

# Taking stock of governance workload

Ensuring school and trust  
governance is sustainable

Summary  
November 2023

**Schools in England are governed by approximately 250,000 volunteers. They undertake this civic role in order that children and young people receive the best possible education.**

The National Governance Association (NGA) has been monitoring their workload and challenges for many years, but recently there have been indications that the heightened intensity of governance is posing a threat to its sustainability, straining even the most dedicated volunteers and adding to recruitment difficulties. Over a quarter of all governance volunteers and a third of chairs are contemplating resigning, with the time and pressure of the role being the main drivers.

We therefore conducted an extensive study this year to gather further evidence to gauge the prevalence of workload pressures on volunteers, identify contributing factors, explore potential areas for responsibility reduction, and propose solutions. The full report includes many quotes from volunteers.

# Key findings on the pressure of governance



## 1. Increasing numbers of exclusions

Exclusion panels demand additional meeting time, huge amounts of preparation, specific training and often have a significant emotional impact and an impact on relationships with leaders.

## 2. Increasing numbers and complexity of complaints being escalated to the governing board complaints committee stage.

## 3. The challenges of the wider system increase the challenges for governing boards, including:

- funding pressures
- staff recruitment and wellbeing
- Ofsted pressures
- increasing safeguarding concerns
- increasing SEND needs
- maintenance of buildings

## 4. The widening expectations on schools to support families apply to governing boards too, including:

- mental health challenges for pupils and families
- poverty and cost of living increases
- reduced public and third sector services for families

## 5. Increasing board vacancies leads to pressures on others

- Despite boards getting smaller, vacancies are at an all-time high, and the sector is seriously struggling to recruit the 20,000 additional volunteers needed, a situation exacerbated by changes in society since the pandemic.
- The expectations make it very difficult to recruit and retain those with many other commitments, in turn acting against some of the attempts to diversify boards, so that the workload burdens are shouldered by a reducing number of hard-pressed volunteers.
- The work of recruiting and inducting new volunteers falls to the same group of experienced volunteers (with the support of their governance professional).

## 6. The responsibility of chairs feels greater as they take on additional work and look at ways of reducing pressures to retain others, in turn hindering succession planning.

## 7. Inefficient board practice and dysfunctional dynamics exasperates volunteers and makes poor use of their time; the issues reported included:

- ineffective clerking and chairing
- poor reporting and late reporting
- lack of knowledge or respect for governance from school and trust leaders
- lack of commitment from other members of the board
- lack of understanding of the strategic nature of the role
- a board culture where patterns of disengagement, non-attendance, or overly dominant individuals, are not addressed

## 8. Training expectations that go beyond induction have become overwhelming for some, with a lack of flexibility in training methods and access issues causing frustration.

## 9. The sheer amount of time it takes to govern is difficult to reconcile with other commitments

- While for those in employment it is increasingly hard to manage board meeting expectations, including the preparation for them, this point of view also often extends to those who are retired.
- It has proved difficult to pinpoint accurately a time commitment for the role: there are a number of estimates of the time it takes which vary widely. NGA commits to undertake a further piece of work in 2024 to quantify the range of time required depending on the role undertaken and the issues at the school/trust.

All of these pressures contribute to a mental load which is taking its toll on many committed volunteers. The governance community has spoken loudly and clearly: there needs to be change.

# The way forward

## **The strategies used to deal with complaints that are escalated to governing boards must be reviewed at an organisational and national level.**

This will require an increased willingness from leaders to acknowledge when mistakes are made earlier on in the complaints process.

## **The governance role being universally manageable is dependent on it remaining strategic and well defined, with a culture of trust, respect, collaboration and effective practice.**

- Better board practice in itself cannot form the entirety of the answer in alleviating workload pressures, but there are opportunities to implement more efficient ways of working for some boards which are addressed in the full report.
- Governance professionals unquestionably have a crucial role in making this happen.
- Where board culture allows patterns of disengagement, non-attendance, or overly dominant individuals, this can have a multitude of negative repercussions on workload and commitment.
- The training expectation must be focussed on both the board's and individual's knowledge gaps and not delivered in a one-size-fits-all manner.

## **There must be change in the role of governing boards in exclusions: this is no longer sustainable and a new approach is needed.**

- While holding school leaders to account for pupil exclusions is part of the strategic governance role, boards do not otherwise get involved with the details of individual pupils and it is time that exclusions is brought in line with this principle.
- Alternative proposals have been suggested, including the call from human rights charity, JUSTICE, in 2018 for the introduction of a new suitably qualified and experienced independent reviewer to replace volunteer panels.
- NGA will be advocating for this change with our members and the wider sector.

## **While not yet a majority view, there has been a notable shift in support for remuneration for the role among the governing community.**

- Potential benefits of paying those who govern our schools and trusts include easier recruitment, greater board diversity, increased visibility, greater accountability and placing it on a more level footing with other sectors.
- Arguments against payment include an alteration of the nature of the governance role and motivations behind it, increasing conflicts of interest, a departure from the charity sector, and the cost to the public purse.
- There is little existing evidence as to whether the payment for governance duties would be transformative; this should be examined by a government funded research project looking at the business case.
- NGA commits to facilitating a debate in 2024, beginning with NGA members, and reporting to the wider sector.

## **In the meantime, we ask all parts of the school sector, but particularly the Department for Education, to appreciate:**

- 1 The education system in England is built on the premise that a vast number of willing volunteers are able to give their time freely to fulfil the governance duties, both defined by statutory requirements and duties dictated by localised context. This is civic duty in action and needs to be celebrated and nurtured. Warm words are insufficient: deeds are required.
- 2 All government funding towards board development has been terminated for a number of years. The offer of an annual training allowance to each volunteer to spend on relevant, quality provision would underline a Department for Education (DfE) commitment to good governance.
- 3 The cost of losing, both experienced and new, valued board members is high and becoming higher, and may prove unsustainable unless action is taken to attract more volunteers. The positive experiences of governing, the joy and satisfaction of being part of a school or trust community, needs to be spread far and wide alongside the personal development opportunity and an honest description of the expectations. NGA will commit to play its part, working with partners, through both the Everyone on Board campaign and our Visible Governance activities, but the need for a significant government push on recruitment has never been more pertinent than it is now. Employers should also be involved to encourage and support their staff to govern.
- 4 In this project we asked ourselves what could be removed from the governance role, and our extensive work only revealed one duty. The work of finding an alternative to exclusion review panels staffed by volunteers needs to be embraced by the whole sector. The current system is not sustainable.
- 5 There is a need to be mindful, and become a champion, of reducing governance workload in order to both protect the wellbeing of those who govern and continue the sustainability of the volunteer role. This requires an increase of knowledge on the part of many senior leaders, which should be supported by DfE leadership training.