Leading trust governance

Helping trusts build governance that is confident, strategic and designed for long-term impact

November 2026

Confederation of School Trusts

Governance Practice

Insight - Assurance - Connection

“Governance reflects something fundamental about how humans think. While history often celebrates the lone genius, most real progress has come from people **thinking together**.

Boards are a formal expression of that principle: they create a disciplined space for shared sensemaking and collective intelligence, so that organisations can act with greater clarity in conditions of uncertainty.”

Samira Sadeghi
Director of Trust Governance



Setting the direction of trust governance

Over the last decade, CST has helped shape governance thinking across the school trust sector through research, professional communities, practical guidance and sector leadership.

Our guidance and frameworks influence practice across the sector and are recognised within DfE governance resources:

- We were the first to define trust governance in **Governing a School Trust**
- We led the steering group that created the **Academy Trust Governance Code**, a code of conduct by the sector, for the sector
- We continue to lead the way in thinking about how to evolve trust governance, setting it out in **Next-gen governance** and **Governance at scale**



Defining effective trust governance

As the school trust sector has matured, so too has our understanding of governance.

Through our work with trustees and governance professionals across the country, we have identified four domains that define effective trust governance and help boards lead with confidence in an increasingly complex environment.



Governing through growth, complexity and change

School trusts are governing organisations of increasing size, complexity and public responsibility.

Today's boards must navigate growth, workforce challenges, safeguarding, SEND, financial sustainability, AI, risk and organisational culture while remaining focused on better outcomes for children and young people.

Our research in *Next-gen governance* highlights that trusts are generally confident in compliance but often seek greater confidence in strategic governance and long-term organisational leadership. Modern governance requires more than oversight.

It requires strategic leadership.



How governance thinking has evolved

We strive to raise the standard of governance in trusts whilst always questioning how we can do it better. To continually evolve governance, we have been telling a new story building on Sinek's Golden Circle: why, how, and what.

2023-24: Why

Inviting trusts to reimagine governance, asking **why** change was needed, surfacing complexity and challenging assumptions.

2024-25: How

Setting out our evidence-led theory of change in *Next-gen governance*, articulating **how** we needed to change to move beyond compliance and build longer-term sustainability in our sector.

2026 and beyond: What

Turning to **what** we do to get there, a theory of action focused on redesigning governance, particularly at scale

From oversight to strategic leadership

Effective governance requires switching from traditional, operational governance to strategic thinking, planning, and implementation.

Compliance and oversight

Compliance mindset

Control and prediction

Mushrooming reports and policies

Overlong, inefficient meetings

Stewardship and strategic leadership

Organisational sustainability

Stewardship

Assurance

Culture



The governance improvement cycle

Effective governance is also a continuous cycle of defining purpose, understanding context, designing for success, assuring delivery and driving improvement.

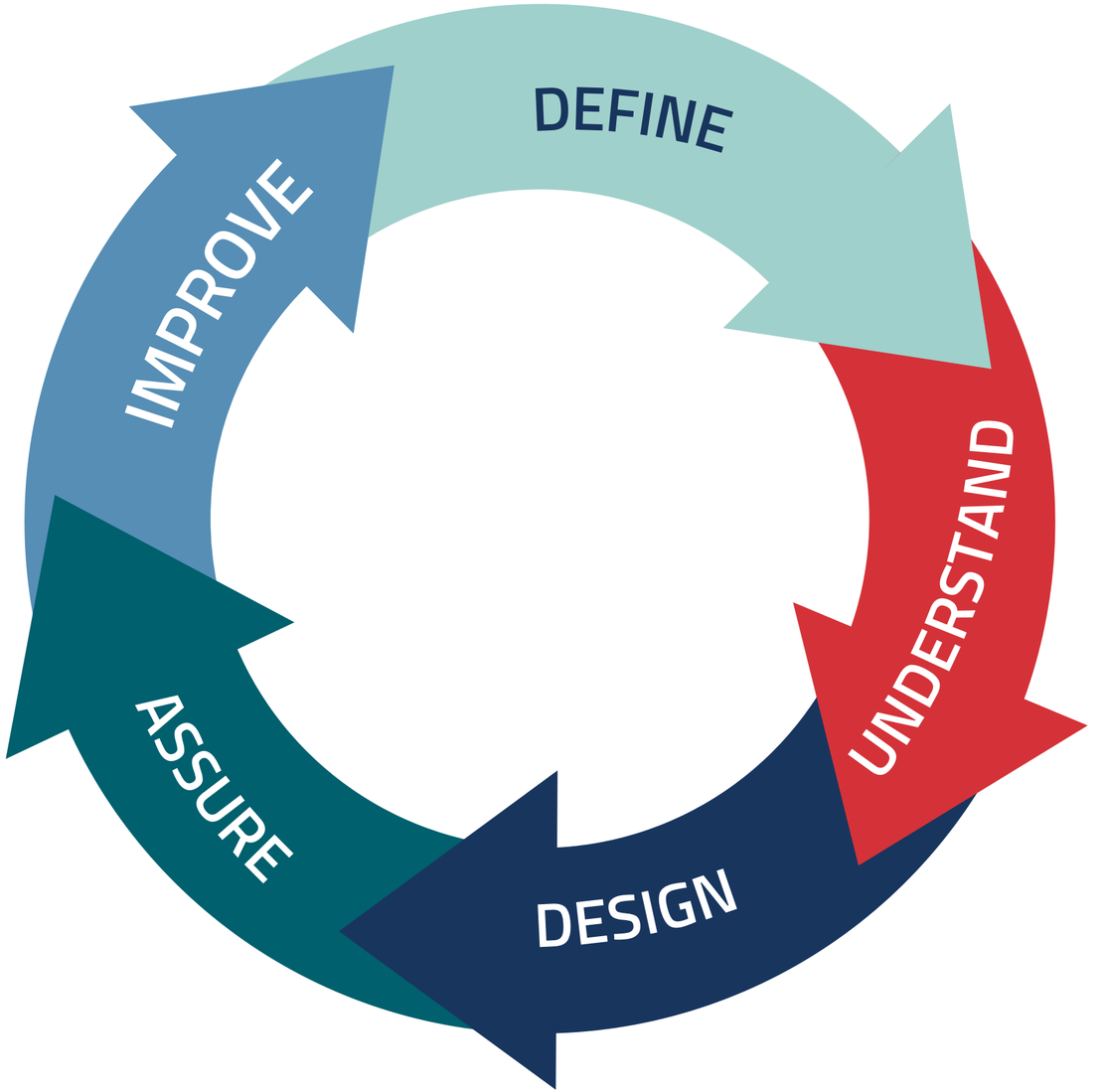
DEFINE - Setting purpose and strategic direction

UNDERSTAND - Building insight into context, performance and risk

DESIGN - Shaping governance structures for success

ASSURE - Providing confidence through effective oversight

IMPROVE - Reflecting, learning and strengthening governance practice



“Effective governance is not a fixed state or a matter of compliance alone. It requires continual reflection, learning and improvement, informed by a trust’s context, priorities and ambitions.

Through our work across the sector, CST brings insight into emerging practice and challenges, helping trustees and trust leaders ask the right questions, make informed decisions and strengthen governance over time.”

Rukia Shaffi
Head of Trust Development Services



Good governance is built through

INSIGHT

Trusted intelligence to support effective governance decisions.

ASSURANCE

Evidence-based confidence to make informed decisions.

CONNECTION

The collective expertise of the wider sector.

Insight informs strategic governance

Great governance is built on understanding.

Drawing on evidence, research and intelligence from across the sector, insight helps trustees and governance professionals understand their trust, ask the right questions and make informed decisions.

Insight enables trusts to:

- Understand performance in context
- Anticipate emerging challenges
- Identify priorities for improvement
- Strengthen strategic decision-making



Developing your governance

We help build your understanding of governance roles and how they work together through **our expert-led governance courses and masterclasses.** These cover the following areas:

- Fulfilling your governance role, whether a member, chair, trustee or local committee member
- Fulfilling your link role, whether SEND, safeguarding or careers
- Effective oversight of trust finance
- Designing governance at scale, to gain the scale dividend and mitigate the risks
- Maximising your risk management processes
- Leading trust mergers
- Establishing next-gen governance at your trust



Assurance creates confidence

Assurance enables boards to move beyond receiving information to gaining confidence in what it means and whether action is needed.

Boards need robust assurance across:

- Educational outcomes
- Organisational culture
- Risk
- Financial sustainability
- Strategy delivery

And a planned three-year cycle of external assurance helps boards test their own effectiveness and ensure governance structures and processes remain fit for purpose.



Assurance support for your board

As the sector body for school trusts, CST draws together insights from trusts across the country, translating emerging practice into practical guidance, tools and frameworks.

For trusts seeking external assurance, development or bespoke support beyond guidance and resources, our governance specialists provide tailored advice and review.

We can help with:

- External governance reviews
- Governance structures advice
- Post-ERG support
- Executive reviews
- Strategy development
- Speakers for events



Connection builds collective intelligence

You don’t need to navigate challenge and complexity in isolation.

Connection creates opportunities for:

- Peer challenge
- Shared practice
- Professional learning
- New ideas
- Strategic thinking

Through CST membership, trusts are connected not only to peers and expertise but also to a collective national voice that influences policy and champions the interests of trusts.



Connecting you with peers and experts

We connect governance leaders through community and shared practice. We have over 3,500 members of our professional community and expert advice and guidance from our governance team is always within your reach. Through CST membership you will have access to:

- Fortnightly governance briefings
- **Fortnightly member engagement meetings**
- Access to the **Governance and trustee professional community**
- Discounted tickets for the annual **CST Governance conference**
- A membership helpline for support and advice
- A network of trusted partners for specialist expertise
- Governance clinics



Governance and trustee professional community

CST's professional communities are knowledge-building networks, focused on key aspects of school trust life. As an inclusive benefit of CST membership, they provide unique opportunities for networking, peer-learning, and sharing of expertise.

Each professional community offers a safe and supportive environment in which to develop your understanding of some of the key challenges and opportunities of your role, with access to expertise from across the sector and beyond.

Membership of our communities is included for all staff and governance volunteers in your trust.

Join the community

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"As trusts evolve, so must governance. Our training and masterclasses give trustees and governance professionals space to deepen their understanding, test their thinking, explore shared challenges and learn from others.

Our seminars are full of guidance, expert advice and opportunities to consider and plan what effective governance might look like in their own trusts."

Jackie Eason MBE
Associate Director of Learning



CST Governance Conference

Our in-person **conference in June** each year is where we gather to hear from engaging and influential speakers about cutting-edge practice.

In 2026, our conference theme was *Designing for stewardship: From theory to practice*. Delegates explored the ‘what’ from Sinek's circle - what we need to do to embed next generation governance.

CST Governance Conference
Thursday 17 June 2027

Available to book now



Governance clinics

These short, focused sessions provide an opportunity to discuss a live governance issue with Samira Sadeghi, Director of Trust Governance.

Open to trustees, governance professionals, and executive leaders, clinics run regularly throughout the year with bookable 30-minute slots.

Book your slot



The Chairs Table

Held regionally across the country, The Chairs Table dinners bring together trust chairs to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing governance today.

Through peer conversation, shared experience and collective expertise, participants gain valuable insight into emerging issues, effective governance practice and strategic board leadership.

Book your place at the table





Let's strengthen trust governance together

If you'd like to explore how the CST Governance Practice can support and strengthen your trust's governance, get in touch with us at governance@cstuk.org.uk
or find out more about our governance support at:

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Confederation of School Trusts

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for academy trusts. Our members educate more than four million children through the dedicated work of their 600,000 staff.

We believe school trusts offer the best model for improving education because they uniquely unite schools in organisations with a strong, single purpose: education. This encourages the sharing of expertise, ideas, and resources to give pupils a better start in life.

We advocate for trusts by helping politicians, policy makers, and the wider public better understand their power to help children. We support trusts through practical advice, strategic guidance, and consultancy. We connect them with each other, and with expert thinking and research.

