Evidence submission by NGA to STRB

October 2025

1. Background

1.1. The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees, and governance professionals within the state school system of England. We advocate for all boards, regardless of school type or governing structure, with the overarching goal of enhancing the wellbeing of children and young people by fostering high standards and bolstering the effectiveness of governing boards.

1.2. Governing boards play a pivotal role as accountable bodies for academy trusts and schools, offering oversight, strategic direction, and ensuring senior leaders are held accountable for the overall performance of the organisation. With nearly a quarter of a million trustees and governors dedicating their time, care, and expertise, these individuals shape the vision, culture, and strategic priorities of educational institutions.

1.3. Drawing on insights from our 2025 annual governance survey and extensive experience supporting governing boards across the education sector, NGA remains acutely attuned to the challenges confronting schools and their communities. The roles of boards includes exercising employer responsibilities, and agreeing balanced budgets, both of high relevance to the STRB process.

1.4. Governing boards acknowledge that staff, particularly teachers, are a school or trust's greatest asset and are pivotal in realising the organisation's vision for student outcomes. Accordingly, boards invest considerable time, effort, and resources into fostering conducive work environments by cultivating positive leadership cultures, prioritising continuous professional development (CPD), and implementing policies to promote manageable workloads and wellbeing.

1.5. NGA welcomed the government's decision to award a 4% pay award for teachers in 2024/25, following the 5.5% pay increase awarded the previous year. This aligns with the recommendation made in NGA's previous STRB responses that teachers should at least receive an inflationary increase. NGA views these pay rises as necessary steps in a comprehensive, long-term strategy for improving pay and incentives for all staff, counteracting the decade-long deterioration in real-terms pay.

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1.6. We were also pleased to see the earlier announcement of the teacher pay award, fulfilling one of our long-term asks that boards have more notice of pay awards, so can plan accordingly through the budget-setting process.

1.7. However, NGA stressed that last years' pay award must be fully funded. We were disappointed that the government was unable to meet the demands of NGA's members and our sector partners by only funding 75% of the pay rise in 2024/25, expecting the other 25% to be met by schools via "efficiencies". This placed further strain on over-stretched school and trust budgets. Our view is that following a decade of budgetary restraint, most schools and trusts are unable to make further efficiencies without compromising the quality of education delivered to pupils. While the spending review outcome for schools was welcome, we do not expect it to transform the financial sustainability of schools and trusts, meaning the government will need to continue to bear the majority of the cost of pay rises.

2. The state of the teaching workforce

2.1. Last year's STPCD report rightly documented the real-terms decline in teacher and leadership pay over the last fifteen years. Despite the welcome pay rises of recent years, the deterioration in the competitiveness of teacher pay compared to the wider labour market still persists, as reported upon by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in their latest teacher labour market report, with the position of teachers in the income distribution remaining far below 2010/11 levels.

2.2. At the same time, teachers are being asked to provide increasing additional support and care beyond education. This ranges from emotional support, managing increasing acute behavioural needs, liaising with CAMHS and social workers due to cuts in LA services, buying school uniform and stationery for pupils, and even resolving family conflicts or keeping family units together. As a result, Education Support (2023) warned that teachers' work "has expanded beyond traditional pastoral care to include a huge range of support for children and young people who cannot access help through overwhelmed health or social care services". Essentially, as NGA's 2025 AGS survey shows more clearly than ever, schools are filling a vast number of gaps left by overwhelmed, diminished or removed health and social care services. Many teachers report working an additional 4-10 hours per week on these expanded pastoral and welfare duties alone (Education Support, 2023), and the DfE's own data shows tasks such as behaviour-incident follow-up, admin, and non-teaching duties are significant and increasing (Working Lives of Teachers & Leaders 2024) yet pay has fallen in real-terms.

2.3. NGA is therefore concerned that the profession has continued to become a less attractive career, in part due to the failure to keep remuneration in line with increases to the cost of living, and in part due to these increased demands. The lack of flexibility within the profession has also contributed to this, with many graduate-level roles towards now having firmly established hybrid working patterns since the pandemic.

2.4. While we accept that flexible working in schools may look different in a school setting, the blanket assertion that flexible working is unavailable has already harmed the profession's attractiveness compared to other options. NGA maintains that if the flexible working narrative and awareness across the sector and in individual schools and trusts is improved and sustained, its potential to solve problems around both recruitment and retention should not be underestimated.

2.5. NGA acknowledges that for those entering public service careers, remuneration is rarely the sole determinant of job satisfaction, and there are additional levers which government can pull to improve the profession's attractiveness. However, NGA is of the firm view that any overreliance on goodwill and public service motivations should be approached with caution. While public service idealism matters, treating it as the primary driver is dangerous. The stark reality, especially following the enduring legacy of the cost of living crisis, is that competitive pay isn't just about fairness – it's about survival of a profession of qualified, skilled individuals.

2.6. NGA would make the case that the narrative therefore needs to change from appropriate levels of pay to attractive levels of pay, which is imperative as part of the wider ambition to make the profession a desired and competitive vocation, comparable to other highly skilled graduate roles.

2.7. Attractive salaries do three critical things that merely "appropriate" pay does not:

- **They create viable career pathways** for talented individuals who have mortgages, families, and student debt. This is essential to understand in an environment where teachers in England earn approximately 10% less than other university-educated workers on average (EPI/ NEU), and the situation is even more concerning for specific subjects. For example, physics teachers face a 27% pay gap compared to physics graduates in other professions (EPI/Gatsby), expecting idealism alone to bridge these gaps is unrealistic.

- **They provide stakeholder confidence and signal societal value.** Compensation speaks louder than platitudes, and a pattern has emerged of paying educators less than they deserve and need, in the context of a rising cost of living while simultaneously asking teachers to provide additional support and care.

- **They prevent a decline in quality in the profession.** Pay competitiveness is clearly linked both to the decision of talented graduates to choose teaching and to the decision of trained teachers to remain in the profession. The House of Commons Library has previously shown that postgraduate teacher recruitment in England for the academic year 2023/24 was 38% below target, driven by secondary teaching recruitment at about 50% below target. At the same time, the most recent national survey of teachers and leaders found that around 36% were considering leaving the state school sector within the next 12 months (excluding retirement). Among that group, 77% cited government-led policy or initiatives as an important factor and 94% cited workload. Pay dissatisfaction was also cited by 63%.

2.8. As it is governing boards who will be the legal employer or the body exercising employer responsibility in state schools and trusts, our annual survey of over 3,000 governors and trustees devotes significant attention to workforce issues. It found that staffing concerns increasingly focus on the overall experience of working in a school, with workload and wellbeing now the most pressing issue, rising from 45% in 2023 to 64% in 2025.

2.9. 24% of boards identified staff wellbeing and workload as one of their top three strategic priorities, and 14% selected developing and retaining staff, making them the sixth and seventh most common strategic priorities chosen by respondents respectively.

2.10. Both staff wellbeing and workload (23%) and attracting high quality teaching staff (11%) appeared as one of the top 10 of challenges facing boards in the 2025 survey. Further, in terms of staffing-specific challenges, addressing workload and wellbeing remained the top challenge for 2023, 2024 and 2025, increasing to 64%. Other main challenges with regards to staffing were recruitment (41%), maintaining the current staff structure (41%) and pay (35%). Notably, pay has risen back to 2023 levels after a dip in 2024 when it was 26%.

2.11. There is also recognition that further work is needed to improve the broader offer to staff. Schools are placing greater emphasis on HR policies like flexible working, cited by 11%, and meaningful professional development and clearer career progression, mentioned by 9%.

2.12. In terms of phase, recruitment (42%), pay (38%) and retention (30%) were the biggest challenges cited by those governing in secondary schools, reflecting a potentially more challenging staffing environment. In contrast, primary schools tend to reflect more balanced concerns, with workload (66%), maintaining staff structure (45%) – likely tied to budgetary and pupil roll concerns, and pay (35%) being most prominent.

2.13. Lack of suitable candidates (60%) was found to be the top reason chosen as the biggest challenges to recruiting and retaining quality staff. Offering competitive pay and benefits was cited by 41% of respondents, rising from 37% in 2024. It is also important to note how the data suggests that there is increasing emphasis on the quality of the employment offer in shaping recruitment and retention, with managing workload and wellbeing cited by 51% (from 33% in 2024) and interest in career advancement within the school or trust doubling to 22%.

2.14. The most recent DfE school workforce data suggests slight signs of improvement in teacher recruitment and retention. 89.7% of teachers joining the profession remained after a year (a 0.7 percentage point increase) and 80.5% of teachers after two years (up from 79.2%), while vacancies have fallen by 20%. However, retention rates fell for most other cohorts. Meanwhile, latest analysis by DfE on school leadership show that over a third of secondary headteachers left their role within three years of appointment.

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2.15. Evidence from a House of Commons report demonstrates how issues with recruitment and retention are of even more concern in subject specific shortage areas such as physics and modern foreign languages.

2.16. High teacher and leader workload is widely considered to be a key contributor to teacher attrition – for teachers and leaders considering leaving the state sector in 2024, high workload was the most commonly reported reason, with 94% saying it was an important factor. Despite the efforts made to reduce workload over the years, this remains an area of concern, and we call on the government to continue to make concerted efforts to reduce teacher workload.

2.17. Reducing workload should be particularly considered regarding accountability measures. It is essential that the reforms currently being untaken to Ofsted meaningfully reduce the workload and negative impact on wellbeing associated with the system, and we await to see the impact of the changes once they begin to be implemented.

2.18. Further, government statistics have shown a consistent failure to meet initial teacher training (ITT) targets. The ITT Census in 2024 found that 62% of the recruitment target for secondary subjects was met, and 88% of the target for primary subjects. NFER research suggests that ITT recruitment this year is likely to be similar, albeit with a modest improvement in overall secondary recruitment.

2.19. It is clear that much more needs to be done to tackle the gender pay gap. A 2023 analysis of the gender pay gap in education shows that difference between female and male secondary head teachers was the largest in 12 years, with women earning £3,908 less on average than their male counterparts. The gap for primary heads has continued to narrow but still stands at £2,181 less for women, on average. This is despite the existence of a 'national pay framework'. The gender pay gap begins to increase from age 35-39, with the difference in average salaries more than doubling by the next age group (40-44), from £3,596 to £7,819. Last year, the difference by age 60 and over for heads reached an average of £15,961.

2.20. The pay gap may be even worse for women of colour or those with disabilities – unfortunately we still do not have the national data needed to track this. We call on the government and the school sector to take this issue seriously and act on several key recommendations following the analysis, including the call for a comprehensive review of the equality implications of the pay framework for both classroom teachers and leaders and for the government to improve their data monitoring to include other pay gaps, for example on ethnicity or disability. We were pleased to see progress in this area in last year's STPCD report, and would like to see this continue.

2.21. CPD plays a pivotal role in fostering an attractive and sustainable career in education. Investing in CPD entails not only financial resources but also allocating time, presenting further resourcing implications. Therefore, we advocate for additional investment to support schools and trusts in developing and delivering coordinated workforce and talent strategies that positively impact recruitment and retention.

3. The financial position of schools and trusts

3.1. In NGA's annual governance survey 2025, when asked about the current financial position of their school or trust, only 54% of respondents could balance income and expenditure, down two percentage points from 2024 and continuing the downward trend since 2021. Being able to balance the budget was worse for primary schools (52%) than secondary schools (60%). Compared to 2024 figures of 65% and 66% respectively, this is a particularly sharp decline for primary schools. Those in secondary schools were also more likely to be able to balance the budget while retaining a healthy surplus (19%) than primary schools (12%).

3.2. Just 16% of respondents said they believe their school or trust was financially sustainable in the next 3 to 5 years, down three percentage points from last year and our lowest reported levels to date. Even among those who felt cautiously optimistic, nearly half (45%) acknowledged that this sustainability is conditional and dependent on drawing from efficiency savings or unspent funds, a rise of five percentage points from last year.

3.3. Bar 2021, when NGA did not specifically ask about challenges, balancing the budget has been the top challenge identified by governing boards since we first asked the question in 2018. Notably, this reached its highest level this year with 68% placing it as their top challenge, an increase of 8 percentage points from 2024 (60%), 16 percentage points since 2023 (52%) and 24 percentage points compared to 2022. The financial strain was particularly acute among nursery and primary school phases, with 74% and 73% respectively highlighting it as a key issue.

3.4. Those in trusts who report they are projected to be financially sustainable with current levels of funding and income in the medium to long term have reached a three-year low - SAT trustees (19%), MAT trustees (19%) and local governors (17%). Alarmingly, 42% of local authority maintained school governors said they would not be financially viable without making significant structural or budgeting changes. When examining whether schools or trusts are financially sustainable with current levels of funding and income by phase, this was 15% for primary (down from 16%) and 20% for secondary (down from 26%).

3.5. The financial strain on schools driven by rising costs, especially those related to energy, SEND and deteriorating estates, remains persistent. Schools are forced to consider efficiency savings while grappling with the repercussions of teacher shortages, posing challenges to provision and standards.

3.6. As already explored in section 2, schools and trusts are increasingly acting as a 'fourth emergency service', taking on a broader role in supporting young people and families beyond simply providing education, which has had a financial cost. The causes have been well publicised: austerity removing other social safety nets; a worldwide pandemic; and a cost-of-living crisis, all of which have negatively affected child and family poverty. These events have

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also coincided with an increase in the complexities and life challenges that children and young people face, with behavioural, attendance, and mental health challenges escalating at an alarming rate.

3.7. We welcomed the government's announcements on education funding in this year's spending review, with school core budgets rising by £4.7bn by 2028/29, reflecting a real-terms increase that will lift per-pupil funding to record levels. However, we also acknowledge that costs are also rising, such as SEND, this year's pay award and the extension of access to free school meals. Indeed, the IFS suggest schools' costs have likely risen faster than inflation. Given the budgetary position outlined above, we are not convinced that there is much additional room for pay rises within existing school budgets.

3.8. Staff pay costs are consistently cited as the foremost challenge for governing boards when setting balanced budgets, with 75% choosing this option in 2025, an increase of 11 percentage points from 2024. This was closely followed by other cost pressures in our survey's findings. The cost of supporting pupils with SEND and high needs has risen again, and this was reflected by an increase in the proportion of boards identifying it as one of their top three challenges - from 60% in 2024 to 69% in 2025. And projected pupil numbers (39%) was the third biggest challenge to setting a balanced budget this year, although the impact of this will be focused on specific school types and communities.

3.9. Given the extent of the budgetary pressures on schools and trust, and the large proportion of budgets which are spent on staffing, it is clear that any pay award needs to be largely funded by the government, as many schools or trusts would be simply unable to fund pay increases themselves including without further depleting reserves.

4. NGA's recommendations

4.1. The government needs to address the urgent tasks of providing both sufficient funding and a realistic, yet ambitious, plan to reverse this historic pay erosion, making the teaching profession suitably competitive to provide the best talented individuals to help realise the potential in children and young people.

4.2. Our stance therefore remains consistent with previous years. We suggest that, as a minimum, an inflationary increase should be the starting point for discussions about this year's pay settlement, but with the STRB also setting out a longer-term plan for pay restoration to make the profession more attractive. Any pay rises will need to be largely funded by the government despite the relatively generous spending review, due to the existing and growing demands on school budgets.

4.3. We appreciate the competition for investment across the public sector and within the Department for Education. A multi-year pay award could be an effective tool to help balance affordability and the pay increases we know are needed. It can allow for a clear trajectory towards real-terms pay rises to be set out even if significant progress is not possible in the

2026/27 pay award. A multi-year award would also support boards in their long-term financial planning.

4.4. We do not advocate for any changes to salary safeguarding. While we recognise that changes could give boards additional flexibility in some circumstances, this needs to be balanced against the needs of individual teachers who could otherwise see reductions in their salaries through no fault of their own. As set out throughout this submission, we recognise that the STRB process must strike a delicate balance between competing needs and interests. Unless the buy-in of stakeholders can be achieved, we would not be confident that the benefits of changes would outweigh the potential damage to employee relations.

4.5. We would support the introduction of the option for non-consolidated payments (including bonuses) for maintained schools. It is right to give schools additional flexibility where possible, and to try to level the playing field between the maintained and trust sectors. Nonetheless, given the pressure on budgets, we would be sceptical of how many schools would be able to make these payments in practice, so we would not see it as a silver bullet. It would also be important for the STPCD to set out clear guidance on the circumstances and parameters of these payments if introduced.

4.6. We are satisfied with the existing working hours arrangements in the STPCD. It is of course true that reduced hours would increase the attractiveness of the profession, but this needs to be balanced against the operating needs of schools and trusts. Changes to the wording in the STPCD would not alter the workload burden placed on staff by their employers and the sector's expectations. We would also make the point that working hours is one area where the teaching profession does differ from many other professions due to the "peaks" of term time and the quieter period of school holidays. Some individuals prefer this, while others may prefer a more consistent set of hours and more flexible holidays. Neither position is objectively wrong, but we think it is to the teaching profession's advantage that it has this unique selling point which will appeal to some people, e.g. parents. We think the more fruitful focus would be to consider where and how these hours are worked, e.g. flexible working, and how to practically limit some of the excessive burdens on staff which generate additional workload, rather than setting arbitrary targets.

4.7. We would also ask the STRB to review the evidence that top-up salary payments given to those teaching shortage subjects and in more challenging schools are likely to significantly improve retention, with eligible early-career maths and physics teachers being 23% less likely to leave teaching when they received an 8% wage bonus. While this approach continues to carry some risks to the wider profession, some NGA members have continued to advocate for this approach, and we think more evidence should be sourced to ascertain its ongoing role in developing the sector's approach to inclusion and equity.

4.8. With the anticipated changes from the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill bringing academy teachers within the STPCD framework, alongside the SSSNB for support staff in both maintained and trust sectors, leaders and executives within trusts are now an isolated

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exception in not having a pay framework. We would encourage the STRB and government to consider whether this exception is justifiable and, if not, how a framework could be established. Like with academy teachers, this would most likely mean a minimum pay level as a first step, so individuals do not see pay cuts. For trusts boards, a national framework would serve as a helpful starting point when setting pay within their own organisation, as they often struggle to know where to begin under the current system. A recent survey conducted by NGA found that trustees and local governors were much less confident in setting leader pay than their maintained school counterparts, and 67% of MAT trustees wanted guidance on suggested pay bands compared to just 10% who did not.

4.9. The current approach to staffing within education relies on excessive short-termism, with a lack of long-term planning. NGA thinks the time is right for the DfE and wider sector to agree a long-term approach to workforce recruitment and retention in education. This would aim to reverse the ongoing profession devaluation highlighted throughout this response. It could draw on international best practice, building on some of the approaches taken in education in Australia, Wales and Singapore, and by other large public-sector employers like the NHS which recently agreed a 15-year workforce plan.

4.10. A co-constructed long-term strategy, overseen by the DfE, would help maximise market-driven system benefits, and force a transparent evaluation of the consequences of sector competition on the workforce. It would also fundamentally empower employers - governing boards – who must be part of national conversations on its development. Furthermore, given the speed of change in the wider workplace, it could have a proactive role in championing innovative practice, building flexible working practices as a cultural norm, and embracing technological advancements in AI to aid the sustainability of the profession while managing the associated risks.

4.11. A long-term strategy looks increasingly imperative to help strike the delicate balance between affordability and key workforce challenges which have been identified throughout this submission. We propose that the STRB and this long-term strategy could seek to define aspirational pay levels for the sector, which demonstrates a recognition of the significant recruitment and retention challenges, and sets out a clear trajectory for the future. A separate recommendation about what is possible this year (and for the following two years if a multi-year award is made), given economic conditions and public finances, could then accompany this.

5. **Conclusion**

5.1. In conclusion, significantly enhancing pay and ensuring effective pay progression for teachers and school leaders will serve as foundational steps toward fostering an attractive and sustainable career in education.

5.2. NGA's view is therefore that there exists a compelling case for granting a pay increase for teachers and leaders at the very minimum in line with inflation, and that consideration also needs to be given to the need to compensate for historic pay deterioration in order to address the escalating recruitment and retention crisis.

5.3. Given the state of school and trust budgets, any pay award would need to be largely funded by the government. Further, in anticipation of any additional employer costs to schools due to the Employment Rights Bill, the government must also ensure this would be covered through increases to funding, not further left to schools to cover.

5.4. Given the national finances, it is unlikely to be possible to resolve all the pay challenges in a single STRB cycle. NGA propose that STRB should consider whether they are able to propose an aspirational level of pay for the government and sector to work towards as national finances improve, in addition to a specific award for this year, or the next three years. Doing so would help to reassure the sector that the extent of the challenges are being recognised, and that there is a clear trajectory for resolving them, even if there are natural limits to what is possible this year.

5.5. NGA continues to urge the government to consider the pay of the teaching profession in relation to the long-term sustainability of attracting and retaining talented individuals in the classroom. This should encompass broader initiatives beyond financial considerations, aimed at tackling matters such as workload, wellbeing, flexible working, and professional development. To achieve this, NGA is of the view that a long-term workforce strategy should be developed as soon as reasonably possible, through a cycle of engagement and consultation with the sector. We believe NGA's voice as the sector body for governing boards of schools and trusts who exercise employer responsibility over the workforce is vital to the success of such a development.

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Annex: NGA Annual Governance Survey report 2025

https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/annual-school-and-trust-governance-survey/

The annual governance survey (AGS) is an annual self-selecting online survey that has been conducted by NGA for fifteen consecutive years. It provides a comprehensive overview of school and trust governance, involving governors, trustees, and academy committee members (local governors) from state-funded schools in England. The survey was disseminated predominantly through NGA's channels. Respondents do not need to be members of NGA, but 85% reported that they are.

This year, the survey was conducted from 2 April to 2 June 2025 and over 3,000 people engaged. The total number of responses varies across the survey according to question requirements and/or target subgroups. The survey was hosted and analysed on the Smart Survey platform. Data analysis identified trends and variations based on region, school type, phase, and other respondent demographics.

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