

How to be a NED

Securing your first non-executive director (NED) role at a multi-academy trust (MAT)

Tips for candidates:

Whether you are new to NED roles or are moving from a different sector this guide explains what to expect and how to prepare for a successful interview and board role.

**Academy
Ambassadors**

Building better trust boards

Is a MAT NED role right for you?

You need to be comfortable with setting direction at a senior level and prepared to challenge underperformance or financial instability.

Based on the [7 Nolan principles of public life](#) you will be confident taking accountability across the work of the trust and all its schools. Academy trusts are passionate about improving education and you need to share this aim.

Know your strengths

Most boards simply require a standard CV or comprehensive LinkedIn profile to apply. It is helpful if you can update your CV to remove industry technical terms/acronyms and add relevant voluntary roles.

Reflecting and preparing in your mind your 'board profile' will allow you to present a more specific set of competencies in an expression of interest letter or when you meet the trust. The Department for Education's [Competency Framework](#) is a useful tool for self-reflection pre-interview. Two principles are often a topic for discussion at MAT board interview:

- **'Leadership'**: A recruiting trust will be keen to hear about your relevant experience of strategic decision-making in a challenging environment. The role specification should offer some examples of their decisions, to allow you to reflect on similar scenarios encountered in other roles.
- **'Selflessness'**: Business leaders appointed through the Academy Ambassadors demonstrate impressive philanthropic desire to 'give back'. A recruiting trust will want to know your story: why education? What's your motivation? You do not require education knowledge but you should demonstrate intellectual curiosity about the sector.

“Being able to add value to a multi-academy trust from the get-go was behind my original interest in becoming a non-executive director. By focusing on finance and governance, the organisations I am involved with can spend more time on the true bottom line of exceptional outcomes in education. The results can be truly gratifying. I would recommend others consider doing the same.”

MICHAEL LARSEN, SENIOR MANAGING DIRECTOR AND PARTNER AT HARBERT MANAGEMENT CORPORATION AND NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT ASPIRE ACADEMY TRUST AND MEMBER AT GATEHOUSE GREEN LEARNING TRUST

What makes an exceptional independent Non-Executive Director?

Choose the right trust

If you have yet to identify an opportunity let your Academy Ambassadors adviser know what you seek from your NED role when they first talk to you. You may have a preference to work with schools in more deprived areas, those who support children with special educational needs, a smaller local trust or a trust with a particularly strong mission to achieve pace of change.

If you have a role identified, read the trust specification carefully. Is the trust ethos and values a good match for you? Can you add value to the decision and issues faced by the trust ahead? Understand the commitment. Ofsted will check minutes and attendance at meetings. Ensure you know the extent and location of the meetings of the board and sub-committees.

First, informal meeting – what to expect, what to prepare

Most trusts start the process with an informal conversation, sometimes by telephone, to check that you have skills and attributes to complement the other board members. The trust is likely to have informal meetings with several candidates.

Know the profiles of the people you are meeting. Use the trust's website or LinkedIn.

Be ready to explain your career to someone who doesn't know your sector and to 'translate' your strengths and experience. Just as you would at a formal interview, you should have ideas for how you would fit in at the trust and what positive role you could play against the ambitions and challenges defined in the role specification.

Even at this early stage it helps to show that you started on your own due diligence to recognise the trust's position and check that you can make a relevant contribution to the future direction of the trust. A couple of relevant questions from you at this stage, based on the accounts summary or a recent Ofsted, signals your intent to the recruiting board. The box below has a more extensive reading list.

This stage is a good time to find out about the other trustees on the board. How do you complement their skills?

Reading-in to the trust

Good public sources to help you to do your homework at the first conversation stage or further into the process include:

- The trust's website should give a potted history and may publish the Accounts and Articles of Association
- Accounts and Company information on Companies House <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>
- The Department for Education performance data on all the schools in the trust <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>
- A recent school Ofsted reports (there is no trust-level equivalent) <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

What makes an exceptional independent Non-Executive Director? (continued)

Reading-in to the sector

- A brief history of academies and education reform
<https://www.academyambassadors.org/resources/brief-history-academies-and-education-reform>
- Comprehensive guidance is within the Academies Financial Handbook - Understanding the data
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-performance-tables-how-to-interpret-the-data>.

NED interview – what to expect, what to prepare

You have applied because you feel your skills are what the trust requires and therefore be ready to highlight your experience in the best possible way. You are likely to be meeting education leaders and again may need to ‘translate’ your CV.

The trust mission statement may not appear particularly unique but is likely to have been the subject of great debate within the trust. Ask about it and seek to articulate how it chimes with your sense of personal integrity. Clearly articulating your philanthropic desire to give back, within education is essential..

Your questions to the trust will be as telling as the information that you provide. Knowing the trust, their pupil outcomes and financial headlines drives better questioning and demonstrates your capabilities.

NEDs need great people skills, so demonstrate this in the interview. Be prepared for challenging questions. What challenges have you faced in work in the past that appear similar to the board’s challenges ahead and how did you deal with them? How have you influenced change? How do you challenge underperformance?

Visiting a school in the trust

- You should be invited to visit a school pre-appointment, perhaps combined with a conversation or interview. If visiting a school, know the name of the headteacher and its Ofsted status.
- Be aware of safeguarding and have photo ID on you if visiting the schools.
- Demonstrate your curiosity about the school you are in: ask about what’s going well to understand strengths and challenges.
- Keep notes on anything you would like to ask the Chair when the tour is finished but be proportionate: schools can be sensitive about a visit that appears to be a pseudo-inspection.

The small print: references and liabilities

- Trusts are obliged to run recruitment along Nolan principles: be ready for the Chair to request references, commence safeguarding checks and to ask you for potential conflicts of interest. You have a duty to declare any private interests relating to your public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.
- Supply all relevant information quickly for the trust’s safeguarding check, also known as a ‘DBS’ or ‘disclosure’, to allow your appointment to proceed.
- As long as you act diligently, prudently and in good faith, the trust’s Director’s Liabilities Insurance provides appropriate protection.

What makes an exceptional independent Non-Executive Director? (continued)

Last word: impact

Congratulations, you have secured the role. When appointed please inform Academy Ambassadors and we can keep you updated with relevant practice and guidance.

Download and read the On Board induction pack - <https://www.academyambassadors.org/resources/induction-pack> - which provides a few essentials for the first 100 days. The trust's own induction process should commence swiftly after appointment.

Beyond the reading: orientation after appointment:

- Find an ally – we offer appointed NEDs the opportunity to meet a like-minded peer from a different board to share learning, develop professional skills and improve governance standards across England.
- Contact academyambassadors@newschoolsnetwork.org for more information. Get to know the big influencers locally. The Local Authority, RSC, and Education Funding Agency lead contact, for Church schools the Diocesan Board contacts.

“Removing the obstacles children face in accessing education is a cause I care deeply about and I am grateful to Academy Ambassadors for helping me find opportunities in this area.”

ILKER YONEY, EUROPEAN BANK FOR RECONSTRUCTION & DEVELOPMENT AND NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT HORNBEAM ACADEMY TRUST AND SPRING COMMON ACADEMY TRUST

For more resources, please visit:

- Read more candidate resources here <https://www.academyambassadors.org/candidates/resources-candidates>
- Closer look: Pontefract Academies Trust <https://www.academyambassadors.org/resources/pontefract-academies-trust>
- What is the difference between a school governor and a non-executive director? <https://www.academyambassadors.org/resources/what-difference-between-school-governor-and-non-executive-director>

Academy Ambassadors

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