

The right people around the table

A guide to recruiting and retaining
school governors and trustees

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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.

Introduction

Having the right people around the table is one of NGA's eight elements of effective governance. It is a continuous cycle that begins with evaluating your board's current and future needs and building an effective team. Finding new volunteers is not always an easy task and recruiting from underrepresented groups can be particularly challenging.

This guide provides practical advice to help ensure that your board has the right blend of knowledge, skills, perspectives and backgrounds to govern effectively. It covers key areas to consider as part of the recruitment process. All types of state-funded schools can use the principles, ideas and resources included in this guide.

There are around 250,000 volunteer governors and trustees currently governing in state-funded schools in England – we hope this guide creates opportunities to increase the number of people volunteering in school governance and enables boards to explore ways of diversifying their composition.

NGA has identified eight elements which research and practice tell us are essential for good governance. These apply to whatever type of school or trust you govern. These eight elements are needed to transform the team of diverse people with a range of skills, experience and knowledge into a highly effective governing board.

[Find out more about the eight elements here.](#)

Terminology

This guide refers to:

Governing boards – to cover maintained school governing bodies, academy trust boards and academy committees (sometimes known as local governing bodies).

Governance professionals – to describe the person providing formal clerking support to governing boards and includes those working at the clerking level who advise boards on their constitution and membership.

MAT – a multi academy trust which is two or more academies governed by one board of trustees.

Eight elements of effective governance



Visible Governance

in schools & trusts

Governors and trustees have many opportunities to increase their board's visibility. Examples include attending parents' evenings, local job fairs, open evenings, staff meetings and training, and community events. Such opportunities bring the board into contact with the communities it serves and helps to highlight board vacancies and identify suitable volunteers to fill them.

Visit our [Visible Governance campaign page](#) to learn about how NGA is raising the profile of school and trust governance.

Evaluating your board's needs

Composition

Boards should regularly review their composition (size and structure), particularly before recruiting new volunteers. Department for Education (DfE) guidance is clear that an effective board is no larger than necessary. Smaller boards are likely to be more cohesive and dynamic – if you have vacancies on paper but are running efficiently without filling them, a reduction in board size may be appropriate.

Making changes to board composition

Maintained schools have an instrument of government that sets out the composition of the governing board. Your board's governance professional should act on any decision to change the composition of the board by contacting the local authority to request a change to the instrument.

The composition of an academy trust board is laid out in its articles of association. Any [changes to articles of association](#) need to be approved by the DfE. In multi academy trusts (MATs), the trust board decides the composition of local academy committees and sets this out in the relevant governance document (usually the [scheme of delegation](#) or committee terms of reference).

For schools and trusts with a religious character, there is also an obligation to consult the diocese (or equivalent) and obtain formal consent for any change to board composition.

Evaluating skills on the board

A board composed of governors and academy trustees who bring a diverse range of skills, experiences, qualifications, characteristics and perspectives and who are from different backgrounds and settings will have a positive impact on setting the strategic direction for the organisation.

All governors and trustees should have relevant skills and experiences to contribute to the work of the board along with the necessary commitment of time and energy.

The following resources can be used to identify the skills and experience your board might need from a new member.

Skills audit

NGA's [skills audit](#) draws on the experience and feedback of our members. It enables boards to assess their strengths and highlight where development is needed to deliver governance functions effectively.

Boards should carry out a skills audit annually and your governance professional is well placed to oversee this process. If there is a shortage of skills or competency on the whole board, this may need to be rectified by training, by recruiting someone to the board with the necessary experience, or both.

Creating a diverse board

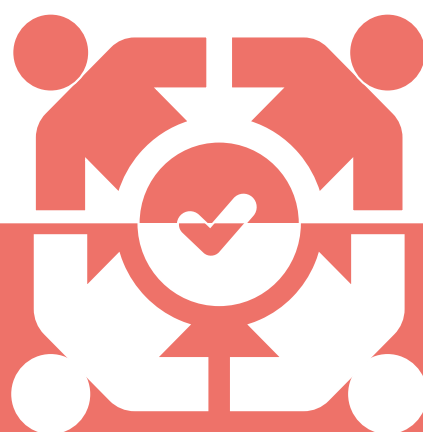
A diversity of thought, voices and perspectives is essential to good governance and the effective running of any organisation. The DfE highlights the importance of diversity and wants governing boards to be increasingly reflective of the communities they serve. Monitoring and evaluating the diversity of your board may highlight a need for targeted recruitment to address specific gaps in experience and potential 'blind spots'.



When monitoring the diversity of your board, we recommend that you:

- Make use of available data (such as [local area reports](#) provided by the Office for National Statistics) to understand the demographic of your community and inform actions.
- Reflect on how your board's membership represents the demographic of your community.
- Explore opportunities to increase board diversity – consider the opportunities and challenges facing your pupils and your community now and in the near future; could new volunteers help to fill gaps in understanding?

The purpose of diversity monitoring is not to promote token diversity – no formula can be applied to determine a representative governing board. Members of the governing board should not be recruited solely on the basis of their protected characteristics or lived experience.



Diversity indicators form

The [NGA diversity indicators form](#) can be used by governing boards in all types of school structure to gather diversity data on their membership and use this as a basis for discussion and action. We have produced a short guide to help boards evaluate and report on form responses. The process should help to highlight issues, put forward solutions and engage stakeholders.

Schools and trusts are encouraged to collect and publish diversity data about governing boards and any local academy committees.

While this is not mandatory, the collection of this data must be anonymised and available to the wider public. There is no prescriptive way to collect diversity data from volunteers; this needs to be done on a voluntary basis.

Everyone on Board: increasing diversity in school and trust governance

NGA's [Everyone on Board campaign](#), developed in partnership with Inspiring Governance, aims to increase the participation of young people and people from ethnic minorities in school governance. You can read more about the campaign on the NGA website and sign up to be part of conversations about positive change.



Attracting new volunteers

We recommend that the following information is included either in the initial advertisement or the supporting information made available on the school or trust website.

The following points may also inform your initial discussion with candidates:

- A brief introduction to the school/trust, including the ethos, values and vision.
- A description of the role and what it involves (meetings, reading, training, school visits and attending panels).
- The time commitment, when meetings take place and length of office.
- The specific skills, knowledge, attributes and characteristics that are being sought.
- Whether you are particularly interested in seeking applicants with particular characteristics (such as from an ethnically minoritised group, the LGBTQ+ community, of a particular gender, with a disability, or young person) and why you are doing so.
- Opportunities to claim out of pocket expenses such as any childcare or travel costs required to carry out their governance role.

Where to promote your vacancy

The school/trust should look to use a range of communication channels to promote your vacancy so that everyone with the potential to fulfil the role has an equal opportunity to apply. Avoid relying solely on personal and/or professional connections and word-of-mouth.

Recruiting from outside the area

The emergence of remote governance activities such as online meetings, briefings and training, creates opportunities for boards to cast their net further and seek volunteers from outside of their local area, because travelling distance and time is less of an issue. Consider remote governance carefully and ensure it suits your board's way of working.

Our [virtual governance guidance](#) provides further advice.

Attracting volunteers within a trust

MATs benefit from being able to attract new volunteers from across the trust community. For example, talent-spotting potential trustees governing at local level and encouraging those serving on academy committees to try different governance roles within the trust. This approach can help to build capacity and support succession planning.

Findings from NGA research show that recruiting local governors is often the most challenging. It is key for academies to clearly outline the role and its responsibilities (as distinct from maintained school governors and academy trustees).

Trust boards may wish to engage with recruitment services (see page 6) that offer packages tailored for trustee recruitment.

Effective advertising

The most effective advertising is:

- inclusive and engaging – it avoids unnecessary detail, formality and jargon.
- encouraging – conveying how the role can be enjoyable, manageable and rewarding, such as by including a positive quote from someone currently serving on the board.
- clear and directs interested individuals to the relevant contact(s) that oversee governance recruitment within the school/trust.

Reply to any interest shown as soon as possible; make sure that school administration staff know who to direct enquiries to.

Below is a list of channels you could use to promote your vacancy – use a few to start with and try more if needed. Successful channels can be used again for future recruitment.

Channel	Possible approaches
School communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place a prominent advert on the school or trust website. Send a letter home to parents/carers or include information in the school newsletter. Place adverts/posters around the school to reach school staff. Have a governing board presence at school events to talk about vacancies.
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post on the school's social media, monitor and respond to any comments. Share your social media post in your local community or social groups and encourage existing board members to share your posts. Try including photographs from the school or a short video. Set up a 'job' on LinkedIn (you can also search LinkedIn to find people who have the skills or experience your board needs).
Local media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit an article to your local newspaper or parish magazine. Local radio stations may report community stories and appeals. Send a press release to your local publication about an achievement at the school, including an appeal for volunteers to join your board.
Neighbouring schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask local schools or schools that are part of the trust if any of their staff would be interested in joining your governing board: an attractive CPD opportunity. Find out if governors/trustees at neighbouring schools are coming to the end of their term and would like to join a different board.
Community spaces and events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community spaces like places of worship, shops, libraries, and social clubs often have noticeboards where you can place an advert. Community events (outside the school) are a good opportunity to meet and speak to local people.
Headhunting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify individuals who contribute to your local community (perhaps through charities and volunteering). You could approach them via organisations such as sports clubs and community centres. Be clear that you are just seeking interest and candidates still need to apply and be interviewed formally.
Alumni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact former pupils – they are often keen to give back to the school. Alumni provide valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities of growing up in the local area.
Employers and professional groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local employers can help you access candidates with transferable skills to bring from their professional life. Some areas have mentoring or development schemes for different professions or underrepresented groups. Many employers/industries have networks for people from underrepresented groups.
Key stakeholders and existing networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with community stakeholders (such as the LA, the police, public health, neighbourhood forums and faith groups) and ask for their support. If your school has a university nearby, you could ask them to share your vacancy with their staff, students and alumni. You could also invite existing board members to share the vacancy through any networks or groups they have links with.



Increasing awareness of school and trust governance

NGA has produced [a short, animated film](#) which can be used by governing boards to explain school and trust governance to potential volunteers. You may wish to share the film on your school or trust website or via social media as part of your recruitment activity.



Share the animation to help make governance visible in your school or trust.

Using recruitment services

There are specialist services that support schools and trusts to identify and recruit governors and trustees. Through the use of their volunteer databases and other sources of information, these providers look to locate suitable candidates. Most are free to use but those providing a more extensive and tailored service are likely to incur a charge.

Do-it is a national database of volunteering opportunities and potential volunteers. It covers a wide range of roles and sectors, including school governance. You can [create a volunteering opportunity](#) for a school governor or trustee online.

Governors for schools finds, places, and supports skilled volunteers as governors and trustees on school and academy boards. They engage in various approaches to inspire those who may not have considered governance roles before. You can [create an account and register a vacancy](#) for free.

Governors for schools also provides a specialist [trustee recruitment service](#) supporting trusts to engage volunteers with the right skills, experience and a range of perspectives.

Reach Volunteering allows organisations to post vacancies and search their community to find new volunteers.

The National Black Governors Network (NBGN) represents Black people seeking to become trustees and governors across all levels of education. Schools and trusts can work directly with NBGN and make use of their training and resources.

Young Trustees Movement specialise in promoting trustee positions for volunteers who are under 30 years of age. You can [fill in a form on their website](#) to advertise your vacancy.

Targeting underrepresented groups

It is important that advertisements reach as many people as possible. The following approaches can be beneficial:

- Make the most of opportunities to promote and celebrate the inclusive culture of your school or trust.
- Review the board's operating routines and practices on a regular basis and remove any potential barriers to participation such as meetings taking place exclusively during the working day.
- Embrace opportunities to recruit younger governors or trustees. Including the time commitment required, benefits and expectations of the role provides a realistic image of what their time as a governor or trustee would look like.
- Use your community and wider links to identify and approach individuals directly – it is not enough to have an open door, you need to invite people through.
- Highlight the induction offer and tools available to candidates new to the board such as NGA's [Young Governors' Network](#).

To increase the chances of hearing from candidates from underrepresented groups you could use the following in your advertisement:

'We would like to make the governing board more representative of our school community. For this reason we would particularly welcome new [governors/trustees] from the following [backgrounds/communities/groups]...'

For example, you may be welcoming candidates from an ethnically minoritised group, the LGBTQ+ community, of a particular gender, with a disability, or young person.

The recruitment process

The recruitment process varies according to the category of governor/trustee vacancy and whether they are elected by stakeholders or appointed by the board or a third party (such as the local authority or diocese).

Elections

- Staff governors/trustees and (in most cases) parent governors/trustees are elected to the board.
- As with any category of governor/trustee, you will need to identify the skills, knowledge and experience needed from the elected governor/trustee and advertise the role accordingly. This will increase the chances of people putting themselves forward who match your requirements.
- Help potential new volunteers to understand the role and expectations before they are nominated – it is a good idea to arrange a meeting to explain what the role entails, the support that is available and answer any questions.
- Your school/trust should have a secure and reliable voting system in place to run elections.

Get recruitment support and advice

Governance professionals have an important role in the election and appointment of governors and trustees and can provide advice on procedural matters.

[Resources to support recruitment and election](#) are available from NGA's Knowledge Centre.



NGA Gold members can [access expert, independent advice](#) on an extensive range of governance topics.

Board appointments

- Co-opted governors and trustees are appointed by the governing board.
- Evaluate the skills, knowledge and experience of the governing board and the gaps that need to be filled from a new co-opted volunteer.

Other appointments

- All maintained schools must have one governor who is nominated by the local authority (LA). If you need an LA governor, you can always source the volunteer yourself and ask the LA to nominate them.
- Foundation governors and trustees are either appointed to the governing board by the religious or foundation body or they assume the role because they hold a certain position.
- Work with your appointing or nominating body to make sure they understand your needs and can provide suitable nominations.
- Church schools should also refer to their diocesan policy and guidance about foundation governor recruitment and eligibility.
- Academy trusts should be aware of limits on the number of local authority associated persons (such as councillors or LA employees) that can sit as trustees, as set out in articles of association.

Interviewing candidates

We recommend that candidates are invited to an informal interview with the chair (or vice chair). This gives them an opportunity to ask questions, meet with school/trust leaders and make an informed decision about whether the role is right for them. It also allows you to learn more about the candidate, their skills and experience. Obtaining references is also considered to be good practice and provides those recruiting with an external view of the applicant.

The review of applications should be done as consistently and as fairly as possible. This can include a process of removing the candidate's name and any other identifying factors that could consciously or unconsciously influence decision making.

Ask candidates if they need any adjustments to be made before the interview so that you are aware of any barriers to full participation. Adjustments might include providing enlarged text documents, for example.

You may want to consider covering the following points during the discussion to ensure you as the recruiter and the candidate have as much information as possible:

- The role, responsibilities and requirement for an enhanced DBS check. Having a copy of [NGA's governor or trustee role description](#) to hand may be helpful.
- The board's routine engagements – board and committee meetings, school visits.
- Your [expenses policy](#) and if the candidate is employed, inform them that they could be entitled to '[reasonable time off work](#)' to undertake school governance.
- The [seven Nolan principles of public life](#) that apply to governors and trustees and your board's [code of conduct](#).

Interview questions

The questions you ask should be relevant to the role and to the skills and attributes you are looking for. The following examples can be adapted to suit your needs:

- What do you know about the work that governing boards do?
- What attracted you to this particular school/trust?
- School governance is a collective responsibility – can you tell me about a time when you have worked in a team to achieve a goal?
- What experience, knowledge or skills might you bring to the role?

After the interview, consider inviting the candidate to observe a governing board or committee meeting to see how the board works in practice before they make a commitment.

Inform the candidate of the next steps, and likely timeframe, and remember to maintain contact with them. Try to make a decision as soon as possible after the last interview. If any candidates were unsuccessful, you might like to provide them with feedback on why they weren't selected on this occasion – they may be a suitable candidate at a later date.

Making an appointment

Determining eligibility

Regardless of the type of vacancy and method of recruitment, individuals must be eligible for election or appointment to the governing board – they should not be disqualified from holding office under the relevant rules and procedures. An individual's eligibility to serve should be established in advance and monitored throughout their term of office. This includes applying for an enhanced criminal record certificate from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). Your governance professional will be able to advise on necessary appointment checks.

Conflicts of interest

All governors and trustees have an obligation to declare any interests that may affect their ability to act in the best interests of the school/trust. A [declaration of interests form](#) should be completed by the new board member and a register of interests must be published on the school/trust website.

The guiding principle is to avoid all conflicts of interest if possible. Avoid appointing close friends and relations of current governors and trustees – the Nolan principles incorporate this, and any new board member must be willing to abide by them.

Inducting volunteers

All volunteers, including staff governors and those with previous experience, should receive a well-planned, accessible induction to help them become familiar with the school/trust and the purpose of their role.

An induction should include a meeting with the chair, an introduction to the governance professional, meeting the headteacher/CEO and a tour of the school with an opportunity to meet pupils. We recommend that new board members are also assigned a mentor who can provide one-to-one support in the first few months.

New governors and trustees should be provided with an information pack. We encourage boards to think about how this information can be provided in a way that is easy to navigate and refer to. As a guide, we recommend that it includes information that covers:

- roles, responsibilities and conduct
- the current context and priorities
- how governance works in the school or trust

[View our guidance on planning induction](#) to find out more.

Knowing the school or trust is one of NGA's eight elements of effective governance. NGA believes that everyone who is new to school governance should have induction training. This training need not be identical for all, but as a minimum must ensure governors/trustees have a clear understanding of what governance is.

An induction training course will typically be provided by the local authority, the foundation charitable body (associated with the school or trust), the academy trust or a specialist organisation such as NGA.

Ongoing development

Induction is essential. However, it is also important for everyone on the board to remain proactive and ensure their training and development needs are met throughout their time governing. Responding to the results of the skills audit should help to identify areas to address through various forms of CPD, including

training courses such as those offered by local authorities, diocesan boards and NGA. The board should ensure that resources and training are flexible and accessible to suit the needs of volunteers.

Potential training and development opportunities include:

- **E-learning**, including NGA Learning Link.
- **Online guidance** – Membership of NGA gives access to guidance and practical resources in our Knowledge Centre.
- **Mentoring** – experienced governors/trustees can mentor (or buddy-up with) newer volunteers.
- **Networking** – including attending events organised by the local authority, local governance association, NGA or your MAT.
- **Education websites** – provide the latest news and policy updates relating to schools.
- **Social media** – some of the leading voices in school governance are active on X. A gateway into accessing their insight is to follow [@NGAMedia](#).

If your board has NGA membership, remember to add any newly appointed governors and trustees to your membership so that they can access NGA benefits. Login at [nga.org.uk](#) and visit 'My NGA' and 'Member Dashboard' to do so. Email enquiries@nga.org.uk if you need help.

Welcome to Governance LIVE

NGA's [Welcome to Governance LIVE](#) offers interactive virtual sessions that help new governors and trustees to make an impact in the first few months. They are exclusively available to governing boards with NGA Gold or MAT membership.

Retention

Retaining governors and trustees can be difficult given the level of commitment required for the role and the competing demands of work and family life.

However, boards and chairs in particular can take steps to make it easier for volunteers to manage the commitment and continue on the board.

The following actions are known to improve retention:

- Being clear from the outset about what is expected of those governing and the level of commitment that is required.
- Discussing the board's shared sense of purpose so individuals are clear about the difference they are making.
- Providing opportunities remotely and ensuring that the technology and management of meetings allows this to happen.
- Discussing the times and dates of meetings and identifying the days and times that work best for most people.
- Providing support and encouragement for those governing to build their confidence and increase their contribution through training and mentoring.
- Publicly acknowledging the contribution that the governing board makes to the school or trust, such as on the website or at events.
- Maintaining a positive approach to meetings and communication whereby people are listened to and differences of opinion are dealt with openly and honestly.
- Proactively encouraging board members to claim expenses under an agreed policy.
- Raising awareness around the opportunities for governors and trustees to network with others outside of the school/ trust.
- Learning from exit interviews that have been conducted with previous members.
- One to one conversations between the chair (or vice chair) and each board member.
- Ensuring that training and development around the governance role is encouraged with the ability to undertake the training through various methods.
- Allowing opportunities for everyone's voice to be heard and drawing on the expertise of individuals to support the role of the governing board.

Keeping the membership fresh

The composition of the governing board should be regularly reviewed and refreshed to ensure that a balance and diversity is maintained. This is partly about creating a culture of governors and trustees moving on: governorship is not necessarily permanent, the needs of the organisation and the board change over time.

The standard term of office for all categories of governor/trustee is four years. NGA recommends that governors/trustees serve no more than two terms of office at any one school/trust. A limited term of office helps ensure that experienced volunteers can benefit the local school system more widely.

If a volunteer decides to leave, it is good practice for the chair or vice chair to conduct an exit interview with them. This conversation may help to identify changes to board practice that are necessary to improve board retention. Consider what information you want from an exit interview and how the board will use any insight gained.

NGA succession planning resources

Subscribers to NGA Learning Link can complete a [succession planning module](#), designed to equip your board with tools, strategies and knowledge to plan for the future.

[Finding your next chair](#) is an NGA guide to support governing boards in proactively planning their future leadership – including chairs and vice chairs of the governing board and its committees.

We recommend that chairs also consult NGA's guide [The Chair's Handbook](#) for advice on succession-planning and how to develop your team of governors or trustees.

Further reading and support

Induction resources

NGA's [step-by-step guide](#) provides a starting point for those planning and delivering induction programmes.

NGA's induction guides are available for governors, trustees and chairs – an essential source of need-to-know information for new volunteers.

Welcome to Governance LIVE [virtual training sessions](#) help new governors and trustees make an impact in their first six months. NGA GOLD members and MAT trustee members can book a free place.

Everyone on Board: increasing diversity in school and trust governance

NGA's [Everyone on Board campaign](#) aims to increase the participation of young people and people from ethnic minorities in school governance. You can read more about the campaign on the NGA website and sign up to be part of conversations about positive change.

Increasing participation in school and trust governance

This [state of the nation report](#) explores volunteer recruitment and retention through the lens of the experiences and views of governors and trustees from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds and young volunteers (aged under 40) alongside data from NGA's annual survey 2021 and a review of research from other sectors.

Training workshops

NGA delivers [face-to-face and online workshops](#) for governing boards on topics including getting the right people around the table and succession planning. These sessions are arranged to suit the governing board and are delivered by experienced NGA consultants.

E-learning for governance professionals

Subscribers to NGA Learning Link can access more than 50 modules. [Modules for governance professionals](#) cover how to support the recruitment of governors and trustees.

Model role descriptions

NGA [model role descriptions](#) can be adapted as needed and used for recruitment, induction and to support ongoing development.

Taking stock of governance workload report

NGA has conducted an [extensive study](#) to gauge the prevalence of workload pressures on volunteers, identify contributing factors, explore potential areas for responsibility reduction, and propose solutions.

Join us

NGA membership provides essential resources and benefits to help governing boards fulfill their roles and tackle new challenges.

Gold Advice

Expert, confidential and independent governance advice easily accessible for Gold members. Our advisers answer queries on education law, offer best practice and provide problem-solving guidance. The service is easily accessible online or by phone.

NGA Gold Advice is supported by leading education law firm Browne Jacobson.

Learning Link

Fast-track your governance skills

E-learning anytime anywhere

Fast-track your skills as a governor, trustee, or governance professional. With over 65 expert-led interactive e-learning modules, you can quickly fill knowledge gaps and confidently tackle any challenge your organisation may face.

NGA Learning Link offers a cost-effective way for NGA Governing Board members to benefit from comprehensive training at a discounted price.

Guidance

Exclusive access to NGA's Knowledge Centre where members can find best practice guidance, templates, checklists and insights.

Explore topics including safeguarding, finance, compliance, Ofsted and curriculum.

nga.org.uk/membership



36 Great Charles Street
Birmingham B3 3JY

0121 237 3780

nga.org.uk