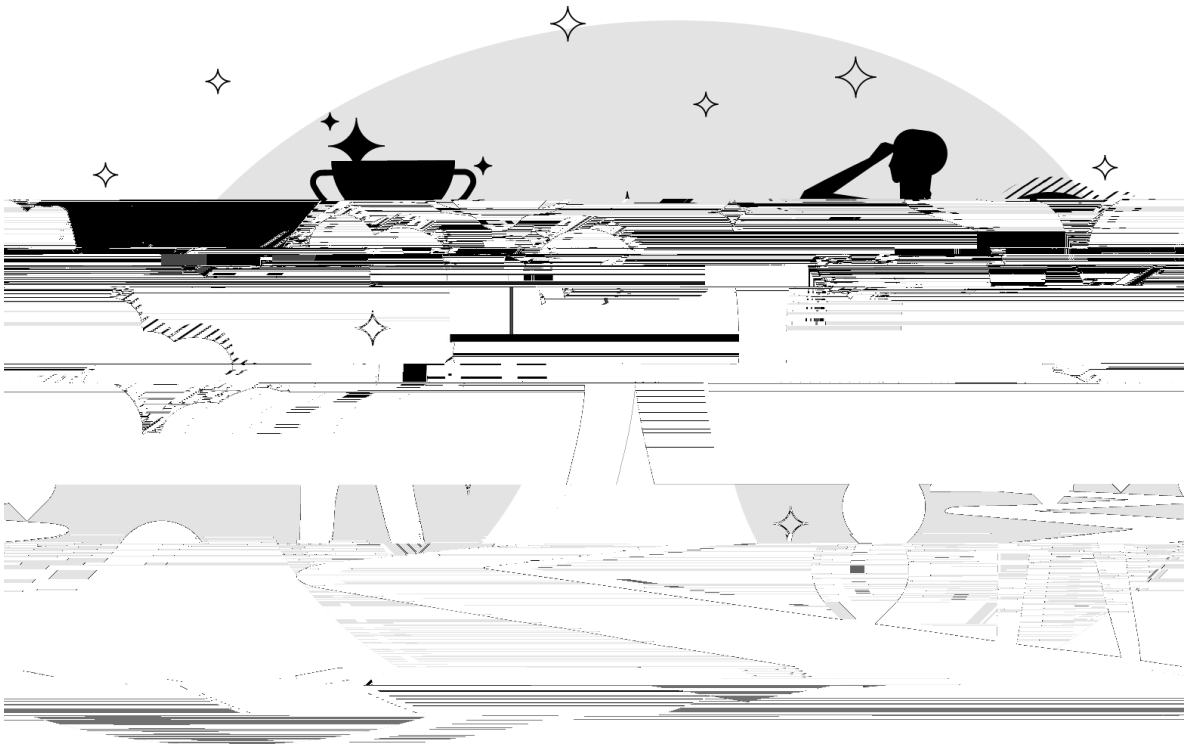
School and trust governance: the here and now

An interim report from NGA's 2023 annual governance survey

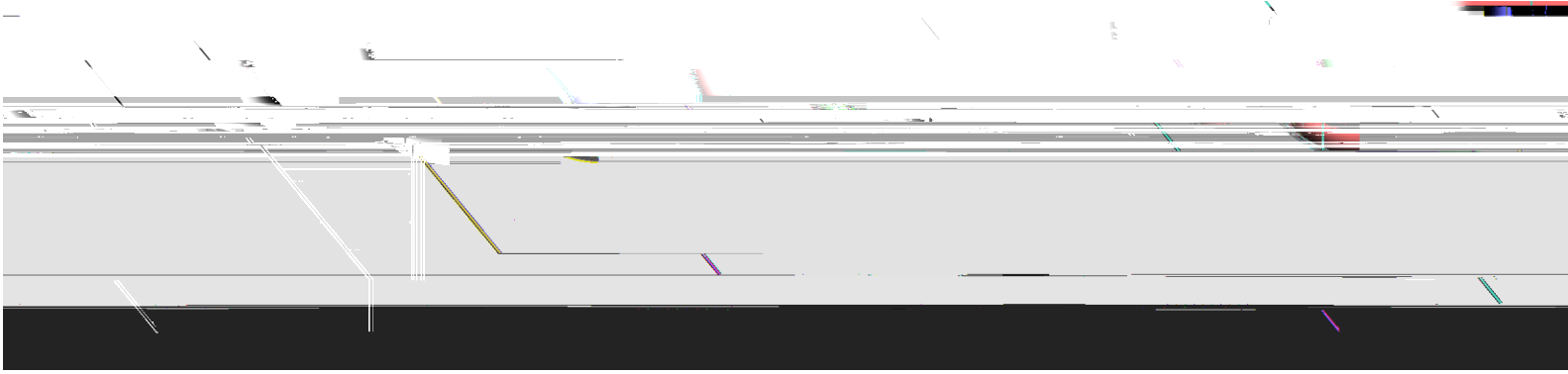


Director of Policy and Communications

July 2023
nga.org.uk

Introduction

"Governance is becoming more and it seems that the growing number of hopes, capabilities or sensitivities."



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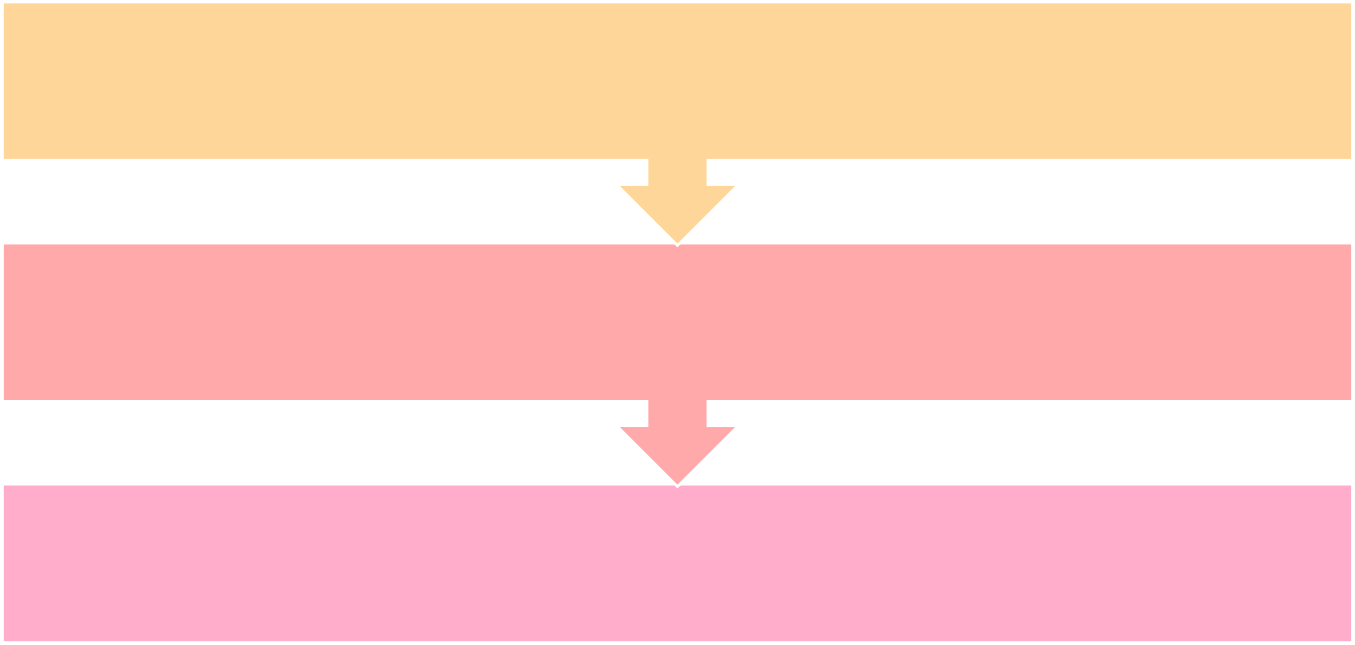
Key findings



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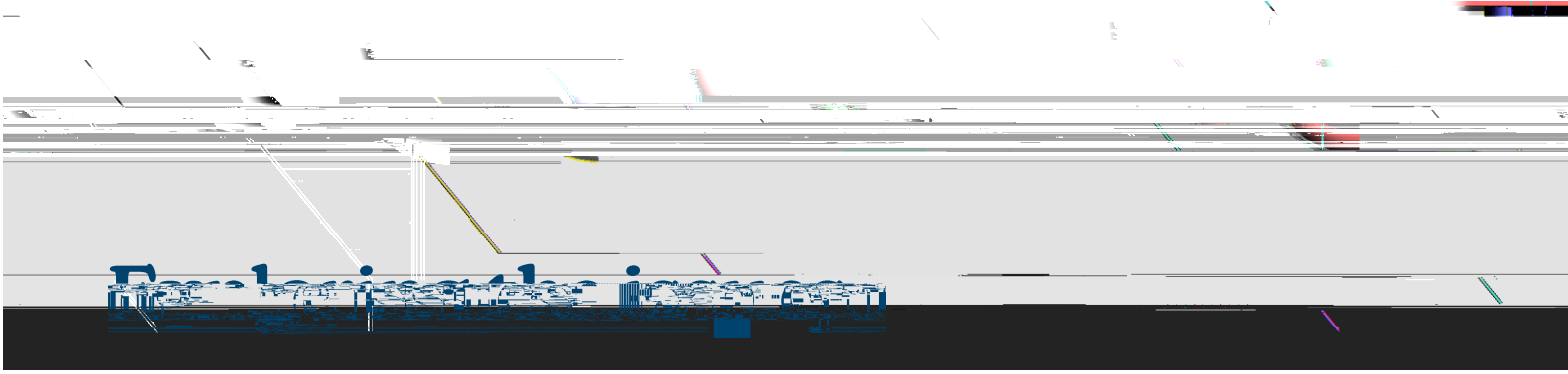

Balancing budget

In the arena of school and trust governance, certain challenges have gained prominence over the last year while others have shifted slightly in significance, as revealed by this year's survey findings.

Respondents were asked to tell us the top three challenges facing the school or trust they governed, picking three options from a list of 16. Bar 2021, when we did not specifically ask about challenges, balancing the budget has been the top challenge identified by governing boards since we first asked the question in 2018, and this year we see even more respondents placing this at the top. Balancing the budget remained the top challenge for governing boards, with an increase of 8 percentage points (52%).

Attendance is the second biggest challenge, followed by support for children with special educational needs. The slip in staff wellbeing including workload from third to fourth position, is a decrease of five percentage points (22%). This is more likely to reflect the growing prominence of attendance rather than any indication that this is an area boards feel slightly less positive about.

Notably, attracting high-quality teaching staff saw a significant increase, while the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and improving attainment moved out of the top five to seventh and 10th place respectively. Energy costs, a new entry for 2023, ranked sixth.

Variations across board types reveal differences in budgetary concerns and challenges related to behaviour, exclusions, and attainment. Primary schools prioritise budget balancing, while secondary schools face challenges in behaviour, exclusions, and pupil mental health and wellbeing. SEND schools emphasise services for pupils and staff development.

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These findings underscore the ongoing financial pressures faced by all state schools and highlight the need for attention to attendance, special educational needs, staff wellbeing, teacher recruitment, and budget management.

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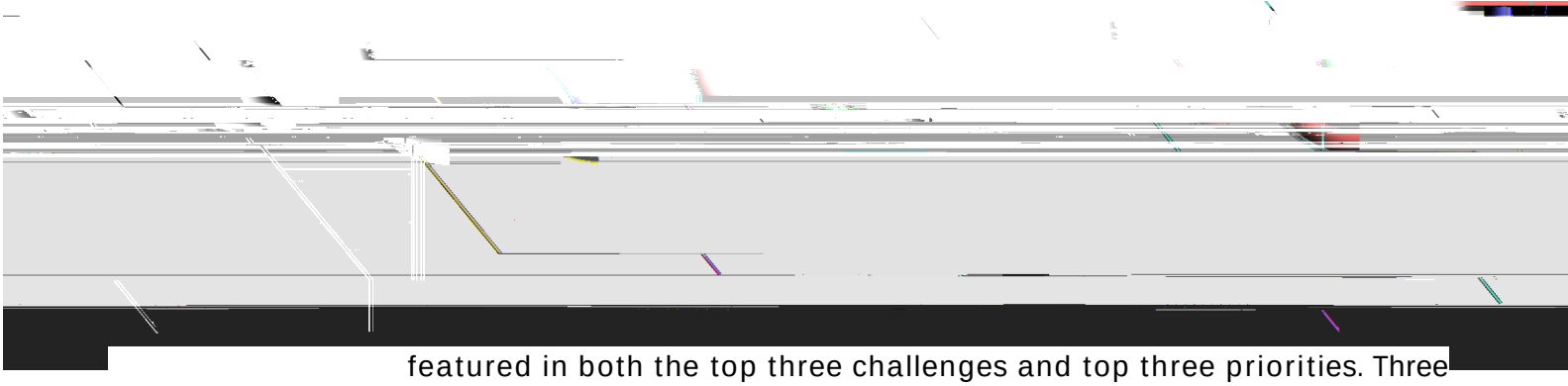
f. London and the East of England are the most pessimistic about the medium to long term financial position, while the East Midlands is least pessimistic. This finding underscores a growing sense of concern regarding the future financial outlook within the sector.

Figure two:



featured in both the top three challenges and top three priorities. Three quarters of respondents (76%) said parental communication was their most successful tool in tackling this challenge.

Attending school is clearly a critically important issue for children's life chances, including their attainment, wellbeing, wider development and safeguarding. This is an area that has gained widespread coverage and attention over the last year, so much so that

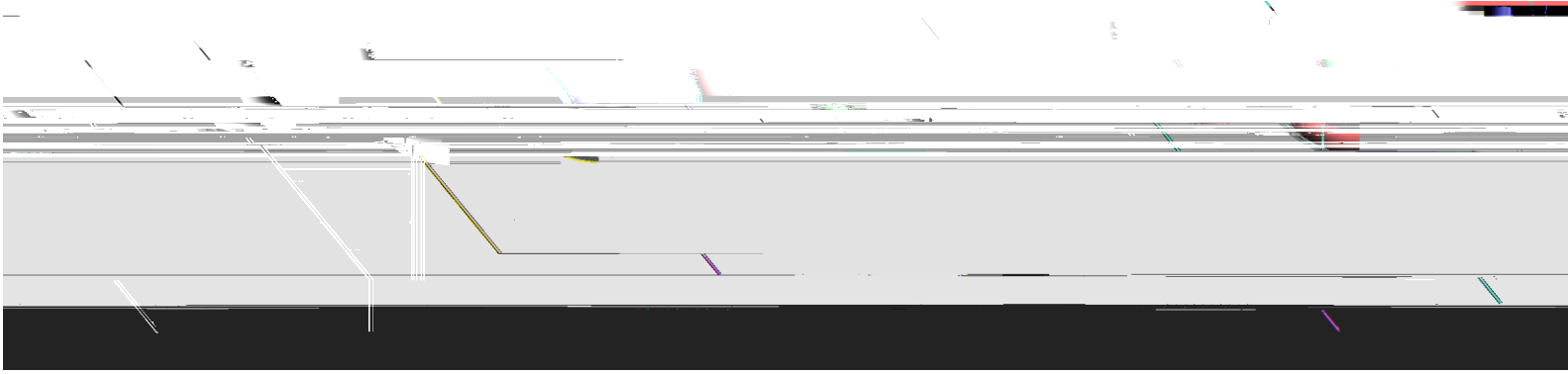


Figure three, which of these statements best reflects your views on recent industrial action.

"I support the principal [illegible] strike action but am [illegible]"

This indicates that effective communication between governing boards has been prioritised regardless of a governing boards actual support for strike action or otherwise.

However, it is noteworthy that only 47% of respondents expressed support for both the strike action itself and its underlying principles suggesting a divergence of opinion among governing boards regarding their stance and sheds more light on the mixed feelings that have dominated thinking on this.

"I understand and feel the frustration of staff about lack of [illegible] especially underfunding of schools. I supported the first couple of [illegible] not support action [illegible] need for a high quality and consistent education."

Interestingly, when analysing the data by age groups, respondents aged 30-39 exhibited the highest level of support for strike action and its principles, with 71% expressing their endorsement.

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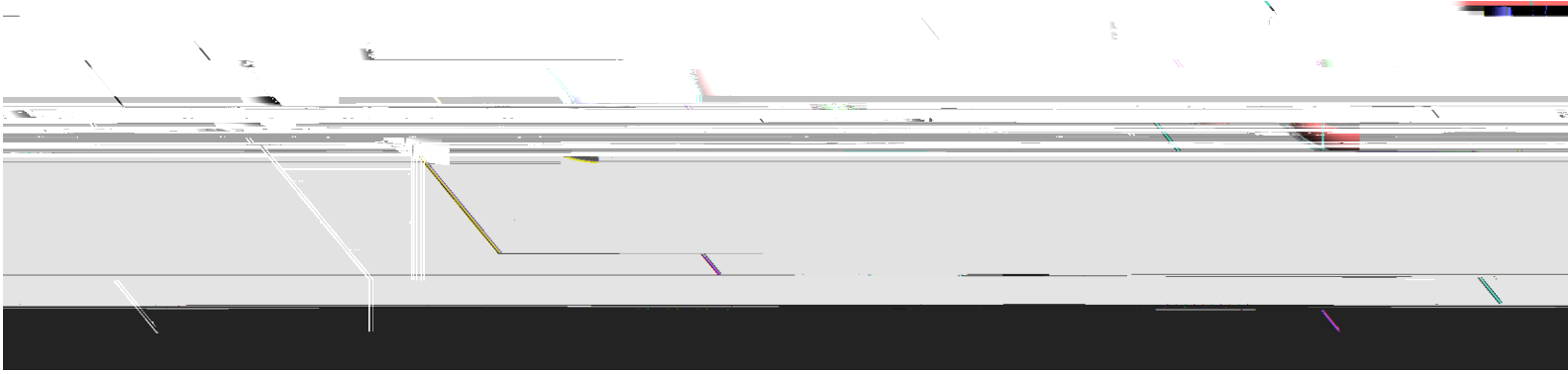

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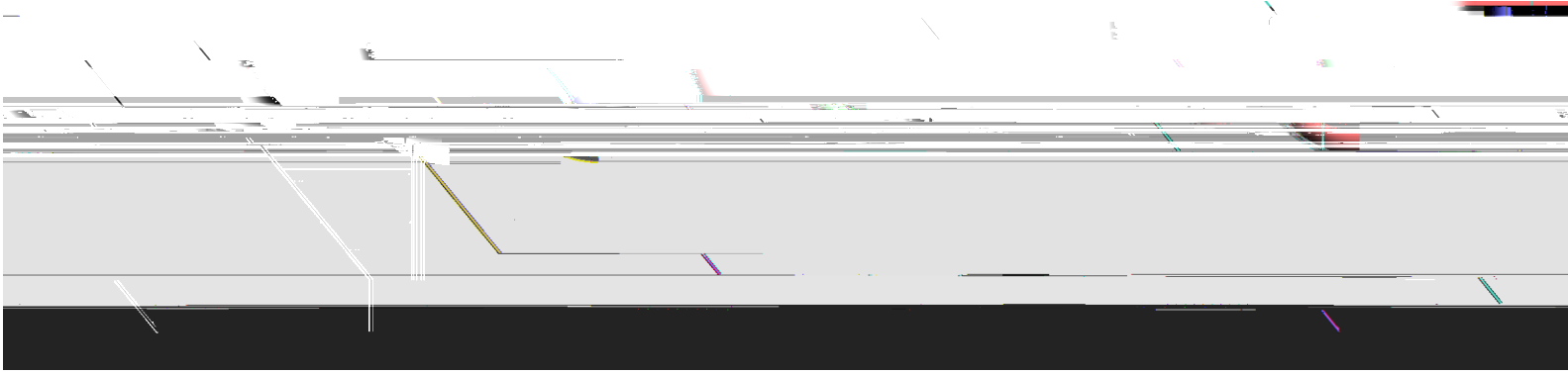

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& actions

The persistent challenge of balancing the budget underscores the need for collaborative efforts between governing boards, school leadership, and government bodies to explore innovative solutions and secure adequate funding.

With 72% of respondents citing staff pay costs as a major concern, it is crucial to address remuneration structures to attract and retain talented educators.

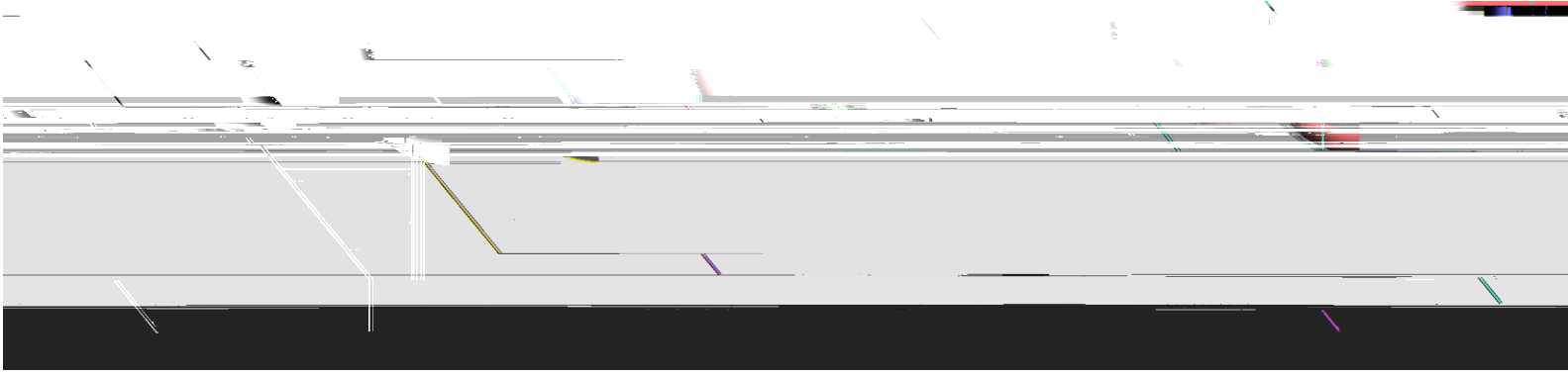
The energy crisis has had a significant negative impact on school budgets, necessitating a re-evaluation of energy procurement strategies and exploring energy-efficient solutions.

The financial strain caused by rising energy costs further emphasizes the need for sustainable funding models and proactive measures to mitigate future energy-related challenges.

As attendance remains a key concern, governing boards should prioritise personalised strategies tailored to the specific needs of their schools and engage in effective communication with parents and the wider school community.

Sharing best practices and implementing targeted interventions can contribute to improving overall attendance rates and ensuring every student has access to quality education.

In order to address ongoing workload and well-being challenges, governing boards need to prioritise comprehensive support systems, including effective workload management, staff well-being initiatives, and work-life balance considerations, to tackle overwhelming challenges faced by staff.

To enhance recruitment and retention strategies within trusts, organisations should proactively share and implement robust strategies including in-house CPD opportunities, progression pathways within the trust, and exploring cross-organisation professional development programs to attract and retain high-quality educators.

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