

Performance reviews of school trust executive leaders

Understanding the challenge: winning hearts and minds

Produced in association with



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Confederation
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The voice of school trusts



The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for School Trusts in England, advocating for, connecting, and supporting executive and governance leaders. Our members are responsible for the education of more than three million young people.

Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.



Independently recognised as one of the best education law practices in the country, Browne Jacobson has a wealth of sector-specific knowledge and experience to assist School Trusts, managing estate and construction projects, employment issues and funding matters, to intellectual property, health and safety, defamation and disputes.

The firm has bases in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Exeter, Nottingham and Dublin.



BlueSky Education is the multi award-winning comprehensive solution that supports school leaders and staff with performance reviews, professional development, quality assurance, school evaluation and improvement. BlueSky helps schools and groups to elevate outcomes by putting people at the centre of a professional dialogue.

BlueSky is the only solution of its kind endorsed by the Confederation of School Trusts.

Introduction

The performance review of the chief executive of a school trust is one of a trust board's most significant responsibilities. It is key to the board's leadership of strategy and values, its accountability for educational outcomes and financial health, and supports the development and well-being of the trust's most senior employee.

School trusts have the freedom to define their own appraisal process for chief executives in line with their trust's ethos and values and approach to performance management. This guidance offers advice on how you can ensure effective processes.

Trusts leaders have a range of job titles for their most senior employee, including chief executive, executive leader, and executive head. For brevity, we use chief executive throughout this guidance.

About this guidance

Understanding the challenge: winning hearts and minds, is the first in a series of three guidance notes on the performance review of chief executives for trust boards. The series provides robust sector and role specific guidance on the principles and practices of executive performance review to support your trust's process from end-to-end, whatever its size or stage of development.

The guidance has been developed by the Confederation of School Trusts in partnership with BlueSky Education, experts in appraisal and professional learning, and Browne Jacobson, experts in education HR and law.

Together, these guides aim to help trustees to deliver effective executive performance review as part of their strategic governance practice:

- *Understanding the challenge: winning hearts and minds* sets out the purpose of executive performance review and helps trustees to prepare for it by understanding the challenge, identifying the right resources – people, tools, and technology – and building the strong relationships required.
- *Process planning and delivery* provides a step-by-step guide to preparing and delivering an effective, purposeful, and developmental performance review for your trust's chief executive.
- *Continuing the conversation* explores the benefits of interim reviews and looks at how to increase the impact of your trust's review process by maintaining focus on performance in the relationship between the executive leader and the chair across the year.

This series does not support board decision-making about pay and reward. Further reading on this can be found in our guidance on executive remuneration.

Who is it for?

This guidance is for chairs of trustee boards and trustees with a role in the executive leadership review process, such as serving on the appraisal panel, nominations or pay committee. It will also be of interest to the governance and human resources professionals in school trusts who support board and leadership development.

Understanding the challenge

Before embarking on the performance review of your trust's chief executive, it is essential to understand exactly why this process is so important.

Executive performance review enables the board and the chief executive to develop clear objectives that align with the trust's strategic priorities, agree how they will be measured, and define what good outcomes look like. This creates a framework for the chair's work with the chief executive across the year to hold them accountable for achieving the agreed goals and provide the ongoing support that will help them to succeed.

To get this process right, the chair and members of the trustee board involved in the appraisal process must develop their own understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the chief executive, know the context in which they are to perform, the skills and resources that they need, and identify the professional development required to maximise their effectiveness.

The regulatory requirement

Understanding the regulatory framework under which trust boards operate is an important starting point for recognising the strategic purpose of executive performance review.

The board's responsibility for the appraisal of the senior chief executive is explained in the *Governance Handbook*. The *Handbook* makes it clear that executive performance review has an integral role in enabling the board to deliver on its duties to:

- Set a clear and explicit vision for the future, in collaboration with executive leaders, which has pupil progress and achievement at its heart and is communicated to the whole organisation;
- Establish strong and clear values and ethos which are defined and modelled by the board, embedded across the organisation, and adhered to by all that work in it, or on behalf of it;
- Carry out strategic planning that defines medium to long-term strategic goals, and development and improvement priorities which are understood by all in the organisation;
- Establish processes to monitor and review progress against agreed strategic goals and to refresh the vision and goals periodically and as necessary including at key growth stages or if performance of the organisation drops;
- Have the determination to initiate and lead strategic change when this is in the best interests of children, young people, and the organisation, and to champion the reasons for, and benefits of, change to all stakeholders

Furthermore, the board's accountability for driving up educational standards and financial health is achieved through:

- rigorous analysis of pupil progress, attainment, and financial information with comparison against local and national benchmarks and over time;
- clear processes for overseeing and monitoring school improvement and financial health, providing constructive challenge to executive leaders;
- a transparent system for performance managing executive leaders, which is

"Appraisal should be a supportive, development process designed to ensure that executives have the skills and support that they need to carry out their role effectively.

"It should help leaders continue to improve their professional practice throughout their career. It is the board's job to make sure that a robust appraisal policy is in place which minimises impact on workload."

Governance handbook,
Department for Education

- understood by all in the organisation, linked to defined strategic priorities;
- effective oversight of the performance of all other employees and the framework for their pay and conditions of service.

Winning hearts and minds

Whilst boards need full command of the regulatory requirements, it is essential to also remember that, however good systems and processes are, individuals create significant value in educational organisations. Executive performance review should be mindful of how leaders and their roles are part of value creation in the trust and recognise the opportunity to reflect on and augment the relationship between the chief executive and the chair.

The relationship between the chair and chief executive is central to the effective leadership of all trusts. The chair is the conduit to the board and needs to make sure that the board is engaged in the review process and supports their approach. The chief executive is the conduit to the executive team and will be setting the tone for objectives to cascade through the trust. Therefore, it is essential that the quality of the relationship is considered in the process and that thought is given to how performance review is delivered, as well as what it contains. Done effectively, it should create a common language and shared sense of purpose in the leadership of the trust, and an opportunity to win hearts and minds, to build commitment and a sense of job satisfaction across trust staff more widely.

The benefits of an effective process

The benefits of an effective executive performance review process are considerable for all participants.

The chief executive gets clear confirmation of direction, with the development route and the staging posts on the journey mutually agreed and mapped out with the chair. There is transparency around the success criteria. The information that will be used to assess progress has been identified, as have the risks and resources required to mitigate them. Their role has been given a focus that builds commitment and engenders job satisfaction, and development requirements have been recognised and planned for.

The board has defined the next phase of the trust's development and has secured the engagement and commitment of its senior executive to make it happen. The chief executive is empowered to cascade the trust's priorities and develop the necessary plans with the central team and school leaders.

The chair and the chief executive together have established a common language of performance and priorities. They can now both build the necessary checks and balances, such as the structure of the chief executive's report and the timing and nature of interim reviews and be equally able to re-visit these priorities in an agile way over the regular course of conversation. The chair's support in enabling the chief executive to maximise their impact on trust priorities is where much of the skill in effective performance review rests.

The challenge for the chair is then to ensure that an honest feedback and appraisal process is in place, that enables objectives to be agreed and progress monitored. The process should allow any concerns to be picked up across the appraisal, and for the executive leader to feel supported and motivated to do even better as a result.

What can go wrong

In preparing for the best outcomes of your executive performance review, it is



important to be aware of what can go wrong and why. Issues with the quality of relationship, quality of evidence and review behaviours typically create the most difficulties.

If the quality of the relationship between chair and chief executive has not been invested in by both parties, and is not underpinned by mutual respect, understanding and purpose, there may be a lack of trust, creating a sense of threat from the outset. A lack of ongoing communication between chair and chief executive will also create tension. Issues that have been stored up to the end of the review period, and not dealt with openly and directly as they arise, may result in a sense of festering resentment that distorts the conversation.

It is essential that the chair has a full appreciation of the expectations of the chief executive, understanding their roles and responsibilities and what is involved in delivering them. The CST *Guide to the roles and responsibilities of the chief executive of a school trust* is a helpful resource. It is equally important that the chief executive has faith in the chair's understanding of education context and expectation and provides support for the ongoing development of this understanding. Additionally, if there is not enough clarity on roles and responsibilities it is hard to develop a genuine collaboration with a shared sense of working to the same end, which can lead to a tug of war between the chair and chief executive.

A shared understanding of trust performance and priorities is also key to avoiding difficulties in the process, so the quality of the evidence and analysis that underpins executive performance review is critical. If there is insufficient evidence or lack of clarity around trust priorities, the review will be taking place on shaky foundations.

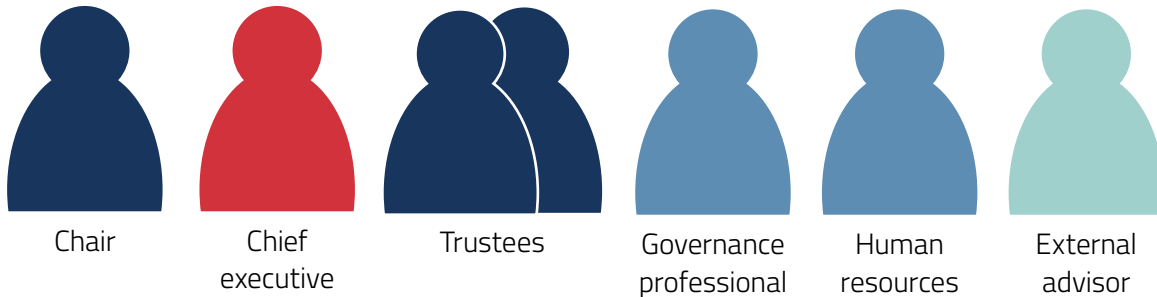
Finally, an effective process needs to be respectful, keeping egos in check. The chair needs to demonstrate their ability and willingness to listen and avoid being heavy handed in providing direction. The chief executive needs to be measured and open to the challenge and support that the process involves, and not seek to dominate or undermine the aims of the board.

Resources for executive performance review

In designing your trust's review process, it is important to consider the people, tools and technologies that will support it.

Who should be involved?

The principals in executive performance review are the chair and executive leader, with support from several other key roles in the process:



The **chair** is responsible for:

- Delivering a suitably robust appraisal for the chief executive, that follows with the appraisal policy of the trust
- Agreeing performance objectives at the outset, then tracking performance against these at regular intervals
- Aligning performance management with strategic goals
- Identifying development needs and opportunities for the chief executive's professional growth
- Supporting the wellbeing of the chief executive
- Holding the chief executive to account, taking action to address any shortfalls in performance
- Following a fair and transparent process in gathering feedback to inform discussion and judgements
- Appointing a suitably experienced and skilled external advisor (if required)
- Ensuring that the appraisal process followed does not breach the terms and conditions of the chief executive
- Setting the tenor and tone for the whole performance management process within the trust as it cascades through the system.

The **chief executive** is responsible for:

- Ensuring that there is a robust appraisal policy and practice in place that covers all staff in the trust
- Taking the lead to cascade objectives to direct reports ensuring that the trust's vision, ethos
- and agreed strategy is understood and enacted throughout the organisation
- Preparing for and cooperating in requests for information to support the review of performance against objectives set which could include a self-appraisal report and/or a 360 review
- Collaboratively contributing to the setting of objectives and proactively sharing information to help the chair track progress.

Trustees sitting on the appraisal panel are responsible for:

- Supporting the chair
- Providing additional scrutiny to evidence review and agenda setting.

The **governance professional** is responsible for:

- Setting up and facilitating meetings, including with the external advisor if required
- Preparing an exchange of information between the chief executive and the chair
- Supporting the chair and chief executive with record keeping and storage.

The **human resources director** is responsible for:

- Drafting a robust appraisal policy that covers all staff in the trust that is regularly reviewed and consulted upon
- Supporting the chair with the understanding of the policy/system for appraisal within the trust
- Supporting the chair with continuous professional development to ensure that they are appropriately skilled and experienced to carry out the executive performance review
- Supporting the chair and keeping them informed on best practice in performance management.

Where used, an **external advisor** is responsible for:

- Providing advice and guidance to the trust board on the performance review process
- Supporting the trust's development and internal relationships – especially the relationship and respective roles of the chief executive and the chair of the trust
- Reviewing the performance of the chief executive across all areas of responsibility with scrutiny of the available evidence against the previous year's objectives
- Validating the evidence for performance review with expertise from the sector and contextual data from the regional and national landscapes
- Helping the chief executive to interpret and understand the feedback from the 360 processes, if followed
- Ensuring that the trust is following best practice and latest official guidance.

The board should not appoint an external advisor for the sake of it, but where there is a gap in skills and experience, such as a new chair or chief executive undertaking the process for the first time, or where the process is part of a wider phase of change within the trust.

Using 360 reviews

The 360 review is an extremely useful tool to support the forward planning process for the development of the chief executive. It provides a multidimensional view of the current competencies and behaviours of the chief executive, signposting conversations for areas of professional development and growth. The 360 review is powerful as it provides a broad spectrum of insight into the working practices of the chief executive and can be used in conjunction with other evidence to create balance.

A 360 review uses a series of questions or statements covering aspects of an individual's competencies and behaviours. The questionnaire is circulated to agreed individuals that have worked closely with the executive leader and likely to have clear insights into their performance. A key element of an effective 360 review is anonymity of the reviewers. To ensure the outcomes enable a sharp focus the statements or questions are focused to fit 'typical' and 'significant' aspects of

behaviour/competence.

They should be clear concise and if possible one ended.

Responses to the questions or statements can include commentary to explain their perspective. The aggregated results of all the questionnaires are summarised and fed back to the chief executive as part of the performance review process, either by the chair or a third party. Facilitated feedback has been shown to lead to more impactful outcomes than simply sharing the report. It is often helpful to engage a third party to provide that facilitated feedback, which should always be used as a basis for development.

Well designed and effectively implemented 360 reviews can lead to changes in behaviour, increased competency levels and motivation. When a 360 review process is used effectively to support future development it is helpful to periodically revisit the review to determine development and areas of continued need.



Using technology

Technologies, such as appraisal systems or shared digital spaces, can also add real value to the executive performance review process. However, this should never be at the expense of the human interaction, a vital part of building rapport and strengthening shared understanding.

Technologies can support the appraisal process by:

- Providing access to real time information – this helps the chief executive and the chair get onto the same page quickly and information can still be shared when working remotely from one another
- Tracking the progress that is being made towards achieving objectives, allowing the CEO to update notes and attach evidence in real time
- Allows for preparation ahead of meetings so that conversations are forward-focused, and time is not wasted on drawing together a picture of the current state of play
- Creating an audit trail of interactions between the chief executive and the chair, meaning conversations can easily be documented and outcomes agreed again in real time
- Reducing the paper trail that a performance review process can often generate, maximising the limited time available for these critical communications.
- Providing a consistency of approach that can be used across the wider team.

Questions to ask of your trust's approach

This guidance aims to help chairs and trustees understand the challenge of executive performance review by setting out its statutory and strategic importance to the effective governance of a school trust.

It is not simply an event but an ongoing leadership process that wins hearts and minds in delivering your trust's core purpose – improving education for public benefit.

In considering how effectively your trust approaches executive performance review, you might find it useful to ask the following questions:

☐ Is the chief executive's appraisal process fair, clear, and aligned with the process used for other employees across the trust?

☐ Are your processes kept under active review from year-to-year?

☐ Does it hinge on one formal meeting or are there check points and a continuous dialogue across the year?

☐ Is it based upon consideration of an appropriately broad and detailed evidence base?

☐ Does the board, and the chair in particular, have appropriate skills and knowledge to undertake performance review?

☐ Is initial and refresher training provided to the chair and participating trustees?

☐ What skills and experience do you look for in an independent advisor and how do you assess the value that they create?

☐ Does your process use appraisal tools and technologies effectively?

☐ Is budget available to support the chief executive's performance review?

☐ Do your human resources team and governance professionals actively support the chair?

☐ What options do you consider for professional development and support of your chief executive and what budget do you provide for it?

☐ When you use an independent advisor, do you request feedback on your effectiveness as an appraisal panel?

☐ Do you ask your chief executive how the performance review felt for them and how you can continue to improve it?

☐ Does your process take account of succession planning and the need to develop other executive and governance leaders in your trust?

Exploring further

Training and advice

CST offers a virtual seminar for trustees, *Executive performance review explained*, and provides independent advisors for executive performance review through our governance advisory service.

Please contact our team at governance@cst.org.uk if you would like to explore further.

Guidance documents

CST members can access a range of related guidance documents from our website:

- [Core responsibilities of a school trust chief executive](#)
- [Role description for the chair of the trust board](#)
- [The role of the accounting officer in a school trust](#)

Relevant guidance is also available from the Department for Education's website:

- [Governance handbook](#)





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