

Annual school and trust governance survey

At a glance

October 2026

A research study by the
National Governance Association



About the 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.

Although 2026 marks NGA's 20th anniversary, the story of AGS began in 2011. Now in its 16th year, the survey has evolved significantly, through partnerships with tes and Edurio and bringing together more than 60,000 governance voices. This year the survey took another step forward, 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 of those involved in school and trust governance, and play a vital role in shaping NGA's representation of the sector and the support it provides.

Finance and funding

School finances increasingly rely on licensed deficits to balance their budgets



Twice as many respondents report their school or trust is in a deficit position, rising from **5%** in 2018 to **12%**

“... 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.”



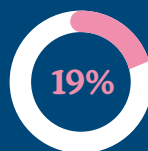
Supporting SEND provision overtakes staffing as the biggest pressure on budgets

41% of respondents cite falling pupil numbers as a key financial challenge

Primary 47%

Secondary 32%

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



expect their school or trust to be financially stable in the next three to five years with current levels of funding and income

Staffing

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



Recruitment

A skills challenge



We have a lack of SEND specialist or experienced teachers of good quality.”



Retention

A workload challenge



Teachers [are] having to take on more work where other organisations are falling short.”

Flexible working

More respondents report that their school or trust has a flexible working policy.



Staff restructuring



of schools are looking at staff restructuring to ensure financial sustainability in the next 3-5 years.

↓ Down on last year

↑ More likely than in 2021



Pay is the issue for support staff – remote working jobs pay as well and are more flexible.”



Pupils, families and the community

Boards are having proactive discussions but could go further with stakeholder feedback



Attendance is now the top priority in secondary schools and third most cited in primaries.

Primary



33%

Secondary



50%



agreed that the government's planned SEND reform has triggered board discussions about their current provision.

“

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

“

SEND provision was already a focus for discussion but the white paper has reinforced it as a priority.”

53%



agree that feedback from stakeholders regularly influences their board's decisions.

71%

felt their most recent inspection gave a fair and accurate picture of the school, well below the 80% seen historically.

“

The [inspection] team refused to consider... the challenges the school faces in relation to its disadvantaged community.”

MATs

Trusts have an opportunity to strengthen local voices



All four measures are at their lowest recorded levels:

65% are happy with the responsibility delegated to the local tier

58% are satisfied with communication between the trust board and local level

55% feel their school is part of 'one organisation' with others in the MAT

28% support the sharing of resources across the trust

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

Compared with **2018**, fewer trusts delegate responsibility for monitoring academy budgets and reviewing academy-level attainment data.

Respondents who have decided to join a MAT in the near future



Lowest post-COVID level

Appetite to join a MAT

Only 34%

of respondents say the white paper has prompted conversations about their school joining a MAT



“ There was no set direction or time limit. So the board have decided to stay as we are.”



Board practice

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



Strategic direction

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.

Just **25%** are considering taking on a chairing role, down from **41%** in 2016.

Six in ten respondents rarely or never use AI to support their governance role.



I do not feel I would have enough time to be an effective chair.”



We have a great mix of governors 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.”

64% report difficulty recruiting to the governing board – this remains well above the 50% recorded in 2015.

Almost nine in ten governors are educated to degree level or above.



Over two thirds of respondents reported that their school or trust does not have an AI policy in place.



Governance professionals

Academisation is changing the nature of the governance professional career with more full-time and senior roles



Respondents working full-time has nearly doubled since 2021



Professionals supporting multi academy trust boards has risen rapidly



Governance professionals share a deep understanding of the top challenges and priorities facing schools and trusts.



Nearly a **third** of respondents now work at the most senior governance professional level

Those not using AI



Very positive feedback from [using AI tools], it saves a lot of time.”



Satisfied with training and professional development opportunities



It's hard to find clerking CPD for the appropriate level.”

