

Guidance:

Guide to using the NGA skills audit

Improving governance



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National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the leading membership organisation for governors, trustees and clerks in state-funded schools, academies and free schools in England.

We are an independent charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We do this by providing information; guidance and advice; undertaking research; delivering face-to-face training, e-learning and consultancy; and holding national conferences and regional events. We ensure the views of governors are represented at the national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.



Introduction

Effective governance requires a board with a range of skills that contribute towards asking good questions and making good decisions.

The guide is intended to support governing boards and trusts to make the best possible use of the NGA skills audit and the accompanying skills matrix for evaluating responses.

If managed well this exercise can have a significant, positive impact on developing and strengthening the governing board. However, this is only the case when governing boards recognise its importance and give it the necessary time and attention. Otherwise it will be nothing more than an annual compliance activity and the completed skills audit forms will gather dust.

First decide what you are going to do with the completed skills audits

Governing boards sometimes make the mistake of focusing on the process of members completing and submitting their skills audit (the compliance aspect), before they have decided how the responses will be evaluated and by whom. Also when and how the evaluation of responses will be fed back to the governing board along with any proposals resulting from the evaluation. The process need not be too onerous, or inflexible to the extent that skills audits completed by individuals who join during the year are not taken into account. At the same time the governing board should be clear about what will happen to the forms and how they will be used before individuals are asked to complete them.

Responsibility for evaluating and feeding back on completed skills audits can be delegated to an individual governor (e.g. the governor linked to Board CPD) a small working group of governors or the clerk as appropriate. We recommend that the chair and headteacher are not involved in this task given the other demands that are placed on their time.

Establish clear expectations for completing the skills audit

The exercise will be most effective if everyone takes part, therefore NGA advises governing boards to establish an expectation that all new members complete a skills audit prior to or on their appointment and existing members complete a skills audit at the start of the academic year. It's important to maintain this discipline and the expectation that new forms are completed even if the individual thinks that their responses will not change from the previous year.

The skills audit is not an exam or an inspection. Individuals should be encouraged to provide honest responses and not to exaggerate or downplay their experience or abilities because they think that they will be viewed in a certain way by others. This is a collective activity to which individuals contribute. The more honest the responses then the more likely the governing board is to identify its real priorities.



Use the skills matrix to guide the evaluation of skills and experience

The skills audit is separated into seven categories: strategic leadership; accountability; people; structures; compliance; evaluation, and positive contribution. Under each category are the relevant areas of knowledge, skill and experience. Individuals completing the skills audit form rate each area on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating no experience or knowledge in this area, and 5 indicating strong expertise.

As the responses are entered into the skills matrix it will both score and colour code the governing board's overall knowledge skills and experience in each area. For example the governing board's collective experience of working with stakeholders.

This provides a useful "at a glance" view of the relative strengths of the board as a whole and of areas that need addressing. Whilst it may seem appropriate to draw up a plan for increasing the board's collective knowledge, skills and experience in every area, this is probably not the best and most practical approach to take. It is far better to identify the priority issues that need addressing, those that will have the most impact and are relevant to the board at this time. Therefore if the governing board's overall score is below three in an area that is deemed essential to the Board, for example knowledge and experience of financial monitoring and decision making in schools, then that should be given priority over an area with the same overall score in an area that is desirable but not essential, unless that desirable area is of specific relevance to the governing board at this time.

At the same time it may well be possible to score some "quick wins" by identifying relatively easy to implement actions that would increase the collective knowledge, skills and experience of the governing board and by extension the overall score on the matrix. For example proposing that one or two individual governors attend a specific training course could lead to them re-evaluating their knowledge and skills and a subsequent increase in the overall score on the skills matrix.

Identifying and proposing actions to address issues raised by the skills audit

NGA recommends that those tasked with Identifying and proposing actions to address issues raised by the skills audit consider a range of options and not be restricted to recruitment and training to resolve every issue, although these may turn out to be the best options. The other ways in which to develop skills, experience and knowledge include appointing associate members and or advisors whose expertise can be deployed to support the governing board on a needs basis. Also promoting mentoring and coaching (formal and informal) that allows governors and trustees to benefit from the skills and experience of their colleagues on the board.

The actions identified in order to address issues raised by the skills audit need to be both proportionate and manageable and it might be useful to separate the list into two parts: actions for individual governors and for the board as a whole. An example of both is included as an annex to this document.



Further reading

NGA guidance: The right people around the table (2019) available via this [link](#)

Further support

NGA offers support and e-learning for school governance. All NGA training is interactive and offers engaging learning.

NGA consultancy offers a range of consultancy support for governing boards, varying the approach according to the individual requirements of your school organisation.

Further information is available via this [link](#).



Annex

Example of an action arising for an individual governor following evaluation of the skills matrix

Proposed action	Why has this been proposed?	What will it achieve?	What will it cost?	Who will lead on this?	When will it be completed
Apply for a place on NGA Leading Governance Chairs' programme	Current vice chair with intention of taking the chair in the next 2 years as part to the governing board's succession plan. Current skills audit score of 3 for experience of chairing a governing board or committee.	Will provide insight into the leadership aspects of the chair's role as well as the knowledge and skills required.	Full cost of the programme is £500. Funding for the full cost available subject to availability.	Clerk will enquire about local availability and dates. Vice-chair will book their place and confirm.	Within 12 months.

Example of an action arising for the governing board following evaluation of the skills matrix.

Proposed action	Why is this been proposed?	What will it achieve?	What will it cost?	Who will lead on this?	When will it be completed
Recruit a new co-opted governor who with experience of financial planning, monitoring, decision making and compliance within the school sector.	Experience and knowledge in this area is essential for the governing board. Current skills matrix scores the governing board as 2 out of 5. New governors score relatively low. Limited scope to address through training.	Expect the new co-opted governor to join the finance committee and contribute towards the schools 3 year financial plan. Compensating for the loss of an experienced member who leaves next year.	No financial cost. Time allocation of approximately 3-4 hours dependent upon the response.	Vice-chair to contact local school business managers and local governance association to make a request. The clerk will advertise the vacancy on the Inspiring governance platform.	By the end of the academic year. Progress feedback given by the vice chair and clerk.