

# Governing in 4D

Setting the standards for  
trust governance in a  
community-rooted system



## POLICY PAPER: QUICK READ

The strong governance that exists in many trusts should be celebrated and built upon. But as government moves towards a universal MAT system, good practice must become consistent. Where governance is weak or underdeveloped, the risks are systemic and the potential of a trust-based system is diminished.

Drawing on NGA's 16 years of evaluating trust governance, this paper argues for a four-dimensional model. It also proposes minimum governance standards for inclusion in the DfE's new trust standards, to be tested through forthcoming trust inspections.

## The four dimensions

We must begin with an understanding of each dimension as distinct but complementary:

**1. A local tier rooted in and empowered by the community it serves**

To hold trust-wide decisions to account locally, bring community insight into trust-level decision-making, and provide a visible face of governance for pupils, families and staff.

**2. Trust executives with specialist professional expertise who enable effective governance**

The executive dimension strengthens governance when it supports the other dimensions and weakens it when it crowds out local challenge or replaces volunteer governance.

**3. Trustees who deliver strategic leadership while delegating intelligently**

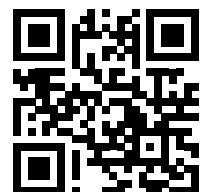
Centralisation and localisation work together, combining scale, expertise and targeted support with adaptation to each school's unique identity, challenges and community.

**4. Members who understand and act on their constitutional role as guardians of the trust's charitable purpose**

Members are the final safeguard when governance fails, yet they are the least supported dimension.

**Underpinned by a governance architecture that aligns all four dimensions and evolves with the trust:**

Clear remits, strong information flows, investment in capacity and ongoing evaluation as the trust matures.



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# 4D governance standards

Drawn from existing practice and our analysis of where trust governance fails or excels:

Dimension	Standards	What good looks like
Local tier	<b>Leadership</b> — The local tier exercises real agency within its remit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenge happens, is appropriate, targeted, and welcomed.</li> <li>Where scrutiny identifies something serious, there is a route to escalate and people use it.</li> </ul>
	<b>Responsiveness</b> — Composition reflects the community the school serves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skills, experience and lived understanding are aligned to community needs.</li> <li>Diversity of perspective is treated as a governance asset, not a compliance exercise.</li> </ul>
	<b>Answerability</b> — The local tier is formed of local volunteers, with clear separation from the executive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The local chair plays a meaningful role in headteacher performance management and appointment, providing accountability that is distinct from executive line management.</li> </ul>
Trust executives	<b>Enabling volunteer governance</b> — Executive governance functions complement the work of governors and trustees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Where executives interact with boards — including in the provision of data — they do so in a way that supports and welcomes meaningful volunteer scrutiny.</li> </ul>
	<b>Enhancing scrutiny</b> — Where executives carry out oversight functions (such as headteacher performance management), this adds professional expertise and trust-wide perspective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Executive oversight is acknowledged, communicated, and does not invalidate local tier challenge and local accountability.</li> </ul>
	<b>Building governance capacity</b> — Investment in volunteer recruitment, induction and development is a core executive responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Executive support for local boards is consistent: variation in support is deliberate and justified by context, not a reflection of convenience or which headteachers are most assertive.</li> </ul>
Trustees	<b>Strategic direction and challenge</b> — Trustees develop and own the trust's long-term vision, grounded in the lived reality of local communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The board holds executives to account with rigour and respect: challenge is substantive and regular, and trustees form independent judgement rather than being led by the executive.</li> </ul>
	<b>Balancing centralisation and localisation</b> — Through its scheme of delegation, the board names and manages the tension between scale and place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trustees demonstrate how they intentionally balance centralisation with local responsiveness and can point to specific instances where local tier insight has informed trust-wide decisions.</li> </ul>
	<b>Purposeful composition</b> — The board's skills, experience and diversity of perspective are mapped against strategic needs and reviewed regularly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment is proactive. No single voice or background dominates.</li> </ul>
	<b>Risk, purpose and stewardship</b> — The board understands the trust's risk landscape — including community-facing risks (erosion of trust with parents, loss of local legitimacy).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When difficult decisions are made, trustees can explain to the community how the trust's educational mission shaped the outcome.</li> <li>Stewardship is more than financial; it is the care owed to publicly funded, community-rooted institutions.</li> </ul>
Members	<b>Understanding the role and its limits</b> — Members can articulate why they exist as guardians of community-centred governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Members probe whether the trust's educational mission is being fulfilled, whether resources are deployed in line with charitable objectives, and whether its culture and values reflect what it exists to do.</li> <li>The boundary between guardianship and governance is respected in both directions.</li> </ul>
	<b>Maintaining independence and engagement</b> — Membership does not overlap so heavily with trustees that independent oversight is impossible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Members stay sufficiently engaged and informed through regular, purposeful touchpoints with trustees beyond the formal AGM, and through appropriate induction, training and information to form their own view.</li> </ul>
	<b>Exercising powers when it matters</b> — Members understand trust governance and recognise good governance from poor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The willingness to appoint or remove trustees where necessary is not theoretical.</li> </ul>