

Being Strategic

Developing a strategy to deliver your vision

A guide for governing boards and
headteachers in single schools

June 2023



Definition of terms

Academy committee

The local tier of governance in a MAT, sometimes referred to as local governing body

Culture

The way things are done

DfE

Department for Education

Ethos

The characteristic spirit of a community as manifested in attitudes and aspirations

Ethos

The characteristic spirit of a community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations

Governing board

The accountable body for the school, a federation of schools, an academy or a single academy trust

Headteacher

Responsible for the overall management of a school, a federation of schools or an academy

LA

The local authority

MAT

Multi academy trust

Mission

Declaration of core purpose

Operational

Day-to-day management and delivery of the strategy

Regional Directors

Act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education. Their main responsibilities include addressing underperformance in schools and decisions on the creation, consolidation and growth of MATs

SAT

Single academy trust

Scheme of delegation

The document that explains the governance structure of the MAT, who carries out which governance function and makes decisions

Stakeholders

Interested individuals and groups who are crucial to the success of a school.

Strategy

Sets out the priorities needed if the school is to achieve its vision

Values

Principles that guide actions and behaviours

Vision

Describes what the school wants to achieve



Foreword

Welcome to this guide to being strategic, for those governing and leading a single school, single academy trust or federation.

This guide is about ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction. It encourages collaboration and engagement between governing boards and headteachers to develop a strategy that reflects your values, your ethos, and what are you trying to achieve for your pupils.

Previous versions of this guide have applied to all types of school. However, this version concentrates on developing a strategy for a single school, single academy trust or federation. The guide can also be used by those leading and governing in schools in a MAT following the remit set by their trust board as set out in the scheme of delegation.

For some, strategy development will involve discussion about the future schools' system and the government's vision for every school to part of a strong MAT. Boards should consider carefully whether the government's vision aligns with theirs and if it does, what [taking the next step](#) towards being part of a MAT might look like.

Whatever your context we hope that you will find Being Strategic a useful guide to strategy development. Please visit www.nga.org.uk/contact-us to share your feedback.

[A separate version of Being Strategic is available for trust boards and CEOs in a MAT](#)



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Introduction

Strategy is a key aspect of governance.

Governing boards work as a team to:

1. ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
2. hold executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils and the performance management of staff
3. oversee the financial performance of the school and make sure its money is well spent
4. ensure the voices of stakeholders are heard

When compared with other areas of responsibility, there is relatively little information that supports governing boards to provide strategic direction. This guide provides a framework that boards and headteachers can use to develop, monitor and communicate a strategy within an annual cycle.

When the school is part of a MAT, we advocate the academy committee (local tier of governance) being involved in strategy development both at school and MAT level, working closely with the trust board at the same time as respecting the parameters set by the scheme of delegation.

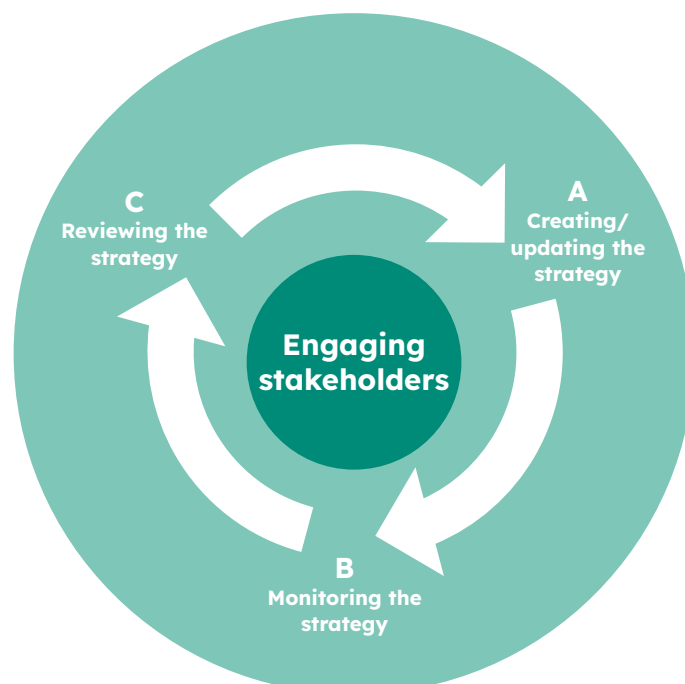
NGA champions local governance in MATs because it provides:

- informed strategic thinking and decision-making
- a positive contribution to the checks and balances of MAT governance
- more diverse views adding to the richness of discussion and challenge
- an understanding of the MAT's role, structure and how individual schools fit within it
- more active engagement between the school and its wider community
- a local focus on accountability, a local connection to the MAT

These areas are explored in greater depth in the research report [Local governance here and now](#), published by NGA in May 2023.

NGA has also published guidance relating to schemes of delegation to help trust boards decide the best local governance structure.

The continuing strategic cycle



Who develops the strategy?

Joint [guidance](#) published by NGA, NAHT and ASCL, explains how the governing board and headteacher have a shared responsibility for developing a strategy that reflects the values of their school. This means working together to:

- articulate the vision
- identify priorities for achieving the vision
- agree a strategy that aligns with available resources
- monitor progress within an annual cycle

A template strategy document is included as an appendix to this guide.

[The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education](#) provides the principles to support ethical decision-making and challenge unethical behaviour. Governing boards should also have a code of conduct and adhere to the Nolan principles of public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

At schools which are part of a MAT, the headteacher and academy committee should also be working with the trust board, CEO and MAT executive team to align the strategy for the school with the strategy for the MAT.

Implementation

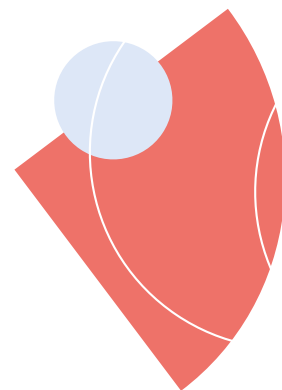
The headteacher, working with their senior leadership team, is expected to implement the strategy through their operational planning and day-to-day management. Effective monitoring by the governing board will provide assurance that:

- plans align with the strategy
- ownership and responsibility are clearly defined
- implementation is supported
- implementation is linked to performance management

Away days

It may be useful to hold an annual 'away day' for the governing board and leadership team to review and develop the strategy and gain a consistent view of strengths and areas for development.

Some MATs hold trust-wide away days which brings those leading and governing schools across the MAT together and creates a sense of belonging.



Start with values and vision

The values the school lives by should influence the vision for its future.

There is no need to set values or write a new vision every year. However, it is important to review, reaffirm and make changes where necessary.

Some boards appoint a working group of governors and members of the leadership team to review values and vision and consider the views of stakeholders. For schools in a MAT, the task of reviewing their values will be influenced and sometimes co-ordinated by the trust board and executive team.

Values

The governing board should foster a common set of values and an ethos that is reflected in the policies and practices of the school. When the values are clear and clearly communicated, they are more likely to become embedded in daily interactions and flourish within a school's unique character.

Whilst approaches may differ, it is important that every board and leader has clarity when it comes to what their values mean and how they should be implemented.

Questions to prompt discussion about values

1. What values should the school be known for and live by?
2. Why are these values important – where do they derive from?
3. How do the values resonate throughout the school and with parents and communities – what evidence is there?
4. Are policies, decisions and actions consistent with values – what evidence is there?

The vision

Every successful organisation has a clear vision; therefore, the vision needs to be taken seriously as it is far more than just a statement for the website.

Whereas in broad terms a mission statement defines the reason for existing, the vision conveys, in a few sentences, the school's ambition for the future. The vision should be a point of reference for discussing the curriculum and the educational experience pupils receive.

Schools with a religious character

In schools with a religious character, 'mission' and 'vision' may have different, specific meanings depending on their context. We recommend that those governing and leading schools with a religious character seek the advice of the religious body to support the development of their vision and also refer to relevant underpinning documents, such as those included in the list of further resources on page 17.

Questions to prompt discussion about the vision

1. Do the values and vision align?
2. Is the vision compelling enough to drive continuous improvement?
3. Does the vision convey the ambition for the school?
4. Does the vision convey what success means in the context of the school?
5. Does the vision align with the available resources?
6. Does the vision resonate with stakeholders – what evidence is there?
7. How are stakeholders involved in shaping the vision?

Use self-evaluation and feedback

Self-evaluation

Conducting SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and PESTLE (Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental) analyses allows those leading and governing to assess:

- how the school is performing for all its pupils: educational outcomes, safeguarding, wellbeing and the wider offer
- how the school supports and influences the communities it serves
- how the school promotes equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of school life
- how resources are deployed and optimised
- current and future capacity
- the school as an employer: recruitment, retention, absence, workload, CPD and talent management
- risks to future success and sustainability
- opportunities to develop and grow
- opportunities to develop and collaborate
- the current and future landscape: government policy, local authority capacity etc.

Those governing and leading schools in a MAT will tailor their approach to self-evaluation to fit the role they have in developing strategy, and in doing so consider:

- the contribution their school makes to the MAT
- the support their school receives from the MAT

Stakeholder engagement

Giving stakeholders a role in developing the vision and strategy both enhances legitimacy and creates a shared sense of ownership amongst the school community.

There are a range of methods that can be used to engage stakeholders. The headteacher and the board should discuss which of these mechanisms work best in their context to inform self-evaluation and decision-making.

Feedback methods

- consultations
 - pupil voice
 - surveys (including staff exit interviews)
 - online forums
 - open days
 - attending family and community hubs
 - maintaining relationships with local organisations
 - peer to peer networks
 - participation workshops
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Identify strategic priorities

Self-evaluation helps the board to establish where priorities lie and identify a limited number that impact most on achieving the vision. Limiting the number of priorities makes progress easier to monitor, and impact easier to evaluate.

Questions to help identify strategic priorities

Select from the following and tailor to fit the context of the school:

Leadership

1. What are the strengths and areas of development for the senior leadership team?
2. What are the areas for improvement according to self evaluation and external review?
3. Is the structure of the leadership team conducive to implementing our priorities?
4. Do leaders model and support work life balance, emotional wellbeing and continuous learning?
5. How can leadership be strengthened at all levels?
6. Are policies effective, compliant, inclusive and consistent with values?
7. What is the projected financial position medium to long term?
8. What are the priorities for ensuring financial sustainability: generating income, optimising resources and or making efficiencies?

Infrastructure

1. How healthy is the school estate (buildings and grounds) – is it fit for purpose over the next 5 to 10 years?
2. What are the priorities for ensuring the school manages its estate in a sustainable fashion?

Staff

1. Does the school attract, develop and retain the staff it needs?
2. How diverse is the workforce at all levels – does it reflect our communities?
3. What are the main staffing challenges?
4. How can we build our reputation as an employer?
5. Do policies relating to staff promote sustainable workloads, wellbeing, flexibility and a positive workplace culture?
6. Does the CPD offer align the school's priorities with the needs of individuals?
7. Is succession planning used to reduce the risk of staff who leave?

School improvement

1. Which groups of pupils achieve well and less well and why?
2. Which subjects perform well and less well and why?
3. Does the curriculum reflect the vision?
4. Is the curriculum broad and balanced?
5. Is the curriculum enriching and does it offer different learning experiences?
6. What are the curriculum strengths and areas for development?
7. Is data and assessment used effectively to monitor progress?
8. Are there effective processes to identify and meet the needs of vulnerable pupils?
9. Are the expectations of behaviour and conduct consistently met – can this improve?
10. Are the expectations of attendance consistently met – how can this improve?
11. Are safeguarding procedures effective and consistently applied throughout the school?



Stakeholders

1. Which stakeholder relationships are the most valuable?
2. Which stakeholders can be engaged better?
3. Are the methods used for consulting with stakeholders accessible and inclusive?
4. Can innovation (such as better use of technology) be used to improve stakeholder engagement?
5. Are parents sufficiently engaged in their children's learning?
6. What is known about the school's reputation in the community?
7. Are there issues that affect reputation and stakeholder confidence?
8. Are vision, values and ambition effectively communicated to stakeholders?
9. How might collaboration with other schools, outside agencies and the community benefit the school?

Future direction

1. What are the biggest risks to achieving the vision?
2. How should risks be mitigated against: investment/collaboration/structure?
3. Is the schools' context likely to change in future years: pupil numbers/community profile/local authority capacity/MAT capacity?
4. What aspects of national and local policy are most likely to impact on future direction?
5. Would a structural change better serve the vision and create long term sustainability - what are the options?
6. Is there capacity to support other schools?
7. Should the school be engaging with others to explore options: local authority/MAT/Regional Director?
8. How should stakeholders be involved in future planning?

Identify success criteria

Success criteria are a fundamental part of any strategy because they clarify for all what the requirements are for successful outcomes. As a general rule, when determining what success looks like, it is important to consider 'SMART' outcomes that are:



It is also important to consider each priority in its own context and whether success should be measured by quantitative or qualitative means. Most likely it will be a combination of the two.

The example below uses the template provided as an appendix to this guide (page 16) to demonstrate how priorities can be presented in a high-level strategy document.

Strategic objective:	Improve the attendance of all pupils across the school
Linked to	Improving outcomes/pupil health and wellbeing/removing barriers to learning.
Success criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase in whole school attendance• Reduced persistent absence• Increased attendance of vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils• Increased awareness of attendance culture amongst parents and families
Who leads on implementation	The headteacher, working with relevant SLT member and family support worker, to plan communication and targeted support/intervention.
Who leads on monitoring progress	The governing board through the outcomes committee and designated lead governor for attendance.
Required resources	Based on estimate of staff time and external consultancy.

Evaluate risks

Risk management helps ensure strategic priorities are maintained and met. It is a requirement for academy trust boards, and good practice for all boards, to maintain a risk register and review it on a regular basis.

The risk register should identify the risks associated with strategic objectives, including not pursuing or achieving them, and the potential impact on:

- daily operations
- financial sustainability
- safety
- wellbeing
- continuous improvement
- compliance
- reputation
- values and moral purpose

The framework referred within [ESFA risk management guidance](#) is suitable for all types of school structure. NGA also provides [guidance](#) and training for governing boards to support their understanding of risk management.

A checklist for evaluating risk

Check assumptions

- ✓ all relevant information is available
- ✓ all relevant information is used in a rational way
- ✓ conflicting information is not subject to 'confirmation bias'

Seek clarity

- ✓ all risks have been considered
- ✓ all risks are clearly defined – cause, uncertainty and consequence
- ✓ ownership has been assigned – usually to one person

Ensure action

- ✓ risks are tolerated where the impact is acceptable
- ✓ risks are treated to modify their impact
- ✓ risks are reassigned where appropriate
- ✓ risks have been removed where all other options are exhausted

Set out how each priority will be resourced

A robust strategy should contain clear estimates of the level of resource required to implement each priority and thereby ensure that all public funding including sponsorship:

- is directed to the areas of most need in the school
- provides equity of opportunity for all pupils
- improves the learning experience for all pupils

The headteacher has overall responsibility for day-to-day financial management in a school and is therefore well placed to advise the board on how decisions to invest resources are serving medium to long term needs and ensuring value for money.

Financial reports, data and forecasts should also be used by the governing board throughout the year to inform strategic resourcing decisions, as well as opportunities to generate income, optimise resources and make the most effective use of any reserves.

The [Schools financial value standard](#) and [School resource management self-assessment checklist](#), which maintained schools and academy trusts are respectively required to complete, serve as useful tools for ensuring effective oversight and management of resources. The DfE also provide a range of [information, training, and guidance](#) which support effective resource prioritisation and financial decision-making.

Many schools use Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP) as a tool for achieving educational priorities whilst remaining financially sustainable. The three basic planning principles of ICFP are the curriculum priorities, operating costs and income. If the curriculum priorities and operating costs consistently exceed the income, then spending should be prioritised to ensure longer term sustainability.

NGA, ASCL and NAHT offer a range of support and development opportunities for leaders and governors on adopting an integrated curriculum and financial planning model.

Working with the school business professional

School business professionals have a significant impact on the leadership and financial governance of schools. Governing boards and relevant committees should work closely with their business professional and make best use of their expertise and support.

We encourage the participation of business professionals in governing board and/or relevant committee meetings to support financial reporting and the board's responsibility for financial oversight.

Monitoring the strategy

Monitoring is the practice of gathering information through reports received, data provided, monitoring visits and conversations with staff and pupils. Evaluation is exploring what the information is saying.

Monitoring and evaluation should provide a clear and accurate view throughout the year of:

- whether strategic priorities are being met or are on course to be met
- if not, the reasons why
- the actions, adjustments, support and challenge required to get progress back on track

The governing board and headteacher should agree the detailed arrangements for monitoring the strategy, along with the data and information required to evaluate progress and assess impact. This should be referred to in the strategy document.

Where a school is part of a MAT, the scheme of delegation should explain the academy committee’s role in monitoring improvement priorities and maintaining accountability on behalf of the trust board.

Measure what you value

Not all priorities lend themselves to simple quantitative measurement. Make the most of naturally occurring evidence, such as information obtained from a well planned visit.

The following table contains some of the most recognisable sources (both quantitative and qualitative) of evidence that trust boards apply to their context and use to monitor strategic priorities. Some of the sources, like those linked to leadership and management, apply to more than one area.

Priorities linked to:	Look for evidence of progress in:
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteacher reports • Pupil progress and attainment data • Safeguarding arrangements and reporting • Stakeholder surveys <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Parents – Staff – Pupil voice • Complaints data • External evaluation (eg school improvement partner) • Anonymised data on performance management outcomes • Ofsted reports • Budget forecast returns • School level budget analysis • Schools financial value standard/resource management self-assessment • Financial benchmarking tools • Audit reports • Governor visit reports • Feedback on staff and leader CPD • Governor recruitment and retention data • External reviews of governance • Governor CPD record

Priorities linked to:	Look for evidence of progress in:
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteacher reports • Data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Recruitment – Retention – Diversity indicators – Absence – CPD – Career progression • Talent management strategy • Flexible working requests • Exit interviews • Feedback from staff
School improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteacher reports • Feedback from relevant committees • Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Progress and attainment of different groups – Attendance – Behaviour and exclusions – Access to learning support – Safeguarding incidents • Pupil destination • Governor visit reports • Pupil/student/parent surveys • Talking to pupils • Feedback from curriculum and school improvement leads • Reports from the special educational needs co-ordinator • Ofsted reports • Performance management outcomes
Whole school wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmarks/baseline – how is it measured? • Headteacher reports • Reports from school leads • Review of relevant policies eg safeguarding and anti bullying, staff workload etc. • Impact assessments: initiatives, policies and support • Wellbeing surveys • Talking to stakeholders: pupils, staff, parents • Reporting of relevant staff CPD • External evaluation and or accreditation
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys • Feedback from Ofsted parent view • Press coverage • Social media • Complaints data • Admissions data • Participation: curriculum enrichment and school activities • Engagement with community organisations and local employers

Headteacher reporting

The headteacher's termly report is fundamental to the governing board's monitoring of the strategy.

Governors should expect the information included in the headteacher's report to be largely aligned with the strategy and be detailed enough to allow a thorough and accurate assessment of progress. However, producing reports should not create an excessive workload for the headteacher/leadership team.

Most headteacher reports cover the following to varying extents throughout the year:

- current context (eg pupil numbers)
- progress against strategic priorities
- current high-level risks
- curriculum, teaching and learning outcomes
- financial performance, compliance and resource management
- human resources and the performance management of staff
- pupil behaviour, wellbeing, welfare and safeguarding

Data

The governing board should expect to receive data in a timely and manageable fashion as tangible evidence of progress. It is important that governors understand the data they receive and this should be taken into account when deciding how data is presented and the development priorities for the governing board.

As a general rule, the data should be:

- up to date
- relevant to the strategy and success criteria
- aligned with the other reporting
- in some cases verified by at least one other source
- conducive to decision making

DfE [guidance](#), *Understanding your data: a guide for school governors and trustees*, refers to seven data 'themes' to use as an evidence base when discussing performance. [Guidance](#) and information is also available to help boards analyse DfE school and college performance tables and [analyse school performance](#) (ASP) data.

Asking questions

Governors are expected to ask questions about the information they are provided with, and they should expect to receive clear answers.

The way in which questions are asked is likely to impact on the way the question is perceived and answered. When asking a question, keep in mind that accountability is about analysing how things are working and what should be done collaboratively, rather than apportioning blame.

Monitoring visits

Monitoring visits provide the governing board with essential information about how its strategy is being implemented and how issues discussed at board level translate into the everyday life of the school.

Governors should expect to carry out monitoring visits at least twice a year. These may be linked to a strategic priority or area of compliance and carried out by a special responsibility or 'link governor' for that area.

Annual review of progress

Even though the strategy is for a three (or five) year period and is therefore effectively a rolling document, a formal annual review of progress should still take place and feed into the annual strategy day and or more frequent strategy meetings.

If monitoring throughout the year is effective, then the annual review is simply an opportunity for those leading and governing to reaffirm what is going well and what needs to improve, as well as highlighting where the strategy is in its lifespan and any significant changes that are required. The review should also consider:

- whether a major review and or change of direction is required
- any significant changes to circumstances
- any significant changes to the landscape in which the school operates
- issues relating to communication, working relationships and culture
- how stakeholders are engaged

Communicating the strategy

Communication is the key to gaining ‘buy in’ to the strategy.

The governing board and headteacher should discuss their approach for communicating the strategy to stakeholders and building a narrative around it. This is important and contributes towards a shared sense of ownership and understanding of direction.

The aim should be to:

- explain the difference that achieving the vision and priorities will make to pupils and communities
- explain the role of stakeholders in supporting the school to achieve the vision
- reach different audiences: parents, pupils, staff, community leaders etc
- utilise different platforms, for example:
 - internal communication
 - website
 - briefings
 - conferences
 - networking
 - external meetings
 - social media

The role of academy committees

While the delegated responsibilities of academy committees vary, they are a powerful and sometimes undervalued force for championing the vision, values and strategic priorities of the MAT as a single organisation.

Making academy committees a fundamental part of the plan for communicating the strategy brings increased opportunities to engage pupils, parents, staff and communities across the MAT.



Creating the right culture

The right culture should be in place for the strategy to succeed.

Culture – the way things are done – is what makes the school unique. It is influenced by values and influences behaviours and practices. It should be perceived in the same way by everyone and is crucial to the strategy succeeding.

Through its culture an organisation can convey such things as:

- humanity and compassion – an overriding concern for the wellbeing of everyone
- openness and transparency
- high expectations of performance and accountability
- balancing challenge with support and appreciation
- commitment to professional growth
- sensitivity to diverse views and other narratives

Those leading and governing the school should work together to foster a culture that reflects their values (and where relevant the values of the MAT) and is reflected in policy and practice.

To truly understand the culture that exists in the school, governors need to carry out regular visits and speak to pupils, parents and staff. For schools that are part of large and geographically dispersed MAT, reinforces strong links and good lines of communication between trust boards and academy committees.

Where to find evidence of a positive culture in your school

- working relationships and sharing of practice
 - safeguarding and compliance
 - fair access to pupils
 - promotion of inclusivity
 - elimination of discriminatory practice
 - wider contribution (developing future leaders in the sector, for example)
 - the way success is celebrated
 - how underperformance is treated
 - manageable workloads
 - family friendly policies
 - handling of complaints
 - investment in CPD and talent management
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Appendix

Strategy document template

The following template can be adapted to align with other plans and documents. Add as many strategic priorities as you need. You can download an editable, printer friendly version [here](#)

Our vision:	
Our values:	

To achieve our vision, we have the following strategic priorities:

Strategic objective	
Linked to	
Success criteria	
Who leads on implementation	
Who leads on monitoring progress	
Timescale	
Required resources	

Useful resources

- [Welcome to Governance induction guide](#)
- [What governing boards and school leaders should expect from each other](#)
- [Governor and trustee role descriptions](#)
- [Stakeholder engagement resources](#)
- [Governing board self-evaluation questions](#)
- [Risk management guidance](#)
- [Integrated curriculum and financial planning guidance](#)
- [School visits guidance, policy and planning tools](#)

Schools and trusts with a religious character

- [Publications from The Catholic Education Service](#)
- [Education publications from The Church of England](#)

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.



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