

# Increasing participation in school and trust governance

A state of the nation report on  
recruiting and retaining volunteers

Summary report  
June 2021



# Making the case for diverse boards

Having the right people around the table is essential to good governance. A board's volunteers should share a common vision for the school/trust but bring different skills, knowledge, experience, perspectives and approaches to the table. If a board is making decisions through a limited lens, decisions won't always be in the best interest of pupils. Boards must avoid groupthink.

Boards need to ensure that the people participating in decision-making 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 action to be thinking beyond their own interests and experiences to include and understand the people they serve. This should not be left only to those from underrepresented groups.

Having volunteers with experiences or an identity in common with pupils, parents and the wider community enables boards to better meet their needs. Being reflective of the community – and wider society – will be unique to every board but in all cases, it will help it to keep connected to local needs and build confidence.

There are two crucial elements to increasing participation and perspectives in school and trust governance: recruitment and retention of volunteers. Embracing and celebrating the benefits of diversity and inclusion offers governing boards a significant opportunity to further their positive impact on children and young people. This is now an expectation, not an option, for governing boards in schools and trusts.

The Department for Education's Governance Handbook (October 2020) says:

“It is important that boards reflect the diversity of the school/trust communities that they serve”.

“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.”

## Why this is important

There are many reasons why a board needs to strive to reflect its community and wider society. 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. In addition, diverse and representative boards can help to build the confidence of the community and provide role models for all children and young people.

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.

Diversity of thought at board level is essential for the effective running of any organisation. Thinking differently – or cognitive diversity and perspectives based on lived experience – is a good thing, and is essential to good governance.

Benefits for boards include better problem solving and decision making; being more aware of current and upcoming opportunities and challenges; and reducing risks because of fewer blind spots across the group. It also helps to avoid 'groupthink' which can otherwise lead to a lack of questioning of information, assumptions and decisions; and an insufficient challenge of executive leaders. Having a group of individuals with different perspectives around the table will help to create healthy debate, questioning, challenge and conflict.

## Diversifying boards

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. 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.

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.

Recruiting skilled volunteers to governing boards has been encouraged over the past few years. This can include personal attributes, qualities and capabilities as well as knowledge and perspectives that will contribute to good decision making. There can be a tension between skills and representation. 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.

No one should be recruited for what they bring in terms of their protected characteristics or lived experience alone. Volunteers should be sought because they have the requisite or potential skills, experience and ability for the role. Skills and backgrounds are equally important and both should be targeted simultaneously. Boards should define and understand why they want to diversify and why it is important to avoid tokenism.

## Setting the scene

NGA's annual governance survey gives an insight into the demographic of school and trust governance volunteers year on year, and the 2021 figures in this report confirm:

- All ethnic minorities remain significantly and consistently underrepresented on governing boards. 93% of respondents 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 and to 1999 where a study found that 5% of governors came from ethnic minorities.
- Young people are underrepresented on boards too. 9% of volunteers are aged under 40, including 1% aged under 30. Volunteers from ethnic minorities tend to be younger.
- Newer governors and trustees are more likely to be both young and from an ethnic minority background.
- Meanwhile, 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.

Other protected characteristics of respondents to the annual survey:

- 63% identify as female and 35% as male (1% prefer not to say).
- 97% said that the gender they identify with is the same

as their registered sex at birth – a small number (but not enough to form a percentage) said no. 2% preferred not to say.

- 7% of governors and trustees considered themselves to have a disability while 92% did not (2% prefer not to say).
- 90% of respondents identify as heterosexual 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.

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. Young people were less likely to say their board 'very much' reflected the community (21%), while Black (33%) and Asian volunteers (38%) were equally or more likely to think the same. Only volunteers from mixed/multiple ethnic groups were less likely to feel that their board very much reflects the community at 19%.

## Recruitment and retention

### What we found:

Through 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 we found a number of barriers to boards diversifying including:

- closed recruitment practices
- lack of visibility of governance
- a lack of priority given to the issue.

As a result, groups of people who make up a sizeable part of the population remain largely excluded from decision making in schools and trusts.

This same combination of organisational barriers and individual barriers to board diversity were identified by both focus group participants and from evidence in other sectors.

### Recruitment practices

A lack of open and transparent recruitment is a significant barrier to entry for underrepresented groups getting involved in governorship and trusteeship. Focus group participants were clear that the emphasis and responsibility for attracting more volunteers from underrepresented groups is with boards to advertise vacancies and provide opportunities.

The ways which boards share information about roles to recruit governors/trustees aside from the school/trust's own channels (used by 46% of respondents) are by asking people

who their governors, trustees or executives knew personally or professionally (38%); using an independent recruit service (22%) and using existing governors/trustees networks to share information about roles (20%).

Research from other sectors showed that board vacancies are often only advertised in a limited way and that there is a tendency for existing board members to draw from their own connections. This practice can replicate existing underrepresentation on boards.

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.

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.

“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.”

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

## A lack of visibility of the role

A lack of visibility of governance both within schools/trusts and within wider society leads to limited awareness and understanding of the role, its importance and how to get involved, which is restricting the opportunities for potential volunteers to join boards. Research from the education sector shows that governance does not have a high profile and is largely hidden from view. Focus group participants expressed

how there is a lack of understanding about their role from parents, staff and pupils. 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.

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.

“[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

“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?”

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

## A lack of priority given to diversity

When boards do actively seek candidates from underrepresented groups, they are more likely than not to be successful. Yet 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.

“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. 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

## Individual factors

Individual factors on the part of prospective volunteers also contribute:

- worries about confidence, in terms of doing the role well and speaking up

“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

- concerns about how much time it takes to carry out the role

“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

- added cultural barriers for some.

“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

## What can make the difference:

### Transforming recruitment:

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. Using a wide range of routes – for parent and staff roles as well as co-opted and other roles – reduces the number of potential volunteers excluded from finding out about the role. 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, including the free recruitment services, so that everyone with the potential to fulfil the role has an equal opportunity to apply.

### Visibility and a national recruitment campaign:

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.

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. 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.

## A systematic approach to retention:

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. 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.

## Inclusion

### What we found:

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. Key features of being inclusive are ensuring all volunteers feel welcomed, have their opinion valued, have a sense of belonging, are developed and are able to contribute to the board's discussions and work equally to others. It also means being open to accepting different points of view and challenge.

Overall, the picture of inclusion on boards seems fairly positive. However, 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.

White volunteers were more likely to strongly agree that their opinion is valued by their board (71%) than Asian (55%), mixed /multiple group (58%) or Black (50%) volunteers and that they feel invited to participate in board discussions equally to others (70%) than Asian (69%), mixed /multiple group (58%) or Black (55%) volunteers. Similarly young governors and trustees were less likely to feel their opinion is valued by their board when offered (53% compared to 71% of over 40s) and to feel invited to participate in board discussions equally to others (57% compared to 71% of over 40s). Focus group participants shared both positive and negative examples of inclusion:

“[My lack of confidence to ask questions] 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

“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

Focus group participants shared how feeling excluded by their board or in other arenas such as governance training can manifest. Volunteers can be excluded by being made to feel unwelcome or like they don’t ‘fit in’ to the environment; meeting practices such as having limited opportunities to speak or not being able to add topics to the agenda; a lack of access to impartial and free information to help them learn more about the topics they are discussing; and poor board dynamics including boards with long serving governors/trustees becoming stale or meetings being dominated by executive leaders.

Ultimately, a better experience with a board encourages governors and trustees to remain.

## What can make the difference:

### Creating an inclusive culture:

Inclusion so that all volunteers can participate and contribute to decision-making fully is critical, and so that they feel their contribution is valued, listened to and makes a difference. No one continues to volunteer if their efforts are not having any effect.

Chairs, governance professionals and executive leaders can have a significant impact on creating an inclusive environment where volunteers’ confidence can grow. Focus group participants highlighted how being invited to participate in discussions, being asked for feedback and ideas, being encouraged to speak up and being shown appreciation for their contributions had all added to them feeling valued.

“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 contribute.”

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

### High-quality induction:

High-quality induction and ongoing training for all governors and trustees is crucial in raising the effectiveness of governance and giving volunteers a confident start to their role. Inductions should be provided to all new volunteers regardless of their role, and be accessible and engaging.

“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

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 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

# Where next?

Boards need to reflect and understand the communities they serve and wider society. There is a big disconnect between the demographic of the people governing our schools and the pupil population they are serving which means that groups of people who make up a sizeable part of the population remain largely excluded from decision making in schools and trusts. The number of volunteers from underrepresented groups (particularly ethnic minorities and young people) needs to increase.

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, 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.

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.

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. Indeed, tackling difficult issues is core to good governance being achieved.

The full 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.

Alongside this report, NGA has updated its popular practical ‘right people around the table’ guidance to support boards with the ‘how’ of recruitment and retention with a focus on diversity and inclusion.

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.

Read the full report for more of the voices of the focus group participants and more on:

- 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 they can best make it possible for people to join boards 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.