



# Early experiences of governance

Findings from our anniversary surveys in 2021-22

## One year on from their appointment

95%

of respondents had enjoyed their first year of governance

94%

would recommend the role to family, friends, or colleagues

59%

had taken on a link role on their board

25%

would consider becoming a Chair, with a further 51% not ruling this out

## Two years on from their appointment

98%

of volunteers felt they were making effective contributions to their boards

97%

of respondents were enjoying their role

62%

had taken on a Link role on their board

17%

had become Chairs, with 29% becoming Vice-Chairs

## Report introduction and background

One of Governors for Schools' key responsibilities is to recruit skilled volunteers for school governance roles across England and Wales. We also support volunteers to develop their skills as board members over the twelve to eighteen months following appointment, as we know that recruitment and retention are two sides of the same coin.

As part of our wider mission to improve and develop our services, we ask all volunteers to respond to a survey both one and two years after their appointment confirmation. The collective responses for both of these surveys across the academic year 2021-22 are presented within this report. The one-year anniversary survey was sent to 1,895 volunteers and received 225 responses while, the two-year anniversary was sent to 1,294 volunteers with 150 individual responses, meaning both surveys attracted a response rate of just under twelve percent.

It is well known that governor recruitment and retention represent a major challenge for the sector. As such, thorough induction processes and high-level support is vital for the volunteers giving their time and expertise to schools, academies, and trusts. This report shares some of the collective and individual experiences of volunteers appointed by Governors for Schools at an early stage of their governor journey. In so doing, we celebrate governor successes while offering improvement recommendations based on extensive feedback.

## Enjoyment within the role

All school governors know, joining a school board is an honour and a privilege. While the role can be challenging at times, we are confident most readers view the experience as deeply rewarding and enjoyable. We're delighted that 95% of respondents claimed to be enjoying governance a year into the role, rising to 97% of respondents two years into the role.

Another positive feature was that 94% of first-year respondents would recommend the role to friends, family, and colleagues, a sentiment shared by 93% of those two years into the role. In Governors for Schools' most recent financial year, we received 457 applications from individuals who had heard about the role via word of mouth or had been directly referred by a friend, accounting for almost 16% of total applications across the year.

These statistics demonstrate that sharing personal experiences represents one of the best recruitment tools available. As such, Governors for Schools supports the Visible Governance [campaign](#) led by the National Governance Association (NGA). We stand firmly behind the NGA's call for governors to stand up and champion their roles, helping others understand the personal and societal benefits associated with school governance. GovernorHub released a [report](#) earlier in 2022 highlighting a lack of public understanding of governors' responsibilities. It is up to those involved in governance to address this problem and deepen others' understanding of the role.

Many respondents took the time to express the specific ways in which governance improved their life. Standout comments included: "I am really enjoying my experience and the work I do is so rewarding. I wished I had done this earlier," and "I love my school governor role, I'm learning loads about how education in early years works and meeting so many lovely people – children and adults!" Such sentiments appeared in different forms repeatedly across both survey groups.

Qualitative responses provided in both the one- and two-year surveys suggest governance roles are enjoyable when:

- There is an effective onboarding process and newly appointed volunteers are given access to buddies and/or mentors.
- There is accessible training across a range of formats.
- Meetings are chaired effectively, with a clear command of agenda items and a mutual understanding of expectations.
- People have access to networks where they can discuss their roles.

A further elaboration on the final point came from a volunteer who stated: “I have really enjoyed my governor experience so far. There is a network of school governors at my workplace (a university) who meet often to share experiences and offer peer support.” Governors for Schools work with a wide range of organisations to help them develop school governor networks and volunteering initiatives. We also maintain our own very active governance community, often sharing best practice, tips, joys, and challenges with each other. If this is something you would find beneficial, please get in touch, as we’d be happy to share our expertise from working with a wide range of employers.

Of course, not all of the qualitative feedback relating to individual enjoyment was positive. Common themes included:

- The impact of COVID-19 on governors’ ability to get to know the school and build relationships in person.
- The time commitment being higher than anticipated.
- Governors feeling that their contributions were not listened to – with a particular focus on the role played by the Chair.
- A resistance to effective challenge and scrutiny from the school.

Many such factors affecting respondents’ enjoyment of the role are well-known and, perhaps, unsurprising to the governance community. However, anyone involved in leading a governance board should ensure their boards are consistently reviewing progress, utilising governor feedback, and following best practice guidelines.

Questions worth considering include:

- Have we conducted self-evaluations within our school over the past twelve months?
- If yes, have the responses been shared? Have suggestions and concerns been acted upon?
- If not, do we know why?

## **Progression and impact within the role**

Succession planning is always central to governing board agendas and is often cited as a priority by the thousands of schools we work with every year. Today's governance volunteers are likely to comprise the majority of Committee Chairs, Vice-Chairs, and Chairs of Governors over the next few years, as people currently in those roles move for a variety of reasons.

We asked respondents in both the one-year and two-year anniversary surveys about the roles they had taken on within their boards and their plans (if any) to develop their skills as governors. The results are quite positive.

### ***One year on from appointment***

59% of respondents stated that they had taken on a Link role within the first year of their appointment. Our recruitment service works to connect volunteers with schools requiring their unique skills and experiences. As such, we're especially pleased to have received responses such as "I have taken on the role of SEND governor" and "This has enabled me to use my SEND qualification and experience in the area to the fullest extent."

25% of first-year respondents also stated that they would be willing to consider a Chair role in future, with 51% undecided and a further 24% saying they would not consider the role. These positive figures indicate that many people who pursue governance roles through Governors for Schools are keen and/or willing to take on leadership roles. As such, board members must consider how to go about developing potential future leaders.

Questions to pose include:

- Are we having regular conversations with our board members about their future plans and aspirations? Do we know who might be interested in stepping up?
- Are we applying talent development principles and increasing the responsibilities of those looking to get more involved?
- Are we utilising opportunities for shadowing and introducing other areas of the work of the governing board?

### ***Two years on from appointment***

After two years in the role, 62% of respondents stated they had taken on a Link role on their boards, marking a slight increase from the first-year data. Of course, not all boards utilise Link governors beyond their statutory function, so there is no need for every governor to take on these roles.

Encouragingly, 31% of respondents had taken on a committee Chair role, 29% had taken on a Vice-Chair role, and 17% had gone on to become Chair of their board at the end of the second year of their term of office. Governors for Schools predominantly appoints people entirely new to school or academy governance, so we're encouraged by how many of our placed volunteers took on leadership roles at an early stage of their governance journeys.

The charity partnered with the National Governance Association on their new guide to succession planning which was released in September 2022 and can be found [here](#). It is a very helpful report designed to give boards the confidence to develop the future leaders that we can see are coming into the school governance talent pool to ensure they are ready to take on the challenge in their schools and trusts when the time comes.

### **Ability to effectively contribute to the board**

A common question the charity faces in discussing governance roles with prospective volunteers is how individuals can effectively contribute to their boards. Indeed, this concern represents an entry barrier for many. Governing boards benefit from a wide range of skills and aptitudes held by people in many different professions. However, this fact is not always apparent to those on the outside looking in. Emphasising the developmental aspect of the role represents a key part of our messaging strategy for recruiting new volunteers, as shown in the data below.

The surveys asked how respondents felt they had been able to contribute to their boards in their first and second years in post.

#### **After one year in role**

At all times	11%
Most of the time	38%
Sometimes	36%
Rarely	12%
Not at all	3%

#### **After two years in role**

At all times	23%
Most of the time	44%
Sometimes	31%
Rarely	2%
Not at all	0%

Reflecting on the important role training plays in development, one respondent stated that: “I think the webinars help considerably in helping people like me keep abreast of the current situation and ask challenging yet constructive questions.”

Many of the respondents’ negative comments related to doubts surrounding their ability to contribute to board discussions. While it is unlikely any individual volunteer will contribute across all the board’s areas of responsibility, it can be helpful for seasoned governors to check in on their less experienced peers. Regular check-ins can help mitigate imposter syndrome and generate productive conversations about how a governor can get more involved with their board if desired.

### **Professional support and development in the role**

While governance is rewarding in and of itself, it also presents wonderful opportunities for knowledge and skills development, helping volunteers learn more about the intricacies of the education system.

The two-year anniversary survey asked respondents to reflect on the skills they had developed during their governance experience to date. Among those most commonly listed were:

- Finance
- Questioning and analysis
- Governance
- Communication/interpersonal skills
- Understanding of the education sector and pedagogy

These findings are in keeping with a wider study the charity undertook with some of our corporate partners in 2018, and you can find a summary of that report [here](#).

## Conclusion

Overall, we believe the responses to our one- and two-year surveys paint a positive picture of early experience in school governance in 2021-22, despite some clear challenges. Given the respondents to both surveys had experienced significant disruptions to their governance experiences as a result of COVID-19, we're delighted to see so many enjoying their roles nevertheless. This gives us cause to be optimistic for the future with many more committed individuals coming into the pool of talent involved in the governing of our schools.

Viewed collectively, these responses demonstrate the value of developing robust induction plans for newly appointed board members. For more detailed advice about building an induction plan, please refer to [this fascinating session](#) on the topic, recorded at the Governors for Schools Conference 2022. Every board and individual board member is responsible for developing informative induction plans and lending support to newer colleagues as they settle into their roles. If your induction plan needs refreshing, it's a good idea to prioritise this task and champion robust induction processes in the weeks ahead.

The National Governance Association estimates there are nearly 20,000 governance vacancies within England alone – an all-time high. Ensuring we create welcoming and inclusive environments for newcomers to the role will improve retention rates and mitigate volunteer shortages.

Another way to enhance recruitment and retention rates is to utilise personal governance experiences as a means to promote the vital role of governors among personal and professional networks. Is there scope for exploring a school governor recruitment initiative within our workplaces? Are there people we believe will be excellent governors who we can speak to about the role?

As a charity we look forward to continuing to help appoint many more people into governance roles, support them in their governance development and hear about their experiences across the forthcoming academic year. Please keep an eye on our correspondence and our website and social media for details of future training opportunities and we hope you and your board have a successful year ahead.