

SEND costs overtake staff pay as biggest pressure on school budgets

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Media:

Governors and trustees warn that supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is now the biggest pressure on school budgets, according to the National Governance Association's (NGA) latest Annual School and Trust Governance Survey.



Those who identified SEND and high-needs provision as one of their top three budgetary challenges rose from 47% in 2022 to 68% in 2026, overtaking staff pay for the first time as governors main concern on school budgets.

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The findings come as schools continue to face difficult financial decisions, despite some signs of improvement. While 57% of boards now report balancing their income and expenditure without drawing on a surplus, up from 54% last year, just 19% believe their school or trust will be financially sustainable over the next three to five years at current funding and income levels.

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The survey also highlights the growing impact of falling pupil numbers, particularly in primary schools. Almost half (47%) of primary respondents identified projected pupil numbers as a top budgetary challenge, compared with 32% of those governing secondary schools. Primary schools were also more likely to identify SEND costs as a major pressure, at 71% compared with 60% of secondary respondents.

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NGA calls for the government to urgently assess whether there are enough specialist places for children with the most complex SEND needs and whether those who need the most support can access it. The findings must drive targeted investment in specialist provision and give mainstream schools the funding and resources they need to support more children with SEND.

NGA Chief Executive Emma Balchin said:

"Unless system capacity and investment catch up with demand, these small improvements in financial pressures will prove short-lived. Falling pupil numbers and increasingly complex needs are squeezing budgets, while high-needs funding struggles to keep pace.

Boards are grappling with the fundamental question: How can they hold leaders accountable for inclusion when schools lack the resources to meet pupils' needs?

Governors and trustees have worked hard to keep their schools financially secure, finding efficiencies, reviewing contracts, restructuring and generating income, but good governance alone cannot make an underfunded system deliver the inclusive education every child deserves."

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Other findings include:

- Falling pupil numbers are a growing concern: 27% cite this as a major challenge, up from just 10% in 2018.
- Attendance is rising up the agenda: It has become the top priority for secondary schools, cited by 50% of respondents.
- Schools are considering staff cuts: 44% are looking at restructuring their workforce to help maintain financial stability long-term.
- Trusts have an opportunity to strengthen local voices: Only 55% of local governors feel their school is part of 'one organisation' with others in the MAT.
- Confidence in Ofsted inspections remains subdued: 71% say their latest inspection gave a fair and accurate picture of their school, well below the historic 80% level.
- Recruiting and retaining staff remains difficult: 51% struggle to find suitably qualified candidates, while 61% cite workload and wellbeing as the biggest challenges to keeping staff.
- Fewer people want to become chairs of governors: Only 25% are considering the role, down from 41% in 2016, with workload, stress and responsibility major barriers.
- AI is not yet widely used or governed: Six in ten rarely or never use AI in their governance role, while 67% say their school or trust has no AI policy in place.
- Governors are engaging with SEND reform: 70% say government proposals have prompted board discussions about their school's current SEND provision.

- Governors and trustees continue to make a positive difference: 84% believe their board has positively influenced their school or trust's direction and outcomes in the past year.
- Schools are increasingly offering flexible working: 56% now have a flexible working policy, up from 39% in 2019.

Contact: Ciarán Scott, Senior Public Relations Officer, on 07554 440580 or ciaran.scott@nga.org.uk

About the research

The NGA Annual Governance Survey is the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind, providing unparalleled insights into the state of governance in English state-funded schools and trusts. NGA has conducted this annual self-selecting online survey for sixteen consecutive years.

This year, the survey was open from 2 June to 30 June 2026, and over 3,000 people took part. NGA released the full survey and will release it at a launch event in Westminster on 20 October 2026.

NGA's Annual Governance Survey offers an extensive overview of the views, experiences, and challenges facing one of England's largest and most crucial volunteer forces.

About NGA

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

NGA is an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and well-being of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards.

The expert leader in school and trust governance, it provides information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning. NGA represents the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and works closely with and lobbies the UK government and educational bodies. www.nga.org.uk

Company Contact:

—

the National Governance Association

T. 07554440580

E. ciar.scott@nga.org.uk

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