



Succession planning for the chair

A guide for governing boards in schools and trusts

Updated December 2025

Contents

Succession planning for the chair	1
Introduction.....	2
1. Electing a chair	3
2. The succession cycle.....	4
3. Succession planning activities.....	5
4. Creating the right culture	7
5. Accessing support	7

Introduction

Succession planning is about ensuring continuity within an organisation by having the right people in the right place at the right time. For governing boards, this means recruiting new board members and encouraging learning and development.

When succession planning works, it creates the conditions for strong chairs to move on to another school or trust after a reasonable time. This contributes to strengthening governance throughout the system and to the success of schools and trusts, including through:

- board effectiveness – from increased leadership capacity
- compliance – because leadership and governance requirements are coordinated
- board dynamics and culture – stability in behaviours and operating routines
- morale and relationships – which are strengthened by certainty

This guide is intended to support governing boards in all types of school structure by making succession planning part of their long-term practice.

The role of chair

The governing board works as a collective, with the chair as its leader. It is the chair's leadership that helps to achieve successful teamwork and a competent board. Broadly speaking, the chair's role is the same on all governing boards – view our [role description for governing board chairs](#).

NGA's [The Chair's Handbook](#) is essential reading for those leading and aspiring to lead governing boards, as well as for executive leaders working with the chair.

1. Electing a chair

When electing the chair (or vice chair) to the board, keep in mind the following:

- To allow the opportunity for a fresh start, NGA recommends that **no one serves as chair in one board for more than six consecutive years**.
- The focus should be on electing chairs and vice chairs with the **necessary skills for the role** as well as the willingness to serve.
- There should be appropriate **distance in relations between the chair and headteacher/CEO** to avoid potential conflict or the relationship being seen as too close.
- It is possible to **elect more than one person to share the role** of chair or vice chair if the board believes this is necessary and in the best interests of the organisation – NGA has [guidance on co-chairing](#).
- NGA recommends that the chair is elected annually at the first board meeting of the academic year and that their **term of office should not significantly exceed one year**. This gives an opportunity for the chair to restate their willingness to continue or step down.
- It is good practice for the board to **evaluate the current chair's performance** before re-electing them – NGA offers a [chair's 360 review](#) service.
- While there will be times when continuity is seen as important, the re-election of a chair should **never be a forgone conclusion** because an individual is viewed as well-established in their position or there is seemingly no alternative.

The governance professional will support the board to follow the correct election procedure and advise who is eligible to stand for the role. See our [guidance on electing a chair](#) for further information.

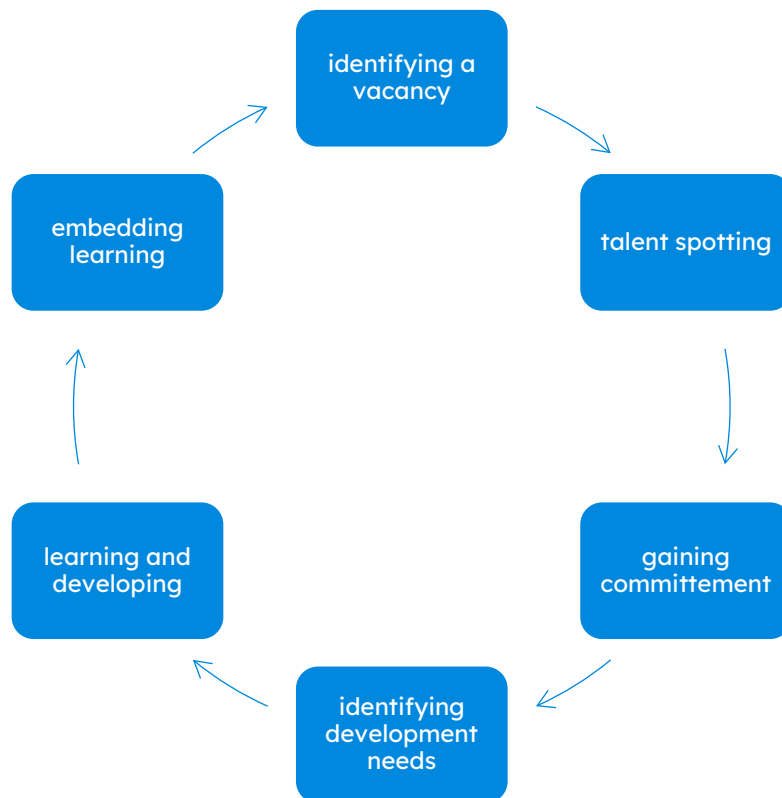
E-learning: Taking the chair

Subscribers to NGA Learning Link can access an [e-learning module on chairing](#). The 'Taking the Chair conversations' is a collection of expert insights into chairing designed to help both those who are new to chairing as well as those with more experience looking to build their leadership expertise in particular areas.

2. The succession cycle

Succession planning has a cyclical nature and is more effective when it is reviewed regularly and scheduled into the annual work plan of meeting agendas to ensure that it does not become a reaction to a vacancy occurring. This is usually led by the current chair.

Stage	What it looks like
Identifying a vacancy	The chair openly discusses their intention to step down.
Talent spotting	Identify current governors/trustees, and potential new individuals to join the board, with the willingness and capacity to take on the role within the relevant time period.
Gaining commitment	Seek assurance of their interest in taking on the role.
Identifying development needs	Agree the CPD needs of these individual(s).
Learning and developing	Increase skills and knowledge through relevant CPD.
Embedding learning	Learning is shared through board, committee, or one-to-one meetings.



3. Succession planning activities

The following activities can be adapted to fit the circumstances of your governing board. They are not sequential and can be deployed throughout the succession planning cycle.

These activities can lead to:

- talent being identified
- potential candidates putting themselves forward
- removing barriers
- proactive action taken by the board to recruit its next chair
- recognition of development needs

Conversations with board members

The current chair should talk to both individual board members and the board collectively about identifying their successor and the timescale for succession.

Having these conversations allows the chair to be open about their plans for stepping down and find out about the willingness and capacity of others to take it on.

Conversations should cover:

- **Misconceptions about the role** – it could be that the current chair is viewed as indispensable or that the role can only be undertaken by people from a certain background or with particular characteristics. There might also be a presumption that a certain person will be the successor, for example based on length of service, which should be dispelled.
- **What's involved** – breaking down the role can help to make others aware of the commitment so that they can make an informed decision as to whether they are well suited and able to take it on. This is also an opportunity for the chair to model good practice and demonstrate that the role can be performed effectively with a reasonable time commitment.
- **What might be putting people off** – individuals may feel uncomfortable if they perceive the board as challenging or see potential issues working with leaders in the school or trust. Board members may also lack confidence or have concerns with current ways of working which should be addressed.

Sharing leadership

There are many ways in which sharing the burden of leadership responsibilities with a vice chair, co-chair and more widely between the governing board can benefit succession planning in the long term. These include:

- increasing leadership capacity by building the experience and confidence of board members
- reinforcing that governance accountability is not assigned solely to the chair
- distributing workload to ensure that the role is manageable
- reducing the risk of disruption if the chair unexpectedly leaves

Creating a team of leaders

Create the conditions for a team of leaders (and potential successors) to emerge by:

- encouraging members of the board to be co-chair, vice chair or chairs of committees
- providing opportunities to shadow the current chair
- providing opportunities to observe and participate in chairing activities, such as meetings with school and trust leaders or external bodies
- leading a particular initiative or working group

Co-chairing

It is possible to share the role of chair, and this may prove to be a useful option, especially where individuals have the necessary skills but not the time. Not only can this make the role practical, but it can also strengthen the leadership of the board by having another person's valued judgment to draw on.

Read NGA's [guide to co-chairing](#).

The vice chair

The choice of vice chair could form part of a succession plan, with the individual viewing it as a precursor for the role of chair. As a minimum, the chair should seek to develop a strong relationship with the vice chair, use them as a sounding board and provide meaningful responsibility that builds confidence.

Read NGA's [guide to the role of vice chair](#).

Increasing options through recruitment

There are many steps boards can take to meet their recruitment needs – this is explained in NGA's [guide to recruiting governors and trustees](#).

- **Targeting recruitment** – when filling a vacancy that arises on the board, consider how you might target the recruitment of your next or future chair. For example, by particularly welcoming applications from individuals with experience of chairing meetings or leading a team and who are interested in chairing committees and being part of the succession plan.
- **Talent spotting** – talent spot among serving volunteers who may have future potential. In a MAT, this could look like potential trustees being spotted among the membership of academy committees or retaining experienced local governance chairs by supporting them to move across academy committees.
- **Engaging stakeholders** – engaging with stakeholders, such as parents and the wider community, can shine a light on talent that exists outside the board's immediate environment who can be encouraged to join the board. Boards can capitalise on the relationship their school or trust has developed with, among others, their local council, agencies, local businesses, neighbourhood forums and faith groups to recruit governors and trustees.

4. Creating the right culture

Create the conditions in which talent is more likely to emerge from board membership and that will inspire confidence and encouragement to governors/trustees considering the role of chair.

- **Cultivating a team environment** – potential chairs are more likely to be encouraged to come forward when they are part of an environment in which individuals share the workload, are respectful of different personalities and perspectives, and celebrate success together. Read NGA's [guide to effective teamwork](#).
- **Working in partnership with the executive leader (headteacher or CEO)** – it is important that the working relationship and rapport which exists between the chair and executive leader is not perceived as being so close or exclusive that it becomes a barrier to those who would consider putting themselves forward as the chair.
- **Working with your governance professional** – review the role of your governance professional and ensure that it allows for maximum support and advice.
- **Prioritising self-evaluation and CPD** – boards that routinely evaluate their strengths and areas for development are more likely to continuously improve, thus increasing their capacity. Succession planning should be considered as part of routine [self-evaluation](#). Auditing the [skills](#) and [diversity](#) of the board will also help to identify potential chairs as well as highlight relevant opportunities for development.

5. Accessing support

There are a range of sources governing boards can access to provide ongoing support to chairs.

- Governance professionals can provide advice and support to chairs in their role.
- Central support teams within trusts or local authorities, or from external traded services, typically provide governance advice, support with issue resolution (such as [NGA's consultancy mediation](#) service) and hold briefing sessions.
- MATs can facilitate peer support and networking by establishing routine meetings between their trust board and academy committee chairs.
- Boards can access independent governance advice such as the [NGA Gold Advice](#) service.
- Current and prospective chairs can participate in role specific training and development.

Training for chairs

NGA's [Leading Governance: development for Chairs](#) programme enables current board chairs, vice chairs and committee chairs, as well as aspiring chairs, to develop their skills in delivering effective leadership. Our specialist programmes equip participants with the skills, knowledge and understanding to deliver board leadership in their setting.