

The Changing Role of the Chair

A research project for AGBIS
March 2026

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FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIR AND CEO OF AGBIS

Looking at the current landscape of independent education in the UK, it is clear that the role of the Chair is both crucial and increasingly complex. Schools today face intensified financial pressures, regulatory change, demographic shifts and greater public scrutiny. This report, commissioned by AGBIS from the Centre for Charity Effectiveness and authored by Leila Baker and Véronique Jochum, offers timely analysis of these challenges and the opportunities they present.

Adaptability and innovation have long been hallmarks of our sector, but today's Chairs must also demonstrate commercial acumen and strategic vision. This report underlines the importance of strategic leadership and effective governance, highlighting the need for accessible, flexible support tailored to Chairs' evolving needs.

Particularly striking in this report is the observation that intentional transformation is vital not only for individual schools, but the sector as a whole. AGBIS is committed to championing this change - providing tools, training, professional support and opportunities for shared learning, so Chairs are equipped to make informed decisions and uphold the essential values of independent education.

We are grateful to all contributors and the authors for their thoughtful research. We hope this report inspires reflection, dialogue, and positive action, empowering Chairs to lead confidently through times of great challenge and rapid change.

Charlotte Marten
Chair of AGBIS

Richard Harman
CEO, AGBIS

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OVERVIEW AND KEY FINDINGS

Independent schools are navigating unprecedented pressures - financial, structural and cultural - prompting AGBIS to commission new research into how the role of the Chair is evolving and what support Chairs need. This work builds on previous studies, including *The Future Charity Chair*, and research into the changing roles of Heads and Bursars.

The research gathered insights from 54 Chairs through six online group discussions, 149 responses to the 2025 AGBIS Members Survey, and interviews with other independent schools' associations. A sounding board helped refine the research questions; sense-check the findings; and think about implications.

Key Challenges and Opportunities

Financial pressures intensify

Rising inflation, increased pension and NI contributions, VAT on fees and loss of rates relief have made financial sustainability the foremost concern for Chairs. Higher fees, falling birth rates and greater public scrutiny are reshaping expectations and demand.

A changing sector landscape

Competitive pressures are driving more school mergers, acquisitions and closures. Larger groups pursue growth strategies, while smaller schools evaluate the risks and opportunities of merging.

Blurring boundaries in leadership

Chairs, Heads and Bursars are operating in increasingly interconnected roles as rapid change demands quicker decision making. Those in leadership and governance positions are often pulled in two directions - education and business, mission and sustainability.

Governance structures under strain

Many traditional governance models are viewed as outdated or too slow. Schools are exploring smaller boards, streamlined committees and hybrid executive/non executive structures to increase agility.

Pipeline of future Chairs at risk

Complexity, workload, voluntary status and daytime availability needs deter potential Chairs. Diversity concerns and differing views on remuneration create ongoing challenges.

¹RS Academics (2023) *The new art of headship 2023: A study of the changing nature of headship in UK independent schools*; RS Academics (2025) *The Art of the Bursar: An in-depth exploration of how the Bursar's role is changing in UK independent schools and the implications for the sector*.

The Evolving Role of the Chair

Providing Strategic Leadership for Change

Chairs play a pivotal role in shaping commercial strategy, ensuring decisions reflect mission and values and communicating long term vision to stakeholders including parents, staff and regulators.

Supporting and Challenging the Executive Team

Described as a “critical friend,” the Chair provides both support and constructive challenge. Chairs increasingly help build resilience, clarify governance boundaries and support the executive team, especially Heads who are facing rising pressures.

Building Dynamic and Agile Governance

From managing board culture to redesigning structures, Chairs lead efforts to create governance that is more responsive, informed and strategically focused.

What Chairs Need to Lead Effectively

- A strong, skilled team: Head, Bursar, Clerk/governance professional, a Vice Chair and engaged governors.
- Delegation and clear accountability structures.
- Strong relationship management, business acumen and strategic thinking skills.
- Confidence leading through change and uncertainty.
- Access to concise, flexible support
 - suitable for new and established Chairs:
 - practical tools and templates
 - training and guidance (finance, governance models, structural change)
 - networking with other Chairs
 - tailored strategic advice and sector insight

Three Key Implications

- Intentional transformation is necessary for independent schools to adapt and for the role of Chair to remain viable.
- Chairs are central to driving transformation. They articulate the why, align decisions with values and bring their communities with them.
- For transformation in independent schools to be successful, there needs to be strong, unified support from their membership associations.

INTRODUCTION

This report looks at the challenges facing Chairs of independent schools, and the support they may require. It considers how the role of Chair is evolving and likely to change as well as skills and attributes Chairs will need in the future to provide leadership, oversight and stewardship, and to strengthen the sustainability of independent schools. The report is aimed at current and potential future Chairs, as well as the associations that support them.

In 2024, the authors carried out research for the Centre for Charity Effectiveness (CCE) at Bayes Business School, The Future Charity Chair, a forward-looking research project on the issues facing charity Chairs in the next decade and beyond. The research for AGBIS builds on and benefits from this earlier research while also including AGBIS members that are not registered charities.

Background

Multiple pressures affecting the independent schools' sector prompted AGBIS to initiate research exploring the range of issues faced by Chairs and how AGBIS can assist. Chairs were having to consider financial sustainability and the impact of the removal of the VAT exemption for independent school fees and the 80% business rates relief currently available to independent schools. They were also needing to address structural changes to their school offer or governance, shifts in parents' expectations, declining birth rate leading to fewer pupils on the roll coming through as well as an increasingly complex system of regulatory compliance and scrutiny.

Recent reports by RS Academics have assessed the future role of Heads and Bursars of independent schools. It is intended that this research will sit alongside those reports and contribute to wider discussions about how these roles fit together in the leadership and management of independent schools.

² RS Academics (2023) The new art of headship 2023: A study of the changing nature of headship in UK independent schools; RS Academics (2025) The Art of the Bursar: An in-depth exploration of how the Bursar's role is changing in UK independent schools and the implications for the sector.

About the research

The research project explored with AGBIS and its members three main research questions:

- What are the challenges and opportunities facing the Chair?
- What is the role of Chair in navigating those challenges and opportunities?
- What would help the chair be the leader of change in light of those challenges and opportunities?

This largely qualitative research project gathered the views and experiences of 54 Chairs through six online group discussions. They included Chairs in for profit and international schools as well as small, local schools, and large groups. Some were new in role while others had been Chair for several years. Carried out between June and December 2025, the research began with a short and focused review of recent literature and also draws on the responses from 149 Chairs to a limited number of relevant questions in the 2025 AGBIS Members Survey (see appendix) as well as a small number of interviews with other independent schools' associations. The project also benefited from having a sounding board to help refine the research questions; sense-check the findings; and think about the implications of the findings.

Use of terms

'Chair' is used to refer to all Chairs of independent schools. Where our findings relate to a specific type of school e.g. smaller schools, then we say so.

'Participant' is used to refer to those who took part in the research through group discussions or sounding board meetings. Where we are referring specifically to responses to the AGBIS Members' Survey, we use 'respondent'.

1 / WHAT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES WILL CHAIRS FACE NOW AND IN THE FUTURE?

Participants were asked to consider the current and future challenges and opportunities facing Chairs in independent schools. We firstly explore the main drivers of change they identified, then look at a number of dominant themes associated with those drivers and the challenges and opportunities they present.

The context in which independent schools operate is challenging and uncertain

Participants discussed going through an intense time of change which some perceived as a threat or crisis for the independent schools' sector. In recent years, schools have been under a great deal of pressure from rising costs due to inflation and higher employer contributions for schools remaining in the Teachers' Pension Scheme. 2025 was a particularly difficult year, with the increase in employer National Insurance Contributions, the introduction of VAT on school fees, and the loss of charitable business rates relief further exacerbating financial pressures. Many schools are passing on these additional costs to parents and have increased their fees. But, these higher fees, combined with falling birth rates, represent a potential risk to future demand. They raise concerns about affordability and have pushed schools to see how they can both continue to attract pupils and take into account changes in parents' circumstances and expectations.

Independent schools have also been subject to increased public and political scrutiny in relation to their charitable status and the extent to which they contribute to wider society, with growing expectations for greater inclusion, transparency and public benefit. They also operate under tighter scrutiny from bodies such as the Independent Schools Inspectorate and the Charity Commission. The impact of all these drivers of change is being felt very differently across the sector, largely because schools, ranging from small, single site schools to large groups, vary significantly in terms of size and resources.

Financial sustainability is the top priority for Chairs

In the AGBIS Members' Survey, respondents were asked to choose the five topics that had featured the most prominently in their board discussions over the last six months and the five topics that they thought would feature the most prominently in future discussions. The results indicate that financial sustainability (97%) was by far the most discussed topic over the last six months, followed by student wellbeing (64%), structural changes (57%), shifts in parents' expectations (52%), and regulatory compliance and scrutiny (49%). Looking ahead, financial sustainability (99%) and structural changes continue to be prominent, with little overall change. Artificial Intelligence (AI) shows the most marked increase (41% vs 24%), followed by partnerships with other schools (30% vs 24%) and relationships with the wider community (21% vs 15%).

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In the discussion groups, participants acknowledged the disruptive nature of AI and thought it had the potential to reshape education and would require new strategic responses. They highlighted that schools needed to prepare pupils for a world where AI played an increasingly important role.

The shape of schools and the sector is changing and will continue to change in the years ahead

Participants talked about growing competition among schools and the consolidation of the sector with closures, mergers and acquisitions becoming more common. They highlighted how some schools were choosing to come together to diversify their offer, cut overhead costs and improve their sustainability. They cited examples of prep schools joining a senior school or a school group to expand the age range of pupils. There seemed to be a general consensus that the number of school groups (with charitable status or run as for-profit organisations) would rise in the future. In the discussion group with small stand-alone schools, one participant shared that over the last two years, they had received more and more frequent calls from groups asking them whether they would be interested in joining them. The question of whether to merge or not had become more and more important. Another participant in the group wondered whether they needed to become more proactive about finding other schools to work in partnership with rather than waiting to be approached.

Across the discussion groups, some participants commented that an approach for a potential merger could be a genuine opportunity for collaboration, but others believed that, more often than not, it would lead to the school just being absorbed in a larger structure. They talked about the difficulty of finding partners to collaborate with in an increasingly

competitive market (especially at a local level) and also drew attention to some of the possible risks associated with mergers and acquisitions, including asset stripping and loss of control. The experience of larger schools and school groups has been markedly different, with mergers and acquisitions, partnerships and collaboration viewed as an integral part of their growth strategy. For some, this has involved the development of international activities, through collaboration with international partners, either in the UK or abroad.

“I can see that the way things are going is that more local cooperation is going to be absolutely crucial, with the problems that are now facing us.”

The pace of change is contributing to a blurring of the boundaries between operations and governance

Participants reflected on how the operating environment of schools was evolving at a rapid pace and that many of the drivers of change required quick action and decision-making. In this context, the relationship between the Chair and the Head was seen as more critical than ever to the success of the school. They also talked about the importance of the relationship of the Chair with the Bursar and with the rest of the senior management team. Many found themselves more and more involved in operational details. They mentioned that it had definitely been the case during the Covid period, particularly in smaller schools, but they thought it was now being driven by increasingly complex commercial pressures and greater expectations of accountability. Several participants discussed contributing their business expertise and experience to fill an existing skills gap within the management team. Others talked about the current inspection regime implicitly encouraging Chairs to be more hands-on.

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“I’m very concerned about how hands on we are expected to be these days. I’m very concerned about how managerial we are expected to be these days”

This blurring of the boundaries between operations and governance highlighted how those in leadership and governance positions were often pulled in two directions - education and business, mission and sustainability. Overall, participants agreed that the primary purpose of an independent school is to educate, but it needs to operate as a business to stay viable. They commented on how important and challenging it was to get the balance right between the two, with some observing that the business dimension had become more prominent in recent years.

“We mustn’t lose sight of the fact that our job is to educate our children. And if you become too commercial about these things, you’ll often lose sight of that. But we do have to become commercial”

The effectiveness and suitability of existing governance structures is called into question

Participants identified as a key challenge the ability to respond effectively to internal and external pressures within the context of existing governance structures. They considered that in many schools, the governance structure was outdated, not fit for purpose and a barrier to effectiveness and change. They mentioned that some boards were far too big, committees too numerous and meetings too far apart to keep up with the issues at hand and make time-critical decisions. In some cases, this was linked to schools having unusual and complex governance structures, shaped by statutes and articles of association (sometimes dating back centuries) that restricted what governance looked like and who could sit on the board.

Most participants agreed there was a pressing need for transformation. Some gave examples of the changes they had been able to implement to become more agile. This included reducing the size of the board, increasing the frequency of meetings, having fewer committees but setting up working groups for a specific issue and/or bringing in specialised external advice when needed. More radical alternatives to traditional governance models were also discussed with interest, highlighting in particular practices in school groups, for-profit schools and international schools. In some of the examples given, executive and non-executive directors had been brought together on a single board, with the Head and the Bursar (or equivalent) sitting as full board members with voting rights. There was mention of schools having both a supervisory board and a management board, which meant that executive authority and responsibilities were shared among senior leaders rather than resting solely with the Head. As a result, governors could focus more on strategy and oversight, and less on operational matters. There was also reference to school groups operating with multiple layers of governance, at both central and local levels.

“If you approach this very different new environment, there’s an opportunity to look at doing governance very differently and to stand back from what you and the school think is its strategy - possibly because it has been the strategy for a long time and it’s been secure in it. I think taking a fresh look can be seen as an opportunity”

1 / The future pipeline of Chairs is at risk

Due to the growing pressures in the operating environment of schools, participants had seen the role of the Chair becoming more intense, skilled and time-consuming. They felt it was an increasingly demanding role that could be quite stressful at times because of the difficult decisions they had to make and the hands-on support they provided to Heads and Bursars. They were concerned that the complexity of the role and the time commitment it required deterred people from putting themselves forward for the role. They highlighted this was likely to be even more the case because the role was voluntary and often required daytime availability, which was problematic for those in full-time employment. While they saw the future pipeline of Chairs as a particularly important issue, they also viewed the recruitment of governors

more generally as challenging. Both raised questions about the diversity of boards and barriers to engagement. As in The Future Charity Chair project, there were mixed views on whether Chairs and/or governors should be remunerated. For some, remuneration was a way of getting the right mix of skills and backgrounds. However, others were more sceptical and believed that those involved as volunteers would have a deeper commitment to the school. Participants found having a connection with the school, either as an alum or a parent, could motivate people to get involved, but it wasn't considered enough if they didn't have the skills that the board needed.

“It's a very, very challenging business environment. My greatest fear is that nobody's going to want to do it in the future”



2 / WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CHAIR IN NAVIGATING THOSE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Participants examined the role of the Chair in mitigating the challenges and maximising the opportunities they had discussed. The discussion illustrated how multi-faceted the role of the Chair was. Three themes stood out: providing strategic leadership for change; supporting and challenging the executive team; and building effective, dynamic and agile governance.

Providing strategic leadership for change

Participants considered that the role of the Chair had expanded in response to an ever-changing environment. Overseeing and facilitating the processes of governance was still viewed as a major component of the role as was ensuring their school was compliant with domestic (and overseas if relevant) laws and regulation, but they highlighted how important the involvement in more strategic activities had become. Chairs were seen as having a pivotal role in shaping the commercial strategy of schools and in encouraging strategic thinking and decision-making. In several discussion groups, participants thought that the commercial strategy sat increasingly with the Chair, and this was especially the case in schools where the Head had limited or no business background. Some also highlighted that providing strategic leadership meant having an active role in sustaining and strengthening the purpose of the school. As stewards of the school's

longevity and reputation, Chairs needed to ensure that strategic decisions were aligned with its mission and values, and that potential changes offered a clear strategic fit. The role of the Chair was to establish whether decisions were being made for the right reasons and not simply in reaction to growing commercial pressures.

Strategic leadership also involved engaging with stakeholders. Chairs were seen as having a key role in advocating for the school's long-term vision and explaining strategic decisions to parents, staff, donors, regulators and external partners. This outward-looking role of the Chair, as an ambassador for the school, was viewed as essential to getting buy-in, building trust and raising funds that all contribute to the successful implementation of a strategy.

"It's incumbent on us as Chairs, to ensure that strategy is kept absolutely foremost. And that's what the Governing Body get behind, and ensure we debate and understand and direct - at the end of the day, that's our job"

Supporting and challenging the executive team

In several of the discussion groups, the Chair was described as being a critical friend to the executive team, and particularly to the Head. Participants considered the role of the Chair as having to balance support and challenge, but the two were seen as going hand in hand. It was also about the Chair constructively challenging the executive team, identifying potential

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risks and asking difficult questions, but without undermining the team. Maintaining a visible presence and building a relationship based on trust were essential to members of the executive team feeling that they could have open conversations and be supported.

“Increasingly, it’s about managing the welfare of the Head in a way that I kind of never really worried about before”

In the current context of increasing complexity and uncertainty, Chairs were often involved in providing business and/or technical support to address existing gaps, but providing emotional support was considered important too. They acknowledged that the executive team (especially the Head) was under a lot of pressure, and cited staff wellbeing as a growing concern. Participants spoke about the role of the Chair in addressing this issue and strengthening the resilience of the executive team with the introduction of some practical steps such as maintaining regular contact and creating space for them to reflect and raise issues. However, thinking of the future, they also spoke of the need to invest in recruitment and professional development so that the executive team had the right skills and experience to respond effectively to pressures. The recruitment of the Head was identified as one of the Chair’s most critical responsibilities given its long-term impact on the school. It was suggested by some participants that the executive team as a whole needed to be considered to ensure there wasn’t an over-reliance on the Head and to help reduce workloads. Participants highlighted that a shared understanding of the boundaries between operations and governance would also help and viewed it to be the role of the Chair to clarify and manage those boundaries.

Building effective, dynamic and agile governance

Clear boundaries between operations and governance were considered essential not only for the executive team but also for the board itself, so that it could focus on strategy and oversight. Beyond facilitating effective board meetings and decision-making, participants saw the role of the Chair as making governance work in practice by managing board dynamics and culture, and ensuring there was the right mix of skills and experience on the board to respond to the multiple needs of the school. Some participants had introduced an annual one-to-one with all governors and felt it had helped with their understanding of the role of governor and a greater focus on strategy. It had also helped with sustaining their engagement. Recruitment and succession planning were seen as one of the Chair’s core responsibilities because it was a way of building future capacity. This could also be achieved through reviewing and improving the way governance was structured.

As seen in Part 1, many participants felt current governance arrangements were no longer fit for purpose and needed to change. While they pointed out that the scope for change might be limited by the school’s governing document and compliance with domestic and international laws and regulation, there was often some flexibility for Chairs to reshape how governance operated. For example, some participants had been able to change the frequency of meetings and the number of committees. The role of the Chair was to lead on the redesign of governance and explore what was feasible, in order to increase the board’s capacity to act with greater agility and effectiveness, and keep pace with a rapidly-evolving environment. Boards should be able to focus on strategy and resist being drawn into day-to-day operations, but they needed access to timely and reliable

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data on operations to oversee how the strategy was being implemented and check progress. Several participants noted the Chair's role in ensuring the executive team had the right systems in place to provide the information the board needed to make the best decisions.

"I think that ability to quickly change direction, to be able to gather a group of governors together, if necessary, and not just wait until the next committee meeting, has been really important"

"One of the observations to make is the need to be much more agile in the way that we operate; things are changing all the time and we need to be able to react to those, which perhaps we haven't done so quickly in the past"



3 / WHAT WOULD HELP THE CHAIR IN THEIR ROLE GOING FORWARD?

The researchers discussed with participants what would help them in their role given the trends and issues they identified. This was broken down into: building a team around the Chair, what kinds of skills and attributes will be required of Chairs; and what support will they need.

Building a team around the Chair

Participants were asked about the kinds of support Chairs would need in the future. As in the Future Charity Chair project, most Chairs said that some support would come from building a skilled and confident team around them – the executive team, a skilled governance professional (often the clerk) and the board of governors. For this to be effective, Chairs needed to have good self-awareness of the skills they possess as well as any gaps; and to be willing to delegate to the team around them.

The support of a Vice Chair or deputy (where schools have them) was seen as invaluable for their capacity and their complementary skills and experience. Heads of committees were also seen as part of building a strong team around the Chair. Having an independent “stand alone” clerk had helped schools to manage changes and resolve tensions around their governance. Many schools – particularly smaller schools – do not have someone in this role and the responsibility sits with the Bursar. There were mixed views about this: on the one hand, the Bursar lacked independence from the Head and Chair, but on the other hand, they had an

excellent overview of the school. One of the schools that took part in the discussion groups had recently retained an independent clerking service through the County Council.

“We also have a really top-class Clerk to the Governors who provides a sort of measure of independence, which I think is quite important as well”

While building a team around the Chair was an effective way to strengthen the school’s leadership and governance, it was also essential that the Chair sees themselves as being in a collaboration with the Head and Bursar and the lines of accountability are clear.

“And last year, there were real conflicts of interest with the person that was the nominated Clerk reporting both to me as the Chair and to the Head”

What kinds of skills and attributes will be required of Chairs

Participants were asked what skills and attributes they thought future Chairs will need. They felt that some skills and attributes would become even more important because of the challenges they face while others were likely to remain broadly the same.

Below are the skills they emphasised followed by the attributes arranged to show how they relate to the role of the Chair as discussed in Part 2. These are not intended as comprehensive checklists but a synthesis of the findings from this research.

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Skills

As in the Future Charity Chair project, **relationships and relationship management skills** were very important. In the AGBIS Members’ Survey, respondents were asked about the skills and knowledge that will be required of Chairs in the future. The results indicate that the ability to develop and manage relationships with stakeholders (70%) was the most important as well as relationship management skills that get the best out of all board members (59%). **Business and management skills** were important (60%) with particular emphasis on commercial skills and acumen as well as skills in foresight and how to think about the future (55%); and knowledge and understanding of governance and regulation compliance (42%). In the discussion groups, there was explicit emphasis (more than in the

Future Charity Chair findings) on the **ability to delegate and to trust other governors to deliver** and this may be reflective of the need to restructure boards in the ways discussed in Part 1. Chairs said it takes confidence to delegate but that is essential. They talked about the value of some form of distributive leadership when trying to move a school forward and discussed the importance of resisting the temptation to take on too much themselves and not make space for others to take on responsibilities. The visual below summarises the main skills and knowledge requirements that Chairs identified.

Figure 1: Leadership skills and knowledge of the future Chair

Skills and knowledge requirements are arranged under the three broad roles of the future Chair as set out in Part 2.

Providing strategic leadership for change	Supporting and challenging the executive team	Building effective, dynamic and agile governance
<p>Strong commercial, business and finance knowledge and skills</p> <p>Ability to problem-solve, analyse and manage change, crisis and risk</p> <p>Ability to develop and manage relationships and partnerships</p>	<p>Mentoring and coaching skills to support and develop the team</p> <p>Knowledge: mergers and acquisitions literacy, fundraising and technology</p> <p>Communication skills and relationship management</p>	<p>Good practical skills and knowledge of governance basics including chairing meetings, processes</p> <p>Ability to delegate effectively</p> <p>Relationship management skills that get the best out of all the skills and experience around the board table</p>

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Attributes

As in the Future Charity Chair, a wide range of leadership attributes were discussed and felt to be important. In the AGBIS Members' Survey, a high number of respondents stressed the importance of the Chair showing genuine interest and commitment to the school (84%). Also significant were that the Chair is a strategic thinker and future oriented (65%); shows integrity through living the values of the school in the way they lead (64%); and inspires trust in others within and beyond the school (62%).

In the discussion groups Chairs also highlighted being comfortable with change and uncertainty as an important attribute; this was less prominent in the Future Charity Chair. It enabled them to lead with confidence and a sense of optimism despite the complex and rapidly changing context in which they were operating. The visual below summarises these and other attributes that Chairs identified in the discussion groups.

Figure 2: Key leadership attributes of the future Chair

Attributes are arranged under the three roles of the future Chair as set out in Part 2.

Providing strategic leadership for change	Supporting and challenging the executive team	Building effective, dynamic and agile governance
<p>Leads with a sense of purpose, optimism and confidence</p> <p>Has good judgement and able to 'see the wood for the trees'</p> <p>Is comfortable with uncertainty and change</p>	<p>Is able to offer both support and challenge</p> <p>Makes self available to Head, shows emotional commitment and empathy</p> <p>Shows genuine interest and commitment to the school and its values</p>	<p>Listens and learns from others</p> <p>Is willing to explore ways to develop and retain</p> <p>Is open to ideas and innovations</p>

3 / What support will Chairs need

Participants were interested in support that brings together Chairs and Heads or executive teams in order for them to learn together; and suggested **that advice and support needed to be concise, accessible and flexible to suit different Chairs' needs.** This section looks at what support Chairs will require including: practical tools, training and advice, case studies and guidance on alternative governance structures and approaches; networking and learning with other Chairs; and tailored and specialised strategic advice, data and information.

Practical tools, training and advice across a wide range of topics would be needed, participants said. In the AGBIS Members' Survey, respondents placed similar emphasis on scenario planning (48%); navigating financial pressures (43%); succession planning (42%); diversifying your offer (40%), digital transformation (32%) and mergers and group structure (32%). Other topics raised by participants included inspections, fundraising for bursaries, and parent governors. This range of topics was reflective of how the role has changed and become more challenging and multi-faceted. People moving into leadership roles needed more training than in the past because of this more challenging environment.

As discussed in Part 2, recruitment and succession planning were seen as one of the Chair's core responsibilities because it was a way of building future capacity. What that looked like, and therefore how it could be supported, varied considerably given the diverse nature of independent schools and their governance arrangements. Chairs shared the following approaches that they thought could be incorporated in a flexible support offer:

- Intentional long-term planning for succession such as giving notice a year or more in advance of their intention to step down, and ensuring governors keep in mind when the Chair's term would come to an end (where fixed).
- Focusing on recruiting and refreshing governors and then creating development pathways for existing governors to be able to step into the Chair and other board roles. The introduction of Chair apprenticeships was suggested by one participant as way to widen the pipeline of future Chairs.
- Being open to external recruitment for a new Chair and to looking at candidates from other industries who might bring relevant skills. This was important for schools where the Vice Chair was not interested in becoming Chair as was frequently the case, participants said.

Case studies and guidance on alternative governance structures and approaches could help with the necessary shift to a more dynamic and agile board (see Part 1). Participants described this as 'an area of optimism' where Chairs could achieve change. They wanted to see Chairs, Heads and boards introduced to fresh ideas and provided with concrete examples of how other schools had transitioned to group structures, 'decluttered' their committees or brought about other changes to their governance. Having more diversity of conference speakers and contributors to AGBIS events and resources could help open up the sector to new ways of working.

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Networking and learning with other Chairs was a familiar and popular form of support. As in the Future Charity Chair project, participants greatly valued opportunities to network and felt this helped build their resilience to be able to operate in an unfavourable policy and regulatory environment. They recognised the benefits of sharing experiences and learning; no one Chair holds all the answers to the challenges they are all facing. Having said that, the independent schools' sector is very competitive and so sharing information was not always straightforward. Some Chairs said national networking opportunities were best because competitors were less likely to be brought together in the same setting.

Tailored and specialised strategic advice, data and information were important to help Chairs guide governors and executive teams to make well-informed strategic decisions. Chairs wanted to be provided with strategic insights on the sector and what might be coming down the line such as AI, policy and economic change, and international markets. The need for faster-paced, more agile decision-making combined with the pressure to consider radical change (merger, expansion to become through schools, or even international and emerging ideas around online or hybrid schooling) were all linked to a need for tailored and specialised support. While Chairs were looking to AGBIS to provide some of this, they were also buying in bespoke professional advice from consultants. Participants implied that the need for both forms of support would continue or increase in the future.



CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of findings

Independent schools are operating in an increasingly challenging environment. In this context, finance has become the top priority for Chairs and concerns about future sustainability are leading to changes in the shape of schools. This is predicted to accelerate in years to come, placing growing pressures on leadership and governance. As schools respond to these demands, traditional boundaries between operational management and governance are becoming less clear, raising questions about the effectiveness of existing governance structures and whether they are fit for purpose. The role of Chair is also becoming more and more demanding, and this is putting the future pipeline of Chairs at risk. All this points to an urgent need to rethink and improve the governance of independent schools.

Chairs have a key role to play in guiding schools through this period of flux and uncertainty by providing strategic leadership for change; supporting and challenging the executive team; and building effective, dynamic and agile governance. In order to fulfil the role, Chairs need a wide range of skills and attributes. They need to be good communicators, possess strong business knowledge and be willing to delegate to others. They need to be comfortable with change and uncertainty and open to new ideas and innovations. Support for Chairs to navigate this challenging role needs to provide: practical tools, case studies and advice especially around alternative governance models; networking and learning opportunities with other Chairs; and tailored and specialised advice and information to inform strategic decision-making.

Implications

Intentional transformation is necessary for independent schools to adapt and for the role of Chair to remain viable.

It involves proactively planning for the future to avoid change happening by stealth in a non-strategic way, and deliberately reshaping the processes and procedures in place, including in terms of governance. This would allow schools to respond more effectively to key challenges and opportunities, and make the role of Chair more manageable, with a clearer focus on mission and strategy, and less time spent on firefighting and day-to-day operations. This could also help make the role more attractive and widen the pipeline of future Chairs, if combined with an expanded offer of support for new Chairs that builds their skills and helps them develop networks and relationships.

The Chair has a critical role to play in driving transformation. In periods of rapid change, there is a risk that decisions are made hastily and in response to short-term pressures. Chairs help to frame why transformation is necessary and ensures that strategic choices and changes remain aligned with the school's mission and values. They bring people with them – the board and the executive team, but also other stakeholders such as the wider staff team and parents. A core part of driving transformation is making sure governance is fit for purpose and that the board works effectively as a group and with the executive team. This may mean introducing some small practical changes to the way the board functions, but also exploring whether some bolder changes are needed and how they might be made possible.

For transformation in independent schools to be successful, there needs to be strong, unified support from their membership associations. Chairs welcomed support that was flexible and accessible, that supported their relationship with the executive, and with other Chairs. They need to work closely with the executive team in order to navigate change, and the support they receive needs to reflect this joined-up approach. The diversity of the independent schools' sector makes it hard to envisage a unified set of recommendations to schools for what they should be doing. Rather, associations could put forward strong unified messaging for Chairs and executive teams that encourage and support them to reflect on strategic questions and work through together what's right for their school.

This report has highlighted an urgent need for change in the governance of independent schools; change that comes with challenges. It has also given cause for optimism: many schools are well advanced in their journey of change and paving the way for their peers. It has shone a light on some exciting opportunities for innovation in governance that will help transform and strengthen schools and prepare them for the future.



APPENDIX: AGBIS MEMBERSHIP SURVEY 2025

Five questions that relate to this project were added to the AGBIS Annual Membership Survey.

Beyond operational or reactive matters what topics have you discussed in your board meetings over the last six months?

Please choose the five topics that have featured the most prominently in your discussions

Financial sustainability	97%
Student wellbeing	64%
Structural changes (mergers with other schools, sale of assets etc.)	57%
Shifts in parents' expectations	52%
Regulatory compliance and scrutiny	49%
Recruitment and retention of staff	39%
Leadership development	26%
Partnerships with other schools	24%
Artificial intelligence (AI)	23%
Relationships with the wider community	15%
Equity, diversity and inclusion	11%
Data security	11%
Other	10%
Environmental sustainability	8%
Social media	6%

Looking to the future, what topics do you think you are most likely to be discussing in board meetings in the next three years?

Please choose the five topics that you think will feature the most prominently in your future discussions.

Financial sustainability	99%
Structural changes (mergers with other schools, sale of assets etc.)	60%
Student wellbeing	49%
Shifts in parents' expectations	46%
Regulatory compliance and scrutiny	43%
Artificial intelligence (AI)	41%
Recruitment and retention of staff	40%
Partnerships with other schools	30%
Leadership development	23%
Relationships with the wider community	21%
Equity, diversity and inclusion	11%
Environmental sustainability	9%
Data security	7%
Other	7%
Social media	6%

What leadership skills and knowledge will be required of Chairs in the future?

Below is a list of skills and knowledge. Please tell us how important you think each of these will be to the role of Chair in the future.

	Extremely important	Very important	Important	Slightly important	Not important
Ability to develop and manage relationships with stakeholders (including the Head, staff, governors, partners)	70%	26%	3%	1%	0%
Business and management skills around problem solving, good process and time management	60%	33%	7%	1%	0%
Relationship management skills that get the best out of all the skills and experience around the board table	59%	35%	5%	1%	0%
Skills in foresight, and how to think about the future	55%	39%	6%	0%	0%
Knowledge and understanding of governance and regulation compliance (including safeguarding)	42%	33%	24%	1%	0%
Change and crisis management skills and some experience around managing risk, uncertainty and reputational threat	42%	42%	14%	2%	0%
Knowledge and understanding of finance and business models	33%	48%	19%	0%	0%
Ability to influence internally and externally	33%	40%	24%	3%	0%
Ability to work with people from different backgrounds, outlooks and experience	31%	39%	28%	3%	0%
Knowledge and understanding of the education sector	26%	32%	38%	5%	0%
Understanding of what it means to be an employer including HR and the duty of care to staff, governors and pupils	21%	52%	26%	1%	1%
Knowledge and understanding of digital technology (including AI)	7%	35%	47%	10%	0%

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