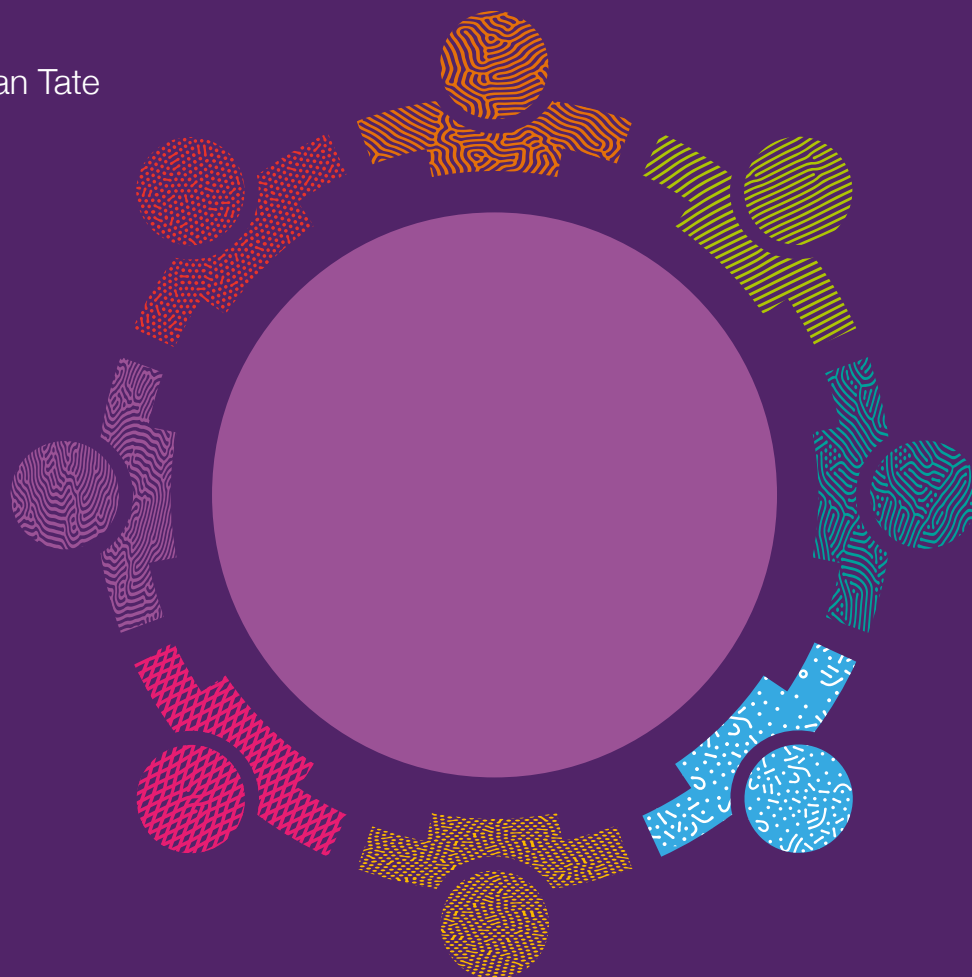


Increasing participation in school and trust governance

A state of the nation report on
recruiting and retaining volunteers

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Foreword

It is a large and important ask that the state school system makes of the quarter of a million volunteers who govern. It is important that NGA begins this report by sincerely thanking everyone who already governs: it is a good thing that you do and not fully appreciated. By that I don't just mean more thanks are required, but that the significance of the role and the effort needed are under-played in the schools system. Accountability is discussed without reference to the role of governing boards. This is why the #VisibleGovernance campaign is being run by NGA this year.

While some governors and trustees move to serve other schools and academy trusts with the benefits of retaining knowledge within the system and spreading practice, many serve often one or two terms of four years (with a few not even making it to the end of the first four-year term for a wide range of issues.) There is - and will always be - constant work to recruit and retain valuable volunteers.

Good governance requires diversity: it is one of the bedrocks of good decision-making. We need to widen participation in school and trust governance. We have known for years that volunteer recruitment strategies do not reach all parts of our society, well before the NGA and Inspiring Governance with the support the Department for Education launched the Everyone on Board campaign in 2018. It aims to promote governorship, especially to citizens who are most under-represented on boards, and to offer practical guidance to boards. In fact we have known for more than twenty years that there are few Black, Asian and ethnic minority governors and in those twenty years we have made little progress, while our country and the communities school serve have become more diverse.

The groups most underrepresented on boards are people from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and younger people (who we define as being under 40 years old). It does not mean that ensuring other groups volunteer too is not important, but that we in the governance community need to be most proactive in seeking out and welcoming people from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and younger people. Wherever we could we asked people from those backgrounds to use their own words for Everyone on Board and tell their stories, and we are deeply grateful to those who took the time to do yet one more thing in the service of broader and better school governance.

NGA values the voices of all, as well as evidence, expertise and our independence, alongside championing the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education, fairness, opportunity, equality, diversity and inclusion for all. NGA has listened to the views and experiences of governors, trustees and governance professionals to shape our actions.

In August 2020, around 50 governors, trustees, governance professionals and educators from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background, along with others who wanted to support and advocate for increased ethnic diversity on boards, attended an advisory group meeting with the NGA team. We invited them to share their experience, views and ideas on what should be done to increase participation from underrepresented group. They asked us to explore the experiences of volunteers from ethnic minorities.

This report shares the findings of the subsequent focus groups undertaken to understand how governing boards can encourage wider diversity in their composition and how the sector can encourage those from these underrepresented groups to govern. Personal experiences and insights of governors and trustees from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and young people (aged under 40) inform our key themes in this report.

Frequently I hear “we do not need any more surveys; we do not need any more reports; we need action”. The authors of this report and I have enormous sympathy with this. We do need action to create change, to make a difference. Many of us have spent years discussing the changes needed, but with school and trust governance it has not been thoroughly documented. It is important to set out the facts, the experiences and to make the case for change.

But actually first and foremost, we need to do the right thing – and the right thing is to seek diverse views and to welcome everyone and what they bring to the table. The values in the Framework for ethical leadership are trust; wisdom; kindness; justice; service; courage and optimism. These are all pertinent. I want every board and every person who reads this report to take away the message that there is an urgent need to be proactive, and that being proactive does brings change. This needs to be reinforced by those in positions of power and influence in the schools sector, including of course the Department for Education. We cannot delay further.

The paths to school governance are too narrow: they need to be widened, and together we can do this. I commend this report to you as a staging post in having then moving from discussion and understanding to whole sector commitment and action.



Emma Knights OBE
Chief Executive,
National Governance Association

Introduction

Changing the expectation of boards

It is widely recognised that good governance is at the heart of any successful organisation. In schools and trusts, good governance which is effective, ethical and accountable drives a broad offer, high standards of education and wellbeing and the very best outcomes for pupils.

School governors and trustees are among the country's largest volunteer forces, with around 250,000 participants. They care about championing and acting in the best interests of all children and young people. They look at the big picture to ensure their organisation succeeds and provide accountability and confidence to stakeholders.



Having the right people around the table is essential to good governance, as NGA made clear many years ago by including it as one of the eight elements of effective governance. It creates the most effective and dynamic governance. Board culture, behaviours and diversity is also a foundation of good governance.

Volunteers should share a common vision for the school or trust and be pulling in the same direction to achieve that vision. But they should also bring different things to the table. The board should actively encourage the participation of people with different skills, insights, perspectives and approaches drawn from their varying backgrounds, knowledge, characteristics and ways of experiencing the world. This includes those that identify with the community that is served by the school and or trust.

The communities served – the pupils, parents and carers, leaders and staff impacted by the work and decisions of the board – and wider society are in most circumstances a melting pot of ways of life, circumstances, ambitions and so on. If the influential group of people taking significant decisions on their behalf is approaching those choices through a limited lens, decisions won't always be in the best interest of pupils. Many decisions in schools "inevitably favour certain pupils over others" Young (2016:14) points out. Weighing up many different perspectives in decision-making – both through the people around the table and in seeking out and including the widest range of perspectives – will help decisions to be in everyone's best interests.

To fulfil this purpose, boards need to ensure that the people participating in discussions, decision-making, holding to account and oversight understand the experiences of the community served and offer a healthy difference of perspectives. Everyone around the table should demonstrate a commitment to training, awareness and taking action to help them think beyond their own interests and lived experience, and to both include and understand the people they serve. This should result in a "multi-faceted and complex group of people who may look similar, but must think differently" (Green Park and Addaction, 2019:7). To achieve this, as a system, we need to widen participation in school and trust governance.

Speaking at an NGA event Baroness Berridge, parliamentary under secretary of state for the school system (October 2020), reinforced that "Boards should not all be cut from the same cloth. Diversity on boards is critical to maintain effective challenge and to ensure boards reflect the communities they serve. I know NGA feels very passionately about this."

The evidence in this report shows a disconnect between the characteristics (and by extension lived experiences, understanding and insight) of the people making decisions and the pupil population who those decisions affect.

Groups of people who make up a sizeable part of the population remain largely excluded from decision making in schools and trusts. There is no shortage of skills and talent, but barriers including lack of awareness of the role and entry routes, closed recruitment practices, poor governance practices and a lack of priority and urgency given to the matter are preventing change.

In the past few years, there has been growing recognition both centrally and at school and trust level - as well as in other sectors – that increasing participation in governance resulting in greater diversity is good for organisations. The need to boost both visible and cognitive diversity in an organisation is a key responsibility for all those in leadership positions (Green Park and Addaction, 2019) and an essential component in helping boards “to navigate the complex and dynamic issues” (Russell Reynolds Associates, 2009:2) that organisations face.

The topic can though be seen as something that is too difficult, not a priority, simply unnecessary or one where no one feels like they can take ownership. It is not yet universal practice for it to be prioritised by governing boards addressing their composition and practice as a non-negotiable to drive change.

Addressing diversity and inclusion is a priority across all levels of the education system, as evidenced in the recent ‘statement of action and commitments on equality, diversity and inclusion in education’ published by NGA et al (2021) and across wider society. For masses of organisations this also includes increasing diversity at board level, which the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016:3) says is “acknowledged as a priority by business, governments and regulators, as well as many shareholders and customers.” Taking deliberate action to consider, then redress, how boards reflect their community and ensure a diversity of perspectives will show leadership in the education system and help to create the best outcomes for all leaders, staff, pupils and their communities.

This is now an expectation, not an option, for governing boards in schools and trusts. The Department for Education has stated its expectation through strengthening language over recent years in the Governance Handbook. It is the expectation of NGA and other governance support organisations that aim to recognise and promote good governance practice. And

increasingly it is becoming an expectation of the stakeholders served – children and young people, parents and carers, and staff and leaders.

Creating the change

There are two crucial elements to increasing participation and perspectives in school and trust governance: recruitment and retention of volunteers. This covers many interconnected issues familiar to governing boards linked to board culture and good practice such as recruitment methods, making better decisions and induction.

This report explores the need for diversity to exist among the group of people around the table: diversity in its fullest sense, considering “all the things that make us who we are” (Sinnatt, 2020). It considers the whole picture of diversity but particularly focuses on ethnicity and age as people with these characteristics are significantly and historically underrepresented on school and trust governing boards. Diverse is a collective term so an individual person should not be described as such, but diversity can exist among a group of people.

It looks at how boards and the organisations that support them can increase the participation of underrepresented groups to create boards that are “‘demographically’ fair” (eg age, ethnicity, gender, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation) and how they can ensure a range of perspectives around the table to benefit from “deep level diversity” (Fanshawe, 2018:31) which focuses on individual qualities such as professional skills, attributes, lived experiences and approaches.

Creating an inclusive board which celebrates and benefits from difference means, for many, doing things differently. This report looks at how boards can create an inclusive culture where all volunteers feel they 'belong' and avoid tokenistic appointments. It is that culture of openness and challenge on boards which will maximise the diversity of voices and perspectives around the table. It is not enough to get the people without the commitment to change and the co-creation of a culture that facilitates diversity of thought and action.

This report draws on new focus group research with governors and trustees from underrepresented groups, NGA's annual governance survey 2021 and a review of research and insight from other sectors. Those focus group conversations revealed informed experiences and fresh insights on a range of governance practice through the lens of diversity and inclusion.

This report aims to share:

- the picture of representation and inclusion in school and trust governance, and the impact of the current landscape.
- the experiences and perceptions of governing boards and their practice from groups which are underrepresented.
- how boards can best make it possible for people to join by taking a different approach to recruitment and practice.
- the importance of a diversity of thought and representation to increase governance's positive impact for children and young people.
- that it is the responsibility of governing boards and the organisations that support them to drive the change needed, and identify approaches to doing so.
- how to move forward with intention and practical action.

Focus groups were conducted with 34 governors and trustees who self-selected for research that sought to understand how governing boards can encourage wider diversity in their composition and how the sector can encourage those from these underrepresented groups to govern. People from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background and/or young people (aged under 40) were invited to take part. Participants were in a range of governance roles – parent elected, staff elected, foundation, and co-opted and from a range of board types including maintained schools, multi academy trusts (MATs) and faith schools. The time volunteers had been involved in governance ranged from a few months to decades, and participants were spread across the regions of England. Some currently hold multiple governance roles or had governed on different boards previously, some in other sectors. About half of participants work in education in some capacity. Quotes from participants have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Boards' views on diversity in composition

All boards will approach this work from a different starting place. Asking NGA members an open question in the 2020 membership survey on the support they wanted with their diversity and inclusion responsibilities illustrated the breadth of attitudes.

Some commented that their school/trust already takes equality and diversity seriously throughout the organisation – and therefore felt that the board did not need to spend any time considering it. Others recognise that encouraging diversity and ensuring equality should underpin and be embedded throughout the school or trust's culture, while some are comfortable in their compliance to legislation, or feel they are up-to-speed. Of course, each respondent may have a different view of what equality means.

The range of responsibilities boards have also meant it is not regarded as a pressing matter for some. With boards having plenty of other challenges they can feel that there is a hierarchy of need, which prevents them from making diversity and inclusion a priority.

Many recognised the need for action and were looking for a steer on how to turn that intention into practice. They were looking for practical steps to take, case studies of what other boards had done, and help with finding the right language to do the right thing. Some had successfully made efforts to recruit volunteers that will add to the diversity of their board, while others including those in communities identified as 'diverse' had struggled to find volunteers.

Skills, ability and the contribution of volunteers to the board were described as 'the only thing' some boards were looking for, but there was less recognition of the need to have people who share characteristics or identities with the wider community, with comments on the 'irrelevance' of characteristics to being a governor/trustee. Though there was occasional acknowledgment of the need for boards to be representative, other comments pointed out that no volunteer should be appointed for what they bring in terms of visible diversity or lived experience alone.

Others acknowledged the importance of creating a culture where people have a 'level playing field' to apply for roles and are recruited on merit, and of ensuring that unconscious bias plays no part in decision making.

The perception of how diverse the community served is also impacted on how boards consider the action they can take. Some in rural areas 'see' little diversity with comments made mostly about a lack of ethnic diversity. While this is true of some communities, boards must look beyond the visible differences (and bearing in mind that many characteristics are invisible), make efforts to search beyond the confines of their own contacts and networks and should consider widest meaning of diversity in their communities.

Different boards "sit in local environments, which can differ significantly from each other" (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde et al, 2018). This means that, though all boards need to be having conversations about addressing diversity and inclusion, it "can mean really different things depending on where you are" (ibid). How each board can address diversity and inclusion must be recognised as proportional to the community served and all steps, however small, are welcome.



Nationally underrepresented groups of volunteers

Why boards need to better reflect communities and society

There are many reasons why a board needs to strive to reflect its community. Most significantly it is an opportunity to do the right thing because the evidence shows that celebrating difference and diversity and being inclusive enables organisations to best serve the people they want to make a positive difference to. It benefits both the perception and practice of the board. Plenty of research demonstrates the importance of boards reflecting the community an organisation serves and the same principles can be applied to school and trust governance. However, Fanshawe (2018:16) points out that “it is becoming more and more clear that, for the argument to be wholly effective, the general case for the dividend needs to be made specific to the organisation, the sector and to their particular goals.”

Best serving the community

Having volunteers with experiences or an identity in common with pupils, parents and the wider community enables boards to better meet their needs. It means decision making will be more “informed, responsible and authentic” (Green Park and Addaction, 2019:28) and will equip boards as well as possible to understand all the factors contributing to, and potential impacts, of their choices.

Being reflective of the community will be unique to every board but in all cases, it will help it to keep connected to local needs. It will help boards to understand the opportunities and challenges being faced by their community today and in the future. It also ensures all stakeholders feel valued because those making decisions may be better able to understand the lives, context and aspirations of the community it serves. Understanding to what extent the board reflects the community it serves relies on boards knowing the community which can be accomplished through collecting and examining data and by engaging with stakeholders.

In addition, the DfE’s Governance Handbook (2020:20) emphasises that “having some people on the board who have no close ties with the school, or who come from outside the faith or ethnic group of the majority of pupils, can help ensure that the board has sufficient internal challenge to the decisions it makes and how it carries out its strategic functions.”

“It’s not just about making sure we’re represented, it’s about really getting the best outcomes for the stakeholders and making the stakeholders feel really engaged.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“If you don’t understand [the communities you serve] then how are you going to identify if a strategy is going to work. Because the strategy is through your lens but it’s being applied to people who don’t have the same home setting and cultural experience as you have.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Better decision making

Our identities and experiences “shape the way we see the world. And when the mix of people in a group changes, so do the decisions that group makes” (O’Connor, 2018). Where a board has a greater diversity of perspectives, it has the opportunity to see decisions ‘through the eyes’ of more of its community and evolve its approaches.

Demographic diversity “can help elicit cognitive diversity through its indirect effect on personal behaviours and group dynamics: for example, racial diversity stimulates curiosity, and gender balance facilitates conversational turn-taking” (Bourke, 2018).

“It makes a significant difference in the quality of questions and the decision making is informed, particularly because we’ve got a really diverse group.”

Participant in focus group - volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Confidence of the community

A board which represents the local community can “increase public confidence and accountability” (NCVO Knowhow, 2021) and begin to build trust. This can be described as the community seeing “people like themselves and thinking ‘they will understand us’” (Jain, 2021) and when people from underrepresented groups can see themselves “recognised and provided for by [an organisation], it speaks volumes” (Green Park, 2019:33).

This also “sends an important message to those outside the governing board that the school is taking measures to address the interests of all stakeholders in the community” (Rollock, 2009:7). Alongside boards being able to make better decisions, in situations like complaints and panels it can inspire the confidence of staff, pupils and parents to be able to see someone like them. Boards too benefit from a broad set of viewpoints to evaluate some difficult and tricky areas, and to better understand cultural dynamics.

“I think it's very relevant if you get into disciplinary proceedings or exclusions with children because getting parents into those processes is difficult enough as it is. Trying to get them in when no one on that panel looks like them or talks like them makes it even more difficult.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“We had a parental complaint and there were bits about racism. I thought the best way to do it would be to have a panel which is ethnically diverse. Because if I have an all-white panel, the parent might not feel that comfortable with it [or the process].”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Developing culture and leadership

Many school and trust values statements talk about values like inclusiveness, fairness and equality. Boards should consider how these values are reflected in the composition of the body setting the strategic direction and culture. Boards which have volunteers with diverse protected characteristics “promote inclusive school environments” according to the DfE’s Governance Handbook (2020:41).

Setting a culture for equality and diversity to thrive is a critical role of the governing board. By committing to diversifying itself and changing its behaviours, the board will set an example and be a catalyst for achieving diversity and equality at all levels of the organisation. This brings many benefits including “attracting and retaining the diverse range of people needed to implement the strategy” and building “engagement with stakeholders” (NGA, ASCL and NAHT, 2020).

This is supported by research from NCVO (McGarvey et al, 2019) which found that “if governing bodies and senior staff embrace diversity, it is more likely to be prioritised, resourced, and embedded in volunteering and across the organisation”. In addition, the CIPD (2017) reiterates that “the leadership at the top of an organisation [is] the main influence on its culture, values and ethics” and asks “if they’re not a diverse group, what message does that send out to employees, customers and wider society?”.

Role models

Seeing governors and trustees with visible protected characteristics provides role models for young people, as well as the wider community, and can give them confidence in what they can achieve. Bennett (New Schools Network and Confederation of School Trusts, 2020:14) highlights that “board members of differing gender, race and socio-economic backgrounds are a powerful visible beacon to others that their knowledge and experiences are of value.”

“Our SLT is not very diverse and I thought if we have pictures of the diverse board [on our website] it might attract more diverse applicants to apply for SLT positions. We're going to use the board's diversity to drive diversity in the school leadership.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“Representation does matter aspiration-wise. If you're always seeing the only black-haired, minority ethnic person in a secondary role then you always think of yourself as no better than the second position, and so on.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I definitely know from their perspective, the children have been amazed to see Black women in leadership and we have little girls coming up to me in the playground saying ‘I'm going to be a governor when I grow up’ – that is definitely one of the highlights.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Aside from the benefits for children being able to ‘see themselves’ in governors and trustees with who they share characteristics, it is equally important for other children to see people with underrepresented characteristics in positions of success and authority. This can send a clear message about what a leader looks like.

Recently lived experience of education

Younger individuals will have a much more recent experience of receiving (and moving on from) education. They can provide insight from this and how decisions might have affected them. They may have new perspectives and ideas to bring to some of the challenges and opportunities schools face both inside and beyond their walls while being able to relate to being a young person in today’s society. Young people being experts by experience (Care Quality Commission, 2020) – where they bring recent personal experience of using a service – is a way to view this.

In addition, younger people are more likely to be closer to the age of parents/carers within the school community, particularly in primary schools, and may offer some insight into engagement and challenges which the board may not have thought of. Urben (2017) points out that “if your beneficiaries include young people, young trustees can provide useful insight and perspectives on beneficiary needs and experience, and increase the board’s credibility in the eyes of this group.”

“We’re so far removed from when we were at school and the experiences of school life, having people who are much closer to having been to school is really useful as well.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“If boards have more younger people, they will know what is coming down the line.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Full board responsibility

It is important to note that a person coming from an underrepresented group or a group with protected characteristics is not necessarily familiar with all of the complex structural issues in society that affect this group. Similarly, whether or not they are experts by experience in these matters, the burden should not fall to anyone from a minoritised group to somehow represent only these interests. Boards should remember that those governing “must govern in the best interest of pupils; it is not their role to represent a stakeholder group” (Knights, 2016).

Everyone on the board shares the responsibility to do the work to “upskill and understand others” and to listen, be heard and participate in the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda (The Unmistakeables, 2021). The expectation should be that, in tandem with recruiting and welcoming governors and trustees from a diverse range of backgrounds and striving to achieve representation, all members of the governing board should be committed and active in their own knowledge on matters concerning equality, diversity and inclusion. This should not be left only to those from underrepresented groups.

“I find that as minorities you’re expected to deal with the problem... There really needs to be [acceptance] that it’s everyone’s responsibility. It’s better for everyone to have proper representation and everyone needs to be involved.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“Those of us that are diverse and join boards, it’s up to us again to take up the mantle and really try to push agendas as much as we can. Intertwining it with everything else that goes on with school governance...”

It shouldn’t just be Black, Asian and other minority groups that are pushing for diversity, it comes from everybody. It’s everybody’s responsibility because the board should be representative of the school and our children and staff.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“What was wonderful to see is that my fellow trustees, who invariably are still older, white males were the ones who brought [racism] up and said that most of the people in school communities have these experiences that are outside of our experience. It was very heartening to see that it wasn’t me who asked that question or brought it up. It was the people who are not reflective, and that’s the way it should be.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

This full board responsibility is vital to the success of the board as it shifts from a mono-cultural or homogenous group to one that is truly inclusive and adaptive to diverse thought, experience and open to new challenge and perspectives. In short, recruiting a more diverse board is just the start, but ensuring the success of that board depends as much on the incumbents’ own commitment to learning, unlearning and developing their own understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion, as it does on that of those joining the board.

“We’ve just had a training session on diversity, equality and inclusion, and that was delivered initially to trustees and governors and executive and middle leaders...”

I think that’s a really important catalyst, and I think it will start conversations.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

Reflecting wider society

Placing board diversity high up the agenda, especially in communities that are not diverse, shapes attitudes and values to prepare children for the wider world of working and personal relationships. It gives an opportunity to challenge stereotypes prevalent across society through the media, the school’s curriculum and more, and begins the process of dismantling damaging unconscious biases and deep rooted societal prejudices of the majority concerning the minority.

Children and young people have ready access to the wider world as global citizens, with an awareness of the broad range of protected characteristics, perspectives and intersectionality within it. If they don’t see this same diversity reflected in the leadership of the school or trust they will not identify with the people making decisions and the board will not be relevant

to the people it serves. In addition, where governors and trustees “look like each other rather than society”, stakeholders’ belief that the organisation “supports social norms of equal opportunity and fairness” will be undermined (ICAEW, 2014).

“[Our composition] may be reflective of our school, but certainly not the world we live in. And so we've diversified our board beyond what our community looks like. We wanted to make sure we weren't one particular group of people or ideas or ideologies.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Underrepresentation

NGA collects demographic data through its self-selecting annual survey, which can be broken down to a regional level. This is the only national source of information available on England's school and trust governance volunteer force. Considering this data at both national and board level helps us to understand the facts and gives a starting point to a process which can otherwise be tricky to begin. Boards may need to redress their own particular imbalance in terms of gender, age, ethnicity or other protected characteristics.

Two groups have been significantly underrepresented on governing boards at a national level for a substantial period – people from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and young people (which NGA defines as aged under 40). The data on board composition drawn from NGA's annual governance survey is substantiated by research by NFER (Kettlewell et al, 2020:137) which concluded that “broadly, there was a lack of diversity among those involved in governance, with regards to age and ethnicity”.

Ethnicity

Findings of the annual governance survey 2021 show that all ethnic minorities remain significantly and consistently underrepresented on a national level on governing boards. 93% of respondents to the survey are white, 1% are from mixed or multiple ethnic groups, 3% are Asian, 1% are Black with the remainder other or ‘rather not say’. These figures are almost identical to when NGA started to collect this data in 2015 – the only slight change being that Asian volunteers have increased by 1%. A study conducted by Scanlon et al in 1999 on behalf of the then Department for Education and Employment, found that 5% of governors came from ethnic minorities.

This picture is supported by NFER's study (2020:16) which found “a minority (3.5%) of respondents identified as Black, Asian and minority ethnic”. The majority of governors/trustees identified as “White: English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/

British’ (88%)” and “the next largest ethnic groups were ‘Any other white background’ 2% and ‘Irish’ 2%”.

Of those volunteers that have joined their board within the past year, 88% are white, 3% from mixed groups, 5% are Asian, and 3% are Black. This indicates that newer governors/trustees are more likely to be from an ethnic minority background. For governors and trustees who have served between five and seven years (ie one complete term), 94% are white, 0.5% from mixed groups, 2% are Asian and 1% Black.

This is corroborated by the figures from recruitment services – Inspiring Governance and Governors for Schools – which are successfully placing more Black, Asian and minority ethnic volunteers, but what remains unknown is the rate of retention for different groups.

By contrast, the latest available data shows that 33.9% of primary school pupils, 32.3% of secondary school pupils and 30.2% of special school pupils come from an ethnic minority background (Gov.uk, 2020a). Asian pupils are the largest group across all phases, accounting for 11.4% of the pupil population. In fact, just two in three pupils are white British. People from ethnic minority backgrounds are to varying extents significantly underrepresented in teacher and headteacher positions too.

The Census 2011 shows that a decade ago 80.5% of the population in England and Wales identified as white British with an additional 5.5% of people from other white backgrounds (GOV.UK, 2020b). 7.5% of the population are Asian and 3.3% Black, with 2.2% from mixed groups. More recent estimates in the Annual Population Survey 2019 show that 16.1% of population in England is from an ethnic minority background, and that almost one in five of the working age population are not white British (gov.uk, 2020d).

An “inequality in outcomes” between ethnic groups in areas including education can be because of “a virtually complete absence of [ethnic minority] individuals in leadership roles in these categories – which could point to a lack of understanding of the issues faced by ethnic minorities” research by Green Park (2020) found.

Locality

Place has a big impact on the ethnic make-up of a local population. In the Census 2011, 40.2% of Londoners “identified with either the Asian, Black, mixed or other ethnic group”, while the North East had the highest population from the white British group (93.6%) (GOV.UK, 2020c).

This is corroborated by the annual school governance survey 2021 which shows that in London, 80% of governance volunteers are white (69% of which are white British), 4%

Nationally underrepresented groups of volunteers

from mixed groups, 11% are Asian and 4% are Black – for comparison to the Census this means that 19% identify as being from an ethnic minority background. In all other regions, over 90% of volunteers are white with the North East highest at 96% white British.

In addition, Dean et al (2007) found in some schools between a quarter and a half of the governing body lived outside the schools’ immediate locality.

This underrepresentation is not confined to school/trust governing boards. Research by Inclusive Boards (2018:4), looking at the boards of the top 500 UK charities by income, found that “6.6% [of trustees] were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, a 0.3% increase in two years”.

A note on language and data

‘Ethnic minority’ refers to all groups that do not self-identify as white British. We use specific groups where the data is available. In the annual governance survey NGA collects more specific data on ethnic background but given the small numbers involved, does not publish the breakdown. We acknowledge that these high-level groupings act as an indicator for representation but cannot possibly recognise the vast difference, nuance and richness of individual lives, and the complex intersectionality at play in each group defining how every one of us differently experiences outcomes, opportunities and barriers.

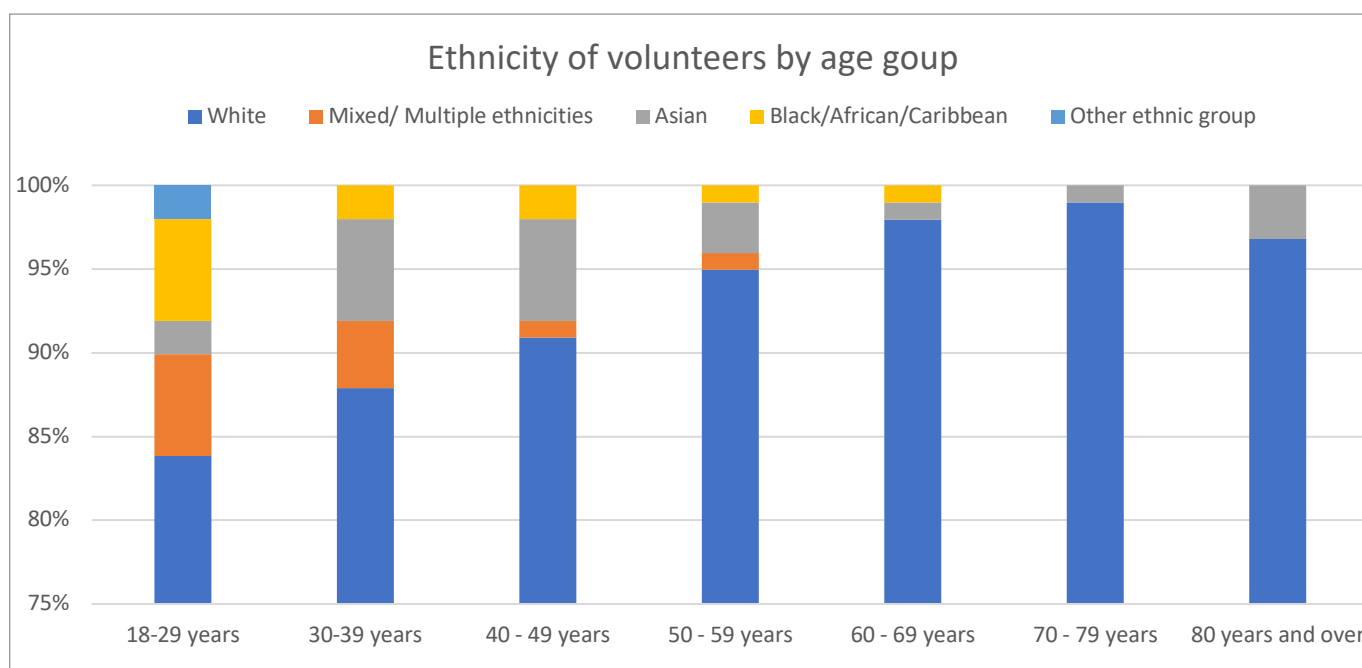
Age

The age profile of school governors and trustees according to the annual governance survey 2021 is that 9% of volunteers are aged under 40, including 1% aged under 30. Around three-quarters (73%) of volunteers are aged between 40 and 70. There are more volunteers aged over 80 than under 30. The average age of a school governor/trustee is 55 years old (NGA, 2019). Similarly, NFER (Kettlewell et al, 2020: 60) found that most (over 80%) of all governors/trustees “were aged 40 or older, with 27% over the age of 60”.

Of those volunteers that have joined their board within the past year, 31% are aged under 40. For governors and trustees who have served between five and seven years (ie one complete term), 5% are aged under 40. This demonstrates again that newer volunteers are also more likely to be younger. From anecdotal evidence it is possible that younger volunteers remain for a shorter period governing: they are more likely to move home and jobs, and more likely to start families.

49% of under 40s are co-opted onto boards, with being an elected staff governor the next more likely route of appointment for under 30s (16%) while for the 30s to 40s the next most likely appointment route is as a parent governor (29%).

Younger governors/trustees are more likely to be from an ethnic minority. 87% of governors and trustees aged under 40 are white, 5% are Asian, 5% from mixed/multiple ethnic groups and 2% are Black. This trend is corroborated by NFER’s study (Kettlewell et al, 2020).



Charity trustees have a similar age profile with the average age being 57 (Charity Commission, 2010). Just 0.5% of charity trustees are aged between 18 and 24, and young trustees are much more likely in charities supporting education. 70% of charities that had at least one trustee aged 18 to 24 had children and young people as beneficiaries (ibid). Of course, this group is the beneficiary of all governing boards.

Other protected characteristics

The characteristics explored in depth are NGA's focus as there is a significant deficit of volunteers with these characteristics on governing boards in relation to general and pupil population.

Gender

Of governors and trustees responding to the annual survey, 63% identify as female and 35% as male (1% prefer not to say). This shows a slight change from 2020 where 60% of governors and trustees identified as female and 39% identified as male (>1% either preferred not to say or preferred to self-describe). In addition, NFER (Kettlewell et al, 2020:60) found that "more females than males were involved in all governance roles, except chairs" including "53% of governors and trustees were female [while] chair roles comprised equal proportions (49%) of females and males".

Gender identity

For the first time the annual survey asked respondents whether the gender they identify with is the same as your registered sex at birth. 97% said yes with a small number (but not enough to form a percentage) saying no. 2% preferred not to say.

Disability

7% of governors and trustees in the annual governance survey 2021 consider themselves to have a disability while 92% did not (2% prefer not to say). There are 14.1 million disabled people in the UK, according to the Family Resources Survey (2019 to 20) which includes 19% of working age adults and 46% of pension age adults.

Sexuality

90% of survey respondents identify as heterosexual (straight) with 2% identifying as bisexual, 1% as a gay man and 1% as lesbian or as a gay woman and a handful preferring to 'self describe' as pansexual or asexual. 7% preferred not to say. In 2020, answering a slightly different question in the annual survey, 3% of respondents identified as LGBTQ+.

The proportion of the UK population identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) was 2.2% in 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2020), with younger people more likely to identify this way.

It is also important to recognise that every individual has multiple characteristics and is "not shaped by one aspect of their identity alone" (Barnard and Taylor, 2011:4) but through a unique mix including "personal outlook and experience", "treatment by others" and class, skills etc which can "change the meaning that such demographic characteristics have". Some characteristics may be important to someone's identity while others may be incidental. This also means that no group that shares a characteristic (eg an age or ethnicity) is homogenous and should not be treated as such – beliefs, values, experiences, perspectives, cultures and customs and so on will all differ. As a result, there is an "intersectional nature of identity" resulting in "complex and cumulative ways in which different forms of discrimination (based upon these attributes) combine, overlap, and intersect" (Association of Charitable Foundations, 2019:13).

Perceptions of representation

In the annual survey 2021, a third (33%) of respondents perceived that their board 'very much' reflects the community it serves while around half (48%) said it 'moderately' did so. Only 12% felt it slightly represented the community and 3% that it did not reflect the community at all. Around a third of respondents in all regions said that their board very much reflects their community, except in London where that falls to 19%.

Younger people are less likely to agree that their board very much reflects the community (21% say this compared to 34% of over 40s).

There was little difference between respondents' views on whether their board reflected the community whichever routes their board had used to advertise vacancies. For example 79% of those using independent recruitment services felt their board reflects the community and 81% of those asking personal or professional connections felt the same.

Participants in the focus groups were asked their view on the representation of different characteristics on their board to understand how these national figures and perceptions play out in local contexts. There was a mixed response to whether participants felt their board was diverse – partly as this is a complicated question which involves different characteristics and intersectionality.

Several said their board was largely representative on some characteristics – mostly gender and age (though the focus groups had deliberately sought out younger governors) – but that representation in terms of ethnicity was less common. As reflected in the data, locality was also a factor with comments made on the prevalent ethnicities in the local area and the degree to which the composition of the board reflected that.

Going ‘beyond the optics’ to understand more deeply whether the board is reflective of the community was a key observation of participants’ experience, as some characteristics like disability and sexuality are not or not always visible.

“It’s moving towards younger governors but ethnic minorities in particular are underrepresented. The school’s located in a predominantly white community, but that picture is changing all the time and we’re closely linked to other local areas which are very different in nature. The number of students from different backgrounds has increased over the last decade and [the board] haven’t kept pace with that.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“We have diversity in the sense of we have people from different financial and professional backgrounds, people with different jobs and different kind of levels of income and what not. But cultural perspectives and age I just don’t think is on the radar at all.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“Our school is in a very well to do area and traditionally it is not diverse ethnically or culturally in the slightest. So the governing board reflects that, but obviously doesn’t reflect at all the national demographic of people.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“The school board is quite diverse. At least I would say half the members are from ethnic minority groups because the school is made up by mainly from ethnic minority children.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“If you’re not in a wheelchair, you could still be disabled, you could still be LGBT but no one could know. I think that those types of diversity are really misunderstood, because you don’t see it and it’s easy to keep it quiet and hidden... so there needs to be more thought on what types of diversity are there and how do we understand what we don’t see as well.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Socio-economic status was raised by participants as an area where their board lacks representation and where it is trickier to reflect the community. Ellis (2003:25) found “some evidence of the over-representation of the middle classes

and underrepresentation of lower/working classes” on governing boards while Young (2016:7) asserts that boards are “disproportionately white, middle-class and not young”.

“We’ve got students and families from every walk of life. Yet, the governing body is generally more affluent, professional people with considerable professional experience so they are used to this kind of environment. The challenges, that some of our families face are very different from others. And that’s I think now more important than ever to recognise that.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Recruitment from underrepresented groups

Progress and perceptions

Boards should give consideration “to all the protected characteristics” in recruiting volunteers, the DfE Governance Handbook says (2020:41).

When boards do actively seek candidates from underrepresented groups, they are more likely than not to be successful. Looking at the two most underrepresented groups, almost three-quarters (73%) of boards responding to the annual survey that had actively sought volunteers from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background had successfully done so, while 83% of boards actively trying to recruit a young volunteer had successfully done so. Among those that had not tried to recruit from an underrepresented group, various reasons were given including having considered it and planning to do so in future (26%), it not being a priority for the board (25%) and having not considered it (25%). 14% perceived that these groups were already represented on the board – an interesting contrast with the high proportion that feel their board very much reflects the community.

Themes of comments provided by respondents give a snapshot of the opportunities, challenges and approaches explored in this report:

- Their board is actively focusing on improving its diversity and representation, or is aware that underrepresentation is a concern for them that they intend to address shortly.
- The board is aware of underrepresentation but finds recruitment a challenge/sees the appointment of ‘any’ volunteer as a success and cannot ‘be fussy’ about diversity.
- Perceived lack of diversity in the school community meaning board diversity is not considered or where it is, there is felt to be a very small pool to draw from.

- Skills, experience and willingness to volunteer/choosing candidates on ability and appointing the ‘right person’ the only consideration.
- Recruiting for diversity perceived as ‘too much extra work’ or ‘difficult to implement’.
- Their board had discussed it but decided (either as a group but also by the chair or headteacher) that was not a priority, not important or the idea was dismissed.
- Their board had not talked about it or that they perceived recruitment to their board as appointing ‘who they like’ without an open process.
- Fear of proactively recruiting people with underrepresented characteristics due to ‘not being sure if it’s okay to do’.

Overall, 49% of survey respondents agreed that their board recruits volunteers from diverse backgrounds with 28% disagreeing. Volunteers from all ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to agree this was the case than white volunteers. 79% of Asian respondents, 59% of Black respondents and 55% of respondents from mixed/multiple ethnic groups agreed compared to 47% of white respondents. Interestingly while 58% of 18 to 29 year olds agreed that their board recruits people from diverse backgrounds, just 41% of 30 to 39 year olds felt the same – this was the lowest level of agreement across all age brackets. Perhaps not unexpectedly this shows that governors and trustees who come from groups that are nationally underrepresented perceive their board to be more diverse, while white volunteers – who make up the vast majority – are less likely to see that action from their board.

Participants in NFER’s 2020 study (Kettlewell et al, 2020:82) “felt that while their board did not have any skills gaps, they did lack diversity” and recognised that “their board was not representative of the local community”. As a result, the boards recognised that they wanted to “increase the makeup of volunteers in relation to ethnicity, socio-economic status and age (specifically younger governors)”.

View from independent recruitment services

The data indicates that the volunteers that sign up with and are appointed by free independent recruitment services are generally more representative of wider society in the characteristics they bring. These services therefore offer boards a way to reach volunteers with the skills they need beyond their existing networks while adding to the representation of their board.

It also demonstrates that there is a growing supply of skilled and talented volunteers finding out about and stepping forward for governance roles, waiting to be recruited by schools and trusts. The three recruitment services largely work with employers and

other groups to encourage people to volunteer, and see a varying supply of volunteers and matches across the regions.

The DfE-funded Inspiring Governance recruitment service has a sustained figure of 23% of volunteers and 21% of matches nationally being from Black and Asian heritage groups. In the current financial year, 34% of Inspiring Governance’s matches are from an ethnic minority background and 45% of volunteers appointed are aged under 35. About 21% of these matches are in London.

29% of both recruits and placements made by recruitment charity Governors for Schools are from an ethnic minority background. 40% of volunteers signed up are aged under 35 and 6% are under 25, while 38% of placements are under 35 of which 5% are under 25. In addition, 6% of all recruits and 5% of all placements identified as having a disability. About a third of the charity’s matches are in London (Wirth et al, 2018:10).

Figures from the DfE-funded New Schools Network’s Academy Ambassadors programme (2020), which appoints trustees to MAT boards, show that 13% of appointments are from ethnic minority backgrounds; 5% are from the LGBTQIA+ community and 33% are women.

Participants’ approaches to recruitment for representation

Focus group participants described a wide variety in practice in their board’s attitude and approach to increasing participation – with experiences ranging from feeling that this had been ‘forgotten’ to other boards doing a great job of understanding and including people from different backgrounds.

One comment showed how a board is progressing its practice:

“There is still a sense of recruiting for skills and understanding what the gaps are. I think there is a greater awareness of diversity too. Now when vacancies are coming there is a broader understanding of ‘how do we make sure we have a diverse board that is reflective of our community?’ It’s certainly still a work in progress. Some of those conversations happen around those points where we’ve got an opportunity to make sure we are diverse and we are reflective whether that’s of gender, ethnicity or age.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Participants showcased some of the approaches that their board is – or should be – taking to increase the participation of underrepresented groups. This included using data to understand the community, evaluating the composition of the board, and using training and guidance.

“We’ve never collected any data or information on the protected characteristics of our governors. Some of it is quite visible – or you might make assumptions, but that’s not great – and some aspects aren’t visible at all... [If you don’t collect the data] how do you understand the diversity of your board versus the diversity of your school.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“It came out of this conversation about parental engagement and then about succession planning. We did a board evaluation of what we think we’re good at as a mix of people and where we could do better. A lot of that was skills based, but some of it was looking at whether the board’s composition can help us really represent community that we had to serve.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“The approach I took as chair was using the last available census [for the area] as a guide to highlight the lack of diversity in the group. I used that as the tool, as a measurement and I believe it was well received.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“Chairs and headteachers should get specific training on how to have and lead conversations about race. How can they provide the environment so that people can talk about it?”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“We’re looking at Inspiring Governance and Governors for Schools to see if that will broaden our reach [...] The DfE Handbook being updated recently to emphasise the importance of it has been useful because I could send that extract around as a definitive bit of guidance that we can work towards. I’ve asked for the NGA guide called ‘the right people around the table’ to be circulated so we’ve got a common, neutral bit of guidance to look at.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Moving the dial – recommendations

To create the necessary change within their own school/trust, boards should:

- Utilise available data and stakeholder engagement to understand the demographic of their area.

- Evaluate how the board’s composition reflects the community and understand any gaps of representation on the board.
- Take active steps to recruit volunteers from underrepresented groups, understanding why their board is doing so.
- Collect, monitor and consider reporting on their composition at a local level to provide transparency to their community, setting out why the data is being collected and how and when it will be used.
- Publish a statement demonstrating how the board is considering and addressing its representation to provide transparency to their community, being honest about where change is possible due to the demographic of a community.
- Be open with governors and trustees about the recruitment processes used and discuss these to discover new opportunities to reach more potential volunteers.

To progress change across the school system the DfE should consider:

- How it can collect and monitor information (or encourage the collection and monitoring of data) about governor and trustee demographics to create a truer picture of representation in this influential role.
- How targets may increase the number of volunteers from underrepresented groups, recognising the varying contexts of schools and trusts.
- How it can monitor and publish the demographic diversity of appointments made through government-funded recruitment services.
- Building on the language in the Governance Handbook by working with Ofsted to consider how the diversity and inclusion of a board forms a requirement for good and outstanding schools.
- Commission research to gather evidence specifically on the benefit and impact of diverse and inclusive boards in schools and trusts.

Ensuring a diversity of thought and perspectives

Why diverse thinking is essential to good governance

Thinking differently – or cognitive diversity and perspectives based on lived experience – is a good thing.

Boards should deliberately seek people who bring difference. Rabiger (Tenpencemore, 2018) writes that “we need to get people around the table who haven’t had the same experiences [and] upbringings as us... and work with them effectively. And we [need] people there to enrich, challenge, and stretch our horizons by forcing us to think differently”.

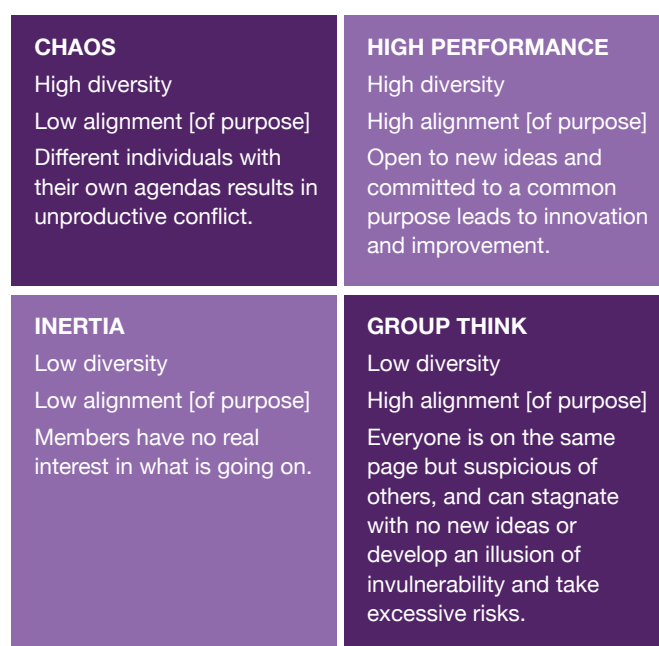
Diversity of thought at board level is essential for the effective running of any organisation. Deliberately recruiting a breadth of perspective, experiences and skills – “not the mere inclusion of various diverse traits” (Russell Reynolds Associates, 2009:1) – and combining this with “the power of human difference” (Sinnatt, 2020) can deliver better outcomes.

The benefit of having multiple perspectives around the board table is well documented and has obvious benefits for school and trusts. The DfE’s Governance Handbook (2020:36) says that “a board composed of governors and academy trustees who bring a diverse range of skills, experiences, qualifications, characteristics and perspectives and who are from different backgrounds and settings will have a positive impact on setting the strategic direction for the organisation.”

There are three governance mindsets: generative, fiduciary and strategic (NGA, 2020c). In carrying out the board’s generative role, cognitive diversity is valuable “for creative tasks such as idea generation as well as tasks where individuals’ judgments are aggregated” while in its fiduciary role of overseeing finances and compliance, identity diversity is useful “when you need to gather information about a complex problem” (Berditchevskaia and Bertoncin, 2021:18).

Effective governance demands volunteers who are committed to asking challenging questions and confident in having courageous conversations in the interest of children and young people. Research shows that young people “are more confident when it comes to challenging the system. They are less afraid to ask questions, make comparisons or question ‘the norm’ of things” (Kurian, 2017:6).

Quoted in Howe and Curtis (2016), this diagram illustrates the relationship between diversity of characteristics and thought and board performance:



Benefits of diverse thinking

Changing the dynamic and outlook of a group generates different, more powerful questions, and a greater depth of challenge leading to different solutions (Green Park and Addaction, 2019; Warmington, 2018).

With the participation of different people, the board will have more experiences and knowledge to draw information from. This will produce more interpretations and views of the potential impact of the decisions it is making, leading to increased sustainability and future-proofed decisions.

Benefits of this for boards include:

- better problem solving and decision making
- being more aware of current and upcoming opportunities and challenges
- assessing and reducing risks because of fewer blind spots across the group
- ensuring a more open and inclusive approach to its work
- understanding and having empathy with a greater range of stakeholders

- reducing the likelihood of unspoken assumptions
- eliciting and cross-fertilising a wider range of ideas (Berditchevskaia and Bertoncin, 2021; New Schools Network and Confederation of School Trusts, 2020; Inclusive Boards, 2019; Russell Reynolds Associates, 2009)

It also helps to avoid 'groupthink' which is where the people making decisions are similar (eg sharing backgrounds, values, views and beliefs) and therefore keen to reach a consensus. 'Groupthink' leads to a lack of questioning of information, assumptions and decisions; and an insufficient challenge of executive leaders.

The DfE's Governance Handbook (2020:20) recognises that "boards should welcome and thrive on having a sufficiently diverse range of individuals, viewpoints and/or experiences, since open debate leads to good decisions in the interests of the whole school/trust community."

Boards "need to be alert to the danger" of recruiting in their own likeness which can lead to 'groupthink' (Knights, 2016). When the people around the table offer a depth and breadth of views, insight and experiences, it reduces complacency and creates the right dynamic to ensure robust decision making. As well as gaining new perspectives it also gives opportunity for "the discussion of diverse views" without which governors or trustees are "more likely to assume that there is no alternative to the status quo" (Young, 2016:14).

The perception of better decision making is also important, as boards "mainly operate behind closed doors" and they need to recognise that "board members whose individual profiles look very similar will raise doubts about its ability to think outside the box" (ICAEW, 2014).

Where a focus group participant's board had brought in a diversity of perspectives the benefits were clear:

"[During a visit] I asked a lot of questions that had never been asked before and that's just coming from a different background, or a different awareness of what can happen out there."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"Sometimes I ask the question that none of us have thought about because everyone around the table has been recruited because [they're experts]. Because I'm not any of those [professional backgrounds] other than being a parent and a member of the community – I ask questions from a very lay point of view.

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"We can have more in-depth, more varied conversations which can only be a strength from asking questions."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

"[We've done activities to] show us what we have in common and show us what was different [among the governors]. It showed us that with diversity comes richness of experience and a richness of understanding and respect."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Others shared examples of where their board was not benefitting from a diversity of thoughts or where concerns that seem to prevent their board from considering it.

"A lot of governors have been there for years and [it was like] they'd all become a single group of people. There probably weren't any disagreements because they'd all got to a point where they all had the same opinion on everything [...] I think [they] almost see the concept of differing opinions as a negative."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"Everyone just agrees and there are no questions [...] There isn't an awful lot of 'let's think about things a different way'."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"There is a concept of 'if we get someone different they're going to want to work in a different way, and it's going to be loads of extra effort' [...] Seeing increasing their diversity as a burden that needs to be managed rather than a bonus to get lots of new and interesting viewpoints on the school and people asking questions they haven't asked before."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"[Visual diversity] means nothing if the thought isn't diverse... boards [have] got to be made up of the right individual people who can help that school move forward. What you don't want to do is pack it out with people who are just sycophantic [of the headteacher]."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Effects of diverse thinking

Healthy debate triggered by some difference of opinion, especially before important decisions are taken, should be encouraged in governing board meetings (NGA, 2020c:34). Having a group of individuals with different perspectives around the table will help to create this debate, questioning, challenge and conflict.

As the perspectives around the table are widened, people will not always concur and meetings should facilitate the contribution of agreement as well as the contentions, making sure that they are all properly explored (Green Park and Addaction, 2019; Warrington, 2018).

“[Good governance] has been made easier by diversifying the board and [it] wouldn't have been as easy in the previous echo chamber. Every one of us comes with our staunch worldviews. We don't always agree. It doesn't make for the prettiest conversations, but the one thing that we all have in common – and we go back to over and over again – is our passion and commitment to do what is the very best for the children in our school... We've had very difficult conversations and we can agree to disagree, but the endpoint of what's best for the children is non-negotiable for all of us, and I think that our school is better for that.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Evidence shows that organisations with diverse boards have a competitive advantage both financially and socially. This signifies that those organisations will be better placed to secure improvements to organisational outcomes. Well-established research from McKinsey demonstrates that “the correlation does indicate that when companies commit themselves to diverse leadership, they are more successful” (Hunt et al, 2015:1).

Summarising research, Syed (2019) explains that those in diverse teams find discussion cognitively demanding. “There was plenty of debate and disagreement because different perspectives were aired. They typically came to the right decisions, but they were not wholly certain about them” however homogenous teams had “radically different” experiences where “they were not challenged on their blind spots, so didn't get a chance to see them. They were not exposed to other perspectives, so became more certain of their own.”

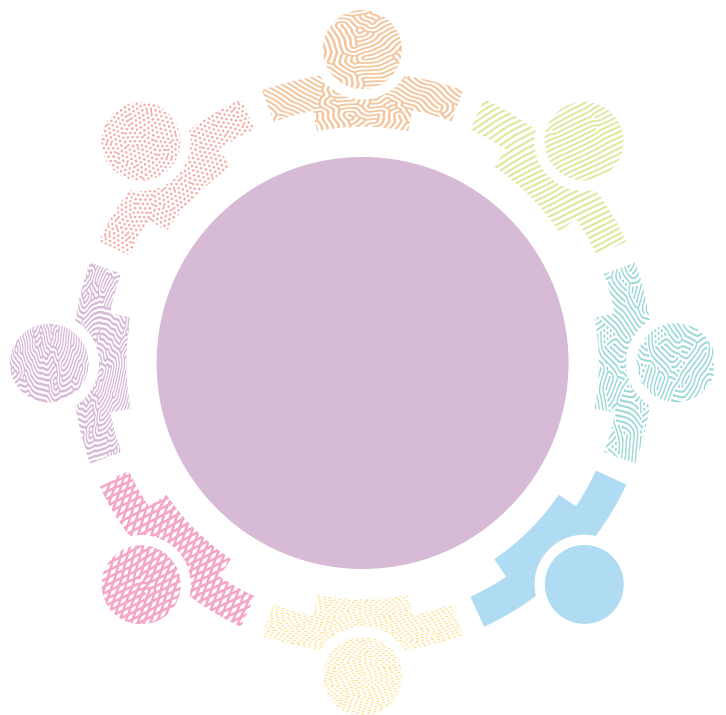
Moving the dial – recommendations

To create the necessary change within their own school/trust, boards should:

- Take active steps to recruit volunteers that bring different perspectives, understanding why their board is doing so.
- Seek to understand and derive the benefits that diversity of thought and difference can bring to their decision making.
- Consider what team-building activities they can do to facilitate volunteers better knowing and understanding each other.
- Undertake training, particularly those in board leadership roles, to positively manage debates and discussion.

To progress change across the school system the DfE should:

- Continue to promote and strengthen its expectations as set out in the Governance Handbook around boards having volunteers with a diversity of perspectives.
- Act by example and diversify the perspectives on its own boards.





Diverse boards and avoiding tokenism

What is a diverse board

No group of characteristics or viewpoints should dominate the makeup of the board. Ultimately boards need a blend of volunteers who between them understand the communities served – gained though having characteristics, experiences and backgrounds in common with stakeholders – and have the skills, approaches and attributes needed for effective governance. Any one person can bring several of these to the mix – and just as all governors and trustees need to learn about the communities served, the skills needed for governance can also be learnt.

A board 'looking diverse' should not be mistaken for a board being diverse in representation or thought. Efforts must go beyond widening the diversity of characteristics – or the faces around the table – to create the outcome of diversity of representation and thought. There is no 'right answer', and a representative board will be different in every school and trust. Boards should define what their composition should look like in relation to the community they serve.

"You can have a lot of one type of minority but if you don't have a wide range of opinions, then don't have diversity."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"Diversity doesn't equal better outcomes. If you are all the same, from the same voice and the same point of view, just because you've got the different colours makes no difference... Most of the boards I know are completely diverse, but are the outcomes for their kids any better? No, because think about the sort of people who get drawn to a board in the first place... We have to move away from that vision that if the boards are diverse and have lots of people from different places, we are going to sit there unified and make things better for kids because it doesn't work like that."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Skilled governance

Recruiting skilled volunteers to governing boards has been encouraged over the past few years. The DfE's Governance Handbook clarifies that "relevant skills may include important personal attributes, qualities and capabilities" and "the knowledge and perspectives that will contribute to good

decision making" (2020:37). Given the deficit between the proportion of volunteers from underrepresented groups and their prevalence in the population, there is a surplus of skilled people that boards are missing out on.

Balarin et al (2008:34) recognised a "tension" between ensuring representation and the skills required and found that school governing bodies place most value on 'fit' between an individual and the school and on particular skills that individuals bring to the governing body. Less important is the ability to represent aspects of the wider community. This emphasis on skills "implies there is no need for" different perspectives and that "representation is not significant" (Young, 2016:9). Where volunteers are recruited for the perspectives they bring, rather than specific professional skills, this "makes their contribution different, not less than" (Charity Excellence, n.d.).

In addition, there can be a misconception that seeking more diverse volunteers means compromising on quality. This can also be expressed as 'we only recruit the best person' or 'we just look at skills' (Guadiano, 2017). The pool of talented individuals with plenty to offer boards is wide – reaching beyond traditional places to find volunteers does not equal settling for less. In fact, a volunteer bringing an underrepresented characteristic or different viewpoint is an extra thing to contribute on top of the skills they already offer.

Focus group participants show how skills are considered in their board's recruitment:

"We haven't put any emphasis on hearing the voice of people with different experiences and I think that's because of this skills focus nationally. A re-balance needs to be struck to say we do need people with specialist skills and experience, but also we want to make sure that we hear a range of voices and a range of experiences."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"I think the board have done really well with diversity of thought and skill set, because we'll do a regular skills audit. Then we will recruit governors purely on skills – sometimes it means that we have a couple of gaps, but we'd rather have gaps and make sure that it's the right person."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“The board has put a lot of work in to try and ensure that when we’re recruiting, it is the skills alongside working to have a board that is diverse... because work has been done around the skill set we do have the appropriate challenge.”

Participant in focus group -- volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

It is particularly important to think about the willingness to learn and develop new skills for both the incumbents and the newly recruited volunteers. Incumbents may need a willingness to learn and develop new skills around their understanding and knowledge of diversity and inclusion. They may need to update their skills on active listening and facilitation. Incoming governors and trustees, through training and support, will bring new perspectives on what they are learning about governance, which they can bring into the board meetings.

Avoiding tokenism

Volunteers should be sought because they have the requisite or potential skills, experience and talent for the role – and the capability to make an impact. Where volunteers are recruited on their potential for the role (eg younger governors or governors from marginalised communities where some experience may have been closed off) there should be a plan to develop and support them to gain the relevant experience. No one should be recruited only for what they bring in terms of their protected characteristics or lived experience alone. Skills and backgrounds are equally important and both should be targeted simultaneously.

Boards should “genuinely understand” why they want to diversify and why it is important and show a “commitment and determination” to making diversity and inclusion central to the work of the board and the culture of the school/trust to prove that “inclusion moves beyond tokenism” (Elmoutawakil, 2018).

Elmoutawakil (2018) describes tokenism as “including a small number of underrepresented groups in an effort to appear diverse” where “these people are often symbolically and interchangeably used to represent an entire group of people”. It is not about adding one volunteer with an underrepresented characteristic to a board ‘for the sake of it’ or to represent an entire group, but about identifying specific gaps between the composition and community, then reaching out to fill those gaps with volunteers that both share the experiences of the community served and bring the necessary talents, insight and skills to the board.

Focusing on the skills and experiences people bring will also help boards to avoid “assuming that they ‘represent’ their peers” (Charity Commission Northern Ireland, n.d.). People

must be appointed – and be aware that they are being appointed – on merit and for what they can add to the quality and performance of the board.

Participants in the focus groups demonstrated how their boards avoid tokenism and recruit for both skills and diversity:

“[We’re] looking at the talent and giving opportunities.

There should be two categories – new recruits who have no skills, help them develop those skills. And those people who do have the skills and get those people on board. I think that should be the focus rather than looking at the person’s skin colour.”

Participant in focus group -- volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I’m always very clear that there should be a role for that person to go into. Recruiting for the sake of the tokenistic effect of increasing the diversity is bad, so we’d want somebody to come in that felt they had a role and a purpose and a place as well as their natural ability to consider perspectives.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“In our application pack we have highlighted that we really want someone who is very aware and brings a diversity of lived experience and thought rather than diversity for the sake of diversity.”

Participant in focus group – Participant in focus group - volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“We make sure that we focus on the skills, but we [tell potential volunteers what diversity is lacking as well] and if they could marry both those up, that would be brilliant.”

Participant in focus group -- volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

One participant added their own experience of being on a board where they might have been concerned that they were there as a token.

“At the board table, I don’t feel like I’m a token person there. There are other people [from ethnic minority backgrounds] and we’re listened to equally, we equally support and challenge and we’re equally supported and challenged in the views that we express. I feel that it’s a really productive place.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Barriers and motivators to increasing participation

Organisational barriers

A combination of organisational barriers to board diversity identified by both focus group participants and through evidence from other sectors mean that boards generally do not recruit a broader range of volunteers. These include:

- Closed recruitment practices
- Lack of visibility of governance
- Personal factors of governors/trustees finding it difficult to talk about
- The board having other priorities which are seen as more important, or that the issue itself is not important
- The organisation of governance

This resonates with Fryer (2013) who quotes research confirming “the two most common themes” when young people were asked how they could be best encouraged to charity boards “were that charities should aid understanding and awareness of the role and that they should advertise, publicise and promote the role and vacancies”.

Closed recruitment practices

A lack of open and transparent recruitment is a significant barrier to entry for underrepresented groups getting involved in governorship and trusteeship. Research from other sectors supports this finding which the experience of focus group participants demonstrated and was also indicated by data from NGA’s annual survey.

Having a child at the school (40%) or working in education (27%) were the main ways in which annual survey respondents overall had first become aware of the opportunity to govern. Demonstrating the use of networks in recruiting, 19% of respondents had been approached by the school/trust and asked to take on a role and 13% had been approached and asked by a personal or professional connection. More open channels including local and national recruitment campaigns accounted for 7% of volunteers being introduced to governance roles.

Working in education was the single biggest route for 18 to 30 years olds hearing about the role while for the 30s to 40s it was having a child at the school. 10% of volunteers aged over 40 had first heard about their role by being approached and asked to take on the role by a personal/professional connection, compared to 4% of under 40s.

Others had actively sought out a governor role or volunteer role supporting education/ the community, been told about the role by family or friends, or had been approached after doing other voluntary roles in the school. Social media and promotion of the role by community and faith organisations also brought respondents into their governance role.

To advertise vacancies over the past year, respondents to the annual governance survey said that they had predominately used the school or trust’s channels (46%) or community channels (10%). Lesser explored options included contacting employers (5%), using other volunteering websites (4%), asking neighbouring schools if their governors want to swap or take on an extra role (3%), and contacting school alumni (2%). Despite the perceived difficulty in recruiting volunteers, it seems a swathe of potential routes are being underutilised by boards.

Forming the second most popular recruitment route, 38% of respondents said that people who their governors, trustees or executives knew personally or professionally had been asked. 16% had headhunted people who fit the bill and 20% had used existing governors/trustees networks to share information about vacancies. 22% said that their board had used an independent recruitment service to search for governors/trustees.

Vacancies are often not advertised “at all” or only in a “very limited manner” (Association of Colleges, 2015:6) and 71% of charity trustees are recruited through an informal process, after being asked directly to become a trustee by someone on the board (The Charity Commission, 2017a). The Taken on Trust survey of charity trustees (Charity Commission, 2017b) also found that the larger the charity, the more formal recruitment processes used. In the largest charities, 50% of trustees had a formal recruitment process.

This shows a natural tendency to draw from board members’ own connections. Relying on personal and professional networks can severely limit the range of potential volunteers. This is because “we are not aware of how limited our own networks are when compared with the full universe of qualified candidates” (Russell Reynolds Associates, 2009). Personal networks lead to “those who look, think and behave alike” and using them as the sole source of recruitment perpetuates boards in which different characteristics and backgrounds are underrepresented and perspectives are reduced (Green Park and Addaction, 2019; Association of Charitable Foundations, 2019).

“Some of them pretty much go through their networks, and so that's why a lot of people don't know about it because they just don't.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“The opportunities tend to be passed through word of mouth or through networks, and if you've got a white network that's how opportunities of learning about governorship spreads. But it ends up building these bubbles that don't really spread out, and so it means that you can be cut out of opportunities as an ethnic minority. That happens a lot happens at my work as well, people just don't get told about stuff so how on earth are they ever going to expect to reach into it even with the most well-meaning board.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“There's a fundamental problem with the way that schools run the boards in the first place, because especially with the trust boards, they pack them out with their mates or whoever they think are going to be the best fit.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“It does worry me that most of our parent governors come from being tapped up to be a governor and how that perpetuates the fact that the white middle class parents say to the other white middle class parents ‘hey, I'm leaving being a parent governor, do you want to come and be a parent governor?’”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“[My board has] exclusively recruited co-opted governors before from friends and acquaintances of the existing governors, which has tended obviously to bring in, lots of good people, but people who were all from the same networks... I had mentioned it [recruiting externally] to the head when I joined, whether they thought about it at all and he said, ‘well, it's very, very difficult to find co-opted governors, so there isn't really any choice about it’. I don't think they knew about any other routes than via word of mouth before then.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Recruitment methods for trustees, evidence from the charity sector shows, are viewed as poor and failing to “keep pace with the aspirations” of wider society (NPC and Green Park, 2018; ACEVO, 2020). To “change the outcome of the judgments we make in appointing”, the process needs to change (Fanshawe, 2018:27).

Research carried out by Getting on Board with underrepresented groups in charity trusteeships found a lack of knowledge on how to get a trustee position, especially for young people. Their perception was that people are “cherry picked” to be trustees or it is “bestowed” upon high profile people (Bailey-King, 2020) and that boards are closed off to younger people and ethnic minorities (cited in Hargrave, 2020). This demonstrates a lack of awareness that governance roles are for a wide range of people; transforming how boards recruit will change the image and perceptions. Meanwhile, John (2020) cites research with younger people from ethnic minorities that found a perception of trusteeship being ““another country” to which they don't have the right passport and find one difficult to get”.

Participants in the focus groups recognised closed recruitment as one of the main characteristics of their board – and other boards' recruitment. They were clear that the emphasis and responsibility for attracting more volunteers from underrepresented groups is with boards to advertise vacancies and provide opportunities.

“[The assertion is that] ‘we've [Black people] got the problem. We don't bother to apply’. When in fact where is the opportunity to apply for these posts, particularly now with academy trusts. If they are never advertised and never put out there because [boards] have no reason to and there's no law to make them. It's not a deficit thing[...] look at what's happening there, why people aren't actually on these boards.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“How do you become a co-opted governor if you've never seen an advert and nobody knows this post exists? I think it's always put on ‘all these ethnic people don't apply’. The barrier is the actual institution themselves, because they are not putting the roles out there for anyone to know they exist. What are they applying for if they don't know it exists? What are we, mind readers?”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Visibility of governance

To be seen within wider society confers importance and being valued. Baralin et al (2008:5) established that “school governing does not have a sufficiently high profile” and is not “widely publicised [or understood] and its contribution is hidden”. They called for “the status of governing bodies [to] be enhanced, their contribution more widely recognised, and greater publicity given to school governing in all sectors of society especially the business community”. Ellis et al (2003:5,8) concluded that a lack of knowledge about “who gets involved and how” creates

a barrier to participation. James (2010:3) agreed that “school governors give an enormous amount to the education system in England, yet their contribution is largely hidden from public view”.

People need to know who governors and trustees are, what they do, how they do it and why. If their contribution and impact is not recognised in school and trusts, by executive leaders, by the school system, education organisations, policymakers and of course governance volunteers and professionals themselves, then it can be no surprise that it is a struggle to get people to volunteer.

When every once in a while a board says ‘please join us’, it cannot be the only time that staff, parents, local communities and wider society – especially groups that are marginalised – are hearing about governance. If the role isn’t seen and valued and understood, then the many skilled and passionate people that boards want to come forward will not be engaged. People want to be part of something meaningful – but to be meaningful they must feel appreciated. If they see it celebrated in public life it will put the opportunity to govern into their horizons and become something that people want to become part of.

A lack of visibility among stakeholders was identified by focus group participants:

“[Pupils and parents] don’t know anything about governing... we’ve got our headteacher. But we’ve also got a governing board – ‘what do they do?’”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“Whenever I engage with parents though their reaction is to have a moan about something, and it then becomes very difficult to say ‘I can’t get involved with that’ so even parents don’t really understand what [governance] is there for, what we do or how to get in touch with us.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I think there’s not enough training given, particularly to headteachers about the role of governors but equally to all school staff. In many cases there seems to be a kind of mythical body that turns up and eats all of the biscuits on an evening now and again.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

There is plenty of opportunity to make the role more visible with different stakeholders, and pupils were a key area where participants wanted to make a difference. How current pupils engage with the governing board should be considered part of this mix to help with future recruitment of governors and to encourage their families to get involved in governance.

“It’s that double edged-sword – you can’t be what you can’t see, so we’ve been engaging our young people in the conversation testing some new approaches particularly with our sixth formers. We’re asking them if they’re staying local to come back into the board. We’ve not got that far with it yet, but the fact those conversations are happening, and we’ve got strategies in place, to me it feels like we’re moving in the right direction.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“It might come back to educating older pupils about the value of it and to think this might be something you could do in a few time that will actually have a positive impact on your personal development in your career... it’s a starting point of planting the seed.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I think there’s a case to engage pupils not just in terms of getting more younger governors on board but in creating more informed young people as well.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“[Our board is] making a conscious effort to make the governors more visible, pointing out their backgrounds and making them more visible to parents.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

A lack of visibility leads to a lack of awareness and understanding of the role, its importance and how to get involved. Rollock’s research (2009:5) gives a comprehensive overview of the experiences of governors from ethnic minority backgrounds and found that “challenging this prevailing image (white, middle class) has also been cited as a hindrance to a more diverse governing body.”

More generally, wider promotion of – and myth-busting about – the role by schools and trusts themselves, as well as by the DfE, the wider school system and people already involved in governance was seen by participants as being critical to increasing participation. This was encapsulated by several focus group participants:

“It’s about raising the profile of governance – nobody really knows what you do half the time, and we need to change that perception and champion the good stories and make it more mainstream.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“Helping people to understand, battling those stereotypes that people have, that the governing body is made up of certain people, certain ages, have certain skill sets and certain types of knowledge, that actually it's a role that other people can do and can add value to. So for me, that was definitely the biggest thing that attracted me: a role where I could do something. That might just be for me, but I imagine that's probably similar for others as well.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“The biggest struggle is knowing how to get into this and where vacancies exist [...] I'd love to be able to support others, but I have no idea where I would start to see if other boards are looking for people. I talk openly about how great it is and more and more people want to get involved, but where do the opportunities come from and how are they presented? Because once you are through the door there's loads of stuff, but I don't see much publicity or promotion or activity... I just don't know how an average person would know about this role and especially if the school doesn't really talk about it and communicate what the governing body does either.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“We need to present the role in a way where all people feel they can contribute. Counteracting the stereotypes that people might have about it has got to be a white person that's able to speak very eloquently in front of a lot of people all the time and has lots of connections.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“Often when I tell people that I'm a governor, they react with surprise. They think you have to be a parent to be a governor. Last time they were in school was when they were attending school and it's not something they would ever have considered. Where would they have heard about it? They just wouldn't... it's just not really on people's radar.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“Although I often see [adverts for governor roles] I think if you don't know, appreciate or understand what school governance does, you won't be attracted to go and apply.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I think people don't understand the connection between their own professional skills and how they might use those on the board.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Participants also spoke about their own perception of the board's and governance's visibility prior to taking up their role, and how they have used that experience to influence others.

“I knew that the governing body was this group of invisible people who had some responsibility to give some oversight to what was happening at the school. But I didn't really understand the dynamics and working relationship between the governing body and the headteacher [...] or about the legal requirements of the governing body and just how responsible governing bodies are.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I don't think that young people understand what is involved or what the role of a governor or a board is. I certainly didn't. Part of why I went into it was to see a little bit of that and see how that operated and then to try and then give something back and to be able to offer myself in that role. Certainly some of the motivations for doing it was curiosity.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I started a blog about being a young school governor and busting some myths about it. And it was only after that people were like 'oh yeah, I could be one', so I think there's something about myth busting from the wider board to show that it can be doable.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Educating people more widely about what governance is, why it is needed in organisations and the difference it makes would help people to be aware of the opportunity to volunteer, focus group participants added.

“Not only should people be more exposed to it, but people should be educated on the importance of it and what happens if it goes wrong. Because governance is pretty much everywhere [...] and the fact of the matter is that if governance at your school, your children's school goes wrong, you as a parent, you're going to be up in arms about it.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Personal factors

"It feels great to work with people who share our own perspectives and beliefs" say Charity Excellence (n.d.a). The organisation illustrates "moral licensing" as a reason why board diversity stalls, explaining that incumbent volunteers may perceive that in "volunteering for a good cause, [it] allows me to feel OK about only appointing people like me" (ibid).

In addition, The Unmistakables report found a challenge that many organisations – and the individuals in them – face is being cautious to ensure they are "using acceptable and inclusive language" as "the language of diversity shifts over time". So great is the caution that people "deploy a number of techniques to avoid conversations around diversity and inclusion". The people involved in conversations about diversity and inclusion must show a "willingness to evolve" and organisations should create "environments of sustained cultural learning" through training the report suggests (2021:4,13,14).

To have conversations, barriers such as assumptions, experiences and discomfort need to be acknowledged and worked through – an effort that will take intention and practice (Standard Chartered, n.d.). Focus group participants explained how they had experienced this 'awkwardness' on their board:

"I have tried to start having those conversations but have found it very 'walking on eggshells'. I feel like it isn't a welcome conversation and it feels difficult to have that conversation without implying that they've done anything wrong or that any individual isn't contributing to the board, because everyone is. It's more of a balance across the governing body thing rather than, it's anyone's fault for having volunteered to be there."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"In terms of what blocks the discussion for us, there is an awkwardness. White people are not used to talking about race, and we're not sure about the language to use and people are concerned about using the wrong language, particularly in a room where there are some people from minority ethnic backgrounds."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Priorities and importance

Where diversity falls on the list of priorities can influence the action a board is taking. Some participants considered that their board did not have the time to look at its composition, while others were giving more priority to the matter.

"Our school is going through changes so we just need to push some stuff through and maybe once we're not massively in debt and not needing to make people redundant then we'll start to worry about self-indulgent things like a diverse governing body. We just need the governing body singing from the same hymn sheet to get us through [the bumpy patch]. And then [we'll look at] how much diverse inputs will help the school flourish once we're on that secure foundation."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"Our issue would be does it get the agenda space? Have you got enough time to give it justice bearing in mind all the statutory stuff we tend to get through and trying to make sure we've got enough time to give it justice?"

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"[You don't think about it] until someone raises that awareness and you put a lens on your board. I think the conversations have been really productive, it does make for some quite interesting dialogue. I think the challenge has been OK, we recognise that we want to be more diverse, how do we go about doing it?"

Participant in focus group - volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

"I think the board is definitely open to new perspectives and making sure we're more representative of ages and ethnicities."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

Organisation of governance

Governing involves giving up time and energy, with no monetary gain – though it can be very rewarding when done well. But for some people, governance roles can be tricky to access due to other responsibilities, their pattern of work or not being able to 'afford' to govern when they need to make a living with the time they have.

Pay and expenses

32% of respondents to the annual governance survey agreed that there should be an option to pay all volunteers – in addition to receiving expenses. Research by Hill and Forrest in 2018 found that paying governors slightly increased attendance at meetings and the perception of quality of governance, characterised for example by governors being more responsive. They also found some volunteers showing a strong resistance

to being paid because of “incompatibility with public service” and recognised that paying governors could increase the expectation of what is required of them (eg attending a set amount of training).

The research identifies a range of questions to be resolved in deciding whether to remunerate governance volunteers. Part of the case for paying governors and trustees may be to improve recruitment and improve the diversity of membership (Hill, James and Forrest, 2020) and while focus group participants recognised this, there were also views that payment could make governance more exclusive.

“I have to wonder if you paid governors, would you get more of a range of people taking it on. I think often with volunteer roles it’s the people who have got the privilege of time... and if you paid people, maybe that would encourage people who may not have the normal background for a school governor.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“If you have to choose between something that is paid or not paid, it feels almost a bit of a luxury to be able to give time to something and mental space in this way.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“[Being paid] certainly adds to the profile of governance. I would be concerned that you might get people there just for the money. It is already fairly easy if you want to turn up to board meetings and not particularly contribute. Thankfully, I don’t see much of that these days, but I suppose that’s a risk if you start paying people.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“If you’re paid, would there be systemic pressures to ‘keep in line’. I’m not disputing that if you were paid, you might get more people applying. But then what’s your quality going to be? Will it be all at the top level who have got lots of skills, as in professional skills, and isolating the people who are trying to get in from the community. That would easily happen. It’s a difficult one to address and it probably needs more debate.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Paying expenses, thereby reducing the cost to volunteers to take part in governing, is something that all boards can do and encourage people to take up.

“Covering expenses would make it more accessible. For a lot of us, it’s nothing but for someone who would like to be a governor it could be an actual barrier. So, rather than just reaching out to new audiences, I think removing barriers is important as well.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Meetings

The timing of meetings and physical and technological accessibility can have an impact on whether people are able to take part in governance. Factors like child and family care, religious and cultural commitments, and working arrangements contribute to this. In the annual governance survey, 80% of respondents perceived that their board reviews practice to ensure that meetings are accessible to everyone.

“If you’re on a zero hours contract, if you are experiencing financial insecurity or are in a particularly low-waged profession, it is not fully accessible. There is an assumption that you have to be able to afford to be a governor because it’s a voluntary role.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Using technology can also facilitate participation via video link for candidates that may face challenges around participation due to caring responsibilities, disability, language and communication needs and so on. Some elements such as training and pre-work can take place remotely to make face-to-face contact more ‘short and sharp’.

Variability of governance

A lack of certainty caused by the variability in practice between boards and the limited information available before joining a board was observed by focus group participants as a factor that can affect volunteering.

“One thing that makes governance particularly intimidating is not knowing if you’re going to have a good school or a bad school, or if you’re going to have support, or if you’re going to be thrown in at the deep end with no formal induction. The experience of being governor does differ wildly, and some of it is intimidating and some of it is hard and some of it is quite scary.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“If you were a prospective governor and trying to do a bit of research on a school, you don't just want to know about how students achieve, you want to know about the board. Is it inclusive? Does it represent the community? Does the head engage positively? Is challenge welcome and accepted? If there was more focus on that as well as the formal inspection side, I think that would be more welcoming to people who are on the fence.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

Individual barriers to participation

Confidence and time came through most strongly as the personal barriers to volunteering as a school governor/trustee. This is supported by other studies which found work commitments (55%) and looking after children/home (25%) contributed to time barriers (NCVO, 2017), while eight in ten cited “a lack of spare time as a reason for not” volunteering in the Helping Out report (2007:68).

In addition, people from underrepresented groups face additional personal barriers. People from ethnic minority backgrounds may be excluded because of lack of confidence in and alienation from the school system, language difficulties, lack of first-hand knowledge of the British education system, concerns about tokenism, and a lack of role models (Rollock, 2009; Ellis, 2003).

Research carried out by the Charity Commission (2010) found that young volunteers had concerns about how time-consuming trusteeship would be and whether they had the necessary skills and experience.

Confidence

Doubts about having “the skills or experience necessary to contribute productively, at least at first” can be daunting for many people (Green Park and Addaction, 2019, 31). Boards therefore need to ensure the adverts for new volunteers are not overwhelming and that it can adapt to ensure volunteers “are not alienated from the interaction at board level” (ibid).

These feelings of self-doubt and lacking confidence before applying for a role were recognised by focus group participants through their own experience or observations:

“I always saw people in leadership as being typically... not from my ethnic background and not for my age group, so I didn't think I had anything to contribute.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I joined both governing bodies so early because I totally wanted to avoid a parent election and not being selected because I knew I had really strong skill set to be co-opted, but I had no confidence I could persuade the rest of the school to elect me.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“Their own feelings of inadequacy stop them from putting themselves forward. And the governor that ultimately was selected was amazing and she doesn't have HR skills, she doesn't have legal skills but she is so fiercely passionate about our school community, we could not have any set of skills that we need better than that. So I think that could also be very worrying... people feeling that they don't have requisite levels of education or eloquence is definitely a challenge.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Time

Three-quarters (74%) of respondents to the annual governance survey agreed that their governance role is manageable around their other professional and/or personal commitments. Younger governors and trustees are slightly less likely to agree at 69% compared to 75% of over 40s.

Governors for schools (2018) found that volunteers aged over 45 spent on average 8.1 hours per month on governing duties, while volunteers under 45 spent 5.3 hours. This decrease is most likely because those under 45 are often juggling several commitments.

The perception of the time needed to carry out the role is a well-recognised barrier to governance, and this corresponds with the experiences of focus groups participants in considering why others may not step forward. Despite this, research shows that young people “are willing to sacrifice their free time to get ahead” (Harmston, 2016) demonstrating an opportunity to tap into that development motivation.

“I always say to my friends and fellow parents, ‘Why don't you become a governor?’ and they say ‘I haven't got the time, because it's a lot of responsibility and you're doing it in your own time as well’.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“It isn’t necessarily that people don’t have the time for it, it’s making it really clear what the actual time commitment is and what you need to do. Because that almost put me off from applying and accepting the role. I didn’t really know what the role involved, or what I would be doing. It was more I didn’t want to let down the school by committing to something that I then just do not have the time to do.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Cultural barriers

Our participants also noted potential barriers specific to different ethnic minority communities including family commitments, their experience with the education system and language skills, drawn from their lived experience.

“Maybe more from the Asian community, which I’m part of, is that people tend to have more caring responsibilities. There’s a higher chance of being in multigenerational households where you’re looking after children and parents and grandparents as a day-to-day responsibility”.

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“Pakistanis hold teachers in really high respect... To match that up with a position on the board where you have to question the teacher might be culturally difficult for some communities.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“A lot of the migrants from mainland China are relatively new to England, so they have no personal experience of the British system... So [governing isn’t] a concept that would occur to them, that it is something they need to do for their children’s school.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“Some people had a very negative experience of our education system, which means that there’s quite large proportions of individuals who would be reluctant and may not think that they’ve got much to offer because of their experience in the classroom.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“It would be a struggle for the majority of people of my background as they don’t have the language skills as well as the educational background, meaning you have to be able to read and understand what’s written in order to contribute adequately... I suppose if somebody were able to go over the papers with the governors beforehand so they can get their ideas together it would be helpful. For the people who want to [join boards] and who have the time and who have the passion, [reading and understanding] is one of the main things that they can’t do. [When I was applying for my parent governor role], I was quite surprised when I saw that they would provide an interpreter if the person required it... They are stressing that you don’t need any prior skills or experience. They just want parents who will engage. They were willing to provide what was necessary [to make that happen]”.

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Motivations

NGA’s annual surveys have consistently shown that the main reasons for volunteering are making a difference for children (63%) serving their community (56%) and having an interest in education (52%) (NGA, 2020b).

The personal stories of the focus group participants reinforced governing to make a difference for children – either their own or young people more generally – as the key motivation.

“If you care about the communities that you’re part of, this is something that you’d contribute to. You can’t just complain when you see things [happening with young people nationally] because these kids are walking to your local school every day and what are you doing about that at the local level?”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“It’s the positive impact you have on the children’s life, their future life, and it is a labour of love. You are putting your time and effort [...] you’re hoping to get something positive out of it. And that’s the wellbeing of the children and just helping them grow and having better futures because of your work.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“My youngest had just started primary school and the opportunity came up and I thought well actually she's going to be in school for six years. If I have an opportunity to make a difference to her learning and education then why would I not have a go at it? Not necessary hers, that was my motivator clearly, but it's for everybody in the school.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Contributing to the local community, either through a sense of giving back or wanting to become more involved in the local area, including having been a pupil of the school where they govern, was another strong motivator.

“I went to the school I am a governor at and really I wanted to keep my foot in the door as to what the school was doing and what was going on. I really wanted to stay connected with my old school so I it's a slightly unconventional way of doing it. I'm very proud to have been a [student here] and it has a very dear place in my heart and it made me who I am today.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I born and raised here, lived here, but I've spent most of my time working away and I think I owe a lot of my progress so far to the good education I had. It was just a way of me giving back.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I live here, but I'm not from here and it is quite nice to have a bit of a connection to my local area rather than just flitting about and feeling like you live in alone and you never really see anybody else.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Learning about how schools and education works was important to several focus group participants. For some it was about helping their own children to navigate and get the best out of the system, while for others it was a more general love of education.

“We just moved to the area when I was pregnant with my first child and I really wanted to understand the state schools in the area.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“When I started dropping the kids off at school, I realised that I had no idea what was going on. You drop them at the gates and that's it. So, I started thinking there must be a way we can know what's behind the gates.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“It got me back into education because that was my first passion but it worked around my family life.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

In addition, the opportunity to gain skills and the value of governance experience to professional development was an important factor in joining a board.

“I moved from quite a generalised job to specific technical role. I was a bit concerned about keeping up line management, budget management, strategic stuff that I've done before, but wasn't doing in this technical role, so thought being a school governor would be a good way to go about it.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I'm definitely interested in governance and leadership [...] so if you're trying to move up, getting on a board would probably be one of the quickest ways to do that because you develop your strategic skills[...] obviously its a labour of love, but then you're developing your skills at the same time.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“Volunteering is important on your CV as well.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Moving the dial – recommendations

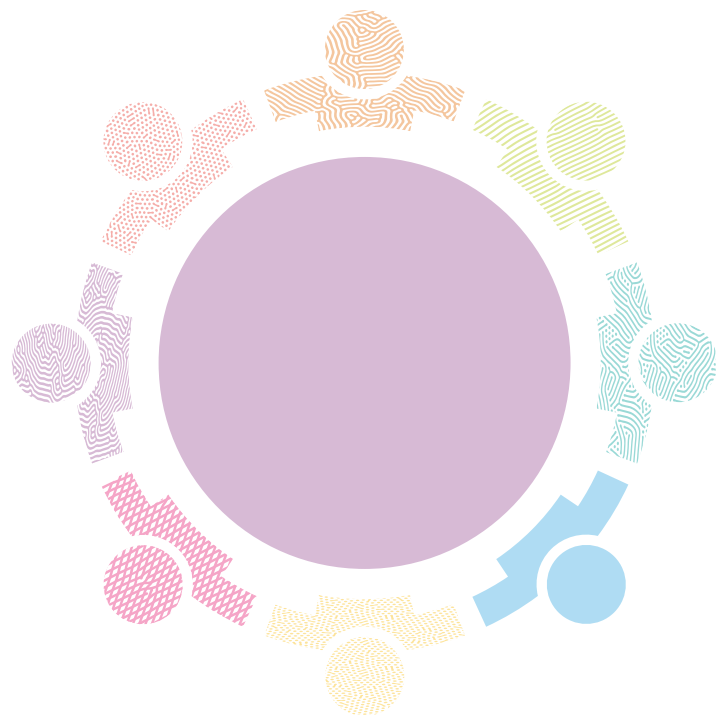
To create the necessary change within their own school/trust, boards should:

- Openly advertise all vacancies using the full range of channels available.
- Be transparent about the number of appointments made and how candidates found out about the role to build a culture of openness.
- Actively discuss and assess when candidates that have come through personal recommendation or been ‘tapped on the shoulder’ are being interviewed and appointed that this approach may be replicating underrepresentation and existing perspectives on the board.

- Capture data on who applies for roles and who is successfully selected, amending processes in response.
- Be more active in making the role of governors/trustees visible both within the school/trust as a board and as individuals through their personal and professional life.
- Provide a clear explanation of what the role entails and what support is available to those new to governance.
- Prioritise a discussion and the creation of an action plan on how to address the composition of the board.
- Understand the personal barriers that potential volunteers may be facing and consider what mechanisms they can put in place to engage and support a wider pool of potential candidates who may have caring responsibilities, jobs which do not give autonomy or the support 'to be away from work', who cannot afford childcare for evening meetings etc.
- Ensure they have an expenses policy in place and promote and encourage its use.
- Engage in training and learning to equip themselves to talk about board diversity.
- Consider how they can tap into the key motivators for volunteers when advertising roles.

To progress change across the school system the DfE should:

- Continue to make clear through its guidance and communications to boards that diversity and inclusion in the board's composition is an expectation of all schools and trusts.
- Examine the role of governors/trustees to ensure that the responsibilities and time commitment are manageable and realistic.
- Explore how it can establish a truer number of board vacancies and how many are advertised openly.





Transforming recruitment

Why recruitment needs to change

Transforming recruitment processes – how and why boards recruit – can have a significant impact on increasing the participation of underrepresented groups and increasing the diversity of thought on governing boards. Importantly, taking this approach will widen – not narrow – the pool and calibre of volunteers available.

Boards need to assess what the pathway to their board looks like from the outside and how and where people can find out about roles. A different approach to recruitment can gain a different outcome. Search where the people with the characteristics, skills and experiences the board has identified it needs can be found. Using a wide range of routes reduces the number of potential volunteers excluded from finding out about the role.

When diversity “becomes a requirement for the candidate pool, it makes for a better search” say Russell Reynolds Associates (2019) and boards “need to be creative in reaching out” to make people aware of vacancies (Lea, 2019).

“I've had some really interesting conversations in my trust board around where are we promoting and advertising these roles? Because if we're going to be seeing people we want to reach then we need to think about the different platforms that people access information from now.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

The task is not an easy one – but there are new approaches that boards can try to reach as wide a range of candidates as possible, and of course it must be acknowledged that despite best endeavours, there will be some boards that cannot attract a wider range of candidates.

When the board identifies a gap of skills, experience or perspective that it thinks it needs, it can adapt recruitment processes eg where advertised and experience sought. Elmoutawakil (2018) suggests asking “‘Who isn't here?’, ‘Why aren't they here?’ and ‘How can we get them to come?’”.

Given the number of vacancies across England – totalling an estimated 18,000 to sustain current board sizes (NGA, 2019:9), ensuring that boards are recruiting from the biggest possible pool of candidates makes sense. It means they are more likely to fill positions and will also reach a more diverse range of candidates to choose from.

Much emphasis can be put on prospective volunteers developing themselves; however Doyle (2020) says more needs to be done to consider how organisations “need to change to attract a wider range of applicants” including eliminating “barriers to selection”. Actively widening processes to seek out “people from groups who the data tell us are [underrepresented]” provides a level playing field where everyone can “be recruited... for what they can do, rather than who they are”. It is not about tilting the process in their favour (Fanshawe, 2018:21).

Recruitment methods

An average board has 11 or 12 volunteers and a quarter have one vacancy, with 33% of boards having two or more vacancies. In addition, 64% of governors and trustees say their board finds it difficult to recruit (NGA annual survey 2021).

Governors for Schools (Wirth et al, 2018) found that just under a quarter (24%) of respondents said that it took them at least a year to fill the last governor vacancy, and just under 50% said that it took them at least two terms to fill the vacancy.

Members also tell NGA through the annual membership survey they need help with promoting the role and finding more volunteers, seeing this as a barrier to diversifying. Some ask “how can any school improve the equality and diversity of its governing board if no one volunteers or you get ‘more of the same’?” or comment that there is a “small pool of volunteers and no one would like to join the board”, particularly in rural communities. Others view filling vacancies as a challenge “so don't have the luxury of considering diversity” and consider “the notion of encouraging diversity rather irrelevant”.

This mindset can result in boards recruiting whoever puts themselves forward rather than choosing the best candidates or indeed rejecting people who are not ideal candidates. Charity Excellence (n.d.b) highlight this approach “isn't usually a good idea, yet that's what very many charities still do”.

Focus group participants recognised the challenge for some boards of recruiting volunteers.

“Governing boards may go through a period where they’re almost desperate to get the numbers up, let alone being choosy about the people you want to be on the governing board. We’re not flooded with lots of volunteers. We don’t get loads of applications, we get enough and of the right calibre.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“[As a foundation governing body], I think your pool is slightly narrowed. We have been using Inspiring Governance, and we have changed the way that we recruit governors so that we’re looking at lots of different applicants, but there’s not really much diversity within the applicants that we’re getting. We have recruited new governors, but they have largely been from the same background as our current board.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

The whole board should be involved in considering approaches to diversify the board. Writing about the importance of openly advertising vacancies, specifically to increase the racial diversity of trustees, John (2021) says “all board trustees – not just chairs – must also step up and insist that open recruitment is the norm, not the exception.”

Intentional efforts

Boards must be proactive and put effort into finding a diversity of talented candidates “rather than expect people to come to you” (Oliver, 2016).

Speaking of ‘hard to reach’ communities’ implies “blame rather than acknowledging that the sector is not reaching out” (NPC and Green Park, 2018). Small (2018) adds that in recruiting “we often put the onus on those who we say are hard to engage but how often do we go to them?”. Boards should consider how they can make it as easy as possible for prospective volunteers to find out about vacancies, identify that they have the skills and attributes needed for the role and explain the development available to support people in the role.

Saying that ‘people didn’t apply’ is “the justification most often put forward” when boards receive no or few applications from the groups they are seeking to attract – a response that is “so passive it is unacceptable” (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, 2018; Sinnatt, 2020).

Rabiger (Tenpencemore, 2020) writes that “excellent recruitment practice will naturally lead to a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, styles, perspectives, opinions and so on, and that can’t possibly mean a cookie-cutter

version of the same person”. Many boards “have woken up to the importance of proactively recruiting so there’s a wider range of people, skills and talent around the board table” and “making efforts to recruit people from backgrounds which are underrepresented”, Cadman (2021) says.

Using open and formal recruitment processes

The DfE’s Governance Handbook (2020: 15) gives clear guidance to boards that governors and trustees should be “recruited through robust and transparent processes against a clear articulation of required skills”. The minister with responsibility for governance Baroness Berridge has also encouraged chairs and clerks to work together to look “at your current processes for encouraging volunteers” and prompted boards to challenge themselves on “how you can ensure that the roles are as attractive as possible to potential volunteers” (Ebbs in Governing Matters, 2021:21). This is supported by NGA’s own ‘The right people around the table’ publication which offers practical guidance on the topic.

This will help boards to signal their openness to “reach a diverse range of good candidates to assess through a competitive process so you increase the likelihood of finding the best person for the role”, according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016:7). The Parker Review Committee (2020:75) proposed several questions for consideration including ‘Are roles advertised in a way that are open, transparent and visible to all?’.

The DfE’s Governance Handbook (2020:37) also says that “in filling vacancies, boards and others responsible for nominating or appointing to the board should make use of all available channels to identify suitable people”. This includes independent recruitment services – which as previously demonstrated have a greater diversity of characteristics within their volunteers. NFER (Kettlewell, 2020:137) suggest the “increased use of recruitment services” can broaden diversity.

Generally, the principle is trying to reach as wide a field of potential applicants as possible – this applies to co-opted, parent, foundation and to some extent, staff governor/trustee posts. This should be done by understanding the audience of potential volunteers and using routes to reach them. A “reactive ‘hit and hope’ strategy” Green Park and Addaction (2019:24) says “is unlikely to yield the kind of results sought”.

Boards need to ensure their recruitment practice widens – rather than replicates – the range of perspectives and experiences held by current board members. This means advertising any volunteer vacancies using a wide range of channels, so that everyone with the potential to fulfil the role has an equal opportunity to apply. Adverts could especially target groups that are underrepresented

on boards and seek to attract people different to existing board members. This means avoiding relying on personal and/or professional connections and using methods other than word-of-mouth. An approach which relies on using these methods “significantly restricts the pool of applicants and risks ruling out good candidates” (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016:7) and could lead to some groups being “effectively excluded from the recruitment process” because they do not have the opportunity to apply.

‘Positive action’ is a voluntary step that organisations can legally take in certain circumstances to target, not favour, people with a protected characteristic that “are under-represented in an activity or type of work” to encourage them to increase participation. This includes “specifying in adverts that candidates from under-represented groups are encouraged to apply” and must be accompanied by a “fair selection process” that does not lead to “candidates from underrepresented groups being preferred over better qualified candidates”. Boards can look further into this option to address gaps in its representation (gov.uk; XpertHR.co.uk, n.d; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016).

A nuanced approach is recommended and while the ‘tap on the shoulder’ method can create homogeneity on some boards, on others, this can be a way to reach out and bring in diverse potential candidates. Some of the focus group participants had got onto their board through being approached, particularly by the school’s executive leaders as they were known as a parent who engaged with the school frequently, or as they had connections within the education sector.

“In my case, it was more to do with networking within the school network system by going to meetings.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I said yes, having not really got much of an idea about what was involved but then got really stuck in and really enjoyed it [...] I was approached by the head of the primary school about becoming a parent governor because there was a vacancy, and nobody had stood.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I didn’t even know that there was anything like school governors. [I said to the head] ‘there might be parents who want to know what’s going on and how can we contribute?’ And then she told me that there are school governors - I had no clue! So she called me and told me a bit more about that.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Others had been ‘the connection’ getting others into a governance role or were keen to recommend the role to others. Existing governors and trustees should absolutely advocate the role – and they can do this in a way where those being ‘tapped on the shoulder’ are encouraged into the role in general, rather than to a specific board. They could then be encouraged to sign up to independent recruitment services or into local authority or MAT pools, rather than to join the board their connection serves on.

“I will try and encourage all my friends and young people to join.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I definitely encourage a lot of my friends to become governors[...] people should also be encouraged to look within their networks. They should encourage other board members to look within their networks as well, because for example, one of my friends wanted to be a governor and obviously she asked me how I did it. And she’s from the same background, same age group as I am. I told her how I did it and a couple of weeks later she got an email about joining.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Making the message meaningful

Governance roles need to be advertised “in a way that’s engaging and meaningful” to the people boards want to attract (Charity Excellence, n.d.a). Agreeing that “it’s up to charities to change attitudes and reframe perceptions”, Lea (2019) quotes research that says “the mindset and framing of trusteeship as boring or dull is owned by the trustee board themselves and it is within their power to change or reframe this to be exciting, challenging and engaging.”

Some focus group participants described their success in increasing applications when they changed the wording of adverts to pare it back to the passion and a knowledge of the local community.

“We had the most applications when we created our own skills description and we basically said ‘if you can read and you can ask questions you can be a governor’ and people were like ‘oh my gosh is that it?’ And we said ‘yes, that is it’. Because ultimately, we’d love governors with HR and legal and all of these other experiences. If you have that, fantastic. But if you don’t have that, you have your story and you have your perspective and that’s just as valuable... So just taking it to its most basic practices of reading documents, asking questions, and being willing to get to know the

school. So many parents who never dreamt that they could even put themselves forward – I think we had like 30 or 40 where we normally get two.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“We'd been sending this generic thing to all parents that said, 'do you have these skills? We would love to have you on board'. And then we changed it and we were like 'the most important skill is knowledge of our local area, our school and our families' because that is really what we needed on our governing board. So that was one of the best things we did: just actually changed what we were looking for or what it said we were looking for.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“Perhaps one of the ways to get people on the board and retain them is to have more proactive recruitment of parents or other people that we feel would benefit the board but may be reluctant to come forward... to demonstrate that they would be of value on the board, and that the board and the school would support the training and information that they would need to act on the board. And I think that would bring great diversity of values and thought processes to the board.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Research shows that young people feel their “leadership skills are not being fully developed” and that they value employers who invest in their development. Young people also recognise the importance of having these skills to progress in the workplace (Deloitte, 2016:7). Focus group participants recognised that highlighting the potential to develop useful skills would appeal to some potential volunteers.

“I always say to people that getting involved in governance has been the single most beneficial thing I've ever done for myself. To improve confidence, improve skillset, to just put yourself out of your comfort zone and not in a scary or obstructive way. There's something really unique about it.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

“We need to act differently [...] we need to market the idea of growing personally, professionally and adding to your CV and development.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“The good thing about being on boards is that you get a network of people that are in different industries and you build relationships as you go along, you build rapport with people and they open up their networks.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Focus group participants were divided about whether recruitment adverts should explicitly mention that the board is seeking candidates from underrepresented groups.

“[Companies] are starting to notice that [diversity] is impacting the business and so they have to be more intentional about the language that they used to recruit because they're not getting people from diverse backgrounds on boards point blank.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“My default is not to put it in because I think you demonstrate absolutely the wrong culture by marginalising or putting one community ahead of the others. [That said] in my working life, where you want a greater diversity and you call it out, you do absolutely get more applications. And whether that's luck rather than judgment, that has been my experience because some people think 'well, it's calling out for me and I'm going to go for it'. But I think you upset more people than you [attract].”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I think it's a bit of a tick box exercise and I don't think that would make someone from any particular background definitely apply or not apply. I think it's nice to say it, but probably better not to have said it... That is not the reason I apply for a job or a role... it's entirely about the skills that you're asking for. If you meet that part of the brief, then your ethnicity should not really matter.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I think it has a negative focus. Because then it makes those people who do not fit in that category feel marginalised. I mean, I know they are the majority, but it's not nice. I just think it's creating division where there really shouldn't be [...]. If I got something that said, we're looking for ethnic minorities or something to that effect, I'd be quite offended... Say, 'we have a school that is culturally diverse. It would be nice to get together and have different ideas. So we would love to hear what you have to say'. I believe people would be more willing to respond.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

What works in attracting volunteers

Participants told us how they got into their governance role, giving useful insight for recruiting boards. Parent governors shared a variety of experience of being elected from being the only candidate or being sought out to stand because no one else had, to carefully making moves to build up support to win an election or at the other end of the scale losing elections and being reluctant to stand again.

“I had tried to become a governor before, but there was a parent that was more well known around the playground and they got it. And then I didn't try again. At that point, I thought it wasn't for people like me.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Governors for Schools and Inspiring Governance were mentioned as routes for co-opted governors/trustees – described by participants as matching services – that put them in touch with schools before they met the head and chair.

“It was specifically looking for young governors and also they had a specific [campaign] on getting ethnic minorities in as well and had some statistics about the numbers that were over 40 and I thought why and I thought, OK, well that's really interesting there's a niche or a gap I can fill here.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

The role of employers and those involved in supporting professional development in both promoting and supporting volunteers to govern was identified as a way to reach more people.

“I really wanted to do something beyond [my very technical corporate role], and so [my director] encouraged me to find a board role outside of my day job.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I'd never considered being on a board until one of my mentors pushed me to consider leadership. I thought that you had to be really smart or way older. And she just said 'no all boards should be diverse'.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“It can be counted as part of your personal development. Some of this is about employers being aware of the benefits of what being a governor can bring into the organisation.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“Especially for younger people, if they realised that this voluntary role would be really valuable on their CV for a job, maybe you'd get a lot more people involved in things like that. [...] So maybe it's on employers to say 'we look for this kind of thing. [Experience gained through governing] is great for us because it shows X, Y and Z skills. Go and get this and [we'll be] interested in you'”.

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Some focus groups participants had actively sought out roles by contacting the school/trust directly, but noted frustrations in the process. There was a tension between boards advertising for volunteers then not replying quickly to interest, as well as general frustration with a slow process.

“I approached them. I couldn't actually get hold of anyone and then I got in touch with someone who I knew at the school and I managed to get in front of the headteacher and they bit my arm off. It was all a bit awkward and I felt a bit like I was being a nuisance.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I approached my school, I just said 'I'm interested, let me know when you have a vacancy'. It was about two years before they got back in touch. He said 'somebody's just finished their term if you're still interested, please email us back'.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I know that they're getting better, but even where we've used [Governors for Schools or Inspiring Governance] there isn't always the efficiency that people expect, especially given someone is offering their time to you for free. There just isn't that 'this is what happens', 'this is what comes next' so I think that can serve as a barrier.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Selecting the candidates

Recruiting to increase participation goes beyond how and where the vacancy is promoted and through the whole process including interviewing and appointing. Boards should be recruiting for what volunteers can bring additionally to the group of people around the table, not trying to fit volunteers into a mould of what already exists – a cultural add rather than a cultural fit (Obubo in Harrington, 2020).

“[On my board there is a feeling of] 'if we get someone different then we're going to have to teach them everything and they're going to want to work in a

different way, and it's going to be loads of extra effort'. [...] Seeing increasing their diversity as a burden that needs to be managed rather than a bonus to get lots of new and interesting viewpoints on the school and people asking questions they haven't asked before."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

The notion of the 'best' person for the role is subjective to the individuals doing the appointing. Boards need to consider how they remove bias from choosing candidates to enable "the appointment of truly the best people, rather than just the ones who appeal to our preferences" (Fanshawe, 2018:11). It should be recognised that "we all operate on [preferences] without being conscious of them and so we all need help to make better choices" and this can lead to the unintentional exclusion of people with certain characteristics (ibid, 27). Therefore, to appoint the best person for the job processes need to be redesigned to "eliminate as much noise from our own biases and preferences as possible so we really can appoint 'the best'" (ibid). Boards should seek training and further learning on how to do this, but this could include removing personal details from the application process, 'controlling' tendencies to choose people 'like us' by giving a 'likeability score', and formalising the interview process (Knight, 2017). If the focus really was on merit and talent, boards, support organisations and policy makers must ask themselves why some groups are still so significantly underrepresented.

An example from a focus group participant shows how bias may occur in the recruitment process:

"A very good friend of mine applied through one of these portals, got rejected from every single one, didn't even get an initial contact. Both of my schools happen to have vacancies, so I said 'why don't you apply to my schools' ... she applied for both and she got both positions. But that's because I referred her to the board... because I put in a personal recommendation, they looked at her properly, but it shouldn't have needed me to put a personal recommendation in."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Rabiger (Tenpencemore, 2020) concurs that "while we must always recruit the best person for the job, in doing so we are often blind to our own inherently biased perception of what that person looks and sounds like, what background and experience they should have had, and rule out the best person not for lack of skills and experience, but for other, more insidious reasons that are masked by seemingly innocent statements like 'team fit' or 'team culture'."

Having one applicant with an underrepresented characteristic is not necessarily enough to make a sustainable change. Williams and Mihaylo (2019) cite research that showed "the odds of hiring a woman are 79 times as great if at least two women are in the finalist pool, while the odds of hiring a non-white candidate are 194 times as great with at least two finalist minority applicants".

Parker (2017:74,75) suggests that data from recruitment processes should be analysed to identify where people with different characteristics 'drop out' of the process – for example not winning elections – and suggests other approaches including "name-blind" recruitment, boards having "the necessary support and training to mitigate bias" and considering if the people conducting the interviews themselves bring diversity.

In addition to recruitment, participants spoke about the importance of a good interview as part of their recruitment process in them deciding to take on the role.

"I didn't want to join something which I didn't have any clue about and [the head] said that I was the first one who had ever approached her to ask what the role was before putting themselves forward."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"I wanted to see the school and make a decision about whether I liked it, liked the headteacher, the board, because you don't want to go into that commitment and feel like the outcast. It was almost a sense of desperation: we just want to fill the space. So saying 'no, can I visit first' was important to me."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"It was a case of is this the right fit for them but also is this the right fit for me. Neither the conversation with the chair nor with the headteacher was like a job interview... for them it was a case of 'we need somebody with strategy, you fit'. And for me it was like I can see me getting really involved here."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Moving the dial – recommendations

To create the necessary change within their own school/trust, boards should:

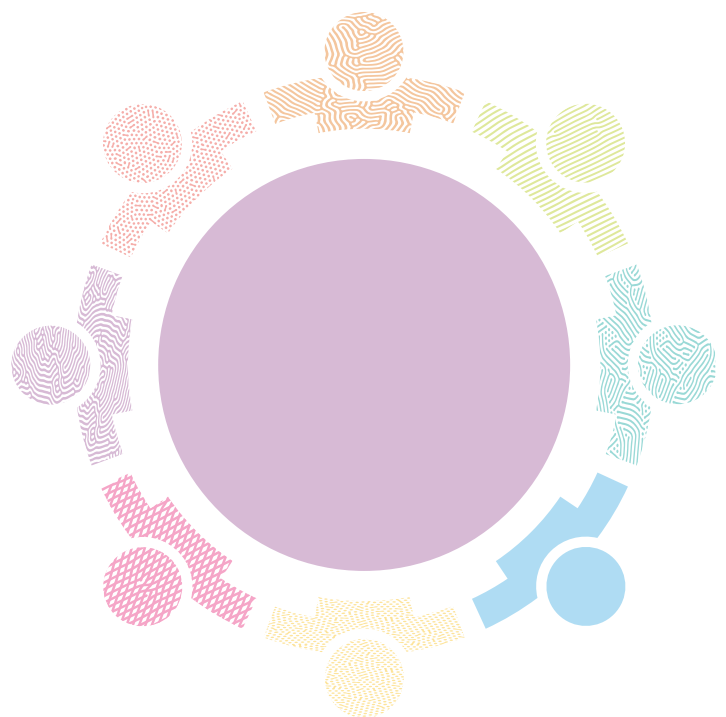
- Ensure that vacancies are promoted openly using the most appropriate routes to reach the particular group of people they want to attract – for co-opted, parent elected and staff elected roles.

Transforming recruitment

- Be intentional in their recruitment practices, exploring and evaluating options and outcomes.
- Continue to work with a range of employers and community groups to spread the word about governance and expand the understanding of local people so they consider taking up a role.
- Identify where there may be barriers in their recruitment process and how these can be overcome.
- Be aware of the processes in place should someone contact the school/trust about joining the board and reply quickly if apply to capitalise on interest.
- Ensure candidates are interviewed and that interviews are as fair as possible.

To progress change across the school system the DfE should:

- Create and fund a national recruitment campaign for volunteers setting out the role, commitments and benefits.
- Strengthen the language in the Governance Handbook on advertising all vacancies openly to ensure equality of opportunity.
- Consider what levers it can use to reinforce the expectation of board diversity including through ESFA monitoring and letters.
- Commission a national collection of data on how volunteers became aware of the role and whether they were interviewed.
- Strengthen how it advocates for and makes governance high-profile and visible within the school system.



Creating an inclusive culture

The importance of inclusion

Inclusion so that all volunteers can participate and contribute to decision-making fully is critical. Recruiting onto the board is one thing: the board must also be ready to accept people with backgrounds and experience different to their own, so that they can retain and make the most of what volunteers have to offer.

"Looking inwards before looking outwards" to ensure that the board is a place where everyone – not just certain people – can thrive (Rabiger, 2020) should be an ongoing task for boards – not just at the point of welcoming a new governor or trustee. An inclusive culture on the board will shine through into other areas of the school/trust and will form an environment that volunteers want to join and are also less likely to want to leave. That will mean reviewing and potentially changing board composition and practice.

"I think that if the board ensures that everybody's voice is heard and everybody feels that they are making a valuable contribution then there's more chance of them sticking around."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"I think there is a difference between the board having a good mix of people represented versus those people feeling able to contribute."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"There's no point trying to encourage people to apply and then making them feel like they aren't valued."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Diversity is "only effective and sustainable if the board works to be inclusive" and if all volunteers are "welcomed, valued and able to contribute" according to The Charity Governance Code (n.d.). Everyone needs an equal voice which may include encouraging and welcoming contrasting views. It can be easier to hear from the majority "but it can take more effort to give others the floor, listen and then amplify their voices", Cadman, (2021) recognises. This is "because so often we inadvertently pay less attention to those with different characteristics and lived experiences than our own" (ibid).

The frequent division of boards into a "core" where volunteers speak and do 'more of the work' than those on the "periphery" was noted by Young (2016:8). The core "tends to be even less

representative of the demographics of the local population" while peripheral governors "included middle and working-class governors and white and minority ethnic governors but were disproportionately... parent governors". This trend was recognised by some focus group participants, while others had themselves become more of the 'core' then sought to change the board's practice:

"It does seem like they don't really pass the work out that much, and that's something that would be better because I'm sure me and others on the board would prefer to have something to do a bit more on sort of day-to-day."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 4

"There was never anyone volunteering [for additional roles] so I would do it... You can get this centre of gravity of a few governors doing a lot, sharing a lot of the burden. They would take these chairs actions that would leave the rest of us [in the dark]... So, I created a much more empowered culture for all governors to recognise that we are all equal. I'm no more governor than any of you and on that basis we have an equal responsibility and an equal opportunity to learn about the school, to use our talent, to use our time."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Establishing an inclusive environment where volunteers all have the same responsibilities and influence will enable everyone "to contribute to their maximum potential". Where volunteers do not feel they can contribute because they have not "been actively engaged or supported" it is "tokenism, even if we don't mean it" (Fanshawe, 2018; Charity Excellence (n.d); Lea (2019).

Moving beyond considering "who we are", boards should be asking "how we are" and respond to how people feel about the board culture and environment, as well as being aware of the collective behaviour of the board (Dawes, 2019; The Unmistakables, 2021; Warmington, 2018). Building an inclusive culture could include examining "whether policies and practices are underpinned by principles that actively celebrate and encourage difference" and changing meeting norms "for difference to be valued, encouraged and expressed in positive terms" (CIPD, 2021; Young, 2016).

The picture of inclusion on boards

Overall, the picture of inclusion on boards seems fairly positive – but both governors and trustees from ethnic minority backgrounds and young volunteers were less likely to feel that their opinion is valued or that they are invited equally to contribute to the board's discussions. Respondents to the annual governance survey strongly agreed that their opinion was valued by their board (70%), that they are invited to participate in board discussions equally to others (70%) and that they felt able to express a contrary opinion without the fear of negative consequences (65%).

White volunteers were more likely to strongly agree that:

- their opinion is valued by their board (71%) than Asian (55%), mixed groups (58%) or Black (50%) volunteers
- they feel invited to participate in board discussions equally to others (70%) than Asian (69%), mixed groups (58%) or Black (55%) volunteers
- they feel able to express a contrary opinion without the fear of negative consequences (66%) than Asian (48%), mixed groups (55%) or Black (39%) volunteers.

Volunteers from most ethnic minorities are more likely to strongly agree that being a governor or trustee is important to the way they think about themselves compared to white volunteers. 40% of white volunteers strongly agreed that 'being a governor/trustee is important to the way I think of myself as a person' compared to 42% for mixed or multiple ethnic volunteers, and 52% for Asian volunteers. Black volunteers differ in that only 20% of volunteers strongly agree, with most (56%) somewhat agreeing.

Feelings of inclusion were higher among governors aged over 40 compared to young governors (aged under 40). Young governors and trustees were less likely to:

- Feel invited to participate in board discussions equally to others (57% compared to 71% of over 40s)
- Feel able to express contrary opinion without fear of consequences (47% compared to 67% of over 40s)
- Feel their opinion is valued by their board when offered (53% compared to 71% of over 40s).

'Belonging' gives people a sense of connection, acceptance and inclusion, and feeling that they belong increases an individual's performance and engagement (Cornell University, n.d.). Overall 66% of respondents strongly agreed that they feel like they belong on their governing board. A sense of belonging was closely aligned to the age of respondents with 36% of 18 to 29 year olds and 46% of 30 to 39 year olds strongly agreeing compared to 78% of 70 to 79 year olds and 86% of the over

80s. White respondents were the most likely to strongly agree that they 'belong' on their board (67%) followed by Asian respondents (56%), respondents from mixed/multiple groups (48%), and Black respondents (39%).

Focus group participants mentioned how they had felt valued on the board because they had experienced inclusive behaviours, but also pointed out that whether governance itself is valued within the school/trust can vary.

"I found that they were very welcoming in terms of wanting me there, wanted to hear my expertise, wanted to hear my opinion."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"It's good because the board comes together, we respect each other and we allow each other to speak our minds and we listen, we sit back and we really listen and then we have a discussion."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"There is an openness and acceptance of different points of view."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"[It's] being part of that school community and knowing what's going on and being part of those decisions, it is quite empowering, especially for a young person to be heard, to be listened to."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"We look at skillsets and where people can make the best contribution. I think there is genuine value placed on the governors by the headteacher, rather than it just being a meeting that she has to attend with a group of people that she has to engage with. The input that we've all been asked for is quite promising."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"I certainly feel valued by the governing body. I think there's still a big challenge for us around governance being valued by the school leadership team which is a difficult thing to tackle. And there's an education piece, ironically, for the headteacher in particular to learn what governance is... I think governance has a way to go in our school in being valued."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

What not being inclusive can look like

Feeling unwelcome

Focus group participants described how not feeling included had manifested for them. They shared the effect of being made to feel unwelcome both within their own board meetings and in undertaking other aspects of their governance role such as training.

“It was a chair’s introduction and it was me and loads of retired old men in the room. And then [I heard] ‘you don’t look old enough to be here’ from the person doing the training. I was like ‘thanks, brilliant, I feel really good now’. That was not the only one either. I think sometimes when you go to these big training events or governance briefings and things, I think you feel even more like the odd one out. It’s nothing that bothers me in terms of my governing board. But I think when it comes to these wider things, it becomes more of an issue.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“[The board is] very appreciative of the kind of skills and knowledge and expertise that I brought to the table so I didn’t feel it there. Where I did feel it though was when I would attend training sessions at the borough, not necessarily from borough personnel, but from the looks you get when you walk into a training session, and you happen to be the only Black female and most of the time it is old white men. You walk in and they look at you confused, kind of with frowns on their faces almost ‘what are you doing here? perhaps you’ve got the wrong room’.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Meeting practice

Volunteering – and particularly formal board meetings – can take place in spaces that are “unfamiliar, alienating or non-inclusive” (Southby and South, 2016:25) to people from underrepresented groups.

Meetings can “often run along very traditional lines which suit the majority and the established structures” (NPC and Green Park, 2018:20) such as an overly formal way of talking, a sense of being short of times, set agendas and minutes that do not record conflict, which can limit opportunities to speak and suggest that debate should not happen (Young, 2016:19). Focus group participants had experienced this on their own board.

“I constantly feel inhibited about challenging or commenting through lack of time. I’ve always wondered ‘should I say this’ because they want to race on and get [proceedings] done.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“[My lack of confidence] may have been overcome by [being invited to share my perspective] ... But it was more about ‘let’s get through this meeting in two hours’.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

“In terms of the process and the way things work I’m so baffled by it. You can ask some questions and that is great but there doesn’t seem to be the room to open up or move on to a new topic of discussion or put something on the agenda.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“There’s a difference between actual challenge and performative challenge of ‘we are going to ask you the challenging questions, so the minutes record that challenge was provided, but we’re not actually going to ask you any questions that we don’t know that you know the answer to or that you’re not expecting’.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Lack of access to support

A lack of access to impartial and free information was raised by focus group participants as a barrier to them both navigating and gaining confidence in their role. “Access to informal support” is recognised as a barrier to participation by Ellis (2003:5).

“It’s so much easier to try and bring something to the board if you’ve been able to look it up and if there is guidance you can access you can be a bit surer of the point you’re raising. Anything that allows individuals to access independent advice that isn’t reliant on going to the chair and getting them to do it for your board I think is really helpful. Anything that relies on [going through a central person] is a barrier to individuals trying to contribute or trying to get more confidence in what they might want to contribute.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“One of the things I find hardest about governing is not being able to get any [free] independent advice [...] so I feel much happier now that I have a group of friends who are governors that I can occasionally ring up and ask, ‘this has come up on our governing board I really don’t know how to handle it’. When I was a young governor, this was a challenge and I was very isolated.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Poor board dynamics

Many participants had observed and experienced poor board dynamics and commented on how this was exhibited on their board, from a lack of challenge and contribution from other governors and trustees to the impact that the head's relationship with the board can have. Poor dynamics can contribute to an environment where volunteers are not getting the experience they expected or where they feel unable to make a difference meaning that boards are not getting the most out of the talents they have to offer. They also shared the impact of this practice on their feelings towards their role.

"I was a little bit underwhelmed when I joined my school. The chair and the headteacher have been there for a very long time and were really experienced and the first meeting I went to, I was really struck by the fact that governors hardly spoke. It was mostly the head giving presentations and updates and the chair just moved through the agenda. There wasn't very much challenge. It doesn't seem like there's much chance for any governors to be leading or discussing."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"[Our acting head doesn't welcome challenge and input so] I feel frankly I'm giving more effort than it is worth... I thought that governing would give me the feeling [of making a difference] but I often feel that we are a talking shop and a rubber-stamping body and that if we wanted to change anything we couldn't. Part of me feels like I should try and move to a different school because I have got skills and experience that I can offer [and because of the difference in what I want as a governor and what the school wants from governors] it's just a waste of everybody's time here."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"[As a staff governor] at first I was quite disappointed to be perfectly honest with the lack of the community governors having a real understanding of what goes on in school [...] and meetings [were led by the headteacher] and everyone would just agree and there was no questions. I asked questions but as a staff governor it was difficult because [the headteacher] was right most of the time and I did have that understanding, but I was just willing for somebody from outside to look and go, 'is this right? Are there other ways of doing things?' [...] But our new headteacher seems keen for the governors to understand what is going on and encourages challenge. And then questions were

coming, it just seemed much more of a conversation and it seemed really positive and I thought yes, this is how it should be."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"There have been times when it was really difficult, we had a headstrong head who was running the board, who had their own candidate put up as chair, who got through and the dynamics were wrong at that time. I and few others weren't comfortable enough to speak our minds to say, this is wrong. We did, but then it became really fraught with tension, and so... I think it depends on who's on the board, who's the chair, how good a head is, what is the relationship between the head and the board? What is the relationship between the board members themselves? It can get really hair-raisingly scary at times."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"In my experience the biggest barrier to the group dynamics is people sitting on the board for far too long, deciding their way or the highway and that's the end of it. Forgetting that you're supposed to be a critical friend of the headteacher, stifling any dissent, any negative responses to anything. It's either support or get out[...] The longer you stay within the group the more it becomes stuck in its ways and the more it doesn't refresh itself, the more the thoughts stay stale. And also you then get very dysfunctional relationships where you sit on the inside of the school and the relationship becomes very dodgy."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"There were some very vocal people on the governing board that had been there for a long time; there was a big change where the chair stepped down and a few people kind of went with her in support. That was probably one of the best things that could have happened because it just it was becoming a board that was led by a few people that had been there a long time and that did know a lot about the school but I think not ideal [in terms of dynamic]."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Creating confidence and impact

Gaining confidence

“Context” (eg a subject matter where the governor has prior knowledge) and “relationships” (such as knowing others on the board), as well as “individual attributes” are significant factors affecting the confidence of volunteers. A lack of confidence can also be “a symptom of a lack of clarity about their role” (Young, 2016:12,13).

56% of governors and trustees responding to the annual governance survey strongly agreed that they felt confident in their role with a further 36% agreeing. White volunteers were most likely to strongly agree that they felt confident in their role (57%) compared to 50% of Asian volunteers, 45% volunteers from mixed groups and 39% of Black volunteers. Only 28% of young governors/trustees felt confident in their ability compared to 58% of those aged over 40.

Growing confidence in the role – to ask the right questions, give appropriate challenge and to speak up – were cited particularly by younger governors in the focus groups as hurdles they had to overcome to take part. Some commented on how their confidence had grown with time.

“I know what I do inside out, and I’m very confident in that arena then to go and put myself in this arena to understand a whole new profession and a whole new setting. I was a bit of a rabbit in headlights when I first got in there. It was mesmerising because you could see the passion and the knowledge and the expertise of these people.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“What value could I add? That concern about would I just be sat there, watching others discuss things and not able to offer anything. I haven’t been a governor for long but the meetings I have sat on you soon find out that you know you can add value.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“[Young me] was absolutely petrified of saying anything in governing body meetings, of saying anything remotely controversial. I was quite happy to sit there and go ‘oh if you need a hand with this I’ve got that skillset’. But when it came to challenge [I found it] really difficult. I found it very hard to get over that barrier of feeling like I’m going to say something stupid or I’m going to ask a question that doesn’t sound strategic or doesn’t feel like it’s either supportive or challenging.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“It took a good length of time to get into the swing of things and feel confident to make any sort of meaningful contribution. I did a lot of smiling and nodding. But [eventually] I felt more at ease and got into it a bit more. Certainly I didn’t feel like anybody so put their arm around me and explained what was going on particularly well. So yeah, definitely overwhelmed to start with.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

The option to ask questions in advance was suggested by focus group participants as a way governors/trustees had been able to feel more confident and how this could create a more accessible environment while recognising that ensuring that questions in advance do not reduce discussion in the meeting is important.

“We moved onto a portal where we would submit questions in advance to help with some of that conversation [...] what I’ve heard from new governors that have joined our board since is that they really welcome that because they can see before the meeting the types of questions that other more experienced governors have asked, which then instilled their confidence to ask and challenge a little bit more.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“We do invite questions and some of our [new governors] email in advance. Certainly, when I chair my committee I’ve made sure that those questions are not answered before the meeting. Because it does become very scripted, and we need that challenge in the meeting... But I do think it works well although it has its limitations. So it’s trying to strike that balance, but I certainly think it’s vitally important to open up that challenge to more people.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“In the right environment it can be a really good mechanism for helping people who don’t feel that confident in expressing their voice to find their confidence, because then you can say ‘so and so raised this question in advance, a really good question and I’m going to address it now before we open the floor to the rest of the board’.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

In contrast, some participants had felt confident right away in their role and had described a responsibility of being in the room to speak up.

“I’ve never felt shy about raising a point if I thought it was something worth raising, I would always raise it.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I didn't feel particularly intimidated... I've got loads of questions, so I'm going to ask them and I'm quite confident in general just with doing that. Certainly, I felt like I could say things and I also felt like it was my duty to say things because it didn't seem like anyone else would.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I'm a fairly confident person and once I knew what governance was... I thought this is something I can give a go.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Boards using an 'associate' governor model both to ease volunteers into the role and to offer candidates who show interest a way to be involved was another option suggested.

“I really like the idea of associate governors because I think it gives people a toe in the water without having to fully dive in into the unknown. So, if they can come in and support a specific aspect whether that's on a committee or specific role, then it's sort of just easing people in a bit.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“We have appointed one [volunteer] as an associate member because we didn't have enough roles, but we wanted to make sure that we didn't lose the good people that had said they were interested, so that's quite a good tactic we found.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Induction

High-quality induction and ongoing training for all governors and trustees, regardless of their role, is crucial in raising the effectiveness of governance and giving volunteers a confident start to their role. 94% of respondents to NGA's annual survey 2021 agreed that relevant high-quality induction training should be mandatory for new governors and trustees, a figure that has remained consistent across the eleven years of the annual school governance survey. When first asked in 2011, 90% agreed.

A good induction can help governors and trustees to “find a way” in what may be an unfamiliar environment – of the expectations of being a board member, how to behave and what to do – experiences which may be assumed to be known because the board environment is the domain of “white, middle class, professional people” who largely make up boards (Rabiger in Tenpencemore, 2016).

A poor, inaccessible or absent induction characterised the experience of many of our participants.

“As a staff governor I think it was just expected ‘oh you'll be fine’ you know what's going on and this is just another part of what you do. It was never offered to me - any kind of induction or support. I was just given a bundle of paperwork and dates of meetings.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I haven't had much of an induction... a lot of it has been me keeping an eye out for it myself and signing up for it myself and being active in that. In terms of the school, they've not really had an introductory meeting explaining the score beyond what the most pressing issue was.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“My initial experience of induction was quite patchy I would say, it wasn't because it wasn't available, it was because I couldn't access it because of my interesting life ‘things’ going on, children and babies and so on”.

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I wrote this written summary statement about why I want to be a parent governor for the application, and then I just got an email saying ‘congratulations you've been voted on the board, you'll hear from our clerk’ and the clerk sends reams of paper through. You get these massive handbooks dumped on your doorstep and then it was the first meeting.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

One participant who has since become a chair is ensuring that all new volunteers on their board get a good experience.

“I knew that my experience hadn't been good and I wanted to make sure people didn't come in and just think ‘I have no idea what's going on, this is just daunting and so overwhelming, and I just don't know what's going on and I don't want to do this. It feels too hard on my own time’. So, the first thing I did was write an induction pack. I've had three governors who have started who have gone through that induction pack and have found it really useful because it's just broken things down... There's an induction programme for new governors and a buddy system, and it just feels a lot healthier and sustainable for whoever comes in after me, and I've been very conscious of doing that because I don't want anybody to have the same experience that I

had. I think it's worked really well and the feedback that I've had from the governors who views the induction pack has been really positive.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Once participants had received an induction, even if it was belated, they noted the benefits.

“I feel more empowered now, I understand the different bits because prior to that, I've sat in on two or three meetings where I have no clue what they were talking about. So, it was good to get that proper induction. I know it's still going to be a steep learning curve, but at least I feel super empowered right now.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“We always have this one-to-one [with the chair] because it's one thing to meet people in a full governing body or even a committee meeting. It's a whole different conversation where you can explore [where the school needs to improve and the dynamic of the board]. It's just nice to know that because then you work better as a full group. So that's something now that we've introduced into our induction process.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Buddying

Offering a buddy/mentor for new volunteers can provide reassurance and a clear point of contact. It was mentioned particularly by young focus group participants as one way to improve their induction – either because they had experienced and benefitted from it, or it had been absent and they would have valued it. A sense of structure and getting the right person involved were given as key components to make buddying work well.

“I was informally asked ‘would you like somebody to mentor you?’ I said yes and I would like regular meetings with them to know that I'm doing OK and I'm making a difference and quite a lot of patting on the head and support because I felt completely out of my depth and overwhelmed... I absolutely think buddying and mentoring is the way forward to support new people who otherwise can feel quite threatened by coming into a governing environment. But you have to pick the people with the right temperament and availability to be a buddy or mentor. [The person assigned as my buddy was really busy] and didn't have time for a needy new governor.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“It was really lovely to have a buddy that wasn't the chair, that was someone who had come in more recently. So it was almost, you're new in, so you can then buddy the next [new recruit] because you can remember that experience.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“We didn't have any buddy system, but I think it would have been useful to have someone who wasn't so busy as the chair but who had been there for a while to just talk you through, this is how things work, this is who everyone is.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“It's useful to map out the typical expectations [of the role and development routes] so that it reassures that voice in your head that says, ‘am I doing the right thing? am I helping, or am I just being an inconvenience asking all these questions?’ I think a buddy from another school or your own board can be quite handy.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Power of leaders

Research demonstrates the “power of a leader's shadow” – the impact that leaders – chairs and executive leaders – can make on inclusion (Bourke, 2018). Leaders who demonstrate inclusive behaviours make people feel “highly included” with an “even stronger [effect] for minority group members”. The research shows this results in “an increase in perceived team performance, decision-making quality and collaboration” (ibid). Chairing “in a more facilitative manner might make meetings more inclusive, deliberative and creative”, Young adds (2016:13).

The impact of board leaders on growing volunteers' confidence and creating an inclusive environment through inviting contributions and offering feedback was calibrated by some of our participants.

“The chair made a point of trying to involve me in their discussions, so you always had a chance to contribute and I dare say looking back, they weren't exactly insightful contributions, but at least the opportunity was there and welcomed into the discussion.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“They went out of their way to get my feedback and my ideas on what would work. I was able to contribute and it became quite clear that everyone's skills were taken into account and it didn't have to be based on their education.... I think it's really quite important just how

much effort they put into getting people's contributions so that they can run the school as best as possible... It's only been a few months that I've been on the board, but they are quite welcoming especially the chair, he goes out of his way to include everybody and says 'so and so do you have anything to add to that?'. He makes sure that the parent governors are pulled into the discussions. So that is quite brilliant. I've had a good experience."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"[The chair] really does try and pull me out a little bit, and when we are meeting one to one, I think that's when I really knew that he really wanted to hear from me a bit more. So it encouraged me and so he still continues to push me to speak up because he probably is aware that I am slightly shy. And then, for example, if I make a contribution he would say 'oh you contributed this and that was really good' and so it really encourages me to contribute as well. I'm learning though, I'm learning everyday".

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"Superb board, excellent chair, excellent clerk. Between them they ensure that everybody is contributing and it doesn't feel like you're picking people out to contribute. It feels very natural and I can only put that down to a very good team and it's a diverse and inclusive group."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"The head and the chair both draw challenge from the right people at the right time and that does add to your confidence because you're being invited to challenge on areas. Somebody has said 'come on, this is you, this is what you are here for'. It does build you up a little bit and give you that confidence to challenge."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"The headteacher's wonderful in terms of showing appreciation for questions. It's always nice when you ask a question and then it leads onto further conversations because you do feel like you're adding to the conversation."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

"[I'm] very confident about being able to express my views and make constructive challenges. But we've got a board which encourages that, we've got a headteacher that encourages that. So that's really our

culture. I just know if I've got something to say that's worthwhile I'll say it, if everything is running smoothly and I've got nothing to add, then keep quiet, let things run and I've got that confidence. But I just need to make sure that everyone else is feeling that."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

As chair, one participant recognised their role in creating this environment:

"I'd hope to be able to create an atmosphere where everybody is able to speak up."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Making a difference

Ultimately volunteers want to make a difference. Focus group participants talked about both the sense of feeling like they were doing so and the time it can take to feel that way. Connecting the contribution of individuals to the impact on pupils, staff and communities can help volunteers feel engaged and that their input is worthwhile and valued.

"It's whether or not those things are making a real impact or whether I'm just a body in a room who's helping the school tick a statutory obligation off the list, [filling a role]. Whether or not the contribution is actually helping the strategic direction at the school I'm less convinced about."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"My expectations were well off from the reality of school governance. I thought that it would be this really directed role I go in and be told 'we need you to do X, Y and Z'. I spent quite a bit of time initially being passive, feeling like I was just listening and not able to contribute. That knowledge takes a really long time and I think you can get to that point where you can start to make a difference... and it definitely took a while to feel like I was actually doing anything there."

Participant in focus group - volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"I thought that very quickly you'd be able to feel like you're making a tangible difference, and you could see the impact you were having. And both of those things were shattered slightly... of course governors make decisions, but a lot of what they do is about monitoring and challenge and quality assurance... I do feel now, like I make a difference and I provide something. If you're not used to governance [it might not necessarily feel like] you are making a difference."

But hopefully to the people you're challenging and providing constructive feedback to it is making a difference to how they think about things. But that took two and a half years to feel like I understand what's going on and the contributions, the challenge and the monitoring reports I provided had any significant impact on the students, which was really disheartening at first."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Some focus group participants were clear about the impact they felt able to make in the role, and what that meant to both them and others. The feeling of making a difference created a strong commitment to being a governor or trustee.

"I love it. I feel like I'm making a difference, yet I enjoy it."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"I find it a very valuable experience [...] and it's obviously a very effective contribution."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"I think senior leadership teams and headteachers really do appreciate the input, the efforts, the expertise, the support that we provide to them. I attend assemblies and I do learning walks and stuff like that and staff would be calling out my name. They genuinely were pleased to see me walking the corridors and being engaged in activities when they had school fairs and things like that."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"I am dedicated for the rest of my life, I will try and be a school governor as much as I physically can, I really enjoy it. It's satisfaction, mutual satisfaction and I will try and encourage all my friends and young people to join."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

"I don't want it to be a flash in the pan or tick in the box or how [great it looks for the] CV. I feel that I really want to spend some time and see what I could help with the school. To me, it's ambition."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"I definitely want to leave a lasting change in some form, which is something I'm aiming for."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

Retention

No one continues to volunteer if their efforts are not having any effect. Ultimately, a better experience with a board encourages governors and trustees to remain:

"If it's collaborative and engaging and you feel like you're making a difference and you're being involved, you're more likely to want to stay and support."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"If people don't feel they are listened to they won't stay on the board."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

When a new governor or trustee joins a board, retaining them for a full term or two is important. If they leave rapidly, it allows little room for strong relationships to form and effective governance to develop. Green Park and Addaction (2019:6) agree that boards "must work to create the culture in which people can be themselves and be developed so that the talent you have worked so hard to attract can be retained and add value to your strategy, progress and impact." Of course, in some cases, personal factors such as changing location or job may impact on term or office, but creating an environment that people want to stay in is valuable too.

Attitudes and barriers to retention

Asked whether they were going to resign or considering resigning from their position in the coming year, 72% of respondents to the annual governance survey said no. Of those who said yes, the reasons for doing so were varied. 6% said they do not have adequate time to give to the role, 4% had a change in circumstances and 3% felt the board was ineffective. A wide range of comments covered other reasons for stepping down from age considerations, length of service and the need for 'fresh blood' to feeling that their contribution has little impact, perceived poor board practice or feeling that the board has little genuine purpose. Several comments also mentioned that although they are resigning from their current role due to having completed two terms of office, they would look to move on to another school/trust.

Of those who planned to continue governing, 74% strongly agreed that their opinion is valued by the governing board compared to 59% of those considering resigning; 73% felt invited to participate in board discussions equally to others compared to 62% of those thinking of resigning; and 58% felt

confident in their ability as a governor/trustee compared to 51% of those thinking of resigning. This demonstrates a strong correlation between volunteers feeling included and confident and them wanting to stay on in their role.

Young governors and trustees were less likely to be considering resigning with 82% of under 30s and 76% of 30s to 40s saying they were not thinking about it compared to 71% of over 40s. There is no variation across ethnic groups of having considered resigning.

Factors that make governors feel valued and want to stay in post are: being welcomed and accepted by the headteacher (84% of respondents), being welcomed and accepted by fellow governors (70% of respondents) and being invited to use their skills (63% respondents) (Adams and Punter, 2008; Punter et al, 2007; Punter and Adams 2008a; 2008b).

A connection to the school or trust was crucial for some in their motivation to stay on, while others were keen to share their experience with other boards. As found in James et al (2010, 2011), some governors in our focus groups wanted to remain on a board to see their children through their time at that school and when the child(ren) left it could leave little motivation to remain:

“I’d potentially do another term of office and then my kids would be getting near to secondary school age; that will be challenging whether we’re still living near here, whether they end up going to a different school or whatever. So, I think that might be the point for me to step away.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“My term finishes in June and I have said all the way through I will step down at that point. I will step down as chair. I will step down from the board. My youngest daughter leaves the school this summer, so it feels like the right time.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

A dysfunctional board dynamic and the behaviour of other individuals can be a barrier to retention. James et al (2010:37) describe “rogue governors” (those who are perceived to act in a disruptive manner) who can hamper an otherwise normally functioning governing board. While this occurrence has been identified by focus group participants, factors of board culture – beyond a governor/trustee ‘behaving badly’ – should be considered such as whether the chair is facilitating well, whether challenge is being seen as disruption (especially where

a board has a diversity of thought but does not understand the importance of challenge, or there is ‘groupthink’ being pushed against) and whether satisfactory training has been provided for the volunteer to know the boundaries of their role.

“I’ve had one member of the board who has been thoroughly unpleasant and has effectively bullied me all the way through. I just have to get away from it because it’s just not doing me any favours and it has taken up way too much space in my head... I will happily walk away feeling I’ve done a decent job. [...] I think had it not been for that [I would have stayed].”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

When governors and trustees do decide to move on, boards should conduct an exit interview. This gives the departing governor or trustee an opportunity to reflect on their own work and the work of the board, and to provide valuable insight about the board’s strengths and areas for development.

“I think there should be some exit interview process when any governor leaves, because schools and the local authority need to look at it.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Retention in the school system

Moving around the system at the conclusion of their term of office was the intention of several focus group participants, who noted the opportunity to both take on a different challenge and for other schools to benefit from the governance experience they had gained.

“It had never occurred to me before doing this role that I might join the board of another school, but it is so clear the value of independent governance to another school. Having people available that aren’t solely parents and friends and former parents etc, which might make me more inclined to offer to govern at another school who needed someone with finance skills but didn’t just want another parent or someone closely linked to the school.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“While I’ve seen what a good school looks like, I’m hoping to be able to take those skills and that experience to a school perhaps that’s not faring as well, and to be able to contribute to that and say ‘this is how things could or should be done going forward.’”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“My skillset and what I feel I would get in terms of being able to bring something to help add value to countless more children made me think actually that's where I see my pathway at the moment to go onto a trustee board level that will have a lot more responsibility and direction going forward.”

Participant in focus group - volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I didn't know that you can just go into school governance. I thought it had to be within the school that your kids were in. [But now I know] there might be opportunities for me to go to other schools in future. I'm in a secondary school, but [I'd consider] the primary school just to get parents who are a little bit more on board on what's going on and to help steer the school in the direction that the local community wants.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I'm secondary and my interests definitely stay with secondary. I think I'd love to become a trustee of a MAT. I think it's a big step up and ultimately men of a certain age and class still dominates trustee level positions and I think it would be a real breaking of stereotypes and boundaries – that would be my aspiration.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I think you shouldn't stay for more than eight years. There's plenty of governor roles to go around. We need to be diverse in that way. I do a lot of work with our council [and they] are quite organised in moving us around and I'd be looking to join another board.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Moving the dial – recommendations

To create the necessary change within their own school/trust, boards should:

- Ensure an accessible high-quality induction is in place for all new volunteers regardless of and tailored to their role (eg parent governor, staff governor) to support effectiveness, retention and inclusion.
- In addition to providing training on roles and responsibilities, ensure new governors/trustees are trained in behaviours such as asking questions and challenge and support.
- Provide a structured buddy/mentor system for new volunteers.
- Ensure governors/trustees have access to independent free formal and informal information, networks etc and encourage them to access it.

- Make space in meetings to properly discuss items and ensure that all volunteers are invited to suggest items for the agenda.
- Review their dynamics through an external review of governance.
- Read the ‘what governing boards and school leaders should expect from each other’ guidance and build and ensure an effective relationship with executive leaders.
- Hold regular one-to-one conversations between a board leader and individual governors/trustees to understand their experience of their role.
- Conduct exit interviews to understand experiences and areas for development.
- Encourage fixed periods of services (a maximum of two terms) to allow for succession planning.
- Capture data on how long volunteers stay on board and analyse this looking for trends related to their characteristics and recruitment method.
- Provide training to volunteers and the governance professional on developing the necessary behaviours to create an inclusive environment.
- Take a strategic approach to encouraging and supporting wanting to move around system by working with other schools/trusts and the local authority.
- Work with governors/trustees coming to the end of their term to help them to think about what they might do next and how they can be involved in recruiting and inducting their ‘replacement’.
- Be open to feedback on the performance of the chair, undertaking a 360-review of the chair to ensure that members feel included and valued, and where not have an open conversation that takes an honest look at board culture.

To progress change across the school system the DfE should:

- Promote governors and trustees completing a maximum two terms on a board, encouraging people to move around the system.
- Introduce mandatory high-quality induction training for governors/trustees.
- Commission ‘exit interview’ research on why governors and trustees leave their role and address the issues discovered.
- Look strategically at how it can encourage and support experienced governors and trustees to move around the system.



Leading boards

Chairs have a crucial role in setting the culture of the governing board. This is not a position of decision-making, but one of considerable influence and one harnessed often to achieve good governance (NGA, 2020a). The DfE's Governance Handbook (2020:44) describes the role as "responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of the board" and having "a vital role in setting the highest of expectations for professional standards of governance".

Demography of chairs

Chairs are predominately older with only 4% aged under 40. The majority (55%) are aged in their fifties and sixties. 70% of under 40s are not in any type of chairing role. Most people in chairing roles (95%) – including vice and committee chairs – are white. Black volunteers make up 1% of chairs while 2% of chairs are Asian and 1% are of mixed heritage (1% prefer not to say).

Governors and trustees from ethnic minorities are significantly more willing to take on the role of chair (NGA, 2020a). 6% of Black governors and trustees are due to be a future chair as part of a succession plan, while 48% would consider taking on a chairing role. 2% of Asian governors/ trustees are lined up to be chair which is equal to volunteers from mixed/multiple ethnic groups (2%) and white volunteers (2%). However, 40% of Asian governors and trustees would consider a chairing role in future compared to 32% of volunteers from multiple/mixed ethnic groups and 27% of white volunteers. Almost half (48%) of those aged between 18 and 29 years and 39% of those aged 30 and 39 would consider or plan to become chair.

Barriers and motivations to chairing

Research confirms that chairing is a considerable undertaking. In NGA's 2016 study of the time it takes to chair, the median total time spent across the sample was 27 hours 30 minutes a month, which equates to 44 days a year or a little under one working day per week (where a working day is seven hours). NGA's 2020 study on the time it takes to chair a MAT found that on average chairing a trust board takes just under 50 days a year (NGA, 2020a).

James et al (2013) found that the necessary capabilities of chairing are demanding, and the time commitment is substantial. Focus group participants had differing experiences of this. They also commented on how the experience of their board's current chair impacts on their perception of the role.

"Not much in terms of responsibilities but in terms of time I do have to balance that with two small kids and a rather high-pressure job at times."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"I've recently taken on the chair responsibility and I think I'm comfortable in terms of workload at the moment and capacity to carry on."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

"There's lots of stuff that goes on being a chair that [would] never be visible to a board member[...] I've been asked if I would consider being the chair after the current chair comes to the end of their term and I'm just undecided because the reality is I don't know how much time it takes."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

"Being a chair is quite a responsibility and overwhelming. I'm doing a lot of work to try and demystify and having [other governors] working alongside so they understand the role and what's expected so that we don't get to a point where I step down and everyone's looking at their shoes and we haven't got someone to move into the role."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

Several focus group participants indicated that they would be willing to consider a chairing opportunity in future, matching the findings of NGA's annual survey. 64% of chairs had governed for five years when taking the role compared to only 12% who had been governing for just one or two years (NGA, 2020).

In the annual governance survey, 7.5% of respondents felt that they did not have the opportunity to progress on their board, with no significant variations by ethnicity or age. Boards should ensure that everyone who wants to has the opportunity and development to progress, and that leadership roles are not exclusive to a core of volunteers. Taking steps into leadership was seen as a way to build confidence.

"I'm very open to the idea long-term, but certainly not anytime soon."

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“I would like to become a chair. Yeah, absolutely yeah.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“I’m quite optimistic and I’ll stay. I’m about to chair a committee.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“They’ll probably ask me to be chair of a committee in about a years’ time, and I’ll probably be up for that.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Succession planning

Succession planning is the process of identifying and developing individuals to equip them with the skills to step into a role when others step down. It is about ensuring continuity within an organisation by having the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time. However, many participants described that often no succession planning is in place and instead other events such as being ‘the last person in the room’ or ‘breaking the awkward silence’ dictated who did the role.

36% of chairs step up ‘as no one else wanted to take on the role’, the NGA annual survey 2020 found. Similarly, what motivated many governors and trustees within our research into leadership roles was being the only person left who could take up the role:

“I’m definitely a believer that there’s no success without succession. I’ve heard of some governing bodies where someone becomes chair and you can’t get rid of them and I’ve been completely the opposite. Every year I say ‘let’s do this vote if anyone wants it, please take it’ and they all say ‘no, we still want you’.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“It very much was a look around the table and point at someone else and keep your head down and don’t make eye contact.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

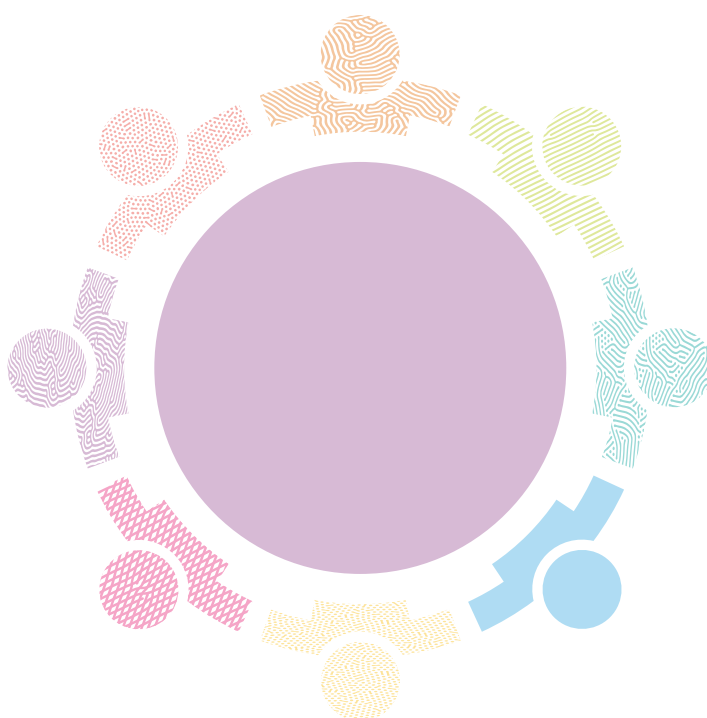
Moving the dial – recommendations

To create the necessary change within their own school/trust, boards should:

- Ensure succession planning is in place, ensuring all groups have an equal opportunity to take on positions should they wish.
- Ensure that current chairs model the role well.
- Encourage board members to partake in training and take incremental leadership roles available to them eg committee chairing.

To progress change across the school system the DfE should:

- Reinvest in leadership development programmes, and include a focus on diversifying board leadership within the programme participants and content.





Moving the dial

A strategic next step

Boards must take ownership of continually reviewing and addressing their composition, practices and dynamic strategically. It is not something that can be done once and ticked off. Diversity and inclusion should not be a separate agenda item – it should be threaded through everything a board considers both for itself and throughout the school/trust. It is not unconnected to or a distraction from raising standards or giving children and young people the best education or finding the best decision in difficult circumstances – it is an essential part of the answer.

Focus group participants shared examples both of where board diversity and inclusion is threaded through the organisation and where it is on the agenda.

“In my trust, diversity and inclusion is integrated into everything they do by default. Everything from the policies to the recruitment process. It's not called out by exception because it's integrated into the whole process, and therefore there's never a focus on it because it just 'is'. It's part of the DNA of what they do.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“It should always be an agenda item whether you spend a couple of minutes talking about it to see what progress you're making in terms of recruitment... We know that there is an issue and just like if there was an issue with something else pertaining to school governance, we would keep it on the agenda until we're satisfied that we've made best efforts.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“There's a huge amount of work the school is doing for its pupils and training for staff on this and I think it's just that translation into the governance. The local authority is very conscious of supporting and helping governing bodies locally to diversify as and when those vacancies come up.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

“It should be in the strategy of every organisation one way or another, because there's a need to enfranchise marginalised groups in every community. If you're in the most diverse community ever, there's always a need. I don't think you should ever take it off the table.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a White British background, aged under 40

To make the change in culture meaningful, boards and executive leaders first need to appreciate “the real organisational benefits of diversity” and understand how “those who think differently, have different life experiences or come from different communities” can make a difference (Green Park and Addaction, 2019, 23). Boards need to dig deep to define their purpose and motives for increasing participation in their own context. They should acknowledge their current position, why they are seeking change and what they hope to achieve. They should be able to “debate, agree and articulate why” recruiting volunteers from underrepresented groups and who bring different perspectives will increase their “ability to deliver on the broad strategic aims” of the school/trust (Fanshawe, 2018:8).

“We use the Charities Excellence Framework as a way of looking at how we need to improve as a governing board. We've got an explicit action item about increasing the diversity of the board. We've not yet had a deep conversation about what that really means. We could have a conversation about what diversity means, we might all come up with different definitions.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

“I think boards are talking more about diversity, which is good. We're looking around the table and saying have we got a representative board or not. What we haven't talked that much about is what diversity means. Very few boards would have people who would consider themselves to have a something which we need to accommodate for – are we ready to do that? Do we make that clear in our recruitment and that we are an equal opportunity board.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged over 40

The survey data and comments from focus group participants has shown that boards are approaching this work from different starting places and with different understandings and attitudes. No matter the current position of the board there is an expectation now that this matter will be addressed – and there are plenty of practical steps that can be taken and positive changes that can be made.

This report shows that there are many drivers and benefits of board diversity and inclusion, and one board cannot possibly reflect every protected characteristic or perspective present in its community and wider society. In tandem, boards should also address how to “take into account of different perspectives even when these cannot be mirrored in the boardroom” (ICAEW, 2014).

It can be tempting to avoid difficult issues “for the sake of agreement and preservation of the common good” (Young, 2016:14); however that the process can “create friction” (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde et al, 2018) should not stop the process happening. Indeed, tackling difficult issues is core to good governance being achieved. “Engaging in dialogue and reflecting on their own and others’ reasons can lead to the transformation of their preferences”, Young (2016:5) says, showing the importance of boards taking forward conversations on equality, diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, the benefits expand as “boards become greater advocates for diversity as they have more direct beneficial experiences with it” (Russell Reynolds Associates, 2009:2).

Of course, a conversation is only the beginning. Conversation must lead to action and progress. Focus group participants shared what action and inaction was evident on their board, demonstrating the importance of driving change.

“The pathway to improving these things... begins with conversation, but then it moves into action. And people often think that conversation is action. It is not. It begins with some real, honest, difficult, dispassionate, objective views of what is true and how we got here. And then work out what happens next.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from an ethnic minority background, aged under 40

“Our board has had on its key objectives for the last three years to increase its diversity which sounds wonderful but we’ve not had anyone new join the board. I’m always conscious that we haven’t defined what that looks like and what we’re hoping for so I think it’s very tokenistic... It looks like we’ve got it on our radar

because it’s on our key objectives on our website and therefore, we’re ticking the box. But if anybody asked ‘what have you done towards this?’, there would be no concrete evidence because it’s not actually happening.”

Participant in focus group – volunteers from a white British background, aged under 40

Being able to demonstrate to potential or new volunteers that the board has discussed and is acting on its diversity and inclusion will be a positive sign particularly for those bringing characteristics or perspectives that are currently underrepresented. It also demonstrates that the board is committed to driving this culture throughout the school/trust by modelling the behaviours it expects.

Responsibility and action for all

We have known that for many years, and despite three years of the Everyone on Board recruitment campaign and the active support from many partners, and the grassroots networks, particularly the BAMEed network and Diverse Educators, that we have not seen the change that is needed. This time we need concerted and universal action across the sector, and with the background of a national recruitment campaign. However even while waiting for this to happen, there are actions that can be taken at trust and school level which will make a difference. There is no single defined route or quick fix but there are lots of things that can be done to accelerate transformation.

Governors, trustees and governance professionals

It is the responsibility of everyone in governance to move this forward. Progress will ultimately come down to the action of the people with involvement and influence in recruitment, appointment and induction processes – their understanding of why it is in the best interest of children and young people, their approach and their will to change.

Conversations and intentions are important, but every effort and action is more crucial. Just because you may feel valued, welcomed and useful on your board doesn’t mean that others do too. Personal actions that governance volunteers and professionals can take include learning about and becoming literate in equality, diversity and inclusion, whether they are in a majority or minority. Treat this as any other topic that you would complete training and learning for because it is important to the effective delivery of your role. Sharing your learning from this report could play a part in this.

Lack of visibility of the role was identified as a significant barrier to increasing participation. How do people know what it is and where to find roles if no one talks about it? How can boards expect to find ready and willing volunteers without making it something that people want to be part of? For the majority, being a governor or trustee is important to the way they think of themselves as a person. Given how passionately volunteers embrace their role and the difference it can make, they have everything they need to champion and advocate it – with family and friends, with colleagues and networks, and with their community.

If you too are passionate about seeing change, take this opportunity to share information and insight from this report with your governance networks about what the evidence shows and the action needed.

Governing boards

Many of the topics, opportunities and issues raised in this report are fundamental to good governance – they should not be news to boards.

What is new is the snapshot provided by focus group participants and fresh data into how these themes manifest in the experiences, perceptions, and feelings of volunteers about their role. They are not passive participants: their encounters will shape how they contribute, whether they want to stay and how they talk about their role to others. Think about the questions and stories raised by our participants. How do they play out on your board?

This report provides insight, ideas and interpretation to equip boards, and especially those with responsibility for recruiting volunteers, with what they need to navigate discussions and action. The recommendations set out many ways in which boards can move the dial on underrepresentation and creating an inclusive environment so that people with the skills, talents and passion needed are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and lived experiences. Some boards may already have made progress – and if so, please share your practice so that others know it is not insurmountable.

Some things are simpler than others and can be done sooner – making sure every new volunteer gets a high-quality, tailored and accessible induction; advertising your next vacancy through as many open channels as possible, all of which already exist; and encouraging contributions and items from quieter members in meetings. Others – like looking at data, learning and training, and cultivating an inclusive board culture – may take more time and effort, but will be equally influential in ultimately increasing the recruitment and retention of diverse volunteers.

Embrace those tricky questions: change will not happen without them. Trust with parents and communities may need to be built before their participation in governance will increase. By recruiting a talented individual from an underrepresented group, will the initial response from that community be 'I now trust the board because there's someone who looks like me' or 'I don't trust that person because they are now associated with those I don't trust'. This shows the importance of communicating the motivation and purpose of the board diversifying and being prepared to make real changes on deep-seated issues, and to do this well, the board needs to have first defined it themselves.

Executive leaders

Heads and CEOs should begin a conversation with their board if this is not already happening to explore the extent to which the board reflects the local community, the aspiration for this and what the impact can be – both for pupils and for governance.

Elevating the status and visibility of the board in school/trust life is a valuable change to which executive leaders can contribute. Leaders' encouragement too of governors and trustees, especially those from underrepresented groups, to speak up is influential in creating an inclusive culture. Focus group participants demonstrated how much an appreciation of their role and the openness of leaders to receiving support and challenge can mean to volunteers, and how much it impacts on their enjoyment and effective practice.

As well as making volunteers feel appreciated and engaged, communication from leaders will aid future recruitment because parents and carers, pupils, staff and the wider community will know about and are more likely to want to be part of the board. We know from the private sector that having the active support and buy-in from the senior executive to widening participation on boards was one of the most critical factors in succeeding.

Executive leaders often have the connections at many different levels to raise this as a critical issue. Networks and forums between executive leaders offer a place to talk about school and trust's progress on board diversity and inclusion, as well as setting a precedent and expectation among peers.

NGA

There are lots of things that NGA can and will do to play our part in leading and creating change. We want – and need – to see urgent, positive movement in those too-long established figures on the representation of people from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and young people of boards. We also want to help boards to develop inclusive cultures and good

governance practices so that all volunteers feel valued and impactful in making a difference for children and young people.

Many of the themes emerging from the focus groups, literature and survey data are those that NGA has been advocating for years to establish good governance practice – the introduction of high-quality induction training, a maximum of serving two terms of office on any one board and proper payment of expenses. This new research adds weight and vigour to those arguments, and NGA will increase our emphasis on these policy positions and practice.

A lack of visibility of governance, both the role itself and the contribution the volunteers make, was noted by several participants. We will continue our Visible Governance in Schools campaign to raise awareness and understanding of the role and its impact, by encouraging and equipping governance volunteers and those working with them to celebrate the contribution of good governance to the success of schools and trusts.

Several of our activities and resources will continue to contribute to understanding and increasing participation in school and trust governance. Alongside this report, NGA has updated its popular practice ‘right people around the table’ guidance to support boards with the ‘how’ of recruitment and retention with a focus on diversity and inclusion. We will continue to collect data through our annual governance survey and monitor trends on representation, inclusion and recruitment practices. Our popular ‘skills audit’ tool is being updated to help boards reflect on their representativeness and on a wider range of competencies. NGA will continue to reinforce and integrate throughout its range of guidance, resources, research, training and consultancy, and e-learning that diversity and inclusion are an essential component of good governance and should be woven into the culture of schools and trusts.

In addition, we will explore how we can utilise the information we hold about and the access we have to boards to collect information about governors/trustees leaving or joining boards.

New content on helping potential volunteers better understand the role, and for existing governors and trustees, specific information on how they can progress and move around the system will be developed too.

This expectation will be made clear to our members, and we will also reinforce it in any work NGA does to assess and influence good governance practice including through external reviews of governance and the reformed National Leaders of Governance support programme.

Knowing what other boards have done and the successes and hurdles they have encountered is key to changing practice. We will collect and amplify the stories of boards that have made progress on their diversity and inclusion to provide practical tips and inspiration. Among the experiences shared by focus group participants were some fantastic examples of boards – and particularly the actions of chairs and headteachers – creating an inclusive culture of ensuring volunteers feel valued and that their voices are heard. Credit to them for achieving this and let it be used as an example for others to follow.

During the focus group research, NGA received fair challenge from participants regarding the composition of its own board of trustees. Here is a statement from NGA’s board in response:

“While promoting the need for greater diversity and inclusion on school and trust governing boards over a number of years, NGA’s own board of trustees has considered its own diversity and inclusion and continues to do so. Nine positions on NGA’s board are elected from our nine regions with a further four places available for co-option. We co-opted onto our board a Black trustee in 2018 and a young trustee in 2019, and both are still serving as trustees. While our trustee board is broadly reflective of NGA’s membership in terms of age, gender and ethnicity as well region, school types and phases, we recognise that it fails to reflect the diversity of wider society and the communities we seek to impact. We are therefore reviewing our board diversity, including in terms of knowledge and skills, after the recent election of four new trustees to the board, with the intention that once again we use co-option to improve it. We want to be able to lead and demonstrate the change we want to see happen across governing boards. Valuing the voices of all is one of NGA’s organisational values, and the board and leadership team aim to set a culture where we champion equality, diversity and inclusion internally as well as externally.”

Governance recruitment organisations

The evidence shows that the volunteers signing up with and being placed by the governance recruitment services are more representative of wider society. Yet it also shows that a smaller proportion of boards are using these services than are recruiting through their existing networks. While using networks may feel easier it is not going to bring the diversity needed.

Recruitment to governing boards is a national challenge, and the governance recruitment organisations should reinforce the need to advertise vacancies openly, including through them, as good governance practice. In their own advertising of the role to potential volunteers, they should continue to provide a clear explanation of what it entails and what support is

available to new governors/trustees as well as encouraging placed volunteers to advocate the role. As they work with many employers and professional groups, the services can also redouble their efforts to encourage both recruitment of and support for their staff, promoting the benefits to professional development.

Continuing to report on the diversity of their volunteers and appointments will help to build a culture in governance recruitment of transparency about progress. It will also increase the confidence of boards in using the services if they can understand the potential they offer. They should also monitor the characteristics of volunteers, addressing any gaps or trends in data, and strive through their recruitment to ensure candidates from diverse backgrounds are targeted and welcomed.

In working with boards, they should also provide information and training on effective and inclusive recruitment practices; and the need to recruit for diverse thought and characteristics.

As a system

Certain changes in practice and expectation are needed at school system level too – from the Department for Education and local authorities (LAs), MATs and dioceses.

NGA is calling for a large-scale national recruitment campaign, funded and delivered by the DfE, to give a tremendous boost to awareness of the role and on volunteers coming forward. The Governance Handbook acknowledges governance as critical to driving relentless ambition for all young people served by the schools system. Given the significance and responsibility attached to the role, there is a duty to match the investment provided by volunteers with investment to persuade a wide range of talented, skilled individuals to join school and trust boards.

Similarly, LAs, MATs and dioceses can build on the insight and data on what works in attracting volunteers for local recruitment campaigns, ensuring groups that are underrepresented locally or within the group are targeted and welcomed.

These organisations must be part of the joint effort to make governance visible and showing current volunteers how valued they are too. They have many opportunities to do this including sharing positive stories about the work of boards, showing appreciation for volunteers, and promoting the role as an essential part of the school/trust's successes or development.

Other contributions that LAs, MATs and dioceses can make to increasing participation include through providing training, information and advice to schools to encourage a focus and

practical action; identifying and developing potential board leaders from underrepresented groups; and ensuring the training they offer is accessible and inclusive.

The stories of focus group participants demonstrate a clear appetite to move onto another board following the completion of their term of office. There is an opportunity for the system to encourage this with existing volunteers to make them aware of the option and to retain expertise, as well as to take a strategic approach to organise and facilitate that moving around the system. A more defined approach will have positive implications for succession planning and upskilling volunteers.

A big picture understanding of who volunteers, how they get into the role and why can provide insight for the governance sector as well as governing boards, so that they can build on what works well. This would also help to provide a truer picture on representation and recruitment methods, and identify wider trends of progress or gaps. The DfE is best placed to explore how this information can be collected.

Given the investment made in recruiting and developing volunteers, it is sensible to ensure as much as possible that they want to stay on, both in the first board they join but also in moving to another board. Developing a national view of retention through data and exit interview content would help to build a much more strategic approach to governor and trustee recruitment. It would allow horizon scanning to understand where there may be significant changes in the supply of volunteers, and produce a better return. In addition, it would produce a strong picture of why people leave and identify any trends in reasons, allowing quick-fixes and strategic solutions to be put in place.

The language on diversity in the DfE's Governance Handbook has strengthened over the past few years. In the 2015 edition, there was a single mention that “**the most robust boards** welcome and thrive on having a sufficiently diverse range of viewpoints – since open debate leads to good decisions in the interests of the whole school community”.

In October 2019 – just a few months after the launch of NGA and Inspiring Governance's Everyone on Board campaign – it was added that the “**primary consideration** in appointment decisions **should** be acquiring the skills, experience and diversity the board needs to be effective” and that “a board composed of governors and trustees who bring a diverse range of skills, experiences, qualifications, characteristics and perspectives and who are from different backgrounds and settings **will have a positive impact** on setting the strategic direction for your organisation”. Lord Agnew, in the Handbook's

introduction, noted that “**for a board to be effective** it will need to consist of a diverse group of volunteers, from a variety of backgrounds, who each bring with them different perspectives and experience but who are there for the same purpose”.

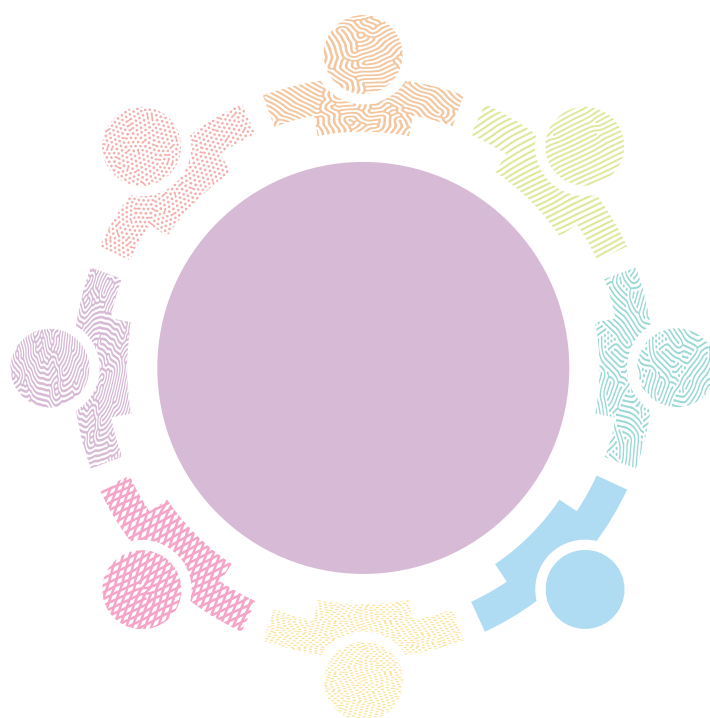
In the most recent version (October 2020), there are several references to diversity, including that the board “**should** welcome and thrive on having a sufficiently diverse range of individuals” and recognition that “it is **important** that boards reflect the diversity of the school/trust communities that they serve”. This reference directly links to the Everyone on Board campaign. In her introduction to the Handbook, Baroness Berridge took the opportunity to stress that: “More than ever we also need diverse boards, and the Handbook has been updated to emphasise the **expectation** that recruitment processes should encourage volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures and perspectives, that better reflect the communities they serve.”

This is a clear indication of the change in emphasis and expectation from the DfE, one which NGA has been delighted to see and shape. To really raise this expectation in the consideration of boards, language should be further strengthened and the DfE’s words must be matched with action exploring how it can leverage that expectation.

The DfE also has the opportunity to strengthen expectations on – or make compulsory – other factors which this report has identified as significant in recruitment and retention such as moving from an “appropriate induction” to mandatory high-quality induction training, and from it being beneficial “to move on to another school or academy trust after a reasonable time (eg two terms of office)” to a fixed two-term period being the custom.

Communities

Finally, governing boards are accountable to the school or trust’s stakeholders and to the community they serve. The makeup of the board will be published on the website as well as volunteers being present at activities and events. There may be a point where pupils, parents/carers or indeed staff are challenging the organisation about the board’s composition and commitment to diversity and inclusion. Being transparent and proactive in sharing how the board is considering this, what it has done and can do and its purpose for doing so will provide reassurance to stakeholders that it is cared about and being taken seriously, and will enable dialogue.



Acknowledgments and methodology

Acknowledgments

The authors' first thanks go to the 34 people who participated in the focus groups. Their contributions here are anonymous but we are very grateful to them for sharing their experiences and insight of volunteering on a governing board with us. They have trusted us with their stories and views to form the heart of this report and its recommendations. Their comments and challenge to NGA and the sector are clear. Use this insight to transform your practices and deliver the change needed.

The thoughtful and constructive feedback provided by our readers was incredibly helpful in shaping and refining the final report – thank you to Penny Rabiger and Alastair Cowen. An overview of the draft final report was presented to the NGA/ BAMEd network steering group on governance and race – thank you to members of the group for clarifying our thinking on some of the core findings and for their suggestions about recommendations.

Undertaking the focus group research was first suggested at NGA's advisory group on diversity and equalities, and we renew our thanks to those who contributed to that first meeting and for their continued engagement with us. The focus groups were made possible with funding from Inspiring Governance and staff time and incentives provided by The Key/Governor Hub – thank you to Neil Collins and Caroline Doherty, Nicola West-Jones, Sarah Bull, Linda Unternahrer and Vikkey Chaffe for supporting the moderation and running of the focus groups. We also appreciate the contribution of Dr Kathlyn Wilson and Teresa Esan from Parents on Board for their input into the topic guide formulation.

Finally, our heartfelt thanks to our colleagues for their efforts in supporting the production of the research and report. To Adelaide Chitanda and Nina Sharma for supporting the focus groups, and Fiona Fearon, Elizabeth Collin and Heidi Copland for providing useful feedback on this report. To Hannah Garrington for devising and leading the focus groups and conducting the analysis. And finally, to Emma Knights and Sam Henson for their comments, insight and guidance in producing a final report.

Methodology

Focus groups were chosen as the method of data collection as much of the data gathered by NGA and the sector up to this point has been anecdotal and focus groups are known to help aid research in the preliminary or explorative stage of a study where little is known on the topic. Discussions are organised but largely led by participants which will allow researchers to uncover issues and themes which are produced from participants themselves.

An online sign-up form for the focus groups was promoted across NGA and partner networks and from this a sampling pool was developed. NGA was conscious of not homogenising Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups into one demographic and made an effort to recruit as widely as possible. All prospective participants were invited to at least one of the following sessions:

Focus group	Demographics	Number of participants
A	Under 40, white British	7
B	Under 40, white British	4
C	Over 40, ethnic minority backgrounds	5
D	Over 40, ethnic minority backgrounds	8
E	Over 40, ethnic minority backgrounds	5
F	Under 40, white British	3
G	Under 40, ethnic minority backgrounds	2
Total participants		34

Ethnicity (on sign up, participants selected an option based on the Census 2021)	Total
White British	14
Black African	4
Black British	1
Black Caribbean	3
Indian	5
Pakistani	3
Bangladeshi	1
Chinese	2
Mixed	1
Total	34

Seven focus groups took place between 17 February and 16 March 2021 with 34 participants in total. All participants were required to give informed consent and no incentives were offered up-front for participants. However, as a thanks for their time and openness in giving their stories, a £25 voucher was given to the participants after they had taken part in the research with the cost kindly covered by The Key.

As the expert organisation supporting and representing governance in the state-school sector, NGA can help governors, trustees, governance professionals and executive leaders to make the most of the opportunities and overcome the challenges identified in this report.

Knowledge Centre

NGA has a wealth of resources available on the [Knowledge Centre](#).

- [The Right People Around the Table](#) – a practical guide to recruiting and retaining school governors and trustees.
- [Model role descriptions](#) – for chairs, governors, trustees, governance professionals and clerks to help introduce volunteers to the role. [member only]
- [Virtual governance resources](#) – find out how virtual governance and the future of a blended approach to board meetings can support recruitment and inclusion. [member only]
- [Skills audit and skills matrix](#) – to help boards ensure that they have the right people, with the right skills and commitment, around the table.
- [Being Strategic: a guide for governing boards and school leaders](#) – encourages governing boards and executive leaders to work together to set a strategy for their organisation and monitor progress within an annual cycle.
- [Creating the right dynamic](#) – a guide to help governing boards work effectively as a team. [member only]
- [Preparing your board for the future](#) – guidance on succession planning with practical advice on planning and developing future board leadership.
- [What governing boards and school leaders should expect from each other](#) – a guide covering the respective roles of governance and management and effective ways of working.

Induction resources

- [Welcome to Governance](#) – an induction handbook containing everything new governors, trustees and academy committee members need to know about their role, covering both local authority maintained schools and academies.
- [Welcome to a Multi Academy Trust](#) – an induction handbook for MAT trustees with everything they need to know about their role and responsibilities.
- [Welcome to Governance LIVE](#) – a virtual session exclusively for new volunteers joining the board of NGA GOLD and MAT members covering making an impact in your first six months as a new governor or trustee.

- [A step-by-step guide to inducting new governors and trustees](#) – provides a starting point for those planning and delivering induction programmes.
- [Resources for new governors and trustees](#) – an overview of key information and useful tips for new volunteers.

Campaigns and networks

- [Everyone on Board](#) – launched in June 2018 by NGA and Inspiring Governance, this campaign aims to increase the participation of people from ethnic minorities and young people in school governance.
- [Young Governors Network](#) – member-led network aiming to support and encourage those aged under 40 to govern in schools by facilitating them to share their experiences, addressing the challenges faced by young people governing schools and creating sustainable connections amongst current and prospective governors.
- [Visible Governance](#) – NGA's campaign to celebrate, champion and raise the profile of the impact of good governance on schools and trusts.
- [Educators on Board](#) – to encourage education professionals to govern in a different school as part of their professional development and to contribute education expertise to boards.

E-learning and training

- [NGA Learning Link](#) – Through our e-learning platform, boards can access modules including in-depth induction modules covering the role and responsibilities, and bitesize modules including 'Holding to account: how to question and challenge' and 'Holding to account: how to conduct a courageous conversation'.
- [Virtual and face-to-face workshops](#) – NGA offers a range of training for boards including on board dynamics and good relationships; getting the right people around the table; and effective chairing as well as induction sessions.
- [Board and self evaluation tools](#) – NGA offers online appraisal tools to self-review the effectiveness of a board's leadership, and of the effectiveness of the board itself.

Resources on the board's role in equality, diversity and inclusion

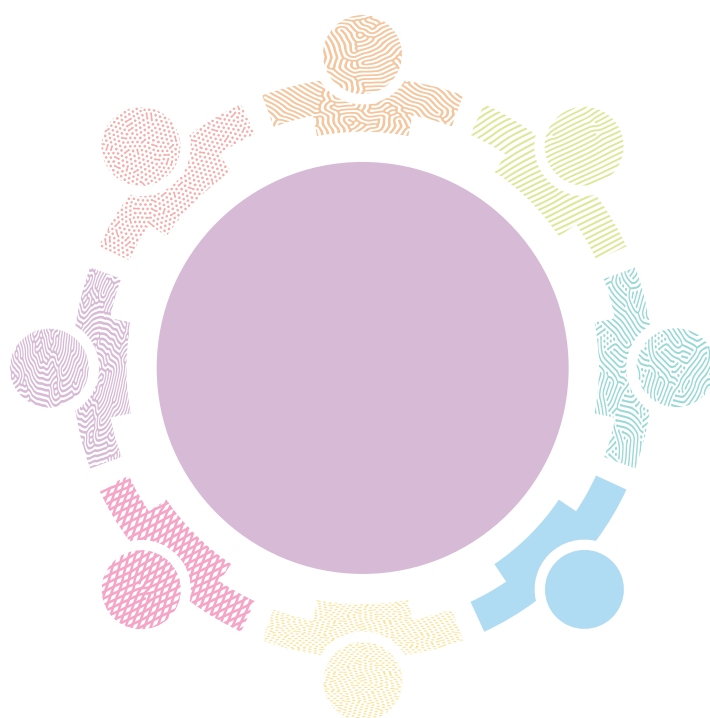
[NGA's campaign page](#) has more information and resources to support the board's role in encouraging diversity and ensuring equality. This role includes determining ethos and culture; when recruiting executive and senior leaders; as employers of all staff; and in the direct impact on pupils (eg oversight of the curriculum, monitoring of behaviour and exclusions, and outcomes).

Independent recruitment services

- **Inspiring Governance** – a free, online service that connects schools and trusts in England with volunteers in your area who are interested in becoming a school governor or trustee.
- **Governors for Schools** – supports all types of state-funded schools and academies in finding governors free of charge.
- **Academy Ambassadors** – provides a free, bespoke service matching business people and professionals with academy trusts looking to strengthen their boards.
- **National Black Governors Network** – works with schools, academies and local authorities to support their aim in diversifying their governing boards.

Other resources

- **#DiverseGovernance webcast series** – a series of free webcasts by Diverse Educators with governors and trustees sharing their experience and tips on a range of topics including board recruitment and board inclusion.
- **Department for Education Governance Handbook** – sets out the expectations and requirements of boards in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.
- **Community Insights** – a tool by Governor Hub pulling together local census data for your school.
- **RACE equality code 2020** – a single code and accountability framework providing one set of standards, applicable to every organisation irrespective of size or sector, and aimed at delivering real change.
- **Young Trustees Movement** – advertise for young trustees (aged under 30) plus other resources.
- **BAMEed Network** – provides resources and events, and connects, enables and showcases the talent of diverse educators so they may inspire future generations and open up possibilities within education careers.
- **Diverse Educators** – provides resources and events, and a community of intersectional educators who are passionate about diversity, equality and inclusion.
- **Statement of intent** – see the progress and commitments of education unions, bodies and organisations on equality, diversity and inclusion in education.



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