

The Trust Governance Professional



Foreword

The **trust governance professional** is a fairly new and still-evolving position – and as yet, there's little consistency in the seniority of this role. As the sector continues to grow rapidly, job titles and reporting lines for the role vary widely. Our research indicates that perhaps more than a quarter of governance professionals **don't** sit on the trust central executive team.

We believe that the sector-wide inconsistencies in the trust governance professional role are, in some cases, holding governance back. Our research reveals clear benefits to the professionals themselves when they take a seat on the executive team, in terms of support for their work and their professional development. We also hear about the benefits to trusts, in terms of joined-up communication, strengthened links between the executive and non-executive teams, and greater effectiveness of the governance function throughout the organisation.

We invite you to consider the issues we raise in our report in light of the high expectations that the government rightly sets out for the role and function of governance in our education system. We hope that this research serves as an opportunity for trusts to review their systems and structures, to make sure that these high expectations are being met.

Introduction

In March 2023, we published [Women's Work?](#), a report into the pay and working conditions of paid governance professionals. It highlighted how female dominated these roles are, and, in addition, explored pay disparities between these positions in school and trust governance, and equivalent roles in other comparable sectors.

At the outset, we asked respondents to identify their role in relation to the National Governance Association's (NGA's) career pathway¹ for governance professionals, as either a 'clerk', 'governance co-ordinator' or 'lead governance professional'. A key focus of the Women's Work report was the role of the clerk, where we found a lot of dissatisfaction around existing salaries and workload.

For this report, we focus on the more senior governance professional positions as they sit within trusts. We analyse responses to the same survey, from 195 governance professionals who identified themselves as either a 'governance co-ordinator' or 'lead governance professional'.

This report explores where these roles sit within the trust, their lines of reporting and what career development support is available to them.

We received the most responses from people identifying as lead governance professionals, so this report mainly focuses on this role, referred to throughout as 'governance lead'.

What's in a name? A note on roles and job titles

This won't come as a surprise to those already familiar with the governance sector, but we discovered many inconsistencies in the job titles used, even between similar-sized trusts.

People we interviewed for this report who, in our survey, identified as a 'lead governance professional', used job titles as diverse as:

- Trust leader of governance and operations (7-school MAT)
- Head of governance (32-school MAT)
- Senior governance adviser (60-school MAT)
- Governance professional (3-school MAT)
- Governance lead (12-school MAT)

We've seen this variability before among GovernorHub conference attendees. At an event we ran in 2022 for governance professionals working in MATs, there were 135 attendees using 37 different governance-related job titles.

Why does this matter? A job title reflects real-world responsibility and seniority, and can affect how a role is perceived. We heard from 1 governance lead who felt her title meant she wasn't always able to have the impact she needed:

“ If they were developing the central team again now, I'd be arguing strongly for this post to be at directorate level. As it stands, headteachers can – and do – say 'no' to me. I think perceptions would increase if I was a director.

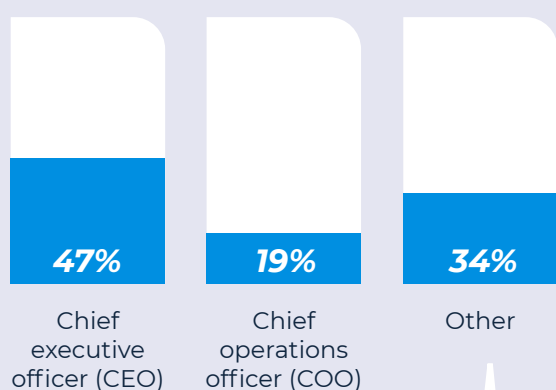
Governance lead employed by a medium sized MAT

1. [The NGA, A Career Pathway for Governance Professionals \(2022\)](#)

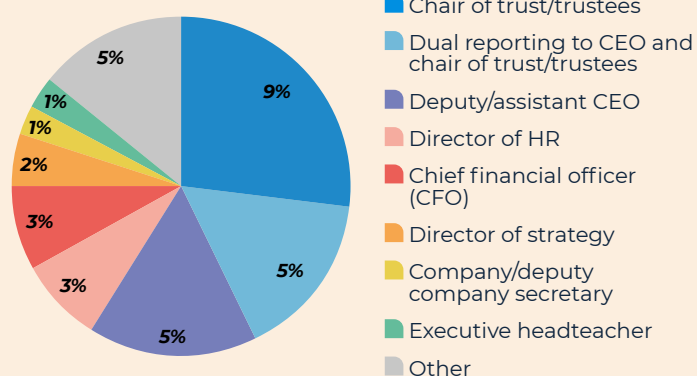
Key findings

1 Less than half of governance leads said they're line managed by the trust CEO – and for the rest, there's little consistency in reporting lines

Q. As a governance professional, who do you report into/who is your line manager?



Graph 1: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 117 governance leads who reported being employed by a MAT or single academy trust (SAT) and who responded to this question



Graph 2: Breakdown of 37 'Other' responses from Graph 1

We found a wide variation in governance leads' reporting lines. Just under half (47%) of governance lead respondents said they reported to the CEO, with a further 19% reporting to the COO. Among the 34% remaining, many reporting lines were mentioned, including into the: chair of trustees, assistant/deputy CEO, director of HR, CFO, director of strategy, and company secretary. Also in this group are those who had dual reporting lines; for example, to both the chair of trustees and the CEO.

For all the governance leads we spoke to who said they reported into executive team members with less seniority, an open line of communication to the trust CEO remained important. One governance lead, who reported into the chair of trustees, explained why this is the case:

“ It works because I know there's that direct link to the CEO – communication really is key. I like to say that the governance professional, CEO, and chair are a 3-legged stool – the 3 together can support anything, but 1 falls and everything falls. I've suggested to the chair that there are other inputs that are needed for my performance appraisals – a proper 360 degree review should be done to include input from others I provide direct support to: the CEO, finance director, committee or LGB chairs, etc.

Governance professional, line managed by the chair of trustees

Our research indicates that reporting to someone in the trust central executive team isn't just about having the ear of someone senior. Some governance leads we spoke to said they felt it was important to report into someone with substantial knowledge and experience of governance, someone who fully 'gets' the role and its responsibilities. Who this is, is likely to vary from trust to trust:

“ Because of our trust's structure, the COO looks after all functional things – everything except education sits on this side of things. I think this is the right person for me to report into; it's definitely not an issue in our setting as she [the COO] works very closely with trustees, has a good understanding of governance, and facilitates the relationship with myself and the board. I don't feel I'm losing anything by not reporting into the CEO.

Senior governance adviser, line managed by the COO

We found similar levels of inconsistency among governance co-ordinators. Only just over a third (36%) said they reported into the trust CEO, with a further 20% reporting into the COO and the remainder (43%) saying they reported into governance leads, chairs of trustees, CFOs or others.

2 More than a quarter of governance leads surveyed don't sit on the trust central executive team

26%

Over a quarter (26%) of governance lead respondents said they didn't sit on the trust central executive team. However, for those who said they reported to the CEO, this figure was just 11%. This indicates that line management access to senior executives, and inclusion in the senior team go hand in hand.

Governance lead interviewees expressed loud and clear that they felt they should sit on the central trust executive team, to signal the importance of governance and make sure communication was effective. They also brought up operational benefits such as being able to bridge the gap between trustee meetings and the day-to-day running of the trust and its schools, and collating trust-wide information for governor newsletters. This view was held by those who didn't sit on the trust central executive team, as well as those who did:

“ To function effectively, the person who leads on governance should have a seat on the exec team. There isn't a representative of the governors on the exec team, so it's important for someone to represent them, and I'm also the point of contact for trustees who delegate to the board. I know areas such as risk, compliance, delegations and policy inside out and also need to make sure that we are on track to achieve our short and long-term strategic objectives. The role I have also provides a link between the executive and non-executive decision-making function. I think it's essential that one side informs the work of the other and vice-versa. I think that my reasoning above would apply to pretty much anyone in my role.

Trust leader of governance and operations, who does sit on the trust central executive team and is employed by a MAT with 7 schools

“ The advantage of attending meetings with the central exec team is that it gives me insight into what's happening in the rest of the organisation. This then helps me and the governance team work out what needs to be included in, for example, agendas for local governors, governor training, or to give them a heads up about what's coming via my weekly trust newsletter. It ensures

governance is firmly embedded within the organisation. There aren't really any disadvantages, to be honest – apart from it using up some time, but the benefit outweighs this.

Senior governance advisor, who does sit on the trust central executive team and is employed by a MAT with 60 schools

“ Effective governance is integral to the operation of a MAT and in my opinion, governance should be represented within the executive team – schools wouldn't function if governance wasn't right.

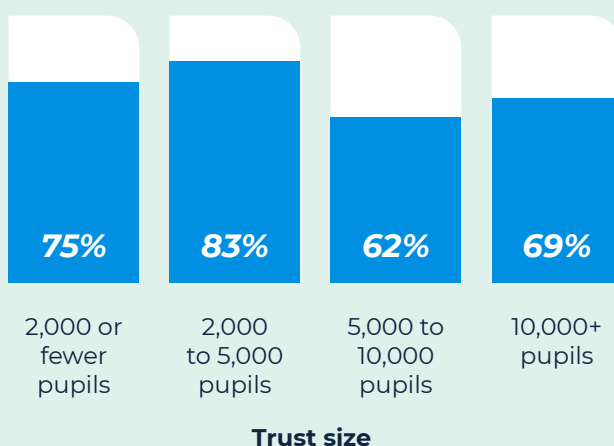
Governance lead, who doesn't sit on the trust central executive team and is employed by a MAT with 12 schools

A higher proportion of governance co-ordinator respondents said they didn't sit on the central trust executive team (41%), with this falling to 26% of those who reported to the CEO.

Size of trust and an executive team seat don't appear to correlate

We looked into what factors might affect whether or not a governance lead sits on the central trust executive team, and we found no clear correlation with the size of trust. The likelihood that a governance lead sits on the central trust executive team was highest among trusts with 2,000 to 5,000 pupils (83%), and lowest among trusts with 5,000 to 10,000 pupils (62%) (see page 8 for our 'Methodology' for details on the sample).

Q. Is your role as a governance professional part of the trust central executive team?

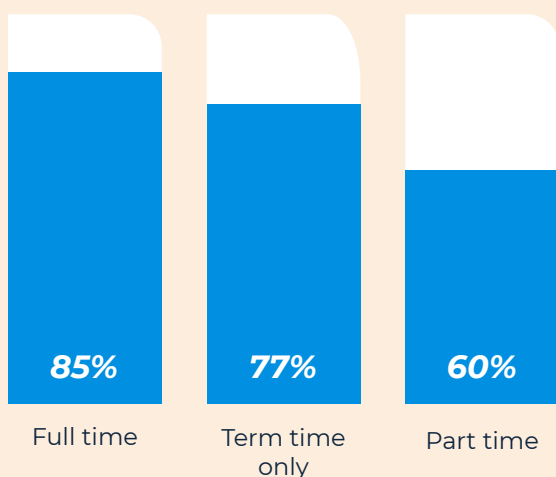


Graph 3: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 117 governance leads who reported being employed by a MAT or SAT and who responded to both questions

Working patterns make a difference

Governance lead respondents who said they worked full time were more likely to sit on the central trust executive team (85%) than those working term time only (77%) or part time (60%).

Q. Is your role as a governance professional part of the trust central executive team?

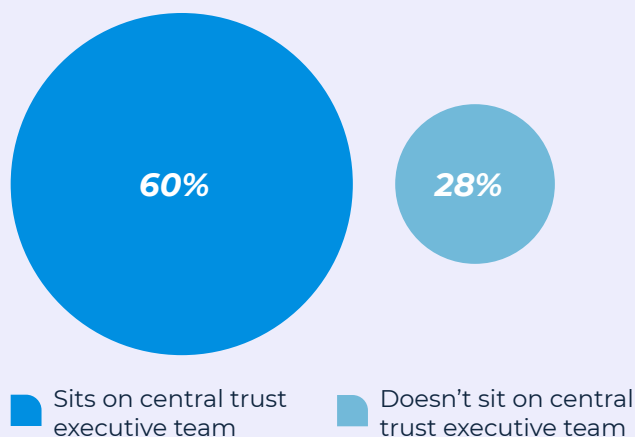


Graph 4: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 117 governance leads who reported being employed by a MAT or SAT and who responded to both questions

3 Sitting on the trust central executive team appears to be linked to better career development support

Our research indicates that sitting on the trust central executive team can be linked to better career development support for governance professionals. We found that of governance lead respondents, those who sat on the central trust executive team were more than twice as likely (60%) as those that didn't (28%) to say they were aware of all career development opportunities available to them.

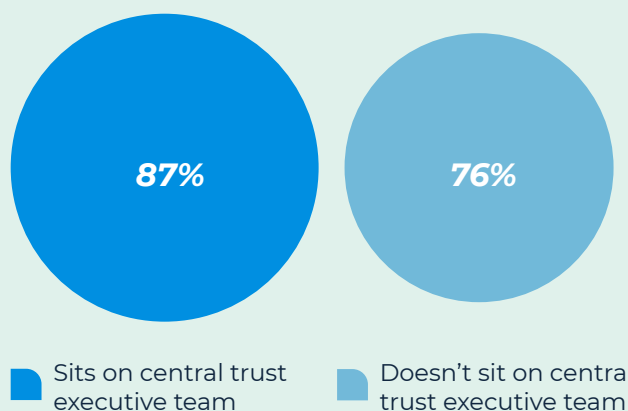
Q: Which of these statements best describes your awareness of opportunities for professional development as a governance professional? A: 'I'm aware of all of the career development opportunities available in school/trust governance'



Graph 5: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 107 governance leads who reported being employed by a MAT or SAT and who responded to both questions. Answer options: I haven't seen any information about how to progress my career; I know very little about how to progress my career in school/trust governance; I'm aware of some opportunities in school/trust governance; I'm aware of all of the career development opportunities available in school/trust governance

Governance lead respondents who sit on the central trust executive team were also more likely to say they were offered funded CPD and allocated time for it (87%), compared with those who don't sit on the central trust executive team (76%).

Q: Which of the following training or development sessions can you access via your employer? A: 'This is funded and I do it during paid work time'

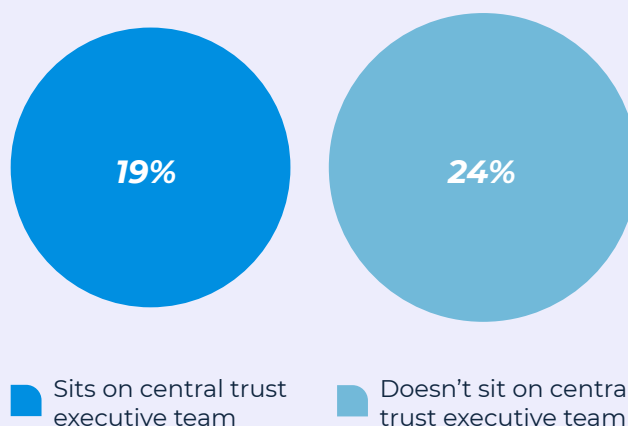


Graph 6: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 107 governance leads who reported being employed by a MAT or SAT and who responded to both questions. This was asked as a matrix question, answers shown are for Training/CPD. Answer options: This is not funded; This is funded and I do it during paid work time; This is funded but I have to do it in my own time; N/A: I'm self-employed

We also asked whether the governance leads had access to governance support from a variety of named paid membership organisations including GovernorHub Knowledge, The Chartered Governance Institute (CGI), The Confederation of School Trusts (CST), National Association of School and College Clerks (NASCC), the NGA, and Trust Governance Professionals (TGP). Governance lead respondents who said they sat on the trust central executive team were more likely to report having fully-funded access to at least one of the named support services. This was true for all subscriptions listed, with an average difference of 10 percentage points from those respondents without a place on the executive team.

A place at the table on the central trust executive team also seems to be somewhat linked with retention. Governance leads who said they didn't sit on that team were more likely to report that they were considering progressing their career by moving to governance in other sectors (24%), than those who did sit on the executive team (19%).

Q: Are you looking to progress in your governance career? A: 'Yes, to governance in another sector'



Graph 7: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 107 governance leads who reported being employed by a MAT or SAT and who responded to both questions. Answer options: No; Yes, to take on more responsibility within my current job role; Yes, to a more senior role in a different organisation; Yes, to governance in another sector, e.g. corporate governance; Yes, to expand into wider work such as consultancy, becoming a National Leader of Governance, or becoming a trainer; Other (please specify)

Emma Perkin, Director, Trust Governance Professionals:

“ The governance professional role is an emergent and developing one in academy trusts. Achieving effective governance is complex and a strong alignment between the governance professional, chair of trust board and trust leader is pivotal for this success. The approach to the line management of the governance professional and where this role sits in trust leadership teams is not uniform, and as such Trust Governance Professionals welcomes this report as part of the ongoing awareness-raising of the role and its importance, and to open up the conversation about the key nature of this role.

Alongside the debate around line management, job title and position within executive teams is a deep need to ensure that the ongoing professional development of governance professionals is recognised. This cannot be seen as a 'bolt-on' to another role.

We know from Trust Governance Insight – our programme which trains and supports governance professionals in academies – that there is a growing understanding in trusts that good governance professionals will and should command good remuneration, investment in ongoing professional development, and proper terms and conditions. This sits alongside the evolving career pathway for those working in school trust governance, which can be seen in the report. However, we recognise that this is a journey and there is more to be done. Thank you to GovernorHub for your championing of these important roles.

Conclusion

The role of the trust governance professional continues to develop as the sector evolves. However, there's currently little evidence of consistency in job titles and reporting lines, even among trusts of similar sizes. In addition, a large minority of those in role do not have a seat on the trust central executive team - despite the high expectations that the government rightly sets out for the role and function of governance in our education system. Critically, we found:

- More than a quarter (26%) of governance leads surveyed don't sit on the trust central executive team
- Less than half (47%) of governance leads surveyed report to the trust CEO – and for the remainder, there's little consistency in reporting lines
- Governance leads we interviewed were strongly in favour of the role sitting at central executive level – whether they themselves do currently or not

Our research indicates that sitting on the trust central executive team offers clear benefits to governance professionals themselves (in addition to the benefits for the trust). Governance professionals in this position are:

- More aware of career development opportunities – which may, in turn, prevent them from leaving the sector
- More likely to have access to a paid-for governance support organisation, which in itself is likely to support better governance
- More likely to be offered funded CPD and have time allocated for it, which is arguably more likely to improve the quality of governance experienced by the trust and its schools

The trust governance professional role provides a rewarding and fulfilling career for those keen to work in education and make a valuable contribution to schools. We support the calls from governance professionals for this role to sit at the top tier of a trust, both in the best interests of governance professionals themselves and the trusts they govern. When a governance lead is a member of the trust central executive team, it's a reminder to the rest of the organisation about the importance of governance, bridges the gap between trustees, governors and the executive, and firmly embeds an effective governance function throughout the trust.

Methodology

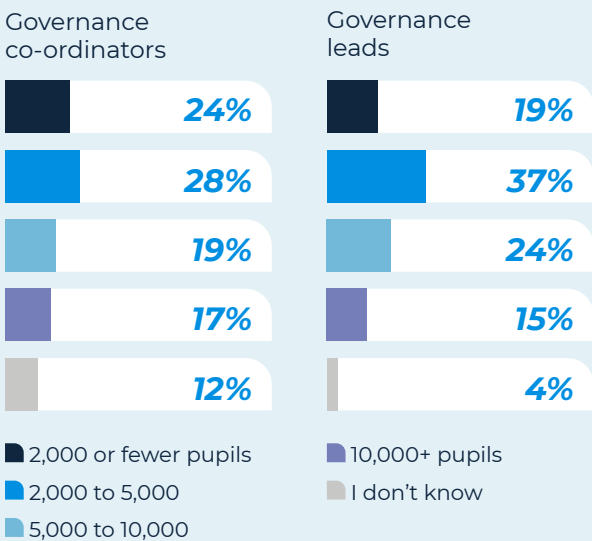
Our survey

For our survey methodology, please see our other report based on the same survey, [Women's work?](#). We also invited 5 governance lead respondents to take part in 30-minute interviews. These governance leads represented a range of trust sizes, reporting lines, salaries and working patterns.

Our sample

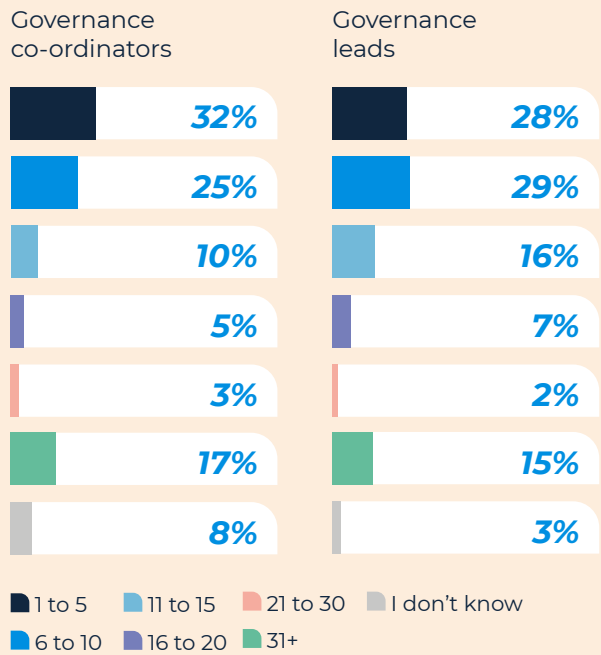
We surveyed 243 senior governance professionals in total, of which 119 identified as governance leads employed by a MAT or SAT, and 76 identified as governance co-ordinators employed by a MAT or SAT. Some response rates to individual questions are lower due to respondents not completing all questions in the survey. Our respondents represented a range of trust sizes (see graph 8 below).

Q. How many pupils in total are there in your trust?



Graph 8: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 191 respondents, comprising 74 governance co-ordinators, 117 governance leads

Q. How many schools are in your trust?



Graph 9: Online survey conducted 12 to 24 January 2023; base = 191 respondents, comprising 74 governance co-ordinators, 117 governance leads

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank several governance professionals who shared their experiences with us for this report. All opinions are their own.

- Becky Poynter from Unity Schools Partnership
- Jill Cameron from Eko Trust
- Julie Adams from The Auriga Academy Trust
- Lisa Benskin from Aspire Educational Trust
- Siobhan Chester from REAch2 Academy Trust

We would also like to thank the National Governance Association for its work in developing a career pathway for governance professionals.

About us

[GovernorHub](#) is the leading provider of governance solutions in England. We support great governance – helping more than 100,000 governors, trustees and clerks focus on what matters: making a difference to children and young people in their schools.

We help boards to work better, develop their skills and evidence their efforts, all in 1 place. Our community of school and trust boards has grown to more than 11,000.

We are deeply committed to supporting governors and trustees, clerks and governance professionals to support leaders to drive school improvement. We believe that, with the right tools and support, all boards can have a meaningful impact.