

Being Strategic

A guide for governing boards

Improving governance
for schools and academies



Why a guide to being strategic?

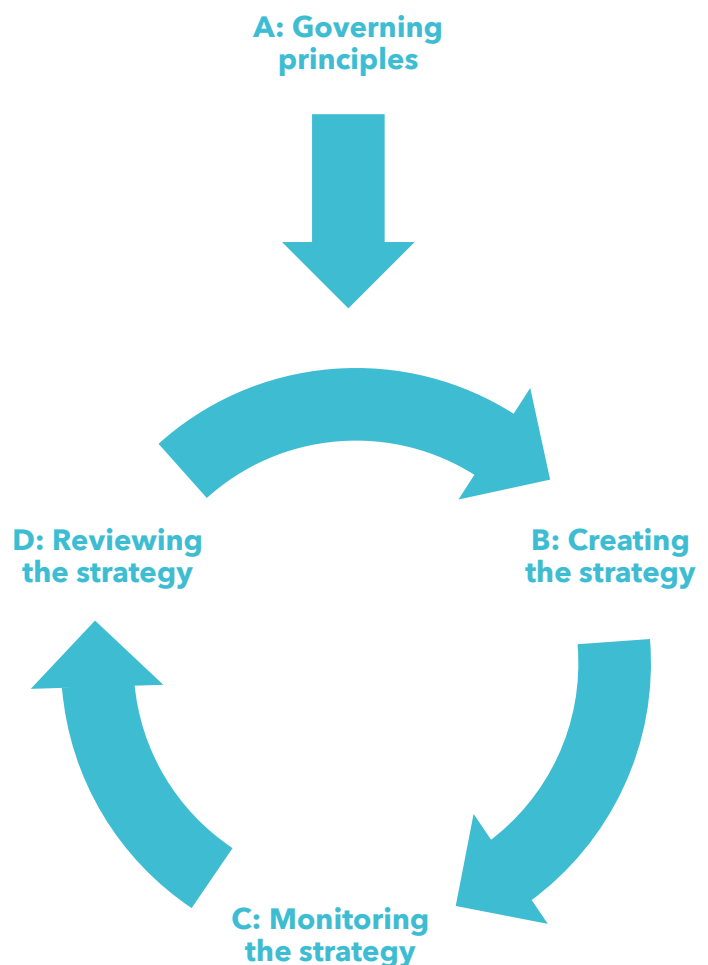
Strong governance is a key part of a successful school. Every governing board, no matter the type, educational phase or size of the organisation, has three core functions as set out in the Department for Education (DfE) [Governance Handbook](#):

1. ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
2. holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils and the performance management of staff
3. overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent.

However, there is little information available to governing boards and school leaders on how to create a strategy. Schools are beset by so many regulations and reporting requirements that it can be difficult to see the wood for the trees in terms of knowing what is most important to monitor. That's why the National Governance Association (NGA) and Wellcome have together developed a guide to help governing boards and senior leaders take a broader and longer-term perspective.

Over the past few years governance has evolved and there is now a diverse range of governance structures. This document provides governors, trustees and senior executive leaders in all settings with a robust framework that they can use to set a strategy for their organisation and monitor progress within an annual cycle. The core functions set out in the guide are consistent with the criteria that Ofsted use to judge governing boards (for more detail see the Ofsted [School Inspection Handbook](#)).

Four stages of the annual strategic cycle



A: Governing principles

Principles against which governing boards should continually evaluate their practice

Effective governance

Governing boards, especially those that are struggling, can be overwhelmed by too much information. NGA's eight elements of effective governance are a good starting point for ensuring that a board successfully carries out its responsibilities.

An effective board has:

1. the right people round the table
2. an understanding of the role and responsibilities of the governing board
3. good chairing
4. professional clerking
5. good relationships based on trust
6. knowledge of the school – the data, the staff, the parents, the children, the community
7. a commitment to asking challenging questions
8. the confidence to have courageous conversations in the interests of the children and young people.

Other useful resources are the DfE's [Governance Handbook](#) and [Competency Framework for Governance](#), which provide guidance on the duties of governing boards and advice on the skills, knowledge and behaviours they need to be effective.

The line between governance and management

It is important that governing boards understand where their strategic responsibilities end and the responsibilities of the senior executive leader begin. Senior executive leaders include head teachers, executive principles and chief executives. Stepping over the line into operational matters is inappropriate and can make the job of the senior executive leader more difficult.

More detailed guidance can be found in [What Governing Bodies Should Expect from School Leaders and What School Leaders Should Expect from Governing Bodies](#), a joint guidance document from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the Local Government Association (LGA), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the National Governance Association (NGA).

Ethical governance

Governing boards must act in the best interests of children and young people, and as guardians of the organisation's ethos they must be willing to challenge any unethical behaviours or decisions. Governing boards should have a code of conduct, and should adhere to the Nolan principles of public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Further help on developing a code of conduct is available at nga.org.uk/codeofconduct.

A: Governing principles

Values

A value is a principle that guides our thinking and behaviour.

Governing boards are responsible for the values of the organisation, which should be at its core and a reference point for all decisions. The organisation's values underpin its culture, strategy, policies and procedures. They should encompass the Nolan principles, such as integrity, but also others that are particular to the school, which could include inclusivity, generosity and respect. They may help to distinguish a school from others.

The organisation's values should be meaningful, discussed and lived – whether you govern in a small maintained primary school or a large multi-academy trust (MAT). The underpinning values should be communicated and understood by everyone in the school community.

As a MAT is a single organisation, all academies within the MAT should have shared values. How values are made relevant within each individual academy is determined by the vision for the academy, which is based on where it is now and where it aims to be in three to five years' time. There is no need to set values every year, but it is good practice to reaffirm them when discussing vision and strategy. Some questions to consider are:

- Do your values speak to every member of the school community?
- Are all of your decisions and actions consistent with your values?
- Where can you find your values best represented?
- Can you think of any instances in which you fell short of your values?
- Have you considered the seven Nolan principles of public life?

Vision

The school's vision should, in a few sentences, describe what the school will look like in three to five years' time.

Every organisation needs to have a vision of what it is trying to achieve. You should be aiming to continuously improve, to make the experience of the school the very best it can be for pupils, parents and staff. Projecting forward a few years, what specific goals do you want the school and its pupils to have achieved? There is no need to rewrite the vision annually, but it is good practice to review it.

Is your vision:

- Based on your shared values?
- Ambitious but achievable?
- Open to new opportunities?
- Descriptive of what the pupils will have achieved in the broadest way – in terms of attainment, progress and being prepared for the next stage of their education?
- Reflective of the views of pupils, parents and staff?
- Agreed by the governing board?
- Communicated to the school community?

A step-by-step guide on how to create a vision based on core values can be found in the NGA's [Growing Governance resource pack](#).

B: Creating the strategy

A strategy document sets out how an organisation's vision will be achieved

Taking time to reflect, discuss and consult before determining your strategy is essential and should be an exercise undertaken in part by the whole governing board, the senior executive leader and the senior leadership team during a dedicated strategy day. You should decide how you are going to involve others, and all ideas, approaches and opportunities should be considered.

When determining a strategy to achieve the agreed vision, consider the challenges, risks and barriers. What does your organisation need to prioritise in order to overcome those challenges and barriers and to mitigate the risks? How will you know the vision has been achieved?

When creating your strategy document

1. Start with your vision.
2. Identify an improvement priority for achieving each aspect of the vision (but try not to have more than six improvement priorities in the strategy document).
3. Outline what success looks like for each improvement priority, in the long term and the short term.
4. Involve other stakeholders – most importantly the staff.
5. Each improvement priority should be measurable in some way; consider the timeframes that are best for each – these may be termly or annual, and some may extend beyond a single year (examples of evidence to consider can be found in section C, 'Monitoring the strategy').
6. Outline the governing board's monitoring arrangements.
7. Try and keep it succinct.

For a step-by-step guide on creating a strategy document from your vision, see the NGA's [Growing Governance resource pack](#).

From strategy to implementation

The strategy document must be approved by the governing board, and each improvement priority must be supported by appropriate budget and staff resource. The senior executive leader will then create an operational plan to lay out the actions needed to deliver the strategy. The operational plan should provide details on how each priority will be turned into reality – this may be called the school development plan (SDP). The strategic objectives of the organisation should also link to the performance management objectives of the senior executive leader.

B: Creating the strategy

An effective way to determine and communicate responsibility for the vision, strategy and school development plan, including monitoring and reporting arrangements, is to put together a table of delegation. You can adapt the following examples to suit your context.

Example table of delegation within a single school

	Vision <i>Three to five years</i>	Strategy document <i>One year</i>	School development plan <i>One year</i>
Develop/recommend <i>Beginning of year</i>	Governing board and headteacher	Governing board, headteacher and senior leaders	Headteacher and senior leaders
Refer <i>Throughout year</i>	Headteacher, staff, pupils and parents	Headteacher	Governing board, senior leaders and staff
Agree <i>Beginning of year</i>	Governing board	Governing board	Headteacher
Deliver <i>Throughout year</i>	All	Headteacher	Senior leaders and staff
Report <i>Termly</i>	N/A	Headteacher (to governing board)	Senior leaders and staff to headteacher
Monitor <i>Termly/annually</i>	N/A	Governing board	Governing board, parents and pupils
Review <i>End of the year</i>	Governing board and headteacher	Governing board and headteacher	Headteacher and senior leaders

B: Creating the strategy

MATs

Trustee boards should develop a vision for the whole trust that looks ahead three to five years and an annual strategy that outlines trust-wide improvement priorities. A MAT must have a scheme of delegation (SOD) published on its website and those of its academies that makes clear where the key governance functions are exercised. There is no one-size-fits-all way of delegating, and the criteria used will differ according to the governance arrangements of each MAT.

A single academy within a MAT could follow the process of a single school when determining its annual strategy. However, all academies within the MAT will share the same values, and some of the vision may be set at trustee board level – this will be set out in the MAT’s SOD. How the vision is made relevant within the individual academy is determined by the specific improvement priorities of the academy. You can adapt the table of delegation for a single school to suit your context.

Example table of delegation in a MAT

	Trust vision <i>Three to five years</i>	Trust strategy document <i>One year</i>	Trust development plan <i>One year</i>
Develop/recommend <i>Beginning of year</i>	Trustee board and senior executive leader	Trustee board, senior executive leader and senior leaders	Senior executive leader
Refer <i>Throughout year</i>	Academy committees, parents, pupils, senior leaders and staff	Senior executive leader	Trustee board, senior leaders and staff
Agree <i>Beginning of year</i>	Trustee board	Trustee board	Senior executive leader
Deliver/comply <i>Throughout year</i>	All	Senior executive leader	Senior leaders and staff
Report <i>Termly/annually</i>	Academy committees	Senior executive leader (to trustee board)	Senior leaders and staff (to senior executive leader)
Monitor <i>Termly/annually</i>	Trustee board	Trustee board	Trustee board, parents, pupils
Review <i>End of the year</i>	Trustee board and senior executive leader	Trustee board and senior executive leader	Trustee board and senior executive leader

C: Monitoring the strategy

Charting progress towards the vision: examples of evidence that can be used to monitor the strategy

What success looks like, based on your desired outcomes, will determine what evidence is needed to measure progress (section B, 'Creating the strategy'). The measures will be agreed in detail between the governing board and the senior executive leader and monitored on a termly/annual basis by the governing board, as set out by the monitoring arrangements in the strategy document.

When determining what success looks like, it is important to consider outcomes that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). Some examples of high-level outcomes and evidence to consider are in the tables in this section. Your organisation can tailor them to its own situation and add others as appropriate. However, do not get caught up when discussing measurement – you do not have to limit yourself to official performance data (though be careful not to create bureaucratic systems that have an impact on staff workload).

As well as monitoring the strategy, governing boards must also evaluate the effectiveness of policies that ensure legal compliance, from safeguarding to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Many improvement priorities can be linked to one or more school policies. Governing boards should also ensure they monitor the policies themselves – it is good practice to establish a policy review cycle so that policies are regularly reviewed and kept up to date.

Measure what you value

Governing boards should not be limited to narrow academic performance measures; in the interest of pupils they must consider the whole education offer. Not all improvement priorities are quantitative and some of the most important outcomes will not lend themselves to simple quantitative measurement. One example is improving the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, which could be monitored through a combination of reports from teachers, pupil voice surveys or less direct measures such as how often children are absent from school. Naturally occurring evidence, such as the information obtained from a well-planned school visit or a response to a challenging question, should also be considered.

For some of the measures there will be limited external data for comparison or use as a benchmark; in these cases, organisations should be able to learn from comparing across different groups of students and tracking their performance over time.

When assessing impact, consider the following questions:

- Do we have ready access to all the data and information we need to monitor the improvement priorities?
- Are we able to access that information independently, or do we depend on the senior leaders to provide it to us?
- Do we have the skills on the governing board to interpret data, or do we rely on senior leaders to do this for us?
- Is the information at the right level of detail – detailed enough to tell us what we need to know, but not so detailed as to make it difficult to read?
- Are we able to use benchmarking data to compare the school's performance with that of comparable schools (not only local ones)?
- Is information available on all the aspects of the school's performance that we agree are important, or only on those aspects that are easy to measure?

A tool to help monitor performance

Analyse School Performance (ASP) is DfE's data service. It provides individual schools with analysis of their performance on headline measures, allowing for both overviews and in-depth reports (such as breakdown by pupil groups). Governing boards are entitled to view information that is not pupil-specific and should ask the organisation's data controller for access to ASP.

There are a number of toolkits and data sources available to help governors monitor the impact of qualitative measures. These can be found at [nga.org.uk/BeingStrategic](https://www.nga.org.uk/BeingStrategic).

C: Monitoring the strategy

The following are examples of high-level outcomes. There is information about why each improvement priority is important, together with examples of the evidence governing boards could use to monitor each priority. Note that some examples apply to all phases of education, while others are specific to primary or secondary.

Staff

Quality of teaching

Teaching is a critical factor affecting pupils' achievement – the quality of education depends on the quality of teaching.

All teachers should receive high-quality relevant continuing professional development (CPD) throughout their career to help improve pedagogy and keep them up to date with subject knowledge.

Teaching quality is one of the four areas for which Ofsted makes a graded judgement during school inspections.

The Ofsted framework has been revised, and now has increased expectations in relation to appraisal and the governing board's knowledge of the correlation between teaching quality, pupils' progress and pay progression.

Examples of evidence:

- Headteacher reports, including anonymised data from lesson observations and performance management systems
- External validation from a school improvement adviser, including peer review from other schools
- Uptake and impact of general and specialist CPD
- Staff performance appraisals
- Ofsted reports
- Anonymised pupil feedback
- Proportion of positions filled by staff with relevant teaching and specialist qualifications
- Governor school visits (these must be well planned and are not teacher observations – visit the [NGA Guidance Centre](#) for more information)

Staff morale and wellbeing

Where the governing board is the employer, it has a duty of care to school staff and therefore needs to be aware of their wellbeing. There is also a direct correlation between staff morale and staff performance. In short, happy workers perform better; where staff morale is high, the quality of teaching is more likely to be high.

The DfE's 2016 [Teacher Workload Survey](#) found that the vast majority (93 per cent) of teachers think that teacher workload is a "fairly serious problem". It found that the top three workload concerns are marking, planning and data.

Examples of evidence:

- Staff surveys
- Staff absence data
- Staff turnover
- Feedback from teacher exit interviews
- What support is available to staff and feedback on the support offered

C: Monitoring the strategy

Pupils

Pupil progress and attainment

Pupils should be in an educational environment that enables them to make at least expected progress, and this should be evidenced by tracking data from teachers throughout the academic year.

Pupil progress and attainment form part of the floor standards for both primary and secondary schools, which the government uses to hold schools to account. This includes the progress and achievement of specific groups of pupils, eg disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Pupil achievement is one of the four areas for which Ofsted makes a graded judgement. Schools falling below the floor standards are subject to government intervention, including being taken over by an academy sponsor.

In secondary schools, the attainment of pupils will also determine the qualifications they gain and consequently their future career options.

Examples of evidence:

- In-school tracking data from teachers
- KS2 performance in the core subjects (primary)
- Progress 8, Attainment 8 (secondary)
- Distribution of GCSE/A-level points across individual subjects (secondary)
- Progress against appropriate measures (special schools)
- ASP
- Fischer Family Trust data
- DfE performance benchmarking data
- Governing board Q&A

Broad and balanced curriculum offer

The curriculum should support the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils, along with their mental and physical development, in order to foster the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed for adult life.

The governing board plays a key role in ensuring that the school's curriculum offer is "broad and balanced" and as far as possible meets the needs of all the young people in the school. The curriculum offer should include a broad range of subjects.

Examples of evidence:

- Curriculum policy
- Headteacher reports
- Governing board Q&A
- Pupil and parent surveys
- School website for subjects on offer (secondary)
- Governor school visits (these must be well planned and are not teacher observations – visit the [NGA Guidance Centre](#) for more information)

C: Monitoring the strategy

Pupil wellbeing and resilience

In maintained schools the governing board has a legal duty to “promote the wellbeing of pupils at the school”.

Governing boards in all settings should consider a whole-school approach to mental health.

Children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing are, on average, more engaged in school and have higher levels of academic achievement, both during school and in later years.

Examples of evidence:

- Provision and access to mental health services
- Pupil and parent surveys
- Pupil and parent focus groups
- Anonymised reports from pastoral staff
- Pupil absence data and behaviour data

Behaviour of pupils

Pupil behaviour has a significant impact on the learning environment. Challenging behaviour disrupts teaching and learning and consequently pupils’ achievement.

As well as being one of the four areas for which Ofsted makes a graded judgement, behaviour has a wider influence on both pupil and staff wellbeing.

Examples of evidence:

- Headteacher reports, including information on incidents of bullying
- Staff, parent and pupil surveys
- Governor school visits (looking at implementation of behaviour policy)
- Number of behaviour-management incidents (eg exclusions, detentions, etc)
- Amount of authorised/unauthorised absence
- Recognition and tracking of positive behaviour through school reward schemes

C: Monitoring the strategy

Preparing pupils for the next stages of life

Part of the role of schools is to give pupils the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the future.

All state-funded secondary schools, including academies and free schools, have a statutory duty to “secure access to independent careers guidance” for their students aged 13–18.

Schools must also “ensure that there is an opportunity for a range of education and training providers to access registered pupils during the relevant phase of their education for the purpose of informing them about approved technical education qualifications or apprenticeships”.

Examples of evidence:

- Information, advice and guidance on careers delivered to pupils based on the Gatsby Good Career Guidance Benchmarks
- Pupil exit interviews
- Options available for next stage of education (secondary)
- Destination data for pupils up to three years after leaving and numbers of students who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) (secondary)
- Proportion applying for degree programmes at universities (including elite universities), vocational programmes at colleges and apprenticeships (secondary)

Range of extracurricular activities

Offering pupils multiple opportunities to experience success enriches their educational experience beyond academic attainment alone. This can positively influence pupils’ wellbeing, health and academic achievement; makes the school more attractive to prospective pupils and parents; and can facilitate engagement with the local community.

Examples of evidence:

- Variety of extracurricular activities on offer and quality of facilities
- Participation in extracurricular activities across groups
- Pupil and parent surveys

C: Monitoring the strategy

Use of resources

Resources

One of the governing board's core functions is overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent. Effective use of resources will allow the school to give pupils the best education possible on a long-term basis.

Governing boards also play a key role in ensuring that the pupil and PE/sports premiums are allocated and spent effectively.

Examples of evidence:

- Financial benchmarking data
- Reports from the school business manager/senior executive leader
- Reports from auditors (internal or external)
- Measures of how money is prioritised and the impacts of spending
- Available facilities (eg indoor and outdoor spaces, laboratories, technology equipment, arts equipment)
- Monitoring of how pupil premium funding is spent and the impact of this spending

Engagement with parents and local community

Engaging with parents

A school needs to understand its parents and their views of the education being provided to their children. Parents care about their children's future and are influential in shaping their aspirations and educational outcomes.

Ofsted uses responses to Parent View when making inspection judgements, and will consider how effectively the governing board engages with parents.

Examples of evidence:

- Parent surveys
- Feedback at parents evenings
- Number and nature of parental complaints
- Number of authorised/unauthorised absences

Relationship with local community

All state-funded schools are required by law to promote community cohesion. Developing a good relationship with the local community benefits a school in many ways.

It opens up experiences that support the curriculum and enhance pupils' learning (for example, enhancing careers education via links with local businesses). It also improves cohesion between the different ethnic and religious groups within a school.

The school's standing in the local community will also affect applications for places.

Examples of evidence:

- Applications and admissions data
- Level of participation in community and voluntary activities at the school
- Parent surveys
- Encounters with local employers and speakers (*primary and secondary*)
- Number of pupils gaining work experience at local businesses (*secondary*)

D: Reviewing the strategy

Review the strategy annually to evaluate progress towards the vision

Key questions for the governing board to ask itself on strategy

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Education Governance and Leadership has produced sets of questions for the governing board to ask itself to evaluate the full range of governance responsibilities in maintained schools and MATs (available in full at nga.org.uk). Extracted here are questions that are relevant to the governing board's responsibility of ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction.

Single schools

Does our vision look forward three to five years, and does it include what the children who have left the school will have achieved?

Have we agreed a strategy with priorities for achieving our vision, with measures against which we can regularly monitor and review the strategy?

How effectively does our strategic planning cycle drive the governing board's activities and agenda setting?

MATs

Does the trustee board have a clear vision and strategic priorities for the next three to five years, to which all academies contribute and which is understood by each of its academies?

How effectively do these strategic priorities drive the governance structure, activities and agenda setting at all levels of the trust?

What vision does the trustee board have for the trust, and how does the strategy ensure that there is the capacity to support any additional academies well?

D: Reviewing the strategy

Some further questions to reflect on

Improvement priorities	Are the measures being met? If not, is there a valid reason for this, or are excuses being made?
Unpredictable/external factors	Has something unforeseen changed the landscape in which the school is working?
Long-term sustainable improvement	Is achieving the vision still the focus, or are you constantly firefighting?
Courageous conversations	Are these happening? Are relationships productive?
Adjusting	A strategy is not a plan but an approach, and as such, must be adaptable to changing events.
Review	At the end of the three-to-five-year period, plan enough time for a review of the school's vision that includes all pupils, parents and staff.

Links to useful documents and resources

- Governance Handbook and Competency Framework for Governance, DfE. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/governance-handbook>
- School Inspection Handbook, Ofsted. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015>
- What Governing Bodies Should Expect from School Leaders and What School Leaders Should Expect from Governing Bodies, NGA, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Local Government Association (LGA). <https://www.nga.org.uk/News/NGA-News/Mar-2017-Aug-2017/School-leaders-and-governing-boards-what-do-we-exp.aspx>
- Growing Governance resource pack, NGA. <https://www.nga.org.uk/About-Us/Campaigning/Growing-Governance.aspx>
- Guidance Centre, NGA. <https://www.nga.org.uk/Guidance.aspx>
- 2016 Teacher Workload Survey, DfE. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-workload-survey-2016>

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Wellcome

Wellcome exists to improve health for everyone by helping great ideas to thrive. We're a global charitable foundation, both politically and financially independent. We support scientists and researchers, take on big problems, fuel imaginations and spark debate.

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National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is an independent charity that aims to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of school governance and promoting high standards in state schools in England. It does this by providing information, advice, guidance, research and training to clerks, governors and trustees. It lobbies and works closely with the UK government and other educational bodies, representing the views of school governors, trustees and clerks. NGA has a variety of membership packages: for more information, visit nga.org.uk/membership