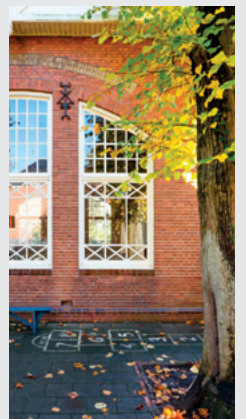


# > The state of school governing in England 2014



# The state of school governing in England 2014

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# Foreword

**Nick Chambers, Director**

Education and Employers Taskforce



This report paints an accurate picture of school governing. It is positive where appropriate, critical where it needs to be, and the recommendations point very clearly to areas where school and college governance can be improved.



Some six years ago when I was the Director of Education at Business in the Community, I commissioned Professor Chris James and his colleagues at the University of Bath to undertake a study of school governing in England. At that time, very little seemed to be known about the overall state of governing and I was keen to see what contribution employers could make to supporting schools and colleges and in doing so help improve the education of young people.

The research undertaken in 2008 and published in a report entitled “Governing our Schools” found that school governing was overloaded, overcomplicated and overlooked. It also showed that those who brought with them experience from paid employment commonly made a significant contribution to school governing. It was clear that many of the particular skills required to make school governing bodies effective were to be found in workplaces up and down the country. Very importantly, the research also showed school governing was a place where those two worlds – education and employment – came together in a productive way to ensure the proper conduct of our schools.

Since the publication of “Governing Our Schools”, the education system in England has changed dramatically and it continues to do so. Those changes are affecting school governing and at the same time raising its significance and importance. School and college governors nationally now oversee an annual expenditure in excess of £46 billion.

It is timely then to take stock of the health of school governing and to consider how national bodies can best work together to support thousands of individual schools. I am delighted that a wide range of organisations including the government; those representing education; employers; governors; professional bodies and numerous private and third sector organisations have come together to celebrate and promote the importance of high quality school and college governance. The Inspiring Governors Alliance aims to: inspire more people with the skills needed by schools to volunteer as governors; inspire more employers about the benefits of supporting their staff to become governors; and inspire more governing bodies to actively recruit governors for their skills.

To ensure that our collective efforts were effective and efficient and that we directed our combined energies to schools and colleges that needed most support, I commissioned Professor James to undertake this study of the current state of school governing. Chris and his colleagues at the University of Bath have worked in partnership with the National Governors Association to produce the most detailed study of the current state of school governance to date. This report paints an accurate picture of school governing. It is positive where appropriate, critical where it needs to be, and the recommendations point very clearly to areas where school and college governance can be improved.

As a new era in the history of school governance begins, the report celebrates the work of hundreds of thousands of individuals who volunteer their time, free of charge, to provide leadership and accountability within our schools; and, prompts a new call to action to make it as easy as possible for all schools to find people, willing and able, to strengthen governing bodies across the country, and so underpin the success of all our schools.

# Executive summary

In 2008, the University of Bath undertook a national survey of school governors in England to ascertain the state of school governing. Since that time, a number of changes in education legislation and policy have been implemented, many of which directly relate to and impact on school governing. This research which sought to establish the current state of school governing in England is therefore highly appropriate and very timely.

A national survey of school governors was carried out by the University of Bath and the National Governors' Association between 10th March and 14th April, 2014. The survey questionnaire was developed jointly with the various partners: ASCL, the Education and Employers Taskforce, the CBI, the NAHT, National Co-ordinators of Governor Services, and SGOSS Governors for Schools and Colleges. 7,713 responses were received.

The main findings are as follows.

**Overall, school governing in England appears to be functioning well and is moving in the right direction.** A number of indicators show important improvements in the way governing bodies work and they are evidence for likely further improvements in the future. A number of effectiveness indicators show that school governing is developing appropriately.

**Governors need a range of important qualities if they are to be effective.** Respondents identified the kinds of capabilities they look for in new governing body recruits.

- The core capabilities required are:
  - a readiness to ask challenging questions, which we contend is underpinned by assertiveness
  - a willingness to take collective responsibility for the conduct of the school
  - commitment to the school, which we would argue needs to be tempered by a wider commitment to the success of other schools and high quality education for all young people
  - the ability to work in a group, which is crucial for being able to contribute appropriately to discussions of complex issues and for enabling collective responsibility.
- Respondents also felt that specialist knowledge, such as financial or legal expertise, on the governing body can be important for ensuring sound scrutiny of significant aspects of the school's work.
- Most respondents also said that their governing bodies seek to ensure that there is a balance of capabilities in the membership.

Governors bring substantial expertise to the role and they also develop their expertise by being a governor. Governors very typically bring a broad range of skills and experience to governing, many of which will have been developed through their paid work as managers and professionals. Governors can also develop a range of high-level skills and qualities through their governing work, which they then take back into the workplace.

Recruiting good governors is difficult, which impacts negatively on the overall effectiveness of school governing. The difficulty of recruiting governors applies across all settings and it undermines the overall effectiveness of many governing bodies and school governing generally.

- There is a shortage of potential parent governors but particular shortages of potential staff governors and governors from the wider community.
- Recruiting governors is harder in special schools and primary schools, schools serving disadvantaged areas schools in urban/city and town locations, schools with below average levels of pupil attainment, schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade and schools that are not academies.
- The findings indicate that the effectiveness of their governing bodies would be improved if recruitment was easier.
- Governing bodies need a larger pool of willing citizens who are ready to become governors. That need is greatest in schools: in disadvantaged settings, with low levels of pupil attainment, with low Ofsted grades and poor reputations.

A sophisticated, thought through and coherent approach to recruiting school governors is required.

- The recruitment of governors would be helped by greater recognition and valuing of the contribution that school governors make. Central government has a role here in acknowledging and appreciating the responsibility governors undertake on its behalf.
- Recruitment efforts should focus on the benefits that being involved in school governing can bring. Employers have a part to play here in promoting the benefits of being involved in school governing.
- Raising the profile of school governing is not seen by respondents as a way of improving recruitment.
- Efforts to promote recruitment need to appeal to people's deeper motivations to make a contribution to society and to inspire future governors.
- A broad based coalition of all those organisations and institutions that have an interest in school governing would help to send out stronger and more consistent messages about the value and importance of school governing and the benefits that can be gained from being involved.

The induction, training and development of governors are important and improving. Respondents acknowledge the importance of induction, training and development by indicating widespread involvement of governors in those activities.

- Governor induction, training and development appear to have improved in recent years, which confirms that school governing is moving in the right direction.
- Training and development in headteacher/senior staff recruitment should have a higher priority to ensure that all governing bodies have that important capability.
- The involvement of governors of schools in challenging circumstances in induction training and development could be improved.

Governing bodies need to address **all** the core functions assigned to them. Governing bodies' three core functions relate to the school's finance, the school's educational performance, and strategic issues.

- Governing bodies of schools in all settings and of all kinds strongly prioritise matters relating to their school's educational and financial performance.
- All governing bodies give less priority to longer term strategic issues and a consideration of 'the kind of school we want our school to be', which is arguably a very important matter for all governing bodies.
- The lack of strategic focus is a matter of particular concern given increasing levels of institutional autonomy and independence as more schools take on academy status.

School governors typically make a substantial contribution. This contribution is of benefit to their schools, the communities their schools serve and the education system as a whole.

- They undertake the same broad set of activities in schools of all types and phases, and in all settings. None of these activities is 'low level' or mundane.
- Governors spend a considerable amount of time on their governing work. Interestingly, they are generally happy about the time they commit and say they expected it when they became governors.
- There are opportunity costs associated with their involvement, with respondents indicating the conflicting priorities between school governing, family commitments and the requirements of their paid work. Governing bodies need to operate in both 'family-friendly' and 'work-friendly' ways.
- As volunteers, school governors are collectively responsible for spending a sizeable part of the education budget in England which is £46 billion.

School governors make a substantial financial contribution to the education system in England. When the time governors give to governing is costed, the financial value of school governors' contribution to the education system can be estimated.

- Estimates of the financial contribution of school governors indicate that they contribute in excess of £1 billion to the education budget.

**The nature of school governing.** The research gives further insights into the true nature of school governing.

- School governing is challenging and can be very challenging in some settings and circumstances, for example in disadvantaged settings, in schools with low levels of pupil attainment and in schools with low Ofsted grades.
- School governing in all settings is becoming more challenging, especially in those settings where it is particularly challenging already.
- Despite the challenges – and maybe even because of them – respondents across all schools in all settings typically say they find school governing enjoyable.
- Overseeing the conduct of a school so that its pupils can gain maximum benefit is difficult but rewarding work. There is a need to inspire further those who are already governors and those who could become governors and also make a contribution to this important endeavour.



In 2008, the University of Bath was commissioned to undertake a research project that examined the effectiveness of school governing in England. As part of that research, governors were surveyed nationally to establish the state of school governing. It was felt at that time that school governing had not received the kind of attention it warranted and that not a huge amount was known about it. The study, which was commissioned by Nick Chambers, Director of Education at Business in the Community, concluded that school governing had a very significant part to play in the education system in England but that it was:

- Overloaded – governing bodies were responsible for too much
- Overcomplicated – their work was unnecessarily complex, difficult and demanding
- Overlooked – what governing bodies are responsible for and how they should function had not received enough of the right kind of attention, and the work of governing bodies goes largely unnoticed.

The findings were published in a report entitled 'The School Governance Study'<sup>1</sup> and used to inform the production of a publication with the title 'Governing our Schools'<sup>2</sup>.

In the six years since we carried out that 2008 survey, the education system in England has changed substantially. A number of changes have been implemented to legislation and policy – changes to school autonomy, for example – that directly relate to and impact on school governing. Governing bodies are responsible for overseeing the expenditure of approximately £46 billion a year. Those developments are starting to affect the way schools are governed and are enhancing the significance of school governing. Research to establish the state of school governing in England in 2014 is therefore highly appropriate and very timely.

This report documents the research we undertook and outlines the main findings. Following this introduction, there is a section that briefly explains the research and the research process – full details are given at the end of the report. A 'Main Findings' section follows, in which we set out the significant findings to emerge from the research. We then discuss some of the main outcomes from the study, draw some conclusions and make some recommendations.

1 <http://www.educationandemployers.org/research/research-reports/schoolcollege-performance/governing-our-schools/>

2 <http://www.educationandemployers.org/research/research-reports/schoolcollege-performance/governing-our-schools/>

# The research

A national survey of school governors was carried out between 10th March and 14th April, 2014.

The overall aim of the survey was to establish the current state of school governing with reference to: recruitment and retention; respondents' views on suitable governor qualities; induction, training and development; respondent's experience of being a governor; governing body functioning; and governing body tasks. The survey questionnaire was developed jointly with the various partners who were supporting the research – ASCL, the Education and Employers Taskforce, the CBI, the NAHT, National Co-ordinators of Governor Services, and SGOSS Governors for Schools and Colleges. The survey was widely distributed nationally and 7,713 replies were received. In the data analysis, we focussed on findings that 'said interesting things' about the current state of school governing in England.

# The main findings

## Introduction

In this part of the report, we summarise the main findings from the survey. Broadly, there are three sections. The first explores who governors are, how they are recruited, and governor induction, training and development. The second section explores what governing bodies do. In the third section, we look at what individual governors do and their overall experience of governing.

In reporting the data we have sought to focus on matters of particular interest revealed by the data analysis.

## > School governors

### Introduction

This section focusses in particular on governors' employment status and their ethnicity, the recruitment of governors, the preferred characteristics of new recruits, and governor recruitment in practice. Governor recruitment can be very difficult so we explore the effect of recruitment difficulties and what would help with recruitment. We also look at new governors' participation in induction and their subsequent training and development. Following each aspect there is a commentary on the data.

### School governors' current employment status

Two thirds of the respondents are in full-time or part-time paid employment.

Of those in paid employment 67% are in full-time employment and 33% in part-time employment.

58% of chairs are in full-time employment, which is a lower proportion than other governors (67%).

Of the 33% of governors not in paid employment, 75% are retired and 15% are 'Looking after the home or family'. Of the chairs not in full-time employment, over 80% of are retired and 6% are 'Looking after the home or family'.

### Commentary

The capabilities people bring from their work – current and previous – make a substantial contribution to school governing. Although the majority of governors are in paid employment, those who are retired from paid work contribute significantly, especially as chairs.

### Governors currently in paid employment

Approximately 75% of those respondents currently in employment (but not employed in the education sector) work in management/professional occupations. Approximately one governor in ten is self-employed.

The proportion of governors in management and professional occupations is higher for schools serving areas that are relatively advantaged socio-economically.

Two thirds of the respondents are in full-time or part-time paid employment.

The capabilities people bring from their work – current and previous – make a substantial contribution to school governing.

More professionals currently working in education are involved in governing schools in relatively disadvantaged areas than in relatively advantaged areas.

### **Commentary**

Those working in management and professional occupations make a significant contribution to school governing, especially so in advantaged areas. The involvement of educational professionals in governing in disadvantaged areas may indicate a professional commitment on their part.

### **Governors not currently in paid employment**

Respondents who are not in paid work typically previously worked in management/professional occupations (84%). A third of those not in paid work previously worked in education.

There are some variations across the data set.

- The proportion of governors who are 'Looking after the home or family' is higher in infant, junior and primary schools (8%, 7% and 5% respectively) than in secondary schools (3%).
- There are more governors in the 'Looking after home or family' category on governing bodies of schools serving relatively advantaged areas (7% of the total) than on those serving relatively disadvantaged areas (3%).
- More retired people are involved in school governing in relatively disadvantaged areas. The proportion of governors who are retired educational professionals is higher in relatively disadvantaged areas.
- The proportion of governors of special schools who are retired is higher than in other schools – 40%.

### **Commentary**

Retired people including former education professionals make a significant contribution to the governing of special schools and schools in disadvantaged areas.

The higher proportion of governors who have full-time home/family care responsibilities in infant/junior/primary schools compared with the proportion in secondary schools is perhaps to be expected given the likely life-style of (elected) parent governors of schools in the two phases. The parent governors of those schools may well be caring for other younger children full-time.

### **The ethnicity of school governors in England**

The survey respondents are overwhelmingly White – 96%. The figure did not vary in relation to schools in advantaged and disadvantaged areas. However, in city/urban areas the figure is 94%; in towns 96%; and in rural areas, 97%. There was no difference in the ethnicity of the governors of the schools in relatively disadvantaged and relatively advantaged settings. Headteacher respondents to the survey are overwhelmingly White (98%). The 2011 census reported that approximately 84% of the English population is White.

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## Commentary

Previous studies have shown the prevalence of governors and indeed headteachers who are in the White ethnic group. However, compared with the English population, and more importantly with the local population in many settings, governing bodies do not tend to reflect the diversity of the ethnicity in their school's community. Moreover, it would appear that governing bodies tend not to appoint headteachers who reflect the diversity in the ethnicity in their school's community.

## Preferred characteristics of new recruits

Respondents identified a number of the characteristics of new members of their governing bodies they considered were important. The percentage of respondents who cited the various characteristics are as follows in order of importance.

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1. Readiness to ask challenging questions (98%)
  2. Willingness to take collective responsibility rather than pursue particular issues (98%)
  3. Commitment to the school (98%)
  4. Ability to work in a group (98%)

1. Readiness to ask challenging questions (98%)
2. Willingness to take collective responsibility rather than pursue particular issues (98%)
3. Commitment to the school (98%)
4. Ability to work in a group (98%)
5. Filling gaps in the governing body's expertise (94%)
6. Specialist knowledge, such as financial or legal expertise, to support the working of the school (89%)
7. Knowledge of education (61%)
8. Ability to represent the interests of particular community groups (56%)
9. Well-respected in the community (49%)

Headteachers and chairs expressed broadly the same ranking, especially in relation to the top five qualities.

## Commentary

This list gives a good indication of the qualities required of school governors – and in that regard it is a significant finding.

The findings illustrate the debate about what kind of expertise is required for school governing and the use to which it is put. Clearly, governors value specialist knowledge and expertise. That expertise (such as expertise in accounting) can be used to scrutinise aspects of the school's work (such as the school's financial management). It could however be used to 'do' that kind of work where for example, the governor with expertise in accounting actually works on the school's accounts: that work is not 'governing'.

Understanding of education is below other specialist knowledge, perhaps because respondents consider new recruits can learn this once they become a governor or perhaps they expect this expertise to come from the headteacher and staff governors.

The relatively low priority given to potential governors representing the interests of particular community groups or having standing in the local community is interesting. It may be that the respondents consider that ability to take collective responsibility for the conduct of the school and to ask challenging questions is more important than representing the interests of particular community groups or having a status in the locality. They appear to be of the view that the qualities required to 'be a good governor' are more important.

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### Recruiting governors in practice

66% of the respondents said that recruiting governors is difficult, a figure which has not changed since our survey in 2008. There is a shortage of:

- people from the wider community who want to become governors (cited by 89% of respondents)
- members of staff who want to become staff governors (cited by 85% of respondents)
- parents who want to be parent governors (cited by 74% of respondents).

There are some variations in the data set. So, respondents from the various settings report that it is harder to recruit governors in:

| special schools (**76%**)  
| than in mainstream schools (**63%**)

| primary schools (**65%**)  
| than in secondary schools (**43%**)

| schools serving disadvantaged areas (**83%**)  
| than in relatively advantaged areas (**62%**)

| schools in urban/city and town locations (**both 66%**)  
| than in rural/village areas (**59%**).

| schools with below average levels of pupil attainment (**74%**)  
| than in schools with pupil attainment levels considerably above average (**42%**)

| schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade (**78%**)  
| than in schools with an Outstanding Ofsted grade (**51%**)

| schools that are not academies (**64%**)  
| than schools that are (**59%**).

Recruiting new governors is thus a significant task for governing bodies with 52% of chairs reporting that they put a lot of effort into finding new governors. This figure varies slightly across the data set. The percentages of respondents in different settings agreeing that their governing bodies put a lot of effort into finding the right kind of people are as follows:

- special schools – 53% ; secondary schools – 47% ; infant/junior/primary schools – 42%
- schools with An Outstanding Ofsted grade – 51% ; schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade – 42%
- schools with pupil attainment levels considerably above average – 50% ; schools with about average levels of pupil attainment – 42%
- academy schools – 50%; other types of school – 45%.

Governing bodies of schools serving disadvantaged areas put about the same amount of effort into finding good governors as those in relatively advantaged areas (both 62%).

Approximately a third of the respondents and half of the chairs who responded said that they know about SGOSS Governors for Schools and Colleges, the national charity funded by the Department for Education as a volunteer bank for governors. Approximately one in six governing bodies have used SGOSS Governors for Schools and Colleges to help find suitable governors.

### Commentary

Recruiting governors in any setting is not easy and about half of governing bodies put a lot of effort into recruitment. There is a shortage of potential recruits in all categories of governor. It is possible that potential staff governors find the prospect of undertaking the role particularly challenging – even daunting – for a range of reasons.

The particular difficulty of recruiting governors of special schools and infant/junior/primary schools is of interest. Schools in those categories tend to be smaller than secondary schools and are therefore likely to have a smaller pool of parents and staff to draw from. It may be that special schools are more ‘hidden from view’ than mainstream schools. Potential governors may not be aware of them – and their need for governors – as much as mainstream schools. However, special schools appear to be responding to the recruitment challenge more so than primary schools. More than half of special schools respondents say they put a lot of effort to finding new governors whereas only 43% of infant/junior/primary school respondents said they did.

Generally the more challenging the setting the harder it is to recruit governors. Academies overall reported slightly less difficulty in recruiting governors. This difference is likely to be because there are more academies in the secondary sector where governor recruitment generally is easier.

Recruiting governors in any setting is not easy and about half of governing bodies put a lot of effort into recruitment.

Generally the more challenging the setting the harder it is to recruit governors.

Approximately 37% of respondents reported that their governing body would be more effective if they could recruit more people of higher overall quality.

### The effect of the difficulties in recruiting governors of the right quality

Approximately 37% of respondents reported that their governing body would be more effective if they could recruit more people of higher overall quality. This figure was higher in schools:

- serving disadvantaged areas (41%) than in those serving relatively advantaged areas (22%)
- with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade (43%) compared with an Outstanding Ofsted grade (20%)
- where attainment was below average (45%) compared with schools where attainment was considerably above average (17%).

#### Commentary

The data from this section and the previous section illustrate a long-standing problem in school governing recruitment and effectiveness, which we consider further in the discussion section.

### What would help to improve recruitment?

We asked governors some questions about what would help recruitment. The questions related to: raising the profile of school governing; greater valuing and recognition of school governing; and the role that employers could play in promoting involvement of their employees in school governing.

There was general agreement that recognising the contribution that governors make would improve recruitment.

There was general agreement that recognising the contribution that governors make would improve recruitment with 66% of respondents supporting this view. 54% of respondents felt that valuing the work of school governors more highly would help. There was less support for raising the profile of school governing with only 46% of respondents supporting this view.

There was support for the idea that recruitment would be improved if employers promoted involvement of their employees in school governing with 62% of respondents supporting this view.

There was support for the idea that recruitment would be improved if employers promoted involvement of their employees in school governing with 62% of respondents supporting this view. In 2008, a similar proportion of respondents (60%) were of this opinion.

#### Commentary

The data indicates that governors do not think a higher overall profile would be of most help recruitment. The respondents appear to be of the view that the place of 'governing' is 'in the foundations' not 'in the limelight'. However, recruitment would be helped more if there was greater explicit recognition and valuing of the governors' contribution – to their schools, their communities, and then to the wider education system. It would appear to be a matter of injecting some positive feedback into the school governing system. That recognition and valuing would help with recruitment and arguably would help to motivate potential school governors.



## Governors' participation in induction, training and development

The data revealed strong involvement in training and development. 87% of chairs reported that all new governors are given a formal document describing governors' roles and responsibilities. Induction is very widespread with 92% of chairs reporting that all new members are required to participate in an induction process. Mentoring of new governors is less widely used with 68% agreeing that all new governors have a mentor to help them understand the role. 81% of chairs reported that most governing body members have participated in training activities in the last year.

Interestingly, all the responses relating to induction, training and development have improved since 2008.

In 2008, 74% of new governors were provided with a 'roles and responsibilities' document compared with 87% in 2014.

Participation in induction was 52% in 2008, it is now 92%.

In 2008, 44% of new governors had a mentor compared with 68% now.

Participation in training is up from 58% in 2008 to 81% now.

There is some variation across the data set as regards participation in induction, training and development. Involvement in all aspects of development was more widespread in the governing bodies of schools:

- serving relatively advantaged areas compared with those serving relatively disadvantaged areas
- where attainment was considerably above average compared with schools where attainment was below average
- with an Outstanding Ofsted grade than in schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade.

### Commentary

Overall, school governing practice in relation to induction, training and development has improved in the last six years, which is a significant and promising sign. The improvements in practice resulting from increased involvement in training should ultimately feed into better governing. The lower participation in training where arguably it is 'most needed' is a significant matter and is not such an optimistic sign.

## > School governing bodies

### **Introduction**

In this section, we consider the responses that relate to: governing body size; the stability of governing body membership; the tasks governing bodies undertake; and the way governing bodies work. Following each aspect, there are comments on the findings.

### **The size of school governing bodies**

A governing body size of 11–15 members is very much the norm; 57% of the respondents said their governing body size was in this range. 17% have 10 or fewer members, 20% have between 16 and 19 members, and 6% have 20 or more members. Those findings are broadly the same as the pattern of governing body size we identified in 2008.

Governing body size varied across the data set.

- Generally, special schools have the smallest governing bodies (89% have fewer than 15 members).
- Secondary school governing bodies tend to be the largest with 40% having between 16 and 19 members and one in five having more than 20 members.
- Governing bodies of schools attended by students living in relatively disadvantaged settings tend to be smaller than those in schools serving more advantaged settings, although for both settings, most have between 11 and 15 members.
- Schools where pupil attainment is considerably below average are smaller than those where it is above average.
- Governing bodies of schools judged to be Requiring Improvement/ Satisfactory by Ofsted are smaller than Outstanding schools.

### **Commentary**

Arguably, governing body capability should be the central issue rather than governing body size but size has been and continues to be a matter of interest.

The view that smaller governing bodies are more effective is not substantiated by these results. Indeed, on the basis of two quality measures, student attainment and Ofsted gradings, smaller governing bodies tend to be linked with lower levels of school quality.

### **The stability of governing body membership**

Generally, governing bodies have a balance of long-standing and relatively new members overall, with three quarters of chairs reporting that their governing bodies are in this category.

There is also relative stability in the governing bodies, with 80% of chairs reporting that members typically see out their full period in office and wish to continue. The respondents themselves are generally split between those who are new-comers in their first term in office (44%) and those at least in their second term (56%). 26% of the respondents have been governors for 10 years or more.

Again, there are variations across the data set. Using the percentage of members seeing out their full period in office as a measure, which is supported by other data, the governing bodies of:

- special schools and secondary schools have high levels of stability (both 85% of members), with primary (78% of members), junior (74% of members) and infant (68% of members) schools having lower levels
- schools serving relatively advantaged areas have slightly more stability (80% of members) than those serving disadvantaged areas (76% of members)
- schools where attainment is considerably above average have more stability (86% of members) than schools where attainment is below average (75%)
- schools with an Outstanding Ofsted grade have more stability (87% of members) than those governing bodies of schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade (70%).

### Commentary

The respondents' governing bodies typically had a balance of new and long-serving members. Generally, a certain level of stability in the membership governing body is likely to be of value especially if combined with the arrival of new members who themselves go onto serve at least one full term of office. Over time, governors are likely to accumulate knowledge of governing and the school they are governing, relationships are likely to be more secure and routines more clearly understood, and therefore a second term of office at the same school can be an asset.

### Governing body tasks

We asked respondents to say whether governing bodies have undertaken a range of tasks associated with governing in the previous year.

In relation to the three key functions specified in the DfE's 2014 Governors Handbook, chairs and headteachers reported that in the last year, their governing bodies have:

ensured clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction  
Chairs: **84%**, Headteachers: **72%**

held the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils  
Chairs: **96%**, Headteachers: **95%**

overseen the financial performance of the school and made sure its money is well spent  
Chairs: **99%**, Headteachers: **99%**

The proportion of academies engaging in these activities is broadly the same as other types of school.

The survey indicated that governing bodies have also undertaken the range of tasks that one would expect: scrutinising the work of the school; supporting the headteacher; approving the school improvement/development plan; monitoring the implementation of plans; monitoring the school's self-evaluation processes; and undertaking headteacher performance management.

One in five have appointed a new headteacher in the last year and nearly 40% had been involved in recruiting senior leaders.

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...nearly 40% had been involved in recruiting senior leaders.

**In 2008, 72% of respondents said their governing bodies asked challenging questions of the headteacher compared with 88% of all respondents in this survey. 98% of chairs and 97% of headteachers said the governing body had asked challenging questions of the headteacher in the last year.**

**99% of chairs and 89% of headteachers said the governing body had supported the headteacher in the last year compared with 95% in 2008.**

**In 2008, 82% of respondents said their governing bodies had engaged with medium and long term strategic planning compared with 75% of all respondents in this survey. Responses in this 2014 survey indicate that special and secondary school governing bodies typically engage in this kind of strategic planning task (83%) more than infant/junior/primary schools (79%).**

The proportion of respondents saying that their governing bodies had collaborated with other community institutions including schools is about the same in this survey – 53% compared with 54% in 2008. A very small proportion of respondents' schools are sponsoring other schools (3%) and an even smaller proportion are currently being sponsored by other schools (2%). The proportion of responses was considered too small to say anything meaningful about governing in those contexts.

### **Commentary**

The relative lack of focus on ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction in relation to the other core functions as specified in the 2014 Governors' Handbook in all types of school, including academies, is of interest. It would appear that the governing bodies of all schools – especially those for younger pupils – are overseeing the day-to-day aspects but are not 'looking forward' and 'being strategic' to the extent that they might.

The low level – and apparent decline since 2008 – of involvement in tasks related to medium and long term strategic planning is of interest in the current climate. It may be that not all respondents view considering or undergoing conversion to academy status as a medium/long term strategic planning matter as such.

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The relative lack of focus on ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction in relation to the other core functions...

The high levels of challenge and support governing bodies give to headteachers perhaps reflect the emphasis placed on these kinds of activity in guidance for governors. Interestingly, headteachers consider their governing bodies to be less supportive than chairs do. The levels of both challenge and support are higher than they were in 2008. Arguably, given the extent of governing body involvement in headteacher/senior staff appointments, support/training in appointing headteachers/senior staff for governors should become more of a priority.

### **The way governing bodies work**

We asked respondents a range of questions that relate to the way their governing body functions. Respondents agreed with the following:

- | The governing body is very aware of its responsibility to conduct the school with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement in the school **(99%)**
- | Governing body meetings have a well-structured agenda **(98%)**
- | The governing body has a positive atmosphere **(94%)**
- | Attendance at governing body meetings is usually very good **(90%)**
- | The governing body has formal terms of reference **(90%)**
- | Governors receive good quality, relevant information **(86%)**
- | The governing body periodically reviews the way it is working **(84%)**
- | The governing body has a clear understanding of its role and responsibilities **(83%)**
- | Governors feel able to speak their minds **(82%)**
- | The governing body has an effective chair **(82% of those who aren't chairs)**

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The governing body is very aware of its responsibility to conduct the school with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement in the school (99%).

84% of respondents reported that their governing body is working effectively, a figure which is more or less in line with findings in 2008. However, within that overall figure for this survey and the 2008 survey, there are some important detailed differences in our findings which indicate the school governing is moving in the right direction:

- more governors report that they have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities;
- governing bodies' own self-evaluation processes have clearly improved;
- the atmosphere of governing body meetings is more positive.

In terms of respondents' estimates of their governing body effectiveness, governors from governing bodies of:

special schools reported higher levels of effectiveness (**90%**) than respondents from other schools which were similar (**83%**)

schools serving relatively advantaged areas reported higher levels of effectiveness (**84%**) than respondents in disadvantaged areas (**72%**)

schools where attainment was above average reported higher levels of effectiveness (**89%**) compared with respondents from schools where attainment was considerably below average (**70%**)

schools with an Outstanding Ofsted grade reported higher levels of effectiveness (**92%**) than those in schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade (**79%**).

Responses from governors of academies about the functioning of their governing bodies and their estimates of the overall effectiveness of their governing bodies were similar to those from governors of other types of school.

Governors were invited to make suggestions about how the effectiveness of their governing body could be improved. The suggestions mentioned most frequently are:

1. Wider sharing of the workload amongst the members of the governing body
2. Better/more training
3. Governors with specific skills
4. More governors
5. Better chairs

### **Commentary**

The responses give a picture of sound overall governing body functioning with distinct improvements in certain aspects over the last six years. However, even in those aspects where there have been improvements, particularly in governors having a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities and in governing bodies' self-evaluation processes, there is potential for further improvement.

In terms of how governing could be improved, the priority given to a wider sharing of the workload is an interesting outcome. Delegation of tasks and responsibility can be difficult in voluntary contexts. Governor capability is a significant issue as illustrated by a need for better training and a need for more governors to undertake it, and the priority given to specific skills. The priority given to improving the chairing of governing bodies is supported by the data on the way the governing body functions (82% saying their governing body has an effective chair), and the related aspect of ensuring all governors are able to speak their mind. Generally, these suggestions for improvement point to the need for governing capability and good governing body organisation.

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However, even in those aspects where there have been improvements, particularly in governors having a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities and in governing bodies' self-evaluation processes, there is potential for further improvement.

The higher effectiveness rating of special schools supports previous findings. For example, when Ofsted graded governing separately (under former inspection regulations) special school governing was typically given higher grades than other schools, with primary school governing bodies typically receiving the lower grades. That respondents from academy school governing bodies do not rate their effectiveness more highly than other schools is of interest and perhaps concern given the relative autonomy and independence of schools of that type.

## > Governors' experience of governing

### **Introduction**

We were interested in governors' experience of governing and the way they work as governors. So this section covers: how governors spend their time as governors; governors' visits to the school; how much time governors spend on governing; governors' views on the time they spend on governing; family and employment commitments; being a governor; the developmental aspect of school governing; and the overall experience of governing. Following each aspect, we make some comments on the findings.

### **How governors spend their time as governors**

Perhaps not unexpectedly, 90% of respondents reported that they spent a fair/large amount of time preparing for meetings, for example, reading meeting papers, and 95% said they then spend a fair/large amount of time actually in meetings.

Typically, governors are not involved in writing up notes/minutes, and spend very little time writing up reports. They don't spend a large amount of time on training and development activities overall, although many do typically undertake those activities (see above).

Generally, the time governors report spending on governing tasks is more or less distributed as would be expected. The proportion of their 'governing time' they spend on intermittent/unusual tasks, such as recruiting staff, disciplinary panels, or headteachers' performance management, may be small overall. However, the time governors spend on those tasks will be significant when they actually do undertake them. Chairs, vice chairs and chairs of committees tend to be more involved in this kind of work than those governors who do not have those responsibilities.

There was no discernable difference in the pattern in the kinds of activities undertaken in schools: in different phases; of different types; in different socio-economic contexts; with different levels of attainment; or with different Ofsted grades. However, how time is spent during visits to the school does vary somewhat.

### **Commentary**

As might be expected, meetings and preparation for them for example, reading through meeting papers, are significant aspects of governors' work. The administration of meetings, for example, the preparation and distribution of papers, and writing up minutes/notes is not part of their work, which indicates appropriate involvement of the clerk. The intermittent and out-of-the-ordinary aspects of governing can be very time consuming for those involved when they do occur.

Governing activities are broadly the same with no discernable pattern in different schools, apart from their visits to their school as we discuss below. Governors generally spend their time working on tasks that help to ensure the appropriate conduct of their schools, which is their main responsibility.



## **Governors' visits to the school**

We were interested in the nature of governors' visits to schools (outside scheduled meetings) and what the purpose of such visits was and what governors did during their visits.

Most governors (70%) visit to get to know the school, a figure that doesn't vary overall between the different school phases and settings.

Respondents reported that they visit for prearranged meetings with a member/members of staff (73%). That figure is higher for secondary schools (80%) than primary schools (74%). Governors also visit to observe how a particular curriculum area/year group is taught (54%). That figure is lower for secondary schools (46%) than primary schools (61%).

Governors' visits can also be to support the school at events or to listen to the views of different groups – parents, pupils or staff. For example, 45% of respondents say they visit the school to represent the governing body at parents evenings.

Governors also visit for monitoring purposes but that kind of in-school involvement is greater for infant/junior/primary school governors than secondary school governors. They visit to monitor:

- progress towards a target in the school development/improvement plan (infant/junior/primary – 62%; secondary – 46%)
- how particular resources are being used in the school/lessons (infant/junior/primary – 41%; secondary – 28%)
- how the values of the school are put into practice (infant/junior/primary – 45%; secondary – 38%)
- how a particular policy is being implemented (infant/junior/primary – 38%; secondary – 34%)
- health and safety matters (infant/junior/primary – 29%; secondary – 20%).

One in 8 governors visit the school to judge quality of teaching (12%). The percentage of governors undertaking this kind of activity is approximately the same in primary and secondary schools at just under 12% and slightly higher in special schools (19%).

About one in five (19%) of respondents say that they visit their school to help pupils in lessons as part of their governing work. This figure is higher in infant/junior/primary schools (24%) than in secondary schools (5%).

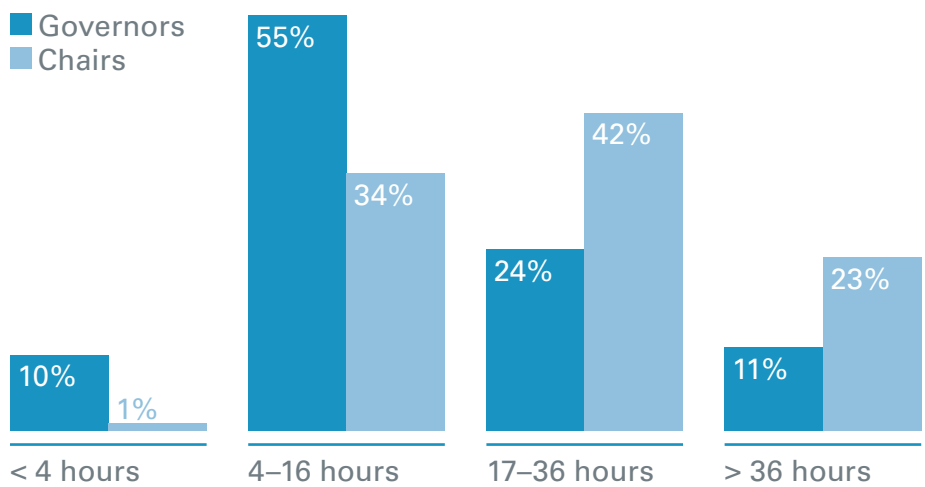
## **Commentary**

For nearly three quarters of governors the purpose of visits is to get to know the school – to 'find out about what they are governing' – which is arguably extremely important. On the other hand however, helping in the classroom is not part of a governor's role. The staff of the school may welcome the additional resource that governors contribute through these 'in-school' activities. However, this in-school contribution is not governing. It is an additional voluntary role.

Only a small minority of governors report that judging the quality of teaching is part of their governing work. As made clear in the DfE's Governors' Handbook 2014, governors should not be directly involved in judging the quality of teaching. They should be scrutinising the quality of judgements made by those with management responsibility in the school. A similar argument can be made for whether governors should visit to observe how a particular curriculum area/year group is taught. Governors should be scrutinising the monitoring work the school management does in that regard. How governors spend their time as governors and for what purpose is an important matter. The NGA are currently engaged on a separate research project on this issue.

**How much time do governors spend on governing?**

We asked respondents to say how much time they spent on school governing in each month of the school year:



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 Nearly a quarter of governors in employment are allowed paid time off

Nearly a quarter of governors in employment are allowed paid time off to help with this time commitment although one in 20 respondents said that they were not allowed time off – paid or unpaid – for their governing duties. 10% of governors are run small companies or are self-employed.

31% of chairs who are in paid employment are allowed paid time off by their employers for governing work. 16% of chairs run small companies or are self-employed and presumably fund their work as chairs largely themselves. One in 20 chairs are not allowed time off work – paid or unpaid – for their governing duties.

In terms of the variation in the time commitment across the data set, generally governors of schools in disadvantaged settings and with below average levels of pupil attainment spend more time on school governing. The time commitment of governors of schools in different phases and of different types including academies is broadly the same.

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The time commitment can be very considerable and especially so for chairs and the time commitment is greater in disadvantaged/low pupil attainment settings.

### Commentary

The time commitment can be very considerable and especially so for chairs and the time commitment is greater in disadvantaged/low pupil attainment settings.

How governors spend the time they commit is of course of interest. As stated above, the NGA are currently researching this important topic.

As we discuss later in the report, the contribution governors make, when costed, is a substantial financial contribution to the education budget in England.

The contribution of employers to school governing is not inconsiderable. Presumably, the involvement of people in governing during working hours who run small companies or are self-employed is funded out of their own income, which again is a considerable contribution.

### What do governors think about the time they spend on governing?

Just over two thirds of respondents agreed that the amount of time they spend on school governing is reasonable, although 16% disagreed. They also were clear that they were aware of the time they would need to commit when they volunteered. Further, they feel that they are not expected to do too much. Fewer chairs think the time they spent on their duties is reasonable (55%) with 26% of chairs viewing it as unreasonable.

In terms of an overall trend, generally from infant/primary/junior to secondary to special schools, governors are slightly more inclined to think that the expected time commitment is more reasonable; there is an increasing awareness of the time commitment when they volunteered; and they are less inclined to think they are asked to do too much.

Over three quarters of all the respondents think the time commitment has increased in the time they have been a governor.

### Commentary

Given the time contribution governors make, it is somewhat surprising that they consider it to be reasonable, especially as the majority of the time employees' give to governing is likely to be outside working hours and therefore unpaid. It is as if they are seeing the time in relation more to the responsibility and ensuring that the responsibility is undertaken properly and all the various tasks are carried out to fulfil the responsibility appropriately rather than seeing the time they commit as a cost to themselves. Governors' time commitment is perhaps both a matter of duty and because they enjoy it (see below). However there remains a significant minority for whom the expectations are felt to be unreasonable, and chairs have a less positive view of the time they give than other governors.

### Family and employment commitments and being a governor

Both family and employment commitments restrict the amount of time governors can spend on school governing.

Overall, just over a fifth (21%) of respondents agreed that family commitments make it difficult for them to spend time on governing.

There were some differences across the data set. 22% of infant, junior and primary school governors, 17% of special schools governors, and 16% of secondary school governors agree that work commitments make it difficult for them to spend time on governing.

Nearly half (48%) of those in paid employment agree that work commitments make it difficult for them to spend time on governing.

Work commitments have a slightly different effect for governors of special schools and schools in different phases. 17% of special school governors, 32% of infant, junior and primary school governors, and 44% of secondary school governors agree that work commitments make it difficult for them to spend time on governing.

### Commentary

School governing is voluntary work, so family and employment are likely to impact on those involved. Overall, work commitments are more of a barrier to spending time governing than family commitments. Perhaps understandably given the likely life-style of parent governors, family commitments have a slightly different effect for governors of schools in different phases and special schools. The impact of family commitments is thus greater for governors of infant, junior and primary schools many of whom will be parent governors with young children to care for. Again, perhaps understandably given typical employment status of governors in the different schools, work commitments have a slightly different effect for governors of schools in different phases and special schools. Arguably, parent governors of primary schools are less likely to be in paid employment than parent governors in secondary schools.

### The developmental aspect of school governing

Over half of the respondents say that being a governor has enabled them to develop their knowledge and skills and over a third of those in paid employment say it has given them expertise that they have used in their paid employment.

### Commentary

The developmental aspect of involvement in governing, especially in relation to the development of work-related skills, should not be overlooked. Governing adds to the skill set of the workforce in England.

### The overall experience of school governing

The data shows that school governing can be both challenging and enjoyable. Overall, 58% of the respondents find school governing to be challenging. Three quarters of governors said that they find being a governor enjoyable.

Over half of the respondents say that being a governor has enabled them to develop their knowledge and skills and over a third of those in paid employment say it has given them expertise that they have used in their paid employment.

Overall, 58% of the respondents find school governing to be challenging. Three quarters of governors said that they find being a governor enjoyable.

There was no difference in the percentage of governors of schools in relatively disadvantaged contexts who found governing challenging compared with governors of schools in relatively advantaged settings. Both were about **60%**.

A comparison of infant, junior, primary and secondary schools gives a similar result – about **60%** of respondents find governing challenging.

**58%** of governors of schools with above average levels of pupil achievement find being a governor challenging compared to **63%** of governors of schools with below average levels of pupil achievement.

**59%** of governors of schools with an Outstanding Ofsted grade find being a governor challenging compared to **64%** of governors of schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade.

Well over half of the respondents said that school governing has become more challenging in the last three years.

Well over half of the respondents said that school governing has become more challenging in the last three years. 62% of governors of schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade report that school governing has become more challenging in the last three years in comparison with 54% of governors from schools with an Outstanding Ofsted grade.

The percentage of governors reporting that governing had become more challenging in the last three years was broadly the same regardless of school type – including academies (58%) – although respondents who are governors of voluntary controlled schools reported higher levels of challenge over the last three years. The increase in the level of challenge was the same regardless of school phase.

Governing seems to be enjoyable regardless of socio-economic context with 75% of all respondents reporting that they find it enjoyable.

Governing seems to be enjoyable regardless of socio-economic context with 75% of all respondents reporting that they find it enjoyable. In terms of the type of school, respondents who are governors of academies find it most enjoyable (81%) and those of voluntary aided schools find it least (74%). It is more enjoyable in schools with above average levels of pupil achievement (81%) than in schools where attainment is below average (74%) and with an Outstanding Ofsted grade (83%) as opposed to a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory grade (73%).

### Commentary

Clearly school governing can be demanding work and most respondents reported that it had become more so over the last three years. Even in schools with an Outstanding Ofsted grade over half the respondents find the task to be challenging. However, at the same time it can be very enjoyable, so even three quarters of the governors of schools facing the challenge of improving their Ofsted grade find the work enjoyable.

Governors are experiencing increased pressure especially in those schools with a Requires Improvement/Satisfactory Ofsted grade.

# Discussion

## Introduction

In this section, we review some of the more significant issues arising from the findings reported above. The section is in three parts. In the first, we consider what the data tells us about the nature of governing, in the second we consider the significance of the work governing bodies undertake, and in the third part we examine the role of school governing bodies in ensuring the appropriate conduct of their schools.

## The nature of school governing

A number of themes emerge from the study that reveal much about the current state of school governing in England.

### Who are school governors?

Those governors working in management and professional occupations – including in the education profession – are already significantly involved in school governing, especially so in advantaged areas. Given the development opportunities being a governor can bring, those early in their careers including middle leaders in schools could be encouraged to make a bigger contribution to school governing.

Fewer employees tend to volunteer to be chairs, although a higher proportion of those who run small companies or are self-employed do so. This finding suggests that paid employees may not have the flexibility to take on this additional responsibility. It also points to the role requirements of being the chair.

To enable those in paid employment to participate in school governing, governing bodies need to be run on 'work friendly' lines.

Those who are retired are significantly involved as governors especially as chairs. Retired people including retired education professionals are particularly involved in the governing of special schools and schools in disadvantaged areas.

Approximately one governor in seven is looking after the home or the family. There is scope for increasing this figure. Governing bodies do need to ensure that they are run on 'family friendly' lines as well as 'work friendly' lines.

We are aware that there is an inevitable tension between running schools on work friendly lines and family friendly lines. Those in full-time paid work typically find attending meetings from 6pm onwards most convenient. This time may be the worst time for parents of young children. Similarly, meetings during school hours could prevent governors in other professions and even staff governors from attending or even volunteering in the first place.

The survey confirms the prevalence of governors – and indeed headteachers – who are in the White ethnic group. There is a very strong case for increasing the participation of different ethnic groups on governing bodies, especially in those communities where pupils are from a range of ethnic groups. A diverse range of views, experiences and skills is useful especially if the right decision is to be made about a complex, school-related matter. Arguably, it would be beneficial to have more people of different ethnic origin involved in those deliberations.

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The survey confirms the prevalence of governors – and indeed headteachers – who are in the White ethnic group. There is a very strong case for increasing the participation of different ethnic groups on governing bodies, especially in those communities where pupils are from a range of ethnic groups. A diverse range of views, experiences and skills is useful especially if the right decision is to be made about a complex, school-related matter. Arguably, it would be beneficial to have more people of different ethnic origin involved in those deliberations.

### The qualities required of school governors

Respondents' preferred qualities of new governors indicate the kind of qualities governing bodies need. The most preferred quality is the readiness to ask challenging questions, which is arguably underpinned by the quality of assertiveness. It is crucial in fulfilling the scrutiny function of governing bodies.

Willingness to take collective responsibility rather than a preference for pursuing particular issues of personal/individual concern is seen as essential in enhancing the joint and shared authority of the governing body.

Commitment to the school is important in motivational terms and it also provides an appropriate mind-set for decisions. Arguably however, that kind and level of commitment does need to be tempered with a commitment to all schools, all students, and the education system generally.

The ability to work in a group is crucial for being able to contribute appropriately to discussions of complex issues and for enabling collective responsibility.

Filling gaps in the governing body's expertise is important for ensuring that the range of capabilities on the governing body is maintained and that the balance of those capabilities is sustained.

Specialist knowledge, such as financial or legal expertise, to support the working of the school can be very important for scrutinising technical aspects of the schools functioning. However, we would argue that it is important that the role of the professional school leaders is not usurped.

### Governor recruitment

Recruiting school governors of all kinds and in any setting is not easy. Generally, there is a shortage of potential recruits in all categories of governor, with recruitment being particularly problematic in primary and special schools. Further, in general, the more challenging the setting, in terms of socio-economic status, level of pupil attainment and Ofsted grade/reputation, the harder it is to recruit governors.

The survey findings in relation to the recruitment of governors are important. They illustrate and confirm a long-standing problem in school governing recruitment and governing body effectiveness, which we set out in the Hidden Givers Report<sup>3</sup>. It is as follows.



Generally, there is a shortage of potential recruits in all categories of governor, with recruitment being particularly problematic in primary and special schools. Further, in general, the more challenging the setting, in terms of socio-economic status, level of pupil attainment and Ofsted grade/reputation, the harder it is to recruit governors.

Schools in disadvantaged areas tend to find it harder to recruit governors, so their governing bodies are probably less effective.

Schools in disadvantaged areas tend to have lower levels of pupil attainment.

Schools with lower levels of pupil attainment tend to find it harder to recruit governors so their governing bodies are probably even less effective.

Schools with lower levels of pupil attainment tend to get lower Ofsted grades, which undermines their reputation.

Schools with poor reputations tend to find it harder to recruit governors so their governing bodies are probably then even less effective.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2010/r-the-hidden-givers-2010>

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As a result, those very schools that need good governors, that is: those schools: in disadvantaged settings, with low levels of pupil attainment, with lower Ofsted grades and with poorer reputations, find it harder to recruit them. A 'vicious cycle' is established, which helps to maintain the gap between educational attainment in advantaged and disadvantaged areas.

As a result, those very schools that need good governors, that is: those schools: in disadvantaged settings, with low levels of pupil attainment, with lower Ofsted grades and with poorer reputations, find it harder to recruit them. A 'vicious cycle' is established, which helps to maintain the gap between educational attainment in advantaged and disadvantaged areas.

About half the chairs report that their governing bodies put a lot of effort into recruitment, perhaps understandably given the continual turnover of governors as a result of governor's four-year term of office. Generally, special schools governing bodies put most effort into recruitment, with infant/junior/primary schools putting in least. Governing bodies of those schools with a higher level of performance indicators put in slightly more effort.

### **What would help with governor recruitment?**

Governing bodies work hard at recruitment – it is a significant activity for many of them. The expansion of the Inspiring the Future initiative to include the recruitment of school governors means that volunteers and schools now have an important additional way to connect directly with potential governors.

Respondents say that more recognition of what governors do, that is, being responsible for the conduct of their schools, and a stronger appreciation of what they do, would help with recruitment. Injecting some positive feedback of this kind into the school governing system would help with recruitment. That feedback together with the some of the messages from this research (that school governing is generally functioning well, is improving and is very rewarding) could help to motivate – indeed even inspire – current and new governors.

### **Governor induction, training and development**

The overall improvement in induction, training and development in the last six years is significant and reason to be optimistic. Those improvements are likely to lead to better governing in the future. Again, the lower participation in training in schools serving disadvantaged areas, and with low levels of attainment and low Ofsted grades is a cause for some concern.



# Governing bodies and the significance of what they do

## **Governing body size**

Governing body capability for the governing task and general fitness for purpose should be the central issues rather than governing body size. Nonetheless, a consideration of the 'size topic' reveals a complex set of issues.

Larger governing bodies, that is, those with 16 or more members, tend to be associated with schools that have higher levels of pupil attainment and better Ofsted grades. Recruitment of governors tends to be easier in such schools. Perhaps governing bodies with low performance indicators would function better and impact more positively on their schools if they were larger. 'More governors' was one of the top five suggestions from respondents as to how governance could be improved, along with the involvement of governors with specific skills. However even if expanding the governing bodies of schools with low performance indicators were to make a difference, governor recruitment is difficult in schools in those settings.

Governing bodies of special schools and schools for younger pupils tend to be smaller than secondary schools. Thus smaller schools, which employ fewer staff and have fewer pupils, tend to have smaller governing bodies. Nonetheless, they still have the same governing tasks to perform, although possibly with less complexity, with fewer governors to do them. Perhaps that explains why governors of those schools for younger pupils are less enthusiastic about the time they have to commit to governing. Those governing bodies are smaller but they still have the same work to do so need to spend more time. However, governors of such schools are more involved in in-school activities which might not actually be governing work.

Governor recruitment is difficult in special schools and especially so in infant/junior/primary schools. Governor turnover tends to be higher in those schools too. Therefore it is not clear whether governing bodies are smaller in these cases by design, or for more pragmatic reasons as that it is simply too difficult to find skilled volunteers.

## **Governing body stability**

A significant number of governors have given extremely long service – in excess of 10 years and well into their third term of governing – with those governing in less challenging schools staying in the role longer. Long-serving governors can give the governing body a sense of stability can allow an in-depth understanding of the school to develop. However, there is a countervailing view that when governors are of long-standing, relationships can become too cosy and the ability to challenge, which is so fundamental to governance, is compromised. Moreover, new governors joining a governing body with very established routines and relationships may find themselves unable to influence decisions and/or bring about perhaps much needed changes in practice.

### **Governing body tasks**

A number of issues emerge overall in the data on what governing bodies see as their main tasks.

First, governing bodies clearly prioritise the task of overseeing the educational performance of the school and ensuring that the finances of the school are secure. However, governing bodies, especially those of schools for younger pupils, do not engage in governing activities related to ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction to the same extent.

Second, governing body capability in the appointment of headteacher/ senior staff appointments needs to be secure given its importance to the school and its surprisingly widespread prevalence in the data as a recent governing body task. This aspect of governors' work is not well supported by the system. Arguably, training in this aspect should be an on-going priority in order to ensure that all governing bodies have the capability in sound and proper recruitment practices when they need it.

Third, the levels of both challenge and support governing bodies give to headteachers are higher than they were in 2008, which indicates a significant improvement in governing body functioning. The challenge function has been championed by many, including the DfE and NGA, since the last survey and the increase the level of challenge may explain this emphasis.

### **Governing body functioning**

The data gives a strong sense that school governing overall is functioning well. Of course, such an assertion needs to be made with some caution. The data is self-reported, the sample size though large in total is a relatively small sample, and the analysis has not explored governing bodies which are experiencing serious acute difficulties at the present time. Nonetheless, a number of aspects of school governing have improved significantly in the last six years since our previous national survey, which is significant progress and bodes well for further improvements in the future.

Respondents' requirements for the capabilities of new school governors and their suggestions for improvements in governing body functioning such as better chairing and a wider sharing of the workload confirm the importance of governor capability and good governing body organisation.

### **Governors' visits to the school**

While the general purpose for visiting the school – to get to know the school – is the same across the data set, how that time is spent varies. As we point out in the commentary on the data when governors of special schools and governors of infant/junior/primary schools visit the school as governors they are more involved in 'operational activities' than when governors of secondary schools visit as governors.

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# Governors' experience of governing and the contribution they make

## How governors spend their time

Governing activities are broadly the same in schools in different contexts – they engage in a broadly similar set of activities as they work on the three core functions that are central to their work. Importantly none of the tasks they engage in can be construed as mundane, they are all substantial and significant to ensuring the proper conduct of the school.

## The time governors spend on governing

School governors contribute a considerable amount of time to school governing. Generally governors of schools in disadvantaged/low pupil attainment settings contribute more time.

Employers of governors also make a substantial contribution in paying for some of that time at least. Similarly governors who run small companies or are self-employed make a significant contribution, which is presumably funded out of their company's profits or their own income, which again is a considerable contribution.

The contribution of the time governors contribute on a voluntary basis when costed amounts to a considerable sum. For each month of the school year, the 7,356 governors who answered this question said they spent the following amounts of time:

709 respondents spend between less than 4 hrs., let's say 2 hrs.	=	1,418 hrs.
4,036 respondents spend between 4 and 16 hrs., let's say 10 hrs.	=	40,360 hrs.
1,781 respondents spend between 17 – 36 hrs., let's say 27 hrs.	=	48,087 hrs.
830 respondents spend more than 36 hrs., let's say 45 hrs.	=	37,350 hrs.
	Total 7,356	= 127,215 hrs.
	Amount of time per governor	= 17.29 hrs.

Let's say governors were paid £20/hr. and there are 325,000 of them – that is 350,000 governors in total less approximately 25,000 headteachers who arguably work as governors as part of their salaried responsibility.

Every governor contributes 17.29 hrs. at £20/hour for 10 months of the year = £3,458

Multiplied up for 325,000 governors = £1,123,850,000

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### **What do governors think about the time they spend on governing?**

Governors contribute a great deal yet they appear to think what they are asked to do is reasonable. It is as if they have taken on a responsibility and therefore understand that it will take time, although awareness of that at the outset is not so widespread in governors of infant, junior and primary schools. Perhaps governors' judgement of the time they spend is tempered by the fact that so many of them enjoy it!

### **The capabilities governors bring to governing**

Governors need to bring a high level of quite sophisticated skills and personal qualities to their governing work if they are to be successful. They are likely to have developed these skills and qualities in a range of ways but typically through paid work.

### **The developmental aspect of school governing**

There are very real benefits to be derived from being a school governor especially in relation to the development of work-related skills. Arguably, the experience of governing gives those participating the responsibility for overseeing the work of complex organisations that are very significant institutions in society. It therefore requires mature perspective on the world, a wise approach to making sense of complex problems, and a sophisticated approach to making decisions. All governors need to acquire those capabilities if they do not possess them already, and they are very powerful qualities to take back into the workplace.

### **A measure of significance of school governors' contribution to the education system**

School governing bodies are responsible for the conduct of schools in England. A very significant but infrequently spoken about aspect of that contribution is their responsibility of overseeing the total budget for schools. That budget is currently approximately £46 billion. In some ways that statistic is a measure of school governors' contribution to the education system. Further, ensuring that budget is well spent together with other governing activities, contributes significantly to the overall educational performance of schools in England.

### **The overall experience of school governing**

Governing is clearly challenging work especially in difficult circumstances but nonetheless an overwhelming majority in our sample say they enjoy it. Our interpretation of that finding stems from an understanding that school governing is difficult and responsible work that can be very satisfying indeed.



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## Concluding comments and recommendations

We undertook this research to ascertain the state of school governing in England in 2014. The research and the analysis of the data reveal a number of issues. Some are significant and new in terms of the insights they bring. Others are relatively unsurprising but even in those cases the findings are very useful in 'putting the facts behind the folklore'.

### **The overall functioning of school governing**

From the survey, overall, school governing in England appears to be functioning well – and indeed is moving in the right direction. A number of indicators show important improvements in the way governing bodies work have occurred in the last few years which strongly suggest possible further improvements in the future.

### **Core capabilities for governors**

The research identifies a number of core capabilities for governors:

- A readiness to ask challenging questions and to be assertive
- A willingness to take collective responsibility for the conduct of the school
- Commitment to the school, which we would argue needs to be tempered by a wider commitment to the success of other schools and high quality education for all young people
- The ability to work in a group, which is crucial for being able to contribute appropriately to discussions of complex issues and for enabling collective responsibility
- Specialist knowledge, such as financial or legal expertise – to ensure sound scrutiny of significant aspects of the school's work.

It is harder to get these capabilities in schools where they are needed most because of recruitment difficulties.

### **The expertise governors bring to the role**

Governors bring a broad range of skills to governing, many of which will have been developed through their paid work. Governors also say they develop a range of capabilities through their governing work. The skills developed may be quite sophisticated leadership skills of the kind that can be powerfully developed by managing in complex setting such as schools.

### **Governor recruitment**

Governing bodies need a larger pool of willing citizens who are ready to become governors. That need is greatest in schools: in disadvantaged settings, with low levels of pupil attainment, with low Ofsted grades and poor reputations.

School governing draws heavily on the experience and expertise of those currently in management and professional occupations. More people from those sectors and the world of paid employment generally need to be more involved and ideally involved in special schools, in primary schools and in all schools in disadvantaged settings, or with low levels of pupil attainment or with poor Ofsted grades. Governing bodies need to be run on work-friendly lines so that people in paid employment can participate easily.

School governing bodies typically derive considerable benefit from the experience and expertise of those who are retired – especially those who have completed careers in management and professional occupations. Again, more people who are retired from paid employment could be more involved in schools governing. Ideally, they should be more involved in the governing of special schools and primary schools and in all schools in disadvantaged settings, or with low levels of pupil attainment, or with poor Ofsted grades.

Approximately one governor in seven is looking after the home or the family. There is scope for increasing this figure. Governing bodies need to ensure that they are run in a ‘family friendly’ way to make sure people with home/family care responsibilities can participate.

### **School governor recruitment strategies**

School governor recruitment strategies should focus on those schools that would benefit from having more potential recruits available to them.

Recruitment strategies should focus on broadening the ethnicity of school governing – and indeed widening the ethnicity of the headteacher population.

Recruitment of governors would be helped by greater recognition and valuing of the contribution that school governors make. Central government has a role here, acknowledging the responsibility governors undertake on its behalf.

Recruitment efforts should focus on the benefits that being involved in school governing can bring. Employers have a part to play here in promoting the benefits of being involved in school governing.

Recruitment efforts could usefully focus on recruiting ‘young professionals’ for both the contribution they can make and the development benefits they will gain from being involved in school governing.

Raising the profile of school governing is not seen by respondents as priority for improving recruitment.

Efforts to promote recruitment need to appeal to people’s deeper motivations to make a contribution to society and to inspire future governors.

Recruitment strategies could include encouraging long-serving and capable governors of successful schools to volunteer to be governors in schools with more challenges.

### **Induction, training and development**

Governor induction, training and development have improved in recent years which confirms school governing is moving in the right direction. There needs to be greater emphasis on headteacher/senior staff recruitment to ensure that all governing bodies have that very important capability to hand.

### **Governing body size**

Larger governing bodies tend to be associated with schools that have higher levels of pupil attainment and better Ofsted grades. However, the size issue is complicated and we are firmly of the view that governing body fitness for purpose and effectiveness are more important considerations than size.

### **Governing body priorities**

Governing bodies of schools in all settings and of all kinds strongly prioritise matters relating to their school's educational and financial performance. However, they all give less priority to longer term strategic issues and a consideration of 'the kind of school we want our school to be', which is arguably a very important matter for all governing bodies. This lack of strategic focus is a matter of particular concern given increasing levels of institutional autonomy and independence as more schools take on academy status. Governing bodies need to address all the core functions assigned to them.

### **The contribution school governors make and what it's worth**

The respondents in the survey clearly put a lot into their governing work. They undertake the same broad set of activities in schools of all types and phases, and in all settings. None of these activities is 'low level' or mundane. It needs to be remembered that, school governors are collectively responsible for spending the education budget in England which is well in excess of £40 billion.

Governors spend a considerable amount of time on their governing work. Interestingly, they are generally happy about the time they commit and say they expected it when they became governors. There are however opportunity costs associated with their involvement with respondents indicating the conflicting priorities between school governing, family commitments and the requirements of their paid work.

Estimates at the financial contribution of governors indicate that as volunteers they contribute in excess of £1 billion to the education budget.

### **The true nature of school governing**

The research confirms that governing is challenging and can be very challenging in some settings and circumstances. In all settings it is getting more challenging. However, it is also clear that school governing can be very rewarding.

# Appendix 1

## The research

A national survey of school governors in England was carried out between 10th March and 14th April, 2014. The overall aim of the survey was: to establish the current state of school governing with reference to: recruitment and retention; suitable governor qualities; induction, training and development; respondents' experience of being a governor; governing body functioning; and governing body tasks.

We were also interested the characteristics of the respondents so we sought to find out: the respondents' occupation/employment status and length of service on the governing body; which type of governors the respondent is; their governing body responsibilities.

We wanted to be able to compare the findings according to the characteristics of their school so we sought information on: school phase and type of the respondents' schools; whether the respondents' schools serve city/urban, town or village/rural communities; and the level of socio-economic advantage/disadvantage experienced by the pupils in their schools', the level of pupil attainment in their schools; and their school's most recent Ofsted grading.

### **The questionnaire**

The questions we asked in the questionnaire reflected the particular interests expressed in the aim; the characteristics of the respondents; and the characteristics of their schools. The questionnaire was developed jointly with the various partners who supported the research – ASCL, the Education and Employers Taskforce, the CBI, the NAHT, National Co-ordinators of Governor Services, and SGOSS Governors for Schools and Colleges. The questionnaire was piloted with a small group of governors and amended accordingly.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically, through Bristol Online Surveys. The survey was made known to governors using a variety of methods, through: the National Governors' Association weekly newsletter and website; the regional and local co-ordinators of local authority governor services; the National College for Teaching and Leadership school governor networks; and headteacher professional associations. Potential respondents were also alerted to the survey via social media (Twitter, Facebook, various blogs), which allowed wider circulation. Those completing the survey were asked to forward it on to contacts in other governing bodies. Potential respondents were informed that the survey was for governors not trustees. We also made it clear that all replies would be treated in the utmost confidence and that the respondents' anonymity would be protected in any reporting of the findings.

### **The sample**

We received a total of 7,713 completed questionnaires, which is 2.2% of the total population of approximately 350,000 school governors on England.



### **Data analysis**

In analysing the data, we were particularly interested in findings that 'said interesting things' about the issues we were particularly concerned to find out about as set out above. We were particularly interested in identifying findings that varied according to the location of the school (city/urban, town or village/rural) and its socio-economic context, level of pupil attainment and Ofsted grading.

### **Commentary of the survey and the research process**

We are conscious that although the overall number of responses is very large it is a relatively small sample of the total population. We have confidence in the validity of the sample for a number of reasons: school size reflects school phase; the proportions of schools in the survey reflect the proportions of schools generally; and the data is well distributed in terms of location; socio-economic context; pupil attainment; and Ofsted inspection categories. Academies are appropriately represented. We are aware that governing body chairs and secondary schools are slightly more strongly represented than might be expected but not disproportionately so. Further, we are aware that some of these variables are linked but nonetheless our analysis has revealed important and distinct variations.





