



# Governor Essentials Guide

- The purpose of the board
- Roles on the board
- Meetings
- School Visits
- Asking questions
- ...and more

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# Introduction

The role of the school governor is important and varied, covering strategy, policy, budgeting and staffing. An effective governing board enables its school to run as effectively as possible, working alongside senior leaders and supporting teachers to consistently drive school improvement and deliver great outcomes for children.

This booklet contains all the basic information and guidance you need to get up to speed quickly and make a positive impact in your school. It covers everything from the function of the board and the different roles through to the commonly used acronyms and governance jargon.

But remember that this is just a small selection of the vast range of resources available on The Key for School Governors which can help you carry out your role with confidence.

We are here for you, whether you're new to the role or experienced, whatever your responsibilities, and whenever you need us.



# The purpose of the board

## The 3 core strategic functions of governing boards are to:

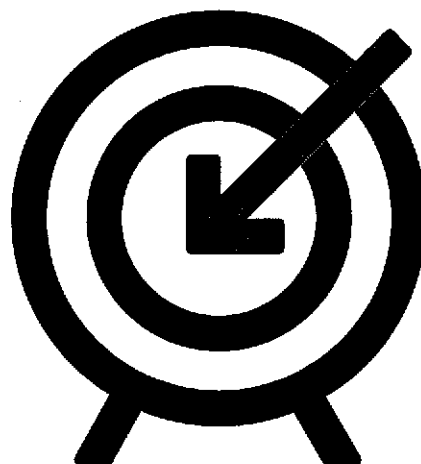
- Ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
- Hold executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the performance management of staff
- Oversee the financial performance of the organisation and make sure its money is well spent

There are specific responsibilities that governing boards have. For example, you need to:

- Approve the school budget
- Performance manage the headteacher
- Recruit a new headteacher when necessary
- Approve certain school policies
- Hear appeals for things like exclusions, staff disciplinary and grievance issues, and complaints

See the full list of statutory responsibilities governing boards have, broken down by the different types of school.

Boards must be strategic, and not get involved in the day-to-day running of the school. Learn how to walk this fine line with our practical examples of when scenarios are strategic or operational.



# Roles on the board

## The core role

For more specific details about what you need to do, take a look at our role description for governors and trustees.

### Chair

One governor is elected as chair. They will:

- Make sure the board is effective, and give it clear leadership and direction
- Encourage the board to work together as a team
- Make sure everyone knows what's expected of them, and help governors develop their skills and knowledge through induction and training

### Vice chair

A vice-chair is elected to support the chair and deputise for them as needed.

### Clerk

The clerk should be the board's "governance professional". The role includes:

- Organisation and administration
- Taking the minutes of meetings
- Helping the board understand its role, functions and legal duties
- Supporting the chair in enabling and facilitating strategic debate and decision making

Read our article on the role of the clerk to get a clearer idea of what the role involves.

## Link governors

A link governor is a member of the governing board appointed to oversee a specific aspect of the work of the school. It's likely that you'll be appointed as one. Read our one-page summary of what a link governor does, and find advice for your link governor role in our full range of articles.

## The different categories of governor

There are different 'categories' of governor that boards might need to have. The different categories reflect how the governor was appointed – they all do the same job on the board. The categories needed will depend on the type of school. Common categories of governor are:

- **Parent** – governors who have a child at the school
- **Staff** – governors who are also employed by the school
- **Co-opted** – governors appointed for their specific skills and expertise
- **Foundation** – governors in foundation or voluntary controlled schools who represent the founding body (this might be a religious organisation)

If you're a governor in an academy, the categories you need to have will be set out in your articles of association. If you're in a maintained school, read more about the types of governors in maintained schools.

# School visits

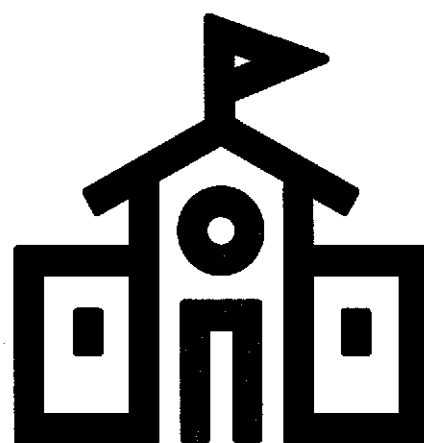
Governors should visit the school regularly. This will allow you to see whether the things people say are happening are actually happening. You might go in to:

- See how a specific aspect of the school works in practice
- Check progress is being made towards the school's strategic objectives

Broadly, there are 2 types of visit:

- Learning walks, where you'll be taken around the school with the relevant staff member to get a feel for the school. During the walk, you might talk to a range of staff members and pupils
- Meetings with the relevant staff member, where you'll sit down and discuss the school's progress in the area of focus

These can be intimidating, especially when you're new. We've got you covered with our one-page summary of school visits, and our how-to guide to going on school visits.



# Asking questions

One of your key roles is to hold senior leaders to account for the running of the school. A key way you can do this is by asking good, challenging questions in meetings and on school visits. A good question:



- Is open – you shouldn't be able to answer them with a yes or no
- Usually starts with 'what', 'why' or 'how'
- Isn't leading, and doesn't have one specific answer in mind
- Focuses on the strategic impact of the item in question, not on day-to-day operational concerns
- Is challenging, but not negative or antagonistic

You can find examples of 'questions to ask' all around our website, for example:

- If you're thinking of joining a multi-academy trust (MAT), you could ask "What percentage of our annual budget will be taken by the MAT? Who will decide this figure? Will it be the same every year?"
- When analysing pupil progress, ask "How is progress among pupil groups? What does good progress look like in the school? Are some individuals or groups making better progress than others?"
- If you've received a GDPR report to governors, ask "Did we have any data breaches? If so, did we expect this number? Could they have been avoided? Was the breach procedure followed properly and were there any problems?"

# Jargon and acronyms

The world of school governance is full of jargon and acronyms. It can be hard to decipher this language, particularly when you're new.

Our glossary of governance basics takes you through the different school types, the technical terms involved in meeting procedures and what the key documents are that you need to know about.

## Governance roles

Term	Definition	School type
Associate members	Appointed to the board for their expertise in a particular area. They are not considered governors. They can serve on committees, where they have full voting rights. They can attend full governing board meetings, but can't vote at them.	Maintained schools
Clerk	Employed to provide effective administration of meetings, such as circulating meeting agendas and taking minutes. Advises the governing board on governance procedures and good practice.	Both
Chair	The governor elected to lead the governing board's work, chair meetings and work closely with the headteacher.	Both
Company secretary	Employed in some academies to handle certain legal, financial and administrative tasks for the board. The most recent funding agreements don't require academies to have one.	Academies
Link governor	A member of the governing board that is appointed to monitor a specific aspect of its work.	Both
Members	Sit above the board of trustees in an academy trust, and are similar to shareholders in a business. They have certain powers including signing off the articles of association, and appointing and remove trustees.	Academies
Trustees	The people on an academy trust's board. They deliver the core functions of governance and must ensure compliance with charity law, company law, and the trust's funding agreement. Sometimes referred to as the board of directors.	Academies
Vice chair	Deputises for the chair when they're absent.	Both



## Types of school

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Schools maintained and funded by local authorities. They follow the national curriculum and rules on teacher pay and conditions. There are different sub-categories of maintained school:

➤ **Community**

Where the school is controlled by the local authority, with no influence from religious, charitable or business groups. The local authority is the employer and is responsible for admissions

➤ **Voluntary aided**

Where the governing board is the employer and is responsible for admissions. They are usually faith schools, and the religious group owns the school's land and buildings and has a majority of members on the governing board

➤ **Voluntary controlled**

Where the school has close links with a religious or other organisation that owns the land and buildings and has input into what the school does, except the local authority is the employer and responsible for admissions

➤ **Foundation**

Where the governing board is the employer and the admissions authority. The school's land and buildings are normally owned by the foundation. The foundation is usually non-religious, making it different to voluntary aided schools

Maintained  
schools

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Academies

Publicly-funded schools have more freedoms and autonomy than maintained schools. They don't have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times. They still have to follow the same rules on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools. They're funded directly from the government, not local authorities.

They have often converted from being a maintained school.

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Free schools

A type of academy set up as a new school under the government's free schools program. Often set up by parent, charitable or business groups.

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MATs

Multi-academy trusts.

Trust that oversees a number of academies, all under one legal entity.

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Special  
schools

Cater specifically for pupils with special educational needs. Run and funded via the local authority.

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Special  
academies

Cater specifically for pupils with special educational needs. Run by an academy trust, not the local authority.

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Non-maintained special schools	Cater specifically for children with special educational needs. Run by charitable trusts on a not-for-profit basis. They are funded mostly from local authorities, who commission places for children with special educational needs in their area.
PRUs	Pupil referral unit. Cater specifically for children who are excluded, sick or otherwise unable to attend mainstream school. Maintained by the local authority.
AP academy	Alternative provision academy. Cater specifically for children who are excluded, sick or otherwise unable to attend mainstream school. Run by an academy trust, not the local authority.
Independent schools	Also known as 'private schools' or sometimes 'public schools'. They charge fees for pupils to attend and don't follow the national curriculum.

### Governance structures

Term	Definition	School type
Board of trustees	The equivalent of the governing board in academy trusts. Delivers the core functions of governance and must ensure compliance with charity law, company law, and the trust's funding agreement. Sometimes referred to as the board of directors.	Academies
LGB	Local governing body. In MATs, the board of trustees can delegate governance functions to local governing bodies. They are technically committees of the board of trustees. Their powers vary between trusts.	Academies
Circle model of governance	When a governing board works without separate committees but delegates monitoring of specific areas of the school to certain governors.	Both
Committee	A group of governors delegated responsibilities for a specific area of the governing board's work.	Both

IEB	Interim executive board. If a maintained school is judged 'eligible for intervention', then the local authority or regional schools commissioner may require an IEB to be put in place of the governing board. The IEB is a "small, focused group" that normally includes individuals "with financial skills and experience of transformational educational improvement".	Maintained schools
Management committee	The equivalent of the governing board for pupil referral units (PRUs).	Maintained schools

## Meeting procedures

Term	Definition	School type
Agenda	A list of the items to be discussed at a governing board or committee meeting.	Both
AGM	Annual general meeting. An academy trust must hold an AGM each financial year, in addition to other meetings that year. The members must attend, and trustees can if they want.	Academies
Minutes	A written record of the events of a full governing board or committee meeting. Recorded by the clerk.	Both
EGM	Extraordinary general meeting. A meeting convened outside of the normal schedule, normally to discuss urgent matters that can't wait until the next scheduled meeting.	Both
Ordinary resolution	A decision that requires the agreement of a majority of the members of the trust.	Academies
Special resolution	A decision that requires the agreement of 75% of the members of the trust.	Academies
Quorum	The minimum number of governors that must be present at full governing board or committee meetings in order for official decisions to be made.	Both

# Everything you need to perform your role with confidence

Being a school governor is quite the task. Knowledge gaps and limited time mean it's sometimes hard to feel confident making decisions and holding leaders to account.

The Key for School Governors is here for you, whether you're new to the role or experienced, whatever your responsibilities, and whenever you need us.

## Not yet a member?

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