



The governance professional's perspective: What makes an effective board?

Findings from a national survey of those working in trust governance

The overview

Earlier this year, we surveyed governance professionals working in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to understand what they believe makes for effective governance, and how confident they are in the skills and experience currently in place across their trust boards and local governing bodies.

The results give a valuable snapshot of priorities and pressures in the sector, and there is broad agreement about the kinds of skills and attributes that matter. But it is also clear that many trusts are still working hard to achieve the right balance, particularly when it comes to recruiting diverse skill sets, specialist expertise, and younger volunteers.

This report brings together the key findings and offers space for reflection: how does your trust compare - and what would strengthen your governance?

Trust boards: clarity on skills, ongoing challenges with recruitment



Governance professionals are clear on what they need from trust boards. When asked about the most important technical or professional skills for trusteeship;



In terms of soft skills, those seen as most essential for trust board members included:



These responses reinforce a view of trusteeship that goes beyond qualifications – and values how people contribute, challenge, and collaborate effectively.

Confidence in whether current boards meet these requirements was also promising, with governance professionals rating their trust boards an average of 7.3 out of 10 for having the right mix of technical knowledge and professional experience. When asked how difficult it had been to achieve this, however, the average rating was 6.4, demonstrating that recruitment can often be an onerous task. From our work in the sector, we know that this challenge often falls on the shoulders of the governance professional.

Creating a pipeline of diverse, future-first talent



“Growing trusts need support from boards with a breadth of experience and expertise. Trustees play an essential role in helping trust leaders to think strategically and to be brave enough to embrace the freedoms and opportunities offered by trust governance.”

There was also a strong appetite for greater diversity in board composition; on a scale of 1 to 10, the importance of having a range of ages and seniority levels on the board was rated at 8.5.

Encouragingly, 100% of respondents also said their trust would consider appointing trustees under the age of 40 – showing an openness to fresh perspectives and a desire to invest in the future of the sector. However, several barriers to this materialising were identified, including ‘bias on the part of members’, time commitment, raising the profile of the role, and a lack of confidence amongst younger professionals.

While there is no simple solution, much can be done to increase young peoples’ participation in trust governance. For us as a charity, our corporate partnerships are an excellent source of fresh, young talent when it comes to trustee recruitment. Work is also being done by the likes of CST in raising awareness of just how beneficial inviting younger perspectives into the space can be.

As per the Next Gen Governance paper, released by CST in 2024: ‘Many trust boards currently lack the required diversity to ‘exist in the pace, information and context of today’ and ‘envisage tomorrow’. The ability, courage, and foresight to ‘envisage tomorrow’ may encompass myriad approaches to Schemes of Delegation, governance structures, and board and committee evolution – an area we, at Governors for Schools, have considered in our [blog](#).

The Next Gen Governance paper continues:

‘Diversity of thought and perspective amongst our boards, teachers and school leaders is crucial if we want to build forward-thinking and effective organisations that equip our children to succeed in today’s increasingly culturally interconnected world’.

Further cited in the Next Gen Governance paper is research by GovernorHub, demonstrating that every group other than white, Christian, higher educated individuals over the age of 40 are underrepresented amongst governance volunteers.

As our survey revealed, establishing a pipeline of future talent also means calling on existing reserves (and preparing them), with 62.9% of respondents recruiting trustees from within their local governing board structure. Arguably, this signals a missed opportunity for the 37.1% who do not. Drawing on existing networks offers continuity, familiarity, and knowledge from across the trust ecosystem, which can enrich trust-level governance. So, if you don’t currently recruit from the local governance tier, what are the barriers? And could greater support, in the form of training and induction, help to overcome them?

What about local governing boards?

When we turned our focus to local governing boards, respondents revealed a slightly less promising picture. Confidence in the blend of technical knowledge and professional experience at local level was rated at just 5.9 out of 10 on average, significantly lower than for trust boards. The perceived difficulty of achieving a balanced and skilled board also rose slightly to 7.4 out of 10.

Over the past decade, the role of the local governing board has been given much consideration, with a variety of models tried and tested. Our results reflect the maturing recognition of the local tier, with LGBs described as ‘the eyes and ears of trustees’ by respondents, providing both a ‘local link’ and community insight. It is clear that there is greater sector uniformity around the role of LGBs, and that trust governance hinges on their success. To carry forward the insights gained through their development, we believe a marked improvement would come from the following changes:

- The local tier needs access to a greater number of skilled, committed volunteers
- Governance professionals need to be given the right tools and budget to find them
- Existing volunteers must be given the right level of induction and ongoing training to deliver their responsibilities effectively

Looking ahead

Unsurprisingly, governance professionals know what good governance looks like. They value a clear mix of technical expertise, soft skills, and diversity – and they recognise the importance of strong governance across the trust structure.

But knowing what a good board should look like doesn’t make it easy to build one. The challenges of finding people with the right experience, balanced skill sets, and diverse perspectives is real. For many trusts, this raises important questions: What’s working in our current approach? Do we have gaps in expertise? And what support might help us build effective, balanced boards, with fewer challenges?