

Guide to *Recruiting* *to academy trust boards*

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**Academy
Ambassadors**
A NEW SCHOOLS NETWORK PROGRAMME

Summary

Great boards build, grow and sustain great academy trusts. If you are planning to recruit Trustees or Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) to your board from business and the professions, this guide is for you. It provides practical advice on planning and running effective board recruitment and is equally useful for an established trust looking to add capacity to its board, as it is for a newly formed trust building a board to achieve its vision.

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

This guide draws upon our experience in recruiting high-calibre NEDs for academy trusts and explains how and when to access the support of our Regional Advisors in your recruitment process.

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

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Overview

A supportive board with a clear vision that takes accountability, and holds the executive to account, is essential in creating strong outcomes for pupils and building public trust.

Getting the right mix of skills, perspectives and experience on your trust board for the challenges that it faces is key to its effectiveness. Getting your board recruitment right is as important as recruiting the best possible executive leaders, teaching and support teams.

The process of recruiting NEDs typically takes 12-16 weeks end-to-end. It requires a range of inputs about the composition and effectiveness of the board, consideration of the trust's current context and development plans, and alignment with its values and strategic goals.

This guide takes you through the board recruitment process in six discrete stages (Planning, Preparing the Brief, Selecting, Appointment, Onboarding, and Review) and provides detailed guidance on each.

How NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme helps

The purpose of NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme is to strengthen academy trust governance through bespoke board recruitment services that bring business expertise to trust boards.

We help trusts to reach beyond their usual recruitment channels, when necessary, to find the skills and experience that their trust needs for the next phase of its development. Our Regional Advisers have extensive experience across the education, government and recruitment sectors and are well placed to add value to your process.

By working with the Academy Ambassadors Programme on your board recruitment you will benefit from our:

- pool of high-calibre candidates, chosen for their skills, experience, understanding and commitment matched against your board skills analysis and growth strategy;
- expert advice on trust board composition, effectiveness and selection that enriches the whole process;
- ability to support trusts at all levels of maturity and performance; and,
- capacity building and interim support where required.

Stage One: *Planning to recruit*

Board recruitment can occur at any stage in a trust's development and is often triggered by events such as:

- when the trust forms and needs its first trustees;
- when significant change is planned or underway and new skills are needed;
- a skills audit or board review has identified that additional skills or capacity are needed;
- a restructure is taking place;
- a vacancy naturally occurs leaving a skills/experience gap in line with the board's succession plan.

When the need arises, it is important to clarify the **'who, what and why'** of the recruitment process.

Agree who is responsible for board recruitment

The Members of a trust are typically responsible for appointing other Members and NEDs. In some sponsored and faith-based trusts, the sponsor or religious body may also have the power of appointment.

A Member or the Chair of the board (also often a Member) usually leads the recruitment process with support from the trust's Governance Professional. Many trusts convene a recruitment panel. Some have a nomination committee to focus on board composition, recruitment and succession planning. Both would typically include the Chair or lead Member, a second Member, a NED with HR expertise, and where appropriate, a sponsor or independent expert. Newly forming trusts establish a recruitment panel from their steering board and use independent experts where relevant.

The Chief Executive or Executive Principal should have some input into the process but is not part of the decision. Many Chairs have prospective candidates shown around by the trust's executive leader and take feedback on candidates' skills in handling

Check the rules around board composition and recruitment

It is important to check the Articles of Association at the start of the process to clarify the number and nature of roles required, the means by which appointments should be made and the eligibility criteria that apply to NED roles in the trust.

The Department for Education (DfE) outlines best practice for board composition and mechanisms for appointment of NEDs in the [Model Articles of Association for Academy Trusts](#). Additionally, the [Multi-Academy Trusts - Good Practice Guide](#) helps set out design principles for academy trusts, including new trusts and existing trusts planning to grow. If a trust's articles have become barriers to effective recruitment, the board may consider changing them.

Establishing your board's needs

Recruiting to the board is your opportunity to take stock. Reflect on the profile of your board, trust strategy and current and upcoming challenges to identify the skills and experience that you need.

As the sector recovers from the coronavirus pandemic, consider whether your board requires new skills and experience to develop in ways that were not anticipated in your strategic plan. These might include IT and digital transformation skills, risk management, or additional expertise in stakeholder engagement, mental health and well-being, communications and PR.

Useful questions include:

Post-pandemic recovery

- What has materially changed in your trust in recent years, and how is the board working with the executive team to reframe the future?
- How robust was your digital strategy and investment in meeting needs for pupils and staff?
- Have new challenges, such as protecting pupil outcomes, funding or workforce planning and well-being emerged?
- Have new opportunities for enhancing pupil outcomes or trust growth arisen?
- How well-equipped is the board to manage the scale of ongoing change and lead the planning for future resilience and robustness?

Your current board

- What individual skills and experience do you have on your trust board? Are there gaps? Is the experience that you have proportionate to your future plans?
- How effective is the board in providing challenge, support, direction and decision-making? How is this captured and evaluated?
- How do you ensure independent evaluation of board effectiveness?
- Is the Chair likely to move on within the next two years? Is adequate succession planning in place and does it reflect the skills needed for future growth and resilience?
- How diverse is your board? Does it reflect the communities that it serves? Does it successfully lead a trust-wide culture of diversity and inclusion?
- What opportunities are there for ongoing training and development of board members?

Plans and challenges

- Is the trust on the cusp of change, in terms of growth, ethos, structure, educational phase or locality?
- How is the risk appetite set by the board?
- What principal risks will your trust face across the next two years?
- Is there a Financial Notice to Improve in place or a developing issue that requires improved board financial security? If so, what skills and experience do you need to address them?
- Does the trust need to establish credibility with key partners: DfE, Regional Schools Commissioners, ESFA, parents, a diocese or sponsor, or local community?

Using insight and context

Decisions about recruitment should be informed by an evidence-base and there are several sources of insight and analysis to take account of in your planning.

At an individual level

All boards should conduct skills audits that assess the competencies of individuals. This is often done in the context of core duties and functions of the board. Skills audits are even more effective if matched to the context of the trust and live board challenges. This allows you to take a more strategic view about capability, e.g. a Trustee with financial skills and experience may serve on the board, but are these at the right level, developed through financial leadership in an organisation of similar scale and budget?

As a board

It is a requirement of the [Governance Handbook](#) that boards undertake regular review of their effectiveness, and the [Academies Financial Handbook](#) requires established trusts to include in their annual accounts an assessment of the trust's governance, including a review of the composition of the board in terms of skills, effectiveness, leadership and impact.

There are a number of tools available for guiding an academy trust's annual self-evaluation exercise. The DfE recommends that trusts periodically undertake an independent external review of governance. This should be done by an individual or organisation with experience of reviewing a trust of similar scale and phase. The findings of an external review are more powerful than a self-assessment and an external review should be undertaken ahead of any significant changes in the trust, such as the delivery of a growth plan.

The most recent outcomes of a skills audit, self-assessment and board effectiveness review, should be key inputs into the recruitment process. If this information is out-of-date or a significant change is planned, you should build an appropriate level of review into your planning process so that the recruitment specification and approach reflects the outcomes.

Other inputs

Inputs from key stakeholders should also be considered at the planning stage, such as Regional Schools Commissioners, sponsors and parents. If the trust has received a Financial Notice to Improve, the recruitment activity should also take the financial control and governance issues highlighted by the notice into consideration.

Useful tools

[CST Improvement Capacity Framework for Trust Governance](#)

[NGA Skills Audit and Matrix for MATs](#)

[Twenty-one questions that all trust boards should ask themselves](#)

[Competency Framework for Governance](#)

Design for diversity

Appropriate diversity increases the effectiveness of the board and brings value to the trust. The business case for diversity and equality in board recruitment is well documented. Boards make better decisions when there is a combination of demographics, skills, experience, race, age, gender, disability, religion, nationality, educational and professional background and other relevant personal attributes around the table.

Designing more diverse boards does not just mean giving consideration to protected characteristics but looking more broadly about what will make an effective board. This includes assessing the extent to which the board reflects trust users and stakeholders, identifying whether it contains a proportionate level of experience to the size of the trust, and whether it has a sufficient range of perspectives to provide the effective challenge that underpins good decision-making.

Three ways in which boards can improve diversity

1. Work with an external partner, such as NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme, to attract candidates with no connections to the existing boards. This will provide an independent selection process.
2. Give significant weight to relevant skills, underlying competencies and personal capabilities in the role specification. This is where good recruitment can be won or lost. A good, engaging specification that clearly states the challenge and the competencies allows candidates from all backgrounds to step forward. Giving weight to underlying competencies and personal capabilities alongside proven career experience can attract a wider range of talent.
3. The selection panel and the process that you use will retain or lose good candidates. Include people with different backgrounds and mindsets on the recruitment panel to provide a rounded view of candidates. Additionally, the use of formalised evaluation and scoring mechanisms can allow for weighting of all factors, such as in-depth community understanding, alongside executive business skills.

On Diversity

Six trustees from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds reflect on their experience on boards and share their views in this [collection of short essays](#) published by NSN and the Confederation of School Trusts.

During shortlisting, interview and selection, trusts should apply the required rigour, transparency and professionalism and seek to reduce the impact of unconscious biases.

Whilst a board should actively seek to recruit a diverse range of NED talent, the trust must treat everyone equally, irrespective of sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, disability, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, political views, or membership of a Trade Union and should place an obligation upon all trust personnel to respect and act in accordance with the Equality Act 2010.

Deciding your approach

To recruit high-calibre people, you need a wide field of applicants. Consider which recruitment channels you will use, such as local, national and sector networks and communities.

Your recruitment partner

NSN Academy Ambassadors Programme gives access to a pool of business leaders, major employers and partners, a wide range of external networks and job platforms, as well as social channels. Any academy trust is eligible to use this free service when seeking to recruit board trustees. Our partner, [Inspiring Governance](#), provides a recruitment service for committees and local governing bodies. Alternatively, a specialist commercial recruitment agency can help you find talent and advise on the process. Be clear about what you want to get the best from working with an external organisation.

Recruiting for educational expertise

To recruit educational expertise, many trusts talk to National or Local Leaders of Education, National Leaders of Governance and their local Regional Schools Commissioner's office. The Academy Ambassadors Programme specialises in recruiting from business and the professions but can often also help.

Recruiting a Chair

When a Chair steps down, the appointment of a new Chair has usually been planned in advance. Where succession planning has not been possible, or for a new academy trust in its formation stage, the trust will need a formal recruitment approach to identify a new Chair, such as the tailored Chair recruitment service offered by NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme.

Whether recruiting a candidate for Chair for immediate appointment or as part of a succession plan, allow more time. Additionally, candidates considering Chair roles, especially if they have not been a Chair before, often seek a high degree of pre-recruitment engagement with the trust including meeting key personnel, observing a board meeting, and meeting key stakeholders such as sponsors or the Regional Schools Commissioner. This level of due diligence should be welcomed and supported.

When recruiting a new Chair, be mindful of how the Articles of Association define the appointment. This is typically worded, 'The Trustees shall elect a Chairman from among their number', which means that a NED has to be appointed and then stand for election as Chair once on the board.

Recruiting a Member

When recruiting a Member, start with your existing trust board. Do you have NEDs who are time constrained or looking to step down? Could they take up a Member's role? Some trusts additionally look to other high performing trust boards for Members.

Setting a timeline

Setting a timeline for your recruitment is important for managing expectations, resources and diaries. Be clear on all stages of the process, key dates and the start date for the role to respect candidates' time. Many will want to have an initial discussion to understand more about the requirements and meet key people from the trust to ensure that they can contribute in a meaningful way. A well-structured schedule, like the sample below, will enable this. Trusts may also capture challenges around recruitment in the risk register with a clear mitigation strategy.

If you plan to conduct a board effectiveness review to shape your specification, allow more time to complete this. Also bear in mind the timing of the AGM for Chair and Member recruitment, but be prepared to appoint by resolution outside the AGM cycle to optimise your board's capacity.

<i>When</i>	<i>What activity needed?</i>	<i>Who should be involved in this step of the process?</i>
Weeks 1 & 2	<p>Assess skills gaps on current board</p> <p>Agree aims of recruitment – strategic challenges the board will face</p> <p>Agree process – who is on the panel and check articles/key dates for shortlisting, interviews, school visits</p>	<p>Led by the Chair with support from the Company Secretary (or Clerk)</p> <p>Members/trustees/Chair</p> <p>Led by the Chair, supported by the Company Secretary (or Clerk)</p>
Weeks 3 & 4	Draft a clear role and person specification	Led by the Chair, supported by the Company Secretary (or Clerk)
Weeks 3 & 4	Check and amend role specification ready for publication of advertisement – decide where to advertise/have recruitment pack ready	Company Secretary (or Clerk)/ Chair or Academy Ambassadors team
Week 5	Role goes live to recruit	Company Secretary (or Clerk)/ Chair via agreed routes or Academy Ambassadors team

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Setting a timeline *(continued)*

<i>When</i>	<i>What activity needed?</i>	<i>Who should be involved in this step of the process?</i>
Week 6 to Week 11	You may opt to receive CVs as they arrive to enable informal conversations to run in parallel Recruitment closes – CVs sent to trust/shortlisting panel	Academy Ambassadors team/trust recruitment panel or the Company Secretary/Clerk
Week 6 to Week 13	Informal conversations/school visits/check references (may require a little longer depending on timing of CVs / visits) If there is not time for candidates to visit the trust / one of its schools at this pre-interview stage, you can combine a visit on the interview day	Chair/CEO/Company Secretary (or Clerk)
Week 13 or 14	Formal interviews/feedback to selected candidate(s) – check references if not done earlier Can include a school visit at this time	Trust recruitment panel
Week 14/15 or next Board meeting	Formal appointment	Members and/or Chair and trust board depending on appointment process within articles
Week 14 or 15	Feedback to unsuccessful candidates/and Academy Ambassadors	Member from recruitment panel – usually the Chair
Week 15 onwards	Induction starts	Company Secretary (or Clerk)/Chair and agreed trust representatives based on trust’s induction process
Week 16	Review of process	Led by the Chair with input from panel, candidate and Governance Professional

Stage Two: Preparing a brief

How you present the trust, role and its challenges will shape the advertising and search carried out by your partner and attract candidates. Your recruitment brief should contain a description of the board and its work, a role description and key information about your trust.

Define the work of the board

This summarises the key areas that the board will address over the next three years. It should answer the following questions:

- Where does your trust want to be in three-five years' time? What board level skills and expertise do you need to take you there?
- What challenges are you likely to face and what skills, experience and personal qualities do you need to address them?
- How has the pandemic impacted upon the trust's development and priorities?
- Is specific business growth, change or risk management or digital transformation expertise needed to achieve your goals?
- Is your Chair moving on in the next two years? Are you seeking specific skills in their successor?
- Which areas do the executive team receive the least board challenge on and can these be addressed through this recruitment?

Write a role specification to attract candidates

A good role specification is at the heart of all recruitment. You do not need to start this document from scratch- there are clear guidelines from DfE in Academy Trust Governance: Structures and roles. NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme online registration form also provides the key questions to formulate a role specification. Once completed, NSN's Regional Advisers will contact you to arrange a consultation meeting and help you to develop and refine your specification and produce a strong recruitment advert.

The ideal role specification should:

- Be very clear about the position- Chair or NED?
- Set out the aims of the trust and the work of the board over the next three years. Do not undersell the issues. High-calibre people identify with challenge and change.
- Sell the role. Identify the opportunities facing the trust, its uniqueness and the strengths of the board.
- Specify the key skills and competencies required.
- Give links to the trust's website.
- Be clear about the commitment: time, frequency and location of meetings, expectations beyond board meetings such as sub-committees and visits.

The candidate pack

The candidate pack gives potential applicants the information that they need in order to apply for the role. It conveys the trust's ethos, the strengths and challenges of the board, and demonstrates to potential NEDs that their time will be well spent in supporting the organisation.

The candidate pack can be sent to interested candidates as a pdf or as a collection of links in an email. It should contain the following:

- An overview of the trust- size, location, phase, type of schools;
- Core information and data on the performance of schools in the trust;
- A prospectus or newsletters from your academies to give a sense of what life is like for a pupil and parent;
- A summary of the trust's governance structure and how it works;
- Short biographies of the current Members and NEDs;
- What new board members can expect by way of commitment, induction and training and links to the trust's key governance documents, such as articles of association and funding agreements;
- Links to core DfE guidance, such as the Academies Financial Handbook, the Governance Handbook and The Seven Principles of Public Life to flesh out the responsibilities of the role;
- A role and person specification; and
- An overview of the appointment process and time-line including clear instructions on how to apply and express an interest and a date for interviews.

Typical areas of expertise needed on Trust boards

Some of the expertise the boards need can only be gained at sufficient calibre, depth and breadth by going out to businesses, the public sector, charities and the professions. Academy trusts are in the business of education, operating as a charity, often with large revenues, multiple site operations and significant numbers of employees; and as such are facing similar challenges to traditional charities and businesses operating at similar and larger scale.

Translating your Member and trust board’s needs to the skills and expertise of people from a different sector can be hard: the following tables suggest specific experience you may want to stipulate is required in the person specification when you recruit.

Typical areas of expertise for trust boards:

<i>Area of Expertise</i>	<i>Skills and Experience</i>
Business / Executive Leadership / Change management / Growth Management / Turnaround & Restructuring	<p>MD, COO or CEO level in a commercial or charity business with revenues in excess of a value no less than you expect your trust to be in 5-10 years.</p> <p>Business growth: managing business growth- commercial, retail or industry experience in growing a business, chain of businesses or franchises operating multiple sites, mergers and acquisitions.</p> <p>Head Office and organisational development: creating, growing and managing a head office, including driving up business efficiency in central services; experience overseeing the establishment of a regional or cluster structure.</p> <p>Consolidation: planning for consolidation or even downsizing including managing financial, personnel and reputational issues and consequences.</p> <p>Turnaround: managing transformation, delivering sustained improvement, managing risk</p>
Governance	<p>Previous experience as Chair: experience of chairing a board or a board committee, developing the people, process and committees of a board, holding colleagues to account and engaging fellow senior board members in change.</p> <p>Governance: experience in leading rigorous, independent board structures that are both compliant and effective for the scale and complexity of the trust. Either in a non-exec or large scale operational context.</p> <p>Charity: experience operating within a large charity/not-for-profit organisation.</p>

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Typical areas of expertise needed on Trust boards (continued)

<i>Area of Expertise</i>	<i>Skills and Experience</i>
<p>Risk Management</p>	<p>Strategic Risk Manager role. The candidate could be from corporate, public sector, charity, financial, regulatory & compliance, or reputational perspectives.</p> <p>The key skill is the ability to consider the strategic risks and ensure that the impact and probability is understood and that effective mitigation and contingency strategies are in place across the trust.</p>
<p>HR / Organisation Development</p>	<p>Personnel: skills to handle the personnel challenges of a large and growing staff body, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing the performance of multiple senior staff • Remuneration decision-making to set leadership salaries • HR expertise in leading/supporting significant strategic change and operational re- organisation • HR and legal expertise to handle grievance cases or where redundancies are planned • Recruitment skills at a strategic leadership level to support growth, particularly in regions where recruitment is difficult • Succession planning where trustees or executive team is likely to retire or move on • Staff engagement and development
<p>Legal / Compliance</p>	<p>Senior legal practice: larger trusts particularly look for legal skills at partner level and above where they are likely to have legal issues such as sponsorship of new schools, land acquisition, complex personnel cases, regulatory challenges, complex contractual management.</p> <p>Compliance: expertise in corporate, charity or regulatory compliance. This skill set can also be linked to HR, Finance/Estates where compliance needs are specific.</p>

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Typical areas of expertise needed on Trust boards (continued)

<i>Area of Expertise</i>	<i>Skills and Experience</i>
Financial	<p>Financial management: all trusts require independent scrutiny of financial planning and budgeting. Some trusts have specifically recruited people who have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebuilt a balanced budget from a deficit position/also associated with turnaround skills • Planned for sustainable growth, developing strategic financial plans • Had experience in overseeing or managing budgets of a particular value, ie: no less than the trust expects in 5-10 years • Audit experience, typically from a corporate context and often linked to compliance and regulatory, but also from audit roles in corporate and charity governance • Procurement expertise and efficiency change programmes and financial restructuring • Experience in bidding and securing grants
IT / Estates / Asset Management	<p>Property and capital: architectural experience, building and capital development, facilities management, managing large scale, multi-site and/or disburse asset portfolios and/or change programmes.</p> <p>IT change programme: CIO roles, transforming and improving IT provision, implementing shared service models, delivering efficiency programmes through procurement and organisation wide systems integration.</p>
Marketing / PR	<p>Communications, Marketing and PR: skills to handle the stakeholder engagement challenges around large change, growth, reputational issues and improving parent and community engagement.</p>
Strategic Partnerships	<p>Developing Relationships: where trusts are looking to strengthen and/or specifically develop new strategic sector / business relationships.</p>

Expertise needed for Member roles

Members are the founders of the trust and ensure that it delivers its charitable object. Members safeguard governance through accountability for the effectiveness of the trust board. They have powers to appoint and remove from the board, direct the board, amend the Articles of Association, appoint external auditors and to wind up the trust. Some Members also serve on the trust board, but the majority should not to preserve independence.

Unfortunately, NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme is not currently able to offer a free Member recruitment service via DfE's funding, in order to focus on the programme's core purpose of matching volunteers to trustee roles for those academy trusts most in need of support. Member recruitment remains available through the Programme at a cost to the trust.

The role specification for Members

The specification for Members should reflect the statutory duties described in [Academy trust governance: Structures and roles](#). Trusts should avoid over-specifying this strategic, 'hands-off' role, whilst recognising the skills and experience needed by those who are ultimately responsible for the trust's compliance with charity law, company law and its regulated authorities through the appointment of effective NEDs.

The person specification

Trusts often seek an understanding of academies, the trust and its community within the Members board. Members usually have corporate governance and/or strategic board, trustee or NED experience. Understanding of audit, compliance, charity and corporate finance and law is also valuable. The board of Members also requires expert education understanding to ensure the broadest view of the trust's ethos and values. Therefore, the person specification should be very broad and it is not appropriate to seek defined competencies such as marketing, or IT. Trusts should also be clear about eligibility criteria.

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Expertise needed for Member roles

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<i>Area of Expertise</i>	<i>Skills and Experience</i>
Business / Executive Leadership	CEO level in a commercial, public or charity business with significant financial and people expertise and understanding of managing and leading businesses through change including growth, mergers and organisational change.
Governance	<p>Previous experience as a non-executive Chair and experience of chairing a board. Developing the people, process and committees of a board, holding colleagues to account and scrutinising board and organisation performance.</p> <p>Corporate Governance: experience in building and leading rigorous, independent board structures that are both compliant and effective for the scale and complexity of the trust. Preferably in a non-executive capacity or a charitable/not-for-profit organisation.</p>
Financial / Audit	<p>Ability at a strategic level to understand corporate and charity annual reports and financial management of a significant scale.</p> <p>Audit experience, typically from a corporate context and often linked to compliance and regulatory, but also from strategic audit roles in corporate and charity governance.</p>
Legal / Compliance	Senior legal practice: particularly at partner level and above where they are likely to have expertise in corporate, charity or regulatory compliance.

Stage Three: Advertising and Sifting

Advertising specifications must be short, sharp and specific. Their purpose is to sell the role and attract candidates' interest. They should link to the full role description that describes statutory duties and the knowledge, experience and skills sought and clearly signpost the next step – how to make an expression of interest.

Allow 6-8 weeks for the advertising and sifting stage. Consider reviewing applications against the key criteria outlined in your role specification as you receive them to maximise your chances of securing the right candidate.

Inviting expressions of interest

Requesting a CV and a brief expression of interest should be sufficient as a first step in the application process. Avoid asking candidates to go through the bureaucracy of completing a form. However, if this is part of your safe recruitment process, make sure that your Regional Advisor is aware that this will be required.

Sifting

When sifting candidates, never include someone on the shortlist just to fill space. Candidates are volunteers and it is not fair to waste their time.

It is useful to do a quick online search at the sifting stage to validate candidates' CVs. This will also identify any negative connections that may make a candidate unsuitable for your trust.

Also make sure that those you do shortlist for applications meet the eligibility criteria required in your Articles of Association. Employees cannot be members and NEDs employed by the trust cannot exceed 33.3% of the board. People working for the Local Authority are also usually not eligible to be Trustees. In many trusts the executive leader attends and reports to the board but is not a member of it, which is a more robust model for holding the executive to account.

Getting the balance right

It is recommended that both Member and trust boards include a healthy measure of external challenge and should not be dominated by individuals who each have a link to a particular activity or previous academy.

In addition to the breadth of business expertise for both NEDs and Members, trusts should keep sight of the importance of business skills sitting alongside Members and Trustees with strong external education leadership experience and knowledge and understanding of the schools and communities served by the trust. The executive leader should not be the only educationalist in the room.

Discovery opportunities for candidates

Board recruitment is a two-way process. You are seeking a high-calibre candidate for your board and prospective NEDs are checking that they will be able to make a meaningful contribution and align with your trust's values. It is good practice to facilitate this by offering opportunities for candidates to discover more about the commitment.

Informal meetings

Invite the candidates that you have identified with potential to contribute to your board to an informal meeting, either in person or via a phone or video call. This will allow them to ask questions and for you to get a sense of their level of interest and appropriateness for your board.

Informal meetings are typically held by the Chair, a Member or a senior NED. Be ready to ask those from a different sector to translate their skills and experience into an educational context. If you do not understand elements of their CV you must ask. It is also a good opportunity to explore the following aspects of the role:

- Brief candidates on the basis of structure, issues, personal liability and statutory documents such as the Academies Financial Handbook.
- Explain your ethos and values. Candidates in alignment with these will be better placed to support you when facing difficult decisions.
- Be clear about the board's expectations of NEDs. Never downplay the time involved to attract a candidate. It is important that they can realistically commit to your trust for the long term.
- Discuss and explore any potential conflicts of interest that the candidate would need to disclose if appointed and how these might be managed.
- Explain how this conversation supports the next stage of formal interview.
- Identify if further discovery opportunities would be beneficial to the candidate.

Visits

Visits to an academy helps to bring the role to life showing what you do and why it matters. This is also an opportunity for candidates to meet the trust's executive leader and for them to have an informal conversation, the key points of which can be fed back to the recruitment panel. If a physical visit is not possible, consider how a virtual visit could be conducted, either by producing a short video or suite of videos, or by using video calling software to give a virtual tour.

Shadowing

If a candidate is unsure about role or expectations, consider inviting them to a members or trust board meeting, if one is in the pipeline, as an observer. This will help the candidate to understand how the board operates and will be particularly helpful for prospective Chairs. Candidates should sign a non-disclosure agreement before shadowing a board meeting and have a follow up conversation with the Chair to share their impressions and ask any further questions about the proceedings that they have observed.

Interviews & decision-making

A formal interview involving two or three people from the recruitment panel is essential to check that candidates share the trust's values and that you are both clear on what they would bring to your board. The interview panel should include the Chair, a Member and a senior NED. It could also include an external expert if required.

A Member or NED interview is not a technical examination of their knowledge. It is an opportunity for you to test their commitment to the trust and that the skills and experience that they have will be complementary to those of existing board members.

The person that you meet in the process is a good indicator of the NED you will get on the board in many respects, including their timeliness, preparation and behaviours. You may want to see candidates in action by sharing some board papers, a performance or financial report and asking for reflections. However, do bear in mind that this is not an examination and you should be looking for appropriate rather than in-depth responses.

If you are interviewing several candidates in one day, schedule the interviews to allow for a 15-20 minute panel review after each one so that you can share your impressions and compare your assessment of how the candidate ranked against your assessment criteria.

At the end of the day's interviewing the panel should agree the selection of candidate and a forward plan that includes:

- Making a verbal offer
- Giving feedback to candidates
- Giving feedback to the MAT board
- Completing statutory checks and notifications

Those not appointed will expect to be informed and often request feedback. You should be prepared to give honest, constructive and timely feedback before the outcome is made public.

References and checks

It is the trust's responsibility to take up references as part of the selection process. This can be pre-interview or post-appointment decision, depending on your trust's policy. You may find it useful to call referees to understand how the candidate is likely to contribute to the board based upon their past behaviours.

An enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check should be made at this time, as well as checks with Companies House for director disqualifications, the Charity Commission for trustee removals and the Individual Insolvency register.

Stage Four: Appointment

Once you have decided who your new board member(s) will be, you need to appoint them in line with your Articles of Association. You will have established this verbally, but a proper record needs to be made via a formal letter. The letter should confirm the appointment, who has made the appointment and the term of office. If checks have yet to be completed, it should be stated that this appointment should be subject to the outcomes of those checks.

Declarations and checks

On the candidate's acceptance of the role you may ask them to sign:

- A declaration of eligibility
- The board's register of interests form
- A commitment to uphold your board's code of conduct

An enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check should be made at this time, as well as checks with Companies House for director disqualifications, the Charity Commission for trustee removals, and the Individual Insolvency register.

Information and compliance

On appointment you should also ask your new NED for the information that you need to both inform the relevant organisations of their appointment and prepare introductions to your trust's community. This might include:

- A professional photograph
- A short board profile for publication on the trust website
- Additional information required for compliance which may not be included in their application, such as date of birth, nationality, name of next of kin and business address.

Companies House and ESFA must be advised of the appointment of new NEDs and Members within 14 days of the appointment being made.

Depending upon the nature of the appointment, you may also need to inform external advisors, such as auditors too.

Welcome and introductions

In addition to your statutory compliance obligations you should also be ready to introduce your new NED to your trust board and the wider academy community as part of making them feel welcome and a valued part of your trust. A new board appointment can be an opportunity to tell others about how the trust is improving. Most trusts will announce the appointment to heads and principals, in school newsletters and inform their Regional Schools Commissioner and other partners.

Stage Five: Onboarding

The recruitment process should not be regarded as done when the position has been accepted. A good induction or onboarding programme is key to orienting your new NED within their role and equipping them with the understanding that enables them to start making a contribution as quickly as possible.

Onboarding should include:

- a briefing on Directors' Duties;
- providing essential reading about the trust via the induction pack;
- providing access to and training for the board portal or area on the trust's VLE
- signposting essential reading from ESFA & DFE- Financial and Governance Handbooks;
- arranging welcome meetings with other board members and executive team members
- arranging appropriate training
- organising visits- both general and aligned with any particular area of interest/responsibility
- arranging for the new NED to be mentored or buddied with a more experienced member of your board, or in the case of a new Chair, with an established Chair of another trust.

The Induction Pack

The induction pack does not need to be a physical tome, but a curated set of documents in your board portal or links to a combination of the public and secure board area of your website.

Sample contents

- History of the trust
- Vision, values and strategy
- Governance structure
- Governance documents e.g. articles of association
- Code of conduct for NEDs
- Reports and accounts
- Calendar of board and committee meetings
- Minutes of previous year's meetings
- List of current NEDs, bios and contacts
- Contact details for the trust's Clerk or Governance Professional
- Overview of sponsor/diocese
- Organisation chart and senior team biographies
- Policy documents
- Marketing literature
- Access to support services that the trust subscribes to such as CST, The Key or NGA

Guide to First 100 Days as a NED

Access the NSN Academy Ambassadors guide for new NEDs [here](#)

Stage Six: Review

Once induction is completed the recruitment committee should review the effectiveness of process and note any learnings for next recruitment cycle. The review should seek input from the panel, partner, candidate, and Governance Professional.

The Chair should also make a note to check in with the new NED three times in their first year- after induction, after their first board meeting and at end of first year to ensure that they feel settled and able to make a contribution.

The feedback from new NEDs in their first 6-12 months is often extremely valuable as they complete their first board cycle with fresh eyes and a truly independent perspective. Chairs should also encourage NEDs to highlight any areas that they are finding challenging in order to direct them to appropriate development and support.

Any questions?

If you have more questions about recruiting to your board, please visit our [website](#) or [get in touch](#).

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