

# Guide to *joining an academy trust board*

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**Academy  
Ambassadors**  
A NEW SCHOOLS NETWORK PROGRAMME

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# Summary

*Welcome to the essential guide for anyone seeking their first Non-Executive Director (NED) or Trustee role on an academy trust board. Whether you are an aspiring NED, or looking to map your senior leadership experience to the needs an academy trust board, this will help you to achieve your goal.*

NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme (AAP) provides a free bespoke matching service to business leaders and professionals with academy trusts looking to strengthen their boards. Since 2013, we have successfully placed over 2,000 appointments to academy trusts as part of our mission to provide a better future for the next generation of school leavers.

Some trusts call their board members Trustees. Others, particularly those with a religious character, call their board members Directors. We refer to those who serve on academy trust boards as Non-Executive Directors in this guide.

Read on to discover what academy governance involves, how to decide if it is for you, what to expect from the process, and our tips for successful applications.

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# Contents

Summary	02
What is academy trust governance?	03
The core academy trust governance structure	04
Is joining an academy trust board right for you?	05
Doing your homework	06
What to expect from the application process	07
Preparing for visits and interviews	08
Taking up your role.	09

# What is academy trust governance?

*Academies are independent, self-governing schools directly funded by the Government and led by trusts. Unlike maintained schools which are funded and overseen by Local Education Authorities, each academy trust has a funding agreement with, and is directly accountable to, the Secretary of State.*

## Academy trusts are a powerful vehicle for school improvement

Academies have autonomy over their structure, finances, curriculum, admissions and term times, and are directly responsible for their staff as employers. Some have sponsors, such as businesses, universities, other schools or faith groups, with the aim of increasing children's opportunities for continuing education and employment.

Over two thirds of academies belong to a family of schools, unified by their trust's vision and ethos. These are known as academy trusts, multi-academy trusts or MATs. MATs are a powerful vehicle for school improvement by sharing expertise, capacity and resources, and working collaboratively to improve pupils' outcomes. MATs vary in size from two to 50+ and often contain schools linked by factors such as geography or type (e.g. special educational needs and disabilities) and phase (e.g. primary, secondary etc.).

## Core duties of academy trust boards

Academy trust boards have three core duties:

- ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction for their school(s)
- overseeing finances and making sure that public money is well spent
- holding the executive leaders to account for each school's performance

Academy trust boards face the same challenges as any business board; defining a compelling vision and strategy, operating within financial constraints and creating a strong and effective governance structure. However, the academy trust board is not trying to make profits but acting to deliver an outstanding education for its pupils.

## Is a NED role similar to that of a school governor?

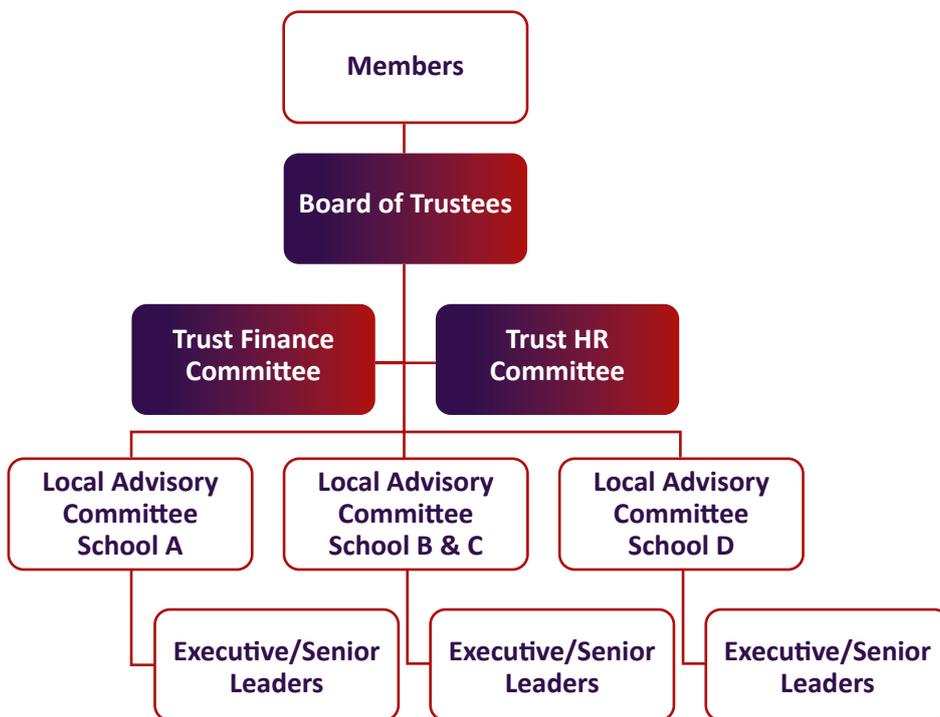
In principle, there are similarities between the duties of NEDs on academy trust boards and those of governors on maintained school boards. In practice, there are also significant differences.

The majority of NEDs serve on the trust board. Setting the direction for a group of schools requires NEDs to operate at a higher strategic and financial level than governors on boards leading single schools. As company directors and charity trustees, NEDs have different personal liabilities and responsibilities to those of maintained school governors. Additionally, trust boards are accountable to the Secretary of State via Regional Schools Commissioners, that provide oversight and scrutiny for trust schools, whilst maintained school governing boards are accountable to their local authority, with whom liabilities for the school reside.

In many MATs, each school has a local governing body or consultation committee with a remit that is defined by the trust's scheme of delegation. The role of governors on local committees will complement but vary from NED roles in the trust in their scope and duties.

# Common academy governance structure

This diagram illustrates the core governance structure that is common to all trusts. In academy trusts with a religious character, a diocese or religious body will also part of the structure, aligned with the role of Members.



The Department for Education delegates authority to monitor and support the educational performance of academy trusts to eight [Regional Schools Commissioners](#), whilst the [Education and Skills Funding Agency](#) (ESFA) has oversight of trusts’ financial performance.

The Members of the trust are accountable for the achievement of its charitable purpose and use their powers to further this aim. This includes responsibility for appointing Non-Executive Directors and undertaking succession planning for key roles such as Chair.

Each trust has the freedom to define a scheme of delegation that determines the role of its committees, including local governing bodies.

# Is joining an academy trust board right for you?

*There are many benefits of serving on an academy trust board. It creates social value by improving the life chances of young people, particularly those from more deprived backgrounds. Raising school standards improves the calibre of school leavers and supports the wider regional economy. It is also a role that will enhance your strategic leadership experience by utilising your expertise in a new sector as a non-executive. This can, in turn, broaden your career. So how to decide if joining an academy trust board is right for you?*

## Six questions to ask yourself

- Are you passionate about improving education?
- Are you comfortable with setting direction at a senior level?
- Are you confident in taking accountability across a trust and its schools?
- Are you prepared to challenge underperformance or financial instability?
- Do you understand and commit to acting in accordance with the seven principles of public life?
- Do you understand and accept the legal duties, responsibilities and liabilities of a NED?

If your answer to each is yes, your next step is to identify to what kind of trust you want to join.

## Choosing the right trust and role

It is important to choose a trust that will be a good match for you. Ideally it should be one which aligns with your ethos and values and has a vacancy that you believe that you can contribute to.

You may have a preference to work in schools in more deprived areas, those who support children with special educational needs, a smaller local trust in your area, or a trust with a strong mission to achieve pace of change. You can discuss this with your Regional Adviser who will help you to find the right fit.

If you have identified a role, read the specification carefully. Be confident that you understand what the trust is looking for in order to be sure that you can add value to the decisions and challenges that it is facing.

Before you decide to apply, also check that you understand the time commitment involved, including the extent and location of the meetings of the board and sub-committees. You should also be aware that NED appointments are typically for a four-year term.

## *The seven principles of public life*

Selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty & leadership are also known as the **Nolan Principles**. How might you demonstrate these on an academy trust board?

# Doing your homework

*Use public sources to research the trust that you are considering joining. Before you make first contact, read up on the trust, the role, and start developing your board profile.*

## Understanding the trust

- The **trust website** publishes ethos, values, governance structure and Articles of Association
- [Companies House](#) provides accounts and company information about the trust
- [Department for Education](#) publishes performance data on all the schools in the trust
- [Ofsted](#) publishes recent school inspection reports (there is no trust level alternative) and the [Compare School Performance Service](#) provides Ofsted reports alongside financial and pupil performance data.

## Reading into the sector and the role

- [Guide to academy trust governance structures and roles](#) explains how the different roles within academy governance work together.
- [Academies Financial Handbook](#) describes the financial management requirements that apply to academy trusts, including the statutory responsibilities of NEDs.

## Identifying your strengths

Your board profile summarises the skills and experiences that you can offer an academy trust. Thinking about your board profile before your first contact with a trust will help you to present a more specific set of competencies in an initial discussion or an expression of interest letter. The Department of Education's [Competency Framework for Governance](#) is a useful tool for self-reflection to help you to develop your profile.

Additionally, two of the principles of public life are often a topic for discussion in academy trust board recruitment, and therefore worth giving consideration to from the outset. These are:

### **Leadership**

What relevant experience do you have of strategic decision-making in a challenging environment?  
Can you identify examples, based upon the requirements of the role description?

### **Selflessness**

A recruiting trust will want know your story. In particular, 'Why education?' and 'What's your motivation to serve on the board?'. You do not require educational knowledge to be a NED on an academy trust board, but you should be able to demonstrate curiosity and interest in the sector.

## *Refresh your CV*

Make sure your CV is up-to-date, free from jargon and reflects any relevant voluntary roles that will support your application. Examples that demonstrate experience of setting vision and purpose, and being accountable are particularly useful.

# What to expect from the application process

*Most trusts start with an informal conversation to check that you have the skills and attributes to complement other board members. This often takes place by phone or video conference, but may also be arranged in person to coincide with a school visit.*

At this stage, the trust is likely to be having informal conversations with several candidates to get a feel for the field of potential applicants. Though this stage is informal, being well prepared will significantly increase the likelihood that you will be invited to apply for the role.

## Before an informal meeting

- Know the profiles of the people who you will be meeting via the trust website or LinkedIn.
- Get ready to explain your career to someone who may not know your sector by preparing to translate your strengths and experience into an education context.
- Have some ideas about how you might fit in at the trust and what positive role you could play in achieving the ambitions and meeting the challenges defined in the role description.
- Be able to show that you recognise the trusts' position from your initial due diligence in order to check that you can make a relevant contribution to its future direction.
- Prepare a couple of questions based upon the accounts summary, a recent Ofsted inspection report or other findings from your research that signals your engagement and intent.
- Find out about the other NEDs on the board and consider how you might complement their skills.

### Your Regional Advisor

Your Regional Adviser can discuss the trust's needs with you and how to shape your board profile.



*“Having had a ‘finance-centric’ career working for multi-national corporations, I was the last to believe I had the skillset or experience required to strengthen academy-trust boards. NSN’s Academy Ambassadors Programme opened my eyes to the fact I could make a positive difference to such an invaluable sector. I quickly came to realise how vital a rounded skillset and diverse team is for a robust trust board, in addition to the responsibility that rests on the trust board’s shoulders! Undertaking the role of Trustee has been exhilarating – not only am I contributing towards providing a better future for our next generation, I am developing my own skills and experience at a greater pace than I thought imaginable.”*

**Katie Stevens, NED, Ascent/SMART**

# Preparing for visits and interviews

*You should be invited to visit the trust, or one of its schools, pre-appointment. This may be combined with an informal conversation or a formal interview. On a visit you are likely to be hosted by the Chair, and have the opportunity to meet the CEO or the school's Headteacher.*

To get the most out of your visit:

- Know the name of the CEO or Headteacher and the trust/school's performance overall.
- Be aware of safeguarding and take photo ID.
- Be curious – ask about what's going well to understand strengths and challenges.
- Take notes on anything that you would like to ask the Chair when the visit is finished – but do be proportionate as schools can be sensitive if an informal visit appear to be a pseudo-inspection.

## Before a NED interview

When you are preparing for the interview panel, be ready to highlight your experience in the best possible way. It is also useful to remember that the decision to appoint will not be made on your experience alone. NEDs need great people skills and successful boards operate as a team, so your interview is also a great opportunity to demonstrate your interpersonal skills.

Make sure that you:

- Know the profiles of your interview panel.
- Are familiar with the trust's mission statement and can demonstrate how it aligns with your personal values.
- Are ready to articulate why you want to give back through joining an academy trust board, and why you want to be part of this particular trust.
- Know the Ofsted ratings and have read the accounts to get a sense of the success and challenges of the trust.
- Are prepared for searching questions. In particular, 'What challenges you have met in the past that are similar to the trust's challenges and how did you deal with them?', 'How have you influenced change?' and 'How do you challenge underperformance?'.  
'How do you challenge underperformance?'
- Are prepared to give your impressions of your visit if you have made one.

## Board shadowing

Some trusts give a prospective NED the opportunity to shadow a board meeting to check that it meets expectations and is a body that candidates feel that they can contribute to. This is a great opportunity for you to complete your due diligence on the role.

### *Questions are as important as answers*

Your questions are as telling as the information that you give. Knowing the trust, its pupil outcomes and financial headlines drives better questioning and demonstrates your capabilities.

# Taking up your role

*Before a trust can appoint you to a board role, it will need to carry out some independent checks to make sure that you are eligible to be a Non-Executive Director.*

## Trust due diligence

Be prepared for the trust to:

- Take up your references
- Commence safeguarding checks with the [Disclosure and Barring Service](#)
- Check with Companies House for director disqualifications
- Check with the Charity Commissions for trustee removals
- Check with the Individual Insolvency Register
- Ask you to declare any private interests relating to your public duties

You may be asked to sign a declaration of eligibility as part of this process.

## Confirmation of your role

Once legal compliance has been successfully completed, the trust will write to you to formally confirm your role. It is good practice for them to share details of your induction and onboarding programme with, or shortly after, your letter of appointment.

On appointment you may also be asked for more information about yourself, such as a photo, a short biography, full contact details, employment details, next of kin and nationality so that information about your appointment to the board can be shared with both the school community and with Companies House and any other bodies which have to be notified, such as auditors if you are to serve on the audit and risk committee.

## What to expect from induction

You should be provided with reading material to get you up to speed with the performance of the trust, matters arising for the board and how it operates, and invited to initial meetings with other board members and members of the Senior Leadership Team to introduce you to the organisation. The process should also highlight training and development opportunities for you as a new NED within the trust. Some trusts will also pair new board members with an experienced NED to provide mentoring or buddying support.

## Be a self-starter

You will have worked hard to secure this role and it is important that you are not over-reliant on the induction pack provided by the trust. Make sure that you continue to do your own reading into the role, the trust and the sector to complement the official process. A good place to start is NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme [guide to your first 100 days on an academy trust board](#).

## Any Questions?

If you have more questions about becoming a NED, please visit our [website](#) or get [in touch](#).

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