

# The mature MAT model

Success, innovation and challenges in the trust system

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**Insight**

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NGA has more than 80,000 members and a growing community who engage with us through networks, forums and conversations with our Gold advice service. Over 3,000 governors, trustees and local governors took part in NGA’s annual governance survey this year.

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# Executive summary

**The time feels right to reflect on the state of the multi academy trust (MAT) sector. 2024 has already brought two major landmarks which act as an impetus to evaluate where we are and where we should be going in the coming years.**

For the first time, in 2024, the majority of state schools are now academies. A majority of pupils had been educated in academies for some years, but this landmark cemented the trust model's majority position. While the mixed economy picture remains a defining feature of our sector, with thousands of LA-maintained schools still serving millions of pupils, the balance has now shifted.

A short time after this landmark, the general election saw the first change in government for fourteen years. While the previous Labour government created the first 203 academies to turbo-charged the growth of the trust sector to over 10,000 academies today.<sup>1</sup> Now, the new Labour government must navigate their complex inheritance and decide the future trajectory of the school system. With trusts serving a technical majority of pupils, and more deprived cohorts on average than their maintained counterparts, MATs will remain pivotal to the government's mission of breaking down barriers to opportunity.

## The mature trust system

This report follows two previous NGA studies, in 2019 and 2021, charting the trust system's evolution with a particular focus on governance.<sup>2</sup> Once again, this report draws on NGA's extensive engagement with trusts as the national body for trustees, governors and governance professionals. Our work with trusts makes clear that the trust system has matured:

- **Growth** – the 'wild west' of 'land grabs' in the early days of the academies programme has been largely replaced by a careful and considered approach to expansion.<sup>3</sup>
- **Culture** – those operating at academy-level increasingly see their trust as a single organisation, and understand and support the benefits of sharing resources, including reserves, across their trust.
- **Governance** – the catastrophic failures that dominated public debate in the early days of the trust system are now almost entirely avoided; trust governance is becoming increasingly distinct and successful.
- **Finances and staffing** – more trusts now harness the opportunities of being a group of schools, from economies of scale to skilled central teams and innovative staff development programmes.

Our research shows that many trusts are driving new forms of innovation in the sector by realising the benefits of close collaboration and integration, and as a result perform particularly well in areas ranging from school improvement to financial efficiencies.

Many trusts have learnt what works from bitter experience – their successes and failures and those of their peers – and acted accordingly. Trusts that have survived and prospered are those that have fully embraced the ideology of formal collaboration and managed to harness its benefits.

Of course, there remains significant diversity among trusts. Just as in maintained schools, there are examples of good and bad practice, and everything in between. Any conclusions about the broad trajectory of the sector cannot escape those nuances. We prefer to think of that diversity as an opportunity for trusts to innovate, to learn from each other and ultimately to raise standards and break down barriers to opportunity in and for their communities.

## Next steps for the sector

This report identifies four key themes for trusts and policy makers to prioritise as they navigate the years ahead. Taken together, they present a framework for how trusts can continue to deliver for our young people:

### 1. Learning to harness the opportunities of localisation and centralisation

Every school is unique with its specific challenges, identity and stakeholders. Yet without some degree of centralisation, there is no merit to grouping schools together. The benefits of true collaboration – from economies of scale to specialised central teams and targeted support – need to be achieved for the trust model to realise its potential. Managing to find the best of both worlds, and harness the benefits of both localisation and centralisation, is the ongoing test for trusts.

### 2. Giving trusts the tools to deliver

Like all schools, academies are struggling to direct adequate resources to where they are needed. The funding situation for schools and the wider public sector has been well documented, but that does not make it any less acute. On top of budgets, there are also challenges for trusts in finding and keeping the right people, with issues around recruitment, retention and workload for both employees and governance volunteers.

### 3. Building the best trusts in the right places

The trust system relies on schools being part of the right groupings to best raise standards and support each other. Context is king when forming trusts, but our experience suggests three fundamental principles should be followed: trusts need to be big enough to realise the ‘trust dividend’ (the benefits of the trust model); they need to have a geographical coherence so individual schools can be supported, not left isolated; and to reach outwards to ensure the buy-in of local stakeholders.

### 4. Constructing a new system architecture

Whilst the running of England’s schools has been transformed, the regulatory context has not kept up. Ofsted, the starting point for most regulatory intervention, retains a school-focused remit despite trusts being the accountable body for most schools.

The remit of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and regional directors evolved haphazardly, and often created confusion and complexity. Local authorities (LAs) have a statutory duty for pupil-place planning but are now legally the admissions authority for less than half of English schools. Institutional architecture needs to evolve to reflect the reality that a large number of schools are now in trusts. The new government has started this work, but further reform is needed.

# Introduction: a shifting ecosystem

**MATs are, by definition, combinations of individual schools, each with their own unique histories. But trusts are more than the sum of their parts – and increasingly so.**

Bringing together a group of outstanding schools does not simply create an outstanding MAT, in the same sense that adding an underperforming school to a MAT does not inevitably weaken the organisation. Trusts have their own central governance, staff, infrastructure and ethos. The maturing of the sector has only increased the extent and significance of trust central capacity. This has raised questions about how we best build, support and regulate the sector. A focus on individual schools within a trust structure is no longer sufficient. The March 2022 education white paper, *Opportunity for All*, attempted to address this, setting out a vision for a fully trust-led school system but without providing a clear process for achieving it.

Questions over the best structure for running schools have been well debated in recent years, but the evidence has not proven definitive.<sup>4</sup> Accurate comparisons between schools within England are near impossible because underperforming schools are moved out of LA control into MATs, leading trusts to contain schools which have been historically weaker and have a notably more deprived pupil intake.<sup>5</sup> Comparisons with other British nations are also difficult – English schools perform far better than Scottish schools despite lower per-pupil spending, but there are more differences between the two education systems than just school structures.<sup>6</sup> What we can say is that as the trust sector matures, more MATs are successfully delivering on the long-promised benefits of the trust model, while the capacity and resources of many LAs to support their schools is diminishing.

The white paper failed to accelerate trust system growth. While gradual academisation has continued, leading to the 50% milestone being hit earlier this year, the rate of growth has not notably risen.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the most interesting changes in recent years have occurred ‘under the bonnet’ of the trust system with a significant fall in the number of SATs and small MATs, leading to an increase in the average size of a MAT from 6.25 academies before the pandemic to over 8 academies in an average trust today.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the total number of MATs has fallen since 2019 despite ongoing academisation.<sup>9</sup> This consolidation has been most common in the most heavily academised parts of the country, suggesting the trend will continue.<sup>10</sup>

Despite its mixed success, the white paper instigated some important legacies for the sector:

- The evolution of regional school commissioners to regional directors, and the accompanying creation of the Regions Group model.
- Guidance on *Commissioning High-Quality Trusts*, shedding light on the Department’s approach to creating and growing MATs.
- The *Trust Quality Descriptions*, the most ambitious attempt to create a framework for defining the quality of a trust.
- The failed School Bill – an unsuccessful attempt to clarify the MAT regulatory framework.
- An emphasis on simplifying, and even reducing, government guidance for the sector.

The new government raises questions about the future of these trends. The message so far from the Labour government has been an unwillingness to focus on structural reform, with some emphasis on ‘smoothing the differences’ between academies and maintained schools.<sup>11</sup> Initial proposals in the government’s new education bill around Ofsted inspection of trusts, the national curriculum, and qualified teaching status, all echo this message.

Nonetheless, despite the government’s structural agnosticism, it is important to recognise that the existing powers and incentives in the sector lend themselves to an increasingly trust based system. Maintained schools can become academies via both consent and underperformance, but currently schools are not able to move in the other direction. At the same time, the growing demographic pressures on primary schools, now the vast majority of the maintained sector, will make the greater financial stability offered by MATs an enticing prospect for many boards considering their school’s future.

## Understanding the mature trust system

This report is NGA’s third on the state of the trust sector and its prospects, drawing on our experience of supporting trustees, the accountable body in MATs, as well as trust governance professionals and local governors. Evidence and insight that shaped this study includes:

- Analysis of ERGs carried out by our expert consultants, including almost 200 conducted in the last two years as part of the NLG programme.
- Numerous surveys of trustees, local governors and governance professionals, including over 1,500 trust respondents to this summer’s annual governance survey.
- NGA governance networks, forums and daily conversations on our Gold advice service.
- Hundreds of interviews with MATs conducted as part of research into central teams, faith trusts, Ofsted inspection, governance workload and our Outstanding Governance Awards.

This report comprises four sections:

1. **‘The mature trust’** considers how MAT leadership has developed and improved – the success of central trust governance; the local governance tier; and the central team in learning from failures and embracing the trust model. Nonetheless, simultaneously enjoying the benefits of both localisation and centralisation remains a key challenge.
2. **‘The resources to deliver’** explores funding, staffing and volunteer recruitment. Cultural changes increasingly allow challenges to be tackled as a united trust, with resources shared and innovative approaches to staff development. Trusts are still, however, held back by sector-wide issues with recruitment, retention and budgets.
3. **‘The right groups in the right places’** examines the creation and growth of effective MATs. Trusts’ approach to growth has become more considered and there is increasingly a consensus on the key criteria for building an effective trust – sufficient scale, geographical coherence, and stakeholder buy-in.
4. **‘Accountability and consent in the mature trust system’** considers how to create a new system architecture. The regulatory context has not evolved with the realities of the majority trust system. The roles of central government, Ofsted and LAs all need to be reconsidered given the transformation of how English schools are run.

# 1. The mature trust

**This report begins by examining trust internal governance and executive leadership. MATs have matured, and this is visible in their success in preventing catastrophic failures and capitalising on the trust model to build strong central teams.**

Defining success by the absence of failure risks falling into circular reasoning, but in this case it is relevant. The reputation of the trust sector was damaged in its early days by well-publicised leadership failures, such as the case of Wakefield City Academies Trust. The absence of failures on this scale in recent years has been notable, especially as the demands on trusts have only been growing with sector-wide issues around funding, SEND, energy costs and other legacies of the pandemic.

It is possible to further demonstrate these improvements by analysing the volume of ‘Notices to Improve’. Where the Department for Education (DfE) or ESFA have concerns about the governance or financial management of a trust, they can issue and publish a Notice to Improve.<sup>12</sup> While year-to-year fluctuations remain, the broad trend over the last ten years has been a steady decline in the number of notices issued.<sup>13</sup> Despite all of the challenges facing them, MATs have become less likely to fail.

More celebratory for the sector is the growth of exemplary practice which drives up standards across a trust. This progress has been evident at all levels: trustees and members who govern an entire trust; the local governance tier which focuses on specific academies or hubs; and the central executive team of paid employees who support schools across a trust.

The conclusion from the hundreds of external reviews of governance (ERGs) we conducted as part of the NLG programme and our wider self-commissioned trust ERGs was that those governing trusts are increasingly successful in delivering on most of the core governance responsibilities – from setting a strategic direction to holding to account and financial scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> Section 1.2 shows that local governance within MATs is also continually improving, with both trustees and those governing locally becoming more optimistic about its success, despite the fact it was neglected in the trust quality descriptions.<sup>15</sup> Section 1.3 shows that the growth of central teams is another way in which trusts are harnessing the benefits of the MAT model, by enabling functions to be internalised, centralised and specialised.<sup>16</sup> The picture across governance and executive leadership is that trusts are becoming steadily more confident in exploiting the scale and integration of the MAT model and that this is delivering tangible benefits.

The challenge for trusts now is to both harness the opportunities of centralisation and deliver localised leadership to academies which accounts for their unique context. It was notable that the one area where our NLG programme found MATs struggling slightly more than maintained schools was around stakeholder engagement.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, this makes sense given the scale of a MAT, but we should not accept it as inevitable. The success of the trust model in breaking down barriers to opportunity will always be limited if delivering the benefits of the scale is undermined by the loss of vital local connection to the communities it serves. The positive news is practice has emerged from an increasing number of trusts showing us it is possible to do both, as some of the examples explored in section 3.2 highlight. Meeting this challenge as a trust sector should be a priority for the coming years.

## 1.1 Governing the trust

As the trust system matures, its governance characteristics are increasingly distinct. The DfE has recognised the growing separation between trust and maintained school governance by publishing separate *Governance Guides* and formulating a distinct core purpose for trust boards. Evidence suggests that trust governance has rapidly improved whilst some challenges remain.

There are few areas of governance which can be objectively measured, but one is the overlap between members and trustees. For nearly a decade, NGA has advocated for minimising this overlap to avoid blurred lines of accountability, working with the DfE to improve guidance in the *Academy Trust Handbook*. The maturity of trust governance is evident in the dramatic improvements on this front – our annual surveys have recorded a reduction from 73% of members being trustees in 2018, to just 9% in 2024.

MATs have also become more successful in establishing clear, long-term strategies. NGA's 2024 analysis of NLG-led ERGs found that 59% of trust boards had no significant issues in setting a long-term strategy and vision.<sup>18</sup> This contrasts with previous analysis where NLGs found more variability and less consistency. One explanation for this progress is the success of MATs in adopting bespoke self-evaluation tools aligned with increasingly simplified schemes of delegation, ensuring that strategic objectives are not only set but regularly reviewed and adjusted as necessary.<sup>19</sup>

Another explanation is the ability of MAT trustees to focus on strategic rather than operational matters. NGA 2024 research highlights that fewer trust boards needed to reduce their focus on operational matters compared to maintained school governing bodies,<sup>20</sup> and that MAT trustees were more successful at avoiding straying into operational activity.<sup>21</sup> The role of clear schemes of delegation in trust governance, as well as the multiple governance tiers with their own remits, are possible explanations. MAT trustees' strategic focus could be one reason they are less likely to report their role as unmanageable (see section 2). It may also explain why NLGs found trusts often had robust financial oversight arrangements and were effective in most cases with scrutinising data and holding leaders to account.<sup>22</sup>

Whilst huge strides have been made, challenges remain. Stakeholder engagement is one of the three newly defined purposes of trust governance, and NLGs reported that it was an issue for 11% of MATs, compared to 8% of maintained schools.<sup>23</sup> The scale of trusts means engaging with stakeholders can be difficult: our 2024 survey found that trust boards were less likely to hear from the local tier about stakeholder engagement in larger MATs. Nonetheless, solutions are possible, with the best MATs establishing robust communication and engagement strategies. Effective local governance (section 1.2) and maintaining the trust's geographical coherence (section 3.2) are crucial to delivering these solutions.



While having a greater number of schools can create complexity, a lack of scale can also be challenging. Our ERG analysis found smaller MATs struggled more with clearly defining roles and responsibilities, often due to confused schemes of delegation, or a lack of central or coordinated governance support.<sup>24</sup> This can lead to overlapping duties, diluted accountability, and inefficiencies in decision-making. The trust model has delivered tangible benefits for effective governance, but there remain challenges in simultaneously harnessing the opportunities of centralisation, such as clear delegation and professionalised governance support, and retaining the benefits of localisation, such as effective stakeholder engagement.

## 1.2 Local governance

Over recent years, NGA has documented a rise in the uptake of local tier governance and the consolidation of best practice. The 2024 annual governance survey shows a remarkable 99% of MATs operating with some form of local governance; a substantial increase from the 88% reported in 2021.<sup>25</sup> This demonstrates how much trusts now value local governance, which is why it was disappointing that mentions of local governance were omitted from the *Trust Quality Descriptions* – an issue NGA will continue to raise.<sup>26</sup>

Last year, we published *Local governance here and now*.<sup>27</sup> The overall message was positive – we now see a greater understanding across the sector that accountability lies with the trust board, but that the local tier can add value by ensuring that local needs are reflected in decision-making.<sup>28</sup>

One area of progress has been around relationships between the local tier and trust board – a historic source of tension as schools joining a trust battled for ‘autonomy’.<sup>29</sup> Our annual governance survey has tracked a steady increase in those who embrace the trust as a single organisation. A significant majority of those governing locally now say they are willing to share or contribute resources across their trust, including reserves. At the same time, only a tiny fraction of reports now raise concerns about relationships between the trust board and local tier.<sup>30</sup>

NGA proposed the ‘4Ss’ as the minimum functions carried out by the local tier.<sup>31</sup> This year’s annual survey vindicated this framework, with the vast majority of local boards engaged in the governance of safeguarding (89%), SEND (84%), standards (78%) and stakeholder engagement (65%). This clarity is thanks to improved schemes of delegation and effective communication within the trust, usually enabled by an expert governance professional.<sup>32</sup>

Whilst there is much agreement on local tier functions, there remain differences on whether it should serve a purely advisory and stakeholder engagement role, or whether it has substantive decision-making powers. We have discussed these nuances for many years, and the Confederation of School Trusts has helpfully contributed to the discussion by setting out a framework for understanding these different approaches – from local advisory boards to true local governing boards.<sup>33</sup>

It has always been NGA's view that local boards should have some decision-making powers as they are best placed to exercise some delegated powers, for example on aspects of the '4Ss'. Fortunately, in another sign of the sector's maturity, trusts have reached the same conclusion, with just 10% of local governors reporting that their board had no delegated decision-making powers.<sup>34</sup>

As highlighted in section 1.1, stakeholder engagement can become more difficult as a trust grows, risking diminished understanding of communities and weakened decision-making. Effective local governance is an antidote: not only can the local tier engage more closely with parents, pupils and staff, but an empowered local tier is itself a form of stakeholder engagement, building trust by giving stakeholders a clear voice and role in decision-making. Perhaps the clearest evidence of progress was in this year's annual governance survey, which revealed record highs in the proportion of local governors saying communication between local and trust boards was effective and well-managed (71%) and in the proportion of local governors who agreed their voices were heard by executives and trustees (78%).

## 1.3 Central team

The continued evolution of central leadership teams is another way that trusts are evolving internally to harness the benefits of the MAT model. NGA's research into central teams<sup>35</sup> identified three key developments which occurred as trusts grew and matured, often helping trusts to raise standards and break down local barriers to opportunity:

1. **Internalisation** means that MATs increasingly bring key services such as HR, school improvement leads, and compliance officers in-house, reducing reliance on external providers.<sup>36</sup> The rationale behind this is to enhance control, improve efficiency, and ensure that the operations align closely with the trust's culture and strategic objectives. For instance, the development of HR expertise at the executive level ensures people strategies are consistent with the trust's culture and wider strategic plans.<sup>37</sup>
2. The **centralisation** of responsibilities away from individual schools and towards central trust staff in areas such as finance and curriculum development is highlighted by research which found that 61% of trusts are now fully centralised, up from 47% in 2021.<sup>38</sup> At its best, centralisation can spread best practice and deliver financial savings. Case studies from Faringdon Learning Trust and Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust exemplify the benefits of centralisation, where it enabled joint procurement and allowed school leaders to focus more on educational outcomes.<sup>39</sup>
3. The **specialisation** of roles in MATs continues to permeate the sector with the move away from broad 'catch-all' roles typical of maintained schools and smaller trusts, allowing trusts to benefit from professional expertise, improving service quality and operational efficiency. A common example is the specialisation of business leadership functions into specific HR, premises, governance, finance and data roles.<sup>40</sup>

One example of these trends is in governance support, which is increasingly provided by specialist trust employees rather than being contracted out. Central governance support teams have developed rapidly, with NGA's 2024 governance professional survey showing that 88% of lead governance professionals manage a team that undertakes clerking responsibilities for the local tier; a stark increase from just 27% in 2021.<sup>41</sup>

The benefits of these developments are multiple. An in-house, specialist team will have a deeper understanding of a trust's strategic priorities and scheme of delegation. Therefore, they are better placed to inform local boards and ensure they operate within their remit. NGA's research on ERGs found that lead governance professionals helped boards manage workload more effectively by avoiding duplication and straying into operational tasks.<sup>42</sup>

This section has highlighted the benefits of the mature MAT, and in particular how centralisation (or shared procurement, and coordination of services) can deliver tangible benefits to trusts and their academies. The challenge is to achieve these benefits whilst retaining the vital connection to local communities served by the trust. As discussed in section 1.2, one way of retaining the local voice in decision-making is via effective local governance. Developing effective central teams can help this – a skilled in-house team of governance professionals is well placed to foster communication between governance layers, maintaining cohesion and ensuring the local tier can understand trust board decisions while making their own voice heard.<sup>43</sup>

## 2. The resources to deliver

**The most skilled governance and executive teams still need access to the right resources if they are to deliver for their trusts and pupils. That means sufficient funding which allows trusts to balance their budgets without harming standards. It also means the right human resources – access to skilled staff and governance volunteers so that vacancies can be filled, and the quality of teaching and governance maximised.**

While this section covers these crucial resources in turn, they are of course deeply interlinked. Sufficient funding gives trusts the freedom to reward their best employees and attract new staff with the necessary skills and experience. Similarly, it often seems that support for governance is hit hardest when DfE budgets are tight. September 2024 will see an all-time low, with no central governance funding for either the recruitment or development of trustees and those governing locally. This neglect fails to recognise the huge contribution of governance to the success of the trust sector, and the importance of maintaining and building upon recent improvements.

The good news is that the trust model can help to mitigate some of these challenges. Costs can be reduced by achieving economies of scale, improving a trust's purchasing power and allowing specialist staff and other resources to be shared. The trust's role as a single employer makes it easier to facilitate staff progression, and the capacity to deliver more effective and specialised development for both employees and those governing.

These benefits are not inevitable. They require a trust to be willing to act as a single entity, necessitating both organisational and cultural buy-in. Evidence shows that this is increasingly happening – in addition to the development of trust governance and executive leadership (section 1.3), the views of those governing locally in our 2024 annual survey are instructive. For a number of years, we have asked those governing locally whether their resources, including reserves, should be shared with other schools in the trust. The proportion agreeing has gradually risen over time and this year, of those expressing a view, over 62% agreed that resources, including reserves, should be shared across the trust: an all-time high, and notable given those governing locally are most likely to have a school-specific focus.

On financial management, there is clear evidence that trusts are harnessing the benefits of their model because they are significantly more financially secure on average than their maintained sector counterparts. Our 2024 annual survey found that those governing in MATs were more confident about balancing their budget than their maintained school counterparts, and less worried about having to cut staffing numbers. On volunteer workload too, those governing in a trust were less likely to say their governance role was not manageable around their other commitments.

However, whatever the relative position of MATs compared to others in the sector, there is no escaping the conclusion that a lack of resources is holding trusts back. As section 2.1 explores, more and more trust budgets are at breaking point, forcing boards to take impossible decisions. Section 2.2 looks at governance volunteers and finds vacancies to be at a record high alongside a lack of succession planning and rising workload concerns. Finally, section 2.3 shows that MATs are not immune from sector-wide trends around growing pupil-teacher ratios, falling staff retention and increasing difficulties in filling staff vacancies.

## 2.1 Funding

There are two ways to explain the financial position of the trust sector, both true in isolation but not enough to explain the current situation alone:

1. **Trusts are in a better position than maintained schools** – both in terms of their ability to balance their budgets and the financial safeguards they have put in place.
2. **The financial position of the average MAT is deteriorating every year**, and trustees are becoming increasingly concerned about the future.

Our 2024 annual governance survey revealed 45% of maintained school governors responding said their organisation was financially unsustainable without significant changes compared to just 23% of MAT trustees. This echoes a range of other research which has found that MATs are more likely to have positive in-year balances and larger reserves.<sup>44</sup> Why is this the case? Trusts can achieve economies of scale by sharing key functions, and there is evidence that centralised procurement and provision of services leads to better financial performance.<sup>45</sup> We have also found that MATs have generally put more robust financial oversight arrangements in place than their maintained and SAT counterparts, likely due to their larger budgets and greater financial expertise among both trustees and the central team.<sup>46</sup>

The growing willingness of academies to share resources across their trust is also relevant and visible in the higher proportion of trusts GAG pooling in recent years. Kreston's found that 32% of MATs were pooling resources compared to 23% in 2022, and our annual survey identified a similar increase.<sup>47</sup> The benefits to financial sustainability of those with the broadest shoulders helping those struggling is obvious, but the question of whether GAG pooling is the best way of targeting resources while retaining stakeholder buy-in, clear accountability and the ability to adapt spending decisions to localised contexts remains uncertain with boards reaching differing conclusions. Context matters, and we find that the larger and more centralised a trust, the more difficult it becomes to operate effectively without GAG pooling.

It is also important to recognise that falling pupil numbers are hitting primary schools harder than secondaries, and primaries are far more likely to be maintained. According to our 2024 survey, 39% of primary schools said they were financially unsustainable without significant changes compared to 22% of secondary schools. However, the evidence from those who have accounted for school phase in comparisons is that primary academies are significantly more financially secure than their maintained counterparts.<sup>48</sup>

For all these nuances, the underlying truth is that the financial position of MATs is deteriorating. This year, 47% of trusts had a revenue deficit compared to just 19% two years ago, while 75% of trusts say their reserves will be lower in three years.<sup>49</sup> Our annual governance survey reflects this: 51% of those governing in trusts say balancing the budget is one of their biggest challenges compared to 33% two years ago. Surveys of executives have similar findings, with financial sustainability at the top of their list of risks.<sup>50</sup> Reasons for education funding crisis are well documented: long-term budgetary pressures have been compounded by rising energy and staffing costs.<sup>51</sup> Rising costs have not been spread evenly among MATs, with the impact dependent on when energy contracts expire, and the condition of trust estates.

The relative strength of trusts' financial position demonstrates the maturity of the majority model. However, that is little consolation to those MATs feeling the pinch – our 2024 survey found over 80% of those governing in MATs felt the new government should prioritise funding compared to just under 20% who felt it should prioritise school structures. The financial position of MATs demonstrates the trust system's progress, but also highlights how a lack of resources is now holding many trusts back.

## 2.2 Volunteers

The findings set out in this report show that MAT governance has matured at both the central and local levels. But maintaining and building on that progress is now being put at risk by concerns about governance recruitment and workload.

Over recent years, our annual governance survey has found a gradual rise in boards reporting that they find it difficult to recruit – from 50% in 2015 to nearly 80% this year. The vast majority of boards now have vacancies, depriving trusts of key expertise and increasing workload for those who remain.<sup>52</sup> The trust sector has been hit just as hard as the maintained sector – our survey results found MAT trust boards had fewer vacancies than maintained boards but the local tier within trusts has slightly more. This is not surprising given that MATs have more governance roles (members, trustees and local governors) to fill.

One explanation for the sector's recruitment challenges is that volunteer participation has been falling across England since before the pandemic.<sup>53</sup> There will always be limits to how far education can resist national trends of this kind. In addition, a sector-specific factor is volunteer workload. Our annual governance survey has recorded a steady increase over the last five years in those who say their governing role is not manageable. Concerns are even higher among those of working age, and most likely to be parents. Reasons for the increased workload include a rise in the volume of complaints and exclusions alongside a growing list of expectations for boards to meet, and difficulties in keeping a strategic focus.<sup>54</sup>

The picture is slightly rosier for trusts than other school types. Our workload research found that MAT trustees and those governing on the local tier were spending less time per month on governance than their counterparts who governed maintained schools.<sup>55</sup> This was echoed in our 2024 annual governance survey, with more local governors and trustees describing their role as manageable than those governing in other structures.

Several explanations could be proposed. The split in responsibilities between local and central governance tiers, and the fact there are therefore usually more volunteers involved could help to spread the workload and avoid any one board becoming overwhelmed. As discussed in section 1.1, trusts are increasingly using an effective scheme of delegation and professional governance support to keep their boards focused on their specific remit. Our NLG work highlighted that trust boards are better at retaining a strategic focus when compared to other board types.<sup>56</sup> Trust boards also have better self-evaluation practices; an effective way of reducing workload by reflecting on how their time could be better spent.<sup>57</sup>

However, as with funding, the relative strength of trust governance highlights the sector's maturity but does not escape the underlying challenges with volunteer recruitment and retention. As touched on above, the Department has long supported governance recruitment via funded programmes such as Inspiring Governance. Following the end of the NLG programme, this was the final piece of DfE governance funding which remained, but it has now too been removed since the beginning of September 2024. NGA has already said much on this topic, but it is worth reiterating that such decisions display a neglect of the value and crucial role of governance. Worse, it makes tackling these challenges around recruitment and workload far harder, just as it makes it more difficult to maintain and build on the significant improvements in trust governance. It is inevitable that the trusts, schools and pupils served by those governing will suffer as a result.

## 2.3 Staffing

The mature MAT can innovate in some aspects of human resources (HR) and people strategy compared to its maintained counterparts. Fundamentally though, trusts are not immune from sector-wide trends and so once again, a lack of access to a key resource – in this case skilled staff – is evidently holding MATs and the wider sector back.

MAT trustees and those governing locally agree that staffing issues are among their biggest challenges and most significant strategic priorities. Of the top eight strategic priorities identified by these respondents to our annual governance survey, three were connected to the trust's employer functions: attracting high-quality teaching staff; developing and retaining staff; and staff wellbeing including workload. The results in relation to what those governing saw as their biggest challenges were similar: the fourth biggest challenge according to trustees was attracting high-quality staff, while for those governing locally, both attracting staff and improving workload and wellbeing were among the top five challenges.

These findings echo data across the sector. Despite government efforts to improve workload, evidence shows that teacher working hours actually rose last year,<sup>58</sup> with a major impact on retention – 44% more teachers are considering leaving the profession this year than last and of those considering leaving, 94% cite workload as a reason.<sup>59</sup> Data for the sector as a whole shows that retention rates are falling, and secondary school teacher vacancies are at an all-time high.<sup>60</sup> One of the consequences is rising pupil-teacher ratios, inevitably leading to either increased workload for remaining teachers, or higher class sizes.<sup>61</sup>

The mature MAT system can, however, help to mitigate some of these developments. The growth of central teams makes it easier to create and protect specialist roles, meaning schools can share expertise rather than taking on the entire cost. Examples include experts in particular languages; a specific special educational need; or musical instruments and other artistic pursuits, relevant to the new government's emphasis on access to the arts.

As a single employer, a trust can improve opportunities for career progression by allowing movement between schools. The evidence suggests this is taking place – staff movement is much higher within a trust than outside it and, crucially, this movement is usually towards schools with more disadvantaged intakes; the schools most in need of support with recruitment and retention and so a key mechanism for breaking down barriers to opportunity.<sup>62</sup> Relatedly, arguments have been put forwards that the scale and resources of a trust allow MATs to overcome common barriers to effective CPD.<sup>63</sup> Surveys of academies which recently joined trusts found a consensus that staff training did improve.<sup>64</sup>

The stronger financial position of the average trust also provides benefits relative to other school structures. While trustee and local governor respondents to our survey told us they were focusing on recruitment and retention, maintained school governors were more worried about maintaining their current staffing structure. In that sense, focusing on trying to fill vacancies rather than having to remove staffing roles entirely is a form of success.

Again, the overall picture has many similarities to that seen with funding and volunteer recruitment: the trust model allows some challenges to be mitigated, but MATs are not immune to a lack of over-stretched resources. The scale of the challenge means that a sector-wide response is required.

### 3. The right groups in the right places

**The combination of schools in a trust will go a long way to determining what central capacity a trust can build, and to what extent it can successfully support its academies. Getting groupings right is fundamental to the success of the sector. But there is huge diversity in MAT groups in terms of size, geography, phases, faith and more.**

Every school has its own challenges, history and values which will help to determine which trusts could be effective partners. Nonetheless, we can draw lessons from the experiences of the sector to construct some basic principles for building an effective MAT. These lessons are relevant to both trusts themselves, where trustees take the key strategic decisions around taking on new schools, and to policy makers, who have a direct role in approving conversions and transfers via the Regions Group.

The approach of many MATs in the early days of the academy programme left much to be desired. West Midlands regional director Andrew Warren recently described the early days of the programme as “a bit like the Wild West, there were various land grabs going on.”<sup>65</sup> Some trusts were more interested in “empire building”,<sup>66</sup> competing with each other for size and influence rather than building the best groups for raising standards.

The maturity of today’s MAT system is evident by the far more careful and considered approach to growth which now predominates. We have seen this through our engagement with trusts; the lack of major governance and financial failures (section 1); and the evolving attitudes of the trustees who take these key decisions. Our 2024 annual governance survey found trustees in the smallest MATs were those most keen to grow, with 43% of those governing in a MAT of 2 to 5 schools saying their trust was too small compared to just 3% of those in MATs of over 30 academies. The reasons cited for wanting to grow were also significant, with a focus on delivering economies of scale and improving pupil outcomes.

This maturity has also been seen in the consolidation of the trust sector. Despite the number of individual schools in a trust continuing to rise, leading to more than 50% of all schools being part of the trust sector, the number of MATs has declined slightly.<sup>67</sup> Instead, the average size of MATs has grown as the Department encouraged SATs and small MATs to either grow or merge. This process has been most pronounced in the most heavily academised parts of the country. For example, in the North West (the least academised region in England) nearly half of all MATs have four schools or fewer, compared to less than a quarter in the South West (the most academised region in England).<sup>68</sup> The implication is that further academisation is likely to be accompanied by further consolidation.

This section looks at some of the key questions when building a trust and sets out basic principles for forming an effective MAT. Section 3.1 looks at trust size and concludes that trusts do need sufficient scale to achieve the various benefits of the MAT model. Section 3.2 considers the question of geography and argues that effective trusts benefit from geographical coherence. Proximity within one or more trust hubs is key in allowing schools to better collaborate and the central trust to provide effective support. Finally, section 3.3 looks at faith schools, one of the key drivers of academisation in recent years and emphasises the importance of stakeholder buy-in through both the construction and running of MATs.



### 3.1 Trust size

Questions about the optimal size of a MAT have proven controversial. The reckless approach of some trusts to pursue growth at all costs harmed perceptions of larger MATs, who were often contrasted against what were perceived to be more organic and community-centred smaller trusts. This was always an over-simplification, and the characterisation is now entirely inaccurate in today's mature system.

The question of size was reignited by the 2022 white paper which argued that trusts should serve at least 7,500 pupils or 10 schools.<sup>69</sup> When we asked trustees whether they agreed with the proposal, they were split down the middle.<sup>70</sup> Respondents accepted the logic that a minimum scale was needed to deliver financial sustainability, and strong central services, but there was a feeling that a hard minimum felt overly “arbitrary”. While the potential benefits of scale are clear, the view from experts has been that there is still a lack of definitive evidence on optimal trust size, and so it felt premature to dictate a specific minimum point.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the huge diversity in geographies and school types across England means that any centrally imposed national minimum would be too blunt a tool.

Nonetheless, the dangers of blanket minimums does not mean we should be completely ambivalent to the question of trust size. In our view, the evidence is clear that many opportunities possible from collaboration as part of a trust require sufficient size to be achieved. That does not mean that small MATs are failing, or all large MATs are succeeding, other factors influence a trust's effectiveness beyond its scale. Nor is it to say that growth is always desirable, other factors also relevant such as geographical coherence and stakeholder buy-in. Moreover, an emphasis on sufficient scale focuses on reaching a tipping point where the potential of the trust model can be realised, whereas growth beyond that point is unlikely to deliver the same revolutionary benefits.

The benefits of sufficient scale have been evident throughout this report. In summary:

- Smaller MATs are more likely to struggle from confused schemes of delegation which fail to properly define and separate governance functions.
- MAT growth is accompanied by the expansion and development of trust central teams, bringing specific expertise and freeing up school leaders to focus on school improvement.
- The financial performance of trusts is benefited by economies of scale and the sharing of resources across the organisation, all facilitated by sufficient scale.
- Trust-led professional development benefits staff, while greater employee mobility between schools provides opportunities for staff and benefits for pupils.

It should also be recognised that the trust sector, led by the trustees who take decisions about growth across the country, has chosen to consolidate in recent years, with a significant increase in the average trust size. While regional directors have supported this trend, our survey findings presented in section 3 are highly relevant: it is those trustees governing small MATs who are judging their organisations to be “too small” and pushing for growth to achieve the benefits outlined above. When those with the best understanding and biggest stake in their trust are pushing to achieve sufficient scale, it cannot be ignored.

## 3.2 Trust geography

Geographic proximity has emerged as a critical factor for the success of MATs, facilitating effective collaboration, resource sharing, and school improvement. The spread of schools within a MAT therefore significantly influences the extent to which the benefits of the mature MAT model can be realised. Our experience is that effective MATs require physical proximity because closeness allows academies and the central trust to better support each other.

Experts have long concluded that close proximity means schools can more easily share resources and expertise.<sup>72</sup> The findings in this report substantiate this view. For example, the mobility of staff outlined in section 2.3 or the benefits of specialist central teams, as some executives, such as those focusing on school improvement, need to be able to access academies to deliver effective support. Even many of the benefits of economies of scale require proximity, as some of the providers offering trust-wide contracts for services like catering, HR, data protection and estate management might operate in a particular locality.

Geographic proximity can also play a crucial role in facilitating collaboration between MATs and local partners such as other local schools and trusts. This is one way trusts can deliver on their wider civic responsibilities, while potentially laying the groundwork to establish whether formal collaboration could be beneficial. Local partners also include local authorities, which often have differing processes and provisions, creating challenges for trusts trying to work with multiple authorities. For example, in a study conducted by NFER on the challenges faced by SENCOs in MATs, variation across LA practice was not only reported to complicate collaboration but also limited the ability of MATs to support SENCO workloads effectively, as standardised resources and templates were often not applicable across different LAs.<sup>73</sup>

This is not to say that trusts should only operate in one area, but those who expand beyond this need to consider how they can build an understanding of the needs of the distinct communities they serve. For some trusts, operating over a large geographical area is inevitable if they are to achieve sufficient scale due to geographical remoteness. One example is a 20 school MAT in the rural South West which uses a hub model to geographically group its schools into smaller units so they can share resources, expertise and local knowledge. A three-year research project (2019-22) assessed the hub model and found it was very successful in allowing the trust to harness many of the benefits of the MAT model, such as enabling specialist and subject-lead staff to drive improvements across their hub.<sup>74</sup> This example also shows the potential of the MAT model to combat the isolation of rural schools.

A hub or cluster model can also benefit trusts with entirely different challenges. Reach2, England's second largest MAT in terms of the number of academies, have spoken of the importance of their regional cluster model in both allowing their schools to collaborate, and ensuring the cluster's own central leadership team can provide the appropriate support.<sup>75</sup>

Ultimately, questions of geography get to the heart of one of the fundamental challenges facing MATs and one of the themes of this report – how to harness the opportunities of both localisation and centralisation. MATs must achieve the benefits of scale while retaining responsiveness to local communities and contexts. With the growing size of the average MAT, these challenges will become more acute, but there are clear grounds for optimism that effective solutions are possible. Part of the solution has to be building trusts with a clear geographical coherence, providing the proximity which will allow the trust to thrive.

### 3.3 Faith schools in the trust system

Schools with a religious character have unique governance and stakeholder arrangements which makes them a particularly interesting group when considering the construction of trusts. We know from our surveys over the years that dioceses are a key driver of academisation for many schools, but we have not previously explored the implications. This prompted a qualitative study of governance models and experiences of academisation in 13 MATs and individual schools of Catholic and Church of England (CofE) character; interviews with three CofE diocesan education leads; and an analysis of diocesan strategies.

Almost one third of all state schools in England have a religious character, with the overwhelming majority being Catholic or CofE. As of 2024, approximately 44% of all faith schools have academised compared to 52% of their non-faith counterparts.<sup>76</sup> Dioceses play a pivotal role in guiding and supporting faith schools through the academisation process, with their consent being required before a school joins a MAT.<sup>77</sup> At present, their approach is by no means uniform, with differences between denominations but also among the same religious group. Our interviews and analysis of several diocesan strategies (publicly available summaries of a diocese's approach to academisation and trust governance) clearly shows the dioceses' role as a key player in the grouping of schools and the considered and strategic approach they have generally taken.

Catholic dioceses more often adopt a centralised approach to academisation, leaving less discretion to individual schools than their CofE counterparts. This often includes explicit directives tied to the local Bishop's vision of how best to advance the Catholic faith, as seen in a recent high-profile case in the West Midlands.<sup>78</sup> This top-down approach ensures schools align with Diocesan goals, faith-based objectives and long-term education planning. However, it also results in schools sometimes being required to academise or join a particular MAT contrary to their preferences. This has, at times, led to significant conflict and resistance from school staff and governing bodies.<sup>79</sup>

CofE dioceses demonstrate less uniformity. While most appear to prefer the trust model in the long-term, many still accept all structures, allowing schools to explore the options themselves. Moreover, unlike their Catholic counterparts, CofE dioceses sometimes allow for the formation of mixed MATs (a MAT with both CofE and non-CofE schools) if sufficient diocesan representation is included. Interviewees suggested this approach could help to maintain and strengthen community links because it was often feeder schools and the local secondary who wished to join the same MAT, despite differences in religious character.

Whatever approach leaders believe is best to build MATs, care needs to be taken to align the views of key stakeholders, including staff, parents, and the governing body which takes the final decision on conversions. An overly top-down approach can make organisational and cultural buy-in to the trust model nearly impossible. Instead, solutions are needed that work for the specific community and, at their best, dioceses can deliver just that. Of course, buy-in must also be maintained after academisation, and here the experience of faith schools is also instructive. The model articles of association for church academies sensibly identify local governance as a key tool for preserving a trust's connection to its communities and the individual ethos of particular academies. In so doing, it demonstrates how the mature MAT model can deliver that essential stakeholder buy-in.

## 4. Accountability and consent in the mature trust system

**However well trusts are formed and run, they sit within a wider system which provides oversight, regulation, inspection and democratic legitimacy.**

Clearly, MATs cannot hold themselves to account, nor can they alone provide the consent needed in a democracy for the running of the one of the most socially important public services. Trusts must therefore always consider the wider system architecture in which they sit. The question is what that looks like moving forward.

The essential context is that we find ourselves in a dual (or even multi) system of school structures. Whilst the majority of schools are now in trusts, a significant number of both schools and pupils remain with the maintained sector. Much has been written about the downsides of the mixed economy and these critics are correct that nobody would design a system which looks like today's English school system.<sup>80</sup> The government and sector bodies must support schools operating in two entirely distinct legal contexts, significantly increasing the workload for any reforms. LAs and trusts often find themselves duplicating functions when supporting schools, wasting resources and making it harder to achieve economies of scale. Diminishing LA resources as schools academise has limited the support they can provide to those maintained schools which remain, as seen in the loss of many governor services teams. The complexity of the system can cause confusion for parents, while collaboration on issues like SEND and admissions has become harder.

However, despite the problems being evident, they are much harder to resolve. Any attempts to fully align the system would likely come at both a political and financial cost, and it is entirely reasonable to prioritise standards over the structures. Meanwhile, time and resources are spent patching up a system that was never formed by design. It is essential, for example, that LAs play an active role in the trust system given their combination of democratic legitimacy and place-based expertise. But any role will be limited while they run their own schools too, given the need to avoid conflicts of interest and blurred lines of accountability. The continued existence of the dual system makes agreeing a suitable regulatory framework for trusts harder.

The wider system architecture needs to evolve to reflect the reality of the system – it is no longer justifiable to build inspection, accountability and local oversight around structures designed for a purely maintained system. The regulatory framework for MATs has evolved haphazardly and continues to create confusion. Ofsted (the starting point for regulatory intervention) has a school-level focus which is unsustainable now trusts are the accountable body for most schools. LAs retain a series of statutory responsibilities which are no longer deliverable while a majority of schools are outside their control. This section makes some suggestions, but there is clearly a need for a sector-wide conversation about the future shape of the system.

Evolving the wider system architecture can certainly help to build consent by generating trust, transparency and clarity, but to focus on this alone runs the risk of an overly top-down view of the education system – trusts need the support of the communities they serve too. This has been a focus of NGA for many years, as we have consistently advocated for the importance of retaining a recognition of the importance of place in a trust-led system.

One way of achieving this is for trusts to act as ‘community anchors’, a concept proposed by the Confederation of School Trusts (CST).<sup>81</sup> They have argued that trusts can show civic leadership by anchoring themselves in their communities, and contributing to the wider social good.<sup>82</sup> CST has published a number of case studies demonstrating this work in action.<sup>83</sup> This highlights the power of the trust model and the opportunities available to other trusts if they follow suit. Our own work has shown the benefits to a trust’s reputation of collaborating externally.<sup>84</sup> As trusts tip over the ‘half of all schools’ marker, there is no better time to remind ourselves of their ability to help break down barriers to opportunity in their communities.

## 4.1 The regulatory framework

Even the architects of the academy programme acknowledge that it has evolved in an unplanned manner, leading to significant regulatory incoherence.<sup>85</sup> The previous government recognised the flaws in the regulatory framework and tried to deliver reform. The 2022 Schools Bill attempted to create a regulatory framework for MATs but failed to win the confidence of the sector. This was followed by a more sector-driven approach, the Academies Regulatory and Commissioning Review, published in March last year.<sup>86</sup> However, despite some positive steps, the review failed to resolve many of the key outstanding questions.

The review’s key achievement was delivering a more transparent approach to commissioning. NGA had long raised concerns on behalf of trustees that some commissioning decisions of the Department’s regional offices lacked clarity and transparency. While some trustees had positive engagements with their regional directors, other described decision making as “arbitrary” or “biased.”<sup>87</sup> In order to build confidence in the Department’s decision-making, the review drove two important changes: the publication of *Trust Quality Descriptions*, a framework for defining the quality of a MAT, and the subsequent publication of guidance on *Commissioning High-Quality Trusts*, explaining how the Department’s judgements of quality would inform commissioning decisions. Some of the content of the quality descriptions leaves something to be desired, such as the absence of local governance, an essential part of trust governance as outlined in section 1.2. Nonetheless, the two documents were positive steps in giving trusts the information they need.

Where the review fell short was in resolving much of the regulatory incoherence which currently surrounds trusts. Currently, trusts are subject to a complex regulatory system. The role of the ESFA evolved after the Bell Review, but it still effectively provides financial regulation via the Trust Handbook and other ongoing scrutiny (such as on executive pay) where failure to comply can instigate intervention. Under plans announced in September 2024, ESFA functions will be brought back into the Department itself, but precisely what this will look like in practice remains uncertain.

Meanwhile, the DfE Regions Group takes crucial decisions around growth and rebrokering, while also holding important powers regarding children’s social care and SEND services. How this will evolve with the new regional improvement teams set to be launched by January 2025 is also an open question. Add to the picture the inspectorate Ofsted and local authorities who retain some powers around the SEND local offer and fair access protocol, and the complexity of the current arrangements are clear.

The regulatory and commissioning review recognised this by committing to “building a single regulatory interface” but progress was not forthcoming under the previous government.<sup>88</sup> This is understandable – resolving the current mess means taking difficult decisions about what accountability and regulation should look like in the trust system, and not all stakeholders agree. Trusts value their autonomy and can rightly point to the successes outlined in this report as showing why it is essential that they retain the freedom to innovate and respond to local needs. The huge pressures on the sector currently – from funding to SEND provision and post-pandemic pressures like attendance – also caution against any regulatory changes which add additional burdens to MATs. On the other hand, it is precisely because the work done by MATs is so important in shaping the lives of our young people that we need to ensure that every trust is delivering effectively.

The challenge for the government is to find the right balance – to measure what we value, to find solutions when children are being let down but without creating new burdens and limiting the flexibility of trusts to respond to their local context. This will be difficult, but finding common ground is possible. NGA has, for example, shown that trustees support providing greater transparency, and we have been heartened that the new government are showing a willingness to tackle these challenges and move towards a single regulatory model.<sup>89</sup> Sensible reforms are possible and can achieve the buy-in of the trust sector, because the current messy status quo benefits no one.

## 4.2 Ofsted

NGA has called for a change in Ofsted’s remit around trusts for a number of years, and we are pleased that the recent Big Listen has, at its heart, been a recognition that reform is required.<sup>90</sup> The current inspection regime, built around the grading and accountability of individual schools, was developed for a maintained system which is no longer the reality for the majority of schools in this country. Instead, the trust is now the accountable body for most of England’s schools, and so the resources devoted to inspections should reflect the fact that trusts really matter.

Our position has been regularly supported by those governing. Our surveys have found a large majority of both trustees and those governing locally support inspections of MATs of some kind.<sup>91</sup> Ofsted themselves have made clear their frustrations with the limitations placed on them, while the House of Commons education committee argued earlier this year that Ofsted must be allowed to “develop a framework for the inspection of MATs as a matter of urgency.”<sup>92</sup> Fortunately, the new government’s education legislation is expected to do just that, aligning the education sector with other public services where accountable authorities are inspected, for example NHS trusts and LA children’s services.

Attention therefore turns to what this new regime should look like, and here the challenge for policymakers becomes more acute. Trusts are understandably sceptical of anything which would limit their flexibility and create additional burdens. Add the sector's low faith in Ofsted to the mix, and the other reforms needed to how Ofsted operates after recent tragedies which will need to be implemented concurrently, and the scale of the challenge is clear.

The first question is what Ofsted would inspect. As already explained, a MAT is far more than the sum of its individual schools. Accurately inspecting a trust would require Ofsted to move beyond the quality of education, executive leadership and school improvement to consider, in the same depth, the other pillars of a quality trust identified by the Department, such as workforce, finance and operations, and trust governance. Doing this effectively would require additional skills and experience to those currently held by inspectors, and Ofsted would likely need support to build this additional capacity.

The new government's move towards a report card format is helpful, as the organisations with the scale of trusts are even less suited to a single-word judgement than individual schools. However, there would still be the question of how trust-level and school-level judgements interact, both in terms of the information available to parents, and how regulatory intervention is instigated. For example, policymakers would need to explain how an adverse judgement for an academy within a highly performing trust would be handled or, on the other hand, whether a poor judgement for a trust would be a reasonable justification to rebroker an outstanding school. One option would be to simply stop issuing school-level grades or judgements for those within a MAT, but that may prove controversial.

Care will also be needed to avoid creating perverse incentives for MATs. For example, it will be essential to avoid penalising trusts for taking on struggling schools. One partial solution would be to create an interim period where new academies within a MAT do not contribute towards the trust's overall judgement, maybe two or three years. However, worryingly, despite some progress in recent years, there is significant evidence of a long-term correlation between the deprivation of an area served by a school, and its Ofsted outcome.<sup>93</sup> Ofsted directors have made the fair point that their judgements cannot be "an effort grade" and so the issues faced in more deprived areas around behaviour and recruitment will influence judgements in the aggregate.<sup>94</sup> That may be true, but it explains why trusts could be reluctant to take on those schools most in need of support if they feel it would harm their trust-wide Ofsted outcome. It is these issues which will need to be carefully resolved in partnership with the sector if the new framework is to succeed in rebuilding trust and contributing to the government's opportunity mission.

## 4.3 Local authorities

The rise of the trust system has had huge implications for LAs. LAs have seen the number of schools they maintain gradually reduce, at the same time as significant budget reductions, and growing demand for many of their core services.<sup>95</sup> The result has been a significant decrease in their capacity to support schools, although there remains huge variations between LAs. Capacity is shaped by the local financial position; the level of innovation such as creating trading services; the proportion of schools academised and the number of local academies which continue to purchase LA support.

Trying to define a role for LAs in the evolving system is a challenge. LAs have a democratic legitimacy and place-specific knowledge that no other organisation can match. As a result, many of the proposals put forward for the future of the English school system have included an active and influential role for LAs.<sup>96</sup> The logic is clear, but these proposals have often relied on an imagined future where all schools share the same structure. Despite all the challenges of the dual system, it is much harder to set out a clear pathway for how we move beyond it.

The implications of the continuation of the dual system are twofold. First, local authorities will continue to devote significant time and energy to supporting those schools they continue to maintain. Second, it becomes harder for LAs to have an active role in relation to trusts, given the need to avoid conflicts of interest and blurred lines of accountability. Any role would need to avoid situations where LAs could be perceived as favouring ‘their own’ schools, and to avoid uncertainty over whether the LA was acting in the capacity as a peer of trusts as a fellow body running schools, or as some sort of regulator.

In our 2024 annual governance survey, we asked those governing in MATs about the roles LAs should play. On protecting vulnerable pupils, 78% agreed LAs should oversee safeguarding and child protection while 62% said LAs should review pupil exclusions in academies. Opinion was split on admissions, with 51% saying LAs should control them in their area, whereas just 16% felt LAs should create and run their own MATs.

There are a number of conclusions from these figures. Notably, those governing trusts were not against LAs playing an active role, even if it meant giving away some powers which currently lie with the trust. The vision of LAs as a “champion for parents and families”, set out in consecutive white papers, attracted a reasonable consensus, although the issue of admissions, where there is more of a zero-sum game between the maintained and trust sectors, was the biggest stumbling block.<sup>97</sup> The only proposal which was comprehensively rejected was around LAs running their own MATs, likely reflecting the need to avoid blurred roles and accountability.

The proposal of LAs controlling admissions makes the contradictions of the current system most clear. LAs have a duty to ensure every child has a school place but cannot require an academy to increase or reduce its pupil admission number (PAN). This therefore makes place planning incredibly difficult as the number of academies in an area expands – LAs need to ensure places meet demand but can only control the places available in some schools. With falling pupil numbers, the need for well-informed decisions about place provision in local areas is only rising. LAs would be the obvious body to take these place-based decisions if not for the fact they maintain some of the schools affected. With place provision likely to become a growing issue, policymakers will have to find a solution, but the dual system makes a sustainable answer far harder to find.



## 5. Conclusion

**As we write, the Labour government's vision for school structures remains uncertain, but the issues of maintaining a dual economy system are inescapable. As things stand, the current structure of powers and incentives in the sector will only further entrench the trend towards the MAT model. Maintained schools can choose to academise or are forcibly converted, but academies are not moving in the other direction.**

The new government has repeatedly been described as structurally agnostic, but fundamentally the only way to reverse this trend would be to radically alter the current framework around opening new schools; intervening in struggling schools, and the choices open to individual maintained schools. With the primary schools which dominate the remaining maintained sector set to be hit hardest by declining pupil rolls, and the diminished capacity of many LAs, formal collaborations which deliver greater financial stability will be an attractive option for the governing boards weighing up their options.

The good news is that, as this report has demonstrated, trusts and the boards which govern them are becoming increasingly successful in harnessing the benefits of their model. Good governance, along with effective leadership, and improving communication channels to maximise the benefits of a centralised, one organisation approach, have made all the difference. The catastrophic failures which blighted the early days of MATs are now almost universally avoided through a more robust, ethical and effective governance.

From financial savings delivered by economies of scale to staff development opportunities and specialised central teams, the promises of the trust model are being achieved with increasing regularity and efficiency. The last decade has seen an awakening to the reality and responsibilities of spending increasingly vast sums of public money. Trust boards have grasped that responsibility and are taking a more considered approach to growth while successfully transforming their internal culture so that all leaders and stakeholders buy into the vision of the trust as a single accountable institution.

Considerable diversity remains within the trust sector in all senses – size, practice, culture and more. Governance is one area where the power of the MAT model to innovate and explore a variety of approaches is most evident. Such diversity was one of the objectives of the trust model but cannot come at the expense of letting down those pupils educated in the minority of MATs which still struggle to drive up standards. Cross-sector learning to share what works while leaving the space for local flexibility is vital.

We know the government want to explore aligning the school system where possible, but details remain unclear. Some voices in the trust system have been quick to stress concern that this will curtail the freedoms afforded to the trust system, from the curriculum to employment practices. Whatever comes next, the fragility of the dual system will have to be addressed, and the real progress of the trust model will need to be protected and maintained. It is in that spirit that this report has identified four priorities for the sector moving forwards.

## Priorities for the trust sector

1. Trusts need to continue to work to harness the valuable benefits of both **localisation and centralisation**.
2. Trusts need **the resources to deliver** for pupils, in terms of funding, staff and volunteers.
3. **We need the right groups in the right places** – combining sufficient scale to harness the benefits of the trust model; geographical coherence to facilitate support and avoid isolation; and stakeholder buy-in.
4. The wider **system architecture** needs to evolve to reflect the reality of the system – it is no longer justifiable to build inspection, accountability and local oversight around structures designed for a purely maintained system.

Trusts are more than the sum of their parts. At their best, they transform the opportunities available to their schools, staff and pupils. As a sector, we need to share best practice in the running and construction of MATs, ensure those trusts are properly resourced, and build an effective system architecture. We look forward to being part of the conversations about how this can be achieved.

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## About us

NCA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning to shape stronger governance. Together, we're raising standards and ensuring every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.



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- <sup>1</sup> Sam Freedman, *The Gove reforms a decade on: What worked, what didn't, what next?* (2022), pp. 7-9.
- <sup>2</sup> See Tom Fellows, Sam Henson and Emma Knights, *Moving MATs forward: the power of governance in 2019* (2019), and Clare Collins, Sam Henson and Emma Knights, *MATs Moving Forward: the power of governance* (2021).
- <sup>3</sup> Comments by West Midlands regional director Andrew Warren, see <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/regional-directors-merger-mission-after-landgrabs/>.
- <sup>4</sup> For a summary of the debate around structures, see Tom Richmond and Eleanor Regan, *20 years of muddling through: Why it is time to set a new course for the state school system in England* (2024), pp. 9-10; and Natasha Plaister and Dave Thomson, *Are LA schools more likely to get top Ofsted ratings than academies?* (2023). For an example of the case for maintained schools, see Local Government Association, *Analysis of Ofsted Inspection Outcomes by School Type* (2022). For an example of the case for a trust-led system, see Department for Education, *The Case for a Fully Trust-led System* (2022).
- <sup>5</sup> DfE, *The Case for a Fully Trust-led System*, p. 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, *How does school spending per pupil differ across the UK?* (2023). Other differences between the English and Scottish Systems including around curriculum, and the existence of governing boards.
- <sup>7</sup> Publicly available data from Department for Education, Get Information About Schools
- <sup>8</sup> Natasha Plaister, *The Current State of Play for MATs* (2024)
- <sup>9</sup> Plaister, *The Current State of Play for MATs*
- <sup>10</sup> See section 3
- <sup>11</sup> Richmond and Regan, *20 years*, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>12</sup> The ESFA investigation publishing policy is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/efa-investigation-publishing-policy>.
- <sup>13</sup> Published notices are available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/academy-trust-notices-to-improve>.
- <sup>14</sup> National Governance Association, *Growing Good Governance* (2024).
- <sup>15</sup> For more information on local governance, see National Governance Association, *Local governance here and now* (2023).
- <sup>16</sup> For information on the development of MAT central teams, see National Governance Association, *Central leadership teams in multi academy trusts* (2021).
- <sup>17</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 19.
- <sup>18</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 22.
- <sup>20</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Megan Tate, *A Matter of Time*, NGA (2024), p. 15.
- <sup>22</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, pp. 12-16.
- <sup>23</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 19.
- <sup>24</sup> NGA, *Charting the course for good governance* (2023), p. 17.
- <sup>25</sup> National Governance Association. *School and Trust Governance Professionals 2021* (2021).
- <sup>26</sup> Our 2022 survey of MAT trustees found nearly 90% agreeing with the statement that all trusts should have local governance arrangements.
- <sup>27</sup> NGA, *Local Governance here and now*.
- <sup>28</sup> See for example James Townsend, Ed Vainker and Leora Cruddas, *Community Anchoring – School Trusts as Anchor Institutions* (2022), p. 15.
- <sup>29</sup> NGA, *The Future is Local*, p. 7,
- <sup>30</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 18.
- <sup>31</sup> NGA, *Local Governance here and now*.
- <sup>32</sup> NGA, *Local Governance here and now*.
- <sup>33</sup> Confederation of School Trusts, *Guidance on the Governance Structures, Roles and Responsibilities in School Trusts* (2021), p. 12.
- <sup>34</sup> GovernorHub, *Is yours a listening school?* (2024), p. 28.

- <sup>35</sup> National Governance Association, *Central leadership teams in multi academy trusts* (2021), p. 13.
- <sup>36</sup> NGA, *Central leadership teams in MATs*, p. 13.
- <sup>37</sup> For more on the benefits of internal HR capacity in MATs, see Mandy Coalter, *The role of trusts as talent architects: Creating schools as great places to work*, CST (2021).
- <sup>38</sup> Kreston UK, *Academies Benchmark Report 2024* (2024), p. 32.
- <sup>39</sup> National Governance Association, *MAT case studies* (2019), <https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/mat-case-studies/>.
- <sup>40</sup> Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), *Effective Business Functionality within Developing MATs* (2020), p. 6.
- <sup>41</sup> It should be noted that since 2021, terminology around governance professional roles in a MAT has been consolidated and so we cannot definitively say that all those who clerked MAT trust boards in 2021 would be described as lead governance professionals in 2024. However, when reviewing raw data, the vast majority of those who served MAT trust boards had job titles including ‘head of governance,’ ‘governance manager’ and ‘director of governance,’ all of which align with level 3 of NGA’s career pathway- the descriptor of ‘lead governance professional’ in the survey, so the figures can be reasonably compared.
- <sup>42</sup> NGA, *Growing good governance*, p. 11.
- <sup>43</sup> NGA, *Local Governance here and now*, pp. 18-20.
- <sup>44</sup> DfE, *The Case for a Fully Trust-led System*, p. 29; Education Policy Institute, *The Features of Effective School Groups* (2024), p. 29.
- <sup>45</sup> Kreston, *Academies Benchmark Report 2024*, p. 32.
- <sup>46</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 15.
- <sup>47</sup> Kreston, *Academies Benchmark Report*, p. 6.
- <sup>48</sup> EPI, *The Features of Effective School Groups*, p. 29.
- <sup>49</sup> Kreston, *Academies Benchmark Report*, p. 7.
- <sup>50</sup> Kreston, *Academies Benchmark Report*, p. 8.
- <sup>51</sup> Kreston, *Academies Benchmark Report*, p. 26.
- <sup>52</sup> Finding from both our 2024 annual governance survey and Kreston, *Academies Benchmark Report*, p. 22.
- <sup>53</sup> Rei Kanemura, Amy McGarvey and Alex Farrow, *Time Well Spent 2023: a national survey on the volunteer experience*, NCVO (2023), p. 17.
- <sup>54</sup> National Governance Association, *Taking stock of governance workload* (2023).
- <sup>55</sup> Tate, *A Matter of Time*, p. 4.
- <sup>56</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 7.
- <sup>57</sup> NGA, *Growing Good Governance*, p. 22.
- <sup>58</sup> NFER, *Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2024*, p. 26
- <sup>59</sup> NFER, *Teacher Labour Market*, pp. 16, 20.
- <sup>60</sup> Education Policy Institute, *The workforce challenges facing an incoming government* (2024).
- <sup>61</sup> Commons Library Research Briefing, *Teacher Recruitment and Retention in England* (2023), p. 5.
- <sup>62</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), *Teacher Retention and Turnover Research - Research Update 2: Teacher Dynamics in Multi academy Trusts* (2017).
- <sup>63</sup> For example, Confederation of School Trusts, *Professional development in School Trusts: Capacity, conditions, and culture* (2022), p. 13.
- <sup>64</sup> DfE, *The Case for a Fully Trust-led System*, p. 25.
- <sup>65</sup> See footnote 5
- <sup>66</sup> Critique made by then Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw in 2016.
- <sup>67</sup> See footnotes 10-11
- <sup>68</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), *Transitioning to a multi academy trust led system: what does the evidence tell us?* (2023), p. 7; Plaister, *The Current State of Play for MATs*.
- <sup>69</sup> Department for Education, *Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child* (2022), p. 47.
- <sup>70</sup> National Governance Association, *The Schools System: the voice of MAT trustees* (2022), p. 7.
- <sup>71</sup> NFER, *Transitioning to a multi academy trust led system*, p. 22.
- <sup>72</sup> House of Commons Education committee, *Multi academy trusts* (2017), p. 17.

- <sup>73</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), *The MAT Factor: Exploring how multi academy trusts are supporting pupils with SEND* (2024), p. 23.
- <sup>74</sup> Tanya Ovenden-Hope and Rowena Passy, *Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools - A case study of a multi academy trusts 'Hub Model' for schools (2019-2022)*, (2023).
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- <sup>76</sup> Publicly available data via Get Information About Schools
- <sup>77</sup> NGA, *Taking the next step: A guide to forming or joining a multi academy trust* (2022), p. 5.
- <sup>78</sup> Jack Dyson, *Biggest academy trust merger ever as diocese eyes new mega MATs* (2024), *Schools Week*. Available from: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/biggest-academy-trust-merger-ever-as-diocese-eyes-new-mega-mats/>.
- <sup>79</sup> Tom Belger, *Legal threats and governor revolts: Inside the mass academisation of Catholic schools* (2022), *Schools Week*. Available from: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/catholic-schools-academisation-mats-education-future/>.
- <sup>80</sup> See for example Freedman, *The Gove Reforms a decade on*, pp. 4-5; Richmond and Regan, *20 years*, pp. 1-5.
- <sup>81</sup> Townsend et al, *Community Anchoring*.
- <sup>82</sup> Leora Cruddas, *The new domains of educational leadership* (2023).
- <sup>83</sup> See for example Leora Cruddas, *School trusts as civic institutions: Exemplifications of the civic mindset* (2024).
- <sup>84</sup> NGA, *Local Governance here and now*, p. 24
- <sup>85</sup> See for example, Freedman, *The Gove Reforms a decade on*, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>86</sup> Department for Education, *Academies Regulatory and Commissioning Review* (2023).
- <sup>87</sup> NGA, *The Schools System*, p. 10.
- <sup>88</sup> DfE, *Academies Regulatory and Commissioning Review*, p. 12.
- <sup>89</sup> NGA, *The Schools System*, p. 5.
- <sup>90</sup> See Sam Henson's evidence to the House of Commons education committee, recorded in House of Commons Education Committee, *Ofsted's work with schools* (2024), pp. 46-47.
- <sup>91</sup> NGA, *The Schools System*, p. 6; Nina Sharma and Megan Tate, *Annual Governance Survey 2023* (2023), pp. 34-35.
- <sup>92</sup> For example, Ofsted, *Let us inspect multi academy trusts (MATs)* (2019); HoC Education Committee, *Ofsted's work with schools*, p. 47.
- <sup>93</sup> Amy Walker, *Are schools in poorer areas now getting better Ofsted grades?*, *Schools Week* (2023).
- <sup>94</sup> Jason Bradbury and Sean Harford, *Deprivation, ethnicity and school inspection judgements* (2018), <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/06/22/deprivation-ethnicity-and-school-inspection-judgements/>.
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- <sup>97</sup> See education white papers in 2010, 2016 and 2022.