



Department
for Education

National Leaders of Governance (NLG) advisory group

Recommendations on NLG reform

September 2020

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Executive summary

1. In January 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) announced in its teacher recruitment and retention strategy that it would carry out a review of system leadership. Following a review by officials, ministers concluded that there was a need to reform and strengthen the structure of system leadership to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of teaching schools, National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and National Leaders of Governance (NLGs).
2. In February 2020, DfE Ministers invited school governance sector leaders, and experienced governors and school leaders to form an external advisory group, which was commissioned to make recommendations for improvements to the current NLG programme. The external advisory group met five times, between March and May 2020. The group's membership comprised:

Name	Organisation
Gaenor Bagley	The Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT)
Emma Balchin	St Bartholomew's Church of England Primary School
Leora Cruddas	Confederation of School Trusts (CST)
Richard Gill	Teaching Schools Council
Emma Knights	National Governance Association (NGA)
Ken Lloyd	Felpham Community College
Kirsten Robinson	The Cherwell School

3. This report presents the advisory group's recommendations for a reformed NLG programme.

Findings of the advisory group

4. The group considered that access to a highly effective cadre of experts in governance was of significant value, particularly for those governing in schools and trusts facing challenges. Since the current NLG programme was launched in 2012, there have been significant changes in the school system and the demands on governors and trustees. The current NLG programme needs reform so that it is well placed to support schools and trusts to improve governance in our current and future school system.
5. In considering reforms, we looked at the scope and role of the NLG, the eligibility and designation process, training requirements and how NLGs should be deployed. We set out within this report our recommendations, including on the timings of the

implementation of reforms. These recommendations should be considered by the department and inform the design and delivery of the future NLG programme.

Recommendation overview

- **The role of NLGs** should be to deliver support to improve organisational governance, with a strong focus on schools and trusts where governance is an identified weakness.
- **Payment** – NLGs should be paid to deliver governance improvement support on behalf of the DfE, removing the expectation that NLGs act on a voluntary basis.
- **Eligibility** – eligibility should be extended to include experienced clerks and governance professionals with strong track records as well as chairs with experience of leading improvement, whose current governance role may not be in a school or trust with strong performance.
- **NLG Standards** – there should be new NLG standards, which set clear expectations of NLGs and define the expertise required. The standards should include i) professional credibility, ii) problem solving and influencing and iii) capacity building and knowledge transfer.
- **Selection** – a robust, two-stage process should be developed and implemented, which enables rigorous assessment against the new NLGs standards and enables testing of expertise in specific governance sectors.
- **Training** – there should be a high-quality training and development programme, in which all NLGs are expected to participate, which will extend the knowledge and skills of NLGs.
- **Deployment** – NLGs should be deployed to improve governance in schools and trusts where they have relevant expertise. Specifically, NLGs should only be deployed at academy trust board level if they have proven expertise in trust governance.
- **Accountability** – designations should last for a period of three years, at which point there should be a full review of designation. During the designation period, there should be appropriate quality assurance of NLG activity.

Recommendations

NLG Role

6. Over time, the role of an NLG has expanded. The original scope of an NLG was to provide coaching and mentoring support to less experienced chairs of governing boards, and those experiencing specific challenges. Over time, NLGs role has expanded to include chairing IEBs and undertaking external reviews of governance. From academic year (AY) 18/19, NLGs have been expected to play a role in delivering the DfE's funded school improvement offer where governance has been identified as a key improvement area.
7. Effective governance is key to sustained school improvement and we therefore recommend that, in future, NLGs provide expert support to schools and trusts where there is an identified weakness in organisational governance. The role of NLGs should be to review the quality of governance across the trust or standalone school, diagnose the underlying problems, and provide ongoing support to improve governance. NLGs would support schools and trusts to build capacity at all levels of governance, for trusts, this would include at academy level, often called local governing bodies. To identify schools and trusts eligible for funded access to NLG support, the DfE should consider educational and financial performance measures, as well as instances where there is a serious breakdown in the way the school or trust is governed, or where the safety of pupils or staff at the school or trust is threatened.
8. The group also recognise that where an Interim Executive Board (IEB) is required, significant expertise and experience in improving governance is required. We therefore recommend that NLGs should be amongst those considered to chair Interim Executive Boards (IEBs).

Payment

9. Currently, NLGs provide mentoring and other support on a voluntary basis. In future, NLGs should be expected to support schools/trusts with significant need, requiring high levels of expertise. In recognition of this, the group recommend that NLGs are paid to deliver support to improve governance.

Eligibility

10. The group has reviewed the existing designation criteria and we recommend substantial changes to ensure that experienced and skilled educational governance leaders and professionals, including clerks, are no longer excluded. The criteria should be extended so that those with a strong track record of improvement, those who chair boards of multi-academy trusts and federations, as well as clerks and governance professionals are eligible.

11. The group recommends additional changes to the eligibility criteria to ensure a closer alignment between the new role of NLG and the experience they need to possess. Breadth of knowledge and experience will be critical, and therefore we recommend that all NLGs have experience of governance of more than one organisation, at least one of which must be a school or trust.
12. The group recognise the invaluable experience that comes from leading governance improvement in schools or trusts where governance is not yet good. Therefore, the group recommends that those with an established strong track record, who then chose to govern in schools and trusts which most need their support, will not be prohibited from becoming or remaining an NLG.
13. We have recommended the following eligibility criteria.

All NLGs should have:

- a minimum 5 years' school/trust board governance experience, including 3 years' experience as chair **or** 5 years' experience as governance professional/clerk;
- a current governance or clerking/governance professional role, unless exceptional circumstances; and
- experience (as trustee, governor or clerk) in at least two unrelated settings. One must be an academy trust board or a school governing board; one or more may be a non-education setting.

Plus, one of the following:

- Currently a chair, or lead trustee/governor in a school or trust with strong performance and financial data;
- Demonstrate an accountable track record in improving governance in a school or trust, resulting in improved overall performance and/or financial position; and
- Track record in providing effective professional services that have stimulated improvement to governance.

An exemption to the requirement to have experience as a chair may be made for trustees or governors with strong leadership experience, for example vice chairs, or chairs of local governing boards, who can demonstrate personal impact in an educational governance role and expertise in the three core functions of governance.

Standards

14. We recommend that the Department introduce standards for NLGs that set out the required expertise to deliver the reformed role. The NLG standards should be aligned to the NLE standards (2020) to encourage consistency in the approach to system

leadership whilst being specifically relevant to school and trust governance and the role of NLGs.

15. The standards are intended to underpin selection, designation, training, and assurance of the reformed NLG role. A single set of standards should apply to both maintained and academy trust sectors.

16. The following standards should be applied:

Standard 1: Professional credibility:

- NLGs demonstrate **secure knowledge** of governance practice required to deliver the three core functions of governance (clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction, holding executive leaders to account for educational performance and overseeing the financial performance of the organisation) to a consistently high standard. The key features of effective governance are laid out in the Governance Handbook. The Academies Financial Handbook lays out additional guidance for academy trusts.
- NLGs demonstrate a **strong track record** of effective governance and leadership of governance in educational organisations, including the ability to exercise strategic expertise and judgement.
- NLGs have a comprehensive and up-to-date **knowledge of sources of support** and guidance available to support improvement of governance, and proactively update their own expertise regularly.

Standard 2: Problem solving and influencing for improvement:

- NLGs **apply their knowledge of governance** practice to identify and analyse the complex causes of weak governance and clearly articulate their findings.
- NLGs **design appropriately targeted plans for governance improvement**, which are based on reliable diagnosis and align with school/trust improvement priorities. Plans will be realistic, appropriately sequenced, suited to context, identify risks and barriers, optimise existing capacity and make effective use of wider sources of support.
- NLGs **evaluate progress** in implementing governance improvement plans, identify impact and show the necessary honesty and courage to reshape them where needed.
- NLGs can demonstrate **strong interpersonal skills**, to build positive relationships with Chairs and trustees in order to influence their practice. They need to challenge constructively, delivering hard messages at times and demonstrate evidence of the willingness to make difficult decisions when

required, as well as empowering those responsible for governance and imparting a sense of ownership.

Standard 3: Capacity building and knowledge transfer to ensure sustainability:

- NLGs strengthen **robust strategic thinking** of those involved in governance, leading to an ambitious vision, with a strong and positive culture, which shapes the school's/trust's provision.
- NLGs strengthen **organisational governance** by ensuring that governance, school, and executive leaders, are able to identify and focus on improving targeted areas.
- NLGs strengthen **governance development** by applying their expertise to enable those involved in governance to shape the well-planned, coherent, and evidence informed building of capacity and skills, as referenced in the Competency Framework for Governance.

Selection and designation process

17. We recommend a two-stage selection, assessment and designation process:

- Stage 1: Initial sift against eligibility criteria, including referees from two different governance settings.
- Stage 2: Assessment against standards, including an interview.

18. The designation process must be robust in order to identify high calibre individuals with the expertise required to deliver the reformed NLG role. We recommend that the process assesses the knowledge and skills of applicants, using the new NLG standards as a basis for developing detailed requirements. Our recommendation is that knowledge of specific governance sectors, for example, governance in multi-academy trusts, is assessed, depending on the experience of the applicant.

Post-designation training

19. The group recommend initial training and ongoing mandatory professional development to ensure that NLGs are kept up to date with changes to the school system including the school improvement offer. The training should provide a high-quality learning experience that recognises and builds on the expertise of NLGs.

20. The training should:

- a. Set expectations for ways of working, so that there is a consistent approach to school improvement support.
- b. Provide updates on new evidence about effective governance and school improvement.
- c. Develop interpersonal and delivery skills, for example, influencing.
- d. Identify and fill knowledge gaps.

Deployment

21. The knowledge and experience required to successfully improve organisational governance in a trust is different to that required in a maintained school. Therefore, the group recommends that NLGs are only deployed in academy trusts where they have proven expertise, validated through the selection and designation process. Likewise, NLGs would need experience in maintained school governance to be deployed in a maintained school.

22. Furthermore, the group recommend that DfE should be aware of the benefits of matching knowledge, experience and skills of the NLG to the specific requirements and challenges of the school or trust needing support and build this expectation into the delivery model.

Accountability and review of designation

23. It will be important to have a robust quality assurance process to ensure that schools and trusts receive high quality support, which can lead to improvements in governance. Quality assurance should be proportionate, recognise the calibre of individuals appointed, but also give confidence to those who commission and receive NLG support.

24. Therefore, the group recommend that formal Reviews of Designation should occur every three years. NLG performance should be judged over the three-year period, rather than on individual deployments.

25. In addition, there should be an expectation that there is regular, light-touch, quality assurance of NLG delivery to inform annual performance or contract management.

26. NLG performance should be assessed based on a combination of:

- Self-assessment
- Feedback from supported school / trust & commissioners of support e.g. local authorities, dioceses, regional schools commissioners
- Objective evidence of improvement of quality of governance, e.g. Ofsted, ESFA,
- Review of written outputs, for example reports, recommendations, action plans

Transitional arrangements

27. To provide sufficient time to implement the reforms, we recommend that the first cadre of NLGs designated under the reformed requirements are in place from September 2021. During this transitional period, until end of AY20/21, the Department should continue to support existing NLGs to provide their valued mentoring support to chairs of governors and trustees, including through the School Improvement offer.
28. We believe that for many chairs, access to a mentor can be an invaluable support. As this aspect will no longer be a primary role for NLGs, we recommend that the DfE consider ways it could support chair mentoring schemes outside the NLG role.
29. The group recognises the important, voluntary work that all governors and trustees undertake and their critical role in our education system. In particular the group recognises the voluntary commitment and time, in addition to their substantive governance roles, many NLGs have given over the past eight years and would like to thank them for sharing their experiences for the benefit of their peers.



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