

Executive leader appraisal

a guide for governing boards appraising headteachers and CEOs

Updated September 2021



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National Governance Association

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.

Introduction

The appraisal process is an annual cycle whereby governing boards monitor and evaluate the progress of the executive leader in achieving strategic priorities. A formal annual appraisal meeting is the endpoint to the cycle.

As well as being a mechanism for ensuring accountability, an effective appraisal process is supportive and provides a basis for decisions on pay progression and meeting the continuing professional development needs of the executive leader.

This document provides guidance on carrying out the appraisal; it comprises two parts:

1. Laying the groundwork for the appraisal process – appraisal policy and forming an appraisal panel.
2. The stages of the appraisal process – monitoring performance, setting objectives and the annual appraisal meeting.

Terminology

We use the term ‘**executive leader**’ throughout this guidance to refer to:

- headteachers in single schools
- executive headteachers in a federation
- chief executives leading a trust

Advice for academy committees within a multi academy trust

Academy committees (local governing bodies) have different responsibilities to the governing boards of maintained schools and single academy trusts. As such, the process set out in this guide may not apply to you.

Refer to your trust’s [scheme of delegation](#) which sets out who is responsible for the performance management of academy headteachers. Ask your governance professional (clerk to the board) if you are unsure.

1. Laying the groundwork for the appraisal process

1.1 The appraisal policy

We recommend that all governing boards have an appraisal policy in place which sets out the framework for the assessment of the executive leader's performance and supporting their development. Maintained schools are required to have such a policy and must also abide by the Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) Regulations 2012. The Department for Education (DfE) provide a [model policy](#).

The appraisal policy should detail:

- appraisal period key dates
- who will conduct the appraisal (the appraisal panel)
- the appraisal panel size (normally two or three governors/trustees)
- the executive leader's right of appeal
- the ongoing monitoring process

The policy should also outline the standards against which the executive leader's performance will be judged. In maintained schools, this must include the [DfE Teachers' Standards](#). You may also wish to use the [Headteachers' standards](#) as a tool to inform performance management.

1.2 Forming an appraisal panel

It is up to the governing board to decide who sits on the appraisal panel. When forming the panel, take into consideration that:

- The panel cannot include staff governors/trustees (to avoid a conflict of interest).
- Chairs often have the best understanding of leaders' performance; however, if the chair is a member of the appraisal panel, care must be taken to balance this close relationship with other panel members.
- The chair and vice chair should not both serve on the appraisal panel – this allows one of them to remain impartial in the event of an appeal.
- Boards should try to avoid panel members sitting on both the appraisal panel and pay committee.
- Panel members will ideally have some experience of performance management and should have good knowledge of school performance.
- A panel appraising an executive leader of a group of schools should also have a baseline understanding of how leadership and management works in their group of schools. For example, in a multi academy trust (MAT), this requires an understanding of the wider duties of a CEO (such as being the accounting officer), the MAT's structure (which will be

more complex than in a standalone school) and the finance, business and education improvement duties which ensure effective performance and oversight of a MAT.

- A panel chair should be appointed as the main point of contact between the executive leader and the panel.
- Any concerns that the executive leader may have regarding panel membership should be listened to and a change considered if the concern is legitimate.

All appraisal panel members should receive appropriate training. NGA provides training through interactive and engaging [workshops](#) as well as flexible [e-learning](#). We recommend that the appraisal panel undergoes regular renewal such that one member of the panel changes each year.

1.3 Appointing an external adviser

NGA recommends that all governing boards appoint an external adviser for the appraisal of the executive leader; **this is a legal requirement for maintained schools**. The role of the external adviser is to:

- Provide advice and support on the legal process.
- Support with interpretation of performance data and other information.
- Advise on appropriate objective setting.
- Complete the necessary paperwork (reducing administrative workload for the panel).

The external adviser should be:

- Appointed by the governing board in consultation with the executive leader.
- Confirmed each year at a full governing board meeting.
- Suitably qualified and experienced to provide advice and support relevant to the executive leader's role. For example, an external adviser supporting the appraisal of a MAT CEO should be able to advise on objective setting relevant to leading operations and performance at scale.

NGA consultancy service

NGA's team of knowledgeable and experienced governance consultants provide bespoke support for governing boards. This includes fulfilling the role of external adviser to the board during the appraisal process. Visit the NGA website to [find out more or make an enquiry](#) with the consultancy team.

2. The stages of the appraisal process

2.1 Setting objectives for the year ahead

New objectives should be discussed and agreed at each annual appraisal meeting. This will allow the panel to ensure that the executive leader understands what is expected during the coming year and can raise any issues. As a guide, NGA recommend setting between three and five objectives.

Objectives should:

- align with the school/trust vision and strategic priorities
- be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound (S.M.A.R.T.)
- allow all parties to track progress through agreed success criteria
- be precise and specific in their wording
- have beneficial outcomes for pupils
- include a timeframe for their achievement (in time for the next formal appraisal meeting for example)
- include at least one objective focused on the executive leader's personal development
- recognise the full extent of the role and its associated responsibilities

Subscribers to NGA Learning Link can access a bitesize [e-learning module](#) on objective setting to help construct clear and effective objectives.

2.2 Monitoring performance throughout the appraisal cycle

The governing board should continuously monitor and evaluate the progress being made on strategic priorities. This provides a foundation for the ongoing appraisal of the executive leader. As such, if governing boards know their school/trust, nothing discussed at a formal appraisal meeting should come as a surprise as issues will be discussed at an early stage.

Routine 'catch up' meetings between the executive leader and a member of the panel (usually the chair) also help to monitor the progress, development needs and wellbeing of the executive leader. The nature and frequency of such meetings will depend on the context and needs of those involved in the process.

The appraisal cycle should also include a formal mid-year review; a more substantive discussion about the executive leader's progress on the objectives set. The panel should discuss where the executive leader is on track to meet their objectives, and where they may be struggling and so could benefit from additional support.

2.3 Evaluating evidence

The panel need to interrogate and evaluate relevant evidence throughout the year to help build an accurate picture of the executive leader's progress. Much of the evidence will be information that the governing board analyses regularly at full board and committee meetings.

The external adviser's role is to assist with the interpretation of performance data. However, panel members should not rely on their adviser to tell them what the data means.

The success criteria within the executive leader's objectives should provide direction on the most relevant evidence to review. Examples of evidence include:

External data

- pupil progress and attainment measures (such as that available through Analyse School Performance)
- national performance data
- [financial benchmarking](#) data
- reports from auditors

Internal data

- staff absence rates and turnover data
- stakeholder surveys (such as those completed by parents, pupils or staff)
- pupil attendance data
- reports from senior leaders (such as the school business manager/chief financial officer)

Additional examples of evidence are provided in NGA's guide to [Being Strategic](#).

2.4 Personal development

The panel are also responsible for overseeing and supporting the executive leader's personal development. As with performance, this should be monitored throughout the year, not just at an annual meeting. The panel should work with the executive leader to identify areas for personal development and support them in accessing relevant opportunities. Examples could include training or providing consultancy support to other school leaders.

A guide to CEO and headteacher development

Governing board chairs have an important role in supporting their executive leader to identify and access the CPD they need to build capacity and expertise. [Download our guide](#) which outlines ways in which chairs can invest in, support, and positively influence the executive leader's development.

2.5 The annual appraisal meeting

Preparing for the annual appraisal meeting

We recommend that the meeting takes place at the start of the academic year. This allows the executive leader to set targets for teachers and senior leaders based on their own objectives.

In advance of the meeting, it is good practice for the panel to ask their executive leader to provide a brief written assessment of how well they met their objectives. This self-assessment should also describe what they think has gone well this year, where they feel that they need to make improvements, and identify any barriers to success. The assessment should be returned to the panel and sent to the external adviser.

The external adviser will review the executive leader's objectives and the relevant evidence. The adviser can then discuss any supporting or contradictory evidence with the executive leader in advance of the appraisal meeting.

The appraisal panel will have accessed data and evidence with which to make their own assessments of how well the executive leader has met their objectives. The panel should discuss their assessments with their external adviser before the appraisal meeting to test out conclusions and identify areas for discussion.

Conducting the annual appraisal meeting

The appraisal panel, the executive leader and the external adviser should all be present at the annual appraisal meeting. Conversation during the meeting should be based upon what has arisen in the interim reviews, preliminary meetings and the evidence that has already been circulated. As such, there should be no surprises and the meeting should be constructive and collaborative.

The executive leader's self-assessment can provide a starting point for the conversation. The panel should ask the executive leader questions about the performance of the school/trust and their own performance. Questions should encourage discussion – there should be no closed questions (with yes/no answers). Examples of the type of questions you might ask include:

- What are the key areas of progress that the school/trust has made over the last year?
- How did you get on with last year's objectives? Do you feel they were manageable?
- What do you think would improve the performance of the school/trust?
- How do you think the pupils/parents/staff perceive the school/trust?

While the panel should question and challenge the evidence presented, they should do so in a respectful and positive way. The panel should be honest when it has evidence that things have not gone to plan but also constructive in identifying solutions.

2.6 Follow-up report

After the appraisal meeting, a written report of the discussion and agreed objectives should be circulated to the executive leader and panel members. It is common practice for this to be completed by the external adviser (this should be agreed when the adviser is appointed).

The report should begin with a summary of the discussion at the meeting and contain:

- an assessment of the executive leader's performance against the objectives and standards set out at the beginning of that appraisal period (the previous year)
- the executive leader's professional development needs and what action will be taken to address them
- where relevant, a recommendation about the executive leader's pay

Maintained schools **must** include these elements in their report.

The panel should be open to feedback and comments from the executive leader and edit the report if they feel that these comments are valid. If the executive leader has not raised any objections, the process is complete.

If the executive leader disagrees with any aspect of the appraisal report or objectives for the coming year, they can make an appeal. The procedure for doing this should be set out in the appraisal policy.

A member, or members, of the governing board who did not sit on the appraisal panel should hear any appeal. They will either uphold or reject the claim. If the appeal is upheld, the appraisal report or objectives should be amended accordingly.

2.7 Making a pay recommendation

It is up to the appraisal panel to make a pay recommendation in line with the school/trust pay policy. The panel must decide whether the executive leader's pay should remain the same, or if their performance warrants an increase. The panel's recommendation, and their reasons for it, should be provided to the committee responsible for pay decisions as a written document.

The recommendation should not contain specific detail about the executive leader's performance against their objectives. Instead, it should provide an overview of the outcome of the appraisal and whether objectives have been met.

NGA guidance on setting and monitoring pay in [academy trusts](#) and [maintained schools](#) provides further detail on this topic.

Setting executive pay: considerations for trust boards

Setting the framework for the pay of the executive leader in an academy trust is a key responsibility of the trust board. They must ensure that the pay is in keeping with the Nolan principles, is affordable and sustainable, and is appropriate for the level of responsibility undertaken. [Download our guide](#) which leads trustees through this process.

Further reading

- [School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document](#)
- ACAS [guidance](#) on performance management
- DfE [model appraisal and capability procedure](#)
- [Taking Headteacher Appraisal Seriously](#) – NGA research 2018
- DfE [Headteachers' standards](#)
- [The governance handbook – section 6 covers headteacher appraisal](#)

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