

A decorative graphic consisting of two overlapping squares, one orange and one light orange, with white outlines, positioned above a horizontal bar with a red top half and an orange bottom half.

## **The chair of the school governing body in England: roles, relationships and responsibilities**

Chris James (University of Bath)  
Steve Brammer (University of Warwick)  
Michael Connolly (University of Glamorgan)  
David Eddy Spicer (Institute of Education)  
Jane James (University of Bath)  
Jeff Jones (University of Bath)



## Welcome to CfBT Education Trust

CfBT Education Trust is a top 30\* UK charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established over 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust has an annual turnover exceeding £100 million and employs more than 2,000 staff worldwide. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development, and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools, through projects for excluded pupils and in young offender institutions.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Agency for International Development, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in our educational research programme, Evidence for Education.

Visit [www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com) for more information.

*\*CfBT is ranked 27 out of 3,000 charities in the UK based on income in Top 3,000 Charities 2010/11 published by Caritas Data*



## Contents

<b>About the authors</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 The research</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3 The findings</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 The characteristics of chairs	11
3.2 Chairs' history and experience	11
3.3 The motivations of chairs	13
3.4 Capabilities – knowledge and skills	15
3.5 The pathway to becoming the chair	17
3.6 The role – what do chairs do?	18
3.7 The chair-headteacher relationship	23
3.7.1 Significant aspects of the relationship	23
3.7.2 What makes the relationship work?	27
3.8 Chairs' and headteachers' views on their governing bodies	31
3.9 Chairs' training and development	32
3.9.1 Training undertaken by chairs for the role	32
3.9.2 Chairs' views on which skills are important and where they felt the need further development	34
3.9.3 Views on chairs; training and development	35
<b>4 Discussion and concluding comments</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>5 References</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>6 Appendix – the schools</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1 The schools where the chairs and the headteachers were interviewed	39
6.2 Background information on the schools where the chairs and the headteachers were interviewed	39



## About the authors

**Chris James** is Professor of Educational Leadership and Management in the Department of Education at the University of Bath. He has published over 200 books and articles, and his research interests include the affective aspects of educational organisations, collaborative working in educational settings and school governance. He is Vice Chair of the governing body of a secondary school in Bath.

**Steve Brammer** is Professor of Strategy in the Marketing and Strategic Management Group and Associate Dean for Research at Warwick Business School. His research addresses the links between organisational strategy and social responsibility, and focuses on how organisations build effective relationships with stakeholders including employees, communities, investors and suppliers. He is a leading researcher in his field with an international reputation, and has been published in major scholarly and practitioner journals.

**Michael Connolly** is Professor of Public Policy and Management in the University of Glamorgan School of Humanities and Social Sciences, where he was formerly the Dean. He has published four books, and more than 50 articles and book chapters; his research interests include leadership and change in public sector institutions. His most recent book is *How very effective primary schools work*, which he co-wrote with Chris James, Gerald Dunning and Tony Elliott and is published by SAGE.

**Dr David Eddy Spicer** is a Senior Lecturer in the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education. His current research explores school governance and the interconnections of professional and organisational development in multi-academy trusts. David has over 20 years' experience as a researcher and has conducted numerous projects researching public sector administration and leadership. Before joining the Institute of Education, he was a lecturer at the University of Bath and was formerly a member of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

**Jane James** is a consultant and researcher working mainly in education. Her research interests include leadership, action learning, school governing and systemic constellations where she is part of an extensive international network. Jane leads 'Enhancing Children's Learning' (ECL) – an innovative not-for-profit international education initiative, coaches educational leaders, and has been a school governor for more than 15 years.

**Dr Jeff Jones** is an educational consultant and researcher, and previously was a Principal Consultant at CfBT Education Trust. During his time working with CfBT he participated extensively in the design, delivery and quality assurance of national training programmes, research and evaluation projects, and a variety of school improvement consultancies. His area of expertise focuses on continuing professional development, school leadership and management development, performance management, and school governance.



## Executive summary

Every school in England has a governing body, which is responsible for its conduct, and every governing body must have a chair. The role of the chair is under-researched, which is surprising given its importance. The research documented in this report sought to remedy that by investigating: the role; the characteristics of the role holders; the nature of the responsibilities; the chair-headteacher relationship; and chairs' development needs.

The research had two main strands: (1) national surveys of chairs and headteachers; and (2) interviews with the headteachers and chairs of 15 primary schools and 10 secondary schools. The survey questionnaires were widely distributed and we received approximately 2,500 responses from chairs and about 600 from headteachers.

The research revealed a number of new and substantive insights.

94% of chairs are over 40 years of age. There is perhaps a case for enabling younger chairs to be elected. However, the necessary capabilities are demanding and the time commitment is substantial. Chairs work in, or have worked in, managerial/professional occupations and bring considerable experience and expertise to the role. Only 3% of chairs are from minority ethnic groups.

Chairs typically have a very wide range of high-level personal qualities, which underpin their moral purpose for the role and the responsibility. These qualities are typically coupled with a sense of personal modesty. Chairs' central concerns are for education, the community, schools and students.

The experience chairs bring to the role is often rich, varied and extensive. Chairs typically combine this experience with considerable experience as governors. Many chairs have a long track record in the role and an even longer record as a governor.

Chairs' motivations are generally of a very high order. Many have a strong desire to make a contribution to schools and to society and have a powerful and meaningful attachment to 'their school'. When the chair's motivation is lacking, the headteacher, the school and the governing body are seriously disadvantaged.

Very clearly, chairs need a broad range of skills and abilities to be effective and to fulfil the role effectively. That 'skill set' covers: organising ability, interpersonal and relationship skills, and a wide array of relevant personal capabilities. Functional expertise, such as human resource skills or legal know-how, are not high-priority capabilities. The skills, capabilities and qualities required confirm that the role is centrally concerned with the leadership and management of the governing body. Governing bodies need to be organised and the members, all of whom are volunteers, need to be led and motivated to govern properly. Chairs need to be well equipped to do that.

The pathway to becoming the chair is particularly interesting and has important policy and practice implications. The normal pathway is a well-ordered and planned succession process. However, even this pathway can have unusual and surprising features. The 'crisis pathway' is the result of some sort of 'crunch point' for the school, the headteacher or the governing body, such as an unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection, illness, or a serious concern of some kind. Both the normal and the crisis pathways can be rapid. In both pathways, the collective nature of governing helps the sometimes difficult succession process to take place relatively comfortably.



The role – what chairs do – has many facets, some of which are particularly challenging. Moreover, the context and what the role requires can change, sometimes quite rapidly. Chairs' commitment to the role can be considerable: it is typically a significant priority for them. On average, they spend approximately five hours a week on governing matters and over one in 10 chairs spend more than 10 hours a week. Some aspects of the role can be very unpleasant indeed; other aspects can be very enjoyable. Chairs can learn a great deal from undertaking the role. Indeed, they must be able to learn to fulfil the requirements of the role. Learning capability is essential for chairs.

The research confirmed the importance of sound chair-headteacher relationships. They are important because of the governing body's formal delegation of the responsibility for the operation of the school to the headteacher. The relationship is also where the school system and the governing body system 'meet'.

The relationship is important and meaningful to both chairs and headteachers. It can be complex and very diverse, with both public and private aspects that can be very different. The quality of the relationship is linked to the quality of governing overall. The relationship is clearly very significant for the work of the school and the governing body.

Managing the underperformance of the other in the relationship can be difficult and yet important. Good headteachers want good chairs – and vice versa. Good headteachers also want chairs who are committed to the success of the school – and vice versa. Capability in their different roles is very important. It enables mutuality and complementarity to be fully brought to bear through shared respect, honesty and openness. The relationship needs time to develop and can be strengthened by joint working through difficult times. As might be expected, chairs and headteachers sometimes express different perspectives on the relationship, for example on the headteacher's openness and acceptance of challenge. Arguably, the differences 'come with the territory' of the relationship.

The relationship can work well in a range of different contexts but is helped by chairs being available and prioritising the relationship. Employers' allowing chairs paid time off work for their governing duties is helpful in this regard. 70% of chairs were provided with paid time off from work for their governing responsibilities. This time allowance is important and contributes positively to the chair-headteacher relationship.

On average, chairs feel the relationship is very good, giving the relationship a score of 6 out of a possible 7. However, 5% of chairs feel the relationship is poor, which is a significant number of schools nationally, especially as the quality of the relationship has a substantial impact on the quality of governing overall.

Chairs' training was typically provided by the local authority. The generally declining capacity of local authorities to provide governor/chair training thus has important implications. Chairs preferred training with other chairs in a workshop/group format where they could interact with – and learn from – other chairs. Surprisingly, a quarter of the chairs we surveyed had not undertaken any role-specific training. Chairs felt that training for chairs should be compulsory but recognised the difficulties with implementing that. The research identified three important capabilities where chairs felt they lacked ability: giving and receiving constructive criticism and suggestions; managing differences of opinion and conflicts; and delegation.



The outcomes of the research have important implications for policy, practice and development.

- The engagement of members of minority ethnic groups in school governing needs to be widened. More members of those groups will then go on to become chairs. Raising the profile of governing generally and making the nature of school governing more widely known would help to broaden involvement both in governing and as chairs.
- The demanding requirements of the role, and the responsibility chairs carry and its significance should have a much higher profile and should be more widely recognised and appreciated.
- The collective nature of governing, involving a wide range of stakeholders, gives the system valuable resilience and is thus very important.
- Who supports chairs when they need it is an important question that needs to be addressed. They do need a range of 'others' of various kinds they can turn to when necessary.
- Chairs and headteachers need to understand the importance of making their relationship work, be able to acknowledge when it is not working, and know how to access support to repair and renew the relationship.
- The qualities that help to make the chair-headteacher relationship work need to be more widely understood. The expectation that employers allow chairs paid time off work for their particular governing duties, especially with regard to the chair's relationship with the headteacher, needs to be more clearly established.
- The training for chairs and the governing body generally could be more closely scrutinised by Ofsted. This would elevate the importance of governing body/chair training. Priorities for chairs' training should be: giving and receiving constructive criticism and suggestions; managing differences of opinion and conflicts; and delegation.
- The chair's responsibility for the functioning of the governing body should be made more explicit in regulations. At present, that responsibility is not made clear.
- Chairs contribute a huge amount to the education system. Although being the chair brings its own rewards and satisfactions, the contribution that chairs make voluntarily and out of a sense of public duty should be more widely acknowledged and appreciated – including by central government. Being the chair of a school governing body is a significant educational and community leadership responsibility.

## 1 Introduction

Governors and governing bodies are significant in the governance of the education system in England. Every school has a governing body, which is responsible for the conduct of the school. Governing bodies must have a chair, who has a range of legal responsibilities. The position of chair of the school governing body in England is clearly important and its status is significant.

Research into chairs of school governing bodies is somewhat limited, especially when compared with research into school leadership and management generally, which is somewhat surprising. The research reported here is an attempt to remedy that shortfall and to enhance understanding of chairs, their responsibilities and the role.

In this first section, we describe the background and rationale for the study and explain the ideas that shaped our thinking about the role. We then describe the research and the findings. Following those sections, we then summarise the findings and discuss the implications.

The importance and significance of the position of chair of the governing body is made very explicit in school governance regulations: 'The governing body must elect a chair' (DfE, 2011: 17). If the post becomes vacant, a new chair must be elected at the next meeting of the full governing body. The position carries a number of legal responsibilities that relate to the performance of the school, the exclusion of pupils and staff disciplinary matters. The chair can also act without the authority of the governing body 'if a delay in exercising a function is likely to be seriously detrimental to the interests of the school' (DfE, 2011: 17). As governing body members, chairs share collective responsibility for the conduct of the school. The changing policy landscape for schools, which includes schools taking up academy status, the pressure on schools to collaborate, and the changing role of the local authority, is likely to increase the importance of the chair. The government's intention in the 2010 White Paper *The importance of teaching that* 'the National College will offer high-quality training for chairs of governors' (DfE, 2010: 71) reflects the increasing sense of the position's importance. Despite this, the chair's responsibilities, for example in relation to the proper functioning of the governing body, are not specified clearly in legal guidance for governors (DfE, 2011).

A number of authors have re-asserted the importance of having an effective chair; see for example, James et al. (2010) and McCrone et al. (2011). Illustrations of 'good chair practice' have recently been published by Ofsted (2011) and the National Governors' Association and the National College for School Leadership (NGA/NCSL, 2011).

Previous studies of chairs reported that about 25% of chairs were professionally qualified, and that a relatively high proportion (26%) of chairs were retired from full-time, regular employment. Earley et al. (2002) found that many chairs had previously worked in education or in similar work.

James et al. (2012) report that the role of the chair in England includes: being a governor; appointing and working with the headteacher; acting as a change agent; actively participating in the school; organising the governing body; dealing with complaints; working with parents; and chairing meetings. In addition, the motivation of chairs and the way chairs articulate their vision for governing reflects high ethical standards and a high-level set of values. They argue that the position of chair is substantially under-played and given insufficient status. They confirm the assertion of James et al. (2010) that 'Being the chair of a school governing body is a significant educational and community leadership responsibility' (p. 3).



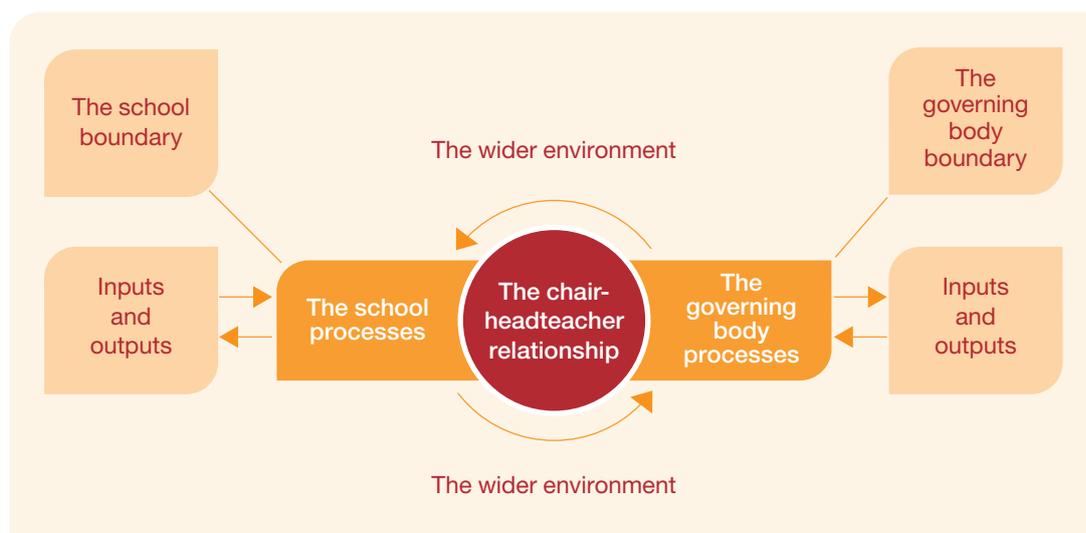
The joint NGA and NCSL publication highlights five aspects of the role: leading effective governance; building the team; the chair's relationship with the headteacher; improving the school; and leading the business (NGA/NCSL, 2011). Guidance for chairs provided by the NGA (2012) includes: organising the governing body; working with the headteacher; relationships with the local authority, diocese or trust; and working with the clerk.

The chair's relationship with the headteacher is a significant aspect of the role (Earley, 2003). Chairs will be involved in the appointment of the headteacher if that happens during their time in post. They will probably be involved in the headteacher's performance management, the outcomes of which determine headteacher's remuneration. The chair might be expected to take the lead in challenging the headteacher and calling the headteacher to account, which are important governing body responsibilities. The headteacher-chair relationship is different in different schools, which Ranson et al. (2005) assert then affects the nature of the governing body.

Coordinators of local authority governor services continue to provide training for governors and chairs in England. Generally, that training is well-regarded (Balarin et al., 2008). The NCSL has recently developed a training programme for chairs. It covers: the role of the chair; effective governance; and improving the school. The College has also established a network of National Leaders of Governance. They are experienced and capable chairs who support and facilitate the development of other chairs.

The design of our study drew on the literature discussed above and we also developed a model that is helpful in thinking about the role and the governing system. Figure 1 shows this system model of the school and the governing body.

**Figure 1. A model of the school and governing body systems**





The key elements of this system model for understanding the role of the chair are as follows.

**1. The governing body.** As with any system, the governing body has:

- **Inputs.** These are what it needs to function; for example a set of procedures, people who are appropriately trained to be governors and information about the school.
- **Processes.** These are what it does – its activities. So, for example, governing body processes include: holding meetings, checking the school development plan and monitoring the finances.
- **Outputs.** These are what the governing body produces and what results from the inputs and processes. Examples include policies and reports, good governance and a well-governed school.
- **A boundary.** This separates the processes from the wider environment. It is formed in a range of ways; for example, physically – the walls of the meeting room; by the task – what governors should and should not be doing; by people – who is a governor and who is not. The governing body boundary links with the school boundary.

**2. The school.** The school system has:

- **Inputs.** For example, well-trained staff, students, teaching resources and classrooms.
- **Processes.** These include lessons, assemblies and lunch breaks.
- **Outputs.** These are what the school system produces; for example students who are motivated to continue learning, students with good qualifications, high levels of parent satisfaction and the headteacher's reports to the governing body.
- **A boundary.** This separates the school from the wider environment. Again it is formed in a range of ways; for example, physically – the fence around the school site; by the task – what the school should and should not be doing; and by people – who is allowed in the school and who is not. The school boundary links with the governing body boundary.

**3. 'Movement' across the system boundary.** The boundaries of the system are typically permeable so there is movement across them. In the case of the governing body, for example, governors cross the boundary when they enter the governing body meeting room, new recruits cross a boundary when they join the governing body, and annual newsletters to parents from the governing body also cross the boundary. Some movement across the boundary may not be appropriate. For example, the governing body should not bring any aspect of 'running the school' across the task boundary. For the school, well-trained teachers, funds from the local authority/ government and policies from central government may cross the boundary and enter the school system. Pupils with qualifications and members of staff who gain promotions in other schools may cross the boundary and leave. The boundary between the school and the governing body systems is important. The chair-headteacher relationship is one of the ways in which information moves between the two systems.

**4. The person in charge and the management of the boundary.** The person responsible for an organisation is usually responsible overall for managing the boundary. The responsibility for boundary management includes monitoring and managing what crosses the boundary – making sure that what comes in as inputs is right and what leaves as outputs is appropriate. The boundary manager has to 'look both ways' – inwards to the processes to make sure they are right and outwards to the environment to ensure that what the processes are producing is what the



environment wants. The chair is responsible for managing the governing body's relationship with the school and the headteacher is responsible for managing the school's boundary with the governing body.

**5. The chair's responsibilities and role.** Although it is not stated in the regulations, the chair typically takes responsibility for the functioning of the governing body. To undertake the responsibility, the chair has to do certain things which we refer to here as the chair's role. Performing the role requires knowledge of a particular kind and certain capabilities, characteristics and motivations.

**6. The headteacher's responsibilities and role.** The headteacher is responsible for the operating system – the school. Performing the headteacher role requires knowledge of a particular kind and certain capabilities and characteristics.

**7. The 'boundary work' of the chair.** In addition to their responsibilities for the governing body, chairs have a responsibility as 'boundary workers' in linking the governing system with the wider environment and very importantly with the operating system – the school. In particular, they have a responsibility to link with the person responsible for the operating system, the headteacher.

To recap, governing bodies have a significant responsibility and within governing bodies chairs have very important responsibilities. The role of the chair is important for a school and for the community it serves. Very little is known about the role in relation to its significance, which has substantive implications for school governing policy, governing practice and the training and development of chairs and governors. That is the rationale for the research we undertook. The aims of the research were to investigate:

- the characteristics of the chairs
- the nature of the responsibilities of the chairs
- the relationship between chairs and headteachers
- chairs' development needs.



## 2 The research

The research had two main strands. The first was to develop a general – national – picture of chairs and the chair's role by collecting the views of headteachers and chairs through national surveys. We developed a questionnaire that sought to provide evidence on: who chairs are and what chairs do, the chair-headteacher relationship and chairs' development needs. It collected information on:

- the name and the location of the school in order to identify the school for the data analysis in relation to performance
- the time chairs had held the position, and their gender, age and ethnic group
- chairs' views on the work of the governing body
- the nature of governing body meetings
- aspects of the chairs' relationship with their headteachers
- the skills and capabilities required by chairs
- chairs' training needs
- matters of particular concern to chairs' governing bodies.

We also asked the chairs if we could interview them to explore the issues in greater depth. The questionnaire was then distributed extensively to chairs and we received approximately 2,500 responses.

The questionnaire for headteachers asked the same questions of them about the chair's role that we had asked the chairs. Again this questionnaire was widely distributed and we also sent it directly to the headteachers where we had received a response from the school's chair. We received approximately 600 responses from headteachers, of which approximately 100 were from headteachers of schools where we had received a response from the chair.

The second strand of the research was to interview headteachers and chairs of 15 primary schools and 10 secondary schools. Using data from the surveys, we identified chair-headteacher pairs in 25 geographically-dispersed schools with a range of levels of school performance and in a variety of socio-economic settings. Fifteen of the schools were primary and 10 were secondary schools. The sample of the schools and information about each school are given in Section 6. In the event, 45 interviews were carried out. Twenty were with both chairs and headteachers from the same schools. One of the schools had two co-headteachers; we interviewed one of them. Two interviews were with headteachers and three were with chairs from different schools.

The interviewers sought to explore: the characteristics of the role-holders; the nature of the responsibilities of the chairs and how those responsibilities were experienced; the chair's role; the relationship between the chair and the headteacher; and respondents' views on chairs' training and development. Following completion of the data collection, the key consistent messages were identified.



## 3 The findings

In this section, we discuss the main messages from the data analysis, paying special attention to those findings that are particularly significant. Primary schools are identified with the letter 'P' and secondary schools with the letter 'S'.

### 3.1 The characteristics of chairs

About two thirds of the chairs we surveyed were employed and about one third were retired. A small proportion (6.1%) were looking after a family at home. From the survey:

- 97% of chairs were of White British ethnic origin
- 52% were men and 48% were women
- they were almost all over 40 years of age (94%), with 31% between 40 and 49 years of age and 28% between 50 and 59. About a third were over 60 (34%).

Significant issues emerge here. The relative seniority of the chairs is perhaps an indication of the experience required, in both governing and generally, to undertake the role effectively. That the chairs are largely of White British ethnic origin is of particular interest because it does not reflect the population at large. This finding reflects the outcome of other studies of governing (see, for example, James et al., 2010) which point to the reluctance of members of minority ethnic groups to involve themselves in governing and to participate actively when they do. There are significant policy implications and practice implications for chairs in encouraging the members of minority ethnic groups to participate in governing and to become chairs.

The headteachers articulated a number of qualities in their chairs that they valued. Thus chairs were described by the headteacher at P1 as *'genuine and unselfish'*; at S1 as *'very honest and sensitive'*; at P13 as *'loyal and supportive'*; at P8 as having *'a high moral code, he hates injustice'* and *'highly intelligent, he is widely read'*; at P9 as *'interested and wants to know'*; at S9 as *'diligent, trustworthy and reliable'*; at P1 as *'conscientiousness and forward thinking'*; and at P5 as *'a sounding board and wise counsel and a diplomat'*, possessing *'quiet thoughtfulness'* and having *'warmth and good self-awareness'*.

Chairs' positive characteristics sometimes also had a negative side. So, for example, the headteacher at P1 regarded her chair's fastidiousness as *'both a positive quality and a slight hindrance at times'* (Field notes). The headteacher at S8 felt that the chair was a *'hard man'* which he clearly had some discomfort with, even though the chair's approach had been useful in dealing with a member of the school leadership team who was underperforming. The headteacher at S5 referred positively to her chair's *'enthusiasm'*, which she felt she needed at times to *'rein in'*.

In various ways, the chairs showed considerable strength of character and a strong sense of themselves as individuals. At the same time, many conveyed a sense of relative modesty. Holding the position was part of the identity of only a small minority, with for example, one of the chairs referring to other governors as *'my governors'* (our emphasis).

### 3.2 Chairs' history and experience

The current or previous job roles cited most frequently by chairs in the survey were: 'manager' (23%); 'director' (11%); 'teacher' (8%); and 'consultant' (5%). Around 12% have or have had some



involvement with education professionally. The chair at S3 was a retired headteacher; the chairs at S8 and P8 worked in higher education; and at S6 the chair trained as an Ofsted inspector when he left his career in the corporate sector. Chairs may work or have worked in a non-school part of the education system, as was the case at S4, P8 and S8. This career experience of education in some form was clearly very useful to the chairs we interviewed and added to the expertise they brought to the role. The headteachers we surveyed valued this experience.

Chairs might not have worked in the education system but they may have had experience of education as an adult. Of those we surveyed, 27% had children currently attending the school and 41% had children who attended the school in the past. Experience of education may have been gained through an involvement in local government; for example, the chair at P1 was a local councillor and was closely in touch with local education developments, as were the chairs at P12 and P13. The chair at S2 was vice-chair of the local authority schools' forum which he felt was 'a very useful position to be in' in terms of the insights it gave him into education and schools generally.

The career experience of chairs in non-educational settings was very diverse and was typically in leadership and management positions or 'professional' in nature. For example, the chair at S5 was a senior police officer; at P1, P14 and P9, the chairs were managers in a range of private sector businesses – brewing, banking and electricity respectively.

Chairs often had considerable prior experience in governing, which was significant. From the chairs' survey data:

- the chairs had been in post on average for approximately five years
- on average, the chairs had over 11 years of experience as a governor, of which 10 years was in their current school
- 48% had been the vice-chair
- 37% had been chair of one of the governing body's committees
- the chairs were typically community governors (33%), local authority designated governors (30%), parent governors (18%) and foundation governors (18%).

The S1 chair had been in post for '16 or 17 years'. She had been a parent governor of her children's primary school before that. At S8, the chair had been a governor for 16 years, for 11 of which he had been chair. A number of the chairs we interviewed were 'multiple governors' in that they were currently governors of more than one school. For example, the S6 chair had a total of 48 years' governing experience. He felt he was now 'really a "professional governor"'. He was also chair at another school and trains other governors. Now an advanced skills governor, he had in the past chaired an interim executive board (IEB). He was in his 'sixth or seventh year' as chair of S6, which was a very large school.

The history and experience of chairs in the role can be complicated. So for example, at S5, an IEB had been appointed following an unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection. The chair recounted his experience of working with the IEB. He felt he had learnt a great deal from it. When the governing body was reinstated, the chair, who was one of the most experienced governors from the pre-IEB governing body, felt 'I could do the job'. The chair at P9 was a manager at a local company who felt that his management experience was very important to the role. He had experience of being the chair with three headteachers. His wife was also the school business manager. He said: 'I pop in



*every day when I am collecting my wife. The head will say "Let's just have a word about this." Can't say I'm under-informed!"* This example reflects the histories and experiences of many of the chairs we interviewed and points to chairs' very varied and often complex histories, experience and contexts.

The changing nature of the general governing context for chairs was a significant matter. In some instances, the context had changed significantly and sometimes rapidly. At P12, the chair reported that the school's wider community had changed over the years from a predominantly white working class to a racially and ethnically diverse one. A number of the chairs had experienced more than one headteacher which very clearly added to their governing experience. For example, the chair at S2 had been in post for nine years and a governor for a number of years before that. He had experienced two headteachers and an acting headteacher. The changes of headteacher were occasionally associated with a crisis of some kind, which significantly complicated and added to the chairs' experience, as the following two examples illustrate.

- The chair at P12 reported that the current head was the acting headteacher and would not formally become the headteacher for some while. He indicated that his relationship with the previous headteacher had not been very strong and that the previous headteacher's performance was not always as good as it might have been. The headteacher had eventually become ill and for some considerable time the deputy head had had to step up.
- At S10, the school's previous headteacher decided to retire earlier than anticipated. The two deputy heads offered a short-term solution indicating that they were willing to act together as co-headteachers. The chair (reluctantly) agreed to this arrangement. The governing body then advertised for a headteacher but after three attempts failed to find a suitable candidate. The co-headteachers proposed that the temporary co-headteacher arrangement be made permanent. Again, the governing body reluctantly agreed. The chair and the co-headteachers all felt that the arrangement has worked well and that the school is improving.

In summary, chairs typically bring considerable experience to the role from their lives outside education, from their experience with the education sector and as governors. Often chairs have held the position for a long period, which has extended their experience. Their experience in the role can be extremely varied.

### 3.3 The motivations of chairs

Given the considerable responsibility that being the chair entails, knowing what motivates chairs is important.

Interestingly, the self-interest or single-issue motivation that can be apparent in some governors (James et al., 2010) was not evident in the interview data. The chairs' motivations were grounded in the interests of others and were underpinned by their strong sense of duty. They were somehow morally bound to the role.

The exact nature of their motivations differed and for any individual chair were often numerous.

Chairs' motivation could be related to 'education' generally. The headteacher at S2 felt that the chair's motivation was *'wanting to get involved in education and wanting to ensure that students get the best possible deal in schools... he sits on several of the county council's committees as well; I know he is very committed to education across the board'*. The commitment to education was often



configured in terms of the pupils. So for example, the chair at S6 felt that *'the fundamental criterion'* for being a successful chair was *'you need to care about children and education'*.

For some chairs a desire to support state education was an important motivation. The chair at S5 said she had *'always been an ardent supporter of state education'*. At S4, the chair was strongly committed to the state school sector.

The chair's motivation can often be related to the school itself. This motivation was particularly evident at S5 where the headteacher felt that the most important thing about the chair was that he was *'very passionate about the school and the role even though he wasn't an educationalist'*. Similarly, the headteacher at S6 felt the chair had *'a genuine passion for the school'*. This kind of commitment and motivation illustrates a deep attachment to the school.

The desire to make a contribution to the community was a strong motivation for some. It was particularly strong for the chair at P12 where the school was in the area where he had lived for most of his life.

The notion of 'giving back' featured as a motivation. The chair at S4 was clear: *'You have to give back'*. The chairs at S3 and S2 had similar motivations. Referring to becoming a governor, the S2 chair reported: *'I'd taken early retirement and guess I was looking at opportunities, and I really wanted to give something back into the education system'*. The chair at S3 who had retired as a headteacher eight years ago, also expressed a desire to *'give something back'*.

The desire to repay a debt can be specific to the school. So for example, the chair at P10 was a former pupil and stated: *'I loved that school when I was a child'*. She continued: *'Many other parents also went to the school – and we can all remember this and that and the teachers – **it's my chance to give something back**'* (our emphasis). The children of the chair at S5 had all attended or were still attending the school and had *'all done well'*. He became a governor in the first place because he *'wanted to do something for **my** school'* (his emphasis).

A desire 'to improve matters' was a motivation for some chairs. So, for the chair at P9, *'seeing children from the school going on to uni, some of the children from poorer backgrounds getting on, I want to be part of this'*. Occasionally, this kind of motivation was more specific. For the chair at P3 'wanting to make a difference' featured strongly, especially in relation to raising standards and pupil attainment: he wanted *'to help the school progress'*.

The sense of achievement at witnessing the school improve was a source of motivation for some, for example at S5. Thus the chair's motivation was an outcome of the school improving. For the chair at P2, witnessing the school move from the Ofsted category of 'Notice to improve' to 'Good' *'really motivated me'*. The P1 chair's motivation for becoming the chair was *'witnessing the school doing well'* while he was a governor and wanting to see the improvements continue.

For some chairs, the motivation was that the position was related to other responsibilities. At both P2 and P5, the chairs were the local priests. Interestingly, they both expressed other additional motivations as well as a strong sense of duty.

The chair-headteacher relationship could be a source of motivation for chairs. At P2, the chair felt she had *'an incredibly good working relationship with the headteacher'*, which motivated her.



The motivation to become a chair can be complex and can change. The headteacher of S1 felt that the motivations of the chair were complicated and had changed. He said: *'When she first took it on... she was a local politician and it was part of the role, you join a local governing body... the second motivation was when her own children came here, third motivation is I actually do think she has, at heart, for the school, as being her local school, to do well'*.

Lack of motivation to do the job properly could be a significant issue for the schools and their governing bodies. At one of the schools, the headteacher felt that the chair had *'a laid-back approach'* and that there was *'no real drive to raise standards, he doesn't challenge or encourage other members of governing body to do so'*. The headteacher went on to say that the chair *'is not doing his bit really'*; *'he needs to have lots more communication with his governors. He should be encouraging them, helping them to understand their role and frame challenging questions'*. The chair himself conveyed a similar sense of struggling with the role. He had a difficulty *'dealing with so many centrally driven initiatives'* and needed *'to learn more about finance'*. There was a sense that the *'reluctant chair'* can be a real hindrance to the school.

Chairs' motivations are often of a very high order, characterised by a deep-seated desire to contribute, an attachment to education and/or their school, and a desire to improve society generally through education. A chair lacking the motivation to undertake the responsibility fully can be a significant disadvantage for the headteacher, the school and the governing body.

### 3.4 Capabilities – knowledge and skills

The surveys and interviews revealed a great deal about the capabilities required for the role. From the surveys, chairs and headteachers value skills in:

- encouraging teamwork and cooperation
- delegation
- interpersonal relationships
- managing differences of opinion and conflict
- decision-making
- problem-solving.

Generally, headteachers and chairs agree on which areas of expertise are important for the role. They are:

- an understanding of the work of schools and educational matters in general
- knowledge of general management matters
- an understanding of the significance of legal compliance.

Headteachers value understanding the work of schools and educational matters more highly than chairs. The more functional areas of expertise are considered to be less important than the interpersonal/organisational skills.

In the interviews, both chairs and headteachers were able to list a range of skills and capabilities they felt were important. Indeed, the wide range of skills required was a significant overarching theme. Thus the chair at P1 was explicit in her acknowledgement and valuing of the chair's *'wide range of*



*skills, knowledge and capabilities*'. The headteacher at S2 emphasised a number of skills she valued in her chair: *'He's an absolutely fabulous **communicator** with **all levels** of people, with the staff, students, parents, and he is an excellent **listener** and he manages **to ask very apt, appropriate questions**, and his **background knowledge** is fantastic'* (our emphases).

Chairs and headteachers particularly valued interpersonal/relationship skills. For the chair at P9, *'interpersonal skills, being able to speak to people, all people, are important'*.

Being shrewd and astute in a political sense was a valued capability. It featured at S9 in particular, where the headteacher felt that the chair was *'politically savvy'*. For the chair at S6, *'the ability to have difficult conversations especially with parents'* was important in a political sense.

The ability to ask challenging questions was valued by both chairs and headteachers. At P9, the headteacher said of her chair: *'He will challenge and ask questions – will ask about Raise-online and ask very searching questions, he challenges in a very supportive way – and he challenges all the time.'* The headteacher at S2 particularly valued the chair's questioning ability, describing it as *'excellent... he manages to ask open questions when they are appropriate to develop knowledge, to ask those probing questions right down to the nitty-gritty and he does it in a manner so that you can't get out of an answer'*.

Chairs felt that being able to assimilate and understand relevant information and its significance was very important. So, the chair at P3 was clear: *'A vital skill for the chair is to be able to absorb and digest information'*.

The capacity to listen to others was highly valued by both headteachers and chairs. The headteacher at S2 praised the chair for *'being a brilliant listening ear'*.

The chair's ability to think strategically emerged as important from the responses of both chairs and headteachers. For the chair at S4, the school development plan was a very important way of ensuring a strategic focus.

The chairs had a good knowledge of their schools, which was valued by headteachers. Chairs' knowledge of education and the education system generally, as in the case of the chairs at S3, S8 and P8, was also appreciated by the headteachers. The headteacher at S6 felt this kind of knowledge gave the chair a *'helicopter view'*.

Being organised was thought to be an important capability by both chairs and headteachers. So, for example, the chair at S4 was clear: *'Quite a lot of being chair is about admin – getting your ducks in a row, things like the timetable of work for committees and the full governing body'*. For this chair, the annual schedule of meetings was very important. The chair at P1 explicitly felt that he used the expertise gained during his career as a manager to run the governing body, *'showing leadership, encouraging participation as well as challenging all concerned'* (interview notes). Similarly, the previous career experience of the chair at S2 was obviously very important especially with regard to running meetings: *'I suppose in my working life I tended to run many meetings, so you get used to chairing meetings... I have those skills'*. For the headteacher of S8, the chair's *'ability to manage meetings is impressive'*. The ability to manage time and 'yourself as a resource' also emerged as important capabilities.



Chairs in particular felt that an understanding of leadership and management issues and organisational matters was a valuable capability. So the chair at S6 felt that his experience as a manager in multinational corporations had given him *'a grounding in how organisations work and in financial management and so on'*. Chairs often expressed a desire to bring their expertise outside education to their role. For example, the chair at P3 expressed a keen interest in using his commercial/business skills to support the school and the headteacher. The chair at P14 *'constantly emphasised that her managerial experience was invaluable in her role'* (interview notes), as did several other chairs.

The chair often took on the role of lead governor, demonstrating and modelling good governing practice. For example, the headteacher of S2 felt that in this lead governor role, the chair *'brings a different perspective to whatever we're doing and he manages to ask some very intuitive questions, making us all think and defend what we're doing and he does it in a fairly nice manner'*.

Having the time to take on the responsibility emerged as an aspect of the capability required. It was important for the chair at P3 and it featured in the pathway to becoming a chair at P1 and S4. The advice of the chair at P1 to those thinking of taking on the responsibility was very explicit: *'Don't take it on unless you've got time'*.

The key message here is that chairs need a broad range of skills and abilities to fulfil the role effectively. The skill set is in the areas of organising ability, interpersonal skills and relevant personal capabilities. Perhaps understandably, chairs' knowledge of education is valued by headteachers and the more functional areas of expertise are considered to be less important than the interpersonal/organisational skills.

### 3.5 The pathway to becoming the chair

The pathway to becoming a chair and the related issue of the opportunity to take on the role were significant matters. They illustrate some of the complexities that can be associated with taking up the position.

The opportunity may have arisen through a normal succession process or may have been the result of a crisis of some kind.

The normal pathway can be characterised in a number of ways. For example, the prospective chair may feel it was *'their turn'*; other governors designate them and suggest that they take up the position; the headteacher may play a significant part in *'advancing'* the *'right'* candidate; or the chair may have been the vice-chair and becoming chair was a natural progression.

The normal pathway can take some time and may have a long history. For example, the P1 chair had resisted taking up the role for some while, but when he retired he felt he had more time and then became the chair. At S4, the chair had been a governor for a number of years and was then willing to step up. The chair at P10, recounting his progression to becoming chair, stated: *'I started as a parent and I was recently appointed as chair. I was quite active in the governing body and got involved and got on well with the head so it seemed a natural step.'*

The normal pathway can sometimes be quite rapid. For example, at P12, *'The chair joined as an ordinary member, but a year later became vice-chair and a year later (again) became chair, a position he has held for ten years'* (interview notes). Similarly at P3, the chair was persuaded by others even



though his governing experience was limited – *'No one else was interested in the role'*. Often chairs take up the position without having been the vice-chair, or may have had only a token period in that role, as was the case at P8 and P4.

Succession planning featured in many of the normal pathways and in a sense created the opportunity. It took different forms, some of which were unusual and creative, as at S10, where the chair explained: *'The ex-chair stepped down as chair at the end of December because of business pressures. However, he is now vice-chair, and he may pick up the baton [become chair again] at the end of the year'*.

The crisis pathway to becoming chair may be the result of a serious problem or trauma of some kind such as an unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection outcome, unexpected illness, or some kind of turmoil in the school or the governing body. These vignettes are examples of the crisis pathway:

**Vignette 1.** At P2, the chair had been in post for about four years. It is a church school and she is the parish priest. She had only been on the governing body for a year before she became chair and took over as chair following an unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection. The chair was approached by members of the diocese and the community to take on the responsibility. She said she *'needed a lot of persuading'* to become chair, largely because of the increased workload. The existing chair, who had held the position for 30 years, did not actually stand down, so she had to stand against him. She felt uncomfortable about doing this but she spoke to him before the election and had said that various people had asked her to stand. She felt that the handover was achieved *'amicably'*.

**Vignette 2.** At S9, the interview notes summarised the current chair's pathway. *'There were a series of problems with the head, who eventually went off ill. However, the teachers indicated that they would strike if she returned, voting no confidence in her. In the meantime, there were issues around the chair who took not only a hands-on approach but seemed to see himself as taking on the day-to-day operation of the school. The governing body sought to remove him and had begun this process when he resigned. The current chair was then elected to the post.'*

In both the 'normal' and the 'crisis' pathways, potential chairs may be reluctant to take up the position. At S2 the chair, who was clearly much valued by the headteacher, took on the role *'probably because no one else was willing to. To be fair, had there been any more ideal candidate who was willing I would have been quite happy not to have been chair'*.

Three aspects of the pathway to becoming the chair are particularly significant. First, even the 'normal' pathways may have unusual and expected features. Second, both the normal and the crisis pathways can be rapid. Third, the governing system seems to cope with the difficulties associated with the crisis pathway and the schools and the governance of the schools often emerge in better condition following the crisis. All three aspects point to the resilience of collective governance.

### 3.6 The role – what do chairs do?

The more important and sometimes more challenging aspects of the chair's role include the following. We have organised the list according to the features identified in Figure 1 – inputs, processes and boundary work. Chairs need to be active in all three aspects.



### Managing the inputs

1. Organising recruitment, which may have to be done proactively to persuade people to become governors, and getting *'the balance right'* (Chair at P12) of governors and their capabilities. The chair also has to ensure that the clerking arrangements are appropriate.
2. Ensuring that the structure of the governing body is appropriate. This aspect included getting *'good people as vice-chair and the chairs of committees'* (Chair at P8).
3. Requiring governors who were not fulfilling their responsibilities to leave. When the chair at S7 took on the role, he *'weeded out the older members of the ex-team'*. For the headteacher at P12, the chair's removal of a particular governor who was acting in a way detrimental to the school – a rogue governor – was very important.

### Managing the processes – making sure the governing body works properly

1. Delegating responsibility for governing matters to others. Delegation can be difficult for any manager. It can be especially difficult for chairs because governors are part-time volunteers.
2. Getting other governors to work in the way they are supposed to. Governors have to learn how to govern their schools and continually have to be 'kept on track'. Ensuring continual improvement of the governing body is an important aspect of the role.
3. Involving and including members of the governing body. Making sure 'all voices are heard' is important. Chairs may need to be patient with new governors, who may need time to settle in and begin to contribute.
4. Working with the core group – the vice-chair, chairs of committees and experienced governors. An expert and experienced core group of governors can be very helpful to the governing body and the chair. The chair needs to work productively with the core group and make sure it is continually refreshed with new members.
5. Managing meetings. This facet was important and included keeping to time, ensuring everyone participated and preparing thoroughly.
6. Participation in staff and student disciplinary matters. This was a relatively infrequent occurrence but when it did happen it could be very challenging and even distressing.
7. Working productively with the clerk. An excellent clerk can make a world of difference to the chair's role and to the work of the governing body.
8. Ensuring sound financial management of the school. This aspect could be particularly difficult.

### Boundary work

1. Having an in-school presence in appropriate ways. That may include attending evening events of various kinds, spending time in the staff room before or after meetings, and attending special in-school events such as occasions to mark the departure or retirement of members of staff.
2. Making links with individuals and organisations in the wider environment, such as other schools, the local authority, and business organisations that have a close relationship with the school.
3. Working with parents. Again, this aspect could be very challenging.
4. Line-managing the headteacher. This facet of the role could be particularly challenging. It may involve instigating capability procedures or refusing to agree increments for the headteacher following performance management procedures.
5. Working productively with the headteacher. This aspect of the role is very important to both the chair and the headteacher. It is discussed fully in section 3.7.

Chairs may also: act as a communicator between the education and the business worlds; be called on to act as the public face of the school; and take part in staff appointments, which vary according to the size of the school and the seniority of the appointment.

### The changing nature of the role

The role and the context for chairing could change very acutely and over the longer term. For example, the social setting of S8 had changed during the chair's 16 years on the school governing body. The chair at P4 was conscious of *'the diversity coming in within the region'* and that *'different types of people are coming in to the school'*. This increased diversity had reduced parental involvement with the school and with governing in particular.

The context and the role could be subject to destabilising events and forces. For example the headteacher at one of the schools reported that a former deputy head *'was an alcoholic, he'd gone for my job [when the headteacher was appointed]; he used to sit in the pub and plot my downfall'*. There were *'accusations from a side-kick of the deputy'*. This period had been difficult for the school and the governing body. She was very positive about how the chair and vice-chair responded.

For some chairs the role had changed because of changes they had initiated. For example, the chair at S7 reported: *'When I joined [the governing body] it was very formal and it wasn't much fun'. When he became chair he 'decided to make it more friendly and fun'*. He also reorganised the governing body: *'I asked people to leave, which they did. I brought new people in. It wasn't quick or easy. Took about two years to get everything in place'*.

Many of the chairs referred to responding to external requirements to change. A number of those interviewed were involved in considering and managing the change to academy status.

Despite all the influences that change and potentially destabilise the role and the governing of the school, many interviewees conveyed a real sense of stability in the governing of the school. It was clear there were governing matters to deal with which did change the nature of the work. Nonetheless they conveyed a feeling of stability and security, which is a testament to their capabilities and the resilience of collective governance.



### The time commitment

Chairs' time commitment to the role can be substantial and is a significant aspect of their experience in the role, as Table 1 indicates.

**Table 1. The number of hours per week the survey respondents spend on governing issues**

Time chairs spend on governing issues per week	Percentage of respondents
Less than 1 hour	2%
1–3 hours	35%
4–6 hours	37%
7–9 hours	14%
10 hours or more	12%

It is remarkable that over one in 10 chairs (12%) spend 10 hours or more on governing matters. If this time was taken during a chair's working time it would represent a considerable cost to the employer. Some of the time chairs commit to the role is spent visiting the school, which is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. The number of hours per week the survey respondents spend visiting their schools in their role as chair**

Time spent in school per week	Percentage of respondents
Less than 1 hour	26%
1–3 hours	59%
4–6 hours	12%
7–9 hours	2%
10 hours or more	2%

The chair at S4 felt that being chair *'could eat up all of my time – like an elephant, it could use all my time and energy'*. The most time-consuming aspect for this chair was *'all the documents to be read, academy status and so on, policy documents'*. Similarly, the chair at S6 was very clear about what took up most of his time: *'Reading. I try to read everything that comes out but the quantity is large'*. For him, it was a question of *'ensuring I am knowledgeable'*.

Contact with other governors also took up time: *'Some governors like to be in contact and to talk things through; it's a very important part of the role'*. For this chair, the time commitment tended to vary over time, with rounds of committees, setting agendas, and prize-givings. Thus giving time to the role was *'also part of the pleasure'* and included enjoyable and satisfying aspects.

From the survey, 70% of chairs were provided with paid time off from work for their governing responsibilities. This time allowance is important and contributes positively to the chair-headteacher relationship (see section 3.7).

### The challenging aspects of the role

The chairs' experience of the role had a number of different facets, many of which would be typically experienced as negative and others as positive. Very often, chairs would experience the role both positively and negatively and often at the same time.

The challenging – and perhaps negative – experience of the role was a significant theme in the data. For example, the chair at S5 felt that he had: *'Got to be all things to all people'*, an experience which he clearly found challenging. He also associated the role with *'pressure'*. For this particular chair, this experience came as a surprise: *'When I was a governor, I didn't realise how much pressure there is on the chair'*. Being the chair can be acutely stressful and even the prospect of such episodes can cause stress. For example, the chair at P8 said: *'The thing that causes me most anxiety is that there's going to be procedures we are going to have to follow, for example a complaint. Have we got all the right policies and procedures in place? Do we know what they are? Do we know what our responsibilities are?'* The same chair was also concerned about *'having a good overview of what Ofsted are going to be looking at'*.

Some aspects of the role were both stressful and distinctly unpleasant. The chair at S2 referred to two particularly disagreeable aspects of her experience in the role. The first was *'finding that one of the teaching staff was a very strong risk to children and having to go through the process of removing them, wasn't pleasant'*. The second was *'dealing with one or two underperforming staff and having to consider the best way forward: not pleasant but had to be done'*.

Some chairs experienced a sense of loneliness in the role, for example the chair at S4. Interestingly, this chair's sense of isolation was eased by his close working relationship with the headteacher.

The work entailed in organising the governing body can be substantial and very time-consuming. The chair of P4 indicated that *'planning'* took up most of his time, *'planning everything's in place, we've got all the relevant things, it's not so much being in school, it's more coordinating people, making sure people attend meetings, getting things done'*. Chairs, for example the chair at P1, did not always appreciate the workload when taking on the role. However, the chair at P8 offered a countervailing view: *'it looks more forbidding from the outside than it is from the inside – it's very process driven, you just get on and do the tasks that come up'*.

Often chairs would voice negative aspects and would then indicate how positively they felt about the role. The chair at P9 simply said: *'I really love what I do'*. The chair of S7 said of her experience of being a chair, there were: *'good days and bad days. Today was a good day. Tears in my eyes today at the college carol service. Back to the school for a mince pie and a chat'*. For the chair at S2 *'when we have success amongst the pupils'* was the main positive aspect. The role was clearly very meaningful to the chairs.

Learning and development are typically important outcomes of being the chair. At S4, the chair felt she had acquired *'confidence and greater assertiveness and clarity about task'*, which she had taken back into her own work role. The chair at S5 felt that being chair *'enriches me as a person and I take that back to my job. It gives me a good idea of the pressures on the modern day family – that gives me empathy when I am dealing with youngsters at work'*. The learning could come from the experience of difficult situations or relationships. For the chair at S5 one of the most significant things he had had to learn was *'how difficult it is to deal with councils. Diplomacy is what I've had to learn'*.



In conclusion, a number of aspects of the role are particularly significant. First, the role has a large number of different facets, some of which are particularly challenging and potentially problematic. Second, the role and the context are subject to change and can sometimes change quite rapidly, which in turn changes the requirements of the role – what chairs need to do. Despite this potential for change, the chairs generally conveyed a sense of stability about the role, the governing body and the school. The chairs' time commitment to the role, including time spent visiting the school, was considerable and indicated the priority they gave to their duties as chairs. It is very important that chairs manage this commitment appropriately. Their resources are limited and all chairs need to ensure that they do not over-commit. For chairs, understanding what they are giving to being the chair and why, is important. Some aspects of being the chair can be very stressful indeed, while at the same time the role does have substantial positive aspects. Finally, chairs can learn a great deal from the experience of being the chair, and indeed they have to be able to learn to undertake the role properly.

### 3.7 The chair-headteacher relationship

The chair-headteacher relationship is important because it spans the boundary between the governing system and the school's operating system (see Figure 1 in section 1). It is therefore a significant aspect of the chair's boundary work. In addition, the headteacher is accountable to the governing body, the functioning of which is (ideally) the chair's responsibility. So there are substantive management aspects to the relationship.

#### 3.7.1 Significant aspects of the relationship

Interviews with the headteachers and chairs revealed a number of factors that are important for successful chair-headteacher relationships.

**Having a sound and productive relationship is very important for both chairs and headteachers.** The chair at S4 was very clear about the importance of the relationship: *'I can't imagine what it would be like if this was not an open and honest relationship'*. The headteacher at P7 felt that *'the relationship between them [her and the chair] was the most important aspect of the chair's role'*. The headteacher of S6 summed up the relationship's importance very neatly: *'A bad chair can make it a nightmare; a good one can make it a dream.'*

**The way the respondents described the relationship indicated its significance and what underpinned it.** Prominent descriptors in the data were: honest, respectful, open, synergistic, trusting, warm, limited (with a previous headteacher), good, OK, a team who are seen as such by everyone, and professional. The chair at S3 characterised the relationship as having *'vigorous openness and honesty'*; there was *'healthy argument'* but *'disagreements are always handled professionally'*. Interestingly, the headteacher at S4 felt that the chair *'doesn't want to compete with me'*, which she clearly valued. At P2, the chair-headteacher relationship was characterised by *'openness and a willingness to talk about the things that matter, and a willingness to explore a subject in a deeper way, not just a tick box but let's see what's going on here'* (P2 chair).

**Chairs and headteachers frequently manage each other.** The interview notes at S5 indicate that the headteacher actively sought to manage the chair: *'There was a feeling of her needing to rein in his rather reactive enthusiasm with a tempered experience of the system'*. Similarly at S9, *'the headteacher actively seeks to manage the chair'* (interview notes). At S7, the chair indicated his approach: *'The head moves too quickly, and I have to try to keep pace with her; I rein her in occasionally'*.



**Managing the average performer was challenging for both chairs and headteachers.** At P6, the current chair had taken up the responsibility in difficult circumstances, which the headteacher clearly valued. Nonetheless, the headteacher felt that the chair *'has a laid back approach to the role, he does not challenge proactively or encourage other members of the GB to do so. He has to be prompted'* (interview notes). The headteacher at P12, while valuing her loyal and supportive chair, felt that *'a more critical and challenging but still supportive chair would be helpful'*. One chair recounted having to manage the previous headteacher who was *'not so poor as to merit discipline but never so good as not to cause concerns'*. There was evidence of chairs managing the inadequate performance of their headteachers and instances where chairs had managed the departure of the headteacher.

**Meetings and contact.** The pattern of contact between the chair and the headteacher varied. At S9, the chair and the headteacher *'meet once a week – every Friday'* (interview notes). S10 had the same arrangement. For the chair at S6, contact was *'as and when – an ad hoc arrangement'*. At the other extreme, the chair at P9 was in the school every day. Making contact with the headteacher a priority was important, as for example at S7 where the chair said: *'I spend most of my time talking to the boss [the headteacher] and dealing with the issues she raises'*.

**A private and a public relationship.** The chair at S3 felt he and the headteacher had *'a very strong relationship'*. He added: *'I'll back her to the hilt outside the room but we argue behind closed doors'*. The headteacher supported this view: *'The chair will back me up whatever my decision is, we have healthy good discussions inside my office but he'll always back me up'*. The headteacher at P9 expressed a similar view. The chair at S2 said that he had never challenged the headteacher individually and directly in public but had done so in private. Relationships between the headteacher and the governing body are significant at the full governing body meeting. Thus the chair at P12 stated: *'I always support the headteacher in meetings'*. It is as if in those public settings the chair-headteacher relationship must be seen to be secure.

The headteacher's office emerged as an important setting for the relationship. It gave privacy and the 'closed door' was important. So the chair at S4 felt she and the headteacher *'can both "shut the door" and say exactly what we think'*. The headteacher at P9 said of the chair, *'He will make the error of trying to have conversations in the corridor which we shouldn't but I just tell him to get in the office'*.

The chair does become privy to confidential information through the (close and private) relationship with the headteacher. This can create difficulties of knowing when others, for example other governors, should be informed and involved. The headteacher at P14 indicated that she and the chair *'are currently discussing a matter privately without taking it to the governing body'* (interview notes). The closeness of the relationship can result in the chair and headteacher being seen as a united 'double act' – a single entity – with difficult consequences. For example, at P13 the headteacher felt that *'at times the governing body was holding him **and** the chair to account'* (our emphasis) because of their close relationship.

The loneliness sometimes experienced by the chair can on occasions be matched by and connect with the loneliness sometimes experienced by the headteacher. The chair and the headteacher can support each other when they are experiencing periods of isolation.



**The importance of working at and investing in the relationship.** Chairs and headteachers clearly invested time and energy in the relationship. It didn't just 'happen'. Where the relationship was less than satisfactory, the participants gave the impression they had 'given up' on it. They were no longer really trying to make the relationship successful and productive.

**A 'professional' relationship.** The chair at S2 felt he was a *'professional colleague to the headteacher'* and that they have *'a shared professional relationship'*. At P2 the chair felt her relationship with the headteacher was *'professional'*.

There appear to be two important dimensions here. The first is the notion of friendship characterised by a mutual bond. The second dimension is the mutual making sense of events and incidents and interpreting the context, for example, for the purpose of making decisions. The data illustrates these two dimensions.

- **The mutual bond.** The chair at S6 was clear that his relationship with the headteacher was a *'friendly professional relationship, not a friendship'*. The nature of friendliness varied between different pairings. So the headteacher at S1 said: *'There is a professional distance... when the business has to be done you need to be professional about it, there's a good balance here, she's a football fan and I'm a football fan, there's a bit of banter about teams and so on, but when there's business to be done then it is very much business'*. The chair confirmed this view, *'We do get on very well, joking about football teams, he has a good sense of humour, we're quite comfortable to say whatever has to be said, I think it goes both ways, it is professional – we would not meet socially'*. The headteacher of S8 felt that the relationship between him and the chair was *'not matey'*. He added: *'It was a strong relationship but it was correct and professional'*. At S4, there was real affection in the relationship. According to the headteacher, the chair has said on more than one occasion *'I'd like to give you a hug'* even though no hug was given. However, it was clear that the chair and the headteacher were not friends. The headteacher at S5 had a similar view: *'We're not friends, but I could say personal stuff to him if I needed to'*, which was supported by the chair who confirmed, *'We get on well'*. At S9 for example, the headteacher felt he had a very good relationship with the chair, but that he was *'not a mate'*, they were *'not chummy'*, and that *'we don't go out for a drink together'*.
- **Mutual sense-making.** This aspect of the relationship emerged in the data in a number of ways. For example, the headteacher at S2 felt the chair was *'a brilliant sounding block'*. She went on: *'he is someone I can go and talk to when I've got issues but I know he will make me think about the solutions to those problems'*. The chair at P8 also felt that he was *'someone for [the headteacher] to sound out his ideas against'*.

**Descriptors of the role holders.** One significant feature of the data was the variation between the chairs and their headteachers as individuals. They could be very similar in a range of ways and very different. No particular combination of descriptors impacted on the success of the relationship. The key descriptors are as follows:



- Age: could be very similar, as at P7, or different as was more often the case.
- As people: at S4 the interview notes reported: *'Two people, who in some ways are very alike, with shared values, approaches and views'*. Often chairs and headteachers were very different as people.
- Gender: from both the survey and the interview data, the gender of the participants was not a factor in the success of the chair-headteacher relationship.
- Life experiences: could be similar, as at P7 where the headteacher and the chair *'both grew up in the eighties'*, or as was more often the case, very different.

Importantly, there was no discernible configuration that was more successful than the others. They all had the capacity to work well.

We used metaphors to capture the nature of the relationship. Some metaphors were offered by the respondents, others were devised by the interviewers. Here are some examples:

- Wise old gentleman (chair) – young enthusiast (headteacher) at P12. The chair has insight and experience, which he uses to guide the energetic and committed headteacher.
- Teenager (chair) – parent (headteacher) at S5. A very enthusiastic and energetic chair who is continually seeking to ensure that the school progresses rapidly, wants the school to take advantage of any new initiatives, and seeks to ensure that the school is responding rapidly to any new policy developments. The more experienced headteacher brings a wiser and more knowledgeable perspective and seeks to shape the chair's enthusiasm and readiness to follow developments without due consideration of priorities and implications.
- A double act of long standing (chair and headteacher) at S6. A chair and a headteacher who share similar views, understandings and approaches and have both been in post some while. As with any double act, they are a foil for each other, providing the other with what is required for secure, thought-through actions.
- Batman (headteacher) – Robin (chair) at S7. This familiar metaphor conveys an image of a superhero duo both engaged in an ambition to do good in the world. Robin is definitely Batman's sidekick but he is a crucial part of the duo, a partner and someone for Batman to discuss things with.
- Father (chair) – child (headteacher) at S2. An imaging along family lines with the wise, experienced father guiding the headteacher who is in the role of child in the relationship. The chair may be a father figure for the whole school.
- Cattle prod (chair/headteacher) – brake-man (chair/headteacher) at P3. Here the interaction is one where energetic instigator/initiator roles and the cautious wise man/sage role are exchanged as appropriate.
- The football team captain (headteacher) – manager (chair) at P8. Here the headteacher takes overall responsibility for organising matters in the school while the chair oversees the school's performance in its widest sense.



- The working team (chair and headteacher) at P8. A chair and headteacher working closely together for the benefit of the school, adding to each other's capability and enabling the other to do their job well.

These metaphorical representations could change. So for example, at P8 where the 'team captain (headteacher) – manager (chair)' metaphor applied, they also appeared to be 'brothers in arms' in their accounts of working through difficult periods.

This data gives new and very interesting insights into the chair-headteacher relationship. First, the relationship is important and meaningful to the participants. Investing in and working at the relationship are priorities. The relationship can be complex and can take a range of different forms. It can have a private side and a public side; what is seen in public may not directly reflect what happens in private. Through the relationship, which has both friendship and sense-making components, chairs and headteachers manage each other. Managing the underperformance of the other can be very challenging.

### 3.7.2 What makes the relationship work?

The survey data indicated that particular strengths in the relationship relate to: openness of communication, integrity and mutual respect. It also revealed that governing body functioning is significantly worse when chair-headteacher relationships are poor. The quality of the relationship appears to be part of the quality of governing overall.

In the survey, we explored the chair-headteacher relationship with both parties, by asking the 21 questions about different aspects of their relationship with the other. They were asked to respond on a 7-point scale from 'disagree very strongly' (1) to 'agree very strongly' (7). The data revealed a number of important issues, as follows.

1. Overall, relations between chairs and headteachers were strong, with chairs giving the relationship an average score of 6.04 out of 7, and headteachers giving the relationship a score of 5.75. Thus both headteachers and chairs were positive about the relationship but headteachers were slightly less so. For a very small minority of chairs (3.7%) the relationship was less than satisfactory. 11.4% of headteachers felt the same way.
2. Chairs consider that chair-headteacher interactions are more frequent than headteachers do, with chairs scoring this item at 6.30 out of 7 as opposed to the headteachers' score of 5.78.
3. Chairs report that the chair-headteacher interactions are longer than headteachers do, with chairs scoring this item at 6.08 out of 7 as opposed to the headteachers' score of 5.54.
4. Headteachers accept that chairs have to challenge them, scoring the relevant questionnaire item at 6.61 out of 7. Chairs do not have such a positive view, scoring the item at 6.42.
5. Headteachers say that they are 'honest' with chairs (6.48). Chairs do not have such a positive view (6.37).
6. Chairs and headteachers generally do not describe their relationship as 'close', giving this item on average 5.53 and 5.16 out of 7 respectively, which were amongst the lowest scores they gave to all the 21 descriptors (see section 3.7).

7. Interestingly, neither felt the other made their job easier, with chairs and headteachers scoring this item 5.52 and 4.87 respectively, which is the second-to-lowest score for any question and well below their average scores.
8. We asked both chairs and headteachers whether they had put a lot into the relationship that they felt would be lost if the other stepped down. It is of interest that this is the lowest-scoring item – chairs (4.55) and headteachers (4.31). From their responses to other items, they clearly invested a great deal in the relationship but it seems that this investment would endure and not be lost when the relationship ended.

We were interested to find out if the chair-headteacher relationship was affected by who was in post when the other took up their position. Where the current chair was in post when the current headteacher was appointed, relationships were only slightly better. Given that the chair would have played a role in selecting the headteacher for the post, we expected the relationship to be stronger.

While chair-headteacher relations were generally very strong, the survey data revealed a range of views relating to the quality of the relationship. Thus in a subset of around 5% of cases the relationship was poor. If that percentage is scaled up, it represents a total of over 1,000 schools across the country.

The interviews also revealed insights into what makes the relationship work.

**Mutuality.** Many of the strong and successful relationships had characteristics that were expressed by the chairs and headteachers **of each other**. So, at P1 there was a strong sense of this mutuality between the chair and the headteacher: *'Each feels able to challenge and support the other'* (interview notes).

**Honesty.** For example, the chair at P1 felt that *'establishing an honest relationship is the secret of success'*. The headteacher at P1 agreed: *'We are painfully honest with each other, that is why our relationship works so well'*.

**Openness.** The chair at P8 was very definite: *'We are open and frank with each other'*, which he thought helped to make the relationship work. At S4, the headteacher felt that the relationship was characterised by *'openness, warts and all can be shared'*. The chair at S3 was *'flattered by how much [the headteacher] discloses'*.

**Respect.** The chair at P1 characterised the relationship as *'respectful'* which he felt was one of the reasons why it was successful. Similarly, the chair at S4 felt that his *'respect for [the headteacher] had grown enormously over the 18 months of being chair'*, which had strengthened the relationship.

**Complementarity.** The chair at P3 was clear that the relationship was *'about recognising complementary strengths and applying them'*. He felt it was *'important to have complementary skills'* which for him, *'offer options'* and help to create *'a mature relationship'*. The headteacher at P8 said: *'I am passionate and a bull in a china shop. [The chair] is calm and well-considered'*. She went on: *'He is always very much in control – I'm not – and we complement each other'*.



**A professional relationship: a bond and a willingness to undertake a sense-making role for the other.** As discussed in section 3.7.1, the notion of the relationship being ‘professional’ and being characterised by a bond between the two parties and the capability of one to act in a sense-making role for the other helped to make the relationship work.

**Capability in the role.** For the chair at P8, *‘the fact that he’s [the headteacher’s] doing such a good job’* helped to make the relationship work. He went on: *‘He can be prickly but the results speak for themselves’*. Capable chairs were also highly valued by headteachers.

**The importance of trust.** The chair at P8 said: *‘There is a trust there. I don’t have any agenda or axe to grind – I am not “plotting behind his back”, because he can be suspicious, he knows he can trust me and I know he’s doing a good job’*. The chair at S8 was clear: *‘The relationship must be one of trust’*. Interestingly, the chair at P3 felt that *‘trust and confidence’* (his emphasis) between the chair and the headteacher were important, almost seeking to strengthen the importance of trust.

**A commitment to the success of the school.** A joint commitment to enabling the success of the school and to making that a priority was crucial to the success of the relationship. The chair being prepared to commit time to the role is a signal of that priority, as is the chair’s availability and accessibility.

The circumstances in which the relationships were good and where they were not good are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. The circumstances in which the relationships were relatively poor (the bottom fifth in terms of relationship quality) and where they were good (the top fifth in terms of relationship quality)**

	Lowest 20% of headteacher-chair relationship quality	Highest 20% of headteacher-chair relationship quality
Chair's time in post	4 years	5 years
Chair's tenure as a governor of their school	7 years	10 years
Chair's total experience as a governor	9 years	11 years
Percentage of chairs who are currently employed	65 %	61%
Percentage of employed chairs that get paid time off from work for chairing duties	65%	70%
Percentage of students in the school entitled to free school meals (FSM)	15%	14%
Number of students on roll	408	410
Percentage in primary schools	82%	80%
Percentage in secondary schools	18%	20%
School performance (judged by contextual value added)	9972	9970

Interestingly the contextual factors do not appear to influence the relationship as much as might be expected. Nonetheless, they do point towards significant aspects that are supported by interview data and other data from the survey. Interesting outcomes are as follows.

- The chairs' experience in the role of chair and as a governor of the school, and length of experience in governing have an influence. As might be expected, the chairs' overall experience of governing appears to have a positive effect.
- School type – primary or secondary – and size does not appear to affect the relationship, which is in some ways to be expected. We might have expected to see the socio-economic context and the size of the school to have an effect – both factors may put the relationship under pressure. However, they do not appear to influence the relationship.
- The relationship appears to be influenced by whether or not the chair is currently employed or not, although the effect is very small. However, this finding – taken with the finding that when chairs are employed but are given paid time off work for their governing duties, there is a positive effect on the quality of the chair-headteacher relationship – points to the importance of being able to give time to the relationship and to make it a priority.

The relationship develops over time and can also be influenced by particular watershed moments and the shared experience of significant, perhaps difficult, times. At S4, the chair said she had '*gradually learnt how to deal with her [the headteacher]*'. At S5, the chair felt that the relationship had '*become more open. She's got the measure of me and I of her, which you can only get over time*'.



The S3 chair felt that *'the relationship had strengthened over time'*. The S2 chair felt that trust was important and that *'trust is something which is earned and seen over time'*.

Particular moments could be pivotal in forming the chair-headteacher relationship. So, from the interview notes, for the chair at P14: *'The relationship was forged in a troubling situation when the school was involved in a tribunal, something that happened at the start of the chair's reign. That meant that both the HT and chair were constantly on the phone to each other or meeting up and hence a considerable degree of trust grew up. It is clear that both regard each other highly'*.

At S4, the headteacher and the chair had brought the school out of the Ofsted 'Special Measures' category. Referring to that time, the chair said: *'Special Measures was grim but it provided its own impetus; we knew exactly where we had to get to, we did it together'*. He admitted that it was *'harder to get that same enthusiasm and motivation now'*. Nonetheless, the Special Measures period was significant in fashioning the relationship. As the chair put it, *'We've been on a journey together'*. The experience of a 'difficult period' can engender respect. The S5 chair reported that: *'The headteacher was here at the time of the IEB and she was hauled over the coals'*. He felt that *'a lesser headteacher would have walked – but she stayed and improved things'*, something he really rated.

In summary, the research reveals a number of new insights into what makes the relationship work. First, good headteachers want good chairs – and vice versa – who are committed to the success of the school. The quality of the relationship is part of the overall quality of governing body functioning. The relationship needs time to develop and can be strengthened by joint working through difficult times. Capability in the different roles is very important; it enables mutuality and complementarity to be fully brought to bear through shared respect, honesty and openness. Arguably the differences between chairs' and headteachers' views on the relationship, for example the headteachers' openness and acceptance of challenge, 'come with the territory' of the relationship. Chair-CEO relationships are like that. The relationship can be good in very different contexts. What really helps it to work is the availability of the chair and chairs being able to prioritise the relationship. One thing that supports this is employers allowing chairs paid time off work for their governing duties. In 5% of schools where the chair responded to the survey, the relationship was poor. That represents over 1,000 schools which, given the importance of the relationship to the headteacher, the governing body and the school, is far too many.

### 3.8 Chairs' and headteachers' views on their governing bodies

In the survey, we asked chairs and headteachers about the functioning of their governing bodies. We posed a number of questions and asked them to respond on a 7-point scale from 'disagree very strongly' (1/7) to 'agree very strongly' (7/7). Their views were as follows.

1. Chairs and headteachers felt their governing bodies were working well, although chairs have a slightly more positive view.
2. Generally, headteachers and chairs tend to agree about how their governing bodies function but there are some differences of view, as follows:
  - Chairs tend to think that governing bodies add to school leadership. Headteachers do not have such a positive view.
  - Headteachers think that governing bodies struggle with managing the strategic-operations management divide. Chairs do not agree with that view.



- Headteachers have a more positive view than chairs about the amount of information provided by headteachers at governing body meetings.
- Chairs have a more positive view than headteachers about whether the governing body establishes policies for the operation of the school.

In summary, chairs and headteachers were generally positive about the way their governing bodies functioned overall. Any differences reflected long-standing issues, for example, managing the strategic-operational divide, differences of view on the contribution that governors make, and whether headteachers provide enough information at meetings. These may simply be differences in perception – chairs and headteachers seeing things differently – or they may be real differences in expectation.

In order to gain a sense of what was ‘on the agenda’ of the chairs’ governing bodies in the current climate, we asked chairs what were currently matters of particular concern for their governing bodies. The results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Matters of particular concern for chairs**

	Percentage agreeing that this matter is a current and particular concern for their governing bodies
Standards/pupil attainment	75%
Moving to academy status	44%
Federation with other schools	42%
Financial management/managing a financial deficit	41%
The building of new premises	32%
Appointment of a new headteacher	17%
Responding to an unsatisfactory Ofsted report	13%

Governing bodies were working on a number of issues. There is a clear focus on improving standards and attainment, which is an important finding. Other matters which were of current and particular concern for between half and a third of governing bodies were: moving to academy status, federation with other schools, new premises and financial management. Responding to an unsatisfactory Ofsted report was a concern for a sixth of the schools. A similar proportion were concerned with appointing a new headteacher. On average, the respondents’ governing bodies were particularly concerned with between one and two substantial issues in addition to focusing on pupil attainment. That is a considerable burden: governing bodies are facing a number of challenges.

### 3.9 Chairs’ training and development

#### 3.9.1 Training undertaken by chairs for the role

Three quarters of the chairs who responded to the survey had undertaken training for the role. That means that one in four of the respondents had not undertaken any role-specific training, which is a surprisingly high figure. The forms of training undertaken by chairs who had participated in training are shown in Table 5.



**Table 5. The forms of role-specific training undertaken by chairs**

Form of training	Percentage of chairs who had undertaken training specific to their role in this way
Training courses, seminars (held at an external venue)	90%
Accessing online materials	39%
Workbooks or other printed materials	24%
Training courses, seminars (held at the school)	17%
Mentoring/coaching with another chair	14%
Mentoring/coaching by the headteacher	13%
Responding to an unsatisfactory Ofsted report	13%

Perhaps unexpectedly, training courses and workshops were the most prevalent modes of training provision. The relatively high incidence of the use of online materials is of interest.

In the chairs' survey, we asked the chairs which kind of organisation had provided their training. Their replies are given in Table 6.

**Table 6. The kind of organisation that had provided the chairs' training**

Training provider	Percentage of respondents who had undertaken training by this provider
The local authority	92%
An external training provider	17%
The National Governors' Association	10%
The headteacher at the school	10%
A chair from another school	6%

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the local authority is currently the dominant provider of training for chairs. This finding is worthy of note given the changing role of the local authority in supporting school governing bodies.

The questionnaire asked chairs for their top five preferred forms of training. Their preferences are shown in Table 7.



**Table 7. The top five preferred modes of training indicated by chairs**

Form of training	Percentage of chairs indicating that this was in their top five preferred modes of training
Workshops on specific topics or concerns	76%
Small groups in local clusters with other chairs	67%
Small groups in local clusters with other chairs and heads	66%
Peer visits to schools	46%
Online modules on your own	42%
Regional or other conferences	33%
One-to-one coaching	32%
Workbooks or other printed materials	27%
Online modules involving interaction with others	22%

The preferred forms of training overall are small groups, in local clusters either with other chairs or with other chairs and headteachers, or workshops on specific topics/concerns.

There was very little evidence of chairs undertaking specific training for the role before taking up the position. Thus many had learnt to be chairs by carrying out the role. The capacity to do that is valuable but the developmental pathway and the learning can be taxing and difficult. The notes on the interview with the chair of P9 indicate just how challenging that learning pathway might be: *'The story of this chair illustrates a journey of developing maturity, sophistication and competence. He started off with masses of enthusiasm and commitment, bringing experience of management especially of finance and money from an entirely different sector. This left him rather gullible and vulnerable. Then through very challenging circumstances – two heads who were duplicitous and lacking in integrity. He learned to be more searching in monitoring especially in educational matters – checking how well cohorts will do in SATs etc. This journey required humility and an orientation to learning from others.'*

### **3.9.2 Chairs' views on which skills are important and where they felt the need for further development**

In the survey, we asked chairs which abilities were important and the extent to which they felt equipped with those abilities. The difference between the abilities the chairs think are important and the extent to which they consider they have those skills may reveal an ability gap. A gap in an important area is significant and represents a training need. The ability gaps were most evident in:

- giving and receiving constructive criticism and suggestions
- managing differences of opinion and conflicts
- delegation.



### 3.9.3 Views on chairs' training and development

Compulsory training for chairs was supported but was acknowledged as being problematic. For example, the headteacher at S2 supported it but said: *'I am lucky, I have got a chair of governors who actively engages in training but I think it is something they need to be able to do to make sure they have the knowledge'*. She did acknowledge that such a view may be unpopular: *'I think the problem is because it's a voluntary position it is difficult if you make something compulsory'*. However, she took this view because of the importance of the position: *'They need to do the job well, they need to understand'*. The headteacher at P3 had a similar perspective: *'Chairs should be trained'*, as did the chair at S3: *'Compulsory training for chairs is a good thing'*. The chair at P5 felt that *'compulsory training would attract the best'*.

The chair at P12 explained his perspective on chairs' training and development. He indicated that he devoted considerable time initially to going to training sessions run by the local authority, which he valued. However, as he had *'been to many of them, there was little new'*. As a result, he cut down the time he gave to formal training of this kind.



## 4 Discussion and concluding comments

The research has revealed a number of new and substantive insights into the very complex role of the chair of the school governing body in England that have important policy, practice and development implications.

Members of minority ethnic groups are not strongly represented amongst chairs. Other studies of school governing in England, for example our own research (James et al., 2010), point to the reluctance of members of these groups to become governors and to play an active role. It seems that as a consequence, they are then under-represented amongst chairs. The engagement of members of minority ethnic groups in school governing needs to be widened. More members of those groups will then go on to become chairs. Raising the profile of governing generally and making the nature of school governing more widely known would also be of benefit.

Chairs typically have a very wide range of high-level personal qualities, which underpin the moral purpose they bring to the role and the responsibility. The life experience of chairs is often rich, varied and extensive, and they often have considerable experience as governors. Chairs' motivations are generally of a very high order. The headteacher, the school and the governing body are seriously disadvantaged when this motivation is lacking. Chairs need a broad range of skills and abilities to be effective and to fulfil the role effectively. The demanding requirements for the role, and the responsibility and its significance should have a much higher profile and should be more widely recognised and appreciated.

The pathway to becoming the chair is of particular interest and has important policy and practice implications. It says a lot about the role, the often complex nature of governing, and the way governing is made to work by those involved. Importantly, all the succession pathways seemed to be supported and enabled by the collective nature of governing involving a wide range of stakeholders. This collective stakeholder governance gives the system valuable resilience and is thus very important.

The chair's role has many different aspects, some of which can be very challenging and stressful, and some extremely satisfying and enjoyable. Chairs can learn a great deal from the role and indeed they have to be able to learn to undertake the role properly. The role can be quite isolating. Who supports chairs when they need it and the support is lacking is an important question that needs to be addressed.

The research has revealed new and rich insights into the chair-headteacher relationship. The relationship is significant because it is the most important place where the boundaries of the school and the governing body meet. It is also significant because of the management/accountability relationship between the governing body, for which the chair is (ideally) responsible, and the headteacher. The relationship is typically important and meaningful to both chairs and headteachers. The quality of the relationship is linked to the quality of governing overall. 5% of chairs said their relationship with the headteacher was poor, which represents a considerable number of schools. Chairs and headteachers need to understand the importance of making the relationship work, be able to acknowledge when it is not working and know how to access support to repair and renew the relationship.



The qualities that help to make the chair-headteacher relationship work are: mutuality, honesty, complementarity, trust, openness, respect, a commitment to the success of the school and capability in the respective roles. The availability of the chair for contact with the headteacher and chairs being able to prioritise the relationship help to make the relationship work. Employers allowing chairs paid time off work for their governing duties enables that to happen and should be more widely established as an expectation.

The declining capacity of local authorities generally to provide training for chairs has important implications, especially as a quarter of chairs have not undertaken any role-specific training. Making training for chairs compulsory is problematic but it – and the training of the governing body generally – could perhaps be more closely scrutinised by Ofsted. This would elevate the importance of governing body/chair training. The three aspects of the role that are important and where chairs lack ability are: giving and receiving constructive criticism and suggestions; managing differences of opinion and conflicts; and delegation. These aspects should be priorities for chairs' development.

In summary, being the chair of a school governing body in England is a complex responsibility requiring personal qualities of a high order, a high level of motivation of a 'public service' kind and a wide range of skills and abilities. The relationship between the chair and the headteacher is highly significant and the quality of that relationship has implications for the headteacher, the governing body and the school. Chairs ideally take on the responsibility for the full functioning of the governing body. That responsibility should be explicitly stated in regulations and should be recognised more widely. The contribution that chairs make voluntarily out of a sense of public duty should be more widely acknowledged and appreciated by all parts of the education system – especially central government. Being the chair of a school governing body is a significant educational and community leadership responsibility.

## 5 References

- Balarin, M., Brammer, S., James, C.R. and McCormack, M. (2008) *The school governance study*. London: Business in the Community.
- Deem, R., Brehony, K. and Heath, S. (1995) *Active citizenship and the governing of schools*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- DfE (2010) *The importance of teaching*. London: Department for Education.
- DfE (2011) *A guide to the law for school governors*. London: Department for Education.  
<http://www.education.gov.uk/b0065507/gttl>.
- Earley, P. (2003) 'Leaders or followers? Governing bodies and their role in school leadership'. *Educational management leadership and administration* 31, 4: 353-367.
- Earley, P. and Creese, M. (2000) 'Walking the tightrope? The role of teacher governors'. *School leadership and management* 20, 4: 475-487.
- Earley, P., Evans, J., Collarbone, P., Gold, A. and Halpin, D. (2002) *Establishing the current state of school leadership in England*. London: DfES.
- James, C.R., Brammer, S., Connolly, M., Fertig, M., James, J. and Jones, J. (2010) *The 'hidden givers': a study of school governing bodies in England*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust.
- James, C.R., Brammer, S., Connolly, M., Fertig, M., James, J. and Jones, J. (2011) 'School governing bodies in England under pressure: the effects of socio-economic context and school performance'. *Educational management, administration and leadership*, 39 (4): 414-433.
- James, C.R., Brammer, S., Connolly, M., Fertig, M., James, J. and Jones, J. (2012) 'The role of chairs of school governing bodies in England'. *School leadership and management*, 31, 1: 3-19.
- McCrone, T., Southcott, C. and George, N. (2011) *Governance models in schools*. Slough: NFER.
- NGA (2012) *The chair's handbook*. Birmingham: NGA.
- Ofsted (2011) *School governance: learning from the best*. London: Ofsted.
- Ranson, S., Arnott, M., McKeown, P., Martin, J. and Smith, P. (2005) 'The participation of volunteer citizens in school governance'. *Education review*, 57, 3: 357-371.
- Scanlon, M., Earley, P. and Evans, J. (1999) *Improving the effectiveness of school governing bodies*. London: DfEE.



## 6 Appendix – the schools

In this section we provide information about the schools where we interviewed the chairs and the headteachers. Table 8 gives a summary and we also give more detailed pen pictures.

### 6.1 The schools where the chairs and the headteachers were interviewed

**Table 8. The schools where interviews were carried out**

OI refers to the outcome of the school's most recent Ofsted inspection. SES refers to the school's socio-economic status.

	Infant (3–7 years)	Junior (7–11 years)	Primary (3–11 years)	Secondary (11–16/18 years)
High OI (1–2) High SES	P1 P2	P5	P3 P10	S1 S2 S6 S10
High OI (1–2) Ave SES	P11	P8	P14	
High OI (1–2) Low SES				S3 S8
Low OI (3–) High SES	P7		P4 P9	
Low OI (3–) Ave SES				S4 S7
Low OI (3–) Low SES		P13	P6 P12 P15	S5 S9

### 6.2 Background information on the schools where the chairs and headteachers were interviewed

#### Primary schools

##### P1

This infant school, which caters for approximately 240 children ranging from 4 to 7 years of age, is located in a shire county in the south east of England. The school is similar in size to most schools and is oversubscribed. Most pupils are of White British heritage and very few speak English as an additional language. There is a smaller percentage of pupils with statements of educational need than found in most schools. The school had an interim Ofsted inspection in 2010 and was graded as outstanding.

##### P2

Situated in the south east of England, this school for children aged 3–9 is smaller than most first schools. It mostly serves a village community, although a growing number of pupils come from surrounding villages and towns. About half the pupils are of White British heritage, with an increasing



number from a wide range of minority ethnic groups. Currently, a few pupils are at an early stage of learning English, and the number of pupils who speak English as an additional language is increasing each year – it is currently almost double the national average. The number of pupils identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is half the national average, as is the number known to be eligible for free school meals.

### **P3**

P3, a school located in the south east of England, is a large primary school (418 on roll) with an age range of 4–11 years. The vast majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils with particular learning difficulties, mostly related to weaknesses in numeracy and literacy, is below average, but increasing. There is a very small proportion of pupils with disabilities. The school makes provision for a substantial number of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The school is part of a large local schools confederation.

### **P4**

The school, a 4–11 junior and infants school, is almost twice the size of the average primary school. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible to receive free school meals is low. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is below average, as is the number for whom English is an additional language. The school has a below-average number of pupils identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school has achieved Healthy Schools Status.

### **P5**

This primary school is of average size and draws pupils from the outskirts of a large town and the surrounding villages. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is low. The great majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds and virtually all speak English as their first language. A small number of pupils have Asian and Caribbean backgrounds. No pupil is at an early stage of learning English. The proportion of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities is average. Their difficulties are typically in the areas of speech, language and communication. The school has been awarded the Sports England Achievement award and has National Healthy Schools Status.

### **P6**

The school is slightly larger than most primary schools. Most pupils are of White British heritage and close to a quarter of all pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The school has a high proportion of pupils from army and air force service families. Owing to military movements and other housing needs, there is a considerable amount of inward and outward movement as pupils join and leave the school throughout the school year. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average as is the proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals. There is a children's centre on the site managed by the school.

### **P7**

Situated in a large shire county in the East Midlands, this infant (4–7) school is smaller than the average-sized primary school. Most of the pupils are White British, with the remainder coming from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds. A few pupils speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average. Most of these have moderate learning or speech and language difficulties. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is below the national average. Children join the Early Years Foundation Stage in either September or January. The school has recently gained a number of awards, including the Activemark award.



### **P8**

For a 7–11 junior school, P8 is smaller than average. The school is located in central England and following a drop in numbers the roll has begun to rise again. Attainment on entry varies but is broadly average. Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds including a substantial number from community housing. More than usual come from minority ethnic groups and have English as an additional language. A few pupils are at an early stage of learning English. The proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities is broadly average. The school has achieved the Artsmark and Eco Schools awards.

### **P9**

This 3–11 school is twice the size of an average primary school and is situated in the north west of England. Its pupils come from a wide catchment area with a stable population. The large majority of pupils are White British, with the others belonging to a range of minority ethnic groups. Few pupils speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils that are known to be eligible for free school meals or that have special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average. The school holds the local authority's Healthy School status and has been awarded the Eco School Green Flag. It has achieved the Financial Management in Schools standard.

### **P10**

P10 is a school located in the north east of England catering for pupils aged 4–11. It is similar in size to most primary schools. It serves an area of average social and economic characteristics. Pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is below average, as is the percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Very few pupils join or leave the school at times other than the start or end of an academic year.

### **P11**

A small Church of England infant school situated in the south east of the country, the school has an extensive range of childcare provision. In addition, there is a children's centre. The school leads and manages a number of projects for the local foundation of ten schools. Almost all of the pupils are White British heritage and there are none at an early stage of learning English. About a third of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities – twice the national average. Most of the pupils have moderate learning or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The school has gained the following awards: Investors in People, Healthy Schools, Sports Activemark and the Nurture Quality Mark.

### **P12**

With over 450 pupils on roll, the school is much bigger than the average primary school. It is situated in an area of extensive regeneration in a London borough. The proportion of pupils (spanning a 3–11 age range) known to be eligible for free school meals is larger than the national average. Over 75% of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds, predominantly of West African heritage. Over a quarter speak English as an additional language, and over 10% are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is higher than in most other schools. These pupils have a range of needs including profound physical disabilities and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The school runs a breakfast club on site and links with an after-school club elsewhere. It has gained Healthy Schools Status and the Sportsmark award.

### **P13**

P13 is a 7–11 junior school situated in the south of England and is smaller than the average-sized primary school, with the vast majority of pupils of White British heritage. A small but growing proportion of pupils come from minority ethnic heritages. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is much higher than average, as is the proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school has specialised provision for pupils who have autistic spectrum disorders, so the proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs is well above average. A higher-than-average percentage of pupils enters and leaves the school between Years 3 and 6. The school was federated with the neighbouring infant school three years ago. Among its awards, the school has National Healthy Schools Status and Artsmark.

### **P14**

This 4–11 primary school located in a town in the south east of England is larger than most of its type and draws pupils from a range of backgrounds. The proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals is smaller than average. The number of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is above the national average but, of these pupils, fewer require help with learning English than might be expected. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with a statement of special education needs is below average. In recent years, the school has experienced an increase in the number of children with learning needs and those requiring support with learning English. The number of pupils who join the school other than at the usual times of entry has also increased. The school holds the Healthy Schools award.

### **P15**

With almost 300 pupils on roll, this 4–11 primary school is slightly larger than most schools of its kind. Whilst the majority of pupils come from White British backgrounds, the proportion of pupils who come from minority ethnic groups is above average. Almost 12% come from Traveller families – a figure which is well above average. The number of pupils identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is about average. A higher than average proportion of pupils start and leave the school at different times of the year.

## **Secondary schools**

### **S1**

S1 is located in the south east of the country. The school is heavily oversubscribed and currently there are 1,950 students on roll, with around 450 in the sixth form. It serves an area that is more advantaged than most and pupils enter the school with attainment that is above average. The school has a unit for visually impaired pupils most of whom are taught in mainstream classes. It is a specialist school for the visual arts. Since 2000, the school has been a training school for trainee teachers and is an accredited provider for the Graduate Teacher Programme. It also enjoys International School status and has strong links with many other countries.

### **S2**

The school (11–18) has just over 1,000 pupils on roll and is a popular and oversubscribed non-selective school in an area served by grammar schools. It has a large catchment area which has a more diverse social and ethnic population than is found in its vicinity. It has two special units. One supports learners with a hearing impairment and the other serves those with a physical disability. The school has achieved the Artsmark Gold, the Sportsmark and the Investors in People awards.



### S3

Situated in the south west of the country, this 9–13 middle school is smaller than the average-sized secondary school. It is situated close to the centre of a town, serving a mixed rural and coastal community. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and who speak English as an additional language is very small. The percentage of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is broadly average, but the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is low. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. The school has achieved Healthy Schools Status and has been awarded Sportsmark.

### S4

With an age range of 11–18 and a pupil population of over 1,000 (over 200 in the sixth form), this mixed secondary school is located in central England. An Ofsted inspection in early 2011 found that the school no longer required special measures and reported that the school had made a great deal of improvement in leadership and management. It is a larger than average school with the majority of students having White British backgrounds. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is rising. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is in line with that nationally. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below average. The school is a specialist media arts college and holds Artsmark Gold, Sportsmark, Healthy Schools and Eco Schools Silver awards, as well as the International Award.

### S5

This Church of England (Voluntary Aided) school is a smaller than average 11–18 school that admits most of its students from a town in the south east of England, and operates a selective secondary system. The majority of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The largest group is of Asian British heritage, representing 27% of the school roll. Approximately 40% of students are of White British heritage. The school has an above average proportion of students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds. Approximately one third of students speak English as an additional language, with some at the early stages of English language acquisition. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is broadly average. The majority of these students have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, though there are some students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and some with moderate learning difficulties. The school has been designated a specialist college in arts, media and English and has been awarded Healthy Schools Status.

### S6

This 11–18 school, situated in the south east of England, is a large secondary school with almost two thousand pupils. There are over 400 pupils in the sixth form. The school's catchment area has wide variations in measures of social advantage. Most of its students are from a White British background but there are some students from a range of minority ethnic groups. A small number of these speak English as an additional language. The school is a well-established specialist technology college and has also been awarded a second specialism in applied learning. It holds the International School and Investors in Careers awards. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is near the national average, but relatively few have a statement of special educational needs.

### **S7**

Located in a shire county in the south east, the school is smaller than the average-sized secondary school. Most of its students are White British and the proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is slightly above the national average. A higher than average proportion of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities, the majority with emotional or behavioural needs. An above average number have a statement of special educational needs. A very small but growing minority of students speak English as an additional language. The school has held specialist status in technology since 2000 and achieved trust status in 2010. It is an Investors in People organisation, and has an International School award as well as National Healthy Schools Status.

### **S8**

An 11–16 secondary school situated in the south of England, this Specialist Sports College is larger than average, with about 1,200 pupils on roll. There is a small but increasing proportion of students from minority ethnic families. The school has been awarded National Healthy Schools Status and Sportsmark.

### **S9**

This is a below average sized 11–16 secondary school situated in the north east of England, with a very high proportion of students eligible for free school meals. The percentage of students from minority ethnic groups is well below average, as is the percentage of students who speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average. The school has a specialist status as a technology college and has gained a range of awards including anti-bullying and eco-school awards.

### **S10**

A much larger secondary school than average, this school has been recognised as a High Performing Specialist School and has achieved specialist status in science in addition to its status as a specialist sports college. A very large majority of students are of White British heritage, with 12% from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. A small number of students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is much lower than average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is broadly average.



**For more information on the Chair of Governors Research Project, contact:**

Professor Chris James  
Department of Education  
University of Bath  
Bath, UK  
BA2 7AY

Tel: +44 (0)1225 383280  
Email: C.James@bath.ac.uk



CfBT Education Trust  
60 Queens Road  
Reading  
Berkshire  
RG1 4BS  
+44 (0)118 902 1000  
[www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com)