

Annual school and trust governance survey

Full report

October 2026

A research study by the
National Governance Association



Acknowledgements

NGA would like to thank all the governors, trustees and governance professionals who took the time to complete this year's survey and share their views and experiences of school and trust governance. We recognise the time and commitment they give to governing and supporting schools and trusts; we are grateful that they also contribute their insights to this research. Their perspectives are invaluable in strengthening NGA's advocacy, ensuring the voices of the governance community are heard and represented nationally, and informing our work to improve the effectiveness of governing boards and, ultimately, educational standards and the wellbeing of young people.

This year's report builds on NGA's unique longitudinal dataset, providing valuable insights into how school and trust governance is evolving over time. We are grateful to the NGA colleagues who contributed their expertise and insights throughout the report, with further details available on the contributors page.

With special thanks to Meg Tate, Senior Policy and Research Officer, for her work on the survey design and analysis, and to Ella Colley for her editorial support.



NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.



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Foreword

Although 2026 marks NGA's 20th anniversary, the story of AGS began in 2011. Since then, the survey has taken many forms, evolving through partnerships and adapting to reflect the changing world of education. It has captured the lasting impact of the pandemic, the changing pressures facing schools and trusts, and now the emergence of artificial intelligence. This year, the survey pivots once again.



Emma Balchin,
Chief Executive,
National
Governance
Association

There are two notable changes to this year's survey. Firstly, it includes the perspectives of governance professionals for the first time. NGA has played a key role in supporting and developing the profession over many years, and bringing these voices into AGS gives us a fuller picture of governance. It strengthens our ability to speak for everyone involved in governance and makes sure governance professionals are part of the evidence base we use in our work.

Secondly, this year we have taken the opportunity to look across the whole AGS dataset, right back to 2011. One of the great strengths of an annual survey is its longevity. Sixteen years of responses allow us to see just how much has changed. When AGS began, academies made up around 5% of schools. Today, roughly half are academies, with many now part of multi academy trusts. Curriculum and SEND systems have been reformed and are now being reformed again. School funding has been through a period of considerable pressure. And, following the pandemic, artificial intelligence has emerged as a new force that could prove to be one of the most significant technological changes our sector has seen in decades.

So much has changed in education, and in the wider world, since those first questions were asked. Yet looking back also shows us that some challenges are remarkably persistent.

Understanding and communicating the experiences of governors and trustees has always been at the heart of NGA's work. This year, the survey gives us some reasons for cautious optimism. After years of worsening financial pressures, there are signs that finances have begun to stabilise. Concerns about SEND have eased too, following years of increasing pressure and as the government's reform agenda begins to take shape.

These changes may help explain why respondents were less negative about government than in previous years, with dissatisfaction at its lowest point in the survey's history. But we should be careful about interpreting this as satisfaction. Much of the change came from a shift towards neutrality. This feels more like a sector watching and waiting to see how reforms play out.

As some pressures ease, others come to the fore. Attendance and falling pupil numbers, particularly in primary schools, are now demanding more of boards' attention. And some challenges remain as persistent as ever. Recruitment is still difficult, while boards continue to face challenges in reflecting the diversity of the communities they serve. There are some encouraging signs, but they are not enough. Inclusive governance remains an important challenge for the sector and one we must not lose sight of.

I am always struck by how much this survey matters beyond NGA itself. With over 3,000 responses this year alone, it gives us a substantial body of evidence about what governors, trustees and governance professionals are seeing and experiencing. We use that evidence to shape our policy work and our conversations with the Department for Education and the wider sector. Our findings are regularly used in reports, discussions and public debate, helping us make the case for governance based on evidence rather than anecdote.

To everyone who contributed to this year's survey, thank you. Your responses give NGA the evidence we need to influence policymakers and make sure the voice of governance is heard. More importantly, they give the sector a chance to see itself reflected in the experiences of thousands of people governing schools and trusts across England.

“Across its history,
the **Annual Governance Survey**
has built a rich picture of
how governance is changing,
capturing trends across roles,
regions, school phases and
governance structures.”

About the Annual Governance Survey

NGA's Annual School and Trust Governance Survey (AGS) is the largest and longest-running survey of its kind, providing a unique and comprehensive picture of governance across state-funded schools and trusts in England. Now in its 16th year, the survey has evolved significantly over time, through partnerships with organisations including TES and Edurio, and has brought together more than 60,000 governance voices. This year the survey evolved again, including the voices of governance professionals for the first time and reflecting on data across the entire survey lifespan.

The findings provide an important evidence base for understanding the experiences, challenges and priorities of those involved in governance, and play a vital role in shaping NGA's representation of the sector and the support it provides to governing boards.

The voice of the governance community in 2026

Challenges and priorities

Attendance has surged up the agenda.

Up 10pp as a challenge and 10pp as a priority, it is now the top priority in secondary schools (50%) and third most cited in primaries (33%).

Falling pupil numbers are a major threat to schools and trusts.

What was a marginal concern in 2018 (10%) is now cited by 27% of respondents as a top challenge. The pressure is particularly acute in primary schools, where 47% identify falling pupil numbers as a top budgetary challenge, compared with 32% of secondary schools.

Finance and funding

Schools increasingly rely on licensed deficits to balance their budgets.

The proportion of respondents reporting their school or trust is in a deficit position has more than doubled since 2018, rising from 5% to 12%. Holding reserves was more common during the pandemic, however this trend has reversed and just 57% can now balance their budget without drawing on a surplus.

Supporting SEND provision overtakes staffing as the biggest pressure on budgets.

The cost of supporting pupils with SEND and high needs as a top budgetary pressure has risen from 47% in 2022 to 68% in 2026, overtaking staff pay for the first time.

Schools are looking at staff restructures to stay afloat.

Although down on last year, schools are more likely than in 2021 to be looking at staff restructuring (44%) to ensure financial sustainability in the next 3-5 years. This is especially true for nurseries (51%) and primaries (46%).

Academisation

Despite the white paper's vision, schools are not rushing to join MATs.

Just 34% of respondents say the white paper has prompted conversations about their school joining a MAT, while the proportion who have decided to join a MAT in the near future has fallen from 15% to 12%, its lowest post-COVID level.

MATs

Trusts have an opportunity to strengthen local voices.

Whilst most local governors are happy with their delegated functions, communication with the trust board and feeling that their school is part of one organisation, levels of agreement suggest there is more to do to ensure local governance feels meaningful and inclusive.

Ofsted

Views on Ofsted inspection remain subdued despite new framework.

Seven in ten respondents (71%) felt their most recent inspection gave a fair and accurate picture of the school, only marginally higher than the record low of 68% recorded in 2022 and well below the 80% seen historically.

SEND

Boards are taking proactive approach to SEND reform.

70% of respondents agreed that the government's planned SEND reform has triggered board discussions about their school/s current SEND provision.



Stakeholder engagement

There is significant untapped potential in stakeholder feedback.

Just 53% agree that feedback from stakeholders regularly influences their board's decisions, while 33% neither agree nor disagree and 9% disagree.



Staffing

Finding staff is a skills challenge, keeping them is a workload challenge.

A lack of suitably qualified candidates was the top recruitment challenge (51%), meanwhile workload and wellbeing was the top retention challenge (61%).

More schools than ever are embracing flexible working.

56% of respondents said their school or trust has a flexible working policy in 2026, up from 39% in 2019.



Demographics

Highly educated individuals are overrepresented in the governance workforce.

Almost nine in ten governors (87%) are educated to degree level or above.



Positive impact

Despite persistent pressures, most governors and trustees continue to feel their board is making a positive difference.

84% agreed that their governing board had made a positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes of their school or trust in the past year – in line with last year's findings.



We have a great mix of governors... that enables us as a collective to have a positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes of the school. I remain incredibly proud to serve on the board and am proud of the contribution I and the other governors make. ”



Artificial intelligence

Most governors and trustees don't use AI in their role.

Six in ten respondents rarely or never use AI to support their governance role, while 28% use it sometimes and just 10% use it often or very often.

AI policy is not on the agenda in schools and trusts.

Over two thirds of respondents (68%) reported that their school or trust does not have an AI policy in place, including 12% where AI use has not yet been discussed by the board.



Chairing

Desire to chair has reached a record low, with the demands of the role a significant barrier.

Just 25% are considering taking on a chairing role, down from 41% in 2016 and the lowest level recorded to date with major concerns surrounding time commitment, workload, stress and responsibility.



What does this mean for government?

As the education system faces falling pupil numbers, persistent funding constraints and acute inclusion pressures, sustainable improvement cannot be achieved without strategic investment in the individuals, structures and standards that govern it.

Against this backdrop, we set out the following recommendations for government to strengthen governance and support sustainable improvement.

Support continuous accountability



Formally designate school and trust governance as a foundational component of the national accountability framework. To support this, the government should introduce mandatory requirements for an External Review of Governance every three years.

Empower the local tier



Anchor the new trust quality standards in the four dimensions of trust governance, requiring trusts to demonstrate an integrated, adaptive system. Crucially, the DfE should establish clear standards for local governance that require trusts to demonstrate meaningful delegation and show how they bring authentic community intelligence and influence into decision making.

Invest in governance



Invest in a sustained, place-sensitive national governance recruitment campaign, delivered in partnership with regional leaders, mayoral combined authorities and local civic networks.

Recognise and reward inclusion accountability



The DfE and Ofsted must redesign accountability to actively recognise and reward inclusive practice. This requires inclusion-sensitive metrics that positively recognise schools that successfully support pupils with complex needs. Contextual inclusion data, published alongside headline results, should track a school's SEND intake relative to its local area alongside retention, unexplained exits and persistent absence rates.

Harness AI responsibly



Build on existing DfE guidance and funding commitments to deliver mandatory, universal standards and safeguards for AI adoption in schools that:

- secures effective data protection, bias mitigation and procurement standards
- protects the human core of teaching, leadership and governance
- prevents digital disadvantage through extended funding and equitable access

Tackle falling rolls strategically



Introduce a national falling rolls strategy and empower region-based authorities to coordinate place-planning and admissions.



Develop a long-term workforce strategy



Publish a costed, 10-to-15-year national education workforce strategy, comparable to the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan. This must address multi-year pay certainty, career development pathways, recruitment pipelines, role design, and flexible working conditions.

These recommendations reflect the priorities set out in NGA's recent mid-term manifesto, which draws on the findings of this year's survey alongside wider evidence from the governance community.

For more detail on our positions and the action we are calling for, read the full manifesto at nga.org.uk/manifesto.

Review SEND system capacity



Urgently audit specialist and alternative provision places to establish where shortages exist and whether specialist capacity is reaching those with the most complex needs. This must inform targeted investment to ensure mainstream settings are suitably prepared and resourced.

Fully fund induction and development



Introduce and fully fund a mandated baseline of high-quality induction and role-specific development for all governors and trustees.



Contributors

Each chapter of this report draws on the expertise of NGA colleagues specialising in different areas of school and trust governance. We are grateful to all contributors for sharing their knowledge and insights to inform this year's report.



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Deputy Chief Executive

Sam oversees NGA's policy, research and influencing work. With over 15 years' experience across the education sector, he specialises in school accountability and workforce.



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Michael leads NGA's policy and influencing work, representing members and championing effective governance. He works with government, parliamentarians and sector partners to advocate for stronger governance and a stronger education system.



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Strategic Lead for Governance Professionals

Ruth champions and supports the role of governance professionals across the education sector, overseeing NGA's professional development programmes, publications, networks and conferences. She has over 20 years' experience as a governance professional across both the maintained and academy trust sectors.



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Sabreen oversees the creation and curation of content for our members, including guidance, publications and other resources. She also leads on the policy areas of staffing and business.



Meg Tate

Senior Policy and Research Officer

Meg takes the lead on developing NGA's research programme, including designing and overseeing our Annual Governance Survey. She is also editorial lead for our Governing Matters magazine and weekly e-newsletter, alongside her policy work on the environment and sustainability, exams and assessments, and governor and trustee recruitment.



Fariha Choudhury

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Fariha supports the development of NGA's policy and thought leadership outputs with a particular focus on multi academy trust governance, school accountability and educational disadvantage.



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Senior Advice Officer

Deiniol provides advice and guidance to NGA Gold members, alongside writing for the website, magazine and weekly newsletter and leading our Young Governors Network. Deiniol's policy work is focused on governing board practice.

“While **national policy debates** look to the future, challenges and priorities reported by the governance community underline familiar, **persistent pressures** dominating board room discussions.”

Sam Henson • Deputy Chief Executive



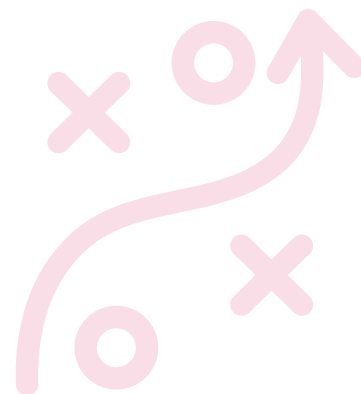
Challenges and priorities

Nationally, the past twelve months were characterised by an education system that is reshaping for the world beyond today. The findings of the curriculum and assessment review had barely settled before a white paper featuring long-term SEND reforms was followed by hints of more change with the arrival of a new Prime Minister and Education Secretary.

While national policy debates look to the future, the challenges and priorities reported by the governance community underline familiar, persistent pressures dominating board room discussions.

Challenges

As in previous surveys, we asked respondents to tell us the top three challenges facing their school or trust. The 2026 environment is defined by compounding challenges.



Top challenges				
2025			2026	
1	Balancing the budget	68%	Balancing the budget	58% (-10pp)
2	Support for pupils with special educational needs	63%	Support for pupils with special educational needs	45% (-18pp)
3	Staff wellbeing including workload	23%	Attendance	32% (+10pp)
4	Attendance	22%	Falling pupil numbers	27% (+5pp)
5	Falling pupil numbers	22%	The attainment of disadvantaged children	18% (+4pp)
6	Managing and improving premises	15%	Managing and improving premises	17% (+2pp)
7	Improving attainment	14%	Improving attainment	17% (+3pp)
8	The attainment of disadvantaged children	14%	Behaviour and exclusions	11% (-3pp)
9	Attracting high quality teaching staff	11%	Services for pupils (eg health services, mental health support)	10% (-1pp)
10	Behaviour and exclusions	10%	Staff wellbeing	10% (—)

At first glance, the results may suggest a positive shift in long-term pressures:

- **Balancing the budget** – up to now on a perpetual journey upwards – is down 10 percentage points (pp) compared to last year.
- **Support for pupils with SEND** comes in 18pp below its 2025 level.
- **Staff wellbeing and workload** down from 23% in 2025 to just 10% in 2026.

Conversely, both attendance and falling pupil numbers have seen an upwards trend. These engrained, structural challenges have been exacerbated by ongoing issues including extreme weather and a reducing birthrate. Our analysis highlights prominent issues being marginally displaced as empty chairs in the classroom become more commonplace.

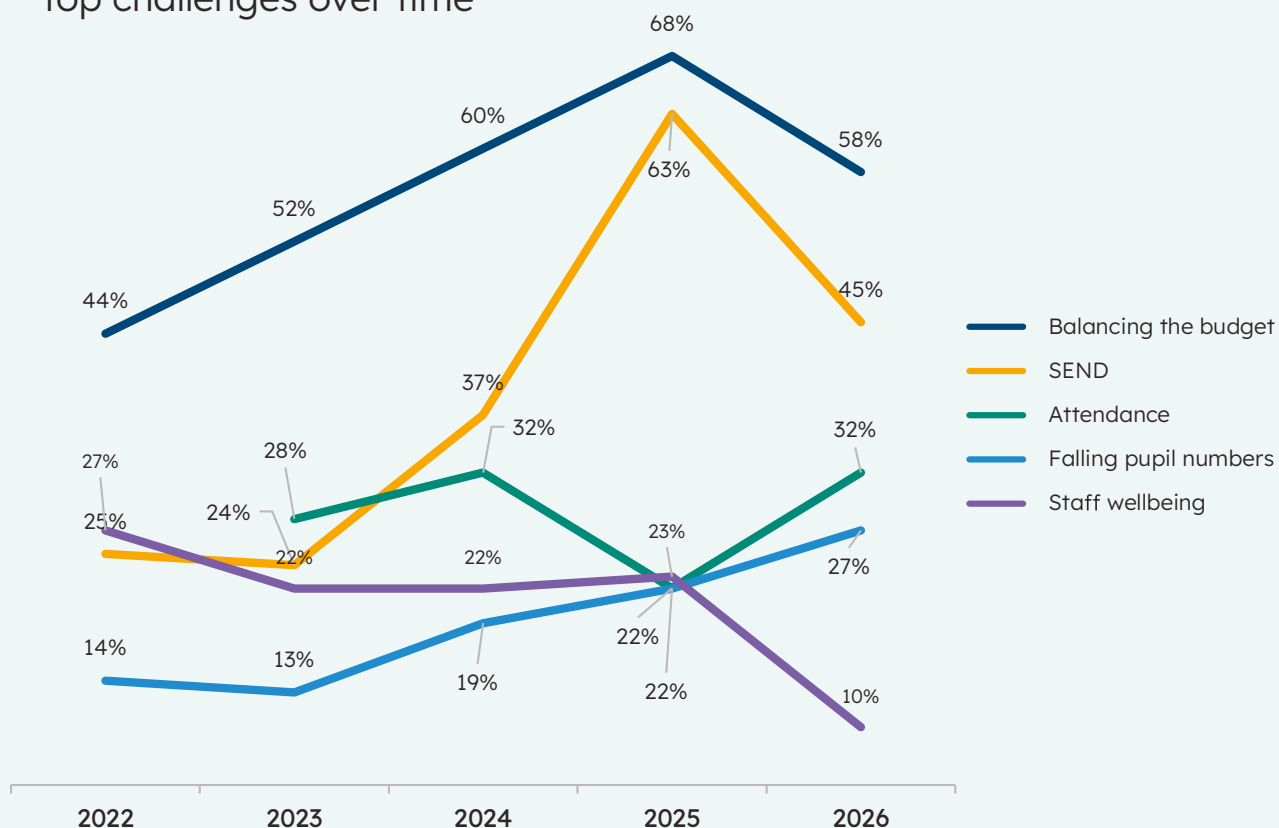
Balancing the budget has seen a notable shift downwards but remains the biggest challenge, as it has been in every year we have asked. The fall from 68%

potentially reflects a spending review that preceded this survey, surprising some as it introduced slightly more, rather than slightly less, money. But a majority of boards cite budget as a top three concern and a return to 2024 levels is not a definitive sign of recovery.

Support for pupils with SEND fell from 63% to 45%; a significant single-year movement, potentially pointing to optimism following the reforms announced in 2026. Respondents' comments indicate that SEND system challenges have become a permanent fixture. This issue has not been solved; it has been absorbed. That distinction matters enormously for how government reads this data.

Attendance is arguably the main story of the year. Up 10pp as a challenge and 10pp as a priority, it is now the third most cited challenge in secondary schools (44%) and fourth most cited in primaries (29%). Improving school attendance has moved from a post-pandemic aftershock to a settled feature of the system and boards are treating it accordingly.

Top challenges over time



SEND reform is reaching boards

As supporting children with SEND has been a consistent challenge, it is perhaps unsurprising that seven in ten respondents (70%) said the government's planned SEND reforms have prompted board discussion about current provision in their school or trust. The figure is consistent across phases and higher among trustees, at 75% in MATs and 73% in SATs. This indicates that boards are not waiting for legislation before examining their own inclusion practice.



“ SEND provision was already a focus for discussion but the White Paper has reinforced it as a priority . ”

Stakeholder voice remains the weak link

Just 53% of respondents agree or strongly agree that stakeholder feedback regularly influences their board's decision making, with more positive findings in standalone schools.

“ I'd like this to happen more. We hear a lot of positive spin from our Head and leadership team, but not many other voices ”



Single academy trustees



Maintained school governors



MAT local governors



MAT trustees

Special school respondents report the highest level of agreement (62%) and primary the lowest (52%). Overall, this is more concerning when considered alongside reported challenges: falling rolls, attendance and inclusion cannot be understood, let alone addressed, without listening to parents, pupils and staff. The finding that almost half of boards make decisions without stakeholder feedback regularly shaping them points to a governance issue that NGA will be exploring further in the year ahead.

“ Our stakeholder engagement is not very scientific - it is mostly anecdotal. ”

Challenges vary by setting

Primary and secondary settings are managing different challenges under the same funding settlement. Primary boards report viability challenges, with balancing the budget ranking highest followed by SEND and falling pupil numbers. Meanwhile, secondary boards are more likely to encounter challenges around engagement and equity, with attendance a more pressing concern.

Structures shape the picture

There is a marked contrast in reported challenges for maintained schools and academy trusts, reflecting the risks and opportunities that exist in different structures. However, it is difficult to definitively diagnose the cause of challenges seen across the MAT sector given that trusts vary so significantly in size, composition and characteristics.

Top five challenges by phase

Primary

Balancing the budget	62%
Support for pupils with special educational needs	51%
Falling pupil numbers	33%
Attendance	29%
Improving attainment	17%

Secondary

Balancing the budget	51%
Attendance	44%
Support for pupils with special educational needs	31%
The attainment of disadvantaged children	25%
Improving attainment	22%

Top five challenges by school type

Maintained schools

Balancing the budget	65%
Support for pupils with special educational needs	47%
Falling pupil numbers	30%
Attendance	27%
Managing and improving premises	18%

Academy trusts

Balancing the budget	50%
Support for pupils with special educational needs	43%
Attendance	36%
Falling pupil numbers	23%
The attainment of disadvantaged children	21%

Over time

The past eight years mark a significant shift in the challenges facing educational leadership. The emphasis has evolved from managing workforce and operational pressures towards making difficult strategic decisions about resources and changing pupil needs.

Falling pupil numbers have moved from a future concern to a pressing reality for schools. The proportion of respondents reporting that their setting's finances had been impacted by this issue rose from 39% in 2024 to 44% in 2025, with particularly sharp increases among primary and nursery settings. Just 10% of boards identified falling rolls as a top challenge in 2018; by 2026, this has risen to 27%, highlighting the embedded consequences of demographic change.

Staff wellbeing has the most striking movement across eight years, disappearing from the top 10 challenges. In 2019, 62% of boards named staff wellbeing and workload as a top challenge; this year it is 10%. Attracting high-quality teaching staff has also fallen from 50% in 2018 to 7% and developing and retaining staff from 17% to 5%. This reflects a labour market shift whereby recruitment is easier than it was, but staffing remains a challenge – just no longer the *most* difficult one.

Priorities

Reported priorities mirror challenges in most areas. Staff wellbeing is no longer a top 10 priority, falling significantly from 24% to 10%. Equality, diversity and inclusion doubled from 6% to 12%, rising fastest among maintained boards (5% to 13%), and ensuring the pupil premium makes an impact rose to 15%.

Top priorities

2025			2026		
1	Support for pupils with special educational needs	53%	Support for pupils with special educational needs	45% (-8pp)	
2	Improving attainment	50%	Improving attainment	41% (-9pp)	
3	Ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum	33%	Attendance	36% (+10pp)	
4	Attendance	26%	Ensuring best use of resources	29% (+3pp)	
5	Ensuring best use of resources	26%	Ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum	28% (-5pp)	
6	Staff wellbeing including workload	24%	Ensuring pupil premium makes an impact	15% (+3pp)	
7	Developing and retaining staff	14%	Developing and retaining staff	13% (-1pp)	
8	Ensuring pupil premium makes an impact	12%	Parental and community engagement	13% (+1pp)	
9	Managing and improving premises	12%	Pupil mental health and wellbeing	12% (+1pp)	
10	Parental and community engagement	12%	Equality, diversity, and inclusion	12% (+6pp)	

Looking beyond the top 10, three items appear on the list for the first time: school readiness, complaints, and the use of AI in schools. The first two describe pressures arriving at the school gate from outside the system, and the third is still a new and rapidly evolving area.

Priorities vary by setting

Attendance is now the top priority for secondaries (rising from third place last year) whereas support for pupils with SEND takes the top spot in primaries despite increasing focus on attendance here too (moving from a ranking of sixth to third).

The variation between 2025 and 2026 reveals a clear sector-wide shift in priorities regardless of board type. Both LA and trust boards saw a substantial rise in the importance of attendance, which grew from 21% to 31% for LA schools and from 32% to 43% for trusts.

“[We have tried] publishing attendance figures, frequent referral to its importance in newsletters, and praising the majority for good attendance.”

Top five priorities by phase

Primary		Secondary	
Support for pupils with special educational needs	49%	Attendance	50%
Improving attainment	42%	Improving attainment	47%
Attendance	33%	Support for pupils with special educational needs	35%
Ensuring best use of resources	30%	Ensuring best use of resources	25%
Ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum	30%	Ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum	22%

50%



of respondents governing in secondary schools said attendance was a top priority.

Over time

Between 2021 and 2026, the priorities facing schools have changed significantly. In the years immediately after the pandemic, the focus was on helping pupils catch up, supporting staff wellbeing and restoring a broad curriculum.

By 2026, these concerns have been replaced by longer-term pressures, particularly pupil absence, financial constraints and the growing demand for support for pupils with SEND. The focus has therefore shifted from recovering from the pandemic to managing increasing pressure on schools' resources and capacity.

What did today's priorities look like in 2021?

Demographic shifts, high-needs funding and (to a lesser extent) persistent absence sit largely outside any individual board's control. While boards are proactively responding with the seriousness these issues demand, responsiveness alone can't tackle structural and societal issues.



Support for pupils with SEND

2021

14%

2026

45%



Ensuring best use of resources

18%

29%



Attendance

29%
(2023)

36%



Staff wellbeing including workload

21%

10%



Improving attainment

40%

41%



Ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum

45%

28%



2022

Post-pandemic focus

- **Education recovery** following the pandemic becomes a top challenge for one in four.
- **Safeguarding** concerns surge following school closures.

2023

New pressures emerge

- **Attendance** enters the strategic priority list, with more than a quarter of respondents identifying this as a top priority.
- The impact of a **cost of living** crisis hits school budgets.

2024-2025

Recovery focus fades

- Boards continue to report **attendance** as a key issue and top of the agenda for secondary settings.
- Findings highlight a 'broken' **SEND system** under increasing strain.

Reform plans meet persistent pressures

- **Attendance** continues to be the dominant focus for most boards.
- **Falling pupil numbers** climbs up the priority list as more schools feel the financial pinch.

2026

“Financial sustainability remains **a significant concern**, with the sector still some way from the position it occupied before the pandemic.”

Sam Henson • Deputy Chief Executive



Finance and funding

Against a backdrop of continuing financial pressures, a number of key indicators have moved in a positive direction in 2026. More boards report being able to balance their budgets, while fewer are relying on reserves to do so. However, these improvements should be taken with caution. Rather than signalling a clear recovery in school finances, the data suggest a degree of stabilisation from a much weaker position.

Financial sustainability remains a significant concern, with the sector still some way from the position it occupied before the pandemic, and further back still from the longer-term picture seen earlier in the decade.

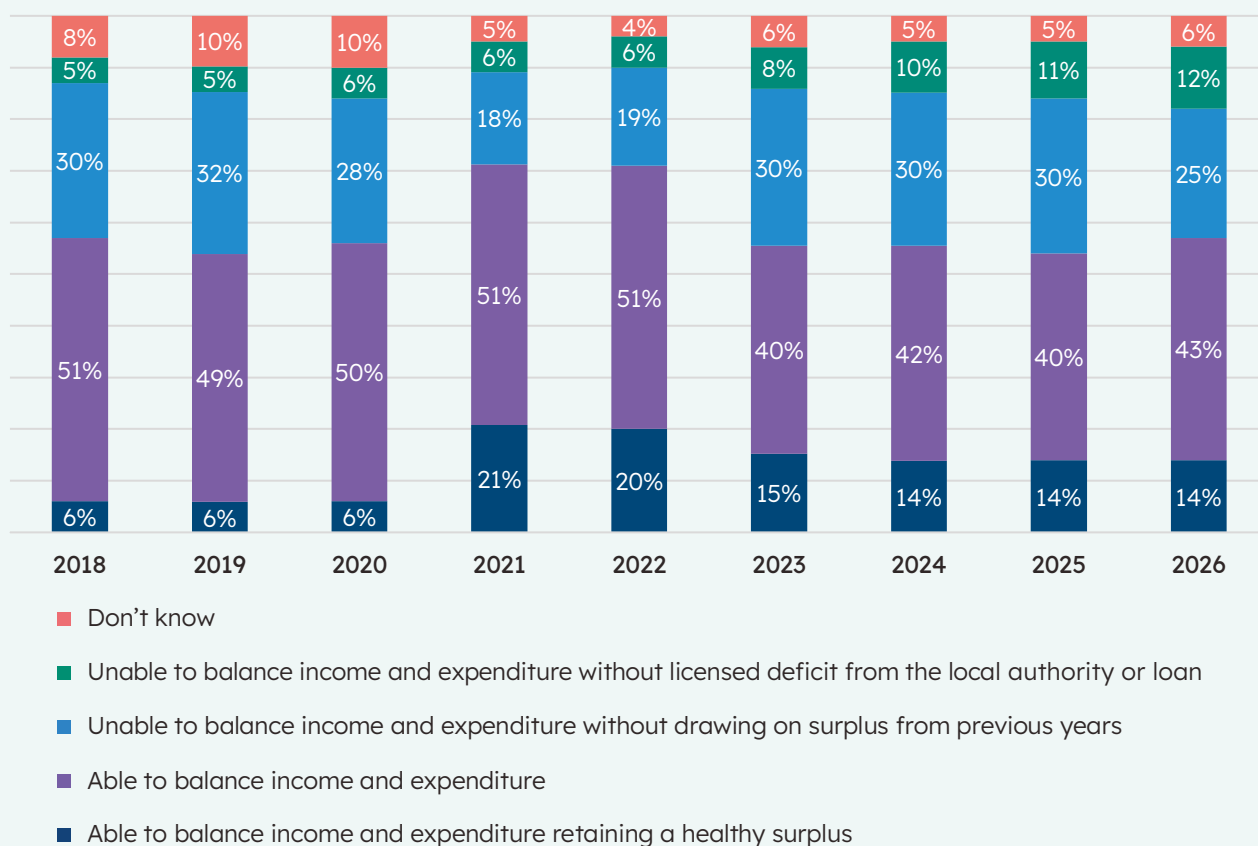
The current financial position

Forty-three per cent of boards can balance income and expenditure, up from 40% last year. The proportion drawing on previous years' surplus to stay afloat fell from 30% to 25%, the first meaningful fall since 2022.

However, if we set this against the long-term picture, the actual level of improvement flattens out. From 2018 to 2020, the proportion balancing income and expenditure consistently hovered around 50%. And so while this year's data shows a clear improvement, the

picture painted by the governance community shows we are now several years into a new normal in which 43% balancing the budget counts as good news.

Alongside this, two other key indicators have failed to move in the right direction. The proportion of boards balancing the budget while holding a healthy surplus has fallen from 21% in 2021 to 14% in 2026. Boards unable to balance without a licensed deficit or a loan has doubled, from 6% to 12%. This clearly shows that the headroom that schools and trusts have been reliant on for the last few years is now disappearing while borrowing is growing.

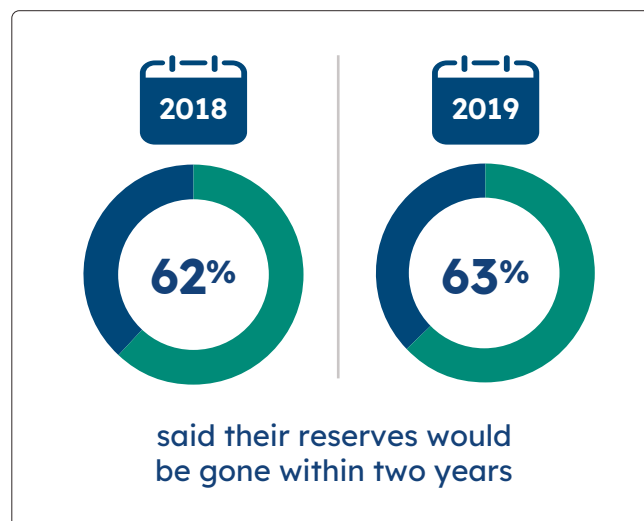


In 2018 (62%), and again in 2019 (63%), most respondents told us their reserves would be gone within two years. We published that warning twice as a forecast that NGA among other sector voices used to campaign for government action. In 2026 this has become the reality for the 25% still drawing on surplus this year.

What is squeezing the budget?

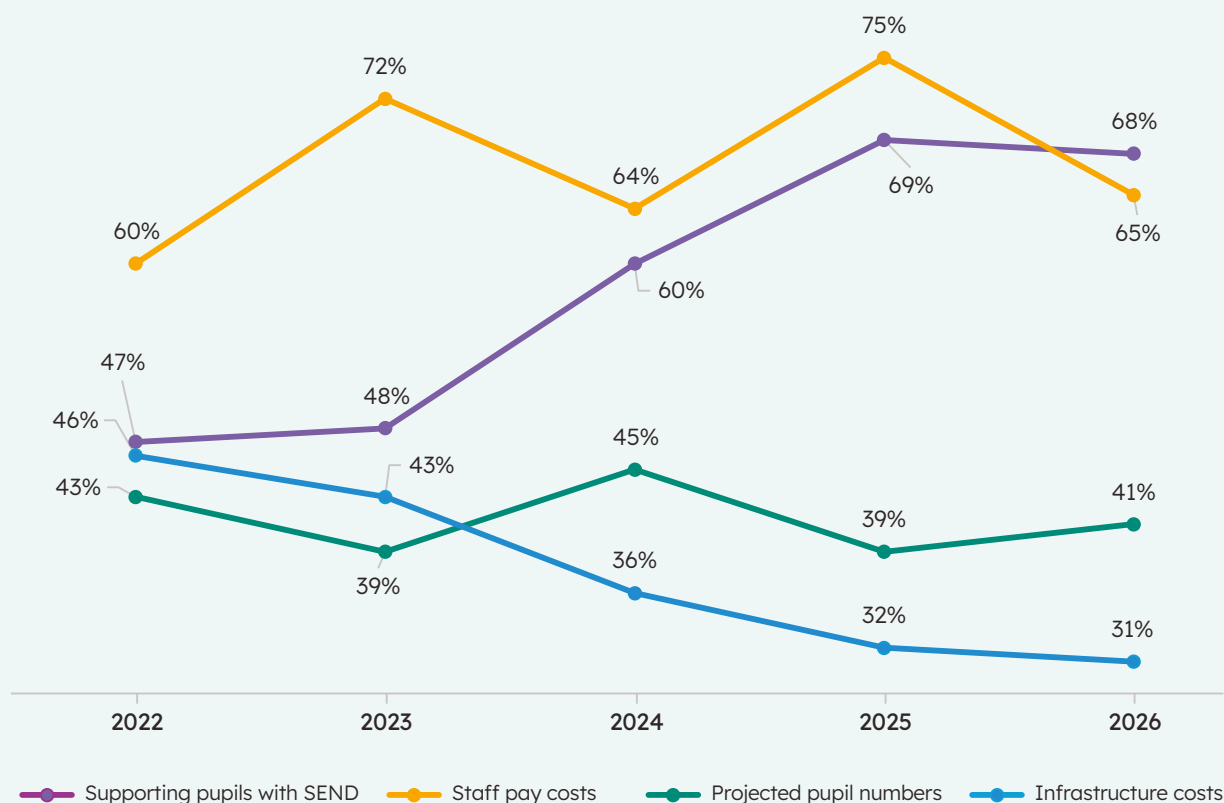
Staff pay remains a big pressure on setting a balanced budget, with 65% identifying this as one of their top three budget challenges, but down ten percentage points on last year's 75%. Infrastructure cost challenges which include energy, technology and catering, are at a five-year low of 31%, down from a 2022 peak of 46%.

However, one significant pressure has moved in the opposite direction. The cost of supporting pupils with SEND and high needs has climbed from 47% in 2022 to 68% this year. It has now overtaken staff pay as a key challenge for the first time.



“ We are doing everything we can to attract families to choose our school; unfortunately [we are] in an area of falling pupil numbers... ”

Top challenges to a balanced budget



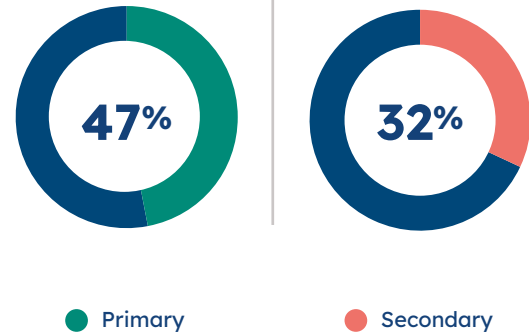
Projected pupil numbers are cited by 41% of boards, rising to 47% amongst those governing primary settings and down to 32% for those in secondary. Falling rolls have stopped being a planning assumption and started being a very real dent on the accounts.

This collective combination is the real story of this chapter. The pressures easing are the ones that the government can move through pay settlements, energy markets and economic policies. The pressures intensifying meanwhile are the ones caused by deep systematic issues where resolution is dependent on long term reforms or, in the case of birthrates, somewhat beyond government control. Boards have been alluding to these pressures for a long time – as far back as 2019, 78% disagreed that they received sufficient funding to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. Seven years on, boards are reporting that they are now absorbing the cost of that gap from budgets intended for everything else.

The three-to-five-year view

Only 19% of respondents believe their school or trust will be financially sustainable in the medium-to-long term at current funding levels. While that is up from 16% last year, it is down from 29% in 2021.

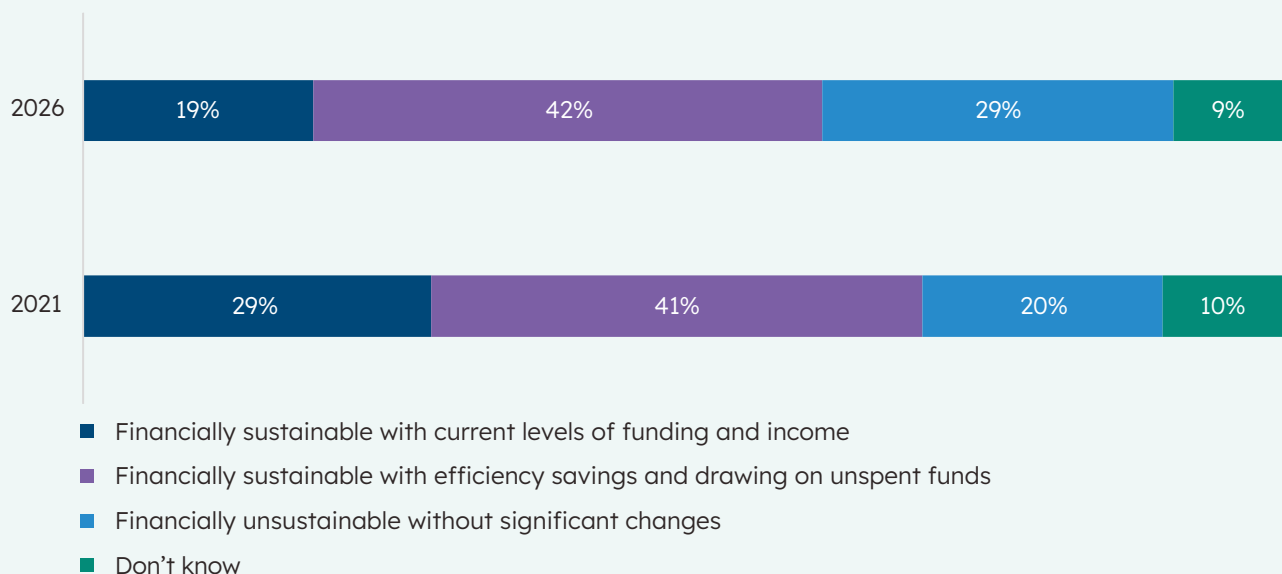
Projected pupil numbers are a top challenge to balancing the budget



78%

In 2019, 78% disagreed that they received sufficient funding to meet the needs of pupils with SEND

Based on projections, what is the medium to long term (3-5 years) position of your school or trust?



Twenty-nine per cent say they will not be sustainable without significant change, again better than last year's 32%, but not a number that indicates long term durability for a sector encountering new and emerging budget pressures.

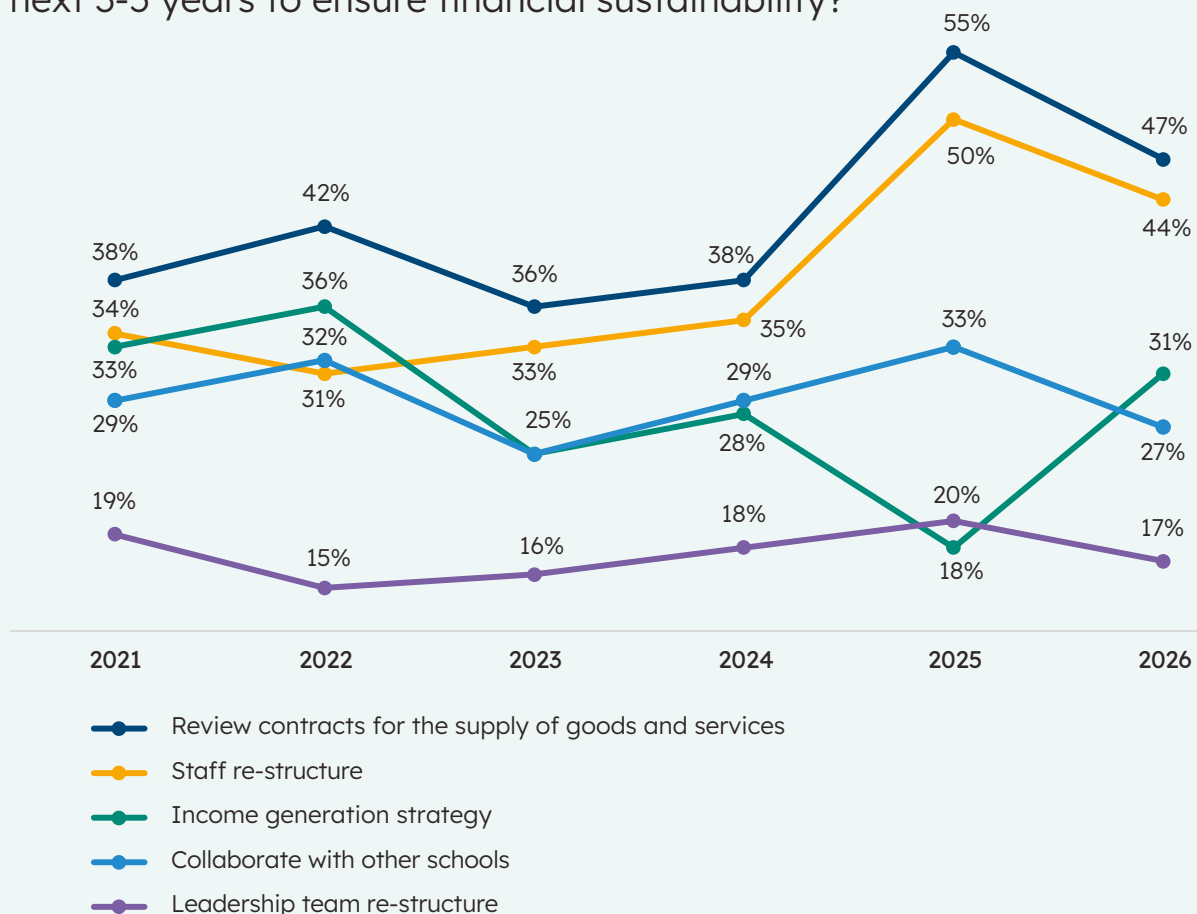
With four in five boards unable to see a sustainable path with current funding, a three-point improvement does little to alleviate financial anxieties across the sector.

What boards are doing about it

For many boards, the easy savings have been made. This year's responses emphasise the financial challenges that persist and the difficult decisions governors and trustees face as a result.

Respondents continue to identify reviewing contracts for goods and services as the cost saving measure schools and trusts are most likely to take.

Which measures is your board likely to take over the next 3-5 years to ensure financial sustainability?



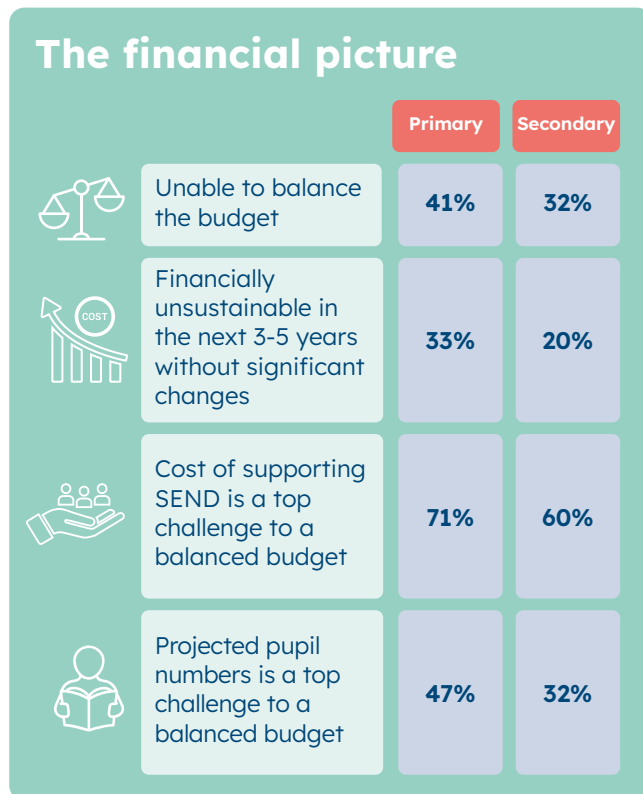
“...Continually having to look for efficiencies [and] student number growth, but at some point, there will be no space to grow [and] nothing left to trim...”

Staff restructure is a close second and whilst this measure fell from 50% to 44% this year, this still sits well above the 34% recorded in 2021. Income generation is a clear focus, increasing to 31%, up from 18% in 2021, though still short of the 2022 peak of 36%.

Collectively, these strategies show a governance community actively looking for solutions, rather than simply accepting a less ambitious offering for their children and young people.

Where is the pressure felt most?

This year's findings highlight that primary schools are in a materially worse position than secondaries. This is partly because falling birth rates are yet to impact most secondary schools, meaning the challenges for the sector as a whole look set to increase in future years.



Variation across board types

The sharper divide is by board type. Maintained governing bodies face the biggest hurdles on nearly every measure.

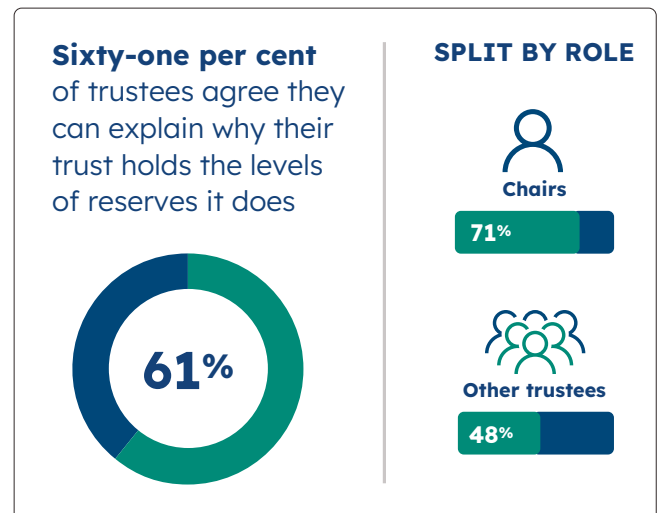
- Just 16% consider their finances sustainable over the next three to five years, against 27% of SATs, 23% of MATs and 21% of local governing bodies.
- Thirty-nine per cent say they are financially unsustainable without significant change. This is more than double the MAT figure of 16%.
- Nineteen per cent already need a licensed deficit or loan to balance, compared with 5% of SATs and LGBs and 3% of MATs.

Maintained boards are also the most likely to plan a staff restructure (49%). MAT respondents report less distress and are the least likely to consider major structural change, with only 5% considering joining another group of schools.

MAT reserves

Reserves policy is one of the clearest expressions of a trust's strategy, both in terms of what it is protecting against and what it is saving towards. Sixty-one per cent of trustees agree they can explain why their trust holds the level of reserves it does. This finding suggests that more than a third of trustees do not have a robust understanding of their trust's reserves policy, which is of some concern, particularly where some of their schools may be experiencing financial hardships.

Trust size is also relevant here. Confidence was highest in trusts of two to five academies (71%) and lowest in those of 21 to 30 (44%) indicating that understanding the reserves strategy potentially gets harder as organisations grow.



Where this leaves us

As indicated by the overall challenges and priorities for 2026, the finding of this chapter is not so much about recovery, but rather a plateau at a level the sector would have found alarming in 2018. **Two things follow.**

First, the improvements are what boards have done, and the deterioration is what has been done to them. Schools and trusts have found efficiencies, reviewed contracts, restructured and generated income. What is left is largely now beyond boards' control – they cannot close the scale of a structural funding gap simply through better governance.

Second, one pressure is rising significantly faster than anything else: SEND provision. This has now become the defining budget challenge in primary schools. Until high-needs funding matches demand, every other improvement in this chapter is temporary.

“Lots of our **teaching/support staff** have left schools in the area to work at [a large private company as they offer] **higher wages** and **working from home/flexible hours**”

Sabreen Marashli • Content Delivery Lead



Staffing

Staffing has long been a dominant challenge for schools, from recruiting and retaining teachers to ensuring they have the resources to deliver high-quality provision. Over the past decade, a combination of pressures has made this increasingly difficult to sustain. Around 30% of respondents have consistently reported difficulties recruiting teachers over the past decade, while staff restructuring has remained one of the most common measures taken to reduce costs long-term.

More recently, these pressures have extended to support staff. Recruitment of support staff has now overtaken teachers as the most acute challenge, with schools struggling to compete with the salaries available in sectors such as retail. While additional government funding has eased some of the immediate pressure on school finances, and flexible working policies have become increasingly common, schools are still struggling to match the flexibility and conditions offered elsewhere in the labour market.

Recruitment

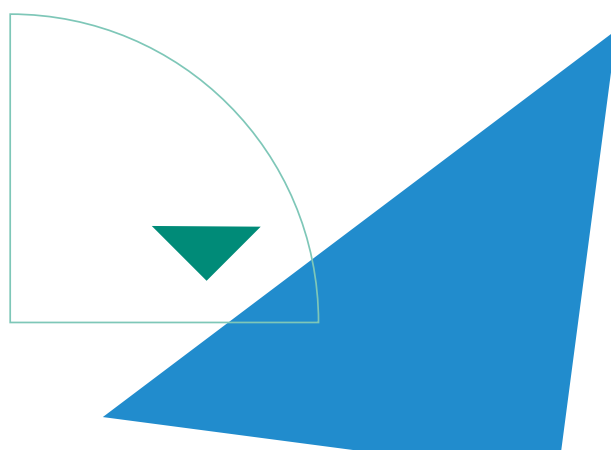
The top reported recruitment challenges suggest that issues are primarily driven by workforce supply rather than school-specific factors, with pupil behaviour (9%) and the school/trust's reputation (10%) the least selected challenges.

Lack of suitable candidates remains a key factor in recruitment, having been identified as the leading obstacle to recruiting and retaining staff for the past three years of the survey. This is a longstanding challenge with half of boards (50%) reporting difficulties attracting good candidates for teaching roles in 2016 and continues to be a priority for policymakers today.

Subject-specific shortages have also persisted, particularly in secondary schools, where 78% report difficulties recruiting candidates in specific subjects. The scale of the challenge has historically been greatest in maths, with 68% of boards reporting difficulties recruiting teachers in 2016, compared with 51% for physics, 40% for chemistry and 28% for biology.

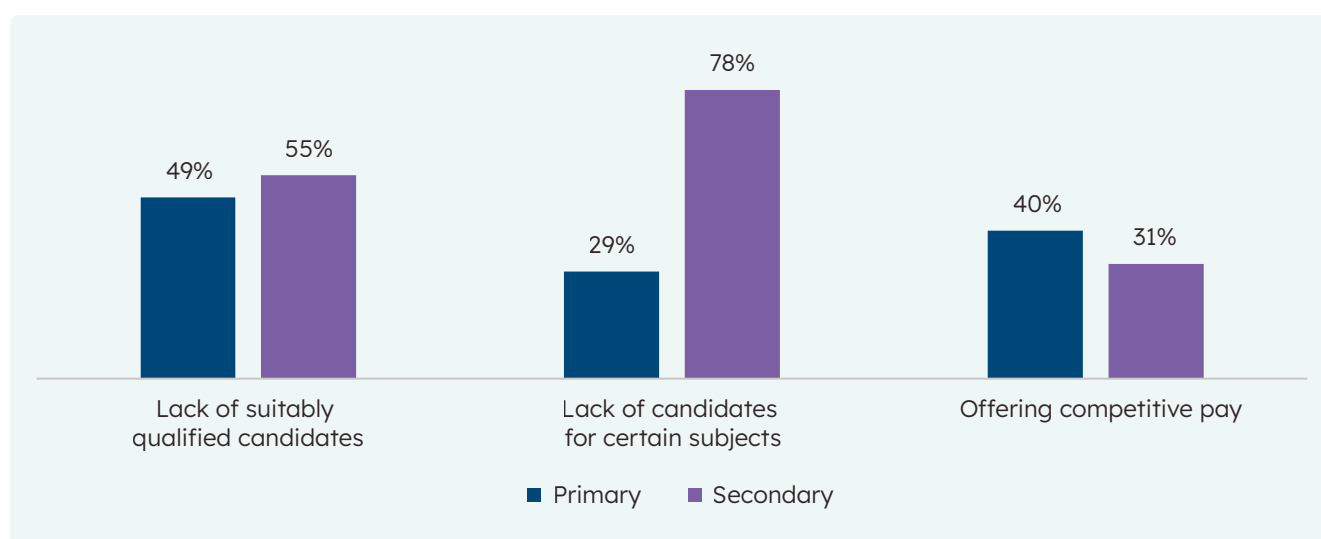
Top challenges

	Recruitment		Retention	
1	Lack of suitably qualified candidates	51%	Managing workload and wellbeing	61%
2	Lack of candidates for certain subjects	40%	Career advancement within the school	41%
3	Offering competitive pay	38%	Maintaining the current staffing structure	31%
4	Location	34%	Offering flexible working opportunities	29%
5	Flexible working	32%	Pay progression	25%



Specific barriers noted by respondents included the struggles of recruiting support staff – consistent with data from last year’s survey, where support staff became the hardest group to recruit and retain. Staff lacking the expertise needed to support pupils with SEND was also identified as a key issue. As special schools are particularly affected by these factors, it is perhaps unsurprising that these settings are most likely to identify a lack of suitably qualified candidates (63%).

“ Recruiting high quality support staff—TAs, lunchtime supervisors, breakfast/after school club staff is more challenging. ”



Retention

Sustainable workloads and clear career pathways posed the largest challenges to retention. Meanwhile, pupil behaviour (14%), issues with parents (14%) and opportunities for professional development (14%) were viewed as lesser issues.

This aligns with the increasing prominence given to workload and wellbeing, cited in last year’s survey as the biggest challenge relating to staffing and second biggest challenge to recruiting and retaining staff. While it was the leading retention challenge across all schools, it was particularly pronounced in all-through (76%) and secondary schools (67%), suggesting heightened workforce pressures in those phases.

Maintaining staffing structures continues to be an important issue for governing boards, driven both by the challenge of balancing budgets and, increasingly, by the operational impact of falling pupil numbers. Financial pressures on staffing are far from new. As far back as 2012, 51% of boards reported that financial constraints meant they would need to reduce spending on staff over the following two years. More than a

decade later, staffing remains a persistent pressure on school finances, with no clear end in sight.

Thematic analysis of respondents’ feedback identified the following additional retention challenges:

- location costs
- workload pressures related to SEND
- limited career progression in smaller settings
- support staff earning more or finding more flexible work in other sectors
- loss of autonomy in a MAT or friction with the central trust team

“ High percentage of SEND pupils creates a highly stressful environment and increases the need for support staff. ”

Flexible working

56% of respondents reported having a flexible working policy in their school or trust – up from 39% in 2019. There was some notable regional variation, ranging from 50% in London to 62% in the West Midlands.

While the data demonstrates progress over the years, there is further to go for all boards to secure a culture of flexible working as part of their role in creating healthy working environments. Almost a fifth stated that they do not have a policy (18%) and just over a quarter that they do not know (26%). The findings also fall short of the DfE expectation that all schools and trusts have a clear flexible working policy.

CPD

We asked boards which areas they consider when staff CPD is discussed at meetings. Impact on teaching quality (67%) and alignment to school improvement priorities (66%) emerged as the standout topics.

There was variation by governance structure, with MAT boards most likely to consider the impact on staff retention (36%) and leadership pipelines (26%). In contrast, academy committees were most likely to report that professional development is not regularly

discussed (24%) – respondents noted that this topic tends to be centralised in MATs, with academy committees often given no role.

In terms of school phase, as with MAT boards, secondary schools were more likely than primary to discuss the impact of CPD on staff retention (38% vs 28%) and leadership pipelines (24% vs 17%), while special schools were most likely to consider staff satisfaction (46%).

While boards derive value from discussing staff CPD in relation to a range of areas, it is essential for it to be on the agenda. Concerningly, nearly one in five (18%) reported that their board does not regularly discuss professional development at all.

Responses highlighted how governing board discussions on staff CPD tend to focus on mandatory training such as safeguarding or allergies. As a cornerstone of school improvement, professional development discussions should go beyond compliance. This includes assessing the impact of both mandatory and discretionary learning on meeting strategic priorities and improving outcomes as well as the culture around staff CPD in the school or trust. As one respondent put it, they “Seek assurance that knowledge is cascaded through school and best practice shared”.

What governing boards discuss when talking about staff CPD



“... despite governors and trustees recognising **a need for external accountability**, there are **mixed views** about how effectively inspection delivers it in practice.”

Fariha Choudhury • Senior Policy and Impact Officer



Ofsted inspection

Over the years, Ofsted has been subject to sustained scrutiny, not least because of concerns around a growing high-stakes accountability culture in the education system. This debate intensified following the tragic death of Ruth Perry, prompting both the inspectorate and the wider sector to reconsider the toll inspection can take on the individuals at the heart of the process.

NGA has shared these concerns over the years. As the body discharging employer responsibilities for school staff, with direct line-management responsibilities for the senior leader, governing boards see first-hand the pressures associated with inspection. Previous attempts at reform demonstrate why continued attention is needed.

In 2022, despite efforts through the then Education Inspection Framework (EIF) to reduce the stress and workload associated with inspection, only 18% of governors and trustees believed this had been reflected in practice. The lesson from this historic finding remains pertinent as changes in policy and intent do not necessarily translate into changes in experience.

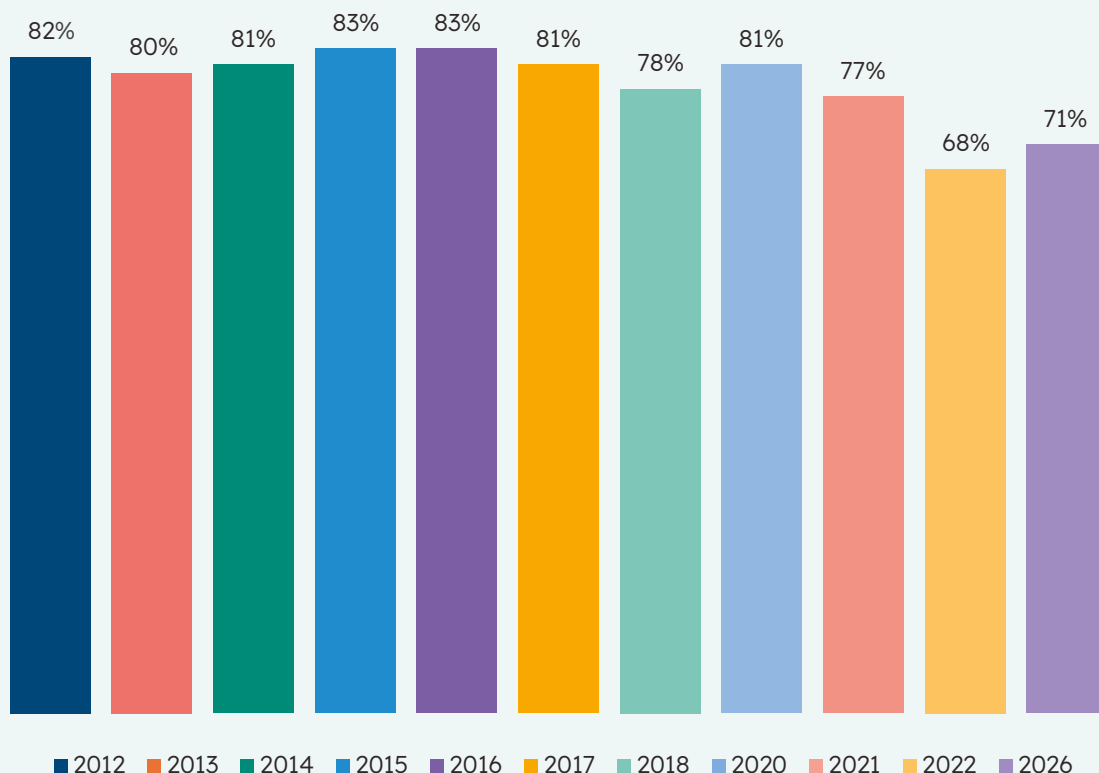
At the same time, the governance community recognises the need for external scrutiny. Governing boards provide front-line accountability day in, day out, and there is a consensus that independent checks and balances have an important, complementary role alongside this. However, our longitudinal data demonstrates that confidence in Ofsted's ability to provide a fair and accurate picture of schools has weakened over time, particularly since the latter half of the 2010s.



2019

agreed that the introduction of the 2019 education inspection framework had reduced the workload and stress for teachers and school leaders

Our recent Ofsted inspection gave a fair and accurate picture of the school



This year's response (71%) shows only a marginal gain on the record low of 68% in 2022, and sits alongside previous NGA surveys, which also found mixed views about the value and impact of routine inspection. The findings point to the important distinction that despite governors and trustees recognising a need for external accountability, there are mixed views about how effectively inspection delivers it in practice.

A new inspection framework

Ofsted's new framework took effect in November 2025. It removed the previous single-word judgement and introduced a five-point grading system across six to eight judgement areas, alongside narrative in a more substantial report card. There were also the additions of a new 'inclusion' evaluation area and a refined 'leadership and governance' category which gave greater prominence to governance – something NGA has long advocated for.

At the time of the survey, 27% of respondents reported that their school had been inspected under the new framework. It is worth keeping in mind that nationally,

approximately 10% of all schools have been inspected. Behind MAT trustees – who are the accountable body for multiple schools in their trusts – those governing on local governing boards were the most likely to have been inspected (35% compared to 20% of LA maintained schools and 17% of SATs). This provides an important, albeit still developing, picture of how inspection is being experienced and respondents' comments provide an early indication of what is working well and where familiar concerns remain.

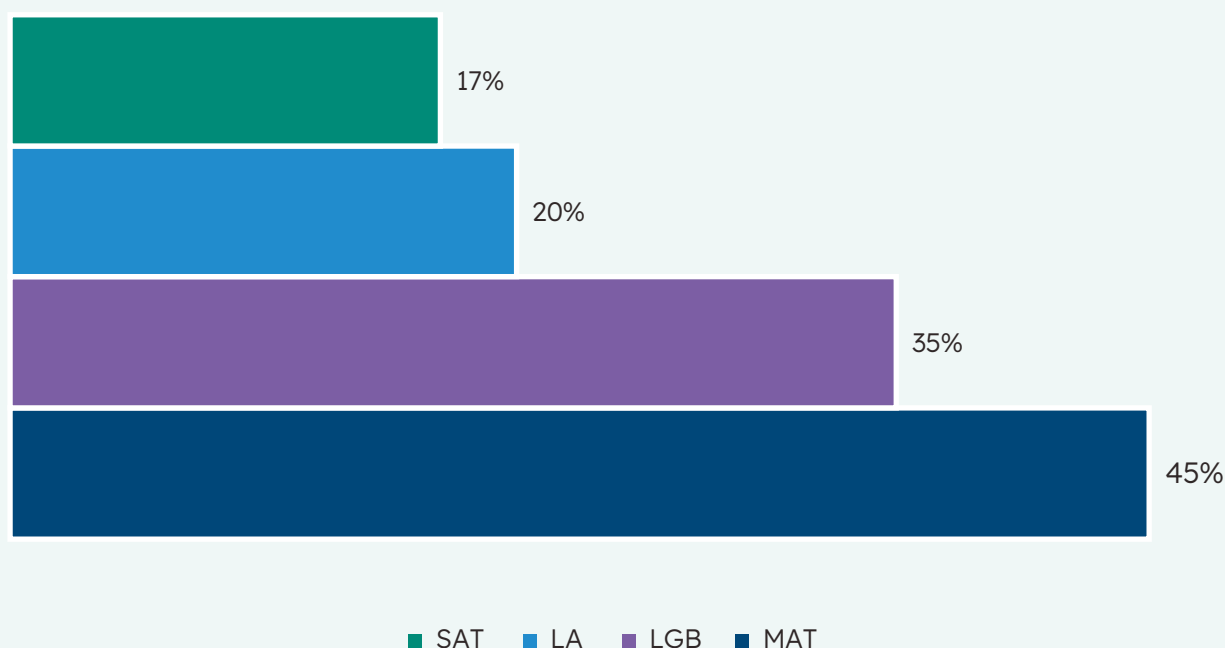
For those who felt that inspection had given a fair and accurate picture of their school, there was a strong sense that inspectors had reached conclusions which reflected what the school has already identified. Respondents frequently pointed to alignment with their self-evaluation and improvement priorities.



“The areas which were found to be needing attention had already been identified by us – we told them what they are.”

That being said, respondents also questioned whether the framework always captured the full picture of a school. Context was a particular concern for those

Has your school, or a school in your trust, been inspected under the new Ofsted inspection framework that was introduced in November 2025?



governing schools with high levels of disadvantage, SEND or pupils eligible for pupil premium. There is an inevitable challenge in applying a national framework across very different schools, but these responses underline the importance of inspectors understanding what sits behind outcomes.



“You can’t compare a school with high deprivation with a leafy lane one.”

There were similar concerns about how consistently the framework and its criteria are applied. Some felt the move away from a best fit (under the new framework, all features of the expected standard grade must be met before a higher one may be considered) approach had introduced too much rigidity. Others also pointed to differences in inspectors’ expertise and judgement. A national framework clearly requires consistency, but confidence in it also depends on inspectors having the expertise and flexibility to understand the school in front of them.



“Much appears to depend on the individual inspector involved.”

Finally, respondents returned to a concern which has featured in our findings over a number of years – the impact of inspection on the people involved. Importantly, some distinguished between the eventual judgement and their experience of reaching it. This is particularly relevant given the longstanding concerns around workload and wellbeing discussed earlier. A fair outcome matters, but it cannot on its own tell us whether an inspection has worked as it should.



“The outcome was fair, but the process was brutal.”

These are early experiences of a framework which has only recently been introduced, and it would be premature to draw firm conclusions. Nevertheless, they show why attention must remain on how Ofsted’s changes are experienced in practice. Clearly some of the concerns are familiar – context, consistency, inspector expertise and staff wellbeing – and the coming years will provide a clearer indication of whether the new framework is able to adequately address them.

“Whilst MATs have **made considerable progress** in embedding local governance within their structures, this is only part of the picture. The **remaining challenge** is partly one of transparency and trust.”

Michael Barton • Head of Policy and Impact

Fariha Choudhury • Senior Policy and Impact Officer



MATs

No change in the English education system has better defined the twenty years of NGA's history, or the sixteen years of the annual governance survey, than the growth of the academy system. Back in 2006, just a handful of schools were academies. The first survey in 2011 came at a moment when the Gove reforms were beginning to accelerate academisation, but they still only accounted for around 5% of England's schools. Now, the majority of state-funded schools in England are academies, and the majority of English children are educated within trusts.

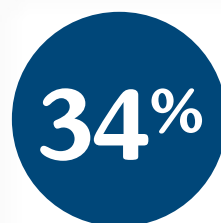
Over 1,000 respondents to this survey govern in a trust so every section of this report partly reflects the views of trustees and the local governance community. This section focuses on the three most fundamental governance questions raised by the existence of the trust system: whether a school should academise, whether a trust should grow and the effectiveness of these governance structures.

Academisation and trust growth

The question of academisation and trust growth returned to the policy agenda earlier this year with the government's education white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving. Within it, the government set out a vision of every school being part of a trust but with minimal new policy levers to achieve this, the only exception being a renewed push to create local authority trusts.

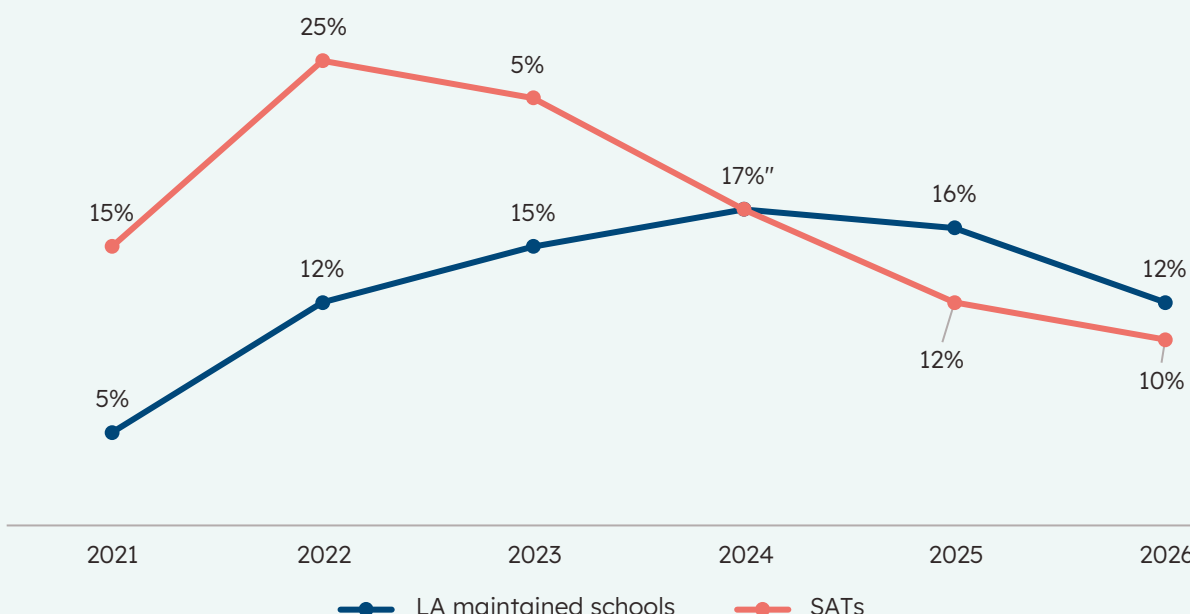
Academisation

If the government was hoping that the white paper would have accelerated the move to a fully trust-based system, our findings suggest they will be disappointed. Just a third of those governing in maintained schools and SATs suggest it had triggered conversations

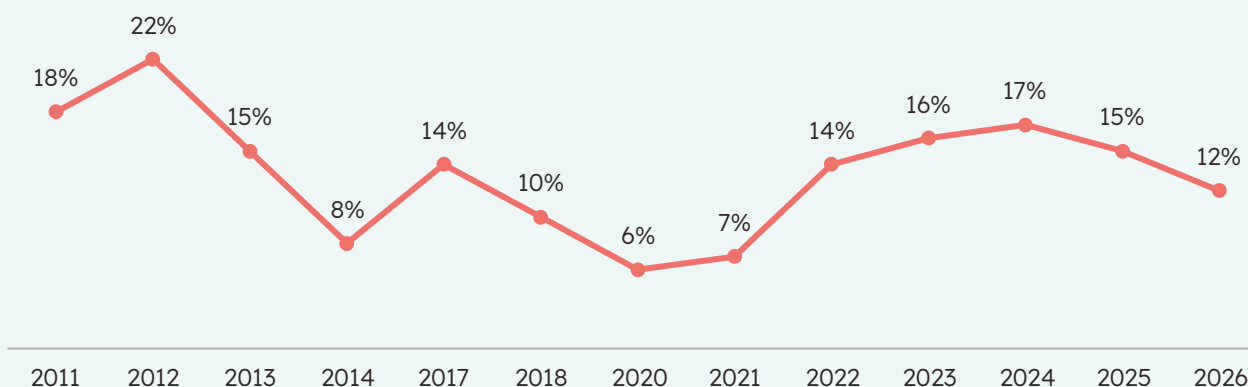


said the white paper had triggered board discussions about joining a MAT

Decided to academise in the near future



Decided to join a MAT in the near future



of joining a MAT and a further third neither agree nor disagree. However, the outcomes of these conversations appeared to broadly favour the status quo, with the proportion saying they had decided to join a MAT at its lowest level since 2020, when the system was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The consequences of these findings should not be overstated. On the one hand, the government has not publicly encouraged schools to academise by either words or policy choices. On the other, the “drip, drip” of gradual academisation does continue, with numbers of academies inexorably rising and the remaining schools becoming increasingly isolated in many areas. While the number of schools deciding to academise was low this year compared to trends over the last five years, it was still broadly consistent with the overall direction of travel since 2011.

Perhaps the most interesting question is what factors are shaping board decisions. We asked respondents to share the key factors shaping their decisions and saw a range of factors cited. One of the most common was financial viability – joining a larger MAT could be the only way for small schools to have a future. The emphasis on financial viability is notable in the context of falling rolls which will exacerbate challenges for some schools. Responses to our questions on school and trust finances demonstrate that trusts are more financially stable on average, but the slight easing of budgetary pressures across the board might be one explanation for the reducing proportion of boards deciding to join a MAT.



“Financial difficulty is driving the need for a MAT discussion – not the white paper”



“[Joining a MAT] is the only economically viable way to enable small village schools to survive”

Other factors cited by respondents as driving efforts to join a MAT included the direction of the school’s diocese and a desire to be ahead of the curve and maintain some control of their destiny given the “inevitable” journey towards a fully trust-based system. What is notable about these explanations is that they have been cited by respondents to this survey for a number of years. This would suggest a lack of “new” reasons to join a MAT, which might in turn explain why the proportion deciding to join a MAT is at best static, and potentially falling slightly. Many of those schools with dioceses who favour the MAT model or whose boards wish to control their future trust partner will have joined by a trust by now.



“The directive [to join a MAT] has come from the Diocese”

Factors persuading schools to decide against joining a MAT included the oft-cited concerns around autonomy and identity. As well as the specific quality and capacity of MATs in their local area, and continued scepticism over whether joining a trust would actually be financially advantageous. Again, maybe the most notable takeaway is how similar responses sound to those given to this question over the years. For those schools not already part of a MAT, neither government

policy or the wider sector context has significantly shifted the dial for many years, and yet the gradual move to a fully trust-based system continues.

- “...It would destroy the character and autonomy of our small school, which currently has a good reputation in the community”
- “We have been discussing it for years and always circle back to not wanting to pursue further for fear of losing our identity and culture”
- “[We have] concerns that the Governing Board would lose their autonomy and roles and responsibilities reduced”

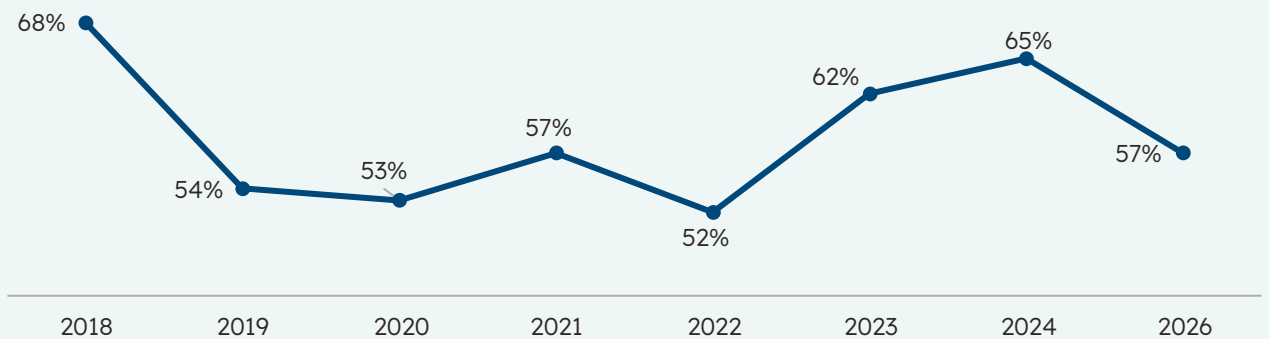
Trust growth

Of course, maintained schools and SATs cannot join a MAT unilaterally. The views of trusts are also highly relevant, and over 500 trustees responded to

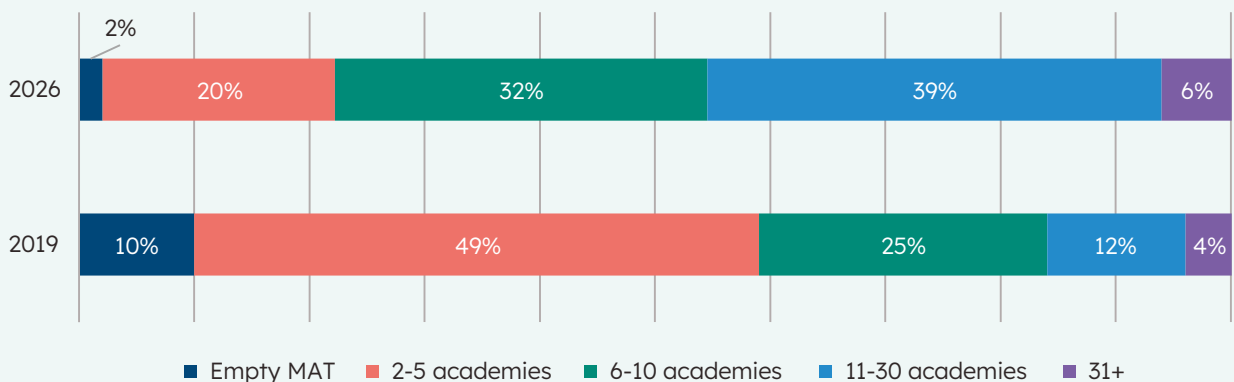
our survey. 57% of respondents said their trust was planning to grow in the near future compared to just 14% who had no plans, a significant majority. Interestingly, respondents said that the white paper had triggered conversations about growth (45%) but there is no evidence this has impacted growth figures yet. Instead, the proportion is down slightly on the last time we asked the question in 2024, and broadly consistent with trends over the last decade.

The parallels here are particularly interesting. The views of MAT trustees on growth display remarkable consistency over the years, just like the views of maintained school governors and SAT trustees on joining a MAT. And just as 2022’s annual governance survey showed, evidence that a white paper is instigating conversations about trust growth does not always mean it happens.

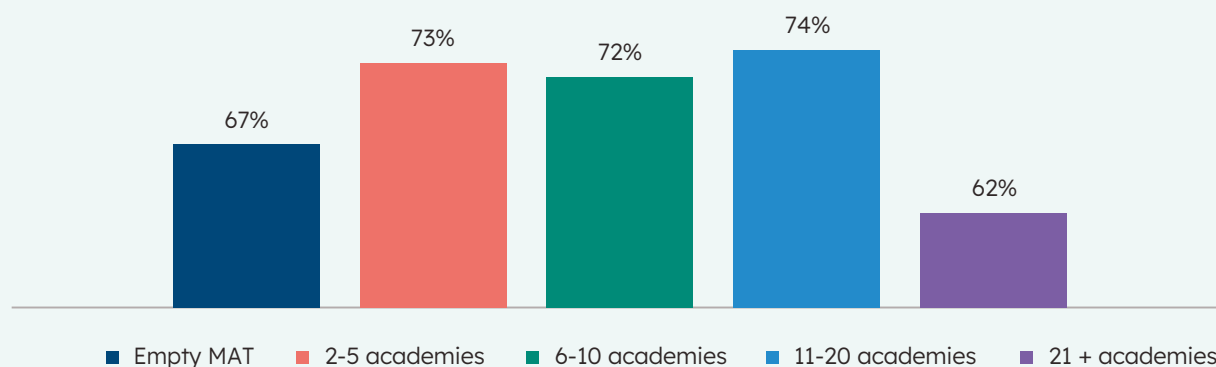
Our trust is planning to grow in the near future



Number of schools in your MAT



Do you plan to expand the number of schools within your MAT in the near future?



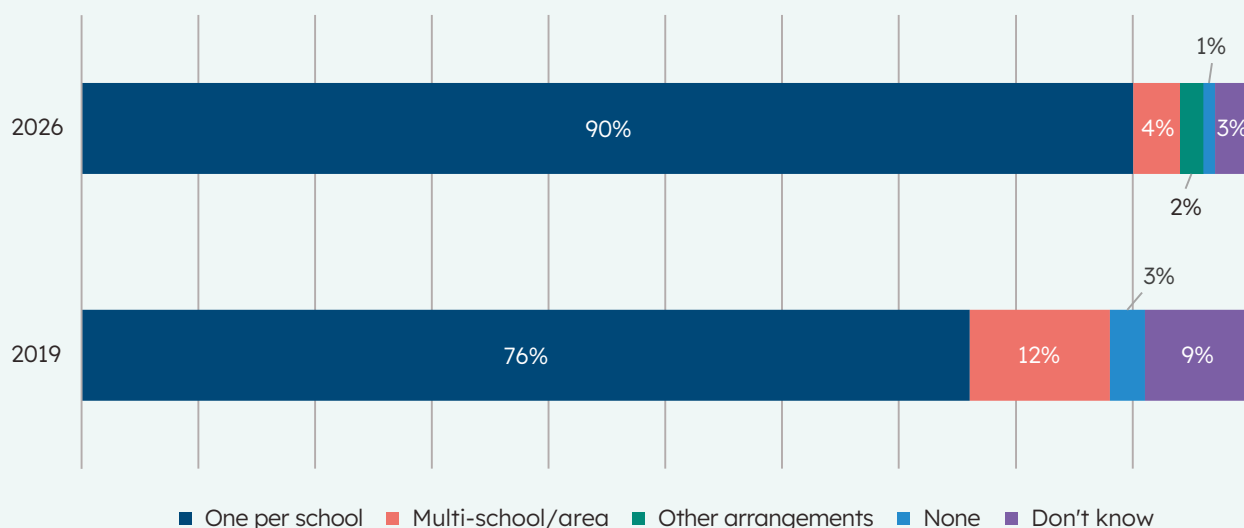
These trends are, by definition, aggregations of hundreds of MATs with significant diversity, and local nuances will persist. Nonetheless, it has been interesting to see the size of MATs governed by respondents evolving to mirror sector-wide trends. As the average size of MATs across the country has increased, so has the size of trusts governed by survey respondents, suggesting that results are broadly representative. Interestingly, the largest trusts are those least inclined to grow – this mirrors findings from previous annual governance surveys and suggest that achieving sufficient scale is a key motivating factor behind trust growth.

Effectiveness of MATs

Local governance arrangements

Local governance remains a prominent feature of the MAT model. In 2026, 90% of trusts reported having a local governing body, academy committee or academy council for each school, up from 76% in 2019. Alternative models remain relatively uncommon, with 4% adopting a hub or cluster model, for example based on location or phase. Positively, only 1% of respondents report having no local governance arrangements.

Local governance arrangements in your MAT



This finding is particularly relevant in the context of the government's ambition for trusts to be rooted in the communities they serve and proposals to give local governance a more explicit place within the national policy framework. NGA's Governing in 4D report argues that simply having a local tier is not enough and that it must be accompanied by a clear purpose and connection to the wider governance of the trust. Our findings provide some reassurance on the first point – local governance is now firmly established across the sector – while raising some questions about the second. We do not want to overstate these findings – the overall picture remains positive with clear majorities happy with the amount of delegation and the quality of communication, but the trajectory does raise concerns.

A changing balance of responsibilities

Local delegation provides a clearer indication of how the role is developing. Safeguarding and SEND continue to feature prominently. In 2026, most respondents said their local board was responsible for appointing a safeguarding governor and monitoring safeguarding arrangements, as well as the equivalent responsibility for SEND. This year, for the first time, we also asked about sitting on panels with over 80% reporting that this was delegated to the local tier.

What responsibilities are delegated to the local tier in your trust?

Appoint a safeguarding governor, and monitor safeguarding arrangements in the academy	87%
Appoint a SEND governor, and monitor SEND arrangements in the academy	82%
Sitting on panels (e.g. complaints, exclusions, staff disciplinary)	82%
Review academy-level attainment data (e.g. SAT or GCSE results)	66%
Review the outcomes of surveys of stakeholders	64%

This broadly reflects NGA's established view of where the local tier can add most value. Our 4Ss framework (SEND, safeguarding, stakeholder engagement and standards) focuses on areas where proximity to the school and knowledge of its pupils and wider community are particularly important and explains why they remain prominent within schemes of delegation.

Top five delegated local governance responsibilities

	2018	2026
1	Monitoring pupil progress and attainment 86%	Appoint a safeguarding governor, and monitor safeguarding arrangements in the academy 87%
2	Monitoring key strategic priorities in the school 69%	Appoint a SEND governor, and monitor SEND arrangements in the academy 82%
3	Determining school level policies e.g. admissions, SEND, curriculum 62%	Sitting on panels (e.g. complaints, exclusions, staff disciplinary) 82%
4	Management of the school's budget 59%	Review academy-level attainment data (e.g. SAT or GCSE results) 66%
5	Appraisal of the headteacher/ head of school 57%	Review the outcomes of surveys of stakeholders 64%

This year's findings also demonstrate greater change in the delegation of finance and performance oversight compared to 2018.

These changing responsibilities may partially explain the decline in satisfaction that has been bubbling among local governors since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost two-thirds (65%) were happy with the responsibility delegated to them this year, but this has fallen from 68% in 2021 and is the lowest figure recorded. Respondents from the smallest trusts (with two to five schools) were slightly more positive about delegated responsibility (70%) but even this figure remains below the 71% recorded in 2019.



"We can monitor and review but don't have any actual responsibility to affect anything."



"[Our responsibilities are] mainly curriculum related. Others are centralised."

There are legitimate reasons why responsibilities may shift as trusts develop. Central teams provide financial expertise and systems across several schools and support trustees with trust-level oversight of performance to identify trends and target support. However, the scale of the longer-term decline in the delegation of budget and performance monitoring cannot be overlooked, as both have traditionally provided local governors with important ways of understanding how their school is performing and holding leaders to account.

While the findings point to a different balance of responsibilities from that seen in the earlier days of the MAT programme, this is not necessarily evidence that local governance has become less important. However, it does make clarity about its purpose more important. This requires trusts to think carefully about how information already collected and considered centrally is shared and used across different dimensions of governance and leadership in a way that is meaningful yet efficient.

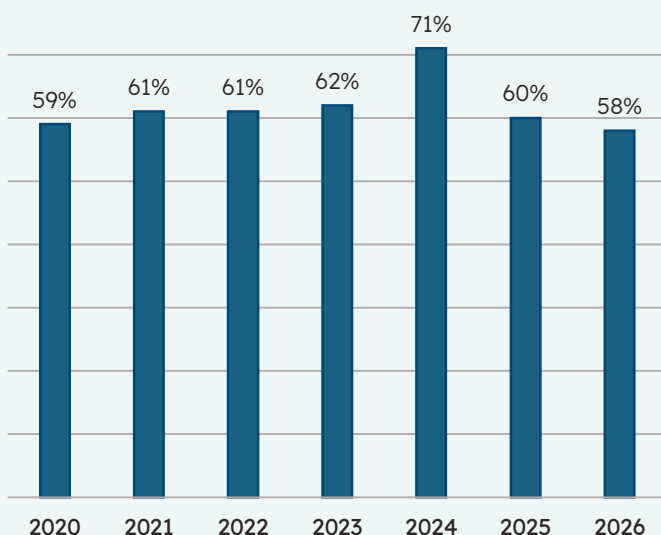
Experiences of communication

Only 58% of respondents agreed that communication between the local tier and trust board was effective and well managed. This figure has reached a record low, but satisfaction has generally plateaued since 2019.

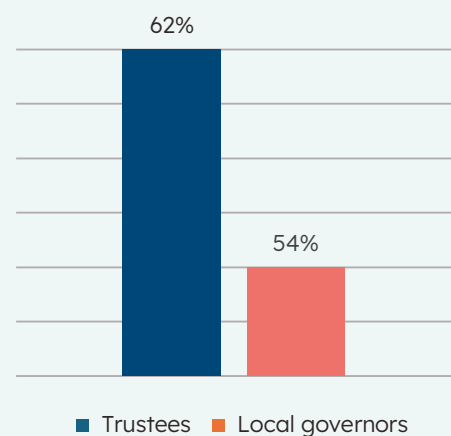
Importantly, views differ depending on where respondents sit within the governance structure. MAT trustees were more likely than local governors to describe communication between the two tiers as effective. While a scheme of delegation establishes the formal relationship, effective governance depends on information travelling in both directions: trustees need local intelligence, while local governors need sufficient understanding of trust priorities and decisions to fulfil their role.

Trust size appears to play a part too. Respondents from the smallest trusts (two to five schools) were the most positive about communication (65%). By contrast,

Communication between the trust board and local tier is managed well



Communication between the trust board and local tier is managed well



those in trusts with 21–30 schools were the most likely to disagree (24%) – eight percentage points higher than any other trust-size group. Interestingly, levels of disagreement among trusts with 31 or more schools were similar to those reported by smaller trusts, suggesting that the relationship between trust size and effective communication is not straightforward. Clearly, there is no single governance structure which will work for every MAT. However, as trusts grow and change, maintaining meaningful connections between the trust board, individual schools and their communities cannot be assumed. Governance arrangements need to be reviewed alongside organisational growth.

Resource allocation

Our findings on resource sharing reveal a more fundamental tension. Just 28% of local governor respondents agreed that their school's resources, including reserves, should be shared with other schools in the MAT, down sharply from 47% in 2025 and, again, the lowest figure we have recorded.

Reluctance about resource sharing isn't confined to a particular type of MAT. Respondents in trusts of six to ten schools were the most supportive, although even here only 31% agreed that resources should be shared. This group was also the most likely to feel that their school was part of 'one organisation' (62%). Nonetheless, across every trust-size group, fewer than a third agreed that resources should be shared, making it difficult to attribute the finding simply to the challenges associated with very large trusts.

This is difficult to reconcile with the principle of a MAT operating as one organisation. The wider findings reinforce this concern. Just over half (55%) of local governor respondents said their school felt part of 'one organisation' with others in the MAT, down from 70% in 2022. While none of these measures should be considered in isolation, collectively they raise questions about the extent to which a shared organisational identity is being felt across trusts.

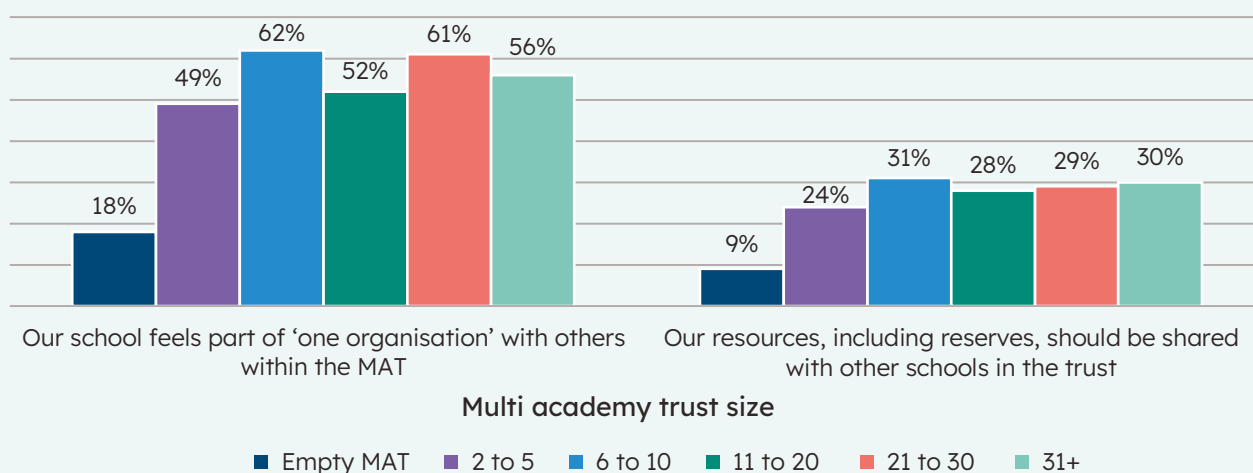
Local knowledge and trust-wide responsibility

Whilst MATs have made considerable progress in embedding local governance within their structures, this year's findings demonstrate that structure is only part of the picture. The remaining challenge is partly one of transparency and trust.

Where resources are pooled or moved between schools, local governors need to understand the rationale, how needs have been assessed and how the decision supports pupils across the trust. Trustees themselves also need to understand and scrutinise these decisions. The fact that 40% cannot confidently explain the level of reserves held by their trust suggests there is further work to do here.

In combination, falling support for resource sharing, difficulty in communication between governance levels and fewer respondents feeling part of 'one organisation' suggest that some trusts still have work to do in building the understanding and confidence required for trust-wide decision-making.

Local governor opinions across MAT sizes



“We have an **absolutely dedicated group of individuals** with excellent professional experiences. Their commitment (time constraints allowing) is **formidable.**”

Meg Tate • Senior Policy and Research Officer



Governance demographics

Governors and trustees contribute an estimated £1 billion to the education system every year, dedicating more than 1.8 million hours to their roles. But who makes up this vital workforce, and how has it changed over time?

Board type

The biggest shift in the profile of our survey respondents can be seen in the type of governance they undertake. The rise of the academy sector is written into the history of AGS itself. Within just five years of the survey starting, the proportion of respondents governing in academies rose from 0% to 27%, reflecting the rapid transformation of the school system during this period.

As the structure of school governance has changed, so too has the profile of respondents captured by the survey. From 2016, we adjusted the question to reflect these changes and distinguish between different levels of governance within the increasingly widespread

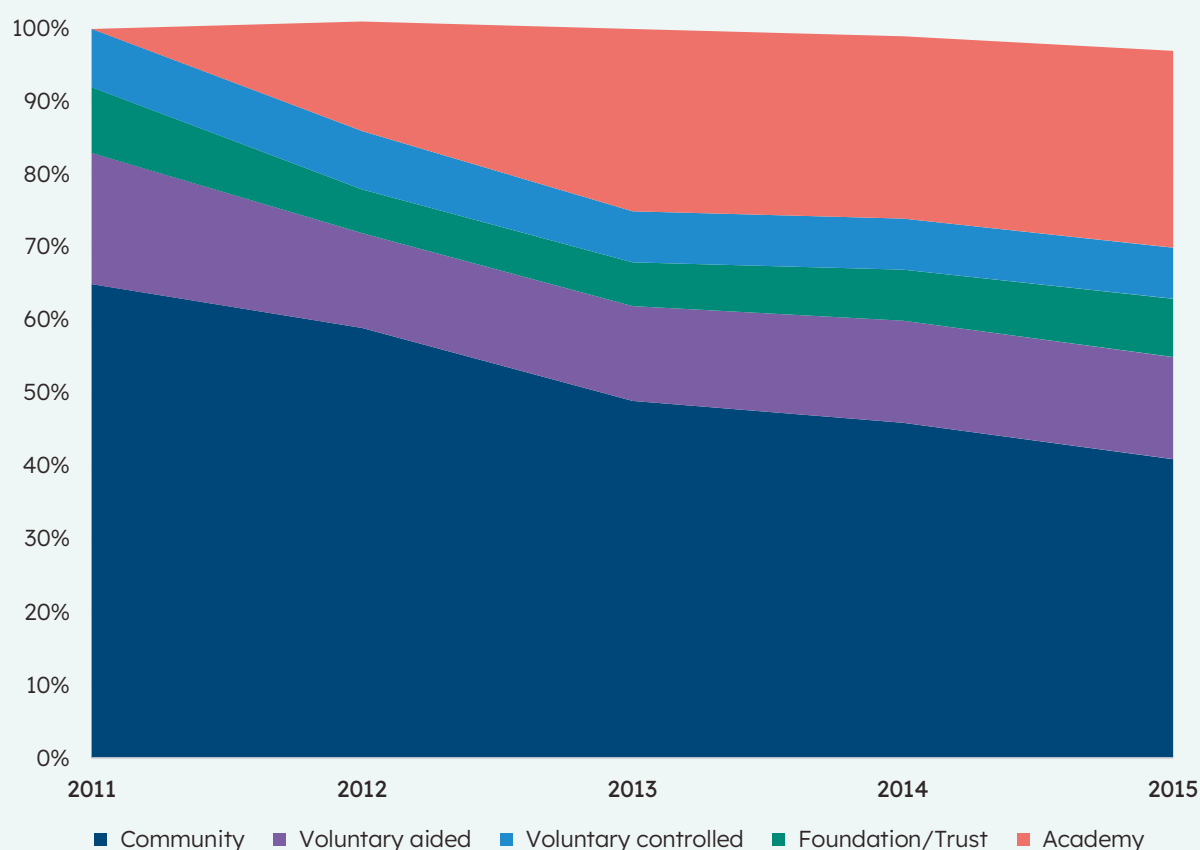
trust models. The results show a substantial shift: the proportion of respondents governing within a MAT has more than doubled, from 18% in 2016 to 37% in 2026. This increase is driven in large part by MAT trustees, who now account for 19% of respondents, compared with just 5% in 2016.

The survey therefore now captures a much broader picture of governance across the trust sector, including both trustees operating at trust level and those governing locally within MATs. This reflects not only the growth of the MAT sector itself, but the changing balance between local and trust-level governance over the past decade.

Age and experience

The age of governors and trustees responding to our survey appears to be increasing faster than wider volunteering trends.

What type of governing board are you part of?



The latest government [Community and Engagement Survey](#) shows that 65–74-year-olds are nearly twice as likely to volunteer formally at least once a month as 25–34-year-olds. Overall levels of formal volunteering, however, remain below pre-COVID levels. So, while governance is part of a wider pattern in which older adults are more likely to volunteer, this does not fully explain the shift seen in AGS respondents.

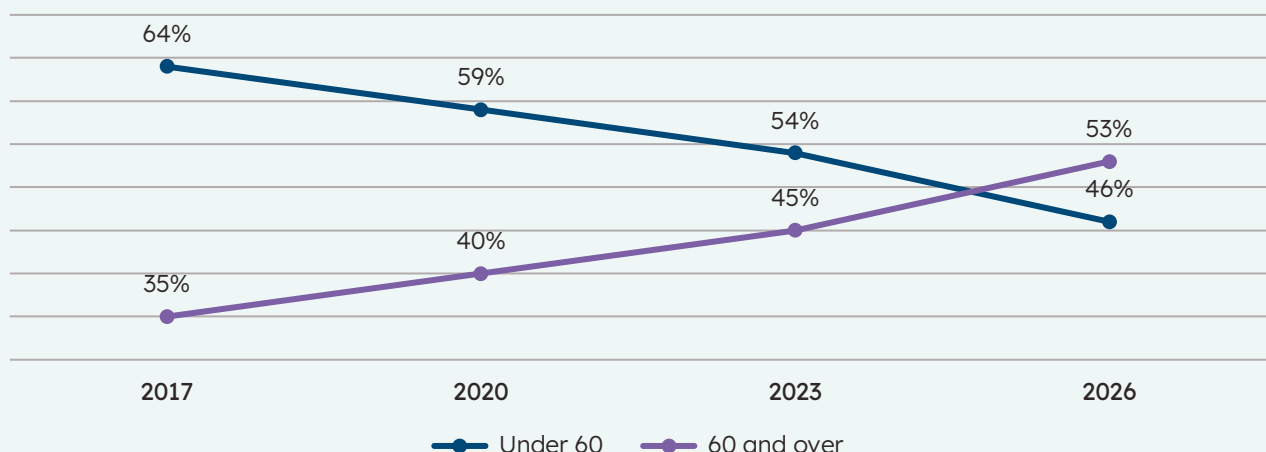
The proportion aged 60+ has risen from 35% in 2017 to 53% in 2026, while the proportion under 60 has fallen from 64% to 46%. This represents an 18-percentage point shift towards an older governing workforce. The age profile is even more pronounced among those in leadership roles: 63% of chairs and co-chairs are aged 60 or over, compared with 44% of other governors and trustees. The shift towards an older governing

workforce is therefore particularly marked among those taking on board leadership roles.

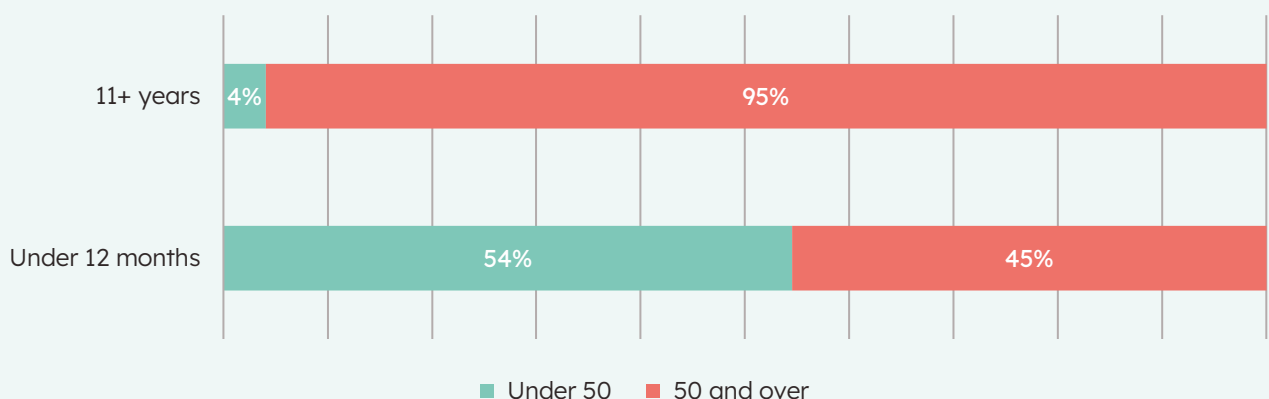
Overall, governance remains an experienced workforce, with little change in the proportion of new joiners. Almost half (46%) of governors have been governing for more than eight years, up slightly from 43% in 2017. Just 10% have joined within the past year, broadly unchanged from 2017 (11%).

Newer governors are considerably younger than the survey average. More than half (54%) of those who joined in the past year are under 50, compared with just 33% of respondents overall. However, the proportion aged under 50 falls progressively with length of service, reaching just 4% among those who have governed for 11 years or more.

Age of survey respondents



How long have you been governing (including any experience prior to your current board)?



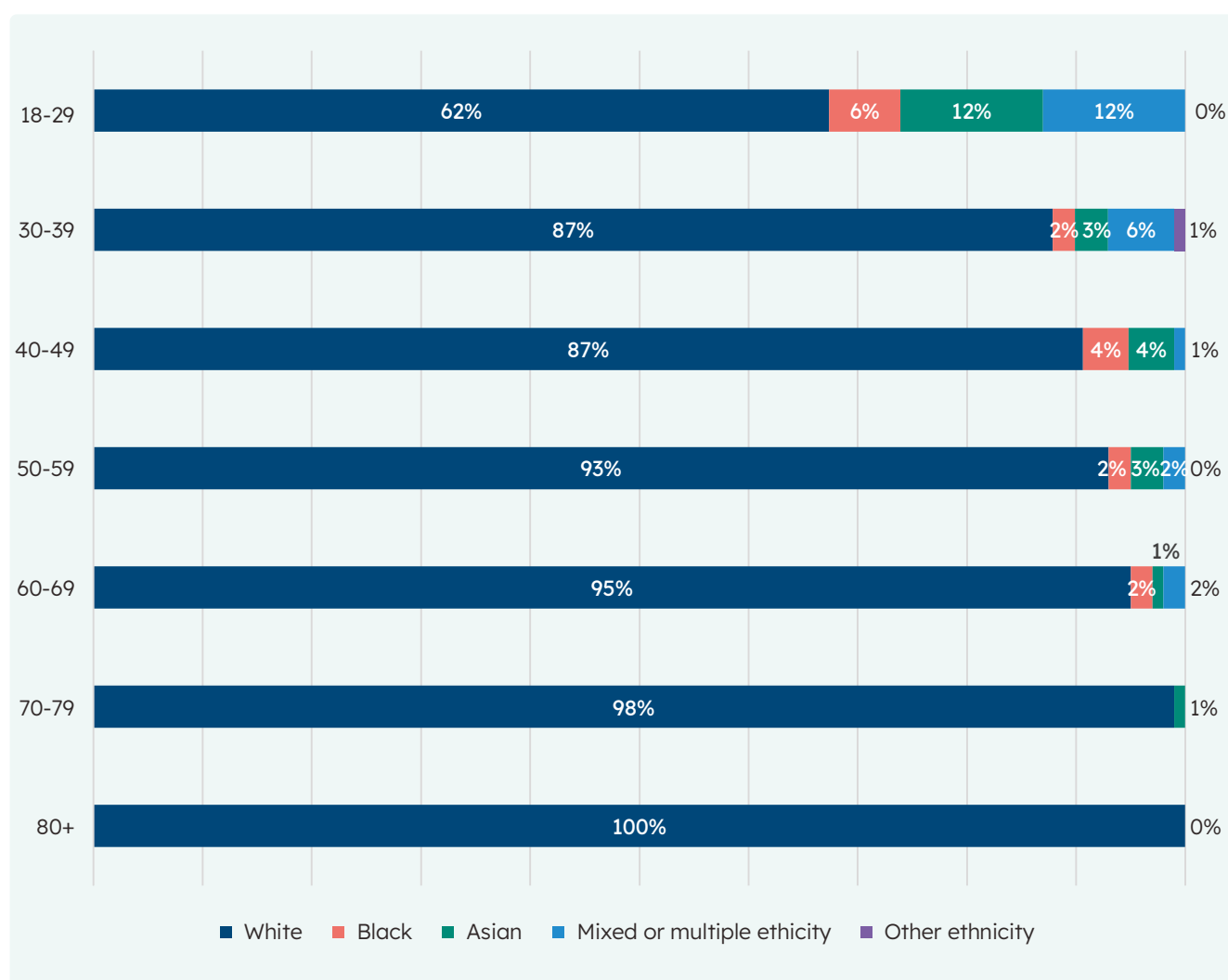
This shows that younger people are joining governance, but not yet in sufficient numbers to change its overall age profile. The challenge is not just to recruit younger governors, but to retain them on school and trust boards for the longer term.

Ethnicity

The ethnic diversity of respondents has remained largely unchanged over the past decade. In 2026, 93% of governors identified as White, up 2pp since last year but broadly in line with the 92-94% recorded throughout our survey dataset. As identified last year, younger respondents are more likely to identify

as being from a minoritised ethnic group and this decreases with age going from 30% of those aged 18-29 falling to just 1% among those aged 70 and over.

There is also a difference by governance role. Those in board leadership positions are more likely to identify as White, with 92% of chairs doing so compared with 84% of other governors and trustees. This suggests that the limited ethnic diversity seen across governance is even more pronounced among those taking on board leadership roles.



Sex

Female respondents make up almost two-thirds of the survey sample, rising from 59% in 2016 to 64% in 2026. Female representation has remained above 60% in most years since 2017, with 2026 marking the highest proportion recorded in our survey. While this shows a gradual increase in the proportion of female respondents over time, it should not be taken as representative of the sex profile of the governance workforce as a whole.

64%

of respondents are female

Qualifications

For the first time, we asked respondents about their level of education to explore how academically accessible governance currently is. Governors are highly qualified compared with the wider volunteering population.



“The Time Well Spent research found that...those with higher educational qualifications were more likely to have volunteered recently than those with lower educational qualifications. For example, 48% of those educated to degree level or above had volunteered recently, compared with 20% of those with no qualifications.” - Time Well Spent, NCVO

In our survey, 87% of governors and trustees are educated to degree level or above, with little variation across board types, phases or roles. Importantly, this proportion was also broadly consistent among respondents with different levels of experience in school governance. This raises questions about how accessible governance, and volunteering in general, is to people from a wider range of educational backgrounds.

87%

of respondents are educated to degree level or above

from 53% to 41%. There has also been a small decline in those who are self-employed, from 12% to 10%, and those looking after their home or family, from 6% to 3%.

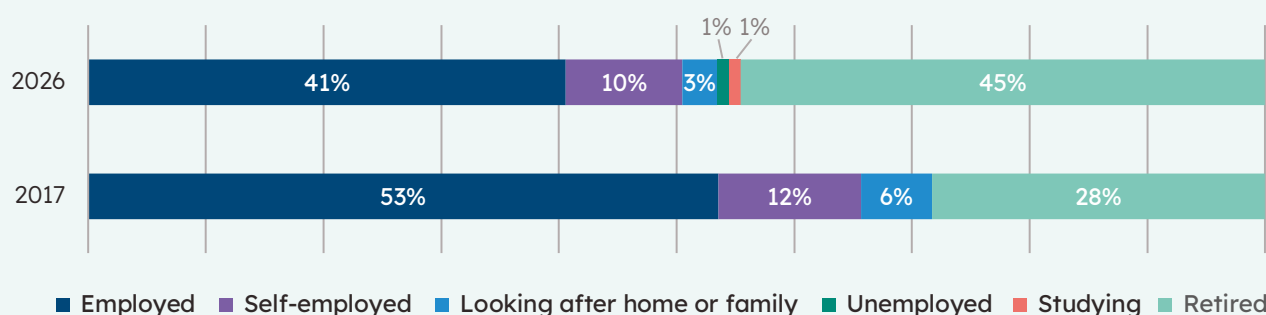
Taken together, the findings point to a change in the employment profile of respondents over the past decade, with a growing proportion now retired and a smaller proportion in employment. This reflects, at least in part, the ageing of survey respondents identified elsewhere in this chapter.

Employment status varies more noticeably by role and board type. Chairs are considerably more likely to be retired than other governors and trustees, with 55% retired compared with 36% overall. They are also the least likely group to be in full-time employment, with just 21% employed full time.

Employment

Almost half of governors and trustees surveyed were retired (45%) and this has risen from 28% in 2017. At the same time, the proportion in employment has fallen

MAT trustees are more likely to be retired than governors and trustees in other settings, at 49% compared with 45%, 44% and 43% respectively. While the difference is relatively small, it adds to the suggestion of a



governance workforce that includes a substantial proportion of people who are no longer in paid employment.

Time off work

Access to time off for governance has improved slightly since 2017, although a significant minority still do not have paid time off. The proportion of respondents receiving paid time off has risen from 42% to 46%, while unpaid time off has remained unchanged at 13%. This means that 59% now have access to some form of time off, compared with 55% in 2017.

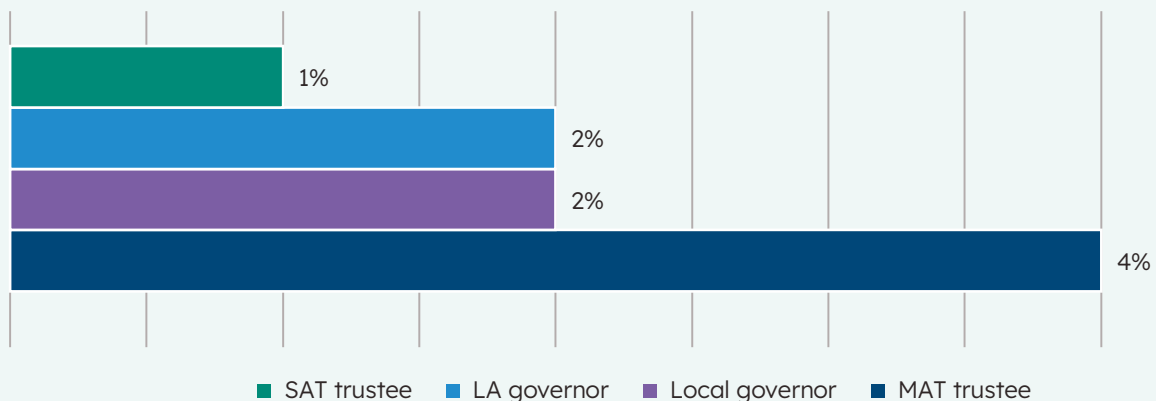
There are also some encouraging signs in how employers respond to requests. The proportion of respondents who had asked for time off but had their request refused has halved, from 4% to 2%. Fewer respondents also say they have not asked for time off, falling from 22% to 18%. However, 41% still do not receive paid time off, and 13% rely on unpaid

MAT trustees were twice as likely to have had a request for time off refused as other respondents and more likely to take unpaid leave

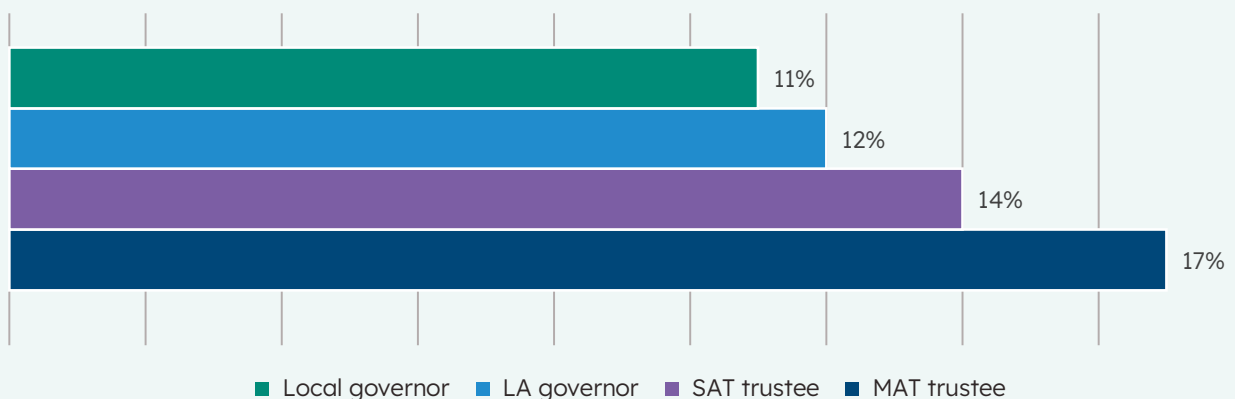
arrangements. This means that, while access has improved, taking time away from work for governance remains a potential barrier for a substantial amount of governors and trustees.

Not all governance roles have equal access to time off. MAT trustees were twice as likely to have had a request for time off refused as other respondents and more likely to take unpaid leave. This makes the government's recent consultation on time off for public duties particularly relevant, with its proposals including whether academy trust governors and trustees should be covered by the statutory right to reasonable time off.

I've asked for time off but my request was refused



My employer allows me unpaid time off to govern



“We have a **great mix of governors and trustees** in terms of their experience and background, that enables us as a collective to have a **positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes** of the school.”

Rosemary Lovatt • Head of Consultancy
Deiniol Sandford • Senior Advice Officer



Board practice

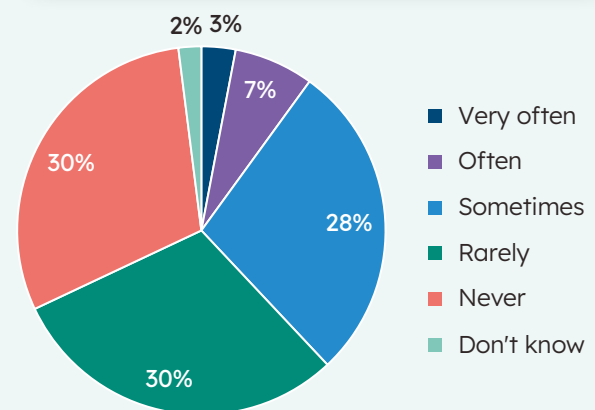
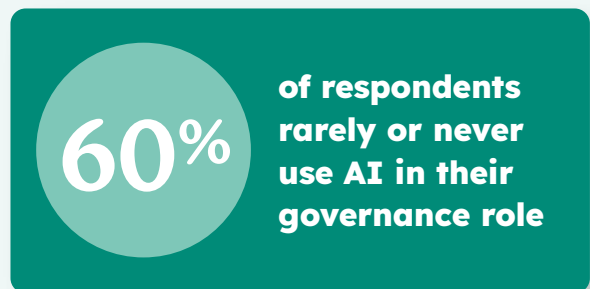
Governing is a commitment of time, energy and expertise, often alongside the demands of work and family life. Yet, for many, it is also a source of pride, purpose and an opportunity to make a real difference to children's education. This year's findings capture both sides of that experience: the value people place on their contribution and the skills they gain, but also the growing questions around who is willing and able to take on these responsibilities in the future. Sustaining good governance means recognising not only what governors and trustees give to their schools and trusts, but what they need to feel confident, supported and willing to continue.

Artificial intelligence

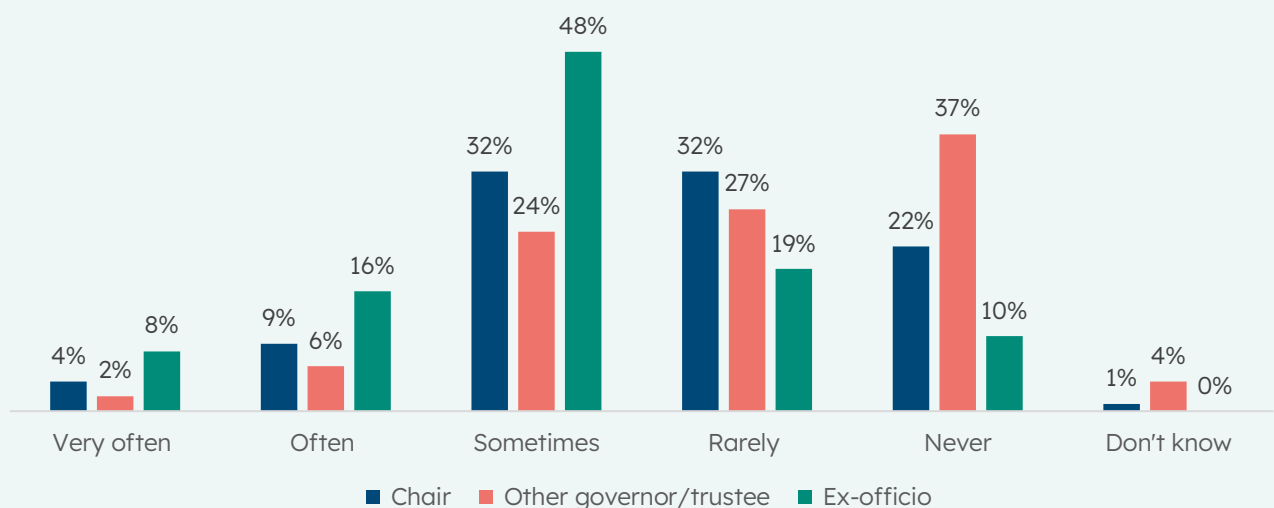
A new topic in this year's survey, findings suggest boards are still at an early stage of understanding how artificial intelligence (AI) should be used in their role and overseen across their schools and trusts.

It appears at present that AI is being treated with hesitation amongst governors and trustees with most respondents rarely or never using AI in their governance role. Usage is more common among those in a board leadership position of if they are ex-officios – perhaps due to its use in other areas of their professional lives.

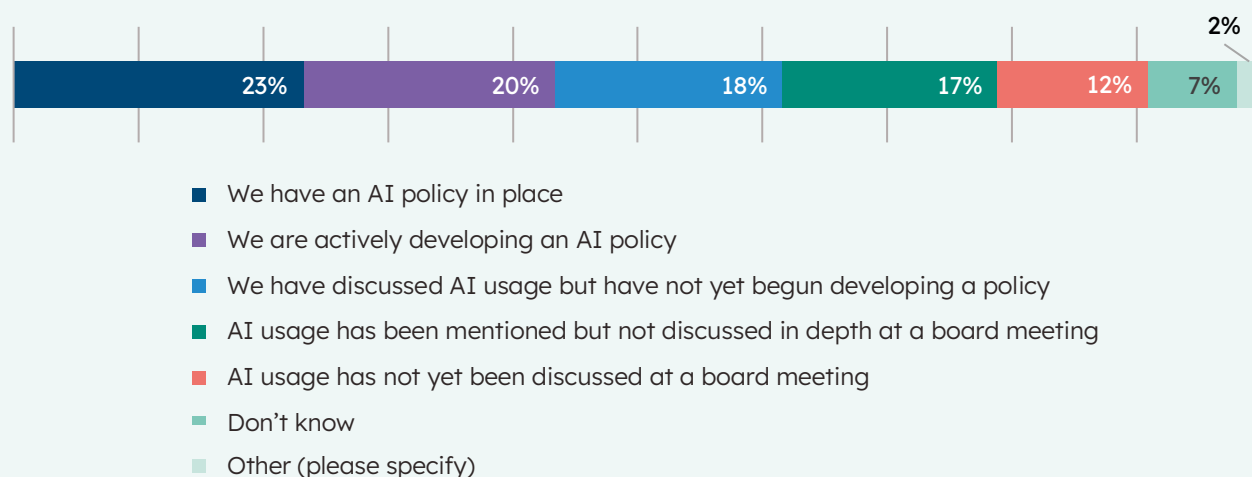
How often do you use AI to support you in your governance role?



In your governance role, how often do you use AI tools to support you?



What is your board's current approach to the use of AI in your school or trust?



This limited use sits alongside an uncertain operational picture: less than a quarter reported having an AI policy in place in their school or trust, and a further 12% said AI had not yet been discussed at a board meeting.

SAT respondents were most likely to report having an AI policy, at 30%, compared with 26% of MAT respondents, 22% of maintained school respondents and 20% of LGB respondents. LGB respondents were also most likely to report that AI had not yet been discussed at a board meeting at 15%.

The absence of a standalone policy does not necessarily mean AI is being overlooked. Some schools and trusts are incorporating AI into existing policies, such as online safety and data protection, while others are reviewing their approach regularly. Some LGBs also reported that AI policy is being developed at trust level, rather than locally.

 “All policy is at the MAT level not school level”

Training is another important theme. Some boards have agreed not to use AI until they have received appropriate training, while others have approached it through organisation-wide learning involving both staff and those governing.

 “We have had a trust-wide professional learning day about the use of AI at all levels in the Trust”.

Where AI is being used, respondents described some practical applications, including supporting administrative tasks such as transcribing committee minutes. However, experiences were mixed, with some reporting that AI-generated drafts created additional work because they required checking and correction.

Concerns about security, privacy and the appropriate use of AI were also prominent. Respondents raised concerns about confidential information being entered into AI tools, as well as wider questions about the impact of AI on thinking and learning. Others highlighted the ways in which AI is already affecting their wider governance work, including its use by staff, pupils and parents.

 “If it wasn't for parent governors, the teaching and SLT would not have even considered use of AI. It is feared rather than embraced”.

 “Staff are using it for moderation and we have noticed that parents are using it to write complaints!”.

As AI becomes increasingly embedded in education and wider society, boards will need to move beyond deciding whether AI should be used to understanding of where it can add value, where risks arise, and what effective strategic oversight should look like.

Impact of governance

Governing boards continue to have a strong sense of their contribution to the schools and trusts they serve, with 84% of respondents agreeing their board had made a positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes of their school or trust over the past year. This remains broadly consistent with last year, suggesting confidence in the contributions of governance has remained high despite considerable pressures.

The strength of this confidence varies across different structures. Governors in maintained schools were most likely to report a positive impact, unchanged from 2025, compared with SAT and MAT trustee respondents which saw the largest decline. While perceptions among LGBs have remained broadly stable since 2025, they were still the least likely to report a positive impact.

These differences may reflect the varying levels of decision-making responsibility across structures. The lower level of reported impact among LGBs raises questions about how effectively some feel able to

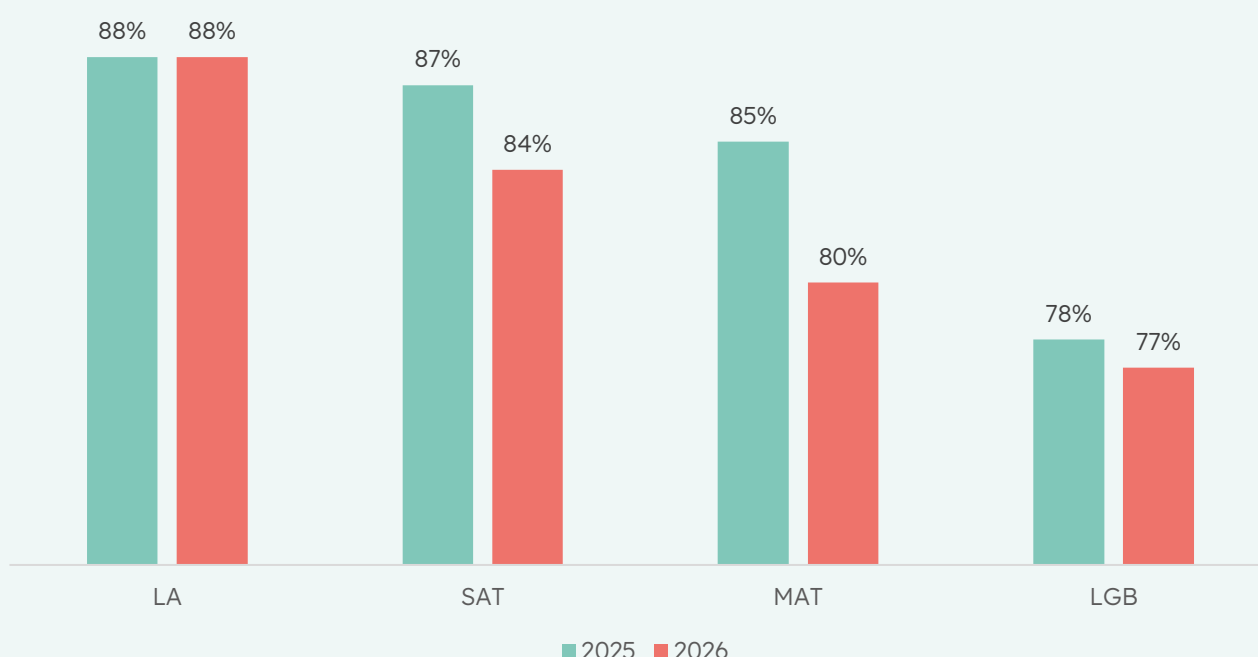
84%

of respondents agree their board had made a positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes of their school or trust over the past year

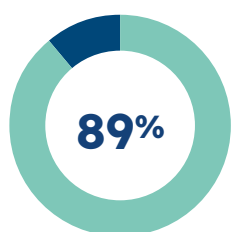
influence the strategic direction of their schools when their input and decision-making powers depend on the level of delegation from the trust board and emphasises the need for them to have the clarity, agency and visibility to make meaningful contributions.

The difference in perception between roles is also notable; chairs were considerably more likely to report that their board had made a positive impact which may reflect the closer involvement that chairs have in strategic leadership and the wider responsibilities associated with their role.

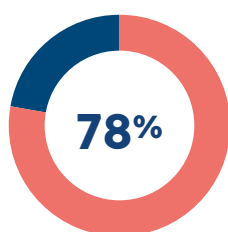
Board impact across board types



My board has made a positive impact in the past 12 months



● Chairs



● Other governors and trustees

Governor and trustee recruitment

Ensuring that boards can recruit enough people with the skills, experience and time to govern effectively is essential to longevity of the volunteer workforce. This year's data shows that difficulty with recruitment is a persistent problem.

Positive impact stories

- “Engagement with stakeholders has improved & more parents are active in the school. We have reviewed policies in light of parents' views. We have taken part in LA reviews, DFE support meetings etc”
- “[Our discussions] led to a revision of (i) the school ethos and vision statement; (ii) the school's future strategic priorities; (iii) assessment of the school's self-evaluation documents.
- “We have managed the head teacher recruitment, had a successful SIAMs inspection, revised the complaints and grievance policies so that complaints have been dealt with at an earlier stage and have significantly fallen.”
- “We have supported the setting up of a 9 months plus nursery and raised the profile of our school and pre school so we have improved numbers in EYs which will feed up into the school to increase overall numbers.”

We find it difficult to recruit governors/trustees to the governing board



Generally, we've tracked recruitment difficulties increasing gradually in the years leading up to COVID-19. The pandemic then appears to have accelerated this trend, creating a legacy of sustained difficulties in recruiting people to governing boards before reaching a peak in 2023. Although recruitment difficulties have declined since then, they have yet to return to pre-COVID levels.

The picture varies between governance structures, with respondents from MATs most likely to report recruitment difficulties, at 66%, followed by maintained schools at 64% and LGBs at 63%. SATs reported lower levels of difficulty although just over half, 51%, still agreed that recruitment was difficult. Across school phases, around two-thirds of respondents reported recruitment difficulties, with secondary schools an exception at 54%.

Although this year has seen improvements, they should not be interpreted as the problem being resolved. A majority of boards continue to experience difficulty attracting volunteers, and recruitment remains more challenging than before the pandemic. Boards also need to consider the range of skills, experience and perspectives they need, alongside retaining and developing volunteers over time.

Governance professionals, who arguably are at the front line of governor recruitment, were more likely to report recruitment as difficult than governors and trustees (72% vs 64%). They also brought attention to perceived workload and that it's particularly challenging in faith trusts, where specific faith requirements can significantly narrow the local recruitment pool.



"[There is a] perception that the duties and accountability of a school governors are too onerous."



"Foundation governors are particularly challenging to recruit, we have had 3 vacancies for some time and despite advertising in various formats, no interest..."

Some trusts are spending significant amounts on board recruitment. We would urge caution around large head-hunter fees and encourage boards to develop networks with local communities and employers.

64%

of respondents said they find it difficult to recruit governors/trustees

Governance develops valuable skills

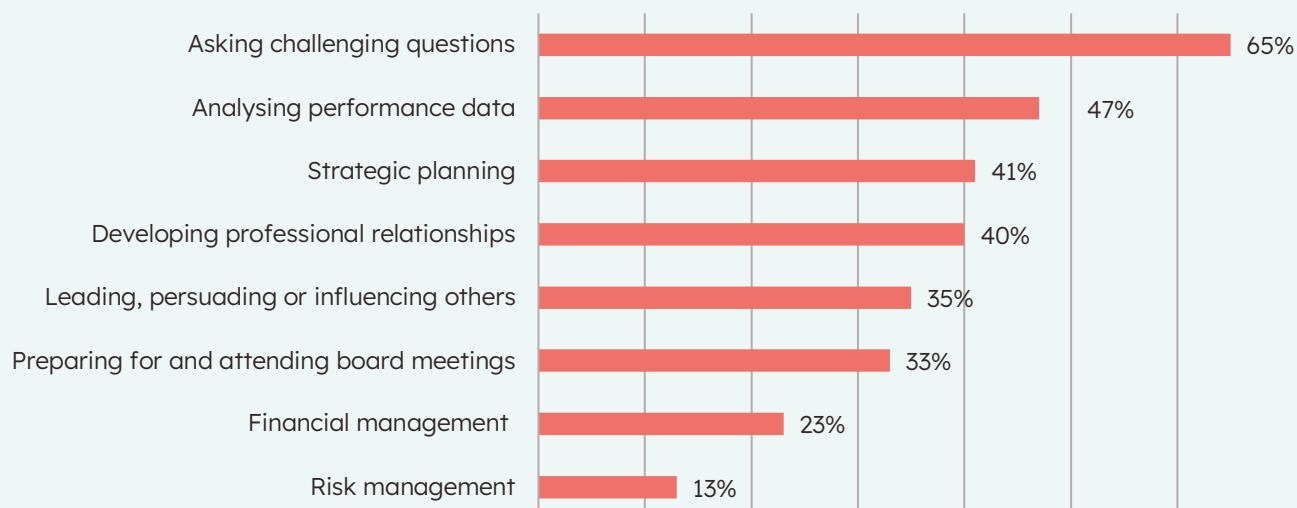
The benefits of governance are not just limited to the contribution governors and trustees make to their schools and trusts. Governance also provides opportunities for individuals to develop skills and gain experience that can be valuable both within and beyond their governance role. This highlights another dimension of the value in volunteering in governance and could also support boards to communicate the benefits of such roles when recruiting and retaining volunteers, such as in making approaches to employers to highlight the benefits to their organisation of encouraging staff to govern.

When asked which skills they had gained through governing, the most commonly identified was asking challenging questions, followed by analysing performance data and strategic planning. Other skills included developing professional relationships, leading, persuading or influencing others, and preparing for and attending board meetings. The findings demonstrate the breadth of skills involved in effective governance and reflect the increasingly complex nature of the role.

Skills gained also varied by role. Chairs were much more likely than others to report developing leadership, persuasion and influencing skills. Committee chairs, meanwhile, were most likely to identify analysing performance data, while other governors and trustees most frequently highlighted preparing for and attending board meetings.

There was also variation between governance structures. Respondents from MAT trust boards (52%) and LGBs (51%) were more likely to identify analysing

Most valuable skills you have gained from governing



performance data than those in maintained schools and SATs. Financial management was more common among maintained school governors (27%) and SAT trustees (26%) than those serving on LGBs at just 12%, reflecting how differing responsibilities affects the skills gained.

Asking challenging questions was the most commonly identified skill across all phases, while some differences reflected the nature of individual settings: those in secondary schools more frequently identified analysing performance data (48%) and risk management (17%), while in special schools, strategic planning and professional relationships were particularly prominent at 49% each.

Although not directly comparable with the question in 2019, respondents highlighted gaining greater understanding, strategic thinking, teamwork, knowledge, and confidence to challenge. These themes remain visible in the more specific skills identified this year, suggesting governance continues to develop critical thinking, strategic capability and leadership.

Governor and trustee development

This year's findings reinforce a consistent picture seen in previous surveys: governors and trustees use a range of methods to develop their knowledge and skills, combining structured training with informal learning and peer support. The 2026 results also highlight the growing diversity of these methods, with networking, mentoring and AI tools sitting alongside more established approaches such as online training and knowledge sharing.

The free-text responses suggest that governance development extends far beyond formal training.

Respondents described a variety of learning opportunities, including drawing on their day jobs and wider governance roles, practical governance experiences such as panels, reviews and school visits, specialist governance resources, and trust or local authority events or development opportunities.



"Trusteeship in a non-education youth support area"

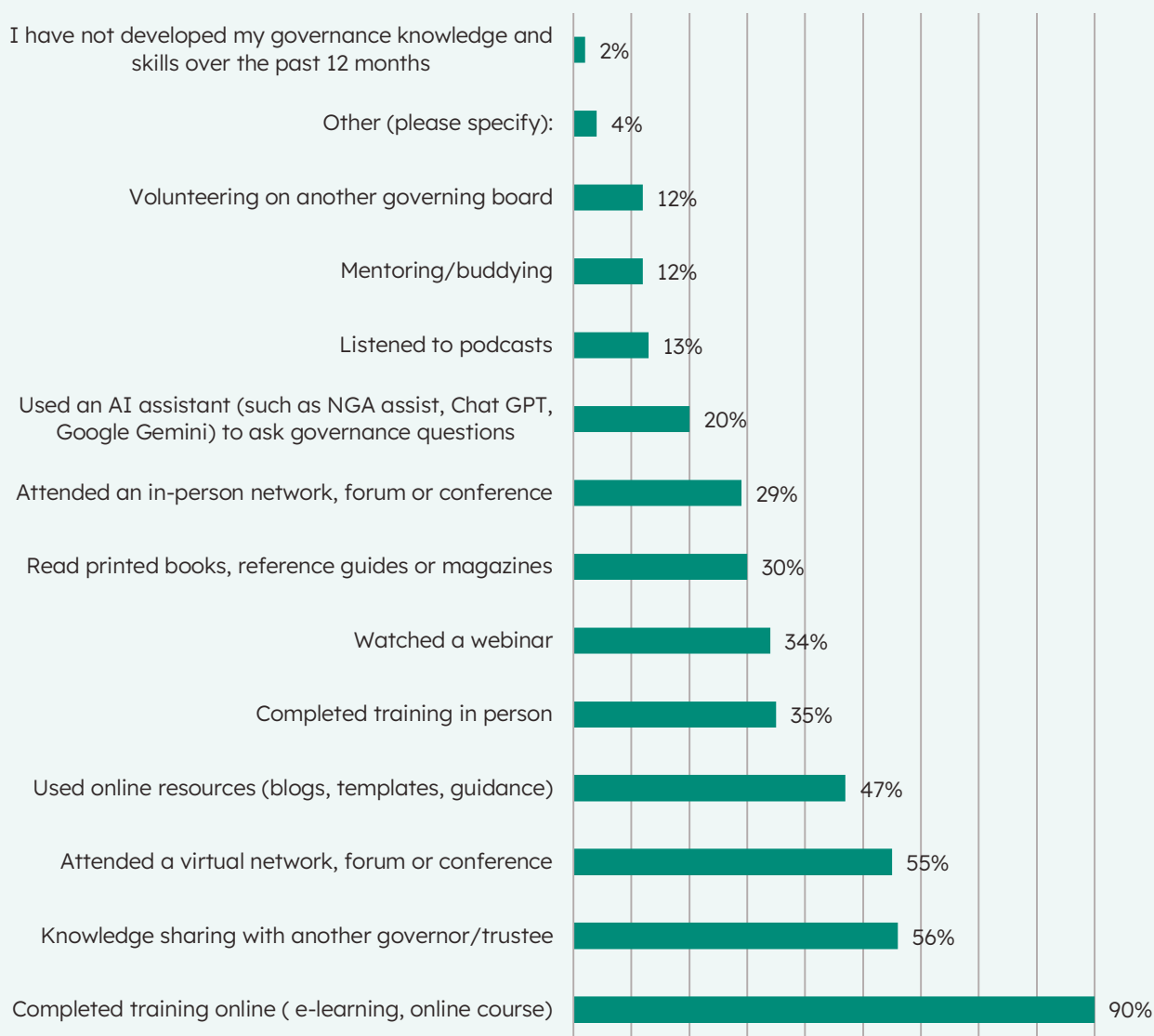


"Sat on panels for the LA - complaints, grievances and exclusions"



"Completed an MBA."

What methods have you used to develop your governance knowledge and skills over the past 12 months?



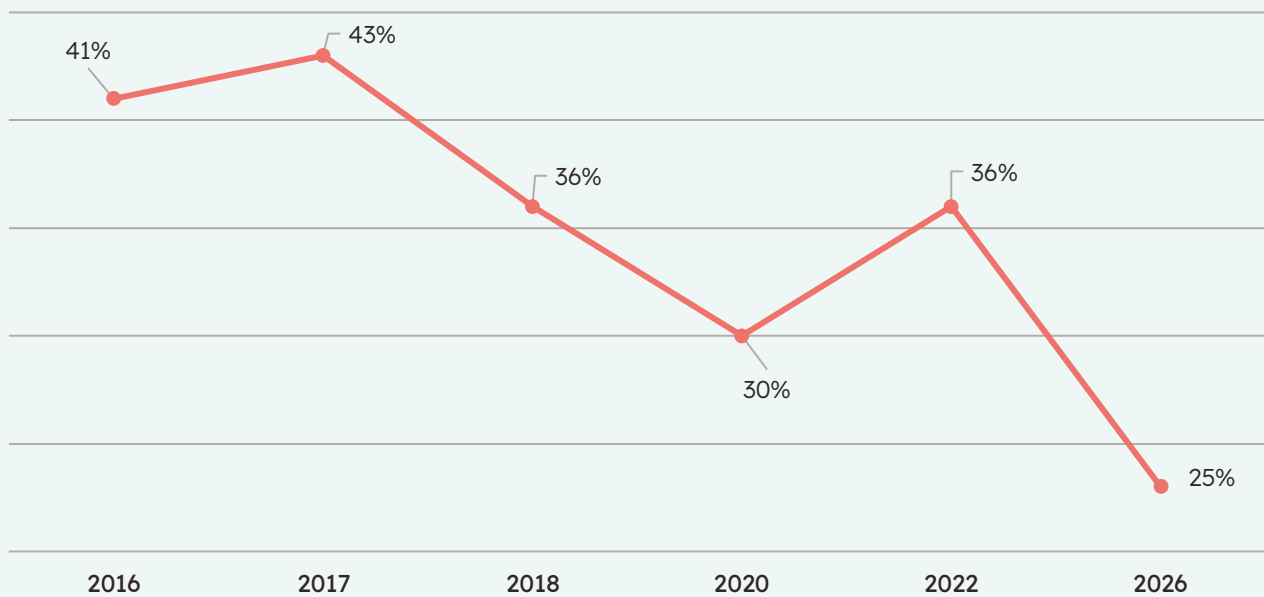
Chairing and succession planning

Just a quarter of respondents said they would consider becoming a chair, the lowest level since the question was first asked in 2016, highlighting a new challenge for boards. Different settings see a slightly different appetite, or lack of, to chair. All levels of MAT governance fare better meanwhile maintained schools trail behind.

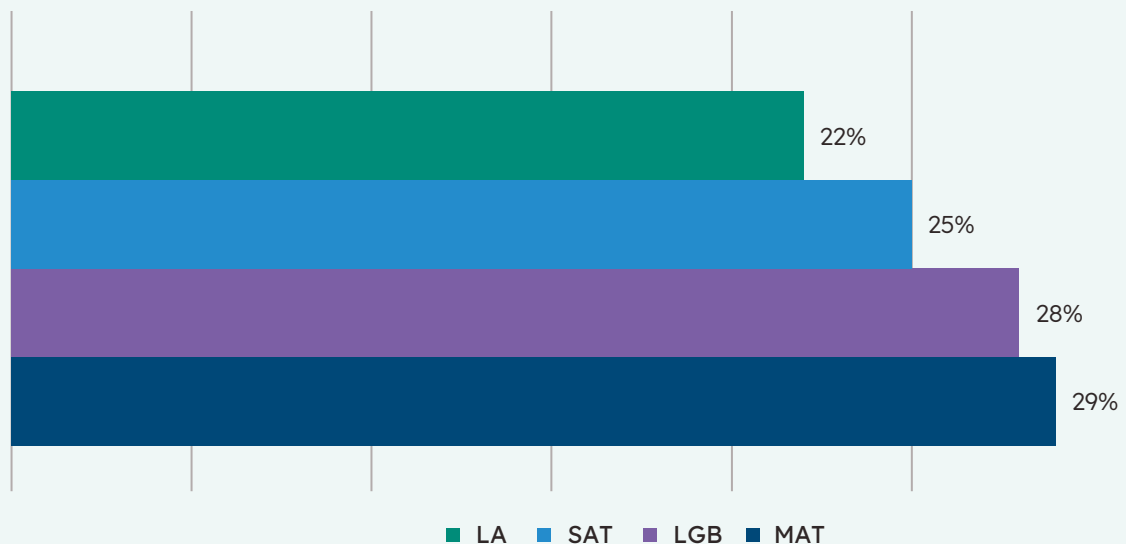
25%

of respondents
would consider
becoming chair

I would consider becoming chair



I would consider becoming chair



Reasons given for not considering the role provide insight into this decline. The main barriers were the time commitment and workload, as well as the responsibility and associated stress. Others questioned whether such a demanding role should remain entirely voluntary. Meanwhile some respondents felt they had given sufficient time to leadership, lacked the skills, experience or confidence required, or believed it was time for a new generation to step forward.



“I currently am unsure if I can dedicate the time.”



“I don’t have enough knowledge or confidence for this role.”

The picture is, however, not entirely negative. Among those who have taken on the role, the proportion who said they did so because they had the right skillset

has increased from 51% in 2019 to 58% in 2026. Other motivations remained broadly consistent, including previous governance experience, wanting to take on a new challenge, and stepping up because nobody else wanted the role.

Free-text responses also demonstrate the strong sense of purpose that can motivate people to chair. Some described a desire to give back to their community or make a difference to children’s education. Others stepped forward because they felt a duty to do so, particularly where there was no obvious successor. Professional experience, confidence in their skills and having the time to commit were also important factors.

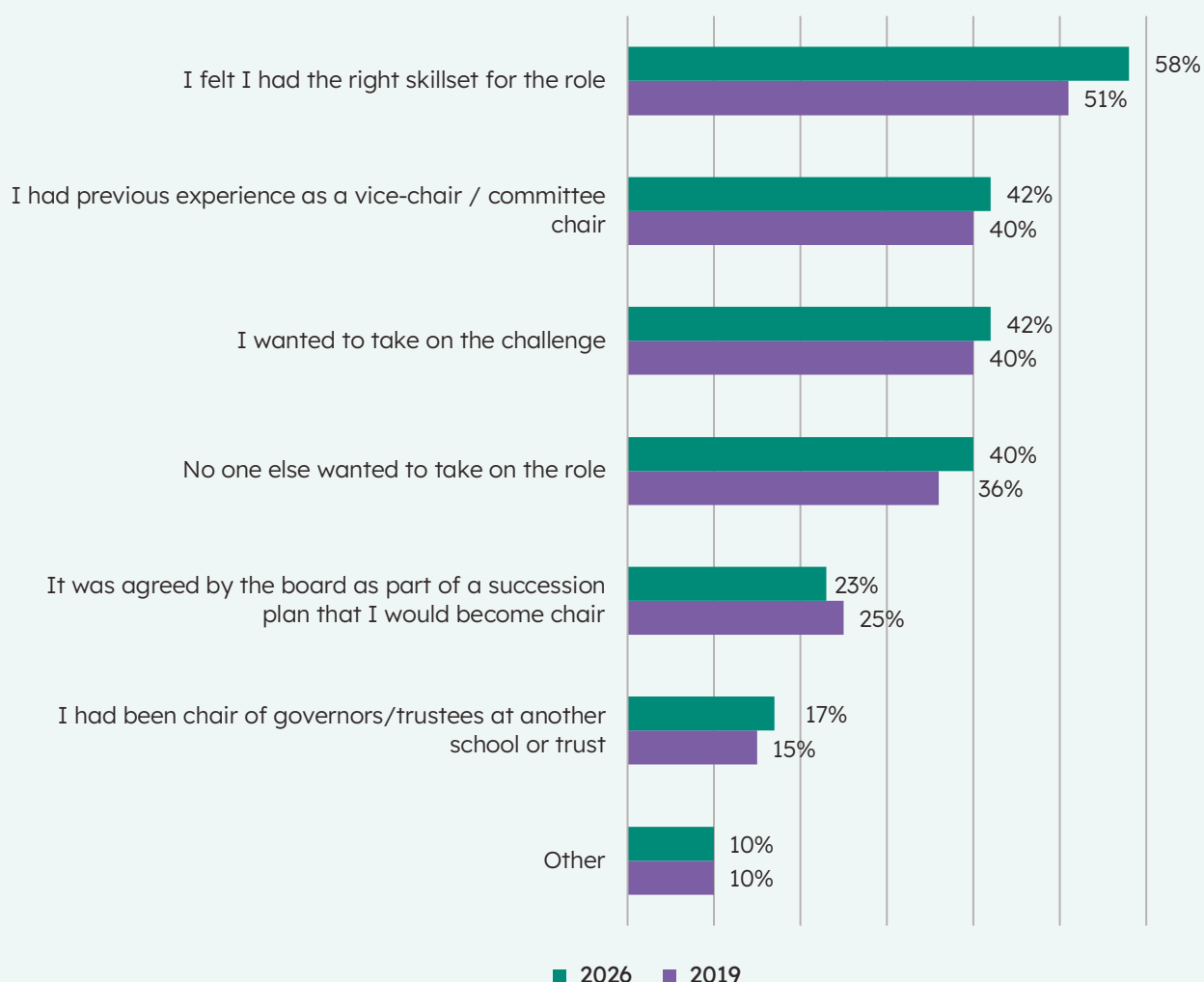


“I felt a duty to step up for my community”



“I felt I had something useful to offer the board.”

Why did you take on the role of chair?



It is concerning that despite board members reporting a strong sense of impact, and acknowledging the skills and experience gained, few respondents would consider taking on the most senior governance role. This makes developing future chairs and effective succession planning increasingly important. Encouraging those governing to build their confidence and leadership skills before a chairing vacancy arises may help ensure that boards have a sustainable pipeline of people willing and able to lead. The possibility of co-chairing should also be considered as a way to share the workload and bring together the individual skills and experiences of two governors/trustees.

External reviews of governance

Good practice is to have an external review of governance (ERG) every three years yet, 13% of respondents said their board had never undertaken one, with the same again reporting that their last review had taken place three to five years ago (13%) or more than five years ago (7%).

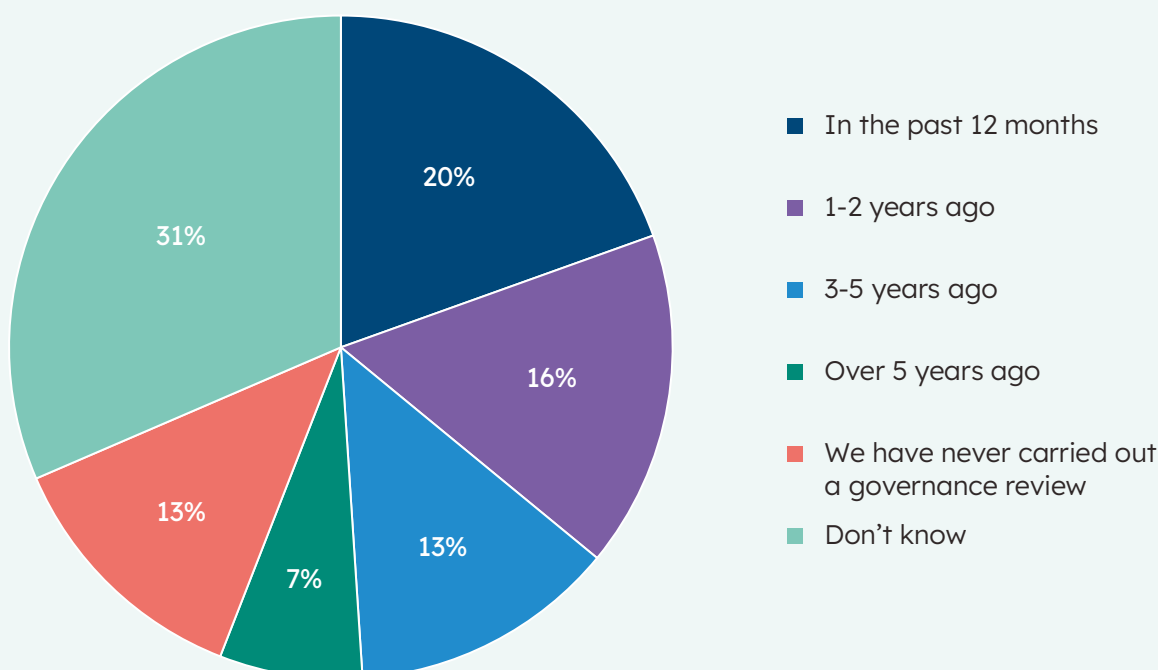
Concerningly, a high proportion of those who said they didn't know (38%) when they last had an ERG were local governors in a MAT, which suggests trust boards may not be sharing their ERG reports with local governors. We strongly recommend ERG reports are shared with all those who govern, especially Members in trusts, as this is an important source of evidence for them to know if the board is effective.

A stark difference was also seen by board type with 62% of MATs and 60% of SATs having an ERG in the last five years, compared to 43% of maintained schools.

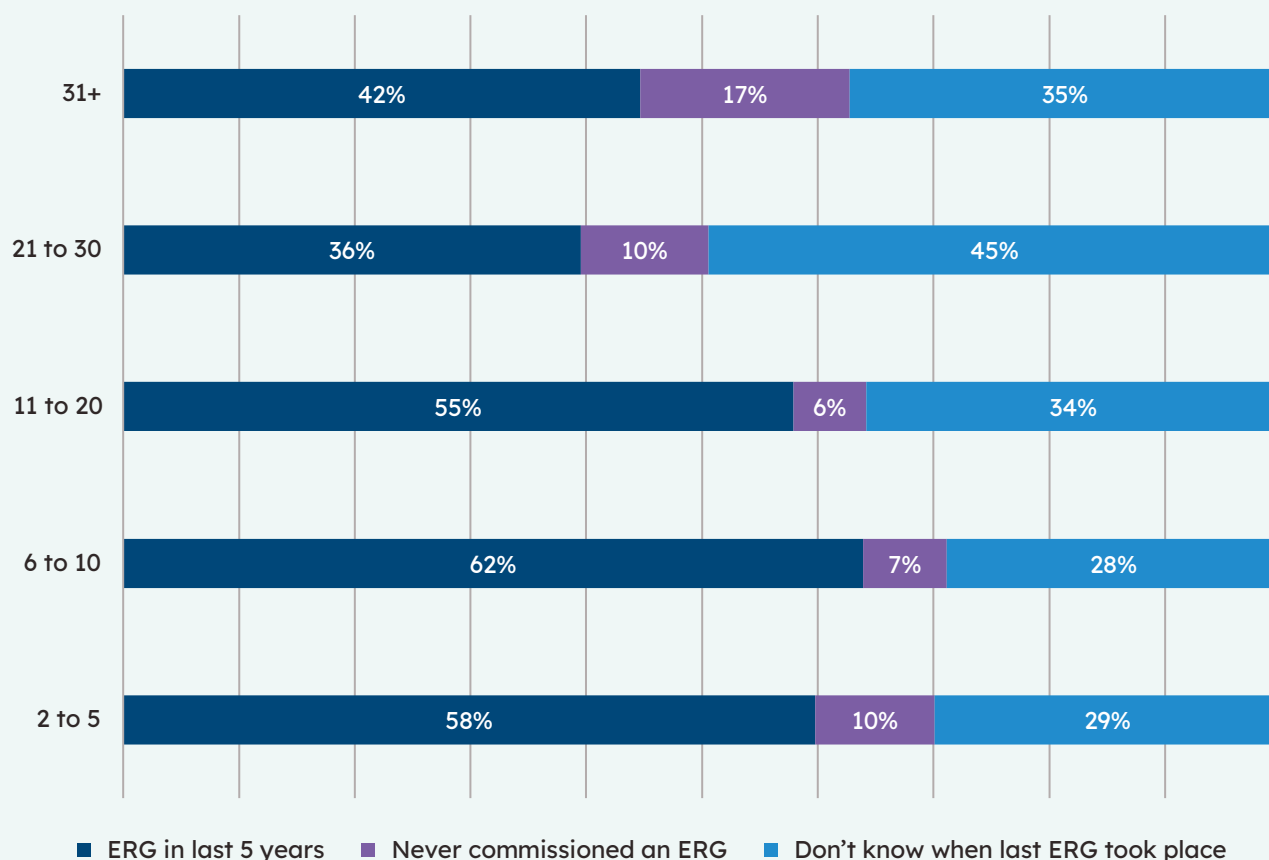
Significant differences can be seen in ERG engagement by size of MAT, with smaller MATs in the 6-10 size bracket engaging most and the largest MATs (31+ academies) engaging the least.

However these statistics are looked at, it is worrying that a high percentage of boards are not engaging with ERGs which are an important source of assurance, accountability and development. We know from

When did you last have an external review of governance?



MATs of different sizes and when they last had an ERG



our own data that boards that regularly engage with ERGs are more likely to have a higher standard of governance.

Since 2017, the average period between reviews has increased from around 3.7 years to approximately 5 years in 2026. Through NGA's ERG work, we know they are often delayed because of a change of CEO or a trust merger. These can be understandable reasons to delay, but they can also be good reasons to bring forward an ERG, as a robust external review can really help a board identify how to accommodate change, such as growth quickly. We certainly see a hesitancy from some boards and governance professionals to commission ERGs when they are dealing with change

in the organisation or board. We would encourage all boards to think of ERGs as a supportive process and learning opportunity and not an inspection or audit. With the introduction of MAT inspections in 2027 we encourage trust boards to consider an ERG as one way to get an external view of their MAT.

“I am **highly respected**
and **valued** in my role by my
CEO, trustees, governors,
headteachers and their SLT’s.”

Ruth Agnew • Strategic Lead for Governance Professionals



Governance professionals

What governance professionals (GPs) are telling us in 2026

1 More GPs than ever are making governance their full-time career

The proportion of respondents working full-time has nearly doubled since 2021, rising from 14% to 27%.

2 Senior roles are on the rise

Nearly a third of respondents (32%) now work at a lead level, compared with 2021, when Head of Governance and Director of Governance roles accounted for just 2% and 1% of respondents respectively.

3 MAT support soars

The proportion of GPs supporting multi academy trust boards has risen from 19% in 2021 to 51% in 2026.

4 GPs are highly educated

73% of respondents were qualified to degree level or above.

5 Shared challenges and priorities

Governors, trustees and GPs align on most topics, demonstrating a powerful shared understanding of the key issues impacting schools and trusts.

6 There may be a governance paradox within MATs

The schemes of delegation that provide clarity, consistency and compliance in a MAT maybe reducing local agency and increasing the administrative burden on volunteers, making it harder to recruit and retain volunteers.

7 Positive views on Ofsted accuracy

Just over two-thirds (67%) of governance professionals with experience of the new Ofsted framework agree that their schools report card accurately reflects its leadership and governance.

8 CPD satisfaction plummets

Only 47% of governance professionals are satisfied with their training and professional development opportunities, down from 63% in 2021, as time and money act as barriers.

9 AI adoption goes mainstream

Only 14% of governance professionals don't use AI tools in their role, down from 72% in 2024.

10 Deep frustration over pay and careers

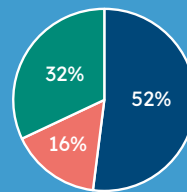
Although 77% said that their governing board had a positive impact on the strategic direction of their school or trust in the past 12 months, a mere 22% are satisfied with their remuneration and only 9% are satisfied with their career progression

The role of the governance professional has evolved significantly over the past decade, with NGA playing an important role in supporting the profession. NGA has conducted other dedicated surveys of governance professionals in 2021 and 2024, but this year we have taken this work further. For the first time, the 2026 Annual Governance Survey brings the perspectives of governance professionals together with those of governors and trustees, providing a fuller picture of how the profession is changing, the experiences of those working within it, and the contribution governance professionals make to effective governance.

Taken together, these insights will strengthen our advocacy for everyone involved in governance, helping to amplify collective voice and ensure governance perspectives are fully represented. This is a vital step towards securing governance professionals a well-deserved place at the table, recognising their critical role in delivering effective governance and improving outcomes for children and young people.

Who are our governance professional respondents?

We heard from nearly 700 governance professionals



Respondent role types

- Clerk
- Governance co-ordinator
- Lead governance professional



89%
are NGA
members



62%
are aged 50
and over



90%
are female



95%
identify their
ethnicity as
white



62%
have been a
GP for over
four years



73%
are qualified
to degree-
level or above

Employment nature and status

Although those working across the different levels of NGA's clerking scale has remained stable in recent years, *where* respondents are working has shifted rapidly. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those supporting multi academy trust boards has more than doubled since 2021.

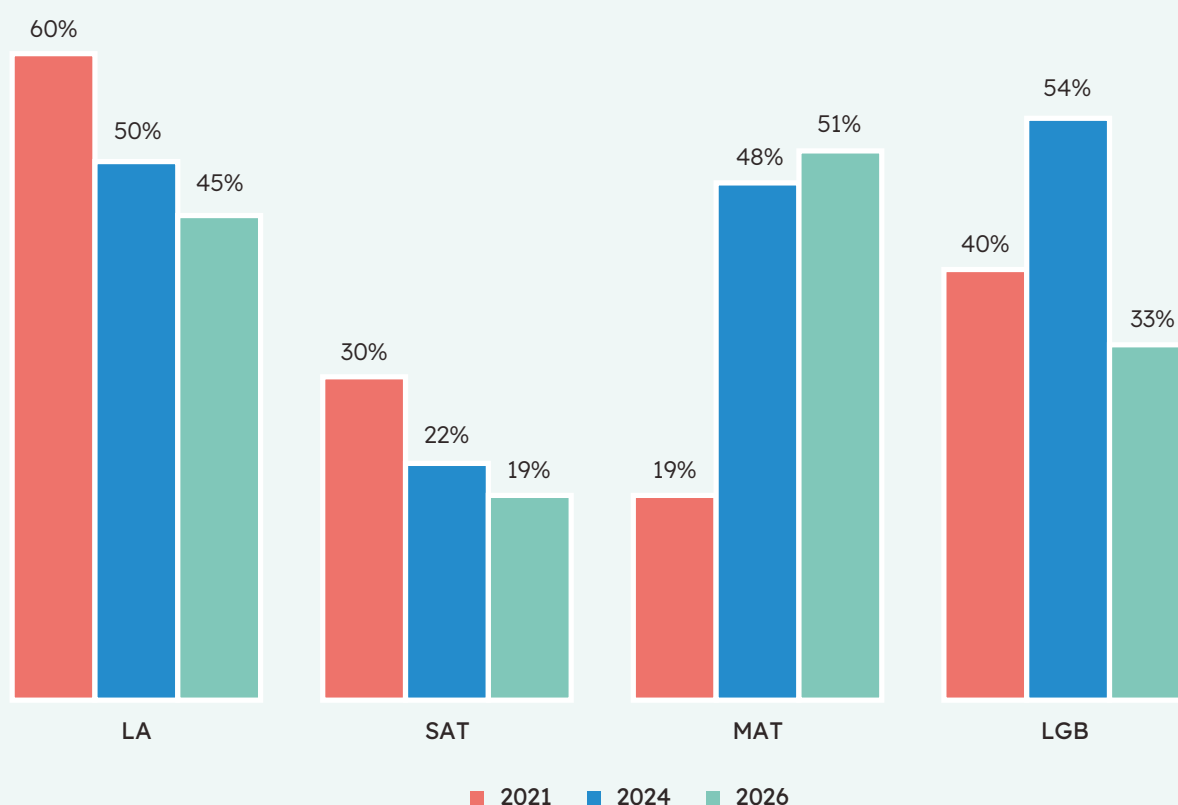
The survey also indicates that clerking-level roles are most common among those supporting LA-maintained schools and SAT boards. The role of lead governance professional is much more prevalent among those supporting MAT boards, which is consistent with support for the more complex governance structures typically found within MATs.

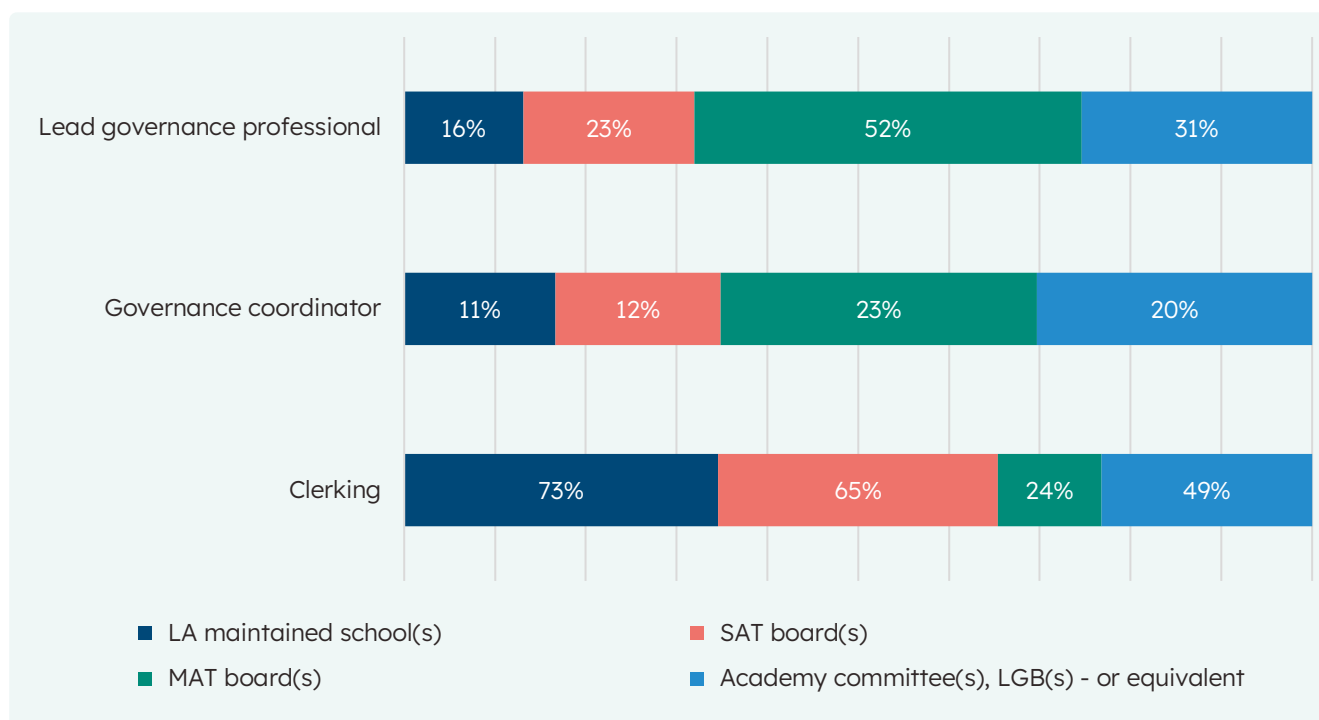
This shift towards the academies sector brings both opportunities and challenges for education governance professionals. Although the principles of governance are the same, the legal and compliance framework in academies is different from that of the maintained sector, with aspects unique to each trust. Transitioning between sectors, or working across both, is challenging and involves time and financial commitment to CPD, which presents its own challenges.

In its governance professional career pathway, NGA recognises **three levels** within the governance professional role:

- 1. Clerking level:** providing direct support to governing board meetings and associated tasks.
- 2. Governance coordinator level:** this usually combines clerking level responsibilities with delivering and co-ordinating wider governance support through a central team. It also involves line management of clerks and supporting and deputising for lead governance professionals as required.
- 3. Lead governance professional level:** responsible for the overall strategic management of services that support governing boards, strengthen and ensure effective and compliant governance across a number of schools.

Which type of governing board(s) are you a governance professional for?



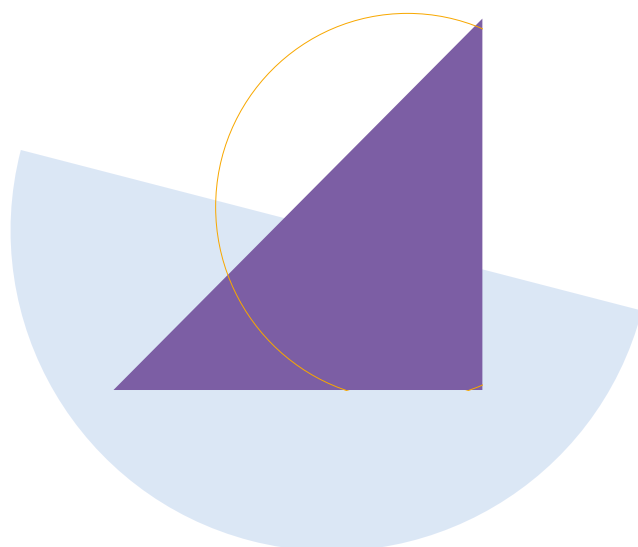


Employment status

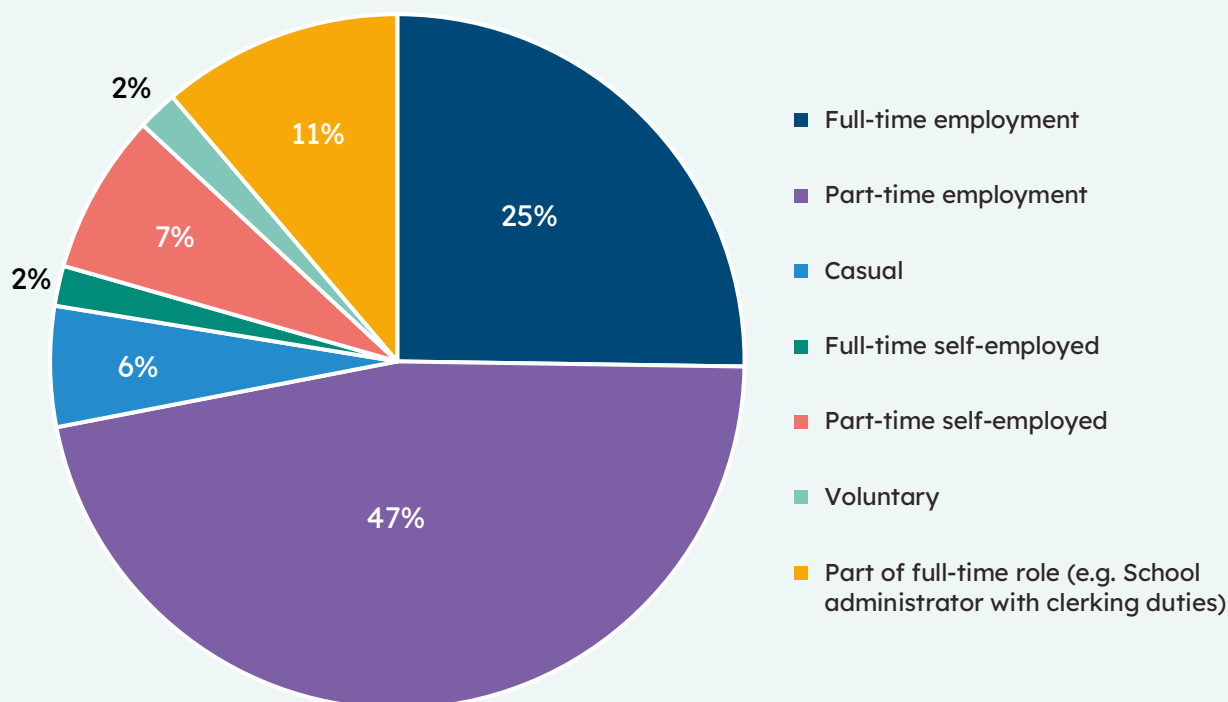
The growth of MATs may be contributing to further changes in the governance professional career. In 2026, 27% of respondents said they were employed full-time as a governance professional by their school or trust, almost double the 14% reported in 2021. Given the important role MATs have played in creating and developing lead governance professional positions, this shift is perhaps unsurprising. NGA expects the role to become increasingly important as the trust sector continues its growth trajectory. This could also help to address concerns raised by respondents about the status of governance professionals and limited opportunities for career progression, particularly for those working in this increasingly important area of governance.

Part-time employment however remains the most common working arrangement, reported by 50% of respondents. This is up slightly from 48% in 2024 but remains below the 56% high recorded in 2021. Part-time working also increases with age: half of respondents aged 60 and over work part-time, compared with just 10% of those aged 18–29. While the profession is seeing a gradual shift towards full-time employment, part-time and flexible working remain an important feature of governance professional roles, particularly for those later in their careers.

“ [In my trust] I lead on compliance, community strategy and strategy delivery too and am part of the executive leadership team. ”



Employment status



Impact, perception and role satisfaction

It's encouraging to see that most respondents said that the governing board they work with had made a positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes of their school or trust over the past year. This was slightly lower than the 84% reported by governors and trustees. Comments suggest that the difference may reflect how strongly GPs feel about operational challenges – particularly around funding pressures and managing deficits – as well as the reduced autonomy for some local governing bodies within more centralised MAT structures.

77%

of respondents said that the governing board they work with had made a positive impact on the strategic direction and outcomes of their school or trust in the past year.

When asked to identify the areas of their role with they were most satisfied, GPs said the guidance available in their role, their relationships with executive leadership teams, and the board's confidence in their advice. Conversely only 22% said remuneration and 9% opportunities for career progression.

We also asked respondents for their views on the status and recognition of governance professionals in the school sector. Responses highlighted a complex picture. Many feel highly respected by the boards they work with but believe this is not reflected in their pay or formal recognition, with some noting that they remain paid on an administrative scale.



"I am fortunate that within my trust I am highly respected and valued in my role by my CEO, trustees, governors, headteachers and their SLT's."



"... there is still [an] idea that they are just a minute taker and administrator... It was still a misunderstood role."



"not held in high status in relation to pay scale. Pay scale reflects admin, governance professional is much more than admin."

High satisfaction areas

The three aspects of the role with highest levels of satisfaction are:

Guidance available to support their role

73%

Relationships with executive leadership teams

67%

The board's confidence in their advice

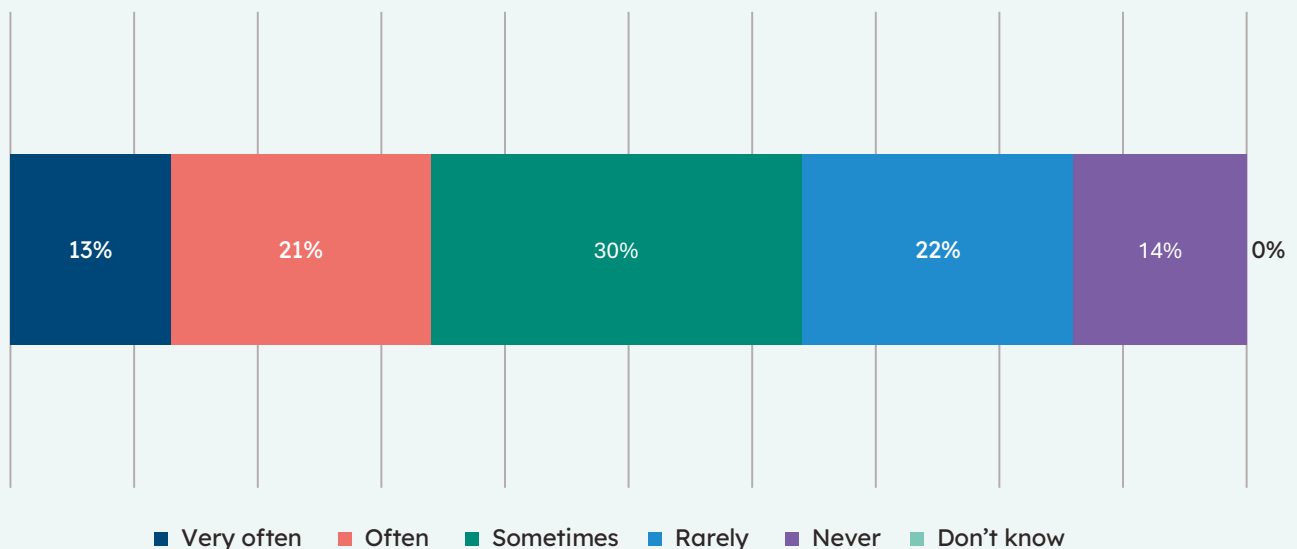
64%

Satisfaction levels regarding remuneration, perception and career opportunities are deeply disappointing to see. It's hoped that this may improve as the structural changes to the role become more prevalent, i.e. more Lead Governance Professional roles become available. NGA is also planning a review of its career pathway and salary levels which will aid this dialogue at a national level.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

A major societal shift is also being reflected in the GP career. Only 14% of GPs say they never use AI in the course of their work, down from 72% in 2024. The majority (64%) use AI at least sometimes.

How often do you use AI tools to support you?



When we asked respondents how often they use AI in their role, we also invited them to tell us more about how they use it. The responses show that meeting transcription and minute-taking are the main practical applications. However, there is also considerable scepticism about AI's accuracy, alongside concerns about GDPR, data security and confidentiality.

- “Our trust has not yet agreed its approach and this means I can't use AI as in many cases I would not be sure that I am using it safely.”
- “I don't want to use AI as it stands at present my view is that AI produces bland, identikit documents where the time taken to check and refine is as much as writing the document myself...”

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Regular CPD is essential to maintaining strong work practices. Worryingly, satisfaction with CPD opportunities has fallen from 63% in 2021 to 47%. And from this year's findings suggest a lack of time, finance and appropriateness/availability may be at least in part contribute to this statistic.

- “School budget is already stretched - no budget for the lowly clerk!”
- “I already exceed my contracted hours and try to have a social life outside of work... Personally, I do not feel I have the time or mental capacity to give the additional workload.”
- “As an experienced clerk with the level 3 qualification it's hard to find clerking CPD for the appropriate level and that I can sign up to, even if I am willing to pay.”

The latter interpretation could perhaps also apply to the minimal 24% who were satisfied with 'the availability and understanding of AI to support my role'; the 'understanding' element may indicate that training and support has not kept pace with technological change.

- “Am starting to embrace AI but feel that i need to explore and utilise this far more than i do.”
- “Not sure how it would help my role but maybe [AI is] something I could learn about”

So, what do GPs think is needed in the next 12 months for them to continue operating effectively and feel satisfied in their development?

- Formal qualifications and professional accreditation
- Legal, statutory compliance and regulatory updates
- AI tools and practical AI application
- Specialist clerking panels for high-risk hearings
- Strategic governance and board leadership
- Core clerking operational skills
- Networking and best practice sharing

MATs

MAT size

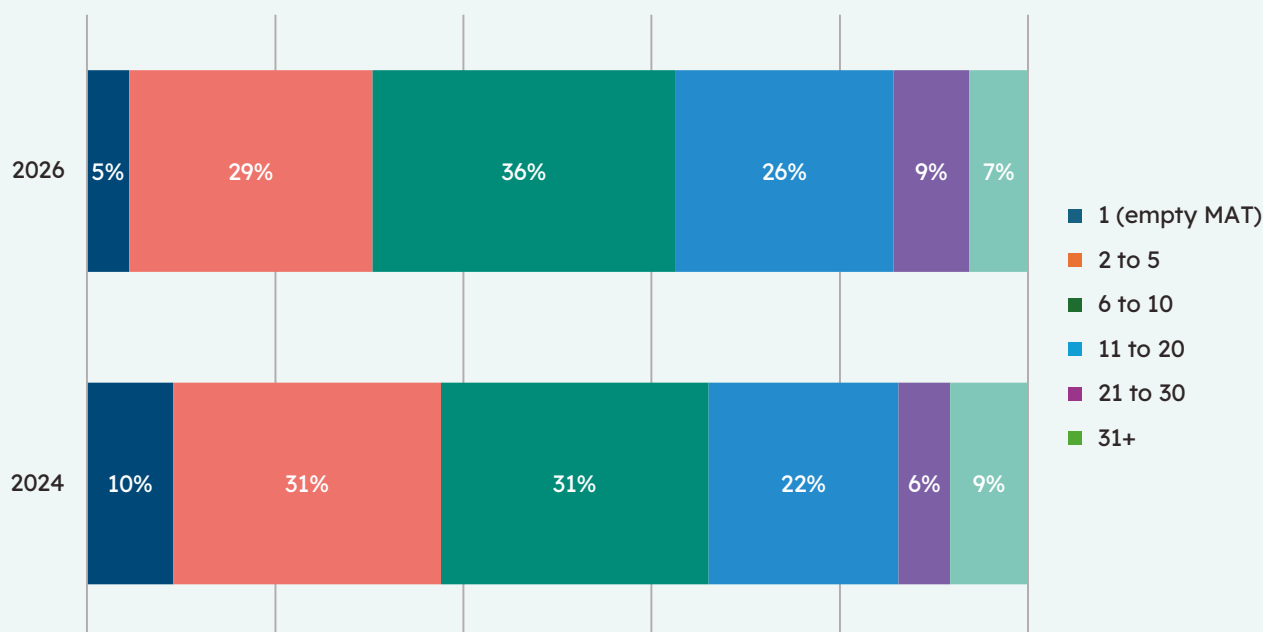
As we've seen, the proportion of respondents working in the MAT sector has increased since previous surveys. They are also increasingly supporting larger trusts, with a shift towards MATs with more schools and away from smaller or empty trusts. This reflects the continued growth and consolidation of the MAT sector.

Perceptions

Our survey has found increasing concerns among governors and trustees about some aspects of being part of a MAT. We wanted to explore whether those employed in the sector experience similar challenges. We therefore asked GPs an open-ended question about the strengths and drawbacks of their trust's governance, allowing them to describe what they see as working well and where they experience difficulties.

Comments suggest there is an apparent paradox: The same schemes of delegation that centralise authority and ensure compliance (the key strengths) are simultaneously driving away the volunteer workforce by reducing their local agency and loading them with compliance paperwork and panel duties (the key drawbacks).

GPs and the size of MAT they support



Top strengths of MAT governance

1. Central clerking and executive support (20%)



“Strong central team, superb support especially in safeguarding, send, HR, governance and finance.”

Trusts heavily value the specialised resources, templates, and advice provided by a centralised MAT team. It is seen as essential to remain compliant and organised.

2. Clear schemes of delegation and accountability structures (19%)



“strong structure has been developed to ensure responsibilities within the scheme of delegation are undertaken.”

A strong, clearly structured, multi-tiered governance model is valued for establishing clear lines of accountability, defining terms of reference, and keeping school-level reporting aligned with trust board priorities.

3. Volunteer dedication, passion and expertise (15%)



“Strong culture with committed and skilled governors and trustees.”

Trusts, in the same way as maintained schools, benefit from dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers. These trustees and local governors bring a wide variety of skills and experiences and are deeply passionate about their school communities.

4. Collaboration and best practice sharing (5%)



“Able to draw on other schools within the trust for support, ideas and any other issues”

An advantage of being within a MAT structure is the ability to pool resources, network, share ideas, and draw support from other schools within the same trust.

Top drawbacks of MAT governance

1. Volunteer recruitment and retention challenges (44%)

“Recruitment is always an ongoing challenge, there always seems to be a vacancy in at least one area member, trustee or local governor.”

This was by far the most-cited challenge (particularly at the local tier and for chair positions). High vacancy rates, lack of a diverse candidate pool, and difficulty finding foundation (faith) governors were particularly noted. Again, this is not unique to the academies sector.

2. Communication gaps and central-local disconnect (13%)

“Communication between the tiers is poor, leading to boards working in isolation - the trust exec board aren't visible to those governing at academy level.”

Communication between the trust board and local academy committees was cited as a weakness in some trusts; a “top-down” flow of information and limited interaction between the board and local committee members can leave some of those governing locally questioning whether their voices are being heard, respondents commented.

3. Overwhelming workload, compliance and panel duties (5%)

“Time pressures remains one of the biggest challenges! The increase of complex matters ... contribute to heavy workloads not just for our small central leadership teams, but all staff and our volunteers too!”

Governance volunteers face a significant time commitment including training expectations, meeting preparation and attendance and increasing operational panel duties (such as permanent exclusion appeals, parental complaints, and HR disciplinarys). Again, this is not unique to the trust sector.

4. Perceived loss of local agency (4%)

“[local academy committee] input largely ignored by trust. They have no powers despite having considerable skills. Local context often not understood by trust.”

Some governance professionals reported those governing at local level as being unclear as to the nature of their role under the trust's scheme of delegation, and feeling disempowered, leading to disengagement and increased turnover.

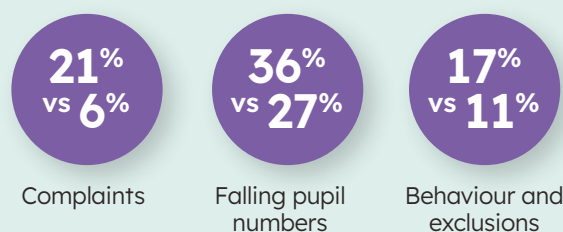
Challenges and priorities

We asked governance professionals for their views on the current challenges and priorities facing the schools and trusts they work with. These largely correlated with governors' and trustees' own views, though with some differences in emphasis.

Challenges

Governance professionals and governors and trustees identify broadly similar challenges facing their schools and trusts, with balancing the budget, support for pupils with SEND, attendance and falling pupil numbers among the most frequently cited by both groups.

Governance professionals were more likely than governors and trustees to identify these key challenges:



Priorities

Supporting pupils with special educational needs is the leading priority identified by governance professionals, followed by attendance and improving attainment. Ensuring the best use of resources is also a prominent priority.

The close alignment on the most prominent challenges and priorities suggests a broadly shared understanding of the pressures facing schools and trusts, despite some differences in perspective, perhaps reflecting the greater visibility governance professionals have of issues such as the workload associated with complaints.

Ofsted

The 2025 Ofsted framework introduced a new expectation, at least in the case of multi academy trusts, that inspectors meet with the trust's governance professional. This is reflected somewhat in our dataset that shows that lead governance professionals (31%) and those working in MATs (24%) were the most likely to have met with inspectors.

Just over two thirds (67%) of those who had been through the new inspection framework felt that the report card was reflective of the school's leadership and governance.



"We received exceptional which i believe is a true reflection of how the school runs, the strength of the governing board and the senior leadership team."

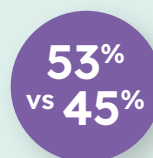


"We are proud of the I&G outcome in the report card... It accurately [represents us], with comments such as 'governors and trustees know their roles well.' 'leaders model high expectations and professionalism'."

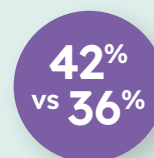
What's next?

This year's survey gives us a valuable picture of a profession that continues to evolve, with governance professionals balancing new demands alongside longstanding challenges. NGA is grateful to everyone who shared their experiences. These findings will help inform our work over the coming year, from our policy and engagement to the support we provide to governance professionals. We hope to hear from even more of the profession in future surveys and build on this picture of how the role is changing.

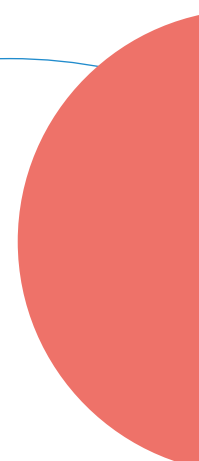
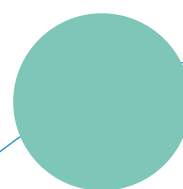
Governance professionals were more likely than governors and trustees to identify these key priorities:



SEND



Attendance



Conclusion

This survey helps NGA to understand the challenges the governance community faces, how it responds to a changing education landscape, and what it needs to fulfil its core purpose: improving outcomes for children and young people. This year's findings demonstrate the commitment and adaptability of those who govern, but also highlight the growing pressures on boards and the wider system in which they operate.

High-quality, ethical decision-making depends on boards that reflect the diversity and lived experiences of the communities they serve. When people face barriers to participating in governance, communities lose opportunities to shape the decisions that affect them. The survey responses raise important questions about how accessible governance is to people from a wider range of educational backgrounds. If we want inclusive, representative boards, we must invest in making governance accessible and equipping people to succeed in the role. As statutory responsibilities become increasingly complex, it is no longer sustainable to assume that volunteers can develop the knowledge and skills they need without dedicated, funded training and support.

The challenges surrounding SEND provision illustrate why this support matters. Boards are proactively engaging with the government's planned reforms, bringing their knowledge of local communities and pupils' needs to discussions. Unlike external inspections and regulatory interventions, governing boards provide continuous stewardship, informed by local context and community need. Yet their ability to turn ambition into reality is constrained by wider system capacity. Rising costs, shortages in specialist provision and funding that does not adequately reflect demand make it increasingly difficult for boards to ensure resources are used effectively and every child receives the support they need. The ambition to support more children with SEND in mainstream settings must be matched by the investment and capacity required to make inclusion work in practice.

Effective governance also depends on trust, transparency and coherent decision-making. Whilst the MAT sector has made considerable progress in embedding local governance, there is further opportunity to strengthen communication between governance levels, build confidence in trust-wide decisions and foster a shared sense of purpose.

For the first time, the 2026 Annual Governance Survey also captures the perspectives of governance professionals, providing a fuller picture of the people and expertise that underpin effective governance. While the profession is evolving, with more respondents working full-time and in senior roles, concerns about remuneration, career progression and access to professional development remain stubbornly persistent, highlighting the need for greater investment in the workforce that supports and enables governance.

These challenges cannot be separated from the wider conditions facing education. Falling pupil numbers, constrained funding and workforce shortages threaten the sustainability of schools and the provision communities rely on. Meanwhile, new technologies, including generative AI, offer opportunities to reduce administrative burdens but must be adopted responsibly, with appropriate safeguards and human judgement at their centre.

Ultimately, governance cannot compensate for weaknesses elsewhere in the system. Boards can challenge, support, plan and advocate, but they need the capacity and conditions to do so effectively. Government ambition must be matched by sustainable funding, strategic place-planning, investment in the education workforce and meaningful support for those who govern. The 2026 findings provide an important evidence base for making that case. By listening to the governance community and acting on its experiences, we can build a stronger, more inclusive and sustainable education system that serves every child and young person.

Methodology

The annual school and trust governance survey (AGS) is an annual self-selecting online survey that has been conducted by NGA for sixteen consecutive years. It provides a comprehensive overview of school and trust governance, involving governors, trustees, and governance professionals across state-funded schools in England. The survey was disseminated predominantly through NGA’s channels. Respondents do not need to be members of NGA, but 83% reported that they are.

This year, the survey was conducted from 2 June to 30 June 2026 and over 3000 people engaged. Total number of responses varies across the survey according to question requirements and/or target subgroups. The survey was hosted and analysed on the Smart Survey platform. Further data analysis was conducted on Microsoft Excel and identified trends and variations based on region, school type, phase, and other respondent demographics.

For this report, ‘agree’ often represents a combination of ‘strongly agree’ and ‘somewhat agree’ responses, and ‘disagree’ represents a combination of ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘somewhat disagree’ responses.

Unless otherwise stated, all percentages on charts/ graphs/illustrations are rounded to the nearest whole number. Please note that percentages may not add up to 100 due to multiple answer selection questions, rounding and/or ‘don’t know’ responses.

Throughout this report we also make reference to percentage point differences referred to as ‘PP’.

Governors and trustees

The survey sample is not fully representative of the national distribution of governors and trustees by board type. Governors from local authority maintained schools (53% of respondents compared with 40% nationally) and academy trust boards (29% of respondents across single and multi academy trusts compared with 11% nationally) are overrepresented, while members of local governing boards or academy committees are underrepresented (18% compared with 49% nationally). As with previous Annual Governance Surveys, participation was voluntary rather than based on quota sampling, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the views of respondents rather than being statistically representative of all governors and trustees in England.

Governors and trustees		
Governing board type	% of respondents	% of governors in state schools in England
Local authority maintained	53%	53%
Single academy trust	10%	3%
Multi academy trust	19%	8%
Local governing board/academy committee	18%	
Total	100%	100%

School/trust phase	%
Nursery	11%
Primary (including infant and junior)	71%
Secondary (including those with sixth forms)	25%
All-through	3%
Special	7%
Alternative provision or pupil referral unit	2%
Total	100%

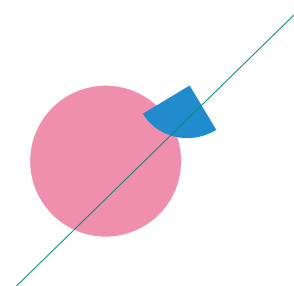
Region	%
South East	21%
South West	10%
London	10%
East Midlands	10%
West Midlands	9%
North West	15%
North East	5%
East of England	11%
Yorkshire and Humber	11%
Total	100%

Role	No.
Chair	25%
Co-Chair	3%
Vice Chair	10%
Committee chair	5%
Other governor/trustee	2%
Ex-officio (by virtue of another position) e.g. headteacher	34%
Governance professional	20%
Total	100%

Governance professionals

Governance professionals were asked to indicate the level at which they work and governance contexts. Around half work with multi academy trust boards with a further third supporting local governing boards or academy committees. 45% support local authority-maintained schools, while 19% work with single academy trusts. Most are working clerking level (52%), 32% as lead governance professionals, and 16% as governance coordinators. These findings provide context for the experiences reflected in the governance professional responses but should not be interpreted as representative of the national governance professional workforce.

Governing board type supported	% of respondents
Local authority maintained	45%
Single academy trust	19%
Multi academy trust	51%
Local governing board/academy committee	33%



Governance professional role	% of respondents
Clerking: Working at clerking level involves providing direct support to governing board meetings and associated tasks.	52%
Governance coordinator: This level usually combines clerking level responsibilities with delivering and coordinating wider governance support through a central team. It also involves line management of clerks and supporting and deputising for lead governance professionals as required.	16%
Lead governance professional: Roles at this level are responsible for the overall strategic management of services that support governing boards, strengthen and ensure effective and compliant governance across a number of schools.	32%

Terminology

This report uses the following terms to describe school and trust governance structures:

- **Ex-officio:** A governor or trustee who is on the board due to another role they hold in the school/trust, for example, headteacher or CEO.
- **Governance professional:** Professionals paid to provide administrative and advisory support to governing boards and, depending on their roles and the governance structures served, act as the strategic lead for wider governance support
- **LA maintained schools:** Schools that receive support and oversight from local authorities including those within federations.
- **MATs (Multi academy trusts):** Governance structures where two or more academies are governed by a single board of trustees.
- **SATs (Single academy trusts):** Governance structures where a single academy operates under its own trust.
- **Local governing boards (also known as LGBs, academy committees or similar):** The local tier of governance in a MAT. We refer to volunteers serving on academy committees as 'local governors'.

Survey questions

Certain questions are rotated in and out of the survey depending on the current priorities and developments within the sector. This flexible approach allows us to track certain issues over time, while also making space to explore emerging trends and topical matters in greater depth. This helps keep the survey relevant and manageable for respondents. If you're interested in questions or themes we've explored previously, you can find them in our [suite of reports](#).