

On Board:

*Your first 100 days on an
academy trust board*

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**Academy
Ambassadors**
A NEW SCHOOLS NETWORK PROGRAMME

Summary

Congratulations on being appointed to serve as a Non-Executive Director (NED) or Trustee on an academy trust board. Your role in improving the skills and life chances of young people could not be more important. You will shortly be embarking on your induction programme which will enable you to contribute to the board and make an impact more quickly.

This guide complements your Trust's induction process by outlining what to expect and what to learn across your first 100 days on the board. It recommends essential reading, highlights the importance of adopting effective board behaviours and building relationships, and signposts sources of ongoing support.

NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme has successfully placed over 2,000 NEDs and Trustees in academy trusts since 2013 as part of our mission to provide a better future for the next generation of school leavers. We recognise that effective recruitment does not end at the appointment stage, but on completion of a robust and well-paced induction.

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.

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What to expect from academy trust board induction

A good onboarding process enables new NEDs to be as effective as possible in the shortest practicable time.

Who is responsible for induction?

The Chair leads the induction process which is facilitated and delivered by the trust's Governance Professional – usually the Clerk to the Board or Company Secretary. Training may be delivered by members of the senior leadership team and introductions to specific areas of trust activity may be given by the Chairs of board committees. On reviewing your induction programme, ask questions and make suggestions if you feel that there's anything else that would be helpful as you get started.

What will it cover?

Your induction will provide an introduction to the trust and the duties of a NED. It should take account of the nature of your new role, including, for example, if you are to serve on a committee or undertake a link responsibility to an area of the trust's activity, such as safeguarding.

At the end of your induction, you should be clear about the trust's expectations of you and how to undertake your statutory duties, the current position and future challenges of your trust, how your board works and where to go for additional help and guidance.

To achieve this, the induction process will build your:

- **Understanding of the NED role** - duties, liabilities, level, and behaviours.
- **Understanding of the trust** - its ethos, pupil outcomes, funding mechanisms and finances, approach to recruiting, retaining and developing staff, strategy, challenges, and future plans.
- **Connections with people at the trust** - other board members, the Governance Professional, and the senior leadership team.
- **Understanding of the trust's key relationships** - with sponsors, partners, and stakeholders.
- **Understanding of how the board works** - governance structures and procedures, matters reserved for the board, access to board information and systems, and the board calendar.

A manageable pace

There is a great deal of information for new NEDs to take in quickly and a good practice is to build your understanding at a manageable pace across the first 100 days of your appointment. A sample timeline for induction is given on page 10.

Your purpose and duties

As a NED at an academy trust, you have joined a board that:

- provides strategic leadership and direction
- holds the executive leaders to account for the trust’s educational outcomes for pupils
- oversees the trust's financial position and risk management and assures compliance with the Academies Financial Handbook
- seeks assurance that the trust meets its legal responsibilities for pupil and staff wellbeing

How trust boards discharge these duties is set out in the Governance Handbook, published by the Department of Education (DfE). Familiarise yourself with the elements that apply to your trust. This guidance is updated annually and your Governance Professional should make you aware of any changes across your term of office.

To be an effective NED you need to work as part of a team and commit to learning and ongoing professional development. On appointment, it is useful to consolidate your understanding of the NED role by recapping on the competencies, principles, legal duties and liabilities it involves to provide a sound foundation for success.

Understand the competencies required for good governance

Being an effective NED requires you to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for good governance in the academy sector. These are explained in detail in the Competency Framework for Governance. This is a useful model against which you can benchmark your development and impact.

Adhere to the seven principles of public life

Becoming a NED means committing to follow the Nolan Principles of public life. Make sure that you can demonstrate selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership in all that you do. These values need to be lived in your service on the board and committees, and outside the boardroom in your capacity as an ambassador for your trust. You may wish to discuss with the Chair how these values are actively demonstrated by the board.

Understand your legal duties and liabilities

The NED role on an academy trust board combines the duties and liabilities of a Company Director with those of a Charity Trustee for an unlisted charity. It is essential that you understand what this means for you in practice.

Essential reading

[Competency Framework for Governance](#)

[Nolan Principles](#)

[Academy Trust Governance Structure and Roles](#)

[Being a Company Director](#)

[Governance Handbook](#)

[The Essential Trustee](#)

Understanding the trust

Providing effective strategic leadership requires a good understanding of the key characteristics of your trust, its impact and the key themes of national education policy.

Understanding trust fundamentals

As part of your induction you should receive access to some core information about the trust that convey its ethos, strategy, performance and news. These may include:

- Values and ethos
- Articles of Association
- Strategy and/or Annual Plan
- Annual report or governance statement and accounts
- Progress and attainment data on each school in the trust
- Audit report and risk register
- Staffing plan, budget and remuneration policy
- Stakeholder feedback

Reviewing this information will give you a good sense the trust's current performance and future aspirations and challenges. It will also form a helpful basis for your initial conversations with key people in the trust, shaping the questions that you will want to ask.

Understanding academy trust data

It is important to understand the evidence base that performance data on pupil attainment and progress in schools in your trust is derived from, and how it is collected, quality assured and monitored. It is the role of the trust's senior leaders to ensure that all board members are aware of pupil performance so that there is a clear understanding of what the trust's priorities are and how they are being met. Most trusts operate a subcommittee structure that includes a group of academy leaders to enable scrutiny work on pupil data, though all board members must have a shared understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in their trust. Your induction should include training sessions on different aspects of data and reporting. The Education and Skills Funding Agency guide to understanding data is a useful starting point for identifying the measures that your trust uses.

Essential reading

[Understanding your data: a guide for school governors and trustees](#)

Eyes on, hands off

A key governance concept to grasp from the outset is the difference between the board's strategic leadership role and the executive's operational leadership – sometimes summarised as 'eyes on, hands off'. NEDs that understand and uphold this distinction are more effective.

Understanding academy funding and control

Academies are funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), part of the DfE, rather than by local authorities. Each trust has its own funding agreement. This is a contract between the trust and the Secretary of State which sets out the obligations the trust must meet to secure its core funding, known as the General Annual Grant (GAG).

ESFA is accountable for the funding that it provides and regulates the trusts in receipt of its funds. It has the power to intervene when there is risk of failure or evidence of financial mismanagement.

Academy boards have a significant responsibility for overseeing their trust's financial management. The framework for financial management and control is set out by ESFA in the Academies Financial Handbook. This is essential reading for all board members as financial scrutiny is not just a matter for the finance committee. The board has collective responsibility for overseeing the trust's financial position and seeking assurance that public money is being well spent.

The Academies Financial Handbook provides information about the management of risk and maintenance of risk registers. It also signposts tools and resources to help trusts to put the framework into action. Trusts must comply with the provisions of the Handbook as a requirement of their funding agreement so it is important that you are aware of its key provisions and have it as a go-to reference.

All trusts are required to have an audit and risk committee. In trusts with annual income of over £50 million, this has to be a dedicated committee. Smaller trusts have the flexibility to combine oversight of audit and risk with another committee.

Essential reading

[Academies Financial Handbook](#)

[Glossary of Academy Funding Terms](#)

Integrated curriculum and financial planning

A strong financial plan means more of the budget can be invested in the classroom. The trust board's role is to scrutinise and challenge their Executive's plans to make sure that they are effective and secure the best value for money.

One way to ensure this is integrating curriculum and financial planning – known as ICFP. This is a management process that helps trusts plan the best curriculum for their pupils with the funding that they have available. It involves measuring the current curriculum, staffing structure and finances and using the data to create a three-five year plan.

Essential reading

[The 7 Step Guide to ICFP](#)

Understanding staffing and the wider educational context

One of the responsibilities of the trust board is to ensure that the organisation has the right staff who are managed and incentivised to perform to the best of their abilities.

Most trusts will have a people or HR committee for overseeing reviews of pay and conditions and performance management policy. However, the whole board should be cognisant of how performance management is used through the trust to achieve strategic goals and priorities and how this links to the criteria for pay, progression and workforce development. It is also important for the board to be in touch with staff needs, well being and perceptions of working in the trust via a staff engagement programme.

Benchmarking the performance of schools within the trust

Core data about the educational outcomes, pupil population and absence, and workforce and finance for each school in your trust is available on the DfE website. It can be found by searching on the trust name. This data includes comparisons to national average performance to put the information in context.

- [Compare School Performances](#)

Tuning into the wider sector

It is important for NEDs to understand the wider context for the trust and the drivers for some aspects of its work by tuning into reliable information sources about education policy.

This might include setting up alerts for information on the latest thinking from the Department of Education, the Education and Skills Funding Agency, the Regional Schools Commissioner, and Ofsted, the schools' inspectorate.

Knowledge and membership services

As an alumni of NSN's Academy Ambassadors Programme you benefit from being part of a network of ambassadors and the opportunity to attend our free events, seminars and roundtables.

We also publish a resource bank with guidance on all aspects of the NED role on our website and our Advisory Ambassadors, a group of NEDs with deep experience of leading change in school trusts, provide mentoring support to our community.

It may also be useful to register for updates from specialist bodies dedicated to supporting trusts and governance in England, especially if your trust has membership. Your Governance Professional can advise on the services that your trust subscribes to. These may include:

- [Confederation of School Trusts](#), the national organisation for school trusts
- [The Key](#), a knowledge and tools service for school and trust leaders
- [National Governance Association](#), the membership organisation for governors, trustees and clerks

If you belong to a professional body, it would also be useful to check if it provides resources and support that is relevant for NEDs in the education sector.

Building connections with people in the trust

Your induction pack should provide biographies of the board members and senior leadership team and organisation charts.

Take key meetings early in the induction process

Your initial meetings with the Chair, Chief Executive, Chief Finance Officer and other board members are a core part of the induction process. This is your opportunity to hear their perspectives and experience and get a feel for what they are proud of and where they think the biggest challenges, risks and opportunities are for the trust.

Depending upon the timing of your appointment, it is useful to have the one-to-one induction conversations before your first board meeting so that you have a sense of the people around the table before you meet them in action as a team.

Get to know your Governance Professional

It is important to also get to know your Governance Professional and understand the role that they play in supporting the board and good governance in the trust. The Academies Financial Handbook describes a knowledgeable Clerk or Company Secretary as ‘an essential part of the non-executive’s toolkit’ because they provide guidance on the legal and regulatory framework, the potential consequences of non-compliance and advise on how the board works. They can often share useful background on the history of the trust and can help new NEDs to navigate the organisation.

Make connections with key stakeholders

Effective boards are well-informed about, and respond to the views and needs of their stakeholders, particularly parents and carers. They enable productive relationships, creating a sense of trust.

Your induction process should identify the key stakeholders in your trust and explain how stakeholder engagement is managed. You should be given reports and information about initiatives and opportunities for you to connect with key stakeholders such as sponsors, partners, and parents and carers as your induction progresses.

If your trust has them, it is useful to have meetings with Link Trustees. These are board members who engage with a particular element of the trust’s work, such as safeguarding, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), or provision for disadvantaged pupils. Link Trustees report back to the board to support its understanding and oversight of this area and often have specialist knowledge and experience. It is also useful to meet Headteachers from your trust and Chairs of local governing bodies or consultative committees to get a sense of how trust values and initiatives are taken up across the organisation.

Understanding the governance structure and board procedures

Alongside the Articles of Association, several key documents will develop your understanding of the governance framework for your trust.

These are:

- The board and committee structure
- Board and committee membership
- Role of members
- Terms of reference for the trust board
- Matters reserved for the board
- Scheme of delegation
- Committee terms of reference

Introduction to board processes

Your induction should also include:

- Gaining access to and training on the board portal or secure information hub for NEDs
- The board calendar of meetings and key events in the year, and an indication of when key activities such as budgeting and reporting take place.
- Description of board procedures for sending out papers, meeting durations and locations
- Code of conduct or ethics for board members
- Guidance on how decision making is undertaken outside meetings
- Information about training and development for NEDs and the board as a whole
- Information about how the board evaluates and reports on its impact.

Getting up to speed with the board's agenda

You should have access to the board minutes of the last 12 months. Review them ahead of your first board meeting to get an insight into of the issues that the board is addressing and how these fall across an annual cycle. The minutes should also give you a sense of the scrutiny and challenge undertaken by board members and their level of engagement on key issues.

Sample induction timeline

In preparing your induction programme your Chair and Governance Professional will be aware of the significant volume of new and complex information there is to take in, alongside building new relationships and the dynamics of becoming part of a new, high level team.

They should phase the induction plan to avoid overloading you with everything at once and set reasonable intervals between meetings and visits to give you time to prepare and reflect, and to balance getting up to speed as a NED with your other commitments.

The order in which you engage with the different aspects of your new role will be determined to some extent by where the board is in its annual cycle when you join. The sample timeline below gives a broad sense of what you might want to achieve by key milestones in the induction process.

<p>First priorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get the board calendar and key trust event dates in your diary • Gain access to your board portal or online workspace • Establish your main point of contact- the Governance Professional • Familiarise yourself with the vision, strategy and recent developments • Review and diarise your induction programme • Update your online profile with your new position to be visible
<p>Before the first board meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet key trust personnel • Read key papers, including minutes, articles, terms of reference, scheme of delegation, the current financial statement and last audit report • Understand the essentials of school performance • Understand the importance of benchmarking against main norms and indicators
<p>Before the second board meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit a school to see the trust in action and how its values and ethos are lived • Meet with at least one Chair of local governors/committees and Headteacher • Set up your information feeds to keep up with wider sector developments
<p>Within 6 months</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete your initial training and create an ongoing development plan that reflects the areas skills and knowledge that you want to develop as a NED • Review the effectiveness of your induction with your Chair • Continue to meet and engage with wider members of the trust • Start building your network of NEDs in other trusts to benefit from and be part of wider 'system learning'

Asking questions

It is important that NEDs have the right mindset and behaviours to complement their skills and knowledge. These are described in the Competency Framework for Governance as the seven C's: committed, confident, curious, challenging, collaborative, critical, and creative. These powerful personal qualities will enable you to engage and have impact on your boards.

One of the main ways in which these qualities are used is in asking meaningful questions. These are questions that provide an appropriate level of challenge to the status quo and which come from an understanding of the value of critical friendship which balances challenge and support.

A good starting point for thinking about the questions that you should be asking about your board as a NED is the twenty-one questions guide for MAT boards. This was developed by the National Governance Association and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Education Governance to support boards' self-review. The self-review process is part of what boards should do on an annual basis to monitor and improve their quality and impact.

Essential reading

[Twenty-one questions](#)

Your feedback

We keep our guidance under regular review. Feedback about how we can develop it, and additional areas that you would like us to cover, is always welcome. Contact us at academyambassadors@newschoolsnetwork.org.

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