instability, when boards provide continuity, institutional memory and reassurance.

Governance as responsiveness

Governance enables schools and trusts to respond intelligently to changing conditions. This includes responsiveness to national policy, regulatory expectations and system signals, as well as to local context, community need and organisational circumstance.

Unlike central oversight or inspection, governance is embedded within the organisation and operates continuously over time. This allows boards to interpret policy, assess risk and adapt strategy with judgement and nuance. Accountability is therefore not simply reactive, but anticipatory.

This responsive function is especially important in periods of economic pressure, workforce instability and system reform. Boards bring additional perspective and expertise to complex decisions about prioritisation, resource allocation and sustainability. Evidence shows that governance plays a stabilising role in such contexts, enabling more disciplined and strategic responses to constraint rather than short-term or reactive decision-making.

Governance as answerability

Governance enables answerability: the obligation of those with authority to explain, justify and take responsibility for their decisions to those affected

by them. This function is often misunderstood. Governance is not a democratic forum in the sense of direct representation or decision by popular vote. Instead, it provides structured mechanisms through which stakeholder voices are heard, considered and translated into insight.

Evidence from NGA's external reviews of governance shows that meaningful board engagement with pupils, parents, staff and communities supports better strategic decisions and maintains stronger organisational legitimacy. Governance ensures that accountability is relational rather than purely regulatory – grounded in dialogue, transparency and trust.

In an increasingly centralised and standardised system, this answerability function is critical. It anchors education in public service values and helps sustain confidence that schools and trusts are acting in the interests of children, families and communities.

Evidence from MAT governance further reinforces this role. NGA's analysis of local governance within trusts highlights how local tiers provide critical contextual intelligence, strengthen accountability, and connect strategic decision-making to community realities when they are clearly understood and properly valued (Henson, 2022).

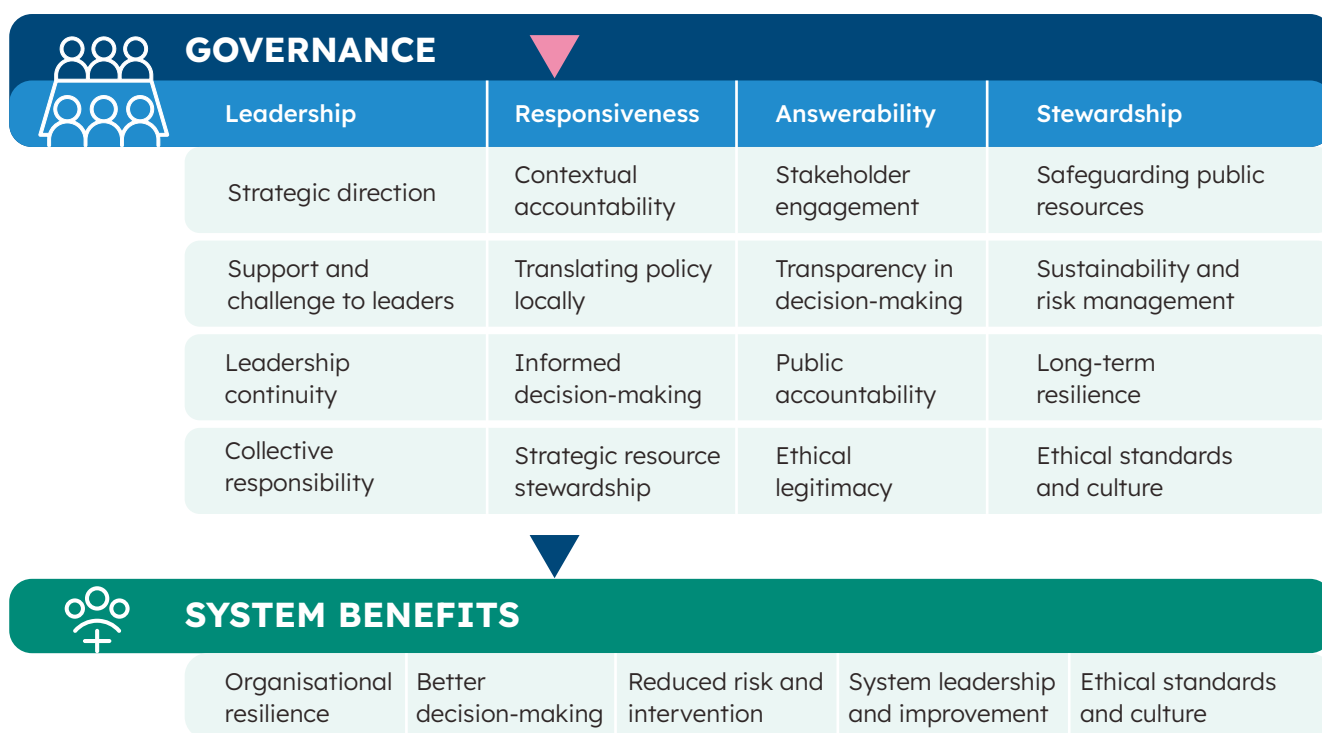
International studies from diverse education systems also indicate that governance arrangements which meaningfully engage parents and communities by providing transparent forms of responsive accountability strengthen organisational legitimacy, trust and professional accountability – conditions that support effectiveness over time (e.g. Mncube, 2009; Moloi et al., 2014).

Governance as stewardship

Governance enables stewardship: the careful and ethical management of public resources, organisational culture and long-term sustainability.

Boards oversee financial probity, ensure appropriate risk management and safeguard assets held in trust for current and future pupils. This stewardship role is not about caution alone, but about enabling ambition to be pursued responsibly.

Evidence from education and other sectors shows that weak governance is a common feature of organisational failure, while strong governance underpins resilience and recovery. Stewardship ensures that today's decisions do not undermine tomorrow's outcomes, protecting both educational quality and public confidence over time.



Embracing the system benefits: governance beyond individual institutions

Taken together, leadership, responsiveness, answerability and stewardship explain why governance generates benefits that extend beyond individual schools and trusts.

Well-governed organisations are more resilient, more innovative and more likely to contribute to improvement across their networks and communities. They reduce risk, strengthen system capacity and help create conditions for sector-led improvement. In economic terms, governance creates positive externalities: benefits that strengthen the wider system, not just the organisations in which it operates.

In summary



Through these four capacities, governance enables:

- strategic leadership and long-term focus
- intelligent responsiveness to change and complexity
- answerability to stakeholders and the public
- ethical stewardship of resources and purpose

This is the core value proposition of governance. It explains why governance is not optional or auxiliary, but essential infrastructure for a sustainable, resilient and high-performing education system. The sections that follow explore how this value has evolved, how it is evidenced, and how the system can better organise itself to recognise and support it.

Evidence of impact: when governance works well

The strongest case for governance lies not in abstract principles, but in what happens when it works well in practice. Across England's education system, a growing body of evidence shows that effective governance is associated with stronger organisational health, greater resilience and more sustainable improvement over time.

While it is neither possible nor appropriate to isolate governance as a single causal factor in educational outcomes, research from NFER, NGA, and international studies consistently demonstrates that governance quality matters, particularly in complex systems facing leadership pressure, financial constraint and heightened accountability.

Governance and organisational health

Evidence from NFER's investigative research into school and trust governance highlights the relationship between effective boards, clearer strategic direction and stronger organisational functioning. NFER's findings show that boards that are confident in their role, skilled in financial oversight and aligned with executive leadership are better placed to support sustainable improvement.

This is reinforced by NGA's analysis of hundreds of External Reviews of Governance (ERGs). These reviews consistently identify stronger role clarity, improved strategic focus and more effective challenge where governance is functioning well. Together, this evidence demonstrates that governance contributes to organisational health, even where its impact is not easily captured through narrow performance metrics.

Leadership sustainability and continuity

One of governance's most significant – and often under-recognised – contributions is its role in supporting leadership sustainability. Evidence from NGA's ERGs shows that governing boards frequently act as a stabilising force during leadership transitions, periods of organisational change, or external challenge.

Boards provide continuity, institutional memory and collective oversight at times when schools and trusts are most vulnerable. This evidence aligns with wider leadership research, including the Three Strands of Leadership model, which emphasises that governance leadership, executive leadership and operational leadership are mutually reinforcing. Where governance is strong, leadership is less isolated and more sustainable over time.

Strategic decision-making and resource stewardship

Evidence also shows that governance strengthens the quality of strategic decision-making, particularly in relation to financial sustainability and resource use. NGA's external reviews consistently highlight improvements in financial oversight, risk management and strategic planning where boards are clear about their role and supported to develop appropriate expertise.

In a period of sustained economic pressure, this contribution is increasingly important. International governance literature and cross-sector evidence consistently show that organisations with strong boards are better equipped to prioritise effectively, manage risk, and steward resources responsibly. In education, this translates into more disciplined, transparent and sustainable decision-making.

Accountability that supports improvement

Unlike episodic forms of accountability, governance operates continuously and relationally. Evidence from ERGs demonstrate that boards that maintain regular oversight of performance, progress and risk are better placed to identify emerging issues early and support improvement before problems escalate.

Research from the Lighthouse Study further reinforces this point, finding associations between governing boards that prioritise pupil outcomes and improvements in school performance. While such findings do not imply simple causation, they support the conclusion that governance plays a meaningful role in shaping the conditions for improvement.

In this way, governance complements inspection and regulation by providing ongoing, contextual intelligence, rather than retrospective judgement alone.

System leadership and wider benefits

Well-governed schools and trusts rarely operate in isolation. Evidence from system practice, reinforced by NGA's work with mature MATs, shows that organisations with strong governance are more likely to contribute to improvement beyond their own boundaries by sharing expertise, mentoring peers and supporting collective capacity-building.

International research on governance and stakeholder engagement also supports this system-level impact, demonstrating that effective governance arrangements can generate benefits that extend beyond individual institutions. These positive externalities strengthen system resilience, reduce the likelihood of intervention, and support sector-led improvement.

A maturing governance landscape

Taken together, the evidence points to a governance system that is maturing, not failing. Over time, there has been increasing clarity about governance roles, greater engagement with training and development, and growing use of external review and self-evaluation.

NGA's longitudinal view of governance practice, drawn from ERGs and sector engagement, shows steady improvement in board effectiveness across a wide range of settings. This progress demonstrates that governance is capable of learning, adapting and improving, and that investment in governance capability yields tangible benefits for organisations and the system as a whole.

In summary



When governance works well, evidence shows that schools and trusts are:

- more strategically focused (NFER; NGA ERGs)
- more resilient during change and challenge (NGA ERGs)
- better supported through leadership transitions (Three Strands of Leadership)
- stronger in financial and ethical stewardship (NGA ERGs; cross-sector evidence)
- more confident in decision-making (NFER; Lighthouse Study)
- more likely to contribute to system improvement (NGA; international research)

This evidence reinforces the core argument of this report: governance is not a marginal or supplementary function, but a central contributor to organisational success. The following section examines what happens when governance is weak – to underline why effective governance must be protected, strengthened and supported.

When governance is weak: lessons for the system

The evidence presented in the previous section demonstrates clearly that effective governance strengthens organisational health, resilience and improvement. It is equally important, however, to understand what happens when governance is weak – not to dwell on failure, but to underline why governance capability must be protected and strengthened across the system.

Evidence from education and other sectors shows that governance failure is rarely sudden. Instead, it tends to reflect the gradual erosion or absence of core governance functions.

Patterns of governance weakness

Analysis from the Department for Education (DfE), the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and NGA's ERGs shows that governance-related issues commonly precede formal intervention. These issues rarely stem from bad intent or lack of commitment. More often, they arise where boards lack clarity about their role, confidence to challenge, or capacity to exercise effective oversight.

NGA's ERGs consistently identify recurring patterns in weaker governance, including:

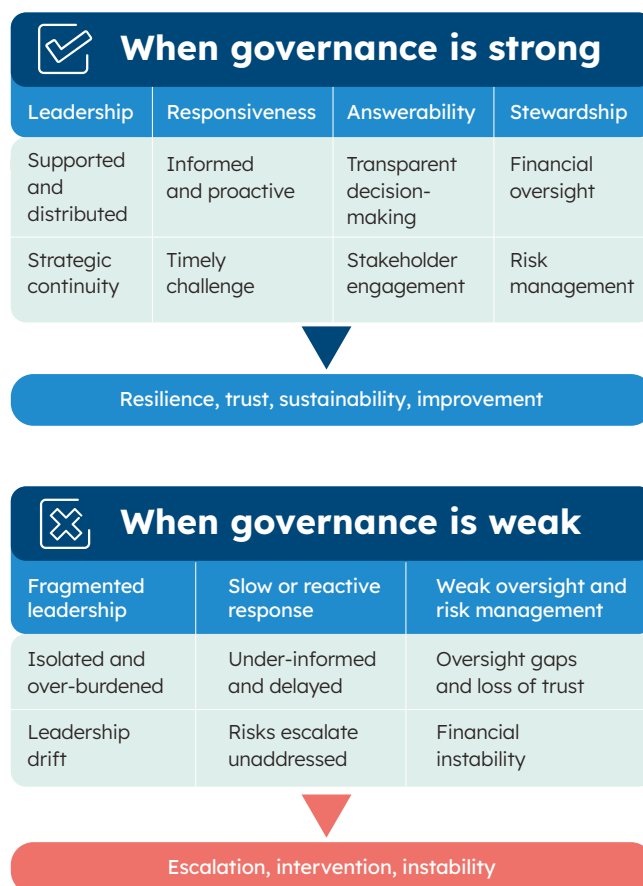
- insufficient strategic focus, with boards drawn into operational detail
- limited challenge to executive decision-making
- unclear lines of accountability and responsibility
- gaps in financial oversight and risk management
- weak mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and transparency

These patterns map directly onto the absence or fragility of the four governance pillars set out in section 2.

Leadership without governance balance

Where governance leadership is weak, executive leadership can become overextended or isolated. Evidence from NGA reviews and system experience shows that over-reliance on individual leaders increases organisational vulnerability, particularly during periods of rapid growth, leadership transition or external pressure.

This is not a critique of leadership quality. Rather, it reflects the reality that leadership without effective governance support is harder to sustain. The absence of a confident governing board reduces collective challenge and increases the risk of blind spots developing over time.



Reduced responsiveness and delayed intervention

Weak governance also limits an organisation's ability to respond effectively to emerging risks. Where boards lack access to timely information, confidence in interpretation, or mechanisms for regular oversight, issues are more likely to escalate before being addressed.

Evidence from DfE intervention cases shows that concerns often develop over extended periods before formal action is taken. In many instances, earlier and more effective governance oversight could have mitigated risk, reduced disruption, and limited impact on pupils and communities. This reinforces the importance of governance as continuous system intelligence, rather than a reactive or compliance-focused function.

Gaps in answerability and public trust

When governance does not provide clear answerability, trust can erode. Evidence from both education and charity regulation demonstrates that organisations are most vulnerable when decision-making lacks transparency or when stakeholders feel disconnected from how and why decisions are made.

NGA's ERGs and wider governance research show that weak stakeholder engagement is often associated with poorer organisational legitimacy and increased conflict. In education, where schools operate as public institutions embedded in communities, this erosion of trust can have lasting consequences.

Importantly, this is not about governance acting as a representative democracy, but about ensuring that decisions are explainable, justified and accountable.

Failures of stewardship and sustainability

Perhaps the most visible consequences of weak governance arise where stewardship breaks down. High-profile cases of financial mismanagement in the academy trust sector illustrate how insufficient oversight, unclear accountability and weak risk management can expose organisations to serious harm.

Analysis from the National Audit Office and ESFA consistently identifies governance weaknesses as contributing factors in cases of financial intervention.

These failures reinforce a central lesson seen across sectors: ambition without stewardship undermines sustainability.

A system-level perspective

Taken together, this evidence shows that governance weakness increases risk not only for individual organisations, but for the system as a whole. Where governance fails, the costs are borne widely – by pupils, staff, communities and the public purse.

However, the presence of governance failure does not imply that governance itself is flawed. On the contrary, the consistency of these patterns across sectors reinforces the importance of investing in governance capability. Just as strong governance supports resilience and improvement, weak governance amplifies fragility.

In summary



Evidence from education and beyond shows that when governance is weak:

- leadership becomes more isolated and vulnerable
- emerging risks go undetected for longer
- accountability narrows and trust erodes
- stewardship of public resources is compromised
- intervention becomes more likely and more disruptive

This section does not undermine the progress described in section 3. Instead, it reinforces its central message: governance matters because it shapes organisational conditions long before success or failure becomes visible.

The final sections of this report therefore focus not on diagnosing weakness, but on how the system can better recognise, support and enable governance to deliver its full potential.

Governance beyond education: cross-sector learning

Education is not unique in facing complexity, public scrutiny, resource constraint or rising expectations, and we argue that understanding how governance creates value elsewhere strengthens the case for investment in education governance.

Across the corporate, charity and public sectors, governance is widely recognised as essential infrastructure for organisational health, legitimacy and long-term success. In fact, extensive evidence from corporate and public-sector governance literature (e.g. Cornforth, 2021) shows that board effectiveness is strongly associated with organisational resilience, risk reduction and long-term performance, even where direct causal pathways are complex and mediated.

Meta-analytic and sectoral studies of governance consistently indicate that effective boards influence organisational outcomes through strategy, oversight and risk management rather than through simple linear effects (Dalton et al., 2019; García-Sánchez et al., 2025).

The NHS offers a useful comparator. Governance is treated as essential leadership infrastructure, and boards are recognised as expert contributors to organisational performance, safety and sustainability. Governance is therefore something to be invested in, developed and relied upon – not simply monitored or managed (NHS Providers, 2022).

Examining how governance operates elsewhere reinforces the central argument of this report: good governance matters not because organisations fail without it, but because they succeed with it. While governance arrangements necessarily differ by sector, the underlying principles of leadership, responsiveness, answerability and stewardship are strikingly consistent.

Corporate governance: purpose, performance and resilience

In the corporate sector, governance is explicitly understood as a driver of long-term performance, risk management and stakeholder trust. The UK Corporate Governance Code and the Wates Corporate Governance Principles both emphasise that effective governance is not about compliance alone, but about aligning purpose, strategy and accountability.

James Wates CBE, Chair of the Wates Group, summarised this approach clearly:

“ Good corporate governance is not about box-ticking. It can only be achieved if companies think seriously about why they exist and how they deliver on their purpose, then explain – in their own words – how they go about implementing the principles.” ”

This emphasis on purpose-driven governance mirrors the role of governing boards in education. In both contexts, governance provides strategic leadership, ensures answerability to stakeholders, and safeguards long-term sustainability.

Evidence from corporate failures reinforces this point. Parliamentary and regulatory analysis of the collapse of Carillion identified weak board oversight, insufficient challenge and failures of stewardship as central contributors. Crucially, the lesson drawn was not that governance is burdensome, but that when governance is weak, organisational risk multiplies.

Charity governance: stewardship, trust and public value

The charity sector provides relevant parallels for education. Like schools and trusts, charities operate in the public interest, steward public or donated funds, and depend heavily on public trust.

The Charity Governance Code sets out clear expectations for trust boards around purpose, leadership, integrity, decision-making and accountability. These principles reflect a shared understanding that strong governance underpins mission delivery, not just regulatory compliance.

Evidence from the Charity Commission for England and Wales shows that the most common causes of serious regulatory concern relate to governance weaknesses, highlighting financial oversight, decision-making and accountability. Conversely, well-governed charities are more resilient, more trusted and better able to adapt to external change.

This mirrors the education context closely. In both sectors, governance acts as the mechanism through which ethical stewardship, transparency and long-term purpose are maintained.

Public sector governance: accountability in complex systems

Across the public sector more broadly, governance is recognised as essential to managing complexity, balancing competing priorities and maintaining legitimacy. OECD analysis consistently highlights governance as a key determinant of public sector performance, particularly in systems characterised by decentralisation and autonomy.

Public sector governance frameworks emphasise:

- clarity of roles and responsibilities
- transparency and answerability
- stewardship of public resources
- responsiveness to citizens and communities

These priorities align closely with the governance challenges and opportunities facing the English education system. As schools and trusts exercise greater autonomy, governance becomes the primary mechanism through which public accountability is maintained.

Consistent lessons across sectors

Across corporate, charity and public sector contexts, several consistent lessons emerge:

- **Governance is integral to leadership**, not separate from it.
- **Answerability builds trust**, specifically where organisations operate in the public interest.
- **Stewardship safeguards sustainability**, especially under financial pressure.
- **Weak governance amplifies risk**, while strong governance embraces opportunity.

Importantly, these lessons apply regardless of organisational size, structure or sector. They demonstrate that governance is not an optional overlay, but a core component of organisational effectiveness.

Implications for education

For education, cross-sector evidence reinforces a clear conclusion: good governance rests on a set of universal principles, even though those principles must be interpreted and applied differently across governance models. Governance in a trust is a fundamentally different proposition from governance in a maintained schools (Cruddas, 2025), reflecting its scale, legal form and system-level responsibilities. But at the same time, schools across the country — regardless of structure — are grappling with many of the same strategic, financial and organisational challenges, similar to those faced by other complex organisations. In this sense, while context and structure matter, the underlying work of governance remains consistent: setting direction, ensuring accountability and stewarding improvement.

The question, therefore, is not whether education governance should be held to different standards, but whether it is being sufficiently recognised and supported to meet the standards that apply elsewhere.

Other sectors invest deliberately in governance capability because they understand its value. Education should be no different.

In summary



Cross-sector evidence strengthens the case made throughout this report. Whether in business, charities or the public sector, governance consistently emerges as a key determinant of organisational health, resilience and trust.

For the education system, this reinforces a central message: effective governance is not an administrative necessity, but a strategic asset. Recognising, supporting and enabling governance is therefore not a marginal concern, but a prerequisite for sustainable improvement.



Governance and the system: accountability, policy and reform

The English education system operates within a complex accountability and regulatory landscape. Inspection, funding assurance, performance frameworks and intervention mechanisms all play important roles in maintaining standards and protecting public value. Governance does not replace these functions – it complements and strengthens them.

This section sets out how governance operates within the system, and why its role becomes more important, not less, as accountability arrangements evolve.

Governance and inspection: complementary roles

Inspection provides valuable external assurance and public transparency. It offers a snapshot of performance at a particular moment in time and plays an important role in identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Governance operates differently. It provides continuous oversight, informed by deep knowledge of context and sustained engagement over time. Where inspection is episodic, governance is ongoing; where inspection is external, governance is embedded.

Research on MAT governance shows that where system design values local governance as a source of insight and mechanism of real accountability rather than a compliance mechanism, boards are better equipped to anticipate risk, understand context and support effective decision-making across complex organisations (Henson, 2022).

Evidence from ERGs shows that organisations with effective governance are better prepared for inspection, more able to respond constructively to findings, and more likely to sustain improvement beyond the inspection cycle. In this sense, governance acts as a form of system readiness, helping organisations translate external judgement into long-term action.

Governance as system intelligence



The absence of core governance functions increases risk and instability, while their presence supports resilience and sustained improvement.

One of governance's most important contributions is the intelligence it provides to the system. Through regular oversight of performance, finance, risk and culture, governing boards are often the first to identify emerging issues.

This intelligence is qualitative as well as quantitative. Boards can triangulate data with lived experience, stakeholder feedback and professional judgement – something no central system can replicate at scale.

As accountability frameworks become more data-driven and standardised, governance ensures that interpretation remains nuanced and proportionate. It enables early course correction, reducing the need for escalation and formal intervention.

Scale and complexity

The growth of MATs and increasing organisational scale have changed the governance landscape significantly. Larger organisations bring opportunities for collaboration, shared capacity and system leadership, but also introduce new complexity and risk.

Evidence from NGA's work with trusts shows that governance arrangements that are clear, proportionate and well-aligned across trust and local levels are better able to manage this complexity. Where governance is fragmented or poorly defined, accountability becomes blurred and risk increases.

Effective governance provides the architecture through which localised need and expression can be exercised responsibly, ensuring that freedom is balanced with answerability and stewardship.

Governance and reform

Ongoing reform of accountability and improvement frameworks, including changes to inspection and intervention, has rightly focused attention on how standards are monitored and supported. Governance must be understood as part of this reform landscape, not peripheral to it.

Policy initiatives that overlook governance risk creating gaps between intention and implementation. Conversely, reforms that recognise and engage governance are more likely to succeed, because they align national ambition with local leadership and oversight.

This is important in a system that depends on voluntary civic leadership. Governance cannot simply be mandated into effectiveness; it must be enabled, supported and developed as a core part of system design.

Measuring governance: evidence and proportion

A recurring challenge for governance is the question of measurement. Unlike attainment or finance, governance impact is not easily reduced to a single metric. This does not mean it is intangible or unimportant.

Cross-sector evidence shows that governance quality is best understood through a combination of indicators, including role clarity, board effectiveness, leadership relationships, financial oversight and organisational culture. External reviews, self-evaluation and peer learning all provide meaningful insight into governance strength.

The absence of simple metrics should not be mistaken for absence of impact. Many of the system's most important functions – trust, resilience, and ethical stewardship – are critical precisely because they operate before failure becomes visible.

Governance as essential infrastructure

As the system continues to evolve, governance must be recognised as essential infrastructure, rather than an optional layer of assurance. It connects leadership with accountability, autonomy with responsibility, and national policy with local reality.

When governance is well-aligned with inspection, regulation and improvement frameworks, the system becomes more coherent and less reactive. When it is overlooked, pressure accumulates elsewhere.

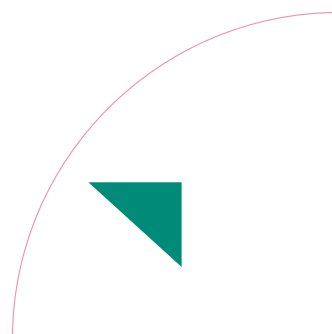
In summary



Governance strengthens the education system by:

- complementing inspection with continuous oversight
- providing early intelligence and contextual understanding
- enabling responsible autonomy at scale
- supporting the effective implementation of reform
- maintaining balance between accountability and trust

Recognising governance as a core component of the accountability landscape is therefore not an administrative adjustment, but a strategic necessity. The final section of this report sets out what a governance-literate system would do differently to ensure this contribution is fully realised.



What a governance-literate system would do differently

If governance is to realise its full potential as universally accepted essential infrastructure for the education system, the question is no longer whether it matters, but how the system organises itself around it. A governance-literate system is one that understands governance's unique contribution and designs policy, accountability and support accordingly.

This section sets out what would look different in a system that fully recognised governance as leadership, responsiveness, answerability and stewardship in action.

Recognise governance as leadership

A governance-literate system would recognise governance explicitly as a form of leadership, rather than as a technical or compliance function. This recognition would be reflected in policy language, accountability frameworks and leadership development programmes.

Rather than positioning governance as separate from leadership, the system would treat governing boards as integral to organisational direction, sustainability and improvement. This would strengthen alignment between governance and executive leadership, reducing role confusion and supporting healthier leadership cultures.

Design accountability that works with governance, not around it

In a governance-literate system, inspection, regulation and intervention would be designed to complement and reinforce governance, rather than bypass it or relegate it as a side note.

This does not require new layers of oversight. Instead, it involves recognising governance as the system's mechanism for continuous, contextual accountability – providing intelligence that episodic inspection cannot. Where governance is strong, external accountability can be lighter-touch and more proportionate; where it is weak, support and development can be targeted earlier.

Such an approach would reduce duplication, improve coherence and make better use of system capacity.

Invest in governance capability and sustainability

A governance-literate system would invest deliberately in governance capability, recognising that volunteer status does not equate to simplicity. As schools and trusts have become more complex, so too has the role of governance.

This would include sustained investment in training, development and external review, as well as greater recognition of the governance professional role. It would also involve more systematic attention to recruitment, succession planning and board diversity – ensuring governance remains sustainable over time.

Investment in governance is not a cost, but a form of risk mitigation and capacity-building that pays dividends across the system.

Embed answerability and transparency

In a governance-literate system, answerability would be treated as a core public value, not an optional add-on. Governing boards would be supported to engage meaningfully with stakeholders, explain decisions clearly and demonstrate how local insight informs strategic direction.

This strengthens public trust and reinforces the legitimacy of autonomous institutions. It also ensures that accountability remains relational as well as regulatory – grounded in dialogue, understanding and shared responsibility.

Support responsiveness in a changing system

A governance-literate system would recognise governance as a key mechanism for responsiveness, enabling schools and trusts to adapt intelligently to policy change, economic pressure and emerging risk.

Rather than relying solely on central data or reactive intervention, the system would value the judgement and contextual insight that governance provides. This would support earlier course-correction, reduce escalation and create a more adaptive system overall.

Strengthen stewardship of public value

Finally, a governance-literate system would place stewardship at its heart. This means supporting governing boards to safeguard public resources, organisational culture and long-term sustainability, particularly in periods of financial constraint and reform.

Stewardship ensures that ambition is pursued responsibly and that short-term pressures do not undermine long-term outcomes. In a system responsible for the life chances of children and young people, this function is fundamental.

A shared responsibility

Crucially, building a governance-literate system is not the responsibility of governors and trustees alone. It requires action across the system:

- Government and policymakers recognising governance as essential infrastructure.
- Regulators and inspectorates working in alignment with governance.
- Schools and trusts prioritising governance development.
- Sector bodies promoting shared learning and strong narratives.
- Governance flourishes where the system around it is coherent, respectful and enabling.

In summary

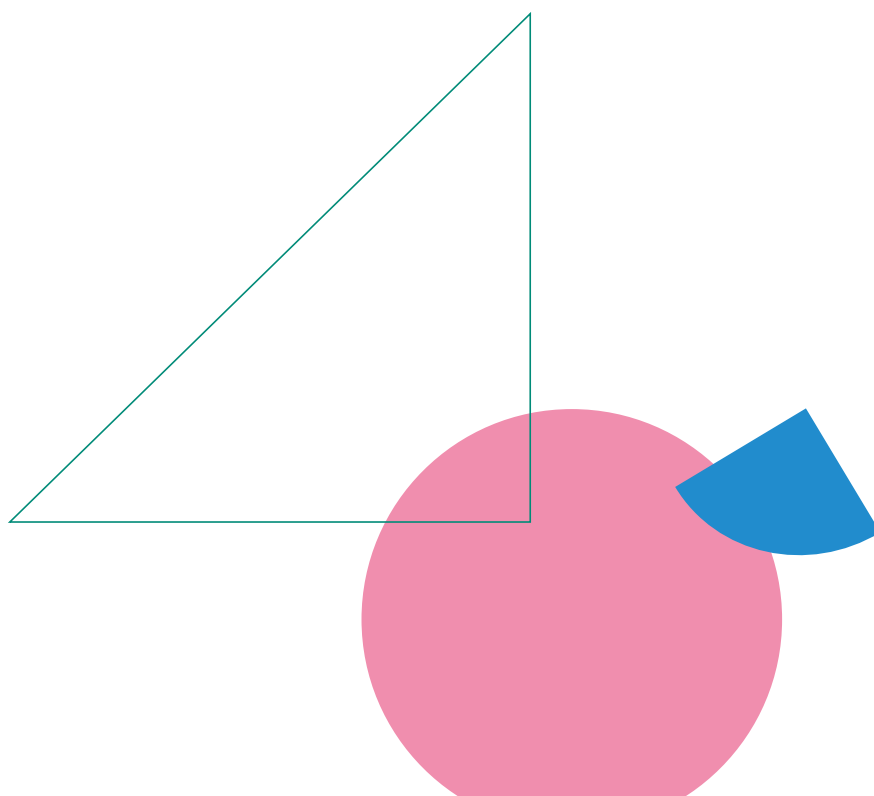


A governance-literate system would:

- recognise governance as leadership
- align accountability with continuous oversight
- invest in governance capability
- embed answerability and transparency
- support responsiveness and adaptation
- safeguard stewardship of public value

Such a system would not only reduce risk and intervention, but increase confidence, resilience and capacity for improvement across education.

The final section of this report returns to a central conclusion: governance is not a peripheral concern; it is a public good, and one of the education system's greatest strengths.





Conclusion: governance as a public good

This report has made a clear and evidence-informed case for recognition of governance as essential infrastructure within the English education system. Governance is not an adjunct to leadership nor a technical exercise in compliance. It is a form of civic leadership that enables strategic direction, responsiveness to change, answerability to communities, and stewardship of public value.

Across schools and trusts, governance already delivers significant benefit. It supports leadership sustainability, strengthens accountability, improves decision-making, and contributes to system resilience. It operates continuously, where other mechanisms are episodic; contextually, where others are standardised; and collectively, where responsibility might otherwise fall on individuals alone.

The evidence is clear that when governance is strong, organisations are healthier, more resilient and better able to sustain improvement over time. Equally, where governance is weak or marginalised, risk accumulates, trust erodes and intervention becomes more likely. These patterns are not unique to education. They are consistent with what is seen across corporate, charity and public-sector governance, reinforcing the universality of governance principles.

This is therefore a pivotal moment. As the education system continues to evolve – facing economic pressure, workforce challenge and reform of accountability – the importance of governance increases rather than diminishes. The question is no longer whether governance matters, but whether the system is sufficiently governance-literate to recognise, support and enable it.

Governance must not remain in the background, quietly absorbing risk and responsibility without recognition. It should be understood, invested in and treated with the respect afforded to other forms of leadership. Doing so is not for the benefit of governors and trustees alone, but for the long-term sustainability, legitimacy and success of the education system itself.

Governance is a public good. Recognising it as such is essential to securing better futures for children, young people and the communities schools serve.

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