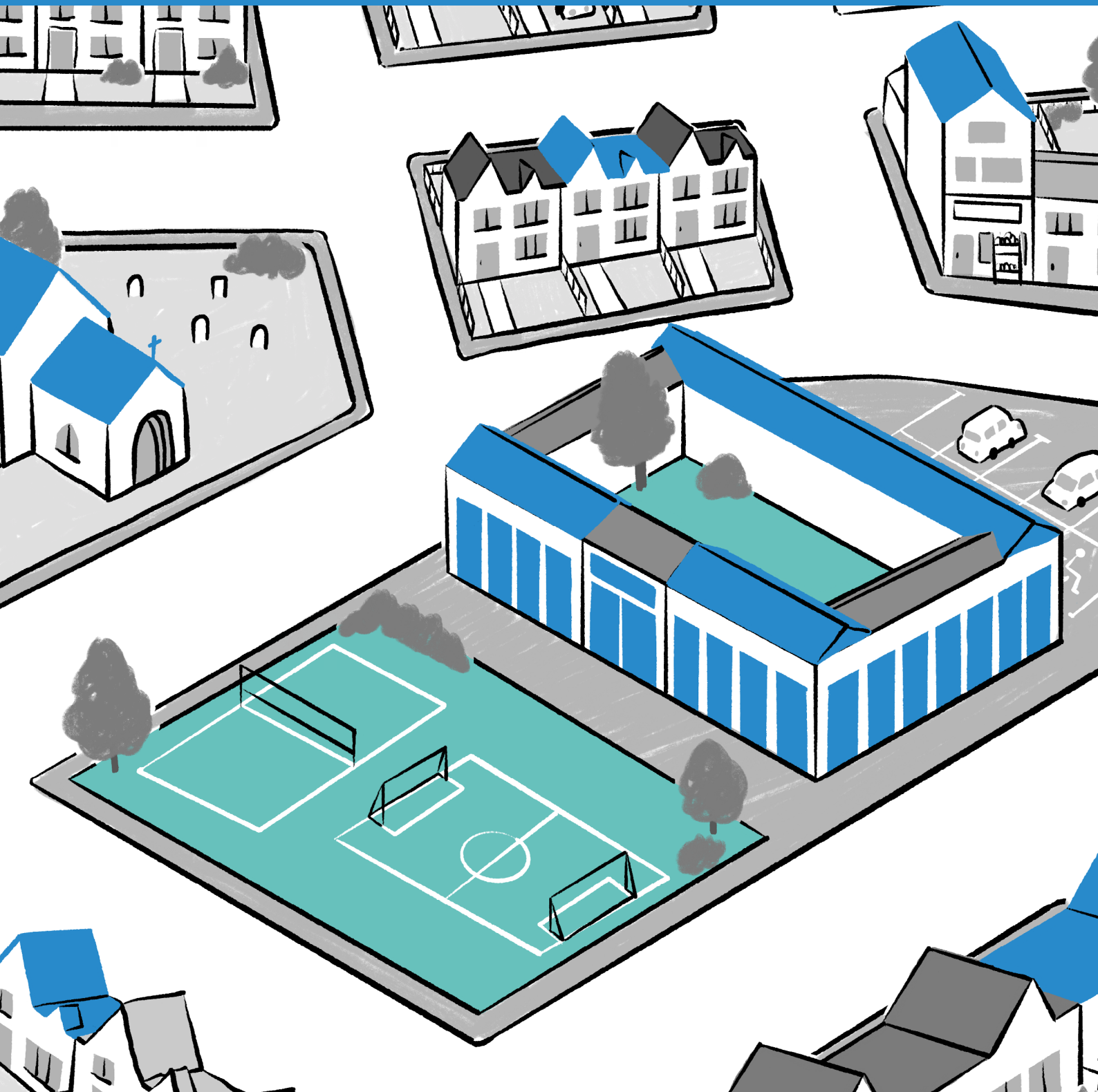


# Is yours a listening school?

Governance and community engagement  
in multi-academy trusts



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# Foreword

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**By Samira Sadeghi**, director of trust governance,  
Confederation of School Trusts

We have reached a pivotal moment in the story of the academy sector. As of April 2024, just over half of England's schools are academies<sup>1</sup>. The next chapter is one where trusts truly establish themselves as 'anchor institutions' in their communities, fulfilling the civic role they must play in order to 'advance education for public benefit'<sup>2</sup>. And it's only natural that this civic work should be designed around the needs of local communities.

Meaningful engagement with stakeholders is a core purpose of a board of trustees, but it is the local tier of governance that is often best placed to carry out that work and then share it 'upwards'. Unfortunately, for too long, generic approaches and models of governance borrowed from the maintained sector have led to conflation and confusion, and many trusts are not fully leveraging the skills and knowledge of their local tier for

community engagement and partnering. As we'll see in this report, although a sizeable majority of those surveyed at the local tier believe community engagement should be a key objective, only a minority actually have it as one of their top three priorities. In a trust context, this is a sorely missed opportunity.

The tide is turning. Many trusts have strategically and intentionally re-designed their governance structures to match their needs rather than adhering to a traditional notion of governance. In these trusts, we've observed that a key focus of the local tier is elevating the voice of stakeholders – particularly those who are the most under-resourced and marginalised – and partnering with other civic actors to address the needs of their families and communities. Like many, I look forward to seeing where this exciting new chapter takes us as a sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Open academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development>

<sup>2</sup> Model articles of association for academy trusts, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-model-memorandum-and-articles-of-association>

# Introduction

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An academy trust that listens to and works meaningfully with its communities is widely considered to be fulfilling one of its key functions - strategic engagement with stakeholders<sup>3</sup> - and is certainly meeting this aspect of the government's recent vision for 'high-quality trusts'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet data shows that multi-academy trusts (MATs) are getting bigger, with an average of 7.54 schools per trust, and 1 in 5 MATs having 10 or more schools.<sup>5</sup> As trusts grow, and the number and range of stakeholders increases, how can trusts make sure they effectively maintain and manage their relationship with the communities they serve?

In this report, we take an in-depth look at community engagement in multi-academy trusts to explore what's happening on the ground and any lessons to be shared.

We hear from local governors and trustees about their experiences of engaging with community stakeholders, including parents and carers, pupils, staff and members of the local community. And, alongside our research partner Edurio, we look at whether additional factors can impact parental engagement,

such as types of governance structure in a trust, and how geographically dispersed a trust is.

We conducted this research against a backdrop of increased focus from the Department for Education (DfE) on community engagement as an indicator of a trust's quality. In particular, collaboration and engagement are themes within the Department's trust quality descriptions<sup>6</sup>, and its academy trust governance guide sets out the expectation for trust boards to make sure there are systems in place to regularly:

- Seek and consider the views of parents, carers and communities – helping them to understand the structure of the trust, how it operates and how they can support their child's education and put forward their views
- Listen and respond to parents and carers, pupils, staff, local communities and employers and capture how their views have informed the board's decision-making
- Communicate decisions clearly to pupils, parents and carers, staff and communities<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Academy trust governance guide, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/governance-in-academy-trusts/2-governance-of-the-trust>

<sup>4</sup> Commissioning high-quality trusts, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commissioning-high-quality-trusts>

<sup>5</sup> Are MATs getting bigger?, FFT Education Datalab, <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/04/are-mats-getting-bigger/>

<sup>6</sup> Commissioning high-quality trusts, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commissioning-high-quality-trusts>

<sup>7</sup> Academy trust governance guide, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/governance-in-academy-trusts/1-culture-and-engagement>



## The sector view

Key voices in the sector feel that the local tier of governance has an important role to play in community engagement. For example, as mentioned in the foreword to this report, the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) believes that trusts have the potential to become “anchor institutions” in their communities, and that governance plays a role in facilitating this, notably at the local level:

**“We argue that local governing bodies should have specific responsibility for ensuring depth of understanding of the community and holding schools to account for using that understanding to enable children to thrive.”<sup>8</sup>**

The National Governance Association (NGA) advocates for a strong and purposeful local tier of governance in trusts which, alongside a focus on standards, safeguarding and SEND, can support the trust’s understanding of the context of its schools:

**“In a climate where many trusts are expanding, and trustees are scattered around the country, local ties and context-specific experiences are becoming a greater necessity for trust boards to remain attuned to their schools’ needs.”<sup>9</sup>**

In an earlier report, the NGA concluded that the way trusts engage and work with their communities needed to evolve, arguing that

“MATs that engage positively with local voice achieve better governance”.<sup>10</sup>

Forum Strategy also highlights the importance of local voice – being at the heart of the community is one of its 6 key principles of ‘thriving trusts’<sup>11</sup>:

**“Thriving boards recognise the importance of not only bringing communities with them, but generating a sense of accountability to them and empowering them to play a part in shaping and delivering upon the organisational vision and strategy.”**

## We wanted to find out what’s happening on the ground

We carried out this research to get a better understanding of how trusts are currently engaging with their schools’ communities, how governance is being used to monitor success, and what factors potentially influence this.

We have not set out to determine whether a particular governance structure or a particular local tier remit is the most effective, as this is for individual trusts to decide, based on their own context, needs and aims.

To understand the view of governance volunteers, we ran two surveys: one with local governors and one with trustees. Between

<sup>8</sup> Community Anchoring - School Trusts as Anchor Institutions, CST, <https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/thought-leadership/community-anchoring-school-trusts-as-anchor-institutions/>

<sup>9</sup> Local governance here and now, NGA, <https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/local-governance-here-and-now/>

<sup>10</sup> MAT governance: the future is local, NGA, <https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/mat-governance-future-is-local/>

<sup>11</sup> Reflections on thriving governance, Forum Strategy, available to Forum Strategy members via <https://forumstrategy.org/>

these surveys, we reached nearly 1,700 respondents, and it's their responses that we explore in this report.

We also ran some in-depth interviews with two senior leaders and a governance professional from different trusts, and had discussions with governance professionals from three further trusts, to explore these themes.

Finally, we reviewed Edurio's parental engagement data (survey responses from 19,000 parents) against a few selected measures to explore which, if any, affect parental engagement. Edurio is a leading provider of stakeholder feedback solutions to schools and trusts. Its school surveys have so far gathered feedback from over 750,000 pupils, parents, and school staff. You can learn more about this on page 20.

You can read more about our methodology on page 28.

## A note on language

Throughout the report, when we refer to 'governors' we are talking about local governors, i.e. those who sit on a local governing body in a multi-academy trust.

We use the term 'local governing body' to refer to the local tier of governance. Your trust might use another term, such as 'local school committee', 'local advisory board', 'academy council' or similar.

When we refer to 'community engagement' we are talking about the following stakeholders in a school, or in the schools within a trust:

- Parents and carers
- Pupils
- Staff
- Local community, beyond the parents/ carers of children attending the school - for example, local charities, businesses, services (such as food banks, arts organisations, health professionals and the police) and community groups

When we are talking specifically about one set of stakeholders from the above list, we will make this clear.

Please note that figures displayed in the graphs have been rounded to the nearest whole number.



# Findings

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## The headlines:

**1** The majority of governors and trustees surveyed think community engagement should be a key objective, but this is not borne out in their strategic plans **(page 7)**

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**2** Most governors and trustees surveyed say their schools are collecting feedback from parents/carers, pupils and staff **(page 10)**

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**3** Feedback from staff is most likely to feed into decision-making, followed by feedback from pupils, then parents/carers and, lastly, the local community **(page 12)**

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**4** Governors who feel that community engagement is effective are more likely to say that they report on it to the trust board **(page 14)**

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**5** Some governors aren't fully aware of who's responsible for monitoring community engagement **(page 16)**

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**We go into more detail on each finding in the pages that follow.**

# 1 The majority of governors and trustees surveyed think community engagement should be a key objective, but this is not borne out in their strategic plans

A clear majority of the governors (75%) and trustees (82%) we surveyed believe community engagement should be a key objective in their school improvement plan (SIP) or trust improvement plan (TIP) respectively (graphs 1 and 2). This suggests that governors and trustees understand that 'staying close' to key stakeholders is not just important in its own right, but that it can support a number of other areas - from attendance to outcomes (as noted by the survey respondents on page 9).

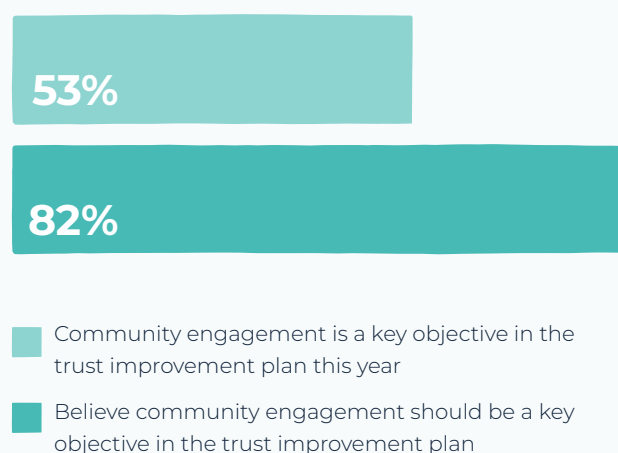
However, only 47% of governors and 53% of trustees said that community engagement

actually is a key objective in their SIP and TIP respectively (graphs 1 and 2). As improvement plans tend to prioritise only the most pressing or strategically important aspects of what a school or trust is focusing on, this finding suggests that, in reality, other areas just feel more critical to address. As indicated by our findings below on current priorities, perhaps community engagement sometimes gets de-prioritised in favour of more immediately pressing areas that schools and trusts will be held to account for.

**Graph 1**  
**Governors' attitudes towards community engagement**



**Graph 2**  
**Trustees' attitudes towards community engagement**



**Graph 1**, Is community engagement a key objective in your school improvement plan (SIP) this year? Do you believe community engagement should be a key objective in the SIP? Governors base size: 1,304

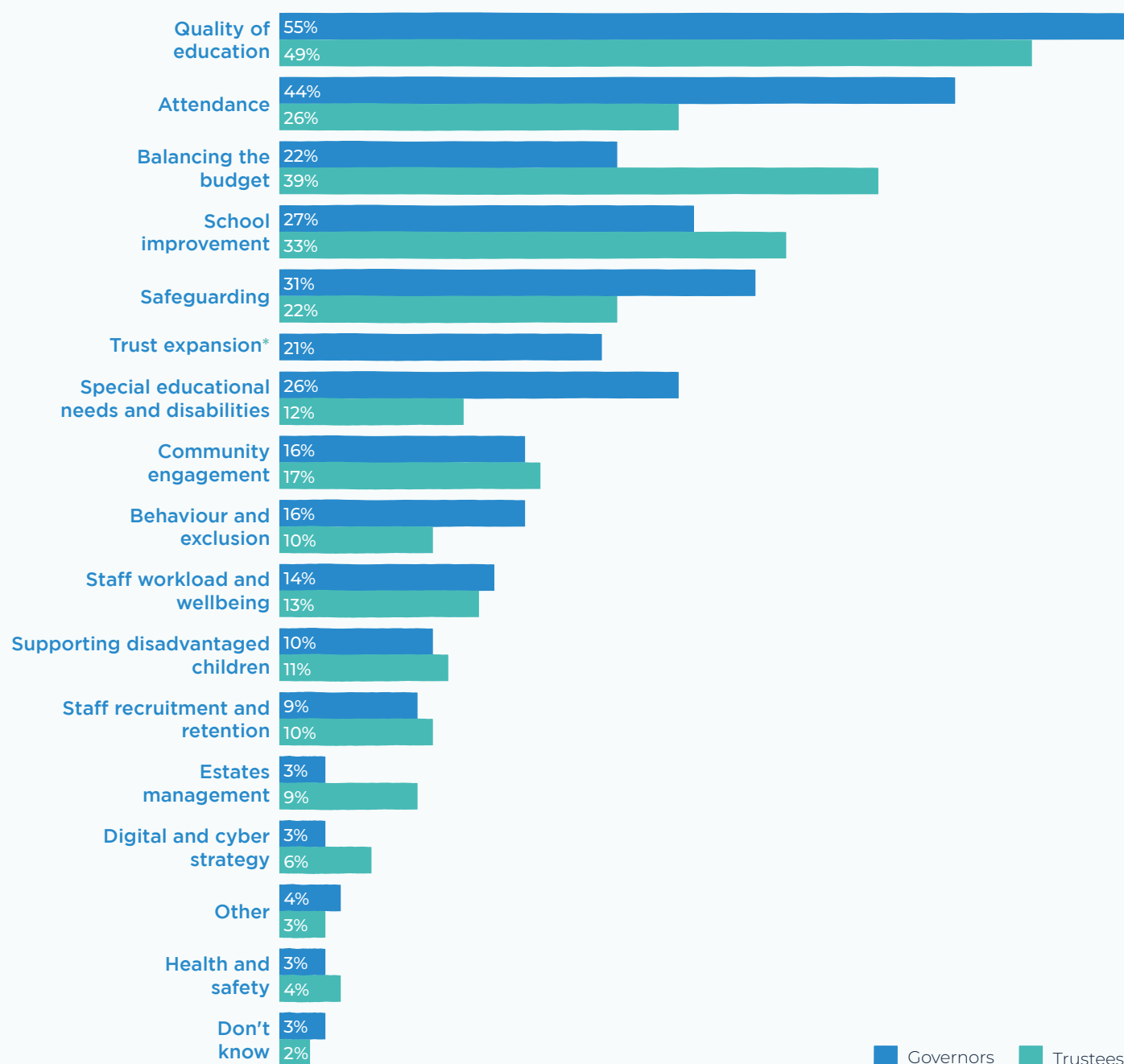
**Graph 2**, Is community engagement a key objective in your trust improvement plan (TIP) this year? Do you believe community engagement should be a key objective in the TIP? Trustees base size: 232

Delving deeper, when we asked about current priorities of the local governing body and trust board, fewer than 1 in 5 governors (16%) and trustees (17%) said that community engagement is one of their top 3 priorities (graph 3). Quality of education,

attendance, and safeguarding were more commonly selected as top priorities for governors. Among trustees, quality of education, balancing the budget, and school improvement were higher priorities.

Graph 3

### Top priorities among local governing bodies and trust boards



\*Trust expansion wasn't available as an answer option in the governor survey

Graph 3, What are your local governing body's/trust board's top priorities right now? Please select 3, Base sizes: governors: 1,436, trustees: 259

However, the comments left by respondents showed clear recognition of the value of community engagement, whether or not they had prioritised it in their SIP/TIP:

**“I believe regular and good school-community engagement brings positive results in many aspects of pupils’ and their families’ lives, including their wellbeing, education, and safety.”**

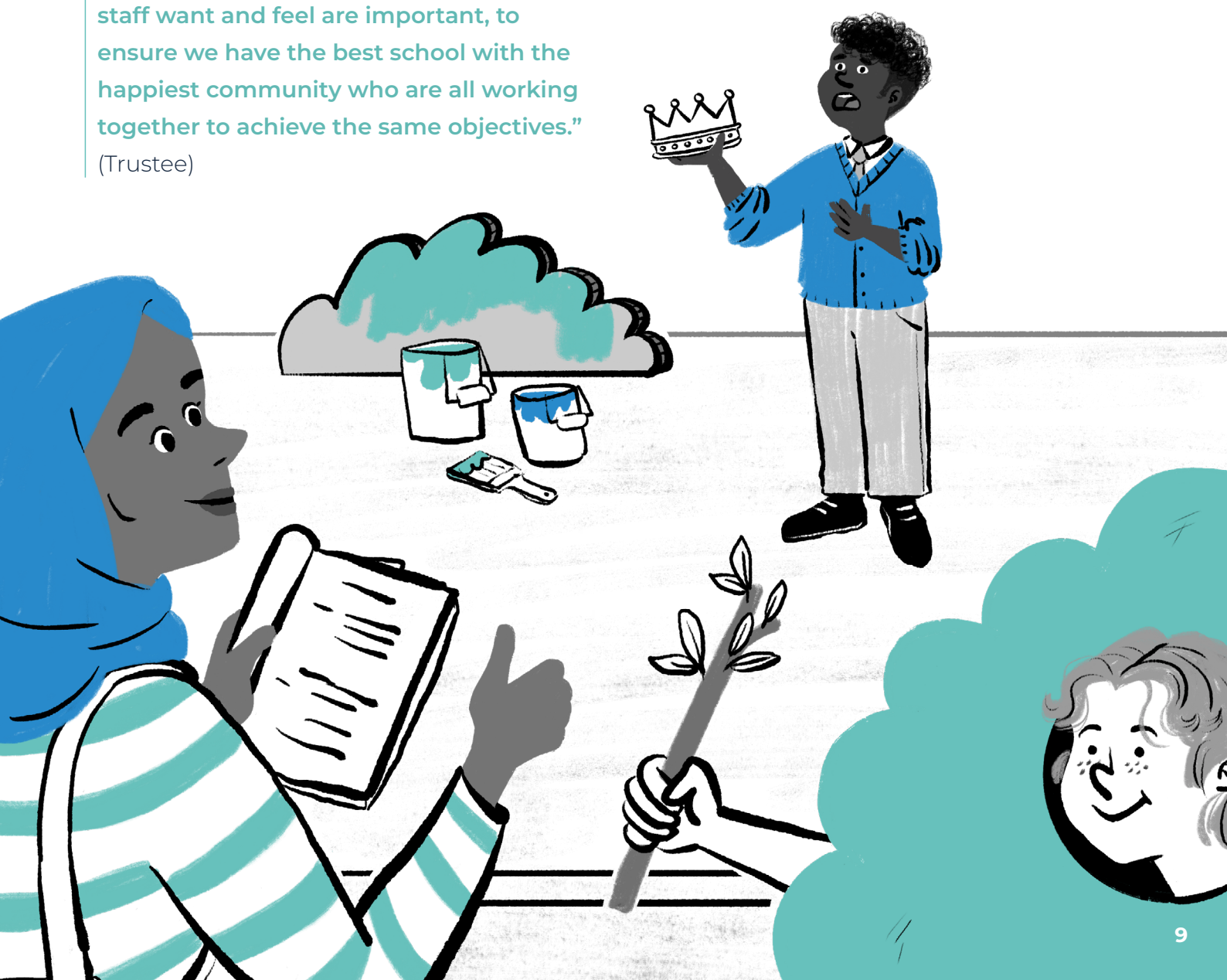
(Trustee)

**“I feel community engagement is important and community co-production is also equally important, as we need to understand what our families/students/staff want and feel are important, to ensure we have the best school with the happiest community who are all working together to achieve the same objectives.”**

(Trustee)

**“Working together with the community and parents is essential to ensuring improved attendance and behaviour in school. We want to be as inclusive as possible and to bring parents along with us on the journey.”** (Governor)

**“Community engagement builds positive relationships, greater involvement with parents, shared knowledge, ideas and opportunities, encourages parental involvement, and builds mutual understanding and respect of cultures - all of which are positive foundations to build positive learning opportunities and attitudes.”** (Governor)

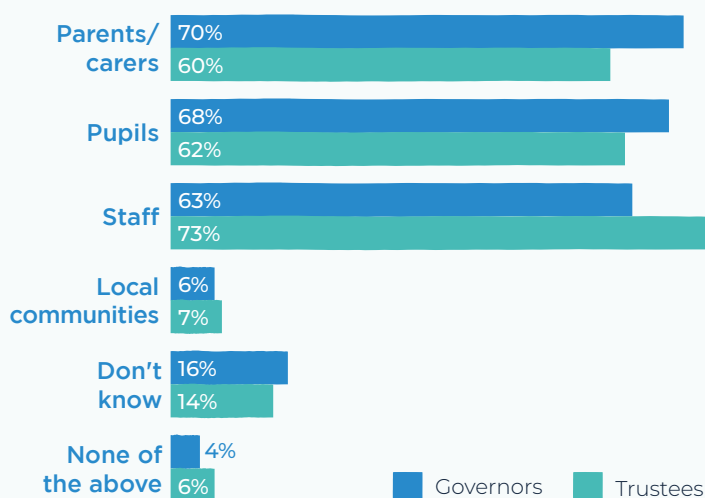


## 2 Most governors and trustees surveyed say their schools are collecting feedback from parents/carers, pupils and staff

Most trusts are using surveys to collect quantitative feedback from stakeholders. However, the local community beyond those directly connected to the school(s) is much less likely to have been surveyed in the last 12 months than parents/carers, pupils or staff (graph 4):

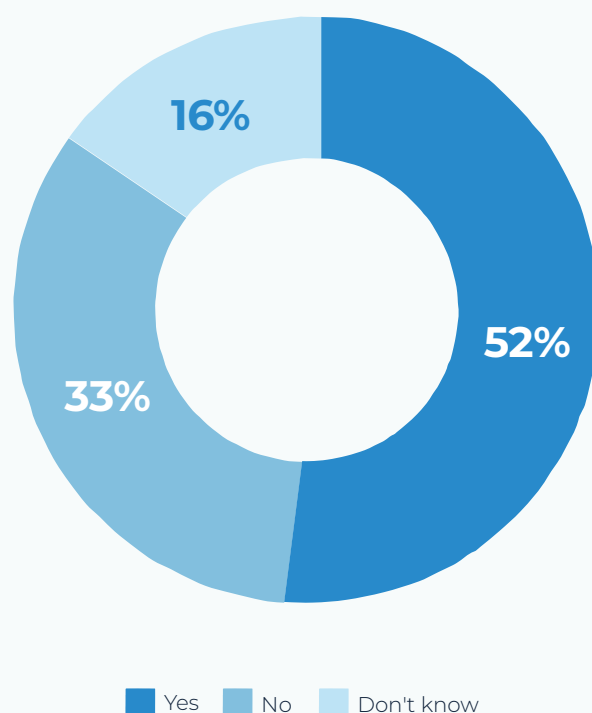
- Parents/carers: 70% of governors, 60% of trustees
- Pupils: 68% of governors, 62% of trustees
- Staff: 63% of governors, 73% of trustees
- Local community/communities: 6% of governors, 7% of trustees

**Graph 4**  
Has your school/trust surveyed any of the following in the last 12 months?



A smaller proportion of schools are collecting qualitative feedback, such as via parent forums or councils (graph 5). Just over half (52%) of governors say their school regularly seeks qualitative feedback from parents and carers - a fairly popular approach, considering that these methods can be harder to operate and take part in, and require more resources than an online survey.

**Graph 5**  
Does your school regularly seek qualitative feedback from parents/carers?



**Graph 4.** Has your school or trust surveyed any of the following in the last 12 months? Please select all that apply, Governors base size: 1,180. Has your trust (either centrally or in a consistent way, via its schools) surveyed any of the following in the last 12 months? Please select all that apply, Trustees base size: 211

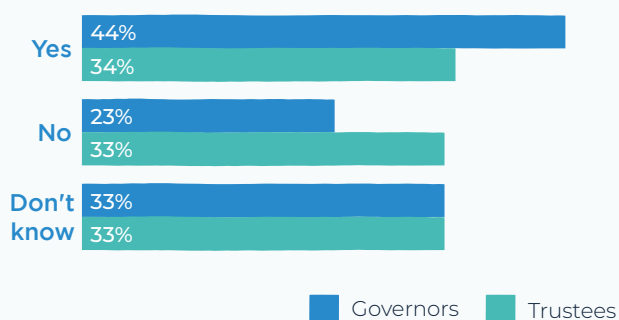
**Graph 5.** Does your school regularly seek qualitative feedback from parents and carers via a function such as a parent forum or council? Governors base size: 1,180



When we asked governors and trustees whether their school/trust has implemented any particularly effective strategies for gathering feedback from, and collaborating with, parents/carers and the local community, 44% of governors and 34% of trustees said yes (graph 6).

Graph 6

**Has your school/trust implemented any particularly effective strategies for gathering feedback from, and collaborating with, parents/carers and the local community?**



Respondents shared a wide range of strategies, including the use of surveys, but other methods of engagement were also mentioned:

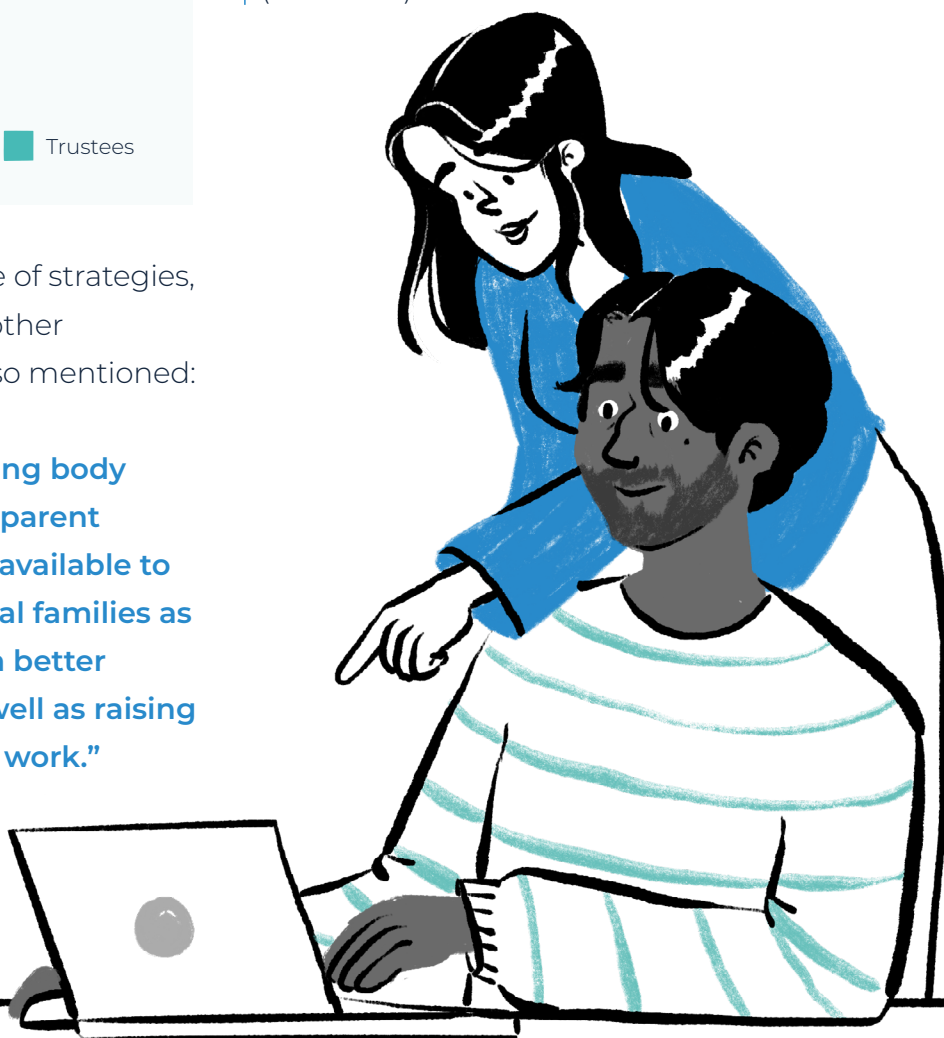
**“Members of the local governing body (LGB) sat at a table at the last parent teacher meetings, so as to be available to parents, and spoke with several families as a result, both giving the LGB a better sense of parent concerns, as well as raising awareness of the role and our work.”**

(Governor)

**“The school is implementing various strategies to engage parents, for example, offering well-being and first aid courses. Last year, parents were invited to speak to the school’s head to discuss various things with their child and the school.”** (Trustee)

**“The school is completing projects through curriculum work, which link to issues of focus within the community, e.g. pollution of the local rivers.”** (Governor)

**“We have effective and much-valued engagement with our church leaders, local police community support officers, parish council and borough councillor.”** (Governor)

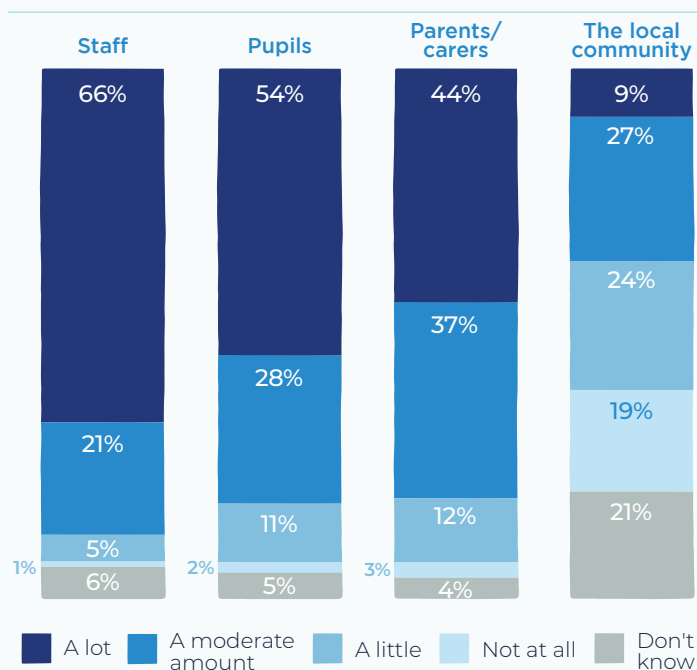


# 3 Feedback from staff is most likely to feed into decision-making, followed by feedback from pupils, then parents/carers and, lastly, the local community

## Governors' views:

Feedback from staff is most likely to have the highest impact on school decision-making, according to the governors we surveyed (graph 7). Two-thirds (66%) of respondents told us that this feeds into decision-making “a lot”. With staff retention issues across the sector well-documented, it may be that schools and trusts are trying to elevate staff voices in order to understand how to better support their workforce.

**Graph 7**  
**To what extent do you feel feedback from the following groups within your school community feeds into decision making at the school level?**



Perhaps unsurprisingly, pupil and parent/carers feedback also has a significant impact, with 4 in 5 governors stating that they feel feedback from these groups feeds into decision-making “a moderate amount” or “a lot”. Many schools promote 'pupil voice' to give their pupils a say in the school community, and it's also understandable that schools would want to get parents on board to hear their views and prevent any issues escalating.

## Trustees' views:

Similarly, trustee responses (graph 8) indicate that:

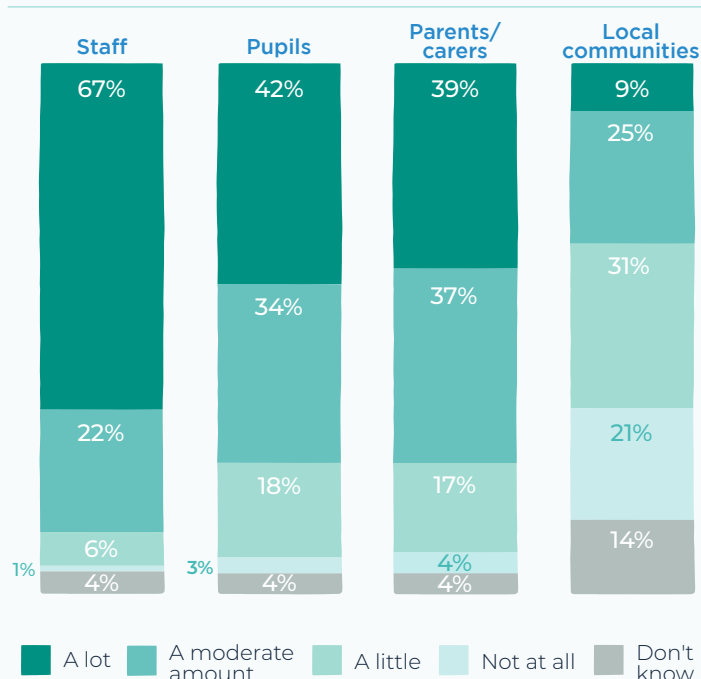
- Staff have the most influence on trust decision-making (67% of respondents said that staff feedback feeds into decision-making “a lot”)
- Feedback from pupils and parents/carers tends to have at least a moderate impact (76% of respondents told us that feedback from these groups feeds into decision-making “a moderate amount” or “a lot”)

Trustees surveyed were less likely to think that feedback from pupils and parents/carers feeds through “a lot” to decision-making at trust level, compared with governors, who answered in relation to school-level decision-making (pupils: 42% vs 54%, parents/carers:

**Graph 7.** You might get feedback in several ways, such as via surveys, the school council, parent or staff forums, or unprompted written or spoken feedback. To what extent do you feel feedback from the following groups within your school community feeds into decision making at the school level? Governors base size: 1,180

39% vs 44%). This might be because trustees are a little ‘further away’ from those pupil and parent voices than governors, who tend to be closer to the communities they serve (though that might depend on the size of the trust and its geographical spread).

**Graph 8**  
**To what extent do you feel feedback from the following groups within your school communities feeds into decision making at the trust level?**



Both governors and trustees surveyed say that feedback from local communities (beyond the parents/carers of children attending the school) feeds into school and trust decision-making to a much lesser extent, compared with other stakeholders. As seen earlier (graph 4), only a small minority of governors (6%) and trustees (7%) say their schools and trusts survey the local community. We can understand why this is so low: clearly, schools don't have ready access to a database of local community members, so it would be more problematic to run surveys at community level.

The small number of respondents who told us they were running surveys with the wider community did not provide any detail on how they were doing this. It would be interesting to hear from schools or trusts on how they get quantitative feedback from these stakeholders, and whether doing so has increased their influence on decision-making. It may be that feedback from this group is gathered through building relationships.



**Graph 8.** To what extent do you feel feedback from the following groups within your school communities feeds into decision making at the trust level?(Your trust and your schools might get feedback in several ways, such as via surveys, school councils, parent or staff forums, or unprompted written or spoken feedback.) Trustees base size:211

# 4

## Governors who feel that community engagement is effective are more likely to say that they report on it to the trust board

We looked at different approaches to supporting community engagement, such as where the local governing body:

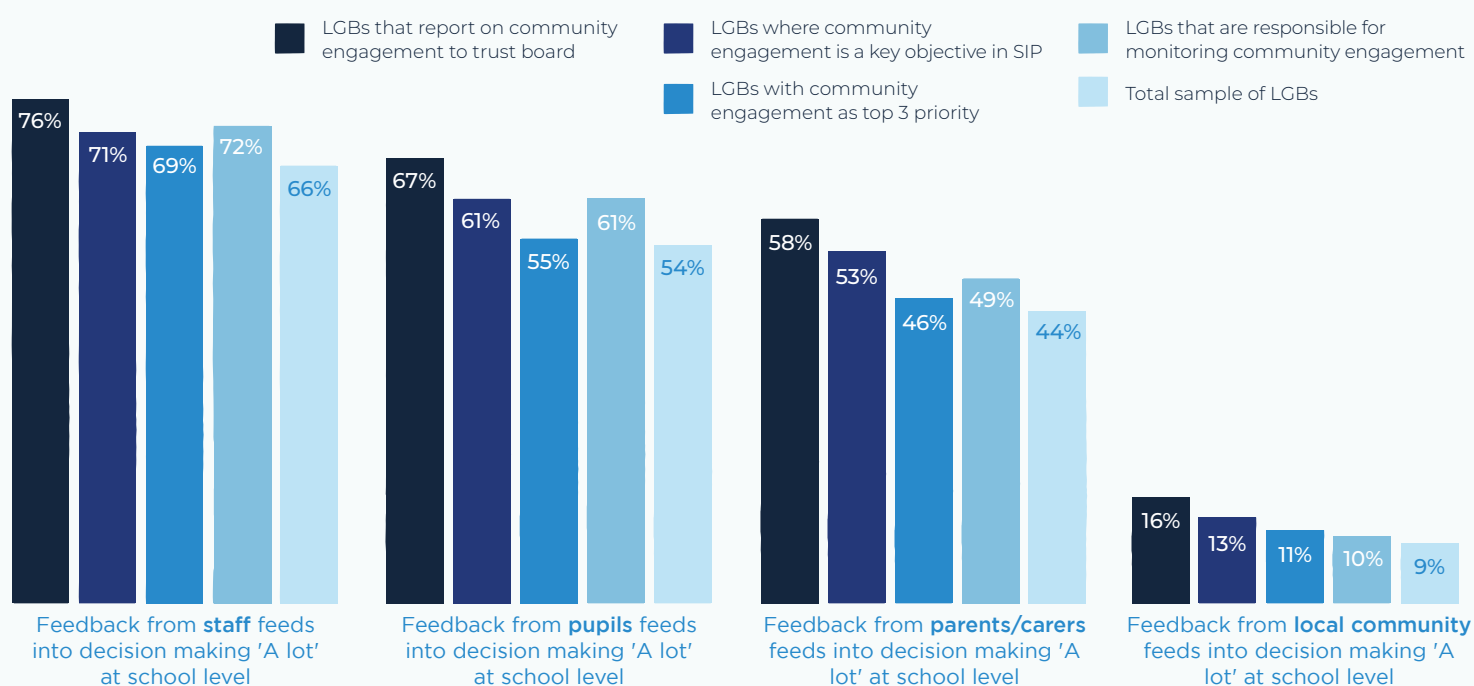
- Reports on community engagement to the trust board
- Prioritises community engagement
- Includes community engagement in the school improvement plan (SIP)
- Monitors community engagement at school level

Reporting on community engagement to the trust board appears to be the strongest indicator of feedback from staff, pupils, parents/carers and the local community having an impact on decision-making in schools (graph 9).

Note: respondents in graph 9 and table 1 may fall into more than one category.

Graph 9

### Influence of feedback from school community on school decision-making compared by different local governing body (LGB) approaches



**Graph 9**, You might get feedback in several ways, such as via surveys, the school council, parent or staff forums, or unprompted written or spoken feedback. To what extent do you feel feedback from the following groups within your school community feeds into decision making at the school level? Governors base sizes: Report on community engagement to trust board: 359, Community engagement is a key objective in SIP: 569, Community engagement as top 3 priority: 199, Responsible for monitoring community engagement: 738, Total sample: 1,180

We also looked at these different approaches to supporting community engagement in relation to some typical indicators of effective engagement (table 1). Including community engagement as a key objective in the SIP; having it as a top 3 priority for the local governing body; and the local governing body having responsibility for monitoring this

area, are all associated with higher levels of community engagement (compared with the total sample, see the far right column in table 1). However, none of these factors makes as much difference as having local governing bodies report on community engagement to the trust board, as shown in the first column of table 1<sup>12</sup>.

**Table 1**

	LGBs that report on community engagement to the trust board	LGBs where community engagement is a key objective in the SIP	LGBs with community engagement as a top 3 priority	LGBs that are responsible for monitoring community engagement	Total sample of LGBs
School regularly seeks qualitative feedback from parents and carers	<b>68%</b> (b.359)	<b>62%</b> (b.569)	<b>60%</b> (b.199)	<b>57%</b> (b.738)	<b>52%</b> (b.1,180)
School has effective strategies for gathering feedback from, and collaborating with, parents/carers and the local community	<b>61%</b> (b.359)	<b>54%</b> (b.536)	<b>46%</b> (b.186)	<b>50%</b> (b.703)	<b>44%</b> (b.1,121)
School is very or moderately effective at forging links with the community	<b>85%</b> (b.359)	<b>77%</b> (b.536)	<b>74%</b> (b.186)	<b>72%</b> (b.703)	<b>67%</b> (b.1,121)
School or trust does a good job of communicating the trust's work to parents/carers	<b>81%</b> (b.359)	<b>73%</b> (b.569)	<b>67%</b> (b.199)	<b>68%</b> (b.738)	<b>64%</b> (b.1,180)

**b.** = governors base size

<sup>12</sup> Survey questions: Does your school regularly seek qualitative feedback from parents and carers via a function such as a parent forum or council?; Has your school implemented any particularly effective strategies for gathering feedback from, and collaborating with, parents/carers and the local community?; Schools can do a variety of things to embed themselves in the local community, such as enabling the use of the school site for community activities or elections, and working with local services like food banks, arts organisations, health professionals and the police. In addition, schools can develop policies and practices to support this work, including how the local governing body engages with the community. To what extent do you think your school is effective at forging links with the community by engaging in these kinds of activities?; Do you think your school or trust does a good job of communicating your trust's work to parents/carers?

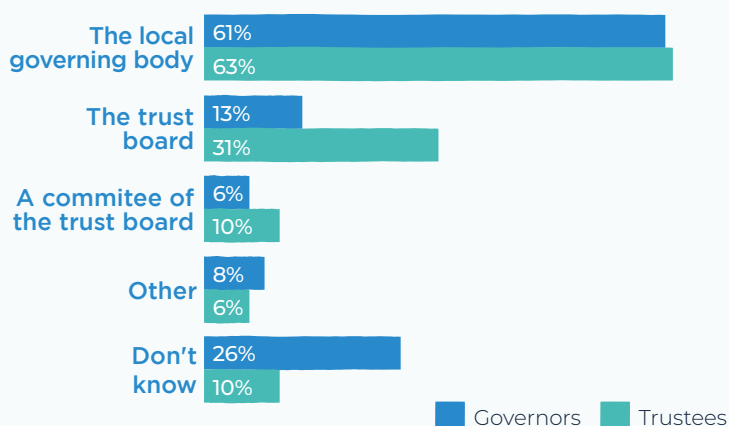
# 5 Some governors aren't fully aware of who's responsible for monitoring community engagement

The academy trust governance guide explains that a high-performing governance structure embodies strong leadership with clear lines of accountability and communication, and clearly defined governance roles and responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

For many, responsibilities around community engagement appear to be clearly defined. Around 3 in 5 governors (61%) and trustees (63%) surveyed state that the local governing body is responsible for monitoring community engagement at school level (graph 10).

However, a quarter of governors don't know who is responsible (26% vs 10% of trustees), which suggests that lines of responsibility and communication are not always clear.

**Graph 10**  
**Who is responsible for monitoring community engagement at school level?**

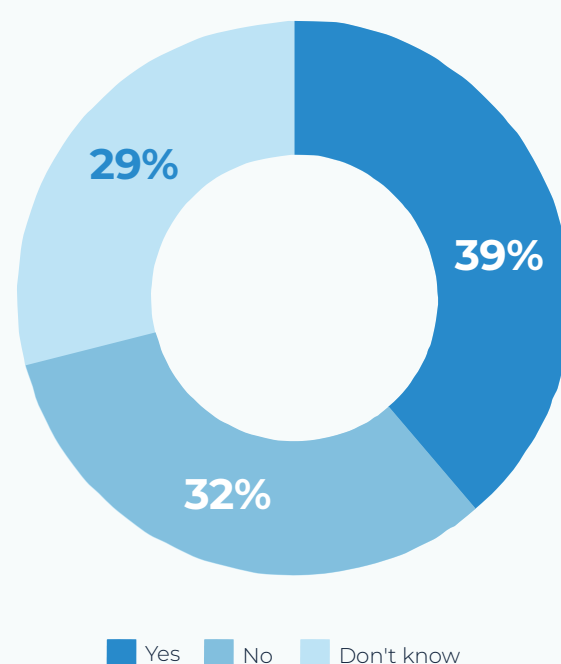


For those governors who state that their local governing body monitors community engagement, only around 2 in 5 (39%) say they report on this area to the trust board (graph 11). And 29% don't know if they do this, which may further suggest that not all trusts are making clear whose role this is and then how the information should be shared.

**Graph 11**

## **Does your local governing body report to the trust board on community engagement?**

(Asked among governors who said the local governing body is responsible for monitoring community engagement)



<sup>13</sup> Academy trust governance guide, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/governance-in-academy-trusts/4-non-executive-leadership>

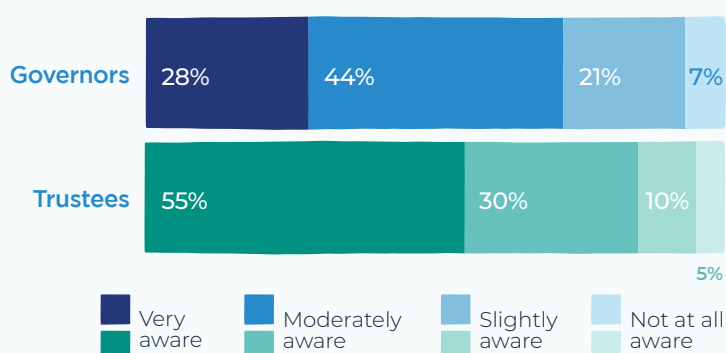
**Graph 10**, In your trust, who is responsible for monitoring community engagement at school level? (Your 'community' might include parents/carers, pupils, staff and members of the local community.) Please select all that apply. Base sizes: governors: 1,304, trustees: 232

**Graph 11**, Does your local governing body report to the trust board on community engagement? Governors base size: 672

As well as asking whether governors and trustees know who is responsible for monitoring community engagement, we asked to what extent they're aware of their wider responsibilities (graph 12):

Graph 12

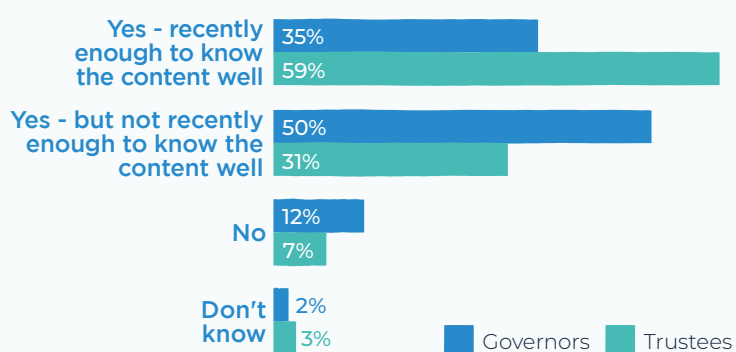
**To what extent are you aware of all of your delegated responsibilities according to your trust's scheme of delegation?**



Just over half (55%) of trustees surveyed say they are “very aware” of their delegated responsibilities, compared with 28% of governors. For context, we also asked who had read their scheme of delegation (graph 13):

Graph 13

**Have you read your trust's scheme of delegation?**



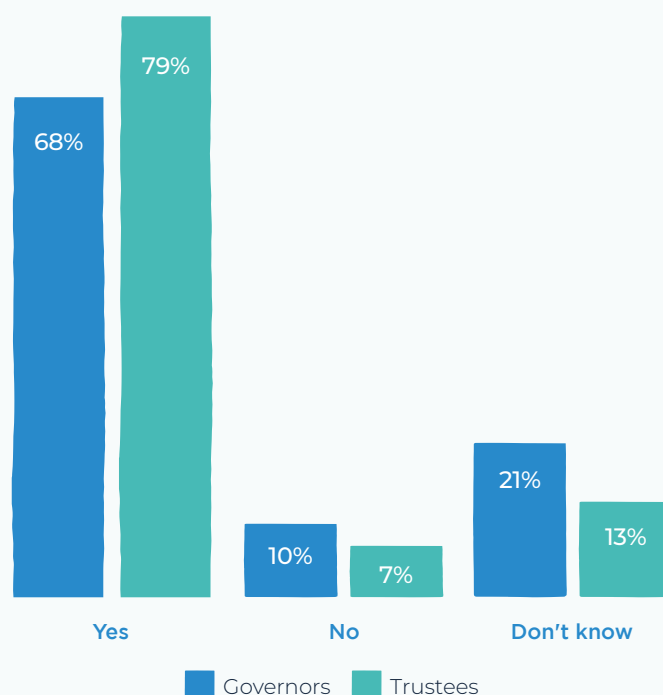
We can see that half of the governors surveyed say they have not read their scheme of delegation recently enough to know the content well (note: we didn't define ‘recently’ in the survey, so we can't be sure what timeframe respondents interpreted this to mean). Around 1 in 10 (12%) governors surveyed haven't read their scheme of delegation at all.

In contrast, nearly 3 in 5 trustees (59%) say they have read their scheme of delegation recently enough to know the content well. Only 7% of trustees have not read it.

We also asked whether the scheme of delegation was easy to understand (graph 14):

Graph 14

**Is your trust's scheme of delegation easy to understand?**



**Graph 12,** To what extent are you aware of all of your local governing body's delegated responsibilities according to your trust's scheme of delegation? Governors base size: 1,078 To what extent are you aware of the full scope of your trust board's delegated responsibilities according to your trust's scheme of delegation? Trustees base size: 189

**Graph 13,** Have you read your trust's scheme of delegation? Base sizes: governors: 1,078, trustees: 189

**Graph 14,** Is your trust's scheme of delegation easy to understand? Base sizes: governors: 1,078 , trustees: 189



The majority of governors and trustees surveyed (68% and 79%) say their scheme of delegation is easy to understand (graph 14). This is not the same as retaining that information over time, however - as suggested by our finding that 50% of governors have not read their scheme of delegation “recently enough to know the content well” (graph 13).

Of the 737 governors who say their scheme of delegation is “easy to understand”, only 38% are “very aware” of their delegated responsibilities. But of the 378 governors who say they have read the scheme of delegation “recently enough to know the content well”, a much higher proportion (62%) are “very aware” of their delegated responsibilities. So, reading a scheme of delegation recently appears to be a stronger indicator of high awareness of responsibilities.

Those who say the scheme of delegation isn’t easy to understand cite “confusion”, “length of document” and “complicated wording” as the barriers. The following quotes from respondents help us to see the issues both governors and trustees are dealing with:

**“If you do not have an educational/school background, it can make it more difficult to understand the terminology.”**

(Governor)

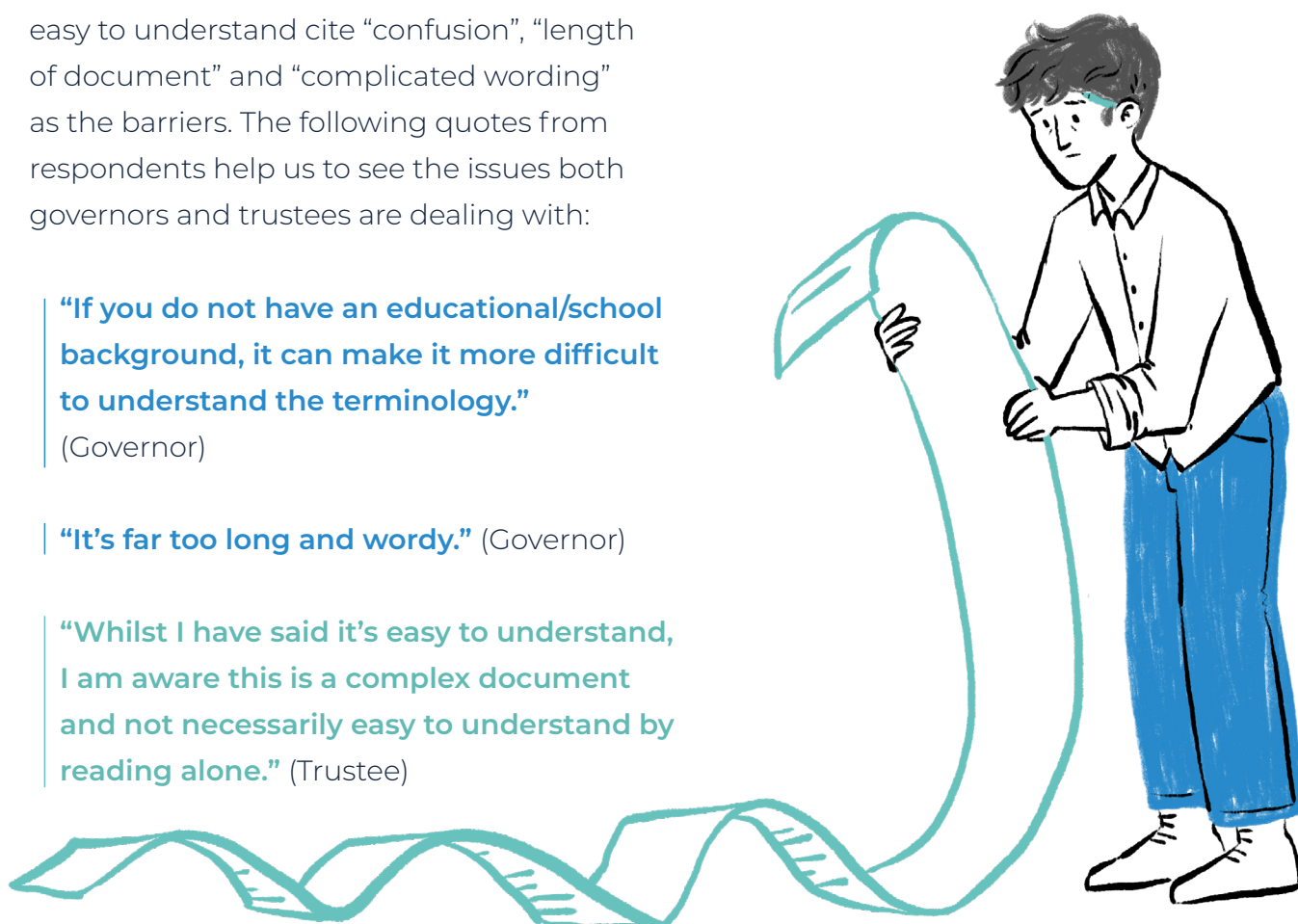
**“It’s far too long and wordy.”** (Governor)

**“Whilst I have said it’s easy to understand, I am aware this is a complex document and not necessarily easy to understand by reading alone.”** (Trustee)

**“Is it easy for an experienced school leader or governance member to understand? Yes. Can a layperson pick it up and understand it without support - no, and I challenge any trust to say this is possible for theirs. There is a significant training/onboarding overhead for anyone stepping into governance/trusteeship for the first time. This is off-putting and I believe is the reason governance recruitment is a constant challenge.”**

(Trustee)

Perhaps these findings are a reminder of just how busy and time-poor governors are. They do this role as volunteers, and many have full-time jobs and other commitments - important considerations for schools and trusts preparing documentation, communications and training that they want their governors to engage with.



## Some governors from the same trust show a differing understanding from one another of their delegated responsibilities

The difficulty in understanding the scheme of delegation cited by some respondents is potentially illustrated by another interesting finding.

When we asked respondents to categorise their MAT's governance structure using the classifications proposed by the CST (table 2), there was some inconsistency from governors within the same organisation about which type of functions are delegated to the local tier within their trust.

Governors from 34 of the 71 trusts identified by name in the survey categorised the type of local governing body they were part of differently from one another when provided with the above definitions. So, in the same trust, people had a different understanding about what they were there to do. We also saw a number of respondents who said they were unsure about how to categorise their trust.

This suggests again the importance of having a clear scheme of delegation and sufficient induction and training to make sure governors understand their responsibilities.

**Table 2,** The local tier of governance in school trusts, CST<sup>14</sup>

Name	Activities
Local advisory committees or councils	No delegated governance functions or powers – the advisory committee is tasked with meaningful engagement with parents and local communities
Local school committees	Limited delegated governance functions (but no powers), for example scrutiny of standards, health and safety and safeguarding, and community engagement
Local governing boards	A fuller set of delegated functions and some powers, which may include some decisions over school level finance

<sup>14</sup> The local tier of governance in school trusts, Confederation of School Trusts, <https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/guidance-and-policy/policies-governance-and-compliance/the-local-tier-of-governance-in-school-trusts-guidance/>

## The relationship between delegation and parental engagement is limited

We mentioned in our introduction that we also worked with a research partner, Edurio, to look at additional survey data collected from a much larger sample.

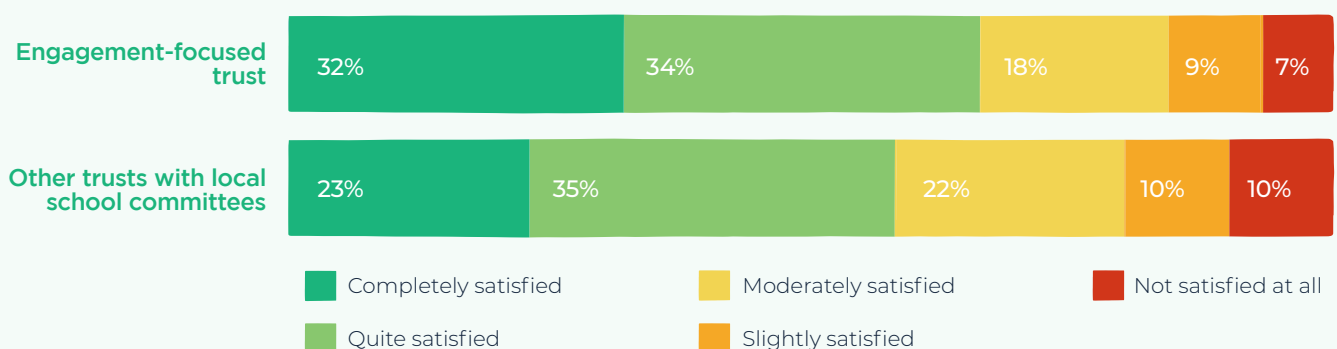
A key question in Edurio's survey (of 19,000 parents in 30 trusts) was around how parents felt the trust was performing in terms of parental engagement. We used the results to understand what relevance, if any, a trust's approach to delegation has on its ability to engage meaningfully with parents<sup>15</sup>. We also wanted to understand whether its geographical dispersal (how far apart a trust's schools are from each other) makes any difference.

When comparing the parental engagement data across both factors, we didn't find any considerable differences, despite what some in the sector believe to be challenges with larger, more geographically-spread trusts, or those which favour more centralisation of governance functions.

However, while we cannot draw conclusions from individual examples, we did note two trusts where parental engagement was higher than average. In one trust (represented in graph 15 in the top bar as the "engagement-focused trust"), with a much more explicit focus on stakeholder engagement written into its scheme of delegation, measures relating to parental engagement were more positive than those trusts with an otherwise similar level of delegation:

Graph 15

### How satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent?



<sup>15</sup> Note: we have not set out to determine which type of governance structure allows for better engagement with communities, because it is invariably more complex than that, but simply to understand whether this was an affecting factor.

**Graph 15,** In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent? This shows the results from the engagement-focused trust, categorised as having local school committees (base size: 250), compared with the results from the other trusts in the sample that were categorised as having local school committees (base size: 9,865).

A second trust in the study, whose local governing bodies are primarily focused on community engagement (and therefore categorised as ‘local advisory committees or councils’, according to the CST classifications - see table 2 on page 19), also demonstrated high levels of parental engagement. Parents at this trust were more positive about the school’s efforts to engage them overall (39% “completely satisfied” vs 26% for trusts with local governing boards and 22% for trusts with local school committees) - although it’s impossible to be clear on the full reasons why. As only one trust of this type was identified, we are not able to say whether there is a causal relationship.

Other school-level information such as a school’s Ofsted grade and its progress 8 measure has a stronger correlation with parental engagement than delegation or locality. For example, Edurio found that 28% of parents in schools that were judged to be ‘outstanding’ said they were “completely satisfied” with their school’s efforts to engage them, versus 7% of parents in schools judged ‘inadequate’. For more detail on this, see graphs 18 to 21 in the appendix.



# Lessons to be shared

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## 1. Make community engagement a priority across the trust

The data collected shows that both governors and trustees value community engagement, but among those surveyed, it is not being prioritised as widely as they would like across the work of governing bodies and trusts. Competing priorities and more urgent issues appear to be the cause of this.

So while the DfE advocates 'strategic engagement' as a key purpose of governance in a trust<sup>16</sup> and highlights the importance of engagement with stakeholders and acting in the interests of the local community<sup>17</sup>, there's a gap between what's advocated and what seems practical at ground level, given other priorities.

Perhaps to overcome this, community engagement might be better viewed as a golden thread running through other priorities - rather than a one-off or discrete activity on its own. This might mean

incorporating community engagement, in some form or other, into a trust or school's vision or values.

For some, prioritising community engagement has involved a restructuring of governance functions. Dan Morrow, CEO of an 18-school MAT, Dartmoor Multi-Academy Trust, told us:

**"While carrying out local level governance reform, we found that there wasn't enough capacity for governors to undertake some of the standards visits, and so that was taken more into the trust board ... The local level is [now] much more focused on stakeholder experience, which I think is so important for the social contract between schools and home."**

**"We increased the regularity of our surveys, and we meet with groups of staff, parents and pupils to have a triangle of voice in order to be reflected back in the work that the local governance does."**

<sup>16</sup> Academy trust governance guide, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/-governance-in-academy-trusts/2-governance-of-the-trust>

<sup>17</sup> Commissioning high-quality trusts, DfE, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commissioning-high-quality-trusts>

## 2. Improve mechanisms for reporting on community engagement

The trust board is tasked with overseeing strategic relationships with stakeholders but to be truly effective it should put in place appropriate processes for this information to be gathered and shared ‘upwards’ appropriately.

Among governors who say the local governing body is responsible for monitoring this area, less than half (39% - see graph 11) say their LGB reports on it to the trust board. Indeed, 2 in 5 trustees surveyed stated that they are only “slightly aware” or “not at all aware” of what’s happening regarding community engagement locally. This could be resolved by trustees formally requesting feedback/reports on community engagement from governors who are responsible for monitoring this.

If trusts also develop systems to allow subsequent actions to be shared, this could improve the flow of information between trust and local tier, and give governors a better sense of how their work is making an impact.

Anthem Schools Trust utilises ‘community champions’ - members of the local governing body, or ‘community council’, who have specific responsibility for this area. They complete reports summarising the work they’ve carried out, lessons learned, and plans going forward. These reports are prepared before community council meetings, where they are then discussed and added to a

dashboard, which is visible around the trust. The relevant trust teams and trust board can act upon the feedback and inform the community council of what they’ve agreed to do in light of the information they’ve received. This structure allows both governors and trustees to be aware of community engagement feedback and how this is impacting decision-making.

Effective external reporting mechanisms can also make a real difference to stakeholder relationships. For example, Paul Harris, CEO at the Tapscott Learning Trust (a MAT with 4 primary schools), has found that feeding back to stakeholders via an annual report<sup>18</sup> has had a significant impact. The report, which the trust makes available to all stakeholders, describes the trust’s values, operations and performance, alongside examples of how its schools engage with their communities. Paul told us:

**“Our attendance rate is above the national average, currently at 98.4%, and we haven’t seen the type of rejection from education which has been reported along with the talk of the social contract breakdown. We feel like we’ve got a good relationship with all of our families, and the stakeholder report has contributed to this.”**

<sup>18</sup> Annual report 2022/23, The Tapscott Learning Trust, <https://www.ttl.academy/site/data/Publications/TTLT-Annual-Report-2022-2023/index.html>

### 3. Make better use of the local tier

There were a few instances where we heard from governors who did not feel that the model of governance in their trust was enabling the local community to be heard. For example:

**“I feel there is a disconnect between the local community and the trust because it is so far removed. It is very difficult to make decisions based on local knowledge when you’re ultimately responsible for a body so far removed. The more that is centralised, the less influence the local community has on the direction of the school; the headteacher becomes a “middle-man” and the model is disempowering.”** (Governor)

This appears to be a missed opportunity for a trust to make full use of the local tier to support and improve community engagement - and to give governors a sense of purpose and value.

Local governing bodies are especially well-placed to take responsibility for community engagement, as their members are likely to live within the local community, giving them an understanding of the local context. And many of our survey respondents expressed a desire for community engagement to be a key objective, indicating that governors would likely welcome a more active role in this area.

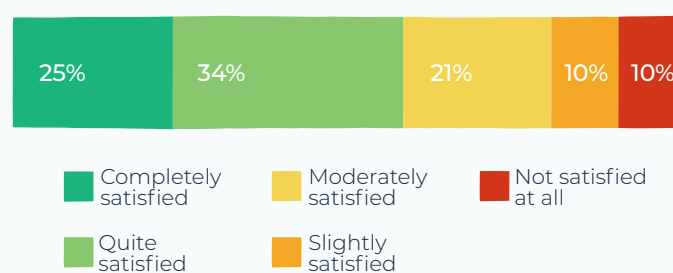
**“It’s particularly important for us to make sure that we enable and empower our schools and our community councils**

**[local tier of governance] to really connect with their own local communities. They need to be feeding back through to the schools, through to the national team, and across the trust, to our trustees, what the local context is. And we need to be listening so we are able to do something about it.”** - Claire Pannell, director of governance - general counsel, Anthem Schools Trust

**“Academisation, over the years, was starting to minimise the importance of local governance. Being a repository for stakeholder voice, shining a light and holding a mirror up is an incredibly important piece of assurance work for the board and for the school communities that they serve.”** - Dan Morrow, CEO, Dartmoor Academy Trust

There is a clear need to improve connection with parents, according to Edurio’s data, which shows a fifth (20%) of parents have low satisfaction with their school’s efforts to engage them, and a further 21% are only “moderately satisfied”.

**Graph 16**  
**How satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent?**





It seems that using the local governing bodies is likely to be a trust's best bet when it comes to understanding any barriers that parents might face, beyond hearing from parents themselves.

## 4. Clear up confusion about 'who does what' in academy governance

Given how much confusion we have found in the sector, it's important that governors and trustees get the support and training they need to understand the 'who does what' of governance in their trust - including, crucially, their own responsibilities. This could include:

- Comprehensive induction, including a strong emphasis on the scheme of delegation
- Simplifying the language and format of the scheme of delegation
- Utilising concise summaries and providing more 'narrative'-style explanations for governors, where possible
- Ensuring that governors can see "at a glance" what falls in their remit
- Encouraging governors to read their scheme of delegation more regularly - and perhaps even quizzing them on it periodically

**"All of our local governors receive an induction from the head office governance team as well as being inducted onto their individual boards by their academy. The head office session makes it really clear to governors how they fit into the wider trust picture, what**

**their role entails and all the structures and supporting documentation around them, including a scheme of delegation and decision-making framework. This is then reinforced with termly briefings from the wider exec team/trustees to give them the national/trust-wide context in which they are operating locally."** - Sunita Yardley-Patel, head of governance, Ormiston Academies Trust

**"We make clear from the outset the remit of the governor role on a local governing body, and engage in discussions with each applicant as part of an initial phone call with them. Governors undertake a full induction process prior to final appointment, again reiterating the remit of their role and the opportunities for engagement with the school community. Our link governor programme supports governors with set link roles on their LGBs, with guidance and forums held with our network leads. This strengthens engagement with the governor role and the involvement governors have with their schools."** - Louise Garcia, head of schools governance, Ark Schools

The various governance structures now available to trusts mean it is particularly important to clearly define responsibilities, so that governors have full transparency regarding what their role entails.

## An opportunity to listen

Our report highlights some of the important work taking place in the academy sector to engage with and listen to stakeholders. It also reveals an appetite from governors and trustees to prioritise this work.

Schools themselves have been through a challenging time, as we know. The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt in the challenges around pupil attendance, behaviour and, in some cases, friction between parents and schools.

As many trusts look to review the effectiveness of their governance structures, we see a clear opportunity to put community engagement at the heart of the process, so that schools are not just listening and working meaningfully with their communities but there are clear systems in place to allow this work to have a real impact.

At GovernorHub, we'll continue to do what we can to support governing boards with community engagement, and have pulled together a suite of resources to help [here](#).



# Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support and feedback we received from the following voices in the sector during the production of this report.

- Confederation of School Trusts
- Edurio
- Louise Garcia (head of schools governance, Ark Schools)
- Paul Harris (CEO, The Tapscott Learning Trust)
- Hannah Jackson (community partnerships lead, Academies Enterprise Trust)
- Dan Morrow (CEO, Dartmoor Multi Academy Trust)
- National Governance Association
- Claire Pannell (director of governance - general counsel, Anthem Schools Trust)
- Louise Weber (governance and admissions officer, Academies Enterprise Trust)
- Sunita Yardley-Patel (head of governance, Ormiston Academies Trust)



# Methodology

## 1. Surveys

We carried out two online surveys in autumn 2023, one targeting trustees of multi-academy trusts and the other aimed at local governors within multi-academy trusts. The surveys were sent to GovernorHub members but also shared with non-members via sector partners.

1,436 respondents took part in the governor survey between 30 October and 4 December 2023. 259 respondents took part in the trustee survey between 30 October and 27 November 2023. The survey data has not been weighted and so is not statistically representative of the whole governor/trustee population.

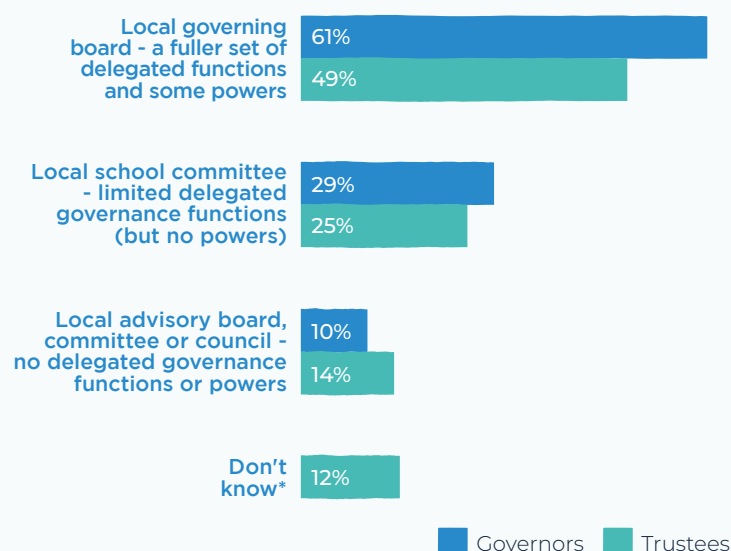
Governors and trustees who responded to the survey were asked to categorise their local governing bodies according to the CST's governance structure classifications:

- Local advisory committee or council – no delegated governance functions or powers; the advisory committee is tasked with meaningful engagement with parents and local communities
- Local school committee – limited delegated governance functions (but no powers), for example scrutiny of standards, health and safety and safeguarding, and community engagement
- Local governing board – a fuller set of delegated functions and some powers, which may include some decisions over school level finance

Our sample was skewed towards respondents from a local governing board structure (graph 17) which may indicate that this is a more common type of arrangement - but we know that some governors and trustees struggled to categorise their LGBs. Either way, it needs to be borne in mind.

Graph 17

### Breakdown of governance structures among the sample



Both surveys broadly followed the same structure and covered the same themes, with some slight differences in the questions asked

**Graph 17,** The Confederation of School Trusts (CST) suggests local governing bodies (which are officially committees of the trust board) should be named in relation to their delegated responsibilities, using the categories listed below. If you had to put your local governing body/your trust's local governing bodies into one of these categories, which would you choose? Base sizes: governors: 1,078, trustees: 189

\*'Don't know' answer option was not available to select on the governors survey

based on remit. The following areas were covered in both surveys:

- Awareness and understanding of the scheme of delegation and duties
- Attitudes towards community engagement
- Community engagement activities, effectiveness and reporting
- Community feedback - how is this collected, and the impact of feedback

## 2. Qualitative interviews

We carried out structured interviews with two senior leaders and a governance professional in January, February and April 2024, covering:

- Governance structure and dynamic in their trusts
- The trusts' attitudes towards community engagement
- The effectiveness of community engagement
- School community feedback - how this is collected and the impact of the feedback

Additionally, we had discussions with governance professionals from Ark, Ormiston Academies Trust and Academies Enterprise Trust which have informed our thinking.

## 3. Edurio data

We used Edurio's 2022/23 parent survey dataset to see if the type of delegation a trust has and the geographical spread of a trust influence the levels of parental engagement. Edurio's insights team reviewed the dataset, and provided us with aggregated and anonymised data to guide our analysis.

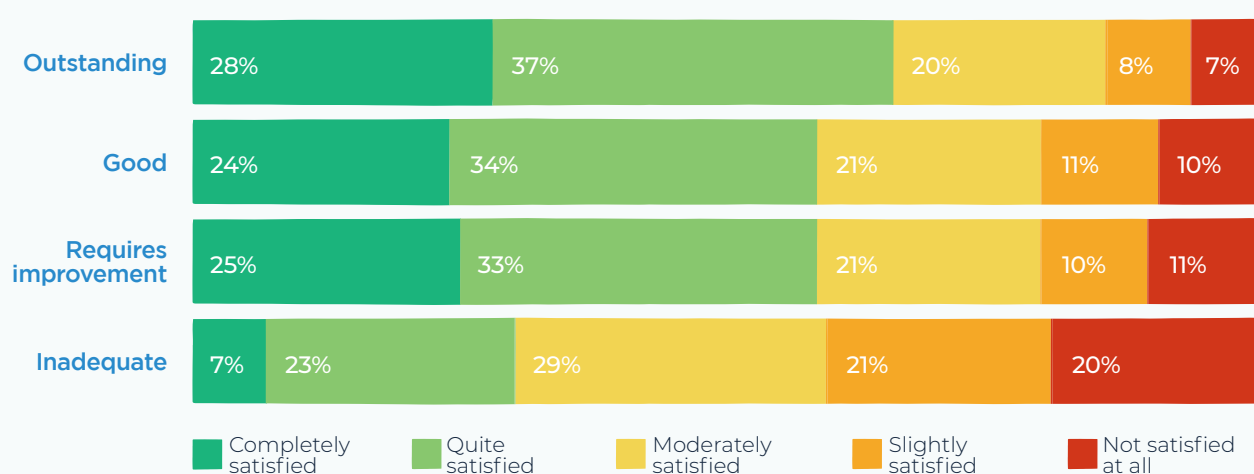
The dataset contained 19,000 responses from parents across 30 trusts. The survey took place between September 2022 and July 2023. We read each trust's scheme of delegation and assigned them a classification that was the best fit with the CST's governance structure classifications (local advisory committee/ council; local school committee; local governing board). We also calculated a locality measure based on how widely dispersed the schools were within the trust. The survey covered a range of areas, but we specifically analysed responses related to parents' relationship with trusts and schools.

# Appendix

Graphs 18 and 19 below were referenced on page 21, while graphs 20 and 21 show parental satisfaction with school engagement efforts by different categories of delegation and locality measures.

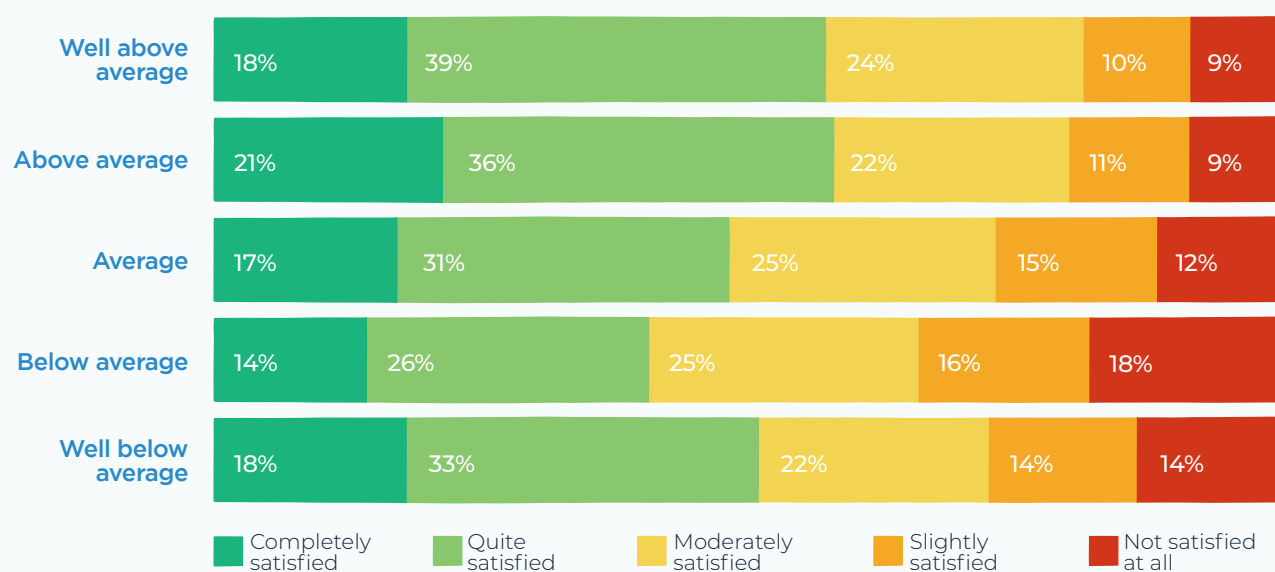
Graph 18 - Ofsted grade

**In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent?**



Graph 19 - progress 8

**In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent?**

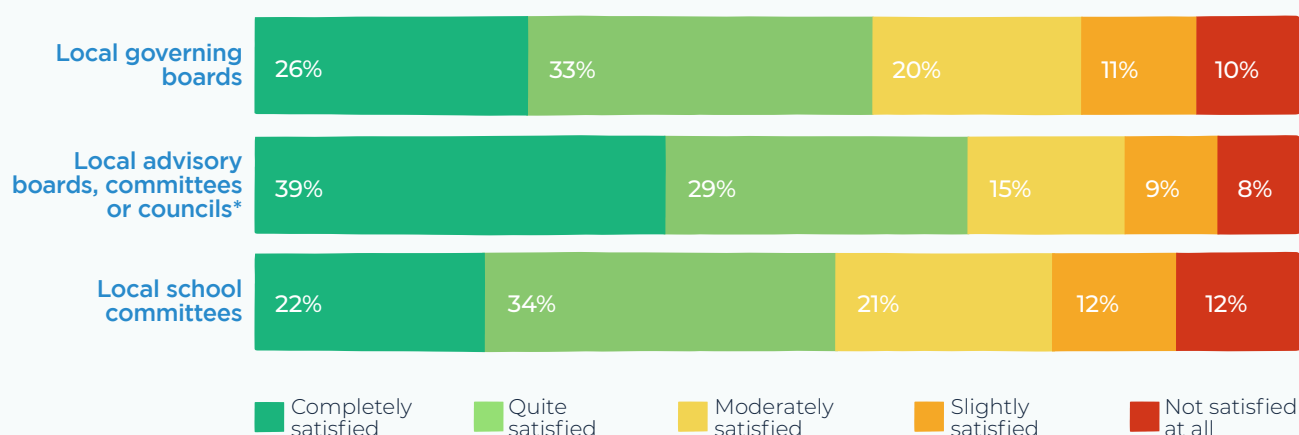


**Graph 18,** In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent? Base sizes: Outstanding: 3,360 , Good: 10,343 , Requires improvement: 950, Inadequate: 611

**Graph 19,** In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent? Base sizes: Well above average: 2,186 , Above average: 2,201, Average: 2,233, Below average: 2,022 , Well below average: 1,027

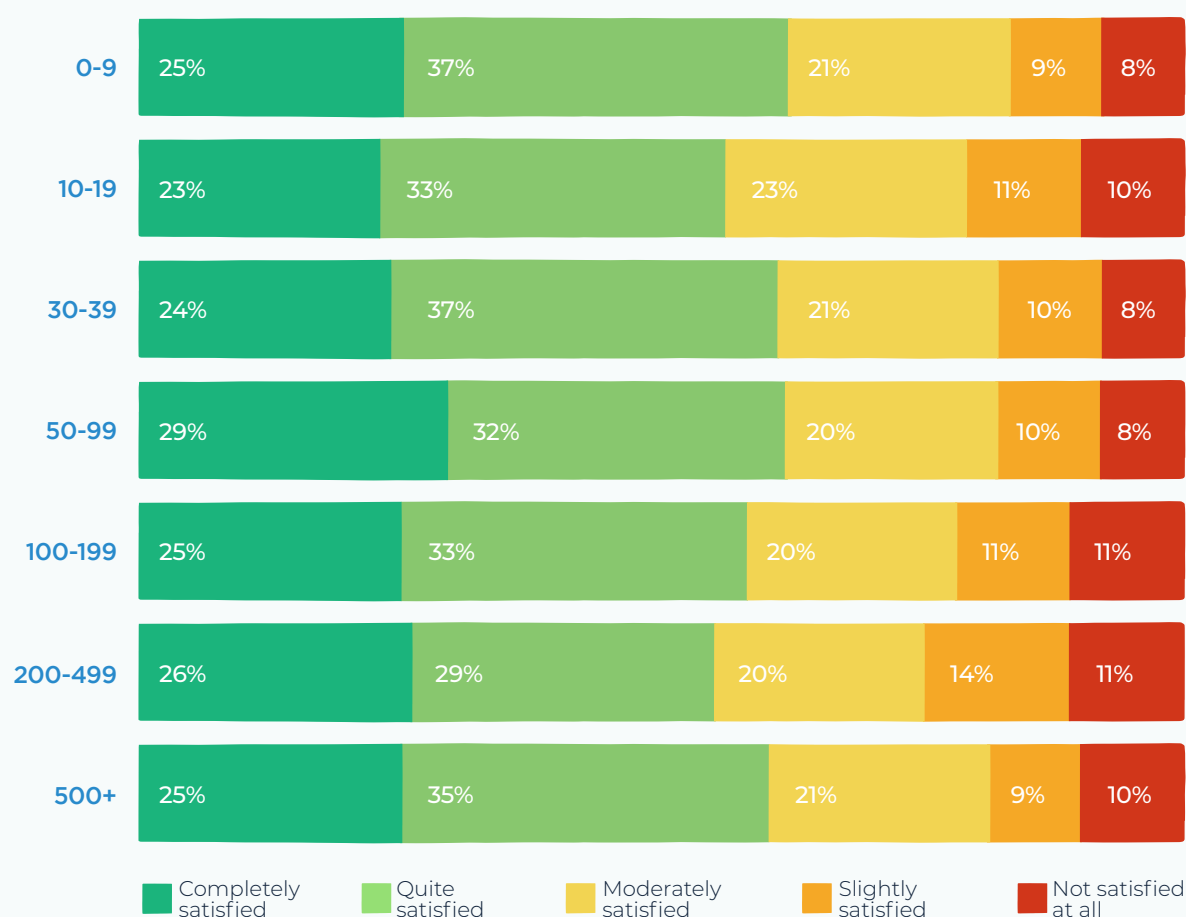
Graph 20 - categories of delegation

**In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent?**



Graph 21 - locality measure

**In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent?**



**Graph 20**, In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent? Base sizes: Local governing boards: 7,985, Local advisory boards, committees or councils: 853, Local school committees: 11,790

\*Note: only one trust in the sample was categorised as having local advisory boards, committees or councils

**Graph 21**, In general, how satisfied are you with the school's efforts to engage you as a parent? Base sizes: LM0-9: 5,336, LM10-19: 2,063, LM30-39: 2,305, LM50-99: 1,439, LM100-199: 3,549, LM200-499: 770, LM500+: 2,325. Please note there were no trusts in the 20-29 and 40-49 locality range



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