

Role description: Chair of trustees

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Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts

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Introduction

The chair of a school trust board has a vital role in setting the highest expectations for professional standards of governance and accountability and providing confident, visionary strategic leadership to the trust. They lead by example, setting the tone from the top. They are the key link between the trustees, with legal and strategic responsibility for the trust, and the chief executive and senior team who are responsible for day-to-day operations.

The chair leads on setting and championing a clear strategy that aligns with the trust's charitable objects, covers all pillars of [trust quality](#) and, where applicable and appropriate, sets out its aspirations for growth over time.

The trust's articles of association will set out how the chair is appointed and removed, and their usual term length. Succession planning is the key to future-proofing the board and ensuring it remains fit for purpose. While there is no set guidelines on the optimal length of time that a chair should remain in role, good practice suggests that chairs should not overstay their time on the board, as this can hamper their ability to be objective. The nine-year milestone is the point at which the [UK Corporate Governance Code](#) stipulates that serious justification is needed to show that a non-executive director continues to be independent.

About this guidance

This guidance sets out some of the key qualities for a good chair of a school trust board. The role description draws extensively on the Department for Education's [Academy trust handbook](#), [Academy trusts: Governance guide](#), and the 2023 [Trust quality descriptions](#). It also draws on the sector-developed [Academy Trust Governance Code](#).

It was originally published in October 2018 and reviewed in July 2026.

Trusts with a religious character may use trustee to refer to those on the board of a connected charity, and director for people on the school trust board. For brevity, we use trustee to refer to those on a school trust board throughout this document.

Role description

Strategic leadership

- Knowledge of national and regional educational priorities and the implications of these for the board and the trust.
- Ability to think strategically about the future direction of the trust and able to identify the steps needed to achieve goals.
- Ability to provide effective leadership of organisational change even when this is difficult
- Ability to lead board meetings in a way which embodies the culture, values and ethos of the trust.
- Ability to ensure that different perspectives, viewpoints and dissenting voices are properly taken into account and recorded.
- Ensures the board seeks guidance from executive leaders and from the trust's governance professional before the board commits to significant or controversial courses of action.
- Sufficient independence from the executive leadership to allow scrutiny of both their performance and organisational performance overall.
- Ensures meaningful engagement with stakeholders to inform decision making and ensure the trust is anchored in the needs of the communities it serves and the wider educational system.
- Ability to communicate clearly with colleagues, parents and carers, partners and other agencies and checks that their message has been heard and understood.
- Ability to lead the board and challenges leaders appropriately in setting risk appetite and tolerance.
- Leads by example to avoid, declare and manage conflicts of interest.
- Ability to work closely with trustees, the governance professional and accounting officer to plan an efficient and effective programme of work leading to well-informed and well-considered decisions.

Educational standards, financial performance, and performance management

- Ability to understand and promote the importance of data interrogation to hold executive leaders to account,
- Ability to ensure the board holds executive leaders to account for financial and business management, in order to deliver educational outcomes.
- Confident in providing strategic leadership to the board during periods of scrutiny.

People

- Enables the board to work as an effective team by developing strong working relationships between trustees and creating a culture where differences are aired and resolved.

- Ensure executive and non-executive leaders have sufficient expertise to fulfil their functions, accessing independent expert advice when required.
- Understands the importance of succession planning to the ongoing effectiveness of both the board and the trust.
- Ability to ensure new trustees are helped to understand their non-executive leadership role, the role of the board and the vision and strategy of the organisation enabling them to make a full contribution.
- Sets high expectations for conduct and behaviour for all those in governance and is an exemplary role model in demonstrating these.
- Creates an atmosphere of open, honest discussion where it is safe to constructively challenge conventional wisdom and creates a sense of inclusiveness where each trustee understands their individual contribution to the collective work of the board.
- Promotes and fosters a supportive working relationship between the board, governance professional, executive leaders, staff of the organisation and external stakeholders.
- Actively seeks the governance professional's advice in shaping the board cycle of meetings and agendas, ensuring their input is respected by the executive and their expertise is embedded in the process.

Structures and compliance

- Understands the importance of non-executive leadership roles and is able to lead discussions and decisions about what functions to delegate.
- Ability to set sufficiently high expectations of the trust's governance professional, ensuring the board is compliant with the regulatory frameworks for governance and charity and company law.
- Ensures the board receives appropriate training and development.

Self-evaluation and performance management

- Ability to lead on effective, purposeful and developmental management of the accounting officer, setting clear objectives and ensuring high performance.
- Ability and willingness to actively invite feedback on their own performance as chair and develops their leadership approach through mentoring, reflection, and professional development
- Ability to put the needs of the board and trust first and is willing to step down or move on at the appropriate time.
- Ability to set challenging development goals and work effectively with the board to meet these goals.
- Ability to lead performance review of the board and its committees.
- Ability to have open and honest conversations with board members about their performance and development needs, and if appropriate, about their commitment or tenure.

Appendix 1: Seven principles of public life

The seven principles of public life (also known as the Nolan Principles) apply to anyone who works as a public office-holder. This includes all those who are elected or appointed to public office, nationally and locally, and all people appointed to work in the Civil Service, local government, the police, courts and probation services, non-departmental public bodies, and in the health, education, social and care services. All public office-holders are both servants of the public and stewards of public resources.

The principles also apply to all those in other sectors delivering public services, including the trustees and executive leaders of school trusts.

1. **Selflessness.** Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.
2. **Integrity.** Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.
3. **Objectivity.** Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.
4. **Accountability.** Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.
5. **Openness.** Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.
6. **Honesty.** Holders of public office should be truthful.
7. **Leadership.** Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Appendix 2: Academy Trust Governance Code

The [Academy Trust Governance Code](#) is a voluntary code developed by the sector that draws upon the Seven Principles of Public Life, the Charity Governance Code and relevant Department for Education guidance. It sets out the principles, desired outcomes, and recommended practice for effective governance.

- **Fundamental principle.** The academy trust's directors are aware of and meet Seven principles of public life, understand the legal, regulatory and contractual obligations they must meet, and have regard to the statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
- **Principle 1: Delivering the academy trust charitable objects.** The academy trust's articles of association set out the academy trust's charitable objects and how those must be fulfilled. the board is clear about its aims and ensures that they are being delivered effectively and sustainably.
- **Principle 2: Leadership.** The academy trust is led by an effective board that provides strategic governance in line with the aims and values of the academy trust and engages effectively with its members.
- **Principle 3: Integrity.** The board acts with integrity, adopting values and creating a culture which helps achieve the academy trust's charitable objects. The board is aware of the importance of public confidence and trust in academy trusts and their schools, and the board undertakes its duties accordingly.
- **Principle 4: Decision making, risk and control.** The board ensures that its decision-making processes are evidence informed, rigorous and timely and that effective delegation, control, risk assessment and management systems are set up and monitored. There is effective reporting at all levels of academy trust governance to ensure decisions are taken at the correct level in accordance with the articles of association and scheme of delegation.
- **Principle 5: Board effectiveness.** The board works as an effective team, using the appropriate balance of knowledge, skills, experiences and backgrounds to make informed decisions.
- **Principle 6: Equality, diversity and inclusion.** In ensuring the effective achievement of the academy trust's charitable objects, the board has a clear, agreed and effective approach to advancing equality, diversity and inclusion throughout the academy trust.
- **Principle 7: Openness and accountability.** The board leads the academy trust in being transparent and accountable. the academy trust is open in its work, unless there is good reason for it not to be.

Support for school trust chairs

We offer comprehensive support for chairs of school trust boards.

CST's [Governance and trustees professional community](#) is an integral part of CST membership, and open to all trustees and governance committee members in CST member trusts.

Our [training and events](#) calendar includes many courses and conferences relevant to chairs and the wider trustee community. Our *Chairing a school trust board* programme provides expert guidance and support for chairs who are looking to develop the unique skills and knowledge required to fulfil their leadership role. We particularly focus on the *Academy Trust Governance Code* and embedding CST's [Next-gen governance](#) practice to take governance from good to great.

We also offer bespoke [trust services](#) advice to help you review and develop your trust's governance, including [external reviews of governance](#), [governance structures reviews](#) and [mentoring for trust leaders and chairs](#).



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