



The missing pool of talent on school governing boards



GovernorHub
from The Key

Contents

1 Foreword

2 Executive summary

4 Methodology

5 Our governor survey sample

7 Findings

7 Visibility and awareness

11 Diversity and representation

17 The missing pool of talent

19 Recruitment, channels into governance and barriers

21 Value, impact and appetite

24 Recommendations

28 Acknowledgements

Foreword

Around 212,000¹ people volunteer their time and skills as school governors and trustees in England, and yet the role remains largely hidden to much of society – most notably, to those people we need and want to recruit.

It's no surprise that the role lacks visibility; it's rare to see a mention of governing boards in the news, even when the story relates to an aspect of school life that's directly related to governance, such as making sure public money is well spent. On the rare occasions that governance does get coverage, it's often in the context of a significant problem.

We carried out this research to gain a greater understanding of how much (or how little) the average person knows about school governance, and to uncover the thoughts of existing governors and trustees on how their role is perceived and how they themselves came into it.

In terms of public awareness, one of our key interpretations of the findings is that our knowledge and understanding of the governor role relates to who we are in society. We're more likely to know about governance the closer we are in profile to the average governor or trustee – which, in itself, is not very representative of society as a whole (and especially given that the only real precondition for the role is being aged 18+).

This dual lack of awareness and visibility is holding boards back. In this digital age, there is a wealth of benefits to bringing younger and more diverse people onto boards – people whose recent experience of the school system and entering adulthood, and different perspectives on life in the workplace and beyond, can bring useful insights into the challenges facing pupils today.

We are left with an “echo chamber” in governance. For many outside this group of volunteers, governance is a check and balance in the education sector that they're simply not aware of. Yet it matters that people understand who headteachers and trust CEOs answer to, and who's holding them to account. It's important to know that probing questions are being asked of

a school or trust's leadership, and that there are people looking out for children from every walk of life.

Successfully raising awareness among a much broader section of society is not something that schools and the governance sector can easily do alone, and, as you'll see in our recommendations, we call on the media and the government to start representing and promoting the role of school governance to the whole of society.

At GovernorHub and The Key for School Governors, our primary pledge to help broaden the talent pool on boards is to start collecting, publishing and tracking data on board diversity, in its broadest sense, through a new, publicly available tool that will allow comparisons between different areas of the country. The Department for Education² is set to recommend boards collect and publish diversity data in its next edition of the Governance Handbook. We welcome this development and look forward to supporting boards with a means to do this.

Our hope is that, in monitoring and reporting this information, we can work with the sector to make sure that every single person in the country who has the skills and passion to make a difference to the future of young people, is given the chance to get involved. This is a pool of talent that we must bring to the table.



Neil Collins
Managing Director,
Governance at The Key

1. 212,113 governors and trustees recorded on [Get Information About Schools](#), 3 March 2022. However, this figure does not include data from independent schools, from those schools, trusts or governors who have not provided the statutory data, or from those who have finished their term in the last 12 months (although these roles are likely to be refilled). The estimated total number of governors is likely to be closer to 250,000 nationally.

2. Policy paper: [Inclusive Britain: government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#), 17 March 2022

Executive summary

This report – drawing from a poll of 1,901 members of the public in England, and a survey of 4,006 serving school governors and trustees – highlights 10 key findings of relevance to both the education sector (schools, academy trusts, local authorities, government and governor recruitment organisations) and the mainstream media outlets that report on education. We offer more detailed analysis of each finding later in this report.

1. Most people don't understand the role of school governance

The majority of respondents to the public poll did not think that “governors/trustees” are responsible for ensuring strategic direction in a school (57%), holding school leaders accountable for educational performance (64%) or overseeing finances in a school (57%) (the 3 core functions of governance). Where they did, it was rare for their answers to indicate a consistent understanding across all 3 functions – for example, only 56% of those who thought governors were responsible for ensuring strategic direction also thought that they were responsible for holding school leaders accountable for educational performance; only 64% also thought they were responsible for overseeing finances in a school. Similarly, when asked about a perhaps more typically relatable topic, school food, only a small proportion of the respondents (21%) thought that it's the role of governors/trustees to monitor that school dinners meet the School Food Standards.

2. The majority of governors and trustees surveyed say that the public doesn't understand their role, and believe it to be largely hidden

82% of respondents to our governor survey felt that the public did not understand their role, backing up what we heard first-hand in the public poll. On average, on a scale of 1 (“hidden”) to 5 (“visible”), the role of governance scored just 2 for public visibility in the eyes of governors.

3. Governors have typically only seen stories about governance in the press a couple of times

More than a third (34%) of governors surveyed had never seen an article in the mainstream press about governance, and more than 4 in 10 (42%) had only seen one or two such stories. This lack of prominence in the media is likely to be a contributing factor in the overall lack of awareness among the general public.

4. Those who understand governance are more likely to be older, white, middle class, more educated and higher earning

In our public poll, among those who (rightly) thought that governors/trustees were responsible for all 4 areas across the survey, there was a significantly higher proportion of 35 to 75 year-olds than 16 to 34 year-olds, and a significantly higher proportion of white respondents than ethnic minority respondents (excluding white minorities). Furthermore, among this group, there was a significantly higher proportion of respondents educated to at least degree level, than to GCSE, A-level or equivalent levels, and a significantly higher proportion of earners within the highest income band than within the lowest.

5. Data from our governor survey suggests that governors, too, are typically older (35+), white and more educated

The majority of respondents to our governor survey fitted the same profile as those members of the public who were more likely to understand the role. In other words, despite repeated cries³ from the various stakeholders in the governance sector for more diversity⁴, we are not closing the gap between those who know about the role and those who take it on.

³ NGA, [Increasing participation in school and trust governance \(2021\)](#)

⁴ *Ibid*, page 2

6. Governors themselves (largely white, older and more educated) reported that their boards were diverse in terms of gender, but much less so for age, ethnicity, social class and disability

Our governor survey respondents think that their own boards are pretty diverse when it comes to gender, but very little else. Diversity on boards seems to be particularly lacking in terms of ethnicity, social class and disability. However, we can only say this finding reflects respondents' perception – it may or may not be an accurate reflection of reality.

7. Younger people and those from most ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be interested in the role, but need to know more about it

When we asked the general public whether they would consider being a governor, we found that the younger people were, the more likely they were to be open to this. Under-35s, in particular, were more likely to consider being a governor, either on the basis that they needed to know more about it, or that they would consider it in the future. Similarly, the interest in the role from those from ethnic minorities (excluding white minorities)⁵ was higher than for white respondents. (Among those who hadn't been a governor, 51% of Asian/Asian British respondents, 46% of Black/African/Caribbean/Black British respondents and 40% of mixed/multiple ethnic group respondents said they would be interested in the role on the basis that they needed more information or would be interested in the future; this compared to 29% of white respondents who hadn't been a governor). These are the very people – younger, from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds – who we need more of on governing boards, and yet we are clearly not doing enough to make sure they know about, or fully understand, the role.

8. Most governors and trustees in our survey arrived in the role through a “closed-shop” route – often, having worked in the school sector, as parents of school-age children, or having links to the sector, such as through personal relationships

We asked governors what prior knowledge they had about the school sector before taking on the role, and allowed them to select any relevant options from a list. More than 4 in 10 (43%) of

those surveyed had worked in the sector – and, anecdotally, comments suggested that many are former teachers and school leaders, or volunteer alongside other governors who've previously held such roles. In addition, 43% said they were parents of school-age children, which correlates with another finding that 39% were parent governors or had been previously. This reveals that people are seemingly not particularly likely to get involved if they are not parents at the school. Only 9% had no prior knowledge of the school sector before becoming a governor.

9. The majority of governors and trustees surveyed feel the difference they make isn't noticed or valued by the public

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of governors surveyed said they don't think that the public notices the difference they make as governors, and only 12% think that the public values what they do. Respondents shared many comments expressing frustration and disappointment about this. This finding reflects perception rather than fact, but it doesn't seem wildly off-course given the public poll's findings around the general lack of awareness of the role. And feelings of not being noticed or valued are likely to be intensified if governors don't see their role and impact represented in the media.

10. Despite this, the majority of those asked would recommend being a governor because “you can make a difference”

Among our governor survey respondents, “giving something back” was the common thread running through the top 3 responses to our question about what motivated them to apply in the first place. Thankfully, this initial motivation seems to have been borne out in experience, with 89% of our respondents happy to recommend governance to others, 92% planning to finish their term and 78% saying they felt they were making a positive impact. And many of those who were less sure about their impact were newer to the role.

⁵ [The Ipsos public poll used the Government Statistical Service census ethnic group question](#)

Methodology

We conducted 2 simultaneous studies in January 2022, and have brought together the results into this report.

The first study was run in-house by GovernorHub, and involved a 37-question survey that was sent to governors who are users of GovernorHub, The Key for School Governors, or both⁶. In all, 4,006 respondents completed this survey between 13 and 23 January 2022.

We asked a range of questions about governors' route into governance, their experience of being a governor, the impact they feel they have had and how they feel their role and impact are perceived. We also asked about diversity and representation on their board, the workload and mental health of the leaders and staff at their school or trust, and succession plans for key roles on their board and leadership team. Throughout this report, we will refer to this study as the 'governor survey'.

For the second study, we worked with Ipsos to poll members of the public over 2 days while the governor survey was in the field (13 to 14 January 2022). Ipsos ran an online Omnibus

survey on i:omnibus. This poll asked 5 questions, to understand how much the general public knows and understands about school and trust governance, and to learn how interested the general public is in the role. It was completed by 1,901 respondents, and the sample obtained was representative of 16 to 75 year-olds in England, having met quotas on age, gender, region and working status. This data has been weighted to the known population profile by age within gender, region, education, working status and social grade to be nationally representative and reflect the adult population of England. Throughout this report, we will refer to this study as the 'public poll'.

Across both surveys, we wanted to capture who governors are and how they think they're seen by the public, as well as what the public itself knows about the role of governors; we have tried, therefore, to balance both of these positions throughout this report.

⁶. GovernorHub and The Key for School Governors are part of The Key group

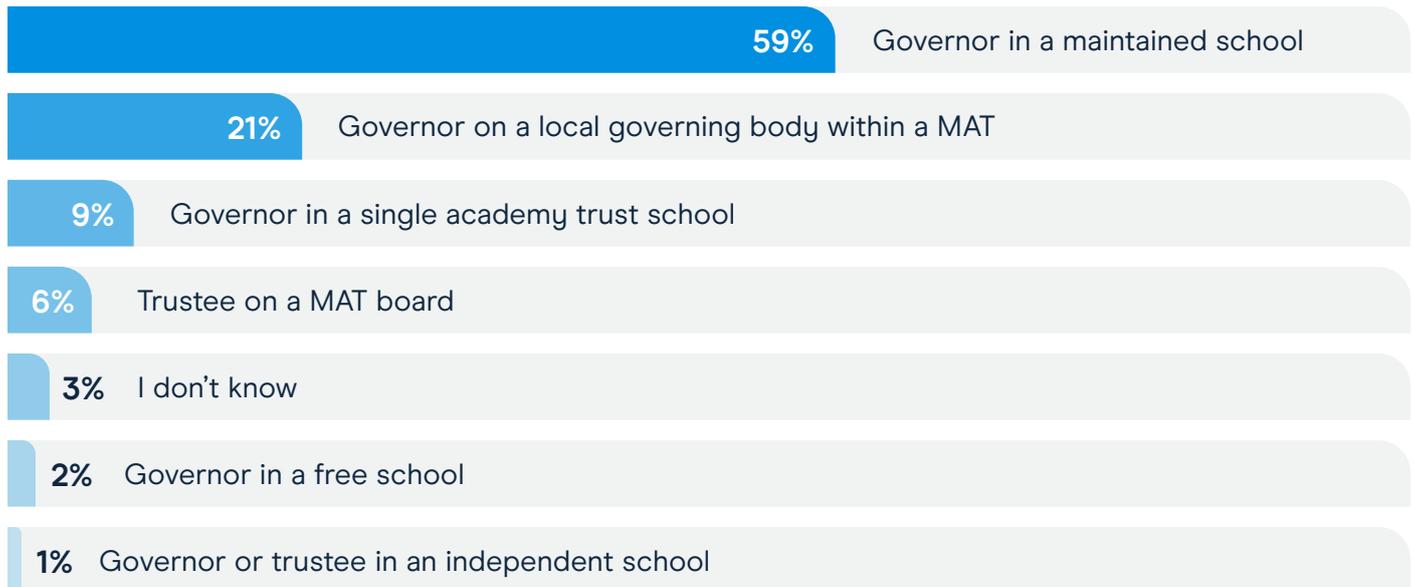
A note on terminology: While we used specific terms such as 'governor' or 'trustee' as applicable in the governor survey, in the public poll we used the term 'governors/trustees' and did not split out 'governors' and 'trustees'. This reflects that those responsible could be school governors, local academy governors in a multi-academy trust (MAT), or academy trustees. For simplicity, where we use the term 'governor' in this report, unless otherwise specified, it is a synonym for all these roles.

Our governor survey sample

While we have not weighted this sample, we believe it to be fairly representative⁷ of both schools and governors generally, with the exception of role, where we see a higher proportion of chairs and vice-chairs in our sample than nationally:

⁷ Data on governors/trustees exported from [Get Information About Schools](#) on 8 March 2022, and analysed by type of school, shows that: 53% were in a maintained school, 41% were governors in academies, including MATs and SATs, and 6% were “neither” (we take this to be ‘academy trustees’)

What kind of governor role do you have?



Graph 1: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

How many years in total have you served as a governor?



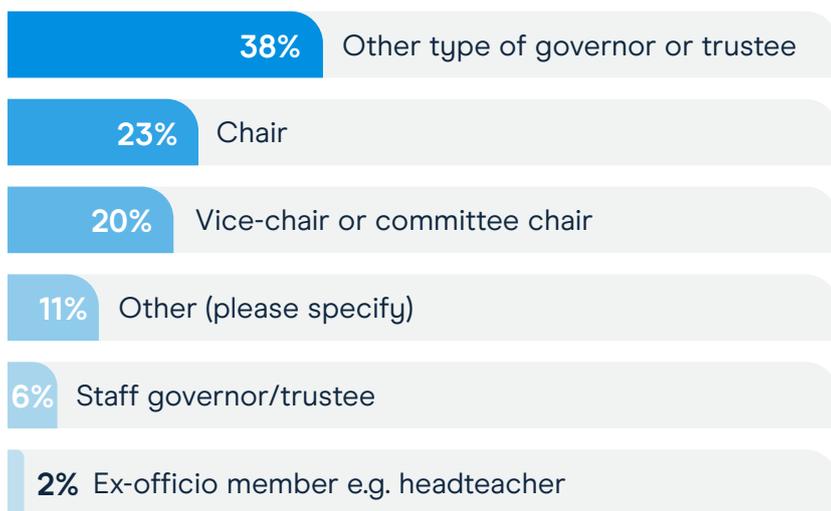
Respondents by length of service:

51% have been a governor for 5 years or more

Nearly 1 in 5 (17%) is new to governance, with less than 1 year in post

Graph 2: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 25 January 2022

What is your current position on your governing board or trust board?



Graph 3: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

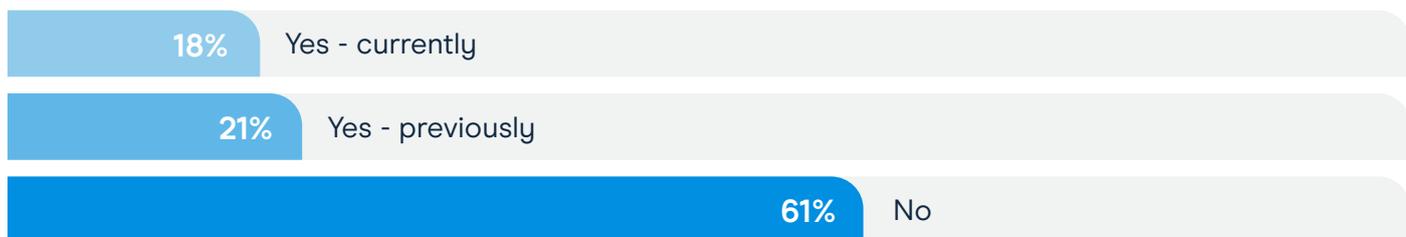
Respondents by role:

43% are in a leadership role (chair, vice-chair or committee chair)

38% are 'regular' governors

The **11%** who picked "other" mainly explained their route into governance and therefore appointment type, as opposed to role. For example, they talked about being a "parent governor" (elected by parent body) rather than being a "safeguarding governor" (their responsibilities on the board)

Are you serving, or have you ever served, as a parent governor?



Graph 4: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

Findings

Visibility and awareness

Finding 1: Most people don't understand the role of school governance

Context

For those people working in and around school governance, the 3 core functions of a governor are laid out by the Department for Education (DfE) in its Governance Handbook⁸. They are:

1. Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
2. Holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the effective and efficient performance management of staff
3. Overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent

In our public poll, we wanted to see what proportion of people understood these functions as they relate to governing boards. We put 3 questions to them, asking, in each case, who, if anyone, they thought was responsible for that function. We allowed respondents to pick all answers that they thought applied from a list – and this list differed according to the function in question (see graphs 5 to 8 for details). In each case, if they chose “the governors/trustees” as their sole answer, or picked it among other options too, we considered this to be correct and show enough understanding.

We also asked a fourth question, related to one of the many additional responsibilities that governors have: who, if anyone, they thought was responsible for monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards (which require schools to provide nutritious and high-quality food).

The final question in this section asked whether they were, or had ever been, a governor, and whether they would consider being one in the future.

● Overall, **only 9% of respondents chose “governors/trustees” across all 4 questions about governors’ areas of responsibility** – suggesting a distinctly low understanding of the role among the public in general

● **24% of respondents picked “governors/trustees” just once across the 4 areas of responsibility.** This suggests that nearly a quarter of respondents had only a limited or incomplete understanding of governors’ role, or were led (using common sense) by the options available to them

In more detail:

● Only **36%** of respondents identified “governors/trustees” as “responsible for **holding school leaders accountable for the educational performance** of a school”. 17% chose the parent teacher association (PTA), which has no role in school accountability at all

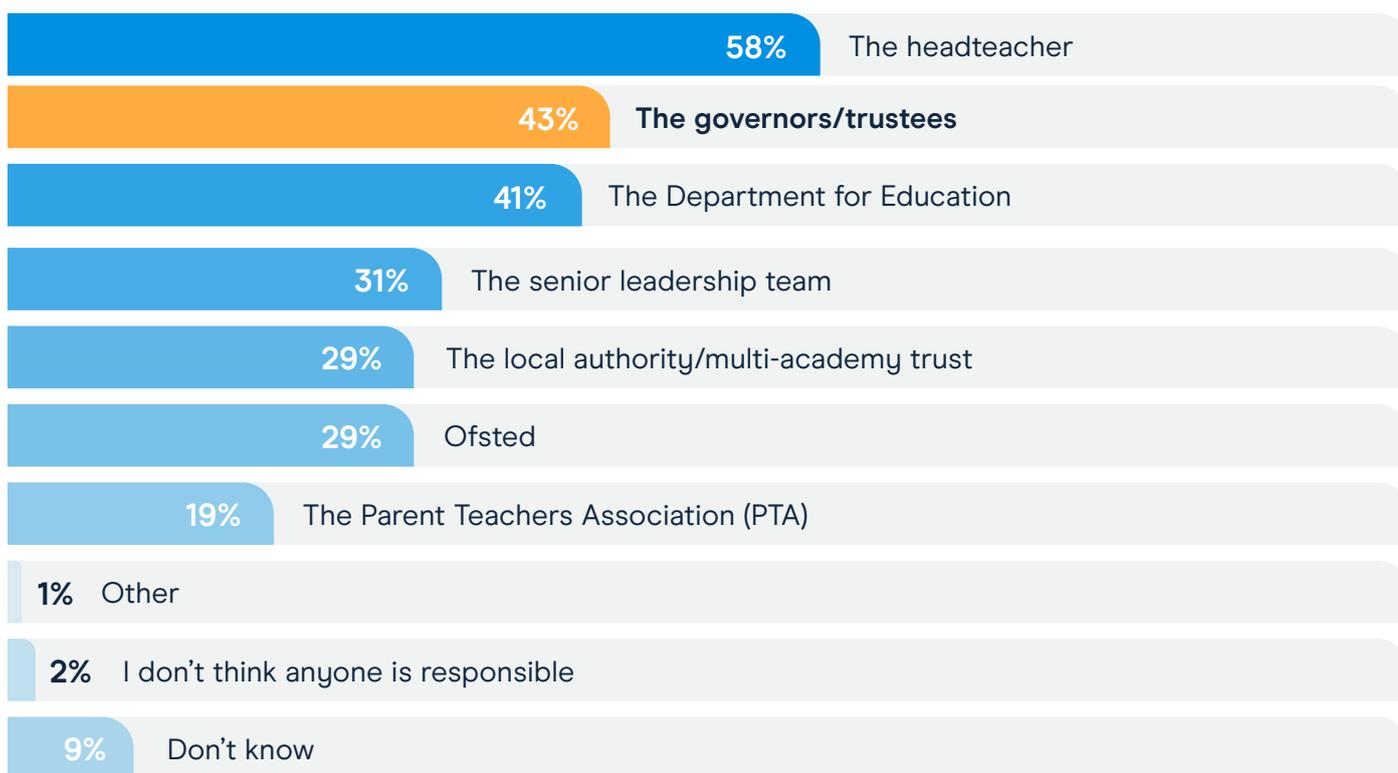
● **43%** identified governors/trustees as “responsible for **ensuring strategic direction** in a school”. (We clarified that, by strategic direction, we meant “ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos”.) This is more positive, but 19% still picked the “PTA” - which has no role in this

● **43%** identified governors/trustees as “responsible for **overseeing the finances** in a school (e.g. financial performance, making sure money is well spent, etc.)” – again, a more positive finding, but sitting alongside 11% who picked the “PTA”

● Only **21%** identified governors/trustees as “responsible for **monitoring that the school dinners meet the School Food Standards**”. Interestingly, a similar percentage picked “midday meals supervisors” (22%) – suggesting a lack of understanding over who is operationally involved and who takes on the monitoring role

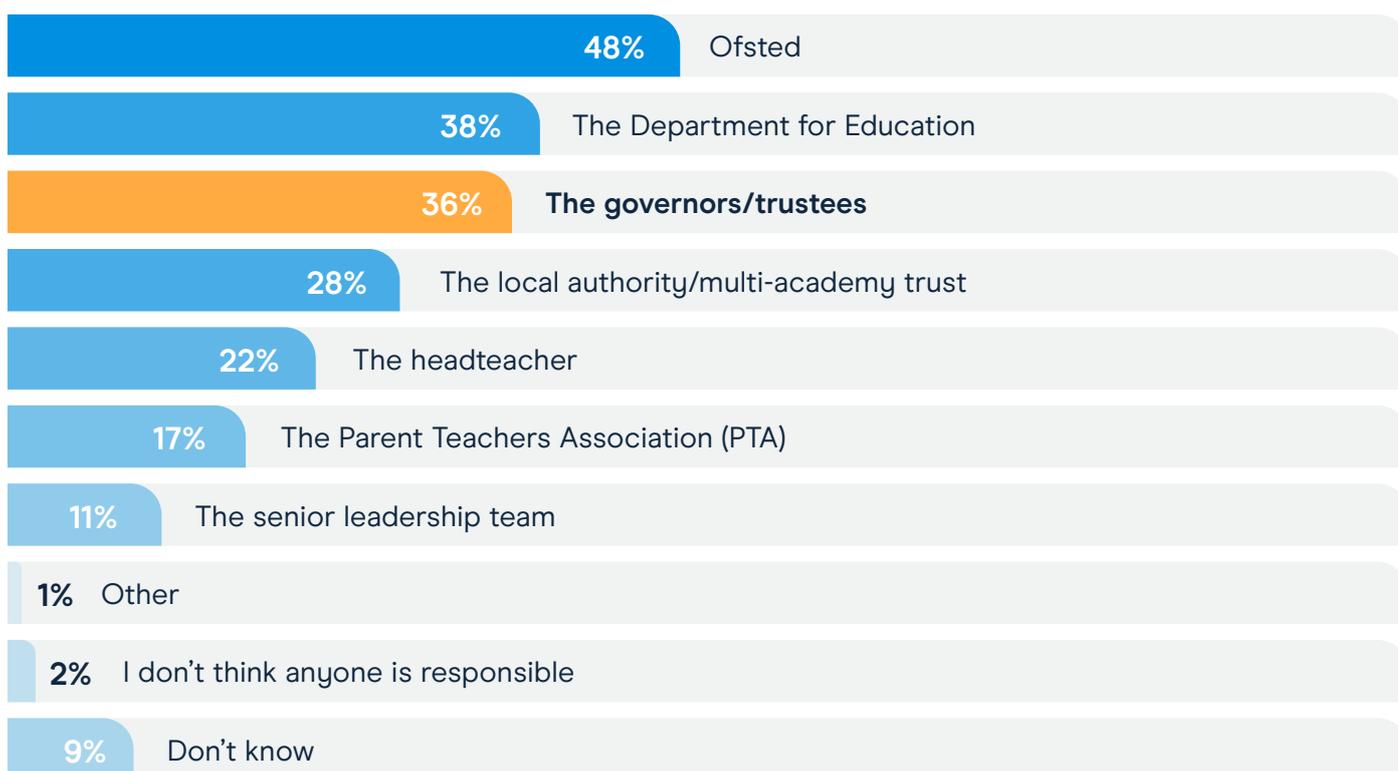
8. GOV.UK – DfE, [Governance handbook](#)

Q1: From the following, who, if anyone, do you think is responsible for ensuring strategic direction in a school? By strategic direction, we mean ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos. Please select all that apply.



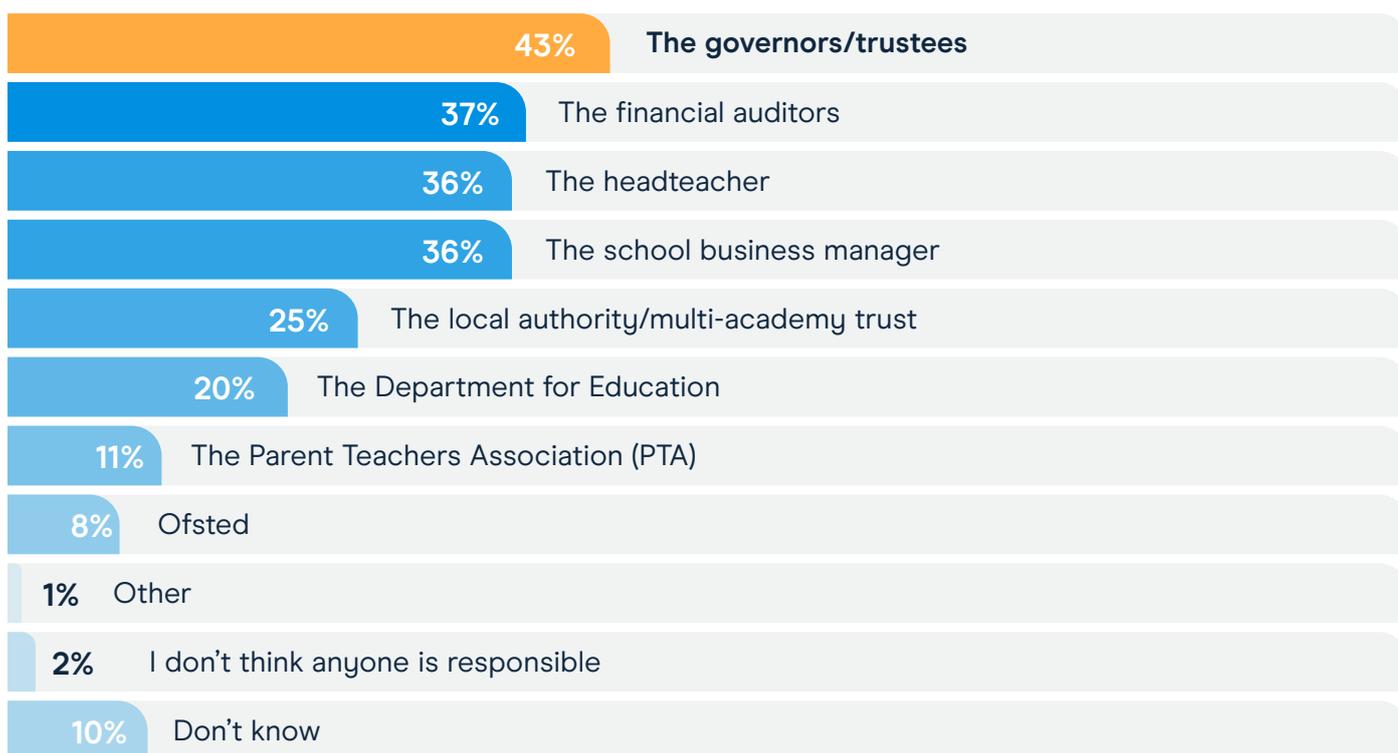
Graph 5: public poll, base = 1,901 respondents aged 16 to 75 in England. Ipsos. Online survey conducted 13 to 14 January 2022

Q2. From the following, who, if anyone, do you think is responsible for holding school leaders accountable for the educational performance of a school? Please select all that apply.



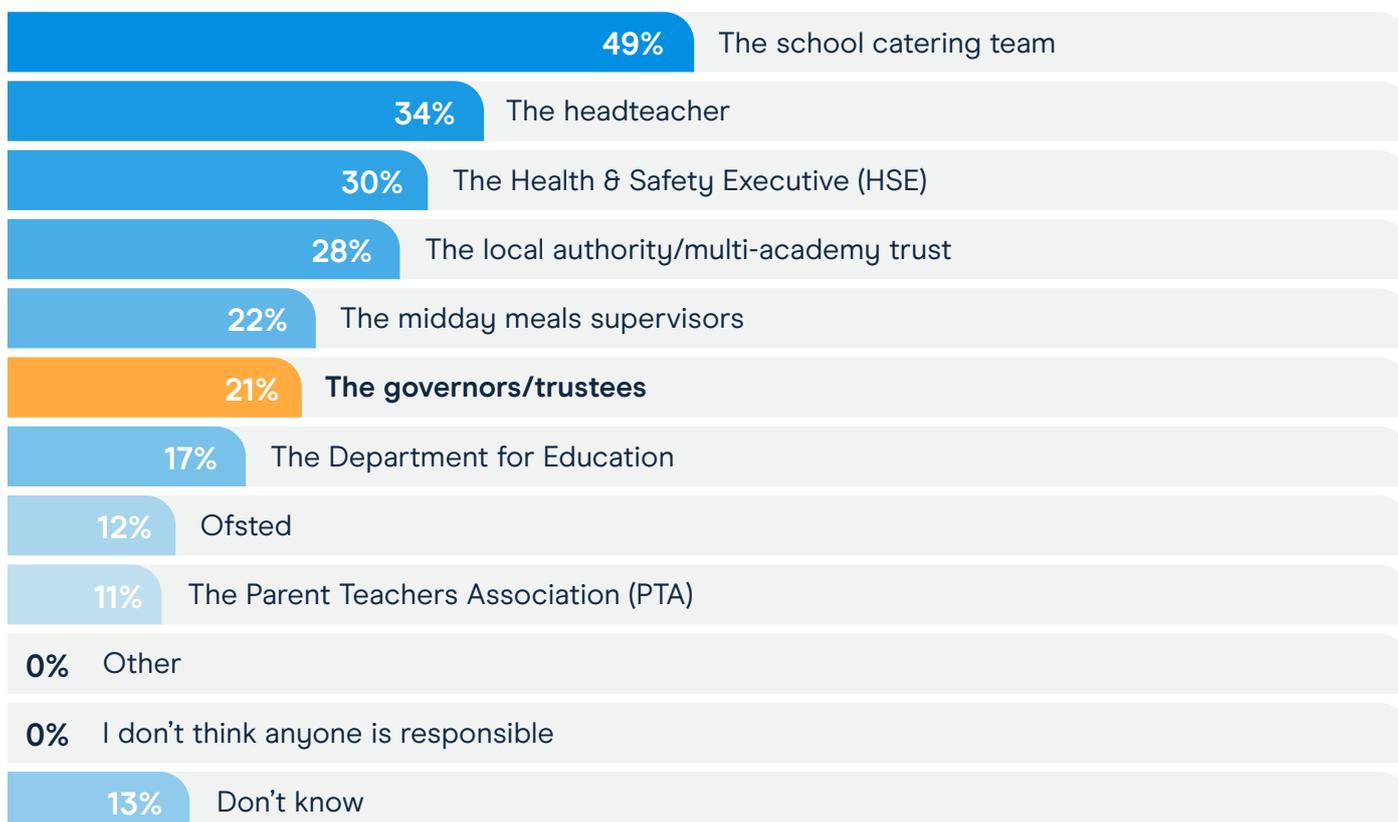
Graph 6: public poll, base = 1,901 respondents aged 16 to 75 in England. Ipsos. Online survey conducted 13 to 14 January 2022

Q3. From the following, who, if anyone, do you think is responsible for overseeing the finances in a school (e.g. financial performance, making sure money is well spent, etc.)? Please select all that apply.



Graph 7: public poll, base = 1,901 respondents aged 16 to 75 in England. Ipsos. Online survey conducted 13 to 14 January 2022

Q4. From the following, who, if anyone, do you think is responsible for monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards (where schools have to provide nutritious and high-quality food)? Please select all that apply.



Graph 8: public poll, base = 1,901 respondents aged 16 to 75 in England. Ipsos. Online survey conducted 13 to 14 January 2022

Finding 2: The majority of governors and trustees surveyed say that the public doesn't understand their role, and believe it to be largely hidden

- In our governor survey, we asked, “How well do you think the general public understands your role?”. A combined total of **82%** of respondents said that the public does not understand their role (**59%** answered “not that well”; **23%** answered “not at all well”)
- We also asked governors to rate how “visible” or “hidden” they thought governance was to the general public. Using a scale of 1 (“hidden”) to 5 (“visible”), governors gave an average rating of just 2, suggesting that they don't believe their role to be very publicly visible at all

I think the role of governors is vital and completely overlooked by society. The hidden value we bring to education is massive. You really don't go into governance for thanks but a bit more value from parents at school, nevermind the public at large, would help retention, in my opinion

Chair of governors in a maintained school

While this only represents governors' perception, it accurately reflects the limited understanding of the role that we found in the public poll. This is problematic for current governors, who, we shall see, then feel less valued. It is also problematic for those who might become governors, who do not then understand the impact and important strategic nature of the role and might be deterred from applying, or not even think to apply.

Finding 3: Governors have typically only seen stories about governance in the press a couple of times

Our governor survey asked respondents how many times they had seen a story about school governance in the mainstream media. Our motivation for asking this was a sense that, more often than not, stories about schools refer only to school leaders (usually, headteachers), teachers or pupils; while governors – a fundamental part of what makes a school successful or not – rarely get featured.

- The largest response, **42%**, came from governors who said they had only seen a mainstream media story about school governance “once or twice”. A further **34%** had “never seen a story on governance”, and **9%** couldn't recall either way
- This lack of reporting (albeit, only perceived or remembered) may well contribute to the public not understanding the role and therefore not seeking out opportunities to become a governor (“you can't be what you can't see”)⁹
- In addition, we heard from some respondents that, on the odd occasion they had seen a story in the media, it tended to be negative

The only time I ever see a governor interviewed or mentioned is in the context of a major problem, failure of judgement or cultural clash. Don't think I've ever seen a positive story/mention of a governing board

Governor in a maintained school

⁹ Quote attributed to Marian Wright Edelman, American children's rights activist

Diversity and representation

Finding 4: Those who understand governance are more likely to be older, white, middle class, more educated and higher earning

In our public poll, we found that the following characteristics all had a significant bearing on how likely you are to know what governors are responsible for across each of our 4 key questions:

Age

The older respondents were, the more likely they were to (rightly) think that governors/trustees were responsible across the questions – except with respect to monitoring compliance with the School Food Standards, where knowledge increased more marginally with age:

- Regarding holding school leaders accountable for educational performance: **25% of 16 to 24** year-olds thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which rose steadily to **43% of 65 to 75 year-olds**
- Regarding strategic direction (ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos): **29% of 16 to 24** year-olds thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which rose steadily to **52% of 65 to 75** year-olds
- Regarding overseeing the finances (e.g. financial performance, making sure the money is well spent, etc.): **27% of 16 to 24** year-olds thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which rose steadily to **56% of 65 to 75** year-olds
- Regarding monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards: **15% of 16 to 24** year-olds thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which rose steadily (but more marginally) to **28% of 65 to 75** year-olds

Ethnicity

White respondents were more likely to think that governors/trustees were responsible across the questions than those from ethnic minorities (excluding white minorities)¹⁰, with the gap less pronounced when it came to understanding who monitors compliance with the School Food Standards:

- Regarding holding school leaders accountable for educational performance: **37%** of white respondents thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **30%** of those from ethnic minorities
- Regarding strategic direction (ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos): **46%** of white respondents thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **30%** of those from ethnic minorities
- Regarding overseeing the finances (e.g. financial performance, making sure the money is well spent, etc.): **45%** of white respondents thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **33%** of those from ethnic minorities
- Regarding monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards: **22%** of white respondents thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **17%** of those from ethnic minorities

¹⁰ Ipsos public poll questions are based on the [Government Statistical Service census ethnic group question](#). When writing about the ethnicity of our respondents, we have used the following government guidance: [GOV.UK, Writing about ethnicity](#)

Social grade¹¹

The higher respondents' social grade, the more likely they were to think that governors/trustees were responsible across the questions (again, with less of a difference in understanding when it came to monitoring compliance with the School Food Standards):

- Regarding holding school leaders accountable for educational performance: **41%** of ABs (commonly recognised as “middle class”) thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which fell steadily to **25%** of DEs
- Regarding strategic direction (ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos): **50%** of ABs thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which fell steadily to **33%** of DEs
- Regarding overseeing the finances (e.g. financial performance, making sure the money is well spent, etc.): **48%** of ABs thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which fell steadily to **33%** of DEs
- Regarding monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards: **24%** of ABs thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which fell (but more marginally) to **19%** of DEs

Education status

The more educated respondents were, the more likely they were to think that governors/trustees were responsible across the questions:

- Regarding holding school leaders accountable for educational performance: **45%** of those educated to degree level or higher thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which dropped steadily to **25%** of those educated to GCSE or equivalent
- Regarding strategic direction (ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos): **50%** of those educated to degree level or higher thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which dropped steadily to **36%** of those educated to GCSE or equivalent
- Regarding overseeing the finances (e.g. financial performance, making sure the money is well spent, etc.): **48%** of those educated to degree level or higher thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which dropped steadily to **37%** of those educated to GCSE or equivalent

- Regarding monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards: **26%** of those educated to degree level or higher thought that governors/trustees were responsible, which dropped steadily to **15%** of those educated to GCSE or equivalent

Earnings

The higher-earning respondents were, the more likely they were to think that governors/trustees were responsible across the questions (except with regard to who monitors compliance with the School Food Standards, where there was not much difference in knowledge by earnings):

- Regarding holding school leaders accountable for educational performance: **46%** of respondents earning **£55,000** or more thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **27%** of those people earning up to **£19,999**
- Regarding strategic direction (ensuring the school is implementing its vision, aims and ethos): **49%** of respondents earning **£55,000** or more thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **37%** of those earning up to **£19,999**
- Regarding overseeing the finances (e.g. financial performance, making sure the money is well spent, etc.): **51%** of respondents earning **£55,000** or more thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **36%** of those earning up to **£19,999**
- Regarding monitoring that school dinners meet the School Food Standards: **22%** of respondents earning **£55,000** or more thought that governors/trustees were responsible, compared to **18%** of those earning up to **£19,999**

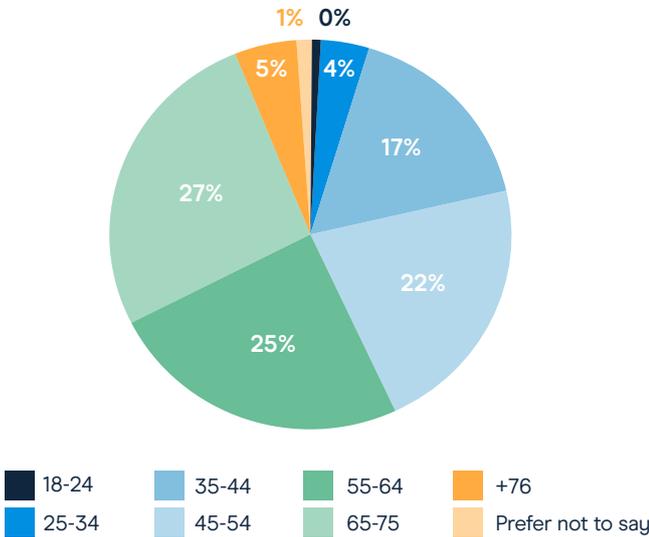
¹¹ Social grades are based on the [National Readership Survey \(NRS\)](#)

classification: AB (higher managerial, administrative and professional/intermediate managerial, administrative and professional); C1 (supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional); C2 (skilled manual workers); DE (semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers/state pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only)

Finding 5: Data from our governor survey suggests that governors, too, are typically older (35+), white and more educated

- More than half (57%) of respondents to this survey – all governors themselves – said they were aged 55 or over. Nearly a third (32%) were 65 or over:

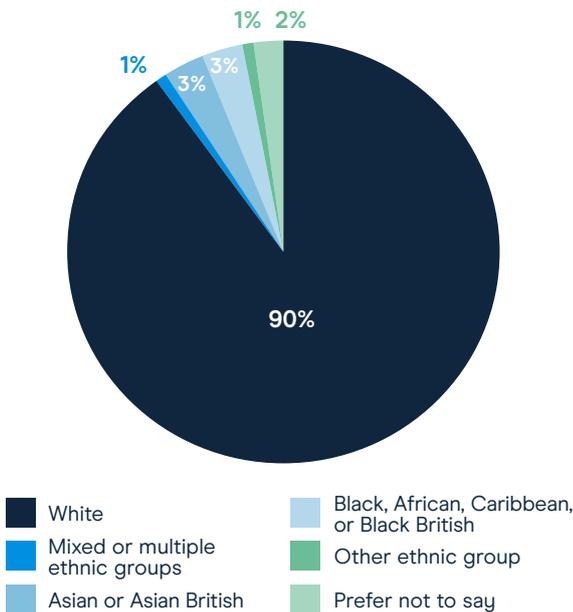
Which age range do you fall into?



Graph 9: governor survey, base = 3,995 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

- 90% described themselves as white¹², with only 8% combined describing themselves as Asian/Asian British, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, mixed/multiple ethnic group/other ethnic group, and 2% preferring not to say

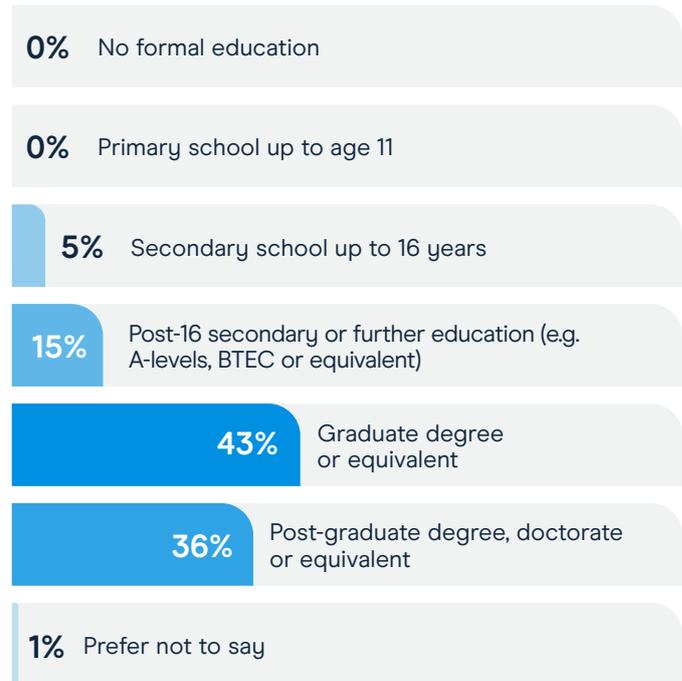
Which option best describes your ethnic group or background?¹³



Graph 10: governor survey, base = 3,995 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

- 79% were educated to at least graduate degree level, despite the fact that there is no requirement to have achieved any particular 'level' educationally (governors only need to be 18 or older). Over a third (36%) were educated to postgraduate, doctorate or equivalent level

What is the highest level of education you have completed? (Choose 1 only)



Graph 11: governor survey, base = 3,995 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022, 3,995

¹² This compares with the latest published census data (2019), where 84.8% of the population in England and Wales identified as "white"; note that our survey did not include respondents from Wales. [ONS, Population estimates by ethnic group and religion, England and Wales: 2019](#)

¹³ We referred respondents to the [ONS categories for ethnicity](#)

There is a clear correlation between the profiles of those people who are more likely to know about governance (as per the public poll findings) and those who are themselves serving governors. This suggests that there is a section of society that isn't fully aware of the role and may be prevented from accessing it due to this lack of awareness.

Finding 6: Governors themselves (largely white, older and more educated) reported that their boards were diverse in terms of gender, but much less so for age, ethnicity, social class and disability

We asked respondents to our governor survey about diversity on their own boards in terms of gender, age, race¹⁴, social class and disability. In each case, we asked them to tell us whether they thought their board was “very diverse”, “somewhat diverse” or “not diverse”, or whether they did not know.

The results reveal how governors perceive diversity on their own boards – although perception, of course, may not fully reflect reality – and jar with the data we reported in the previous section.

This also begs the question ‘How diverse is “diverse enough”?’ Do governors believe that it’s enough to have ‘some’ diversity on their boards? Or does this speak to there being areas of the country or local school communities where, say, diversity in social class or ethnicity is less pronounced generally? In addition, the issue of ‘hidden diversity’ comes through here – with many people not sure how to respond to the question as related to social class or disability, which people don’t always “wear on their sleeve”.

- Gender diversity fared best, with **48%** of respondents saying their board was “very diverse” in terms of gender, and **44%** saying “somewhat diverse”
- Age diversity fared less well, with **23%** thinking their board was “very diverse” and **64%** saying “somewhat diverse”

[Being a governor] requires a lot of time commitment. I am retired and have more time available but you need diversity on governing boards, not just older people.

Chair of a local governing board in a MAT

- Racial diversity scored much less well, with only **11%** of respondents describing their board as “very diverse” in this sense and the majority, **55%**, saying it was not racially diverse

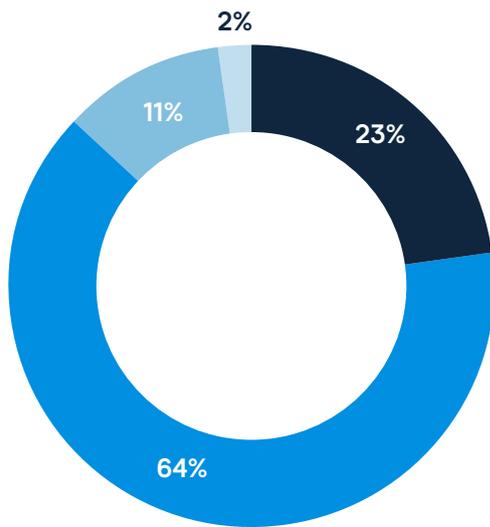
I feel the board I work with is very prejudiced and biased. There is very little diversity and they take no notice at all of any opinion that is different.

Governor in a maintained school

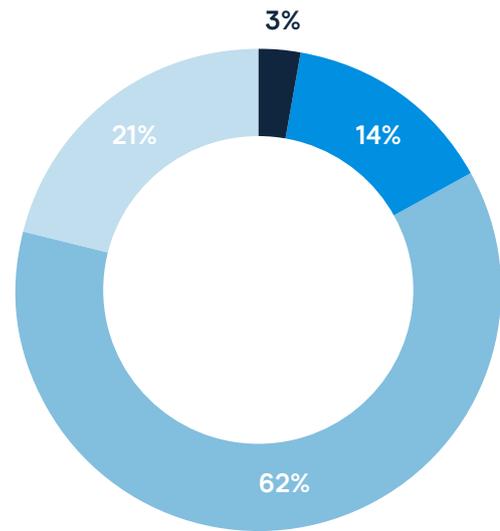
- In terms of social class, an even smaller proportion – **9%** – said their board is “very diverse”, although a smaller proportion described their board as “not diverse” for social class (**28%**) than “not diverse” for race (**55%**)
- Disability fares worst among the boards represented by our survey respondents. **62%** described their board as “not diverse” in terms of disability, and only **3%** said it was “very diverse”
- With this question, around 1 in 5 in each case answered that they did not know about the diversity of their boards regarding social class and disability, the perhaps more hidden characteristics of those we asked about. **18%** did not know about social class, and **21%** did not know about disability

¹⁴ We used the term “race” in the governor survey; in the public poll we used “ethnicity”

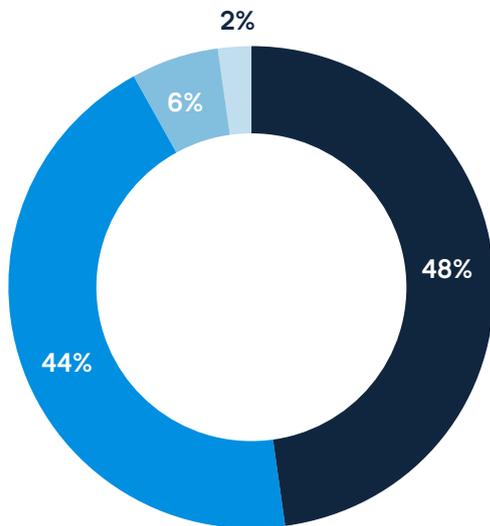
How diverse would you say your board is in the following areas?



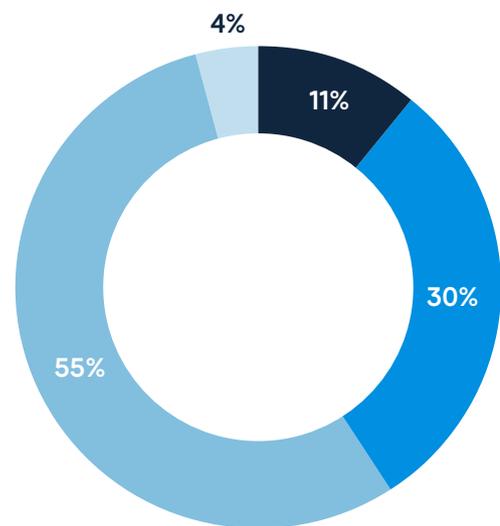
Age



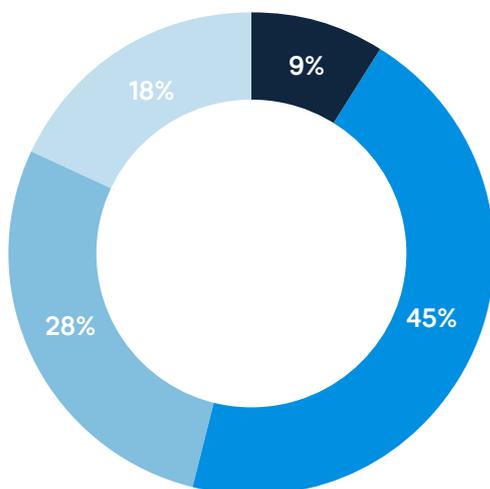
Disability



Gender



Race



Social class



• In addition, among just the respondents who identified as white, **13%** thought that their stakeholder communities were “extremely well reflected” on their boards and **44%** said they were “well reflected”. Again, this is perception and may not reflect fact, but given what we know about the characteristics of our sample, it points to a narrow interpretation of what being a diverse and representative board means

Why is this important?

The DfE’s Governance handbook¹⁵ stipulates:

- “Boards should welcome and thrive on having a sufficiently diverse range of individuals, viewpoints and/or experiences, since open debate leads to good decisions in the interests of the whole school/trust community”
- “Boards must ensure they understand the full diversity of the cultural and religious context of the school and the community it serves. Having some people on the board who have no close ties with the school, or who come from outside the faith or ethnic group of the majority of pupils, can help ensure that the board has sufficient internal challenge to the decisions it makes and how it carries out its strategic functions”
- “It is important that boards reflect the diversity of the school/trust communities that they serve. Consideration should be given to all the protected characteristics. Diverse boards promote inclusive school environments and provide diverse role models for staff and young people”

15. [GOV.UK](#) – DfE, *Governance handbook and competency framework*

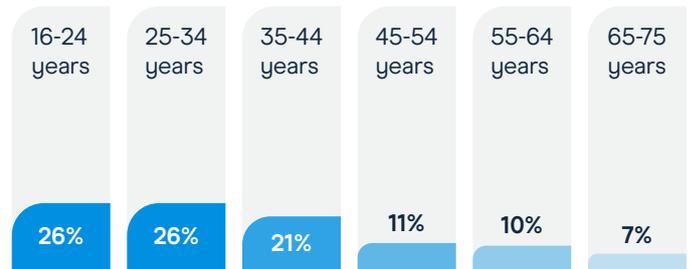
The missing pool of talent

Finding 7: Younger people and those from most ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be interested in the role, but need to know more about it

Our public poll asked a fifth and final question, alongside the questions about knowledge of the role of governance. This was about respondents' level of experience and interest in governance – had they been a governor, and would they be interested in the role in the future? The options available to them were:

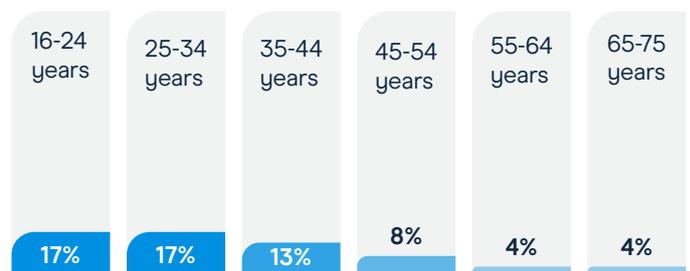
- I have never been a school governor and am unlikely to consider it for the future
 - I have never been a school governor, but I might consider it if I knew more about it
 - I have never been a school governor, but would consider it for the future
 - I have been a school governor in the past and would not consider doing it again
 - I have been a school governor in the past and would consider doing it again
 - I am currently a school governor
 - Don't know
 - Prefer not to say
- Of those who had not been a governor, the younger they were (particularly the **under-35s, with 26% of 16 to 34 year-olds**), the more likely they were to say that they would consider it in the future or that they might consider it if they knew more about it:

Breakdown of respondents, by age, who answered “I have never been a school governor, but I might consider it if I knew more about it”



Graph 13: “I have never been a school governor, but I might consider it if I knew more about it”, public poll, base = 322 respondents aged 16 to 75 in England. Ipsos. Online survey conducted 13 to 14 January 2022

Breakdown of respondents, by age, who answered “I have never been a school governor, but would consider it for the future”



Graph 14: “I have never been a school governor, but would consider it for the future”, public poll, base = 213 respondents aged 16 to 75 in England. Ipsos. Online survey conducted 13 to 14 January 2022

• These findings beg the question: is the lack of younger governors on boards today mainly down to an awareness issue for those under 35? And, given their higher propensity to show an interest in governance, how do we reach them to increase that awareness?

• The data also shows that, among those who had not been a governor, those who identified as Asian/Asian British, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, mixed/multiple ethnic group/other ethnic group, were more likely to say they might consider the role if they knew more about it, or would consider it in the future, than respondents who identified as white. (Among those who hadn't been a governor, just **29%** of white respondents would consider the role, compared to **51%** of Asian/Asian British respondents, **46%** of Black/African/Caribbean/Black British respondents, and **40%** of mixed/multiple ethnic group respondents)

• This throws up positive opportunities to improve both age and ethnic diversity on boards, if we can do more to raise awareness and build on the higher propensity among younger people and those from ethnic minorities (excluding white minorities) to consider governance

Recruitment, channels into governance and barriers

Finding 8: Most governors and trustees in our survey arrived in the role through a “closed-shop” route – often, having worked in the school sector, as parents of school-age children, or having links to the sector, such as through personal relationships

In our governor survey, we asked, “What was your knowledge of the school sector before taking on your first governance role?”, to better understand routes into governance and whether prior knowledge of the sector is a factor. The findings demonstrate a “closed-shop” route into the role, and potentially an over-representation on governing boards of people with (often strong) pre-existing links to the sector:

- Only **9%** of respondents said they had no knowledge of the school sector at all when they became a governor
- **43%** had some professional knowledge, having worked in the sector
- The same proportion, **43%**, had some knowledge from being a parent or carer of school-age children
- **20%** had some knowledge through personal relationships with people working in the sector

We have a very un-diverse board of mainly retired teachers

Governor in a maintained school

I have been both a head and an assistant head in secondary and also worked in special schools

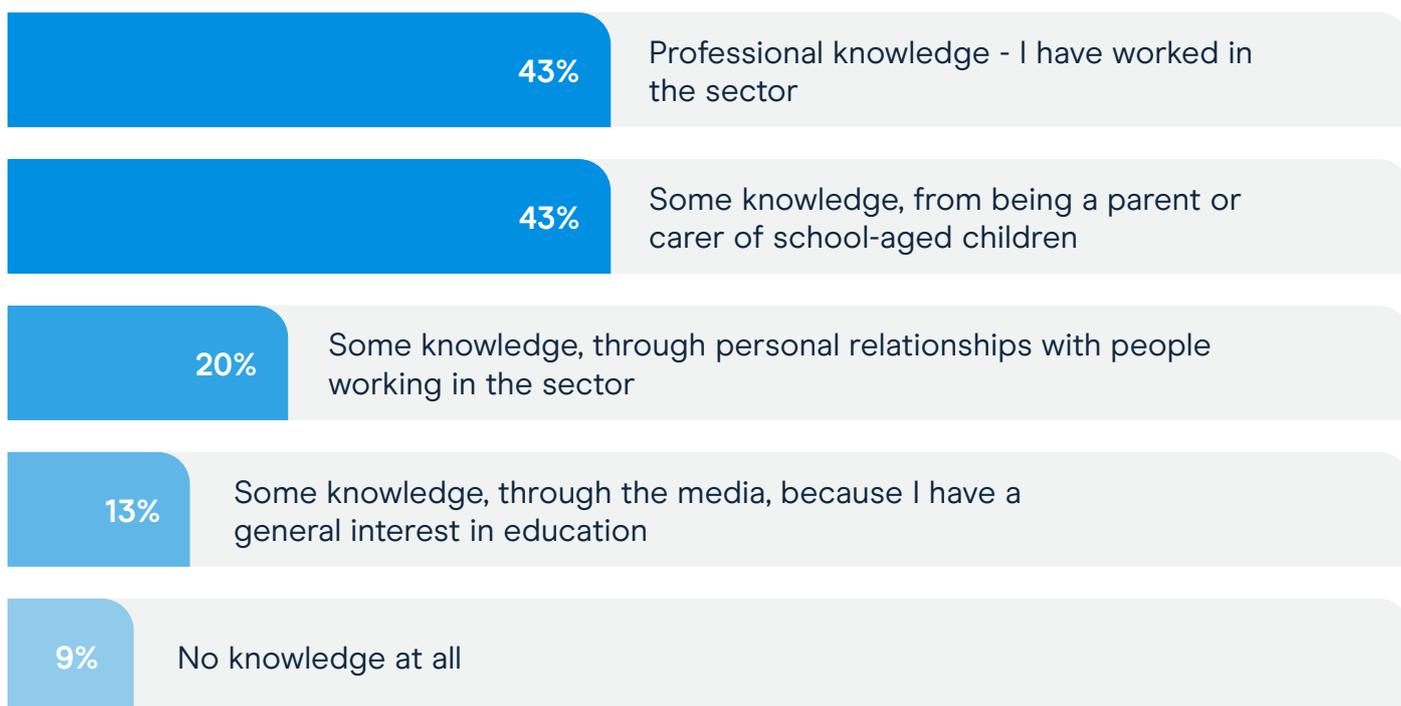
Vice-chair of governors in a maintained school

In addition, as we’ve already covered, **39%** said they were, or had been, a parent governor. Anecdotally, we know that many parent governors, when they finish their (usually) 4-year term, go on to be co-opted into a different role on the same board, thus populating the board with parents.

Although I was an elected parent governor for 5 years, once my children left to go to secondary school, the board wanted to keep me on for my skills and experience, so I was given a new role as a local authority governor

Vice-chair of governors in a maintained primary school

What was your knowledge of the school sector before taking on your first school governance role? Select all that apply



Graph 15: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

- We also asked more specifically about barriers to being a governor. While **38%** of all respondents said they had faced “no barriers”, this was true for only **32%** of those who previously answered that they came into governance with “no previous knowledge”. Among this group, a higher proportion reported facing the barriers “lack of experience of the English education system” (**23%** vs **9%** of all respondents), “lack of experience on a board” (**23%** vs **18%** overall), and “capacity due to other commitments” (**27%** vs **24%** overall)

- These broken-down findings highlight the increased difficulties involved in being a governor for those who are not ‘linked’ to the sector, and reinforces the need for us to think about how we better support these governors, especially when they are first getting to grips with the role

Value, impact and appetite

Finding 9: The majority of governors and trustees surveyed feel the difference they make isn't noticed or valued by the public

Our governor survey asked how respondents felt about the public perception and value placed on the difference they make in their role:

- **74%** said they don't think the difference they make is noticed by the general public. Only **8%** thought it was noticed
- Only around **1 in 10 (12%)** said they feel that the difference they make is valued by the public. **56%** did not feel it was valued, and nearly **a third (32%)** said they didn't know
- These findings tie into our theme around "closed-shop" routes, as well as media representation of governance – the public cannot notice or value something that they don't see or hear about

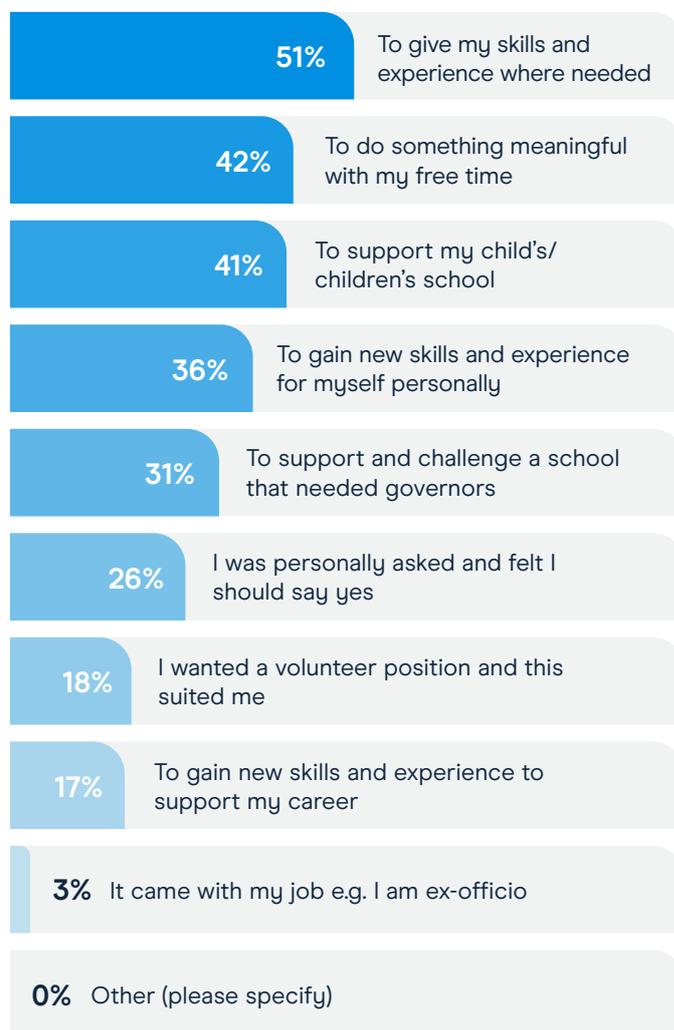
Finding 10: Despite this, the majority of those asked would recommend being a governor because "you can make a difference"

In our governor survey, we also asked respondents why they decided to become a governor, whether they'd recommend the role to other people and the reasons for this, and whether they planned to finish their term of office:

- When indicating why they decided to become a governor, respondents' 3 most commonly-selected reasons were all about "giving back"
 - **51%** said "to give my skills and experience where needed"
 - **42%** said "to do something meaningful with my free time"

- **41%** said "to support my child's/children's school"
- In addition, over a third (**36%**) wanted "to gain new skills and experience for myself personally" (as opposed to supporting their career) via the role:

Why did you first decide to become a governor? Select all that apply

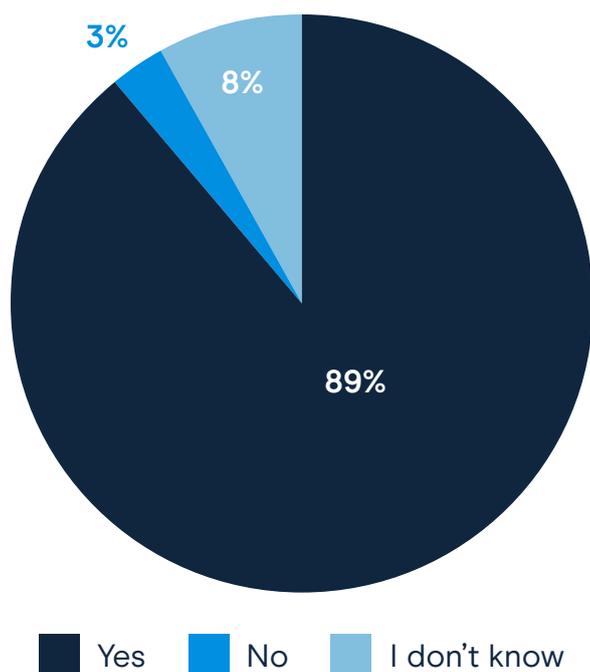


Graph 16: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

Alongside this, we also heard that, generally speaking, respondents feel like they understand the school sector. When asked to rate their knowledge of schools now, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), the biggest response came from the 44% who chose 4, and a combined total of 69% chose 4 or 5.

- Nearly 9 in 10 (89%) of those surveyed would recommend being a governor to other people
- Of those who would recommend the role, the most popular reasons were that “you can make a difference” (96%), “you can develop your skills” (68%) and “it’s enjoyable” (54%). That 96% (of the 89% who would recommend it) who feel they are “making a difference” is a huge testament to the impact governors themselves feel they’re able to have

Would you recommend being a governor to other people?



Graph 17: governor survey, base = 4,006 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

I decided to become a governor because, following my own experience of the school system, I didn't want to sit back and be a bystander but to have an insight, and understand a system that restricted me, to be involved, to persevere towards change, to challenge, to succeed

Vice-chair of governors in a maintained school

I decided to become a governor because I left school at 15, and my school had no aspirations for me. I've just retired as a senior pathology research fellow. The current pupils at the school I govern will not have the same deal as me

Chair of governors in a maintained school

Among the 3% (125 respondents) who would not recommend being a governor, the main reason given was that “it's too much work” (58%)

Unrealistic expectations of amateurs. Too much responsibility without tools to do the job properly

Vice-chair of governors in a maintained school

• We also received more than 300 comments from those who did not know whether they would recommend the role. Among these, there were some common themes:

- **36%** mentioned the time commitment being too much
- **20%** said they were too new to the role to advise
- **17%** said it's too much responsibility
- **16%** commented that it would depend on the person – the role is not for everyone

“It would depend on how much time the other person had available. It involves a massive amount of paperwork, reading and training

Local governor in a MAT

• Encouragingly, **92%** said they plan to finish their term of office, and nearly half (**46%**) plan to do another role or term when their current term finishes

• Among the **17%** who don't plan to do another role or term, nearly half (**46%**) are over 65, and we noted many comments from them about about age being a barrier to subsequent terms

“I am now 80 years of age and need a rest!

Governor in a maintained school

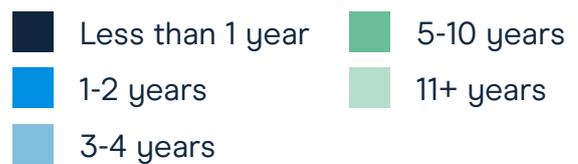
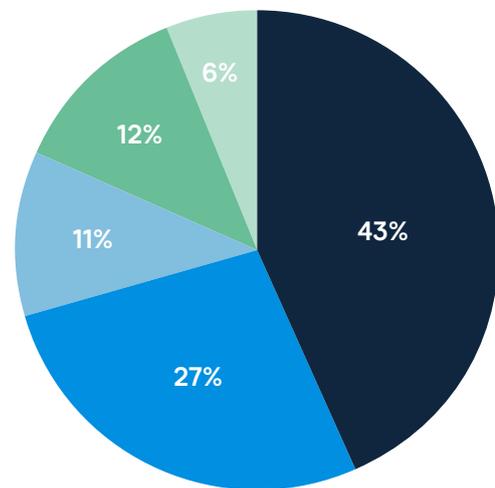
“I feel that it's time to allow space for younger people to become governors

Chair of governors in a maintained school

• Adding to the positive findings, over three-quarters (**78%**) of governor respondents said they feel they have had a positive impact on their school or trust as a governor, which validates why they went into the role in the first place

• **16%** however, did not not know whether they had made a positive impact, and this rises to **34%** among the 1,338 who said they have been governing for less than 2 years. Further analysis shows that **43%** of those who had been in the role for less than a year felt they had not made an impact, compared to only **6%** of those with 11 or more years' experience. This all supports the widely shared consensus within the sector that governors – who we must also remember are volunteers – need time, training and support to be effective, let alone to feel that they are effective

Split of respondents, by length of service, who answered “no” in response to the question “Do you feel you have personally had a positive impact on your school or trust through your role as a governor?”



Graph 18: governor survey, base = 237 respondents, online survey conducted 13 to 24 January 2022

Recommendations

There is a missing pool of talent on governing boards – people whose fresh perspectives and breadth of skills and knowledge from outside the school sector would help schools to thrive.

As we have discovered, they may not be aware of the opportunity but are more likely to be keen to explore it on the basis of knowing more, either now or in the future. There are real gains to be had in terms of skills and board-level experience, career development, feeling part of the local community and the associated mental health benefits of having a meaningful impact.

Our challenge to all of us within the sector, and importantly to those outside the sector, is to make sure that everyone in society knows about school governance, not just the type of person who is currently more likely to be in the role.

To this end, within The Key group, we plan to do the following:

- **GovernorHub** commits to collecting and tracking data on the diversity of boards in 2022 - including information on age, disability, education level, ethnicity, gender and religion. Once we have a statistically significant sample, we will publish, through a publicly available tool, data that will allow comparisons between local authorities and different areas of the country
- **The Key for School Governors** has published a freely-available article to support boards on this issue: [“Recruit missing talent: resources to help you tackle diversity on your board”](#)

In addition, we make the recommendations below

• **The media:** to ensure that governance is fully and properly represented in stories relating to education and schools, not just stories that relate to governance specifically. This recommendation applies to all those in editorial roles across the media – national, local and trade. By under-representing the role, the media contributes to some significant challenges for school boards in terms of recruitment and diversity

• **The government:** The government: to make sure that there is more of a focus on the input of governors and trustees. This applies to all those in government with a platform to speak or write about schools – from the education secretary to individual MPs. This is especially important when dealing with the general public. In addition, we strongly urge the Department for Education to run a specific awareness campaign, so that it is not left to “the governance sector” and schools to solve the wider societal challenges around governor recruitment and diversity.

• **Schools, trusts and their boards:** to do more to find younger and more diverse candidates. We know this isn't easy. The NGA's report on [increasing participation in school and trust governance](#) takes an in-depth look at this. We also list some questions to consider and possible actions below:

• **Do you carry out “conscious recruitment”?** You might start by using [this free tool from GovernorHub](#) to audit the diversity of your school community, and then compare that to the make-up of your own board

• **Do you think hard about how you recruit onto your board? Do you rely too much on existing networks to reach new governors?** Your network may not stretch to those who are currently not sitting on school boards but who would bring valuable skills and input

• **Do you use professional agencies to help you recruit, such as the charities [Governors for Schools](#) or [Inspiring Governance](#)?** These charities have a strong track record of providing more diverse candidates, helping to overcome the “echo chamber” of word of mouth and connections

• **Have you considered reaching out to organisations like the [National Black Governors Network](#) or [Transforming Students](#) to find out about diversifying your board by race and/or age?** These organisations exist to help those who aren't traditionally represented on boards to find their

place at the table, and they also guide boards on how to diversify their membership

• **Are you making the next generation aware?** Consider what you can do to introduce your own pupils to governance – remembering that governors can be aged 18+. For example, this might be linked to your spiritual, moral, social and cultural curriculum, or could involve pupils from the school council meeting governors or special assemblies on governance and the democratic process

We should acknowledge the important work in this area that's already been done by many organisations in the governance sector. In particular, the National Governance Association (NGA) has published and promoted [Everyone on board](#) (2018 onwards) and a state of the nation report, [Increasing participation in school and trust governance](#) (2021).

The figures in the 2021 NGA report differ slightly to our findings on ethnicity, which may indicate some progress is being made on this particular issue although clearly nowhere near enough.

The NGA reported that 93% of respondents to their 2021 survey are white, 1% are from mixed or multiple ethnic groups, 3% are Asian, 1% are Black with the remainder other or 'rather not say'. In our survey, 90% described themselves as white, with 8% combined describing themselves as Asian/Asian British, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, mixed/multiple ethnic group/other ethnic group, and 2% preferring not to say.

Elsewhere, those in governor recruitment, including [Governors for Schools](#) and [Inspiring Governance](#), have made good progress in trying to find and speak to people who are 'younger' (up to age 40) and/or from a broader range of backgrounds.

We strongly believe that there are important roles for those both inside and outside governance to play in tackling the issues highlighted throughout this report, in order to bring about greater “diversity of thought” in England's schools and trusts.

It's important that we still welcome volunteers from all backgrounds, but to ensure true 'diversity of thought' on boards, it's time to focus more on those whose voices have traditionally not been heard

Rochelle Clarke, Operations Manager and Training Manager, Governor Services, Tower Hamlets Council

Working with a charity like Governors for Schools means boards can access a matching service to find a more diverse set of people than might be possible by just relying on local word-of-mouth connections

Hannah Stolton, CEO, Governors for Schools

School governors can come from all walks of life. While it can help to have an educational background, the most important trait is a commitment to the role and willingness to learn. On my board, we are open minded to exploring various channels for recruiting governors, which is the reason behind our diverse board. The board has only gotten stronger as a result

Nisadha Bandara, Chair of Governors at Webster Primary School, Manchester

“ We welcome change in others, but we don’t want to change ourselves. But this is human nature. It’s not an indication of being bad or good – it’s not an indictment. It simply IS. We don’t really want it to happen, but that’s the reason we can’t stop talking about it

Oludolapo Ogunbawo, Consultant, Ascot Education Services and The Teaching Network Foundation

“ The National Governance Association welcomes the report’s confirmation of the challenges we have known for many years; change has been frustratingly slow and every effort to make the work of school and trust governing boards more visible plays a part in encouraging action. Without the participation of more people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and young people, governing boards are missing out on talent, passion and the range of perspectives needed for good governance. The paths to school governance are too narrow: they need to be widened, and together we can achieve this. That needs to include the Government: since our Increasing Participation report last June, NGA has been calling on the Department for Education to fund a nationwide advertising campaign to spread the word about this important role for ensuring pupils receive the very best education possible. By adding to the weight of evidence, I hope this report will help make this crucial next step happen.

Emma Knights, Chief Executive of the National Governance Association

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- **Alex Robinson**, former National Leader of Governance, Director of VNET Education CIC and one of the founders of GovernorHub
- **Hannah Stolton**, CEO, Governors for Schools
- **Sharon Warmington**, CEO, National Black Governors Network (NBGN) and Co-Founder and Director of National Association of School and College Clerks (NASCC)

About us

GovernorHub and The Key for School Governors are the leading providers of governance solutions in England. Together, we support great governance – helping more than 100,000 governors, trustees and clerks focus on what matters: making a difference to children and young people in their schools.

We help boards to work better, develop their skills and evidence their efforts, all in one place. Our community of school and trust boards has grown to more than 11,000.

We are deeply committed to supporting governors and trustees, who are first and foremost volunteers, to support leaders and drive school improvement. We believe that, with the right tools and support, all boards can have a meaningful impact.

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