

The mature MAT model

Success, innovation and challenges in the trust system

Key findings

October 2024

The time feels right to reflect on the state of the multi academy trust 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 local authority-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 help turn around underperforming schools, Conservative-led administrations since 2010 turbo-charged the growth of the trust sector to over 10,000 academies today. 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

NGA works closely with trusts across England through hundreds of external governance reviews, over 1,000 trust respondents to our annual governance survey, and countless conversations on our advice line, governance networks, forums and more. This work has made clear to us that the trust system has matured in multiple senses:

- **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.
- **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.

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.

Four key themes for trusts and policy makers to prioritise as they navigate the years ahead:

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 localisation and centralisation, is the ongoing test.

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 that 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.