



Department  
for Education

# **National Leaders of Governance (NLG) reform: year 1 evaluation**

**Research report**

**November 2022**

**York Consulting LLP**



Government  
Social Research

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## Glossary of terms

AMSD	Academies and Maintained Schools Directorate (Now known as Schools Financial Support and Oversight or SFSO)
ATH	Academy Trust Handbook
ERG	External Review of Governance
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
NTI	Notice to Improve (previously known as Financial Notice to Improve or FNTI)
IEB	Interim Executive Board
LAs	Local Authorities
MAT	Multi Academy Trust
MI	Management Information
NGA	National Governance Association
NLE	National Leaders of Education
NLG	National Leaders of Governance
QA	Quality Assurance
RDD	Regional Delivery Directorate
RI	Requires Improvement
SAT	Single Academy Trust
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TSIO	Trust and School Improvement Offer

## Executive Summary

This is the final report of the monitoring and process evaluation of Year 1 of the reformed National Leaders of Governance (NLG) Programme. The National Governance Association (NGA) was contracted to deliver the reformed NLG programme from 2021, for up to 4 years. The programme aims to improve organisational governance and is focused on schools and trusts where governance is an identified weakness. Key features of the reformed programme outlined by the Department for Education (DfE) include:

- Intentions to extend eligibility and introduce new standards for NLGs; enhance deployment of NLGs to schools and trusts in need through effective matching processes; and payment for NLGs to deliver governance improvement support.
- Referral of schools and trusts via 4 potential routes - Regional Delivery Directorate (RDD) regional priorities; Trust and School Improvement Offer (TSIO); Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA); and Local Authorities (LAs) or dioceses.
- A core role for NLGs to undertake an External Review of Governance (ERG) with each school or trust they are matched with; produce a report and action plan; and review progress 3 months later.

## Evaluation aims and activities

This evaluation aimed to establish the effectiveness of this new delivery model for National Leaders of Governance (NLGs). It addressed 4 lines of enquiry:

- Capacity of the NLGs recruited.
- Deployment of the NLGs to schools and trusts in need of governance support and improvement.
- Quality of delivery by NLGs.
- Aspects of process efficiency which supported the programme.

The evaluation was undertaken between September 2021 and June 2022. It involved scoping consultations with strategic and delivery organisations; regular review of management information (MI) about programme delivery; and 3 waves of online interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, including NGA, commissioning organisations, NLGs, and senior leaders, governors and trustees from the schools and trusts involved. This covered a total of 18 interviews with stakeholders in wave one, 29 in wave two and 35 in wave three.

The quantitative data and findings presented in this final report are based on the latest MI provided by NGA. This reflects delivery of the reformed NLG programme up to the end of May 2022.

## Findings

### Capacity of NLGs recruited

#### **Research Question 1: To what extent are the recruited NLGs meeting, or likely to meet, school/trust needs?**

In Autumn 2021, through a rigorous recruitment and assessment process, NGA appointed 66 NLGs (known as designated NLGs) from 291 applications. This exceeded an initial target to recruit 50 NLGs. The number and range of NLGs recruited was sufficient to meet the needs of the number and profile of referrals received over the initial year of delivery.

There were some sufficiency challenges, with regional and local gaps in NLG availability; and some variance in ability of individual NLGs to accept deployments (due to location or workload, for example). NGA worked closely with NLGs to overcome these constraints and matched all referrals to one of the designated NLGs, in 85% of cases this was within a 3-week target. In June and July 2022, NGA also ran a campaign to recruit additional NLGs, with a focus on specific regions and increasing the diversity of NLG characteristics.

Decisions on the roll-out of the programme from September 2022 will affect whether the number of NLGs remains sufficient in the future. Demand might increase through, for example, removing the cap on the number of potential referrals from RDDs; widening the eligibility criteria for maintained school referrals; or extending the role NLGs play for maintained schools.

#### **Research Question 2: Is the amount of NLG support sufficient and appropriate?**

The amount of time available for the individual deployments varied depending on the educational context and referral route. DfE set out the eligibility criteria for each route as summarised in the box below.

**RDD regional priorities:** Risk assessment process. Multi-academy trusts (MATs) eligible for 5-day external review (3-day for SATs), with up to 5 follow-up days (3 days for SATs).

**TSIO:** Trust with at least 1 school with 2 RI judgements with 1 RI in all areas. Recommended by a National Leader of Education (NLE) or system leader with RDD agreement. Eligible for a 5-day review (3-day for SATs).

**ESFA:** Trusts which have been identified as 'at risk' through risk assessment. Eligible for a review lasting between 5 and 10 days.

**Maintained schools:** Schools with single RI judgement overall and RI in leadership and management. Eligible for 3-day review.

Maintained schools and single academy trusts (SATs) were normally allocated 3 days and multi-academy trusts (MATs) 5 days. RDDs had the option to commission more days for trusts requiring additional support. Deployments via the ESFA often had up to 10 days available, reflecting the considerable challenges faced by trusts referred via an ESFA case worker.

Most stakeholders were satisfied that the 5-day (or more) offer for referrals from RDDs and the ESFA was sufficient to meet needs and deliver an effective ERG process. In many cases, additional support, facilitation, and capacity building was provided to support trusts to progress action plans. However, some NLGs and LA stakeholders said the 3-day model for maintained schools (via referrals from LAs and dioceses) was insufficient. Several stakeholders also thought that the NLG role for maintained schools could be expanded to include the option for additional days to capacity build and support progress with action plans (as is the case for other referral routes).

Feedback from the data and stakeholder reflections highlighted that an initial 3-month timeframe to deliver and report on the ERG had often been a challenge to achieve. NLGs were also required to provide a progress review a further 3 months after delivering the ERG action plan. This is intended to ensure that improvements in governance are embedded as soon as possible and not left for the longer term. Some stakeholders said that a longer timescale (up to a year) for these reviews would be more appropriate, allowing more opportunity for schools and trusts to progress actions.

## Deployment of NLGs

### Research Question 3: How effective has referral to the reformed NLG programme been?

By the end of May 2022, there had been 231 referrals to the reformed NLG programme. This included those from all commissioning routes, all 8 regions and across education



settings. Numbers were broadly in line with expectations except for those via the Trust and School Improvement Offer (TSIO) route (which was around 20% of expectation). There were some differences in referral rate across geographical regions and LA areas.

There were distinct differences in the referral approaches adopted by commissioning bodies, which reflected variance in funding route and eligibility criteria. RDDs and the ESFA tended to adopt diagnostic and preventative approaches whereby the commissioner identifies those trusts most in need of NLG involvement (based data analysis and regular review meetings with trusts). Whereas referrals via LAs more often involved promoting an offer to eligible schools. Several stakeholders said that the eligibility criteria for maintained schools (made mostly via LAs) could be expanded to support a more preventative approach, for example, to include good or outstanding schools that might be experiencing governance issues.

There was also related variance in the ways in which referrals were supported and communicated. This included some differences in how specific the referral reasons were (with LAs generally being less specific than RDDs and ESFA) and in the extent to which NLGs undertook scoping discussions with commissioners (which occurred more often with RDDs and ESFA for trust referrals).

Stakeholders identified several referral practices that worked well including when NLGs undertook scoping discussions with commissioners prior to engaging with the school or trust; use of an online portal developed by NGA for commissioners to submit referrals; and a supportive and responsive approach from NGA. Suggested areas for improvement included a more proactive and targeted approach taken by some LAs; using feedback from schools and trusts that have participated to help engage others; improving internal processes for clearance within RDDs; and consideration of the timing of some referrals.

#### **Research Question 4: How effective has matching NLGs to schools and trusts been?**

Stakeholder views and data showed that matching of schools or trusts to an NLG was timely. Most matches were made within 2 weeks of the referral being made by commissioners. Where there had been delays, this was linked to school holidays or, in some cases, requests for delays from commissioners, trusts or NLGs (due to workload or capacity constraints).

The timing of referrals was more compressed than expected during the first year of the reformed programme: most referrals and deployments took place within a 4-6-month period rather than over 9 months. Nevertheless, the responsiveness and management of the NGA team continued to enable timely and effective matches overall. Many stakeholders said the matching process had duly considered skills, prior experience, and expertise. All stakeholder groups were positive about the matches that had been made

with NLGs demonstrating considerable experience, a good range of knowledge and skills and pertinent skills to challenge.

## **Quality of NLG delivery and role**

### **Research Question 5: What activities do NLGs undertake to deliver the role?**

For each deployment NLGs were required to undertake an ERG (involving document review, interviews, and trustee/governing board observation), produce a report and action plan, and deliver a review of progress 3 months later.

Driven by the eligibility criteria, there are slightly different models of delivery for this NLG offer. LA-referred deployments involve just the ERG, report, and review, whereas the ESFA and some RDD deployments can involve additional support, facilitation, and capacity building to help them progress their action plans. Stakeholders would welcome more consistency in the availability of additional support to help schools and trusts to progress their action plans.

Stakeholder feedback pointed to the potential to improve effectiveness for schools and trusts at the point of initial NLG deployment. This included through:

- More consistency in communication from NLGs regarding activities, timescales, and the specific focus of ERGs.
- Clarification regarding the necessity and purpose of the requirement for schools or trusts to send significant volumes of background material to NLGs.
- Potential access for NLGs to an online self-assessment tool to enable more efficient gathering of governor perceptions as part of initial assessment.

Stakeholders identified considerable value associated with NLGs conducting an in-person visit to observe governing or trust boards in action.

### **Research Question 6: To what extent have NLGs been able to provide the skills and knowledge required to meet school and trust needs?**

Most senior leaders and trustees/governors commented on the considerable skills, expertise, and experience that NLGs had been able to use during deployments. This included knowledge, organisation, diagnostics, challenge, and independence. ESFA case workers had valued the regular updates and engagement they had had from NLGs for individual cases.

Where reports and action plans had been received, feedback from stakeholders was generally positive about their content and value. Reports were described as good quality, challenging, sensitive and constructive. LAs suggested there could be clearer signposting within action plans to support services or training for schools to progress actions.

## **Research Question 7: How effective has the NLG role been to date?**

Many trustees/governors and senior leaders engaged positively with the NLG and the ERG process. In some examples, where trustees/governors were less engaged, the NLG and commissioners have worked persistently to encourage some commitment to the process.

Schools and trusts were being challenged to address a range of themes including board composition, structures, and relationships; financial oversight; trust growth, vision and planning; and scrutiny and risk.

It was too early to comment on the change and progress made by schools and trusts, but many stakeholders were positive about the potential of the reformed programme to challenge them to improve governance in these areas. There are a small number of examples of progress made.

## **Process efficiency**

### **Research Question 8: What has been the value and effectiveness of the recruitment, assessment, and training processes for NLGs?**

A comprehensive process was delivered for recruitment, assessment, and moderation of NLGs. NGA sought to place emphasis on improving provision from the previous NLG offer whilst also supporting applicants through the process.

Most NLGs felt that the recruitment process worked well with clear criteria and a suitably challenging assessment process. Some commented that including criteria to involve governance professionals<sup>1</sup> was an inclusive process. Nevertheless, some NLGs and LAs thought that the recruitment process and eligibility criteria had excluded some “really strong talent”.

NLGs had positive regard for the induction training provided, saying that it provided a useful baseline. Some felt that those new to conducting ERGs would benefit from additional training and support, something that NGA put in place for NLGs where a need was identified.

NLGs said the provision of templates and style guides were a useful addition to the training, together with networking opportunities, check-ins and a WhatsApp group developed by NGA. NLGs also said how valuable and responsive the support from the NGA team had been.

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<sup>1</sup> Governance professionals are clerks to governing/trustee boards. The use of the term governance ‘professionals’ recognises the complex role played by clerks, particularly on multi-academy trust boards.

## **Research Question 9: What has been the value and effectiveness of the quality assurance process?**

NLGs provided positive feedback about the comprehensive quality assurance (QA) processes that were delivered by NGA. They said it was rigorous and reflected standardised expectations in the reformed programme. It had also enabled some NLGs to develop a better understanding of the intended report style and structure. It is possible that the QA process contributed to a lengthier process for reporting in a small number of cases.

## **Conclusions**

### **Research Question 10: To what extent has the reformed NLG programme effectively challenged schools and trusts to improve performance?**

It was too early in the delivery of the reformed NLG programme to definitively address this question. Nevertheless, stakeholders reflected positively on the level of consistency, rigour and challenge that was offered compared to the previous less-structured support offered through NLGs. Feedback was also positive about the considerable skills, expertise and experience brought to bear through NLG deployments. Commissioners said the reformed programme provided them with another useful “tool in their armour” to challenge and support schools and trusts.

The reformed NLG programme offers a core service to all eligible trusts and schools of an external review and a follow up. Some routes allow for additional support. Therefore, the programme did not operate as a single model in its first year of delivery. There was variance in referral approach, eligibility and targeting, and delivery of or signposting to additional support and capacity building. These differences limited consistency and could potentially undermine overall outcomes and the ability of the programme to challenge all schools and trusts engaged to improve performance.

Areas for consideration to address these consistency issues included a more preventative approach for LA referrals; clearer signposting to additional support for schools and trusts; further research to understand different approaches to engagement across LAs; and extend expected delivery timescales, both for the initial 3-month delivery time frame and for the progress review just another 3 months later. There would also be value in clarifying some expectations and developing some good practice for several aspects of process.

## Introduction

This is the final report of the monitoring and process evaluation of Year 1 of the Reformed National Leaders of Governance (NLG) programme, as commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE). The evaluation, undertaken between September 2021 and June 2022, was carried out by a team of researchers from York Consulting LLP.

## Background

NLGs were originally introduced from 2012 to provide support to build confident and strong strategic leaders within schools and trusts. A study undertaken in 2014<sup>2</sup> on the NLG programme established some key points on success and future considerations:

- The most widely quoted impact by some margin was help in understanding roles and requirements and greater confidence, followed by helpful feedback/reviews and the governing body operating better.
- NLGs considered the most notable barrier (at that time) to be lack of awareness or understanding of the NLG role by schools, closely followed by lack of awareness or understanding of the NLG by commissioning bodies, such as the dioceses, local authorities, or multi-academy trusts.
- While the positive impact of deployments undertaken was anticipated to help promote the NLG programme, NLGs' feedback suggested that some chairs remained reluctant to ask for help, and so further work to remove any potential stigma could be of benefit.

In January 2019, DfE announced in its teacher recruitment and retention strategy<sup>3</sup> 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 NLGs.

In February 2020, DfE Ministers invited school governance sector leaders, and experienced trustees/governors and school leaders to form an external advisory group, which was commissioned to make recommendations for improvements to the current NLG programme. The report<sup>4</sup> was published in September 2020 with the recommendations outlined in the box overleaf.

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<sup>2</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/374601/national-leaders-of-governance-study-research-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374601/national-leaders-of-governance-study-research-report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/786856/DFE\\_Teacher\\_Retention\\_Strategy\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/786856/DFE_Teacher_Retention_Strategy_Report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/916114/NLG\\_Reform-Advisory\\_Group\\_Report\\_Sep\\_2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/916114/NLG_Reform-Advisory_Group_Report_Sep_2020.pdf)

**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.

## The reformed NLG programme

The National Governance Association (NGA) was awarded a contract to deliver and manage the reformed National Leaders of Governance programme for up to 4 years from 28 June 2021. The reformed programme aims to improve organisational governance and is strongly focused on schools and trusts where governance is an identified weakness.

Key aspects of the reformed programme outlined by the Department for Education (DfE) include:

- Extending eligibility, improving selection and accountability, introducing new standards and training for NLGs.
- Enhancing deployment of NLGs through more effective matching of expertise to school needs.
- Paying NLGs to deliver governance improvement support.

NGA are responsible for the recruitment of NLGs including both marketing the reformed programme and assessing eligibility and suitability of individuals. NGA are also responsible for training designated NLGs and subsequently matching these individuals to the schools and trusts referred based on skillset and location. Once NLGs have been deployed and formulated reports, NGA undertake quality assurance of each NLG's first report and thereafter on selected reports. Schools/trusts are given an opportunity to fact check any descriptive elements of each report before reports are formally issued to commissioners, schools, and trusts.

The recruitment process involved a variety of marketing techniques to gather interest from new individuals, who had not previously delivered an NLG role. As the eligibility for the role had been extended to also include governance professionals (clerks to governing/trustee boards) the pool of talent available increased<sup>5</sup> Individuals who had delivered the NLG role through the previous programme were also invited to apply through the reformed programme. The eligibility criteria set by DfE for applicants are outlined below.

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<sup>5</sup> Governance professionals are clerks to governing/trustee boards. The use of the term governance 'professionals' recognises the complex role played by clerks, particularly on multi-academy trust boards.

To be considered, applicants must have:

- A minimum 5 years' school/trust board governance experience, including 3 years' experience as a Board chair or 5 years' experience as a clerk or governance professional.
- A current role within governance which involves holding the executive to account, or a current clerk/governance professional role (unless exceptional circumstances).
- Experience (as trustee, governor, clerk/governance professional) in at least two unrelated settings; one must be an academy trust board or a school governing board; one or more may be in a non-education setting.

NLGs must also meet at least one of the following requirements:

- Currently a Chair of a good or outstanding school according to Ofsted's judgement, or Chair/lead trustee in a trust that is not subject to a Notice to improve (Nti) or any other warning notice relating to financial management.
- Demonstrate a track record in improving governance in a school or trust, resulting in an improved overall leadership and management Ofsted judgement, or other objective measure.
- Demonstrate a track record in providing effective professional services that have challenged and delivered improved governance in schools or trusts, leading to an improved Ofsted judgement or other objective measure.

Source: NGA Application documents

Alongside collecting information and case studies to assess eligibility, NGA collected and processed information regarding the applicants' previous experience, for example faith school experience, phases of education and experience in trust and maintained sectors. Applicants also provided information regarding which geographical locations they would be able to work in. This data allowed for analysis of specialisms and expertise to support the process for matching NLGs to the schools and trusts referred to the programme.

## Referral routes

A total of 4 commissioning routes were established by DfE for schools and trusts to access funded reviews by NLGs, the criteria of which are outlined below.

- **Regional Delivery Directorate (RDD) regional priorities:** Multi-academy trusts (MATs) identified as high risk, or having governance concerns, through a risk assessment process are eligible for a 5-day external review, with capacity for up to 5



follow-up days where the trust's capacity to improve is low. Single academy trusts (SATs) are eligible for a 3-day external review, with capacity for 3 follow-up days.

- **Trust and School Improvement Offer (TSIO):** A Trust with at least 1 school with 2 Requires Improvement (RI) judgements with 1 RI in all areas; and support has been recommended by a National Leader of Education (NLE) or system leader with RDD agreement. These trusts are eligible for a 5-day review by an NLG.
- **Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA):** Trusts which have been identified as 'at risk' through Academy and Maintained Schools Directorate (AMSD) External Review of Governance (ERG) risk assessment. These trusts can be directed through the Rapid Response Hub to help commission reviews or through AMSD Territory funded deployments for the hardest to help trusts. These Trusts are eligible for a review lasting between 5 and 10 days.
- **Maintained schools:** Schools with a single RI judgement overall and with RI in leadership and management are eligible for a 3-day review commissioned through Local Authorities (LA) and dioceses on behalf of school boards.

## NLG offer

NLGs were tasked to undertake an initial ERG taking between 3 to 5 days (up to 10 days for the ESFA route) depending on the commissioning route. The process involves documentation review, interviews with board and staff members and an observation of a board meeting. An ERG report is produced by the NLG to summarise findings of the review alongside an Action Plan to provide clarity on what needs to be delivered, and how. The expectation is that this Action Plan will be reviewed 3 months after the initial review, by the same NLG, to assess progress made towards meeting those actions, or what had been put in place to do so in the future.

## Methodology

The evaluation aimed to establish the effectiveness of the new delivery model for National Leaders of Governance (NLGs) and to understand:

- The extent to which the programme was being delivered as intended.
- The effectiveness of the programme in providing sufficient, appropriately skilled, and matched NLGs, to meet needs across different educational contexts.

The evaluation addressed 4 lines of enquiry:

- **Capacity:** the extent to which NLGs are being recruited, trained, and designated to meet demand.
- **Deployment:** the extent to which NLGs are being deployed appropriately and in a timely manner.
- **Quality:** the extent to which the NLGs are delivering the skills and knowledge required by schools and trusts to build their capability for strong governance moving forward.
- **Process efficiency:** what lessons can be learnt to improve practices and processes to optimise capacity, deployment, and quality issues.

Beneath these overarching aims were several specific research questions. The full list of evaluation questions is provided in Appendix A.

The process evaluation was undertaken between September 2021 and June 2022 and involved:

- Scoping: Consultations with strategic and delivery organisations.
- Management information (MI): Regular review of MI about programme delivery.
- Qualitative interviews: 3 waves of interviews and focus groups with stakeholders.

## Scoping

Scoping interviews took place to develop understanding of DfE expectations and the plans NGA had in place to deliver the reformed programme. A total of 6 scoping consultations were undertaken with 8 individuals from the DfE, NGA and two commissioning bodies (RDD and ESFA).

## Management information (MI)

To assess the ongoing capacity and effectiveness of delivery, MI data from NGA was provided to York Consulting for analysis. This MI formed the basis of 4 MI reports presented to DfE. The MI included data on the NLG application and designation process and referral and deployment data once NLGs had been designated.

MI regarding NLG applicants included the information from application forms and interviews. This incorporated previous experience (such as phases of education and faith school experience), locations they were able to work, and preference of academies or maintained schools, and equality and diversity information.

Referral and deployment data consisted of the names of schools/trusts referred, where possible, the commissioning route, reasons for referral and various characteristics of the institution. The dates of referral and NLG matching were also recorded alongside the dates of ERG and progress report submissions.

## Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews took place over 3 waves of fieldwork, designed to capture different stages of the process in year 1 of the reformed programme. All consultations took place over Microsoft Teams throughout all 3 waves of fieldwork.

Qualitative interviews took the form of both focus groups and individual interviews. Group-based research is generally more efficient for assessing process effectiveness as there is more opportunity for discussions. Focus groups also allow for participants to gain a greater understanding of the processes from different angles and to explore any issues and establish consensus.

The number of individuals engaged in each wave of fieldwork is outlined in Table 1

**Table 1 Qualitative interviews**

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Wave 1 (December '21 – February '22)</b>	<b>Wave 2 (March '22)</b>	<b>Wave 3 (May – June '22)</b>
NLGs	5	11	7
Trustees/Governors	2	5*	8
Senior Leaders	3	2	5
LA	0	5	9
RDD	5	0	4

ESFA	3	4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>27*</b>	<b>35</b>

\*Not inclusive of scoping interviews and 2 governors from non-participating schools

Source: York Consulting 2022

An additional group of stakeholders was identified in the evaluation process which is not reported in Table 1. A couple of interviews took place with trustees/governors from schools or trusts that chose not to accept the offer of a funded ERG with an NLG, despite their eligibility. Short telephone interviews were conducted with these 2 individuals to understand the reasoning behind their decision.

## Findings: Capacity of NLGs recruited

The evaluation addressed the following two research questions in respect of the capacity of NLGs recruited for the reformed NLG programme:

- **Research Question 1:** To what extent are the recruited NLGs meeting, or likely to meet, school and trust needs?
- **Research Question 2:** Is the amount of support and length of time spent by NLGs with schools and trusts sufficient and appropriate?

## Are recruited NLGs meeting needs?

### Number and range of designated NLGs

In Autumn 2021, through a rigorous recruitment and assessment process, externally moderated by the Association of Education Advisors (AoEA), NGA appointed 66 NLGs (known as designated NLGs), from 291 applications. This exceeded an initial target to recruit 50 NLGs. The characteristics of the designated NLGs were broadly reflective of the characteristics of school governors and trustees across schools and academies in England (as indicated by the NGA's Annual School Governance Survey 2021<sup>6</sup>). Nevertheless, neither group (NLGs nor trustees/governors more generally) was particularly diverse nor representative of the wider population, in terms of, for example:

- **Ethnic background:** 6% of designated NLGs were of Asian background, with no other minority ethnicities represented. Across all governing board types and phases of education, the proportion of governors and trustees from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background varied between 1% and 6% (based on the 2021 Annual School Governance Survey). This compares to 14% of the wider population from BAME backgrounds<sup>7</sup>
- **Disability:** 5% of designated NLGs and 7% of respondents to the School Governance Survey identified as having a disability, compared to 18% of the wider population<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nga.org.uk/getmedia/457ca398-1732-4d94-aed3-3359e94d2607/nga-annual-survey-volunteers-practice-2021.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationcharacteristicsresearchtables/Population estimates for England and Wales in 2016](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationcharacteristicsresearchtables/Population%20estimates%20for%20England%20and%20Wales%20in%202016)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/nearlyoneinfivepeoplehadsomeformofdisabilityinenglandandwales/2015-07-13> Census data for England and Wales 2011.

- Gender: 66% of designated NLGs and 63% of trustees/governors responding to the School Governance Survey identified as female, compared to 51% of the wider population<sup>9</sup>.

Table 2 shows there were designated NLGs able to work across all regions in England.

**Table 2 Number of NLGs applied and designated by region able to work (at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**

	Applied	Designated	Designated as % of Applied
All	32	10	31%
East Midlands and the Humber	45	12	27%
East of England and North-East London	59	13	22%
Lancashire and West Yorkshire	52	7	13%
North of England	25	3	12%
North-West London and South-Central England	66	14	21%
South-East England and South London	72	13	18%
South-West England	32	9	28%
West Midlands	57	16	28%

Source: NGA Management Information May 2022

NLGs had a broad range of previous experience, skills sets, and specialisms. Most were experienced across primary and secondary, trust and maintained settings and within faith-based schools or trusts. Across the designated NLG pool, there was also experience across other phases of education, including nursery, infants, and further education. There were 4 NLGs with experience within non-Christian faith settings (i.e., Jewish schools).

One-third of designated NLGs had previous experience of being an NLG; and with eligibility requirements expanded to include governance professionals<sup>10</sup>, a wide variety of skills and prior experience was demonstrated in those designated. The most common

<sup>9</sup> [Male and female populations - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\) Census data for England and Wales 2011.](https://ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/census-data-for-england-and-wales-2011)

<sup>10</sup> Clerks to governing/trustee boards.

specialisms and experience demonstrated through the application and interview process included:

- **School or trust function:** Safeguarding, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and alternative provision were the most commonly mentioned school functions with some references also made to mental health, pupil premium and exclusions.
- **Leadership and governance:** Almost one third of NLGs had some financial understanding through experience with schools with Financial Notices to Improve (FNTI), accounting and managing budgets. Several NLGs also had experience of helping schools and trusts with strategy and vision, school improvement and safer recruitment of staff and board members. A smaller proportion mentioned experience with risk management.
- **NLG skills and functions:** These included provision of training and support to board members and school staff, including headteachers; experience of Interim Executive Boards (IEBs) included setting up, supporting and chairing boards; and conduct of external reviews of governance (ERGs).
- **Issues addressed:** NLGs identified prior experience with addressing various compliance issues (with the Academy Trust Handbook (ATH), safeguarding, and general risk); handling complaints and investigations; and supporting trust growth.
- **School or trust context:** The most mentioned specific specialism was with special schools. Several NLGs also indicated experience within early years settings, free schools, and virtual schools.

## Sufficiency of recruited NLGs

The number and range of NLGs recruited for the reformed programme was sufficient to meet the needs of the number and profile of referrals received for the initial year of delivery. All the stakeholder groups consulted in the evaluation were positive about the relevant experience of the NLGs recruited, identifying them as professional with specific and relevant expertise. This underpinned sufficiency to support the range of contexts and needs referred to the programme. There was also a good spread of NLGs able to work across all regions.

There were indications of potential limitations in the capacity of the NLG programme to meet the needs for referrals from non-Christian faith settings (though no referrals had been received to date). There were also some potential regional and local sufficiency issues. The North of England and the South West had the highest number of referrals in the first year of the reformed NLG programme but there were relatively low numbers of NLGs able to work there (Table 3).

Stakeholders also identified some more localised gaps in NLG capacity. Some LA and senior leaders said they thought understanding and/or experience of local context was important for the NLG role.

“There are no NLGs in our LA area which potentially limits NLG’s understanding of local context when deployed to schools in our area.”  
– *LA representative*

“We took a lot of time to bring the NLG up to speed with the context and mistakes were made in the draft report because they lacked the local understanding.” - *Senior leader*

**Table 3 Number of designated NLGs and referrals per region (at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**

	Designated NLGs	Referrals
East Midlands and The Humber	12	31
East of England and North East London	13	14
Lancashire and West Yorkshire	7	20
North of England	3	37
North West London and South Central England	14	25
South East England and South London	13	30
South West England	9	40
West Midlands	16	34

Source: NGA Management Information May 2022

There was variability in the number and location of deployments that individual NLGs were able to take on. This was reflected in the pattern of actual deployments made over the year: half of NLGs received between 1 and 3 matches; almost one third received between 4 and 6 matches; NLGs with 7 or more matches were deployed across multiple regions; and 4 NLGs had not been matched with any schools/trusts. Much of this difference resulted from some variance in the type (trust or maintained schools, trust characteristics) and location of referrals received. For example, designated NLGs with maintained school experience located in areas where few of these types of referrals have been made, will have fewer deployments.



Equally, some NLGs said they had declined or deferred referrals due to their own workload and commitments and/or the location of the referrals; and others said they had not received as many as they had expected. Commonly cited reasons included personal circumstances, other employment commitments (for example, for those NLGs that are governance professionals<sup>11</sup>), and/or preferences to limit deployments to 2 or 3 at one time.

NGA worked closely with NLGs to overcome these constraints and matched all referrals to one of the designated NLGs, in 85% of cases this was within a 3-week target. During June and July 2022, NGA also sought to increase capacity to support greater diversity and help address some of these potential capacity constraints. A campaign was undertaken to recruit additional NLGs, with a particular focus on the North East, North West and South West; and encouraging applications from BME candidates and those with experience of governance in schools and academies with religious character, including non-Christian faiths in those areas.

Looking forward, some stakeholders questioned whether the overall number of NLGs would be sufficient to meet needs.

- RDD stakeholders said a cap on referrals had been in place for the first pilot year, and that if this were lifted, there was the potential for considerably more referrals to be made.
- By May 2022, 12% of the potential list of eligible maintained schools had been referred (those that had an overall and leadership and management requires improvement (RI) Ofsted rating)<sup>12</sup>. Decisions about whether and how to boost future engagement through this referral route will influence the extent to which the current level and location of NLGs is sufficient for the programme going forward.
- Some LA and other stakeholders also felt that eligibility criteria for maintained schools should be widened to support a more preventative approach including with those currently rated good or outstanding.

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<sup>11</sup> Clerks to governing/trustee boards.

<sup>12</sup> Data supplied by DfE (in November 2022) regarding the number of maintained schools eligible for an NLG.. 94 maintained schools had been referred to the reformed programme, compared to 777 maintained schools across England that were eligible for funded support from an NLG through the reformed programme. This is those schools that have a Requires Improvement (RI) Ofsted judgement with RI in Leadership and Management.

## Is the amount of NLG support sufficient and appropriate?

### Number of days available for NLG deployments

The amount of time available for individual NLG deployments through the reformed programme varied depending on the educational context and referral route. Maintained schools and single academy trusts (SATs) were normally allocated 3 days and multi-academy trusts (MATs) 5 days. Deployments via the ESFA often had up to 10 days available. This was to reflect the often more challenging circumstances or issues that these trusts referred via an ESFA case worker faced.

These differences reflected the different funding routes and eligibility criteria identified at the outset of the programme (as outlined in the introduction). They enabled different types of NLG offer or delivery according to the commissioning organisations (LAs, RDDs or ESFA). Specifically, the maintained school deployments (referred by LAs) were focused purely on delivering the ERG and report. Whereas the ESFA (and some RDD) deployments could, and did, involve additional support, facilitation, and capacity building to support trusts to progress the action plans arising from the ERG.

Stakeholders were mostly satisfied that the amount of time spent by NLGs and the support available via the 5-day or more models was sufficient to meet needs. However, some NLGs and other stakeholders reflected that the 3-day model for maintained schools was insufficient. Some NLGs said that they would take 4 to 5 days to deliver the offer.

Several stakeholders also thought that the NLG role for maintained schools could be expanded (and therefore the number of days available to deliver it). This would be to bring the offer in line with that available through the RDD and ESFA referral routes: to include the potential for the NLG to deliver or, at least to more clearly signpost schools to additional support to help schools address the actions identified for them through the ERG.

### Timescales for NLG deployment

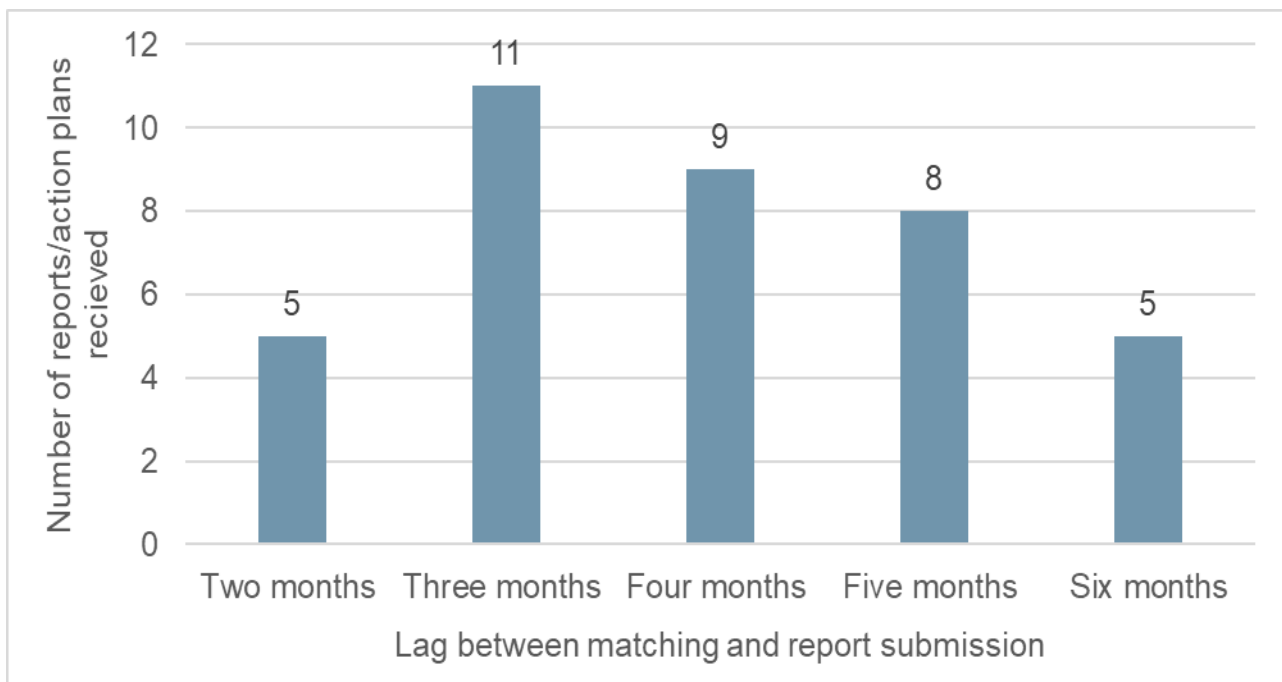
An expectation was set for the first year of the reformed programme for NLGs to deliver an ERG and produce a report and action plan within a 3-month period. Some NLGs said the initial 3-month timeframe could be a challenge to achieve. Examples where this was the case included when:

- NLGs had been matched to a school or trust just before school holidays started.
- There was a reluctance amongst governors or trustees to commit to the NLG process.

- A Governing Board meeting had been held just before the match was made. In these cases, NLGs had to wait at least another 3 months to have the opportunity to observe a board meeting (this being a requirement for all NLGs to deliver).

These challenges were reflected in the timescales achieved for the 38 reports and action plans that had been produced by the end of May 2022. Almost 60% were delivered 4 to 6 months after the initial deployment of the NLG (Figure 1). It is also worth noting, however, that the intention was for delivery to take place within 3 “term” months as opposed to calendar months. This was to accommodate, for example, school holidays. There is therefore the potential for greater clarity regarding intended timescales in this respect.

**Figure 1 Timeliness of report submission from matching (at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**



Source: NGA Management Information May 2022

Feedback from some stakeholders (commissioning bodies and senior leaders) also highlighted some frustrations associated with delays in the receipt of reports from NLGs (up to 2 months in a couple of cases). It is not clear whether this was a delay linked to the production of the report by the NLGs concerned, or whether it was more a function of the quality assurance process.

NLGs were also required to provide a progress review a further 3 months after the production of the ERG report and action plan. This was intended to ensure that improvements in governance were embedded as soon as possible and not left for the longer term. Some stakeholders said a longer timescale (up to a year) for progress reviews would be more appropriate. This would allow more opportunity for schools and trusts to effectively progress the actions identified.

## Findings: Deployment of NLGs

The following two research questions were considered for the deployment of NLGs:

- **Research Question 3:** How effective have referrals to the reformed NLG programme been?
- **Research Question 4:** How effective has matching NLGs to schools and trusts been?

### How effective is the referral process?

By the end of May 2022, 231 referrals had been made to the reformed NLG programme. This included those from all commissioning routes, all 8 regions and across education settings.

#### Commissioning routes

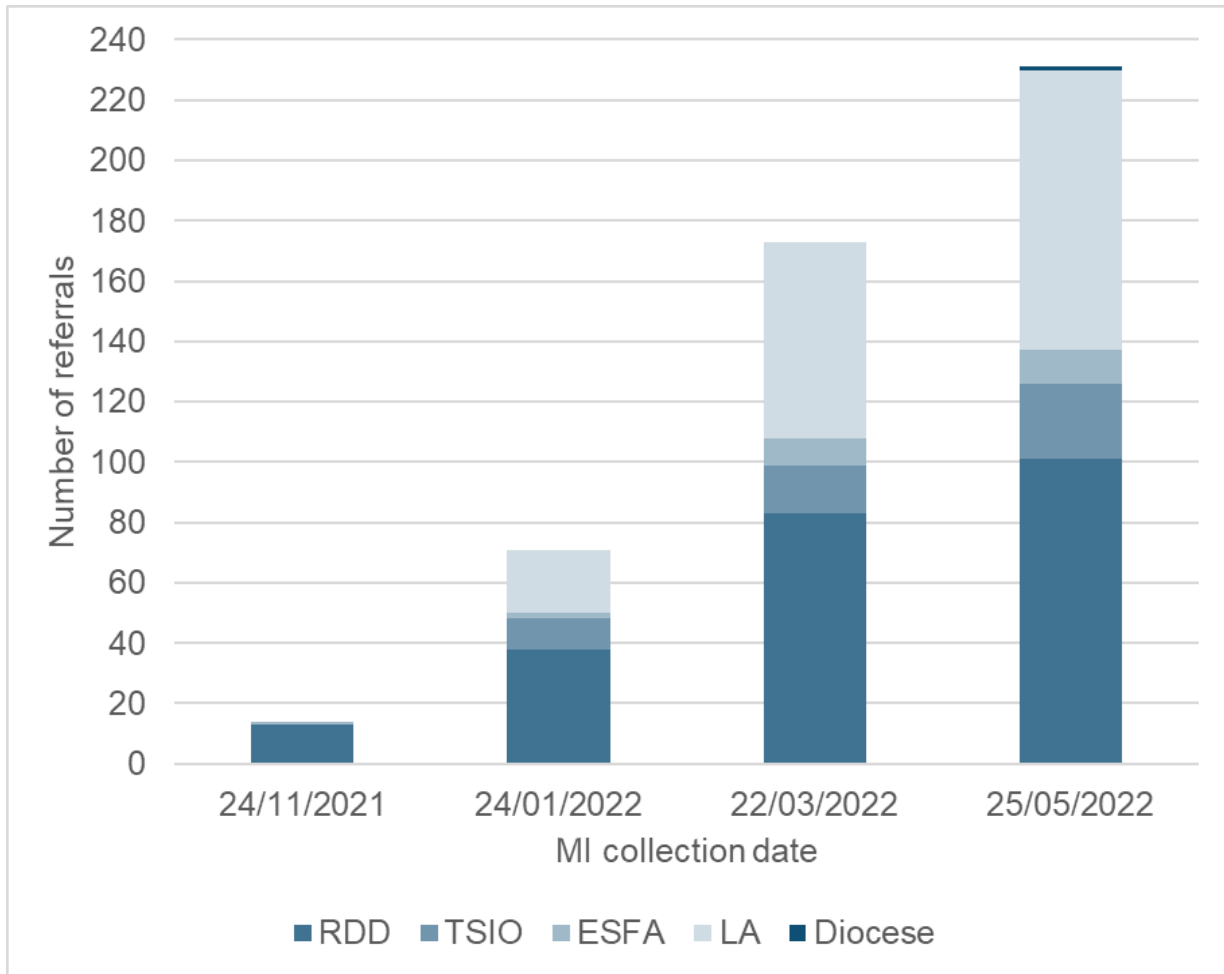
The number of referrals in the first year of delivery was broadly in line with expectations for RDD regional priorities, LAs and the ESFA, with respectively, 93, 101 and 11 referrals made by the end of May 2022. Referrals via the RDD TSIO route were lower than anticipated (with just 25 referrals compared to an expectation of 90 by the end of April 2022). Only one referral from a diocese had been received by the end of May 2022. Overall, 104 referrals were for MATs, 33 for SATs, and 94 for maintained or faith schools.

#### Profile of referrals

The profile of referrals was more compressed than expected, with most referrals and deployments taking place within a 4-6-month period rather than over 9 months. Initial engagement with the programme came primarily from RDD referrals in November and December 2021, with a small number also from ESFA. NGA started to engage with some LAs before Christmas 2021, with the pace of referrals from all routes picking up in the new year.

Figure 2 shows a concentration of referrals occurred between the January and March MI reporting dates, with an increase of over 100 in 2 months. This was a result of significant numbers of referrals from the RDD route taking longer than anticipated to come through the system, so they started to come through in earnest at the same time as those from LAs. This, coupled with an increased concentration of referrals prior to the end of the financial year, led to more intense delivery for NGA and NLGs. There is an expectation that the profile of referrals is likely to be smoother for future years of delivery.

**Figure 2 Number of referrals by commissioning route, aggregated over 2-month periods (at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**

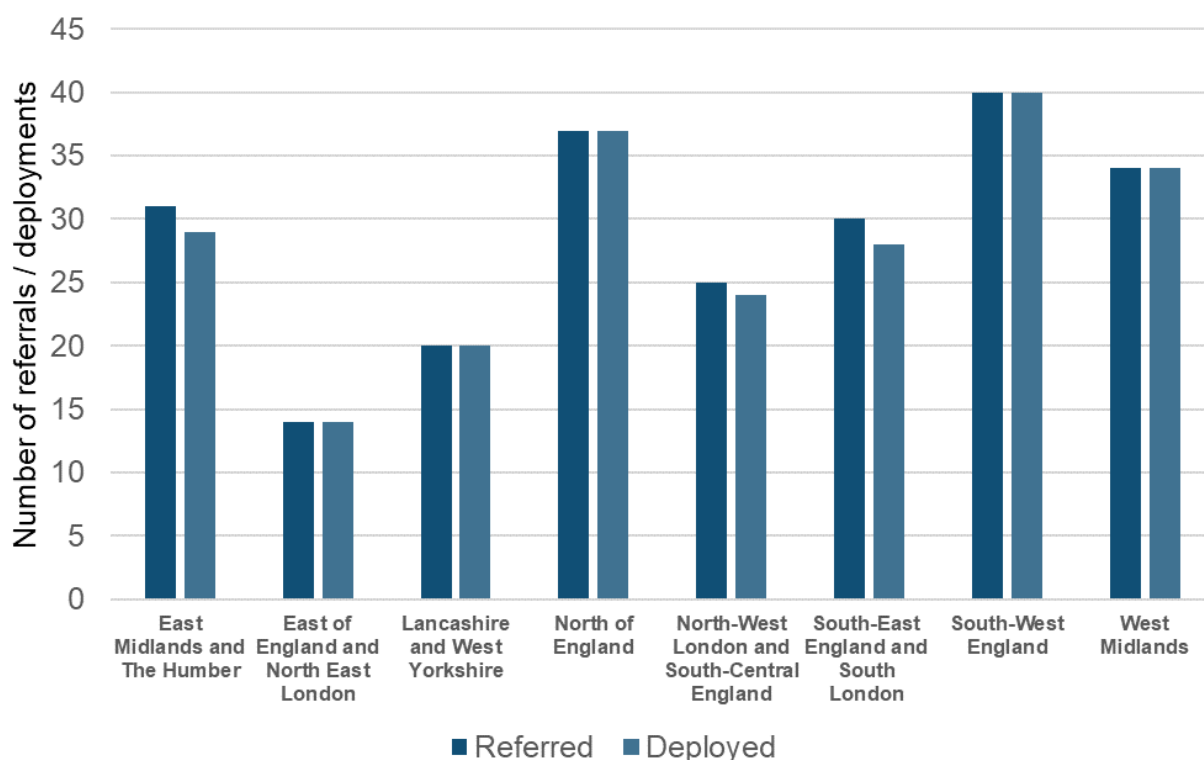


Source: NGA Management Information May 2022

### Regions and localities

There were some differences in referral rate across geographical regions and LA areas. Figure 3 shows the North of England and South-West England had the most referrals and deployments. The East of England and North-East London had the least.

**Figure 3 Number of referrals and deployment by region (at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**



Source: NGA Management Information May 2022

Table 4 shows that whilst referrals from LAs covered all 8 regions, there was variability in numbers which reflected different approaches taken by LAs to engage and refer maintained schools. Some LAs did not engage at all with the reformed programme. Lancashire and West Yorkshire was amongst the regions with the lowest number of referrals, despite having the largest number of eligible schools for referral<sup>13</sup>. Although the East of England and North East London has a smaller number of eligible schools, they too have a low number of referrals, with LAs referring just 4% of the schools eligible for support.

<sup>13</sup> Data supplied by DfE (in November 2022) regarding the number of maintained schools eligible for an NLG.

**Table 4 Number of eligible maintained schools and referrals by region  
(at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**

	Number of eligible schools	Number of LA referrals	% of eligible
East Midlands and the Humber	107	15	14%
East of England and North-East London	49	2	4%
Lancashire and West Yorkshire	164	15	9%
North of England	76	22	29%
North-West London and South-Central England	77	6	8%
South-East England and South London	96	4	4%
South West England	89	13	15%
West Midlands	119	17	14%
Total	777	94	12%

Source: NGA Management Information May 2022

## Educational context

Most referrals (55%) were for primary school settings with smaller numbers from multi-phase, secondary and all-through settings. The smallest number of referrals came through for distinct early years settings.

## NLG days requested

Most referrals requested the 3-day (for maintained schools or SATs), or 5-day (for MATs) offer from NLGs. Some referrals specified the potential for additional days which could be used if required after the initial review period:

- ESFA commissions were referred for reviews between 3 and 8 days for the initial review, with the option for additional days (up to 10) for some. The 3-day reviews were for SATs.
- RDD referrals varied between 1 and 7 days, again with the option for additional days (up to 10) for some. Some RDD referrals for SATS had been for 5-day reviews, differing from the standard 3-day offer.

- TSIO referrals have mainly been for 5-day reviews, with a couple of 3-day reviews for SATs.
- All LA and diocese commissions were referred for 3-day reviews.

## Referral approaches

There were distinct differences in the referral approaches adopted by the commissioning bodies. This reflected the different funding routes and eligibility criteria and ultimately impacted on the offer available to schools and trusts.

RDDs and the ESFA tended to adopt diagnostic, targeted and preventative approaches:

- RDD commissioning included two routes for referral to the reformed NLG programme: those identified by regional delivery offices; and those identified via the TSIO alongside the NLE programme. Referral involved RDD officers diagnosing and targeting trusts that might benefit from the NLG offer. This would often involve encouraging senior leaders and trustees to commit to the process involved. In some cases, senior leaders or trustees had themselves suggested or asked for NLG involvement. There was some variance across individual RDDs in the approach and level of proactivity taken. In one RDD region, specific promotional activity was undertaken to encourage referrals via the TSIO route, whereas in other regions engagement via this route had been relatively low.
- ESFA referrals were also identified by local case workers. Internal promotion activity was undertaken to encourage and support referral targeted on financial concerns, particularly with a view to developing a preventative approach.

Referrals via LAs (and dioceses) predominantly involved promotion of an NLG offer to eligible schools. NGA provided LAs with promotional material to contact those schools in their area that were eligible: i.e., those that had an RI Ofsted rating overall and including RI for Leadership and Management. Emails were sent from NGA via LAs letting schools know about the opportunity for “free support” from an NLG.

As such, LAs tended to be a conduit for information, rather than undertaking a more targeted approach based on their understanding of needs and issues within specific schools. As might be expected, individual LAs did take slightly different approaches. Some were more proactive and targeted in engaging schools (resulting a greater number of referrals/deployments in these areas). Others chose not to make any referrals (rather addressing needs locally or through other support mechanisms).

Several stakeholders, including LAs and senior leaders from schools, said that the eligibility criteria for maintained schools could be expanded to support a more preventative approach to referral from LAs (more in line with that taken by RDDs and ESFA). They felt that RI schools often already had processes or actions in place to



support improvement. Conversely, good or outstanding schools might be experiencing governance issues which if identified could be supported and addressed early through the NLG offer.

Linked to the variance in referral approach, feedback from stakeholders identified several other related differences in the way in which referrals were supported and communicated.

- **Reasons for referral:** When outlining the reasons for referral, LAs commonly simply stated “confirmed by the LA” or “Ofsted judgement”. RDDs and ESFA referrals on the other hand tended to provide more specific diagnostic information linked to, for example, the structure or leadership of the trustee board, skills of trustees/governors, consistency of governance, potential growth of a trust, or financial risks.
- **NGA engagement with commissioners:** NGA were able to offer some strategic engagement with RDDs and the ESFA which supported the targeted and diagnostic approach to referral. They conducted regular meetings with RDD and ESFA commissioners to promote engagement with the programme, explain eligibility and the support on offer. Through these conversations, they were also able to identify reasons for potential fluctuations in referral rate. NGA also undertook a considerable amount of proactive engagement with LAs (identifying contacts, emails, follow up phone calls and meetings to describe the programme and commissioning process). Driven by the eligibility criteria, however, the focus was more about encouraging LAs to promote the offer of an NLG to schools, than identifying or diagnosing those that might benefit most from NLG involvement.
- **Scoping activity:** NLGs themselves sometimes undertook scoping discussions with commissioners prior to contacting the school or trust they had been matched to. This approach was not undertaken consistently and occurred more often with RDDs and ESFA for trust referrals; and less so with LAs for maintained school referrals. There was initially no expectation that scoping should be undertaken. However, given the complexity of ESFA referrals, it was formally incorporated into the ESFA approach to referral.
- **Encouraging school or trust commitment:** There was a requirement that the commissioners that made referrals to the reformed NLG programme should also undertake some activity to secure the commitment of schools or trusts that they were putting forward. In line with the promotional approach taken by many LAs, they tended to be less engaged (compared to RDDs) in directly encouraging schools to engage with referrals. Nevertheless, there was considerable variance across individual LAs (and RDDs), with some more proactive or strategic in their approach.

## Successful referral practices

Stakeholders identified several referral practices that worked particularly well.

- **NLG scoping:** Where this occurred, stakeholders said there had been real value provided. It enabled NLGs to have a better understanding of context and issues to be explored. Some LA and RDD stakeholders also said they thought it should be a formal part of the process for information sharing prior to deployments taking place.
- **Portal:** NGA developed a portal for commissioners to share information about referrals that were being made. Stakeholders said this worked well and was an improvement on the initial spreadsheet approach that was used.
- **NGA guidance:** NGA supplied guidance information to all commissioners to aid with understanding which schools were eligible, how to refer them, and what support from an NLG would include. This included case study examples that could be shared with schools and trusts to encourage them to participate. Stakeholders identified this information as useful.
- **NGA support:** All stakeholder groups said that the NGA team were very supportive and responsive to commissioners needs and queries. Some RDDs identified real value in the regular review meetings undertaken with them by NGA. A couple also said NGA (or an NLG) had undertaken training with commissioners which was an additional benefit, providing them with a better understanding of what an ERG would involve for a school or trust.

## Areas for improvement in referral practices

Feedback across stakeholders also highlighted the potential for some improvements in referral processes.

- **More consistent approach to engage and secure commitment from schools and trusts:** Through consultations with non-participating schools, we are aware that the less engaged and proactive approach by some LAs is likely to have led to some missed opportunities to engage schools that may have benefited from the NLG offer..
- **Build on feedback from schools or trusts that have already engaged:** Some stakeholders suggested that more direct engagement from NGA to support the “sell” to trusts would be beneficial. This might include, for example, links with other trusts to speak about how the NLG offer had helped them.
- **Internal commissioner approval practices:** Some RDDs reflected that there was potential to improve efficiency with internal processes for NLG referrals, which involve fact checking and approval being sought from deputy directors – “this can be quite an arduous process, extending timescales” - *RDD*.

- **Consider timing of referrals:** Some stakeholders said the timing of some referrals could be more considered, for example, not directly after a Governing Board meeting; or when a senior leader or chair of trustees/governors is about to leave the school or trust.

## How effective is matching?

Most school, trust and commissioning stakeholders were positive about the timeliness of the matches made by NGA. The MI also shows that three-quarters of referrals were matched to an NLG within 2 weeks of the referral being made and almost all (95%) within 1 month.

Where matching took longer (5 to 10 weeks) this commonly occurred around Winter or Easter school holidays. A few referrals were placed on hold as per the commissioner's request; and a small number of NLGs also accepted matches on the basis that they could delay the start date because of their own capacity constraints. Some said that having no more than 2 deployments at once was ideal, to limit any confusion and enable them to effectively concentrate on each deployment. Others referenced employment and other commitments meaning they could not commit to too many deployments at once.

Some NLGs also reported that, as the rate of referrals increased over March to May 2022, there was an increase in contact from NGA to complete additional matches. In a couple of cases NLGs felt the matching process during this time may not always have resulted in best-fit matches.

“Matching has felt less precise and planned recently with a little more urgency to find a match.” – *NLG*

“Not all matches can be perfect. I am matched with a trust facing financial issues. I do have a wide range of expertise for their context but am not confident in and don't have experience of dealing with financial issues.” - *NLG*

Nevertheless, the responsiveness and management of the NGA team continued to result in timely and appropriate matches overall. All stakeholder groups were positive about the NLG matches that had been made. Many said they were satisfied with the matching process and thought that skills, prior experience, and expertise had been duly considered in the match.

- NLGs agree that their matches worked well and commented that “open and honest discussions” with the NGA team supported this.

- Most senior leaders and trustees/governors said their matches had been excellent or good, with NLGs demonstrating considerable experience in the sector, for relevant contexts (such as, in year transfer, children with SEND, local contexts), and with pertinent skills to challenge.
- Commissioners supported these views identifying that NLGs were well matched with a good range of knowledge and skills. Some also commented on the flexible approach of NGA if the Trust had a preference for a particular NLG.

## Findings: Quality of NLG role delivered

The evaluation addressed the following three research questions to consider the quality of the NLG role delivered:

- **Research Question 5:** What activities do NLGs undertake to deliver the role?
- **Research Question 6:** To what extent have NLGs been able to provide the skills and knowledge required to meet school and trust needs?
- **Research Question 7:** How effective has the NLG role been to date?

### What NLG activities are undertaken?

NLGs were usually commissioned to deliver the role within 3 days for maintained schools and SATs, and 5 days for MATs. During each deployment to a trust or school, an NLG was tasked with the following:

- Undertake an ERG - an external review of governance. The process for this involved a document review; interviews with senior leaders, governors and/or trustees; and an observation of a board meeting.
- Produce an ERG report to summarise findings and an action plan to provide clarity on what needed to be delivered, and how.
- Undertake a progress review meeting 3 months after the action plan had been delivered.

There were slightly different models of delivery for this NLG offer. This was driven by the varying educational contexts, funding routes, eligibility criteria and referral approaches as discussed in earlier sections. Specifically, the maintained school deployments (via LAs) were focused purely on delivering the ERG and report, whereas most ESFA deployments and some RDD deployments could, and did, involve additional support, facilitation, and capacity building to support trusts to progress the actions that arose from the ERG. For example:

- Feedback from NLGs, senior leader and trustees/governors identified examples of NLGs participating in and facilitating strategy days for trustees, which directly supported some of the actions identified for them.
- Some NLGs involved governors or trustees themselves in developing and identifying the actions during feedback of ERG findings.
- In one (unusual) case, where the trust had up to 10 days of NLG time, the NLG facilitated several discussions to guide the trust board through a complete change in

model of governance, developed a timetable, kept it under review and “got us back on track” where necessary.

Feedback from several stakeholders suggested the potential for more consistency and clarity in the availability of additional support to help schools and trusts to progress their action plans:

- Senior leaders and trustees/governors said they would welcome additional support or ideas on how to progress some of their actions.
- RDDs said NLG participation in a strategy day should be a standard option for all NLG deployments.
- LA stakeholders said there would be benefit in including much clearer signposting to support services and training for governors or trustees as part of the NLG reporting and action plan.

NLGs and other stakeholders also indicated that differences in referral reason also contributed to the NLG offer having a different “feel” across deployments. They reflected that some deployments felt quite “inspectoral” (e.g., when linked to financial issues or Ofsted judgements) whereas others were more focused on a requirement to grow; or others still were more developmental and reflective.

Stakeholder feedback pointed to the potential to improve consistency and effectiveness for schools and trusts at the point of initial NLG deployment.

- Whilst information about what to expect through NLG deployment is supplied to schools and trusts by the NGA, some senior leaders and trustees/governors said that they were not clear at the outset about what activities the NLG would undertake, nor the timescales involved. Some were also unclear about the reason for referral or specific focus for the ERG (as determined through referral and scoping activities).

“There could have been a clearer, upfront brief about the specific focus of ERG which would have helped to manage expectations and understanding of the purpose of the review.” – *Senior leader*

- Some NLGs and senior leaders also questioned the necessity (and value) of providing the volume of material that schools and trusts were required to provide to NLGs at the beginning of the deployment.
- Alongside this, several NLGs said it would be helpful for them to have access to NGA’s online self-assessment tool for trustees/governors. This would enable NLGs to develop an initial assessment of issues more efficiently and consistently - accessing information and views from trustees/governors at the start of deployment.

Several stakeholders (including NLGs, LAs, and senior leaders and trustees/governors) reflected that there was considerable value associated with NLGs conducting an in-

person visit to observe governing or trust boards in action. Being able to observe how governors or trustees interact enabled NLGs to develop a first-hand understanding of governance effectiveness issues. Whilst in-person observations were a requirement for the NLG offer, some flexibility was operated during times when Covid restrictions were in operation.

Earlier fieldwork identified some lack of clarity for NLGs on whether an in-person visit was required, or whether an observation of a virtual meeting would suffice. The evaluation also highlighted some examples where, due to NLG preferences, some flexibility had been provided. In one case, a senior leader said an in-person visit would have been appropriate, but it had not been delivered.

## Do NLGs provide the skills and knowledge required?

Most senior leaders and trustees/governors commented on the considerable skills, expertise, and experience that NLGs were able to use during deployments. Stakeholders said NLGs had:

- Been knowledgeable; organised and professional; forthcoming and to the point.

“So knowledgeable about governance, I had every respect for him and his views.” – *Chair of Trust Board*

“Knowledgeable, helpful, professional and useful reflections and discussions” – *Senior Leader*

- Effectively diagnosed issues within context.

“Took the time to listen and had an open mind” – *Chair of Governing Board*

“Aligned the plan with our existing plans” – *Senior Leader*

- Enabled a focus and recognition of requirements of governance.

“Focused our attention and developed understanding of requirements” – *Chair of Trust Board*

“Galvanised the team and helped them set targets and get going” – *Chair of Governing Board*

- Challenged and engaged governance teams.

“The NLG was excellently matched, and expertly delivered. Very engaging, organised, detailed, challenging, open to discussion, transparent, sensitive” – *Senior leader*

“Informal feedback was good and challenging – really put me through the mill, very positive” – *Senior leader*

- Brought an external and independent perspective.

“Very sophisticated and clever how they got us to think about things in a non-confrontational way” – *Chair of Trust Board*

ESFA case workers commented that NLGs had regularly engaged with them through the process. They had valued this opportunity to receive feedback and early insight into the issues and progress made. This is a particular feature of the ESFA deployment model and did not occur consistently for the other commissioning contacts (RDDs and LAs).

At the point at which evaluation fieldwork was undertaken, very few NLG deployments had got to the stage of an ERG report and production of an action plan. It was, therefore, often too early for stakeholders to comment on this element of the process. In the small number of cases where this point had been reached, feedback was generally positive about the content and value of the action plans produced.

- RDD and LA stakeholders said that the reports they had seen appeared to be good quality, often challenging to trust boards and with constructive feedback.
- One RDD felt there was some variability in style across NLGs, with some being more very forthright and others a little ‘softer’ in their approach.
- Some LA stakeholders identified the potential for reports to include clearer signposting to support services or training to help meet actions identified.
- Senior leaders and trustees/governors reflected that action plans were good, appropriately sensitive and with a mix of positives, challenges, and achievable recommendations.

“Excellent report and advice provided by the NLG” – *Chair of Trustees*

## How effective is the NLG role?

Several stakeholders indicated strong positive perceptions of the NLG role, and notably, an improvement in professionalism and expertise of NLGs compared to the previous programme.



Many stakeholders said that trustees/governors and senior leaders had engaged positively with the NLG and the ERG process – in many cases supported by the role played by the NLG.

“The trustees are fully engaged – they were not all ‘on side’ at the outset but came with an open mind and prepared to listen. The NLG helped us in the way she framed the issues for them, and supported us to get the messages across” – *Senior leader*

“The NLG has been persistent in seeking to engage trustees/governors once initial contact was made” - *RDD*

Through a review of action plans delivered by the end of May 2022, NGA identified some common themes that schools and trusts are being challenged on to address. These included board composition, size, skills, and turnover; outdated structures and schemes of delegation; financial oversight; separation; relationships and communication between the tiers of governance; scrutiny and focus; vision and strategic planning; risk; and board dynamics.

Whilst it was too early to comment on the change and progress made by schools and trusts, many stakeholders were supportive about the potential of the reformed programme to have a positive impact and to challenge them to improve governance in these areas. Some also indicated that improvements happened sooner than planned or would not have happened otherwise.

“The NLG was really good at interrogating us and encouraging us to make decisions with her advice – this has given us a firm foundation to go forward” – *Chair of Trustee Board*

“We wouldn’t be where we are now without the NLG – this has really accelerated our plans for improvement” – *Senior Leader*

“We think it will be really valuable – as a governing body, you’ve got nothing to compare yourself against. If you have an expert telling you what you should and shouldn’t be doing it’s really helpful. I wish I’d had one four years ago!” – *Chair of Governing Board*

“We had already identified several things, but this process may have spurred us on to quicker action. Even as self-reflection it has been helpful” – *Chair of Trustee Board*

There were also a small number of examples of progress already being made. In a couple of cases NLGs had observed some progress during the early process of the ERG, with schools or trusts making some immediate changes following initial observations and recommendations from the NLG.

“We are making huge changes – we have completely changed our model of governance and are putting the child at the top of the agenda. We should be ready to go for 1st September” – *Senior leader*

“We have made good progress on actions so far – developing finance systems; changing management of the board, and providing further detail in our strategic plan” – *Chair of Trustee Board*

## Findings: Process efficiency

The evaluation considered two research questions focussed on the process efficiency of the reformed NLG programme:

- **Research Question 8:** What has been the value and effectiveness of the recruitment, assessment, and training processes for NLGs?
- **Research Question 9:** What has been the value and effectiveness of the quality assurance process?

## How effective is NLG recruitment and training?

### Recruitment, assessment, and moderation

A comprehensive process was delivered for recruitment, assessment, and moderation of potential NLG applicants. It was focused on specific eligibility criteria, which included previous experience and current role as chair of trustees/governors or governance professional; and skills, including professional credibility, problem-solving and influencing for improvement, and capacity building and knowledge transfer.

The process involved:

- An initial review of applications based on core eligibility criteria.
- A more in-depth review by two assessors of candidates' prior experience.
- Panel interviews for those shortlisted.
- External moderation by the AoEA of all applications passing the initial assessment and a sample of applicants' interview notes.

From application to designation, prospective NLGs completed application forms, produced case studies, and undertook a panel interview. A total of 115 passed the initial assessment phase, thus taking part in the interview process. Following interview, 66 applicants were then recommended for designation.

Assessors, panel members and moderators were all trained prior to their involvement in the recruitment process to ensure consistency of expectations throughout the process. NGA placed emphasis on improving provision from the previous programme but also focused on supporting individuals to do this rather than being restrictive. For example, applicants were able to expand on their case studies or submit additional examples if assessors felt their submitted case studies did not fully reflect their experience and specialisms.

AoEA found the assessment process to be robust. Overall, most NLGs felt that the recruitment process worked well with clear criteria, a suitably challenging assessment process and comments that the wider criteria to include governance professionals<sup>14</sup> was positive. Comments included that assessing and recruiting governance professionals was a more inclusive process.

Nevertheless, several NLGs and some LAs thought that the recruitment process and eligibility criteria had potentially excluded some “really strong talent”. NLGs commented that it was difficult to specify all their experience in just 2 case studies. Both NLGs and some LA stakeholders identified individuals they had previously worked with who had not been recruited but were described as strong candidates.

## **NLG induction and training**

Training for designated NLGs involved a 2-day induction. NLGs were positive about the training they received noting it was a useful baseline. The training was particularly valued by previous NLGs who said they had not had any similar training in previous years.

Some more experienced NLGs also commented that the training would have been useful for individuals new to conducting ERGs but felt that additional training or mentoring may have been needed for these individuals prior to commencing their first deployment. This was taken on board by NGA who provided additional support for newer NLGs and did not include them within the first wave of referrals. One NLG reflected that one improvement to the training would be to include an expectation for participants to recognise the contribution and value that other perspectives could bring to the learning.

NGA supplied style guides and templates for reports alongside example reports. NLGs said these were a useful addition to the training. More recently NLGs suggested that a template for progress reviews would also be helpful, which subsequently was actioned by NGA.

NLGs identified how valuable the support from the NGA team had been, and particularly how responsive they had been to requests for additional guidance and support or queries. NLGs were also positive about the opportunities provided for further development and there was an appetite for this to continue. NGA provided various networking opportunities and check-ins for NLGs where they were able to discuss and clarify aspects of process and provide further guidance on specific elements of the NLG role. NGA also setup a WhatsApp group which supported further networking opportunities.

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<sup>14</sup> Clerks to trustee/governing boards.

## How effective is quality assurance?

NGA undertook a comprehensive quality assurance process as part of this initial roll-out of the reformed NLG programme. This included review of the first reports produced by each of the NLGs; and then a sample of reports thereafter based on the complexity of cases and some random sampling. NGA were keen to ensure consistency of delivery, structure, and style of report and that key messages were easy to identify within action plans, thus providing clear pathways for development.

Feedback provided by NLGs was positive about the QA process. They said it had been rigorous for the first report and reflected the standardised expectations in the reformed programme. Some NLGs also said that the QA process allowed for a greater understanding of the report style and structure required. This included some more experienced NLGs who felt that, as their style was different to what they are used to, the QA process allowed for their understanding to be verified.

One NLG commented that the process was lengthy, involving 3 individuals in the process, but reflected this could have been due to it being one of the first reports submitted. In addition, through the evaluation, we were made of a small number of reports that had been considerably delayed and it was not clear why this was the case. It is possible that the QA process may be contributing to this.

## Conclusions

This final section addresses the overarching research question - **Research Question 10**: To what extent has the reformed NLG programme effectively challenged schools and trusts to improve performance?

It was too early in the delivery of the reformed NLG programme to definitively address this question. Only 38 action plans had been produced by the end of May 2022 and only two progress review meetings had been held. Nevertheless, stakeholders provided views on the likelihood of achieving this goal based on delivery to date.

- Stakeholders reflected positively on the level of consistency, rigour and challenge being offered through the reformed NLG programme compared to the previous less-structured support offered through NLGs.

“A very purposeful programme – I had concerns about the quality of NLGs in the previous programme, but now they are more quality controlled it is so much better and more professional” - *RDD*

“The programme has professionalised governance and is likely to achieve change as a result” - *LA*

- Feedback also highlighted the considerable skills, expertise and experience brought to bear through deployments this year; and the quality, challenge and constructive feedback offered through the action plans produced to date.
- Commissioners stated that the reformed programme provided them with another useful “tool in their armour” to challenge and support schools and trusts.

The evidence from action plans also shows that, through the programme, schools and trusts were being challenged to address a range of themes including board composition, structures, and relationships; financial oversight; trust growth or separation; vision and planning; and scrutiny and risk.

Despite some regional and local capacity constraints, the profile and number of NLGs recruited and designated in this first year was sufficient to meet the level of demand from referrals. This was supported by a proactive and responsive NGA team who effectively matched schools and trusts with specific NLG experience and expertise. Decisions on rollout for future years of the reformed programme would determine whether there was a need to expand capacity, even with the additional NLGs that NGA were recruiting in June/July 2022.

The reformed NLG programme offers a core service to all eligible trusts and schools of an external review and a follow up. Some routes allow for additional support. Therefore,

the programme did not operate as a single model in its first year of delivery. There was variance in referral approach, eligibility and targeting, and delivery of or signposting to additional support and capacity building. These differences limited consistency and could potentially undermine overall outcomes and the ability of the programme to challenge all schools and trusts engaged to improve performance.

Areas of consistency that could be addressed included:

- Encouraging a more preventative approach for LA referral practices. Consider expanding eligibility criteria to good or outstanding schools that face potential governance issues, with a greater focus from LAs on diagnosing schools in need.
- Encourage and support clearer signposting to additional support and training necessary for schools or trusts to achieve actions. This might include a flexible option for additional NLG time for strategy days or other capacity support.
- Further research to understand different approaches to engagement across LAs, with the potential to encourage LAs to take a more diagnostic (rather than promotional) approach.
- Consideration as to whether the expected delivery timescales were realistic and appropriate. This includes both the 3-month delivery timeframe from deployment through to delivery of the ERG report and action plan; and the expectation of a progress review just 3 months later.

There would also be value in clarifying some expectations and developing some good practice associated with programme delivery, including:

- Clarify and confirm guidelines and exceptions associated with the expectation of an in-person board observation.
- Clarify expectations and a process to ensure that NLGs provide a verbal outline of what a school or trust can expect in terms of the ERG activities to be undertaken, timescales and the specific focus for the ERG in context.
- Provide additional support for all commissioners to support them in the requirement to encourage governors or trustees to engage and commit to the NLG referral.
- Encourage and/or expect NLGs to undertake scoping discussions with commissioners prior to each NLG deployment.
- Develop case studies from schools and trusts that have previously been through the process, to provide a promotional and explanatory tool for use with new potential referrals.

## Appendix A

Research Themes
<b>i. Capacity</b>
<b>1) Your view of the extent to which the NLGs recruited and trained meet or are likely to meet school/trust needs, in terms of?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of NLGs recruited &amp; trained</li> <li>• Skill sets/mix of those recruited and trained</li> <li>• Representation - regions, groups, educational context</li> <li>• Scale of support provided (number of trusts/schools supported and amount of support)</li> </ul>
<b>2) Please describe the amount of support provided by NLGs - to date and planned:</b>
- Number of schools/trusts deployed to per NLG by type (education context), referral route (RDD, ESFA, LA/Diocese, other), region/location
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amount of time spent per school/trust</li> </ul>
<b>3) Your view of sufficiency/appropriateness of the amount of support and length of time spent by NLGs with (your) school(s)/trust(s) - to date and planned:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More or less time spent than anticipated? Why?</li> </ul>
<b>4) To what extent are NLGs leaving the programme (becoming de-designated) during their 3-year term? How many and why?</b>
<b>ii. Deployment</b>
<b>5)a) Please describe how schools and trusts are referred onto the programme.</b>
<b>5)b) How was your school/trust referred to the reformed NLG programme?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process for identifying school(s)/trust(s) in need</li> <li>• Eligibility criteria used? Flexibility of process?</li> <li>• Links/overlap with other routes - RDD, ESFA, LA/Dioceses, other</li> <li>• Expectations/targets set</li> <li>• Any schools/trusts that were invited but declined an NLG referral?</li> </ul>
<b>6) Your view of the effectiveness to date of referral processes?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the eligibility criteria fit for purpose? How flexible have they been? Is this appropriate?</li> <li>• Representation - regions, groups, educational contexts</li> <li>• Performance against targets to date?</li> <li>• Anything that has worked particularly well? Do you think the process could be improved? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<b>7) Please describe how NLGs are matched to schools/trusts.</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Factors affecting decisions around matching</li> <li>• Stakeholders involved</li> <li>• Involvement of the NLG(s)</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support provided to NLG(s)</li> </ul>
<b>8) Your view of the effectiveness of matching schools/trusts to NLGs?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have all schools/trusts referred been matched? If not, why?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timeliness of matching, flexible to meet demand?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantity &amp; quality of NLGs available for matching</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effectiveness in matching NLG skills, experience, contexts, needs, locations to those of the school/trust. <i>[To what extent is/has previous matched experience been important to success of the NLG role played?]</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - Anything that has worked particularly well? Do you think the process could be improved? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<b>iii. Quality</b>
<b>9)a) Please describe the deployments made for the trusts/schools you have referred</b>
<b>9)b) As an NLG, please describe the deployments you have had to date</b>
<b>9)c) Please describe the NLG support your school/trust has had to date</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mix of referral route (RDD, ESFA, LA/Diocese, other), educational context</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reason for referral, aspects of need</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities undertaken - diagnostics, ERG, action plan, Capacity &amp; support, PIR, board observation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aspects of governance supported/addressed through NLG role</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have the school(s)/trust(s) received other support or interventions for school improvement recently? (via RDD, ESFA, LA/Dioceses, other routes)</li> </ul>
<b>10)a) Please describe role played by NGA to quality assure the ERGs, action plans and PIRs delivered by NLGs.</b>
<b>10)b) Your views on the value and effectiveness of this QA process</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anything that has worked particularly well? Do you think the process could be improved? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<b>11) Your views on the extent to which NLGs have been able to deliver the skills and knowledge required to meet trust and governance needs:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective diagnostics, challenge, action planning, advice/guidance, capacity building, progress review</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of ERGs undertaken</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective action plans produced</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of progress &amp; impact reviews (PIRs)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any additional support/guidance provided to NLGs during deployments</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anything that has worked particularly well? Do you think the process could be improved? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<b>12) Your view of the effectiveness of NLG role to date?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How well have school leaders and trustees/governors engaged with the NLG role?</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress made by school(s)/trust(s) with action plans to date</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What changes or outcomes have been achieved by school(s)/trust(s) as a result of the NLG role?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were there any activities or aspects of support provided by NLGs that were most or least useful to schools/trusts?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent have schools/trusts been satisfied with the NLG role, action plans and progress made?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anything that has worked particularly well? Do you think the process could be improved? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<p><b>13) Your view of the extent to which the reformed NLG programme has effectively challenged trusts to improve governance? How does this differ from the previous NLG programme?</b></p>
<p><b>iv. Process efficiency</b></p>
<p><b>14) Please describe the processes involved with each of the functions - recruitment, assessment, moderation, induction/training and quality assurance of NLGs? [nb - matching &amp; deployment covered in previous questions]</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key steps/mechanisms</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholders involved</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations &amp; targets set</li> </ul>
<p><b>15) Your view of the effectiveness of each of the functions - recruitment, assessment, moderation, induction/training and quality assurance of NLGs? [nb - matching &amp; deployment covered in previous questions]</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have expectations and targets been met?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were the eligibility criteria and application process fit for purpose?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were NLGs adequately recruited, assessed and trained for their role?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are effective processes in place for quality assuring the NLG role?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anything that has worked particularly well? Do you think the process could be improved? If so, how?</li> </ul>
<p><b>v. Conclusions and final comments</b></p>
<p><b>16) [In summary, you have identified what worked well/could be improved] - Is there anything else you would add about the effectiveness of the reformed NLG programme?</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• worked particularly well?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lessons learnt?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• anything you would change?</li> </ul>
<p><b>17) [Where appropriate] are there any schools/trusts that declined to participate in the reformed NLG programme that may be willing to participate in an evaluation interview? Please provide contact details.</b></p>



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For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

[Governors.MAILBOX@education.gov.uk](mailto:Governors.MAILBOX@education.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

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