



**Written by Julie McCulloch**

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## About the author



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### Who is this guide for?

This guide is aimed at helping school leaders and governors in both maintained schools and academies in England to better understand the changing educational landscape and to explore the options open to them.

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# Introduction

## A fully academised system?

Back in 2016, the white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere*<sup>1</sup> set out the government's vision for a fully academised system and their ambition that, by the end of 2022, all schools would be academies. The white paper proposed that most schools would form or join multi-academy trusts (groups of academies under a single governance structure). This would, according to the government, enable "schools to operate in strong, resilient structures that work to drive up standards so that external intervention is only necessary in exceptional circumstances" and allow "proven educational models to be scaled and the system's best leaders to run more than one school".

## The changing landscape

Much has changed in the period since *Educational Excellence Everywhere* was published. Responding to concerns about the compulsory elements of these proposals, the government rapidly backtracked<sup>2</sup> on the idea of enforcing the blanket conversion of all schools.

However, while the government has moved away from compulsory academisation, its belief in the benefits of academies and, particularly, in the multi-academy trust model, remains. And in the consultation document, *Schools that work for everyone*<sup>3</sup>, the government stated categorically that their new proposals, including expanding selective schools, "complement our wider approach to school improvement and our drive to build capacity in the system through multi-academy trusts", making it clear that it "remains the Government's ambition that all schools ultimately benefit from the autonomy and freedom to innovate and to meet the needs of their community that academy status brings, and we will be supporting schools to make this transition".



# What does this mean for your school?

We are unlikely to see any further attempts to bring in compulsory academisation in the foreseeable future. The legislation required to pursue this route is simply not a sufficient priority for a government currently focused on other issues, particularly Brexit.

It is therefore down to schools to decide for themselves how best to secure their long-term futures. Although the threat of compulsory academisation has diminished, the challenges of running a successful school have not. More than ever, school leaders and governors need to consider how best to secure the support they need to enable them to provide the best possible education to their pupils.

There are some things of which we can be sure:

- Academisation has now built up a momentum of its own. At the time of writing, about a quarter of primary schools and three quarters of secondaries were academies. The pace of conversion has slowed, but is still steady.
- Local authorities are struggling to provide the support schools need. Schools are increasingly having to look elsewhere for both the support and challenge they used to receive from their local authority (LA).
- Strong school-to-school partnerships, always important, are becoming even more crucial as this central support diminishes.

It is essential that school leaders and governors stay abreast of these changes, think proactively about the likely impact on their school and steer their school towards the best outcome for their pupils, staff and community. This guide is designed to help you to do this by highlighting research evidence on the potential benefits of forming or joining a MAT, exploring what the most successful partnerships look like and how they operate, and suggesting a step-by-step process to scaffold your decision-making. It is structured around the following questions:

1. What are benefits of strong school-to-school collaboration?
2. What different partnership models are available?
3. What does leadership (including governance) look like in a MAT?
4. What can we learn from existing strong partnerships?
5. How can I make the right decision for my school?



# School-to-school collaboration

## Benefits of collaboration

Many schools already effectively support and challenge each other through formal and informal partnership and collaboration. The majority of academies are now part of formal partnerships (multi-academy trusts, known as MATs).

### Key benefits

There is an increasing body of evidence for the benefits of formal partnerships between schools, which include:

- sharing responsibility to meet rising expectations, resulting in better pupil progress and attainment
- shared strategic thinking, planning and expertise for school leaders, governors and teachers to tackle challenges together
- new and different inter-school solutions to address recruitment and retention challenges as well as to plan succession more effectively
- opportunities to find and fund specialist expertise within a school group (specialist teachers, specialists in data analysis or finance) and provide richer curricular and extra-curricular activities
- increased options for shared professional development whether led by staff from one of the partner schools or an outside body
- new economies of scale and collective purchasing made possible within larger groups, helping schools to cope better with shrinking budgets.

These benefits are not, of course, automatic. Some school partnerships are much more effective than others. (See [page 11](#) for emerging evidence on the characteristics of effective school groups.) The following sections of this guide are designed to help you assess your options and to choose a path that will give your school the best opportunity to realise these benefits.

## Evidence for the benefits of collaboration

### *Education Select Committee reports*

The Education Select Committee (a cross-party group of 11 MPs which monitors the work of the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted and other bodies), recently undertook two large-scale enquiries into school partnerships and structures. These form a significant body of evidence for the benefits of strong collaborations, and shared accountability, between schools.

### ***School Partnerships and Cooperation***<sup>4</sup>

This first report found that “school partnerships and co-operation have become an increasingly important part of a self-improving or school-led system” and that “such collaboration has great potential to continue driving improvement to the English education system”.

The report found there was “little doubt among school leaders that collaboration can play an important part in school improvement”, quoting research commissioned by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCSL) which found that 87% of headteachers and 83% of chairs of governors described partnership with other schools as “critical to improving outcomes for students”.<sup>5</sup>

“We believe that school partnerships with clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation are more likely to be successful in achieving gains from collaboration.”

***School Partnerships and Cooperation***

The report recognised that “the terms ‘partnership’, ‘co-operation’ and ‘collaboration’ are sometimes used interchangeably”, but identified the key distinction as “those partnerships which have a formal basis and those which do not”. It found evidence for the benefits of formal partnerships, including a report for the NCSL which found that, two to four years into the partnerships, schools in federations performed better than schools with similar characteristics that had not federated. In addition, the report noted that federations adopting executive leadership structures, with one executive head leading schools within the federation, achieved better results than those which maintained traditional structures, with one head for each school.

### Academies and free schools<sup>6</sup>

This second report set out to explore the impact of academies including free schools. It found no evidence that academisation in itself raises standards. What it strongly identified, though, was a relationship between school-to-school collaboration and improved outcomes. It quoted evidence from the Sutton Trust on the stronger performance of sponsored academies in chains over stand-alone academies. It also included evidence from Ofsted on the higher likelihood of the performance of stand-alone converter academies declining since their previous inspection, as compared to academies in MATs.

*“The 2012 Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2012 a) reports that academies in chains perform better than stand-alone, sponsored academies in terms of inspection judgements: Of the 204 inspected, 25% of those in chains were judged to be outstanding by end of August 2012, compared with 8% not in chains. The best are intolerant of failure and impatient for success”*

The benefits of being part of a formal group were particularly strong for primary schools, whose smaller size and greater reliance on LA support often made stand-alone academy status more problematic.

This belief that it is the shared commitment generated by entering into formal partnership (whether a multi-academy trust or a federation) that makes the difference was clearly articulated by one primary head. Katie Beal, Headteacher of Eastfield Primary School in Hull, told the committee that, while becoming an academy had improved their practice and their school, this was primarily because of the advantages generated by the collaborative framework of a MAT: “We are accountable for each other, and therefore it is imperative we support each other to improve.”

*“The model of partnership ... is less important than the level of commitment of the heads and teacher involved.”*

**Academies and free schools**

### Ofsted report

A recommendation made in the report, *Unleashing greatness*, was: “Both local and central government should encourage the federation of primary schools without an immediate emphasis on academy status.”<sup>7</sup>

An Ofsted report, *Leadership of more than one school*,<sup>8</sup> similarly identified some clear benefits from formal partnerships. The report highlighted the positive impact of federation on improvement in both provision and outcomes:

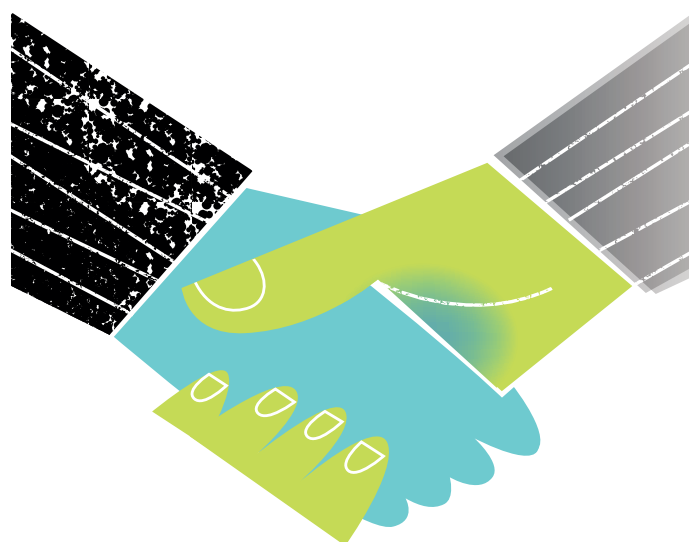
- In federations where weaker schools had joined forces with stronger ones, the key areas of improvement were in teaching and learning, pupil behaviour and achievement.
- Federations which had been set up to improve capacity among small schools had been successful in broadening and enriching the curriculum and care, guidance and support for pupils.
- In the case of cross-phase federations, federation had resulted in stronger academic transition between schools.

# Partnership models

So the benefits of schools working together are increasingly clear. But what do these partnerships actually look like?

## Types of partnership

There are essentially two types of partnership that involve shared governance: federations and multi-academy trusts. As the earlier evidence shows, shared governance is most likely to have an impact on the effectiveness of the schools involved.



### Multi-academy trusts

Multi-academy trusts are groups of academies that have come together to form a charitable company, with a single group of members (who have an overview of the governance arrangements) and a single board of trustees, or directors.

### Federations

Federations are groups of maintained schools. Historically the term 'hard federation' has been used for groups with a single governing body, and 'soft federation' for more informal partnerships in which schools retain separate governing bodies.

Whilst it is still possible for schools to come together to form federations, the vast majority of new formal partnerships now take the form of multi-academy trusts. We therefore focus in this guide on MATs, though many of the benefits of forming or joining a MAT can also be realised through federations.

## What happens to individual schools?

The following might help to clarify the status of individual schools in a MAT:

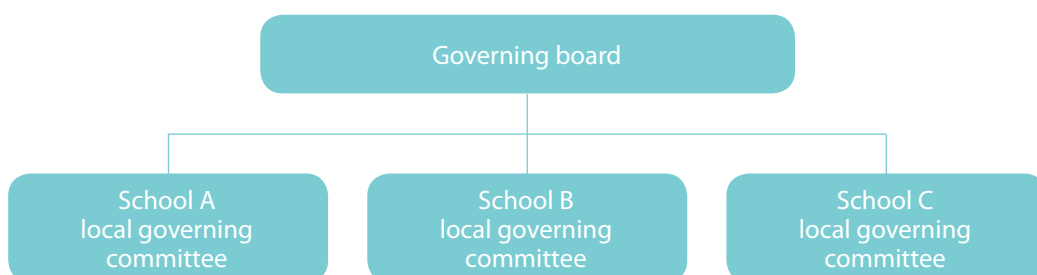
- Although the MAT is a single legal body, individual schools remain as separate entities, with separate names and DfE numbers.
- Individual schools still receive separate Ofsted judgements (though Ofsted is beginning to 'co-schedule' inspections of schools in some groups, and the government is considering ways in which MATs might be held to account in their own right).
- Performance tables are still based on individual schools.
- Individual faith schools retain their existing religious character. For Church of England and Catholic schools, detailed agreements between the DfE and both the National Society and the Catholic Education Service ensure that the religious character of a school can't be changed through joining a MAT.

# Governance in a MAT

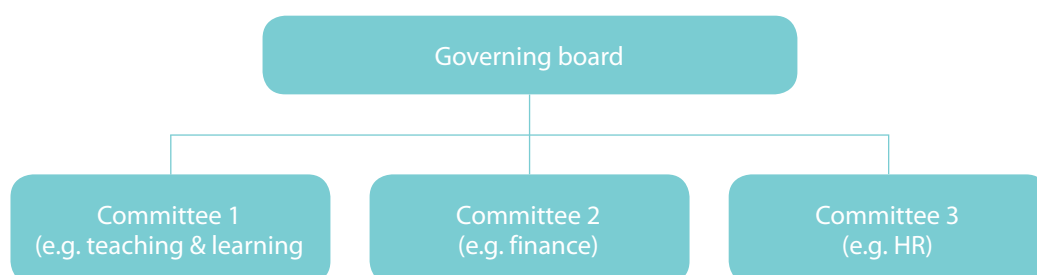
## Governance structures

Schools forming or joining a MAT become accountable to an over-arching governing board, (variously called boards of directors or trustees), which sets the strategic direction for all schools in the group.

**Model 1: school-based committees**



**Model 2: issue-based committees**

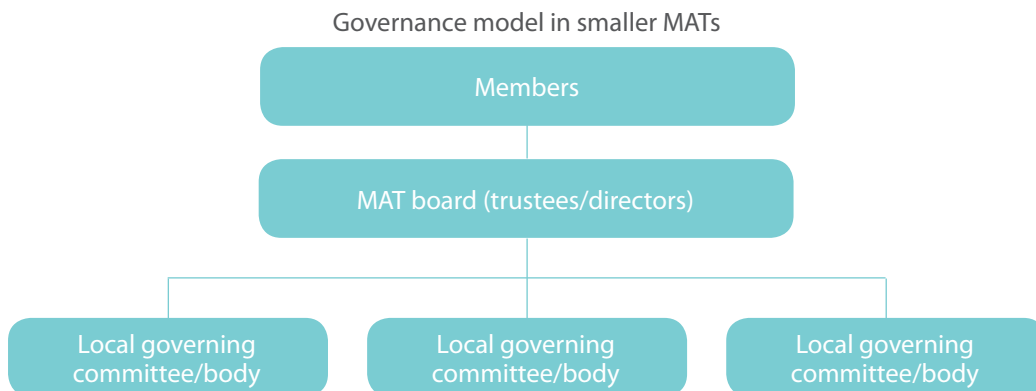


The roles of the directors/trustees come with specific legal responsibilities including:

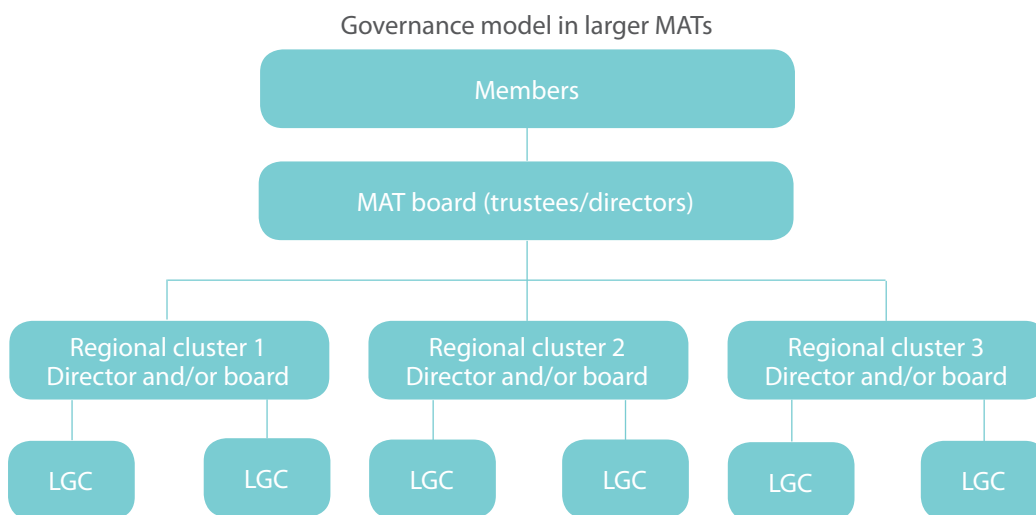
- ensuring the organisation remains solvent and spends money in accordance with its charitable objectives
- ensuring the schools in the MAT provide a good standard of education
- managing any conflicts of interest.

MATs are also required to have a group of people called members, who sit above the board of trustees. The members have a hands-off, but very significant, role. They monitor the performance of the trust and hold the trustees to account. They will intervene if the board is not performing by making changes at board level. It is likely that the members will meet rarely, though they are able to meet more often if they wish.

The governance model in many smaller MATs therefore looks like the one below.



The smallest MATs may actually only have one level of governance, without local governing committees. As MATs grow, particularly if they become more geographically dispersed, many add in an additional layer between the MAT board and the local governing committees, resulting in a structure along the lines of the one below.



## Who is responsible for what?

It is up to the board of trustees to decide how much responsibility it keeps for itself, and how much it delegates to committees, though there are some responsibilities that must be held at board level. In some groups, committees have significant decision-making authority. In others, they act in an advisory capacity. The structure and the degree of delegation need to take into account the number and size of the schools involved.

It is also possible to have different approaches to schools within a group, delegating more decision-making powers to high-performing schools than struggling schools (sometimes referred to as an 'earned autonomy' or 'asymmetrical local governance' model).

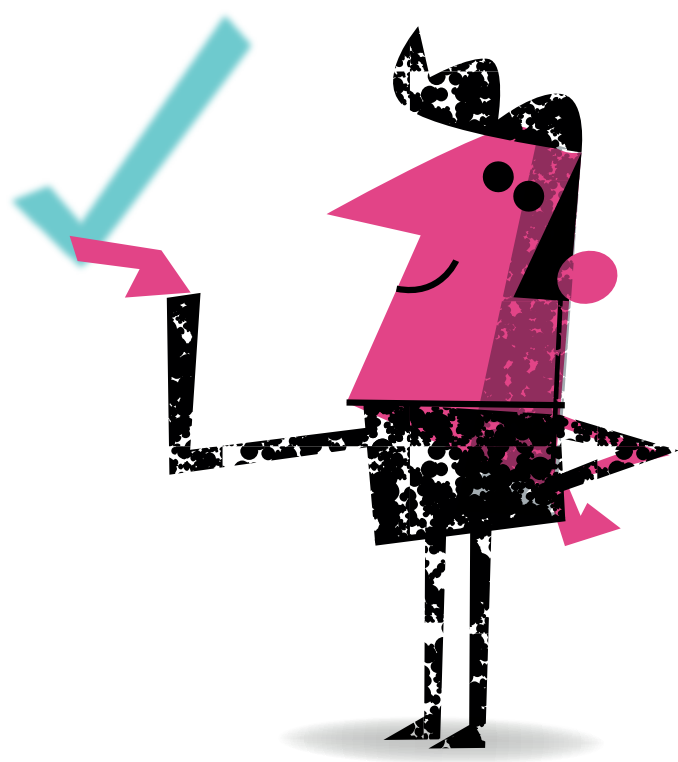
MATs are required to produce a 'scheme of delegation' which outlines what decisions are taken by whom, and at what level of the organisation. MATs must also comply with the *Academies Financial Handbook*, which acts as the financial framework for academy trusts and sets out the financial governance requirements to which all trusts must adhere.

# Leadership in a MAT

## Leadership structures

There are a several ways groups can approach leadership, depending on the size of the group and the skills, experience and ambitions of the school leaders involved. Whatever leadership structure a group decides to implement, the board of trustees needs to be confident that the structure will enable it to hold the heads of the schools accountable for the performance of their schools and to take appropriate action if required.

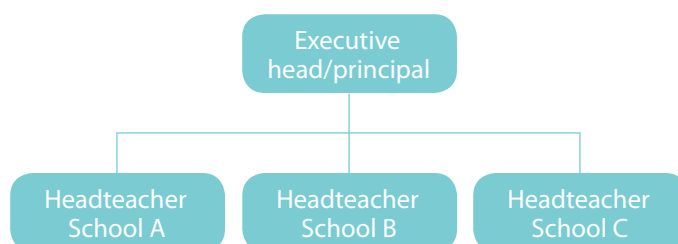
The *Academies Financial Handbook* makes it clear that all academy trusts must have a senior executive leader, and that this should be a permanent role, not a rotating one. This person should also be nominated as the trust's accounting officer, a role which includes personal responsibility for the financial resources under the trust's control. It is possible for the executive head to be also the substantive head of one or more of the schools in the group.



## Leadership models

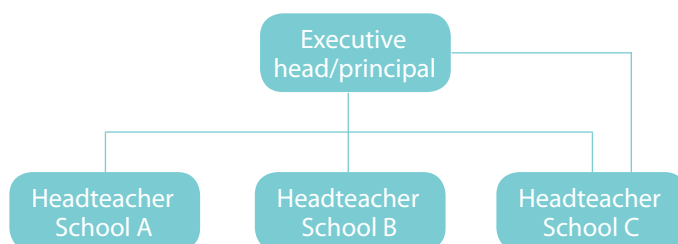
Below are four leadership models which ASCL has developed, but this is by no means an exhaustive list.

### 1. Executive head or principal – pure model



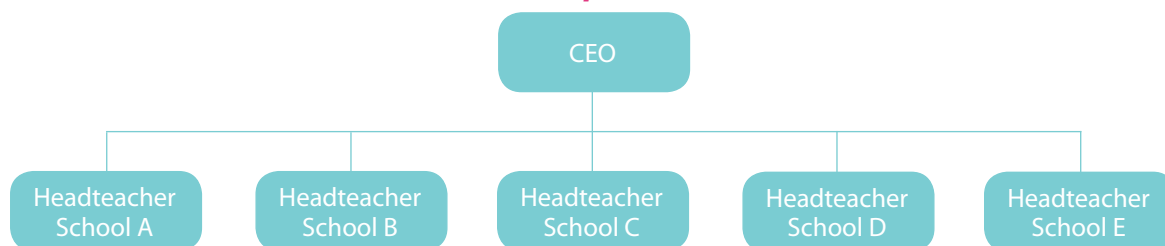
In this scenario, the executive head or principal is the substantive headteacher of all the schools in the group. He or she holds the legal responsibilities of the headteacher of all three schools, and also has an overarching, strategic role for the group. Day-to-day operational management is delegated to the heads of each school.

### 2. Executive head or principal – mixed model



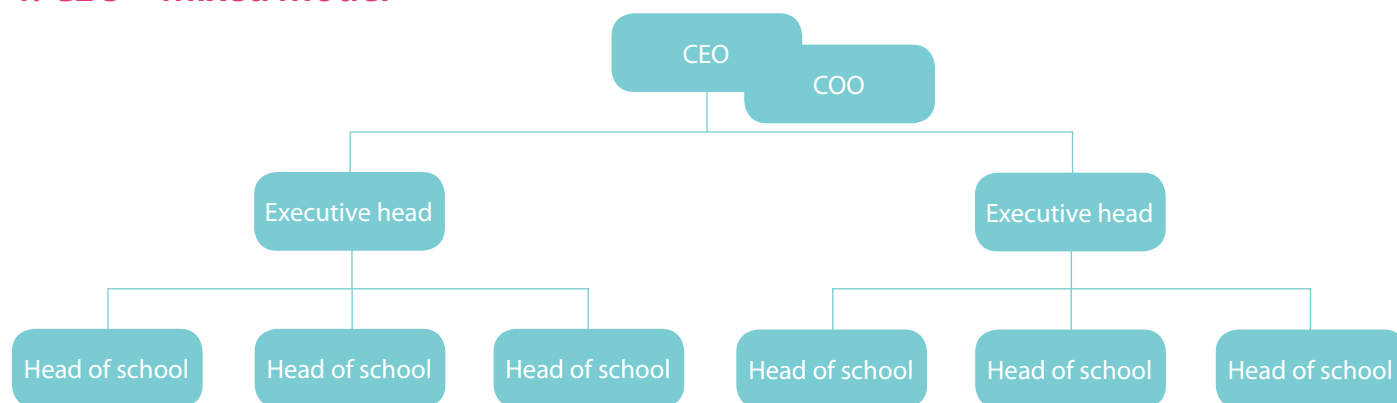
In this scenario, the executive head or principal is the substantive headteacher of one school in the group, but also has an overarching, strategic role for the group as a whole. The headteachers of School A and School B hold the legal responsibilities of the head in the individual school, but are probably line managed by the executive head or principal of School C.

### 3. Chief executive officer (CEO) – pure model



In this scenario, each of the schools in the group has its own headteacher. The CEO has an overarching, strategic role without being the substantive head of any of the schools in the group. In this model, the CEO does not have the legal responsibilities of the headteacher. He or she will probably line manage the headteachers. This model may be more appropriate as groups grow beyond three or four schools.

### 4. CEO – mixed model



In this scenario for larger MATs, each cluster of schools has an executive head. The CEO has an overarching, strategic role, and each executive head is the substantive headteacher of the schools in their cluster. Some larger MATs also have a chief operating officer (COO) who is responsible for day-to-day operations.



# Learning from existing partnerships

Not all partnerships are created equal. Some are much more effective than others in achieving the potential benefits outlined on [page 4](#). So what do we know about what the most successful MATs look like and how they operate?

## Commonalities

### 1. Vision and ethos

They have a clear vision for what they want to achieve and a clear ethos underpinning everything they do. This is clearly communicated to, and shared by, all the schools in the group.

### 2. Strategic plans

They have well-developed strategic plans, with success criteria that are shared with all staff.

### 3. Growth

They have grown in a considered, strategic way, understanding their own capacity and the risks and challenges they take on.

### 4. Leadership, including governance

They are led by strong, ambitious and determined leaders with a clear moral purpose, who are able to balance an appetite to grow with a focus on delivering the best possible outcomes for all schools in the group. They are governed by a skilled group of trustees.

### 5. Portfolio of schools

Most successful groups have a diverse portfolio of schools: primary and secondary, converter and sponsor. There are some thriving primary-only groups, but many find benefits in including schools in both phases.

### 6. Geography

They have carefully considered the geographical location of their schools and structured their governance including leadership accordingly. While there are many advantages to geographically close groups, more dispersed MATs can be successful – but usually only if they are able to cluster their schools in ways that enable them to support each other effectively.

### 7. Finance

They have people with strong financial and commercial skills on their board and, for groups larger than about five schools, a full-time financial director. They have a clear, sustainable business model and a strong financial plan.

### 8. Monitoring, evaluation, support and accountability

They have rigorous procedures for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the whole group and the individual schools within it, and for holding staff to account. They provide strong support for school improvement (both top-down and peer-to-peer), and delegate authority to schools in different circumstances.

### 9. Staff development

They have a strong belief in the importance of, and well-established procedures for, coaching and developing staff at all levels, and for identifying and growing future leaders.

# The right decision for your school

There is, then, a growing body of evidence about the benefits of strong, sustainable partnerships, and how effective partnerships operate. School leaders and governors should weigh up the evidence to help them to determine the best course of action for their school.

## Key steps

Every school will need to plot its own course through this decision-making process. There are some key questions, though, that school leaders and governors need to ask themselves and others. Below are three key steps to assist in this process.

### Step 1: Horizon-scan

Make time to discuss the changing landscape and the implications for your school at a full governing board meeting. Questions you might want to explore include:

- What is our vision for our school?
- What are likely to be our biggest challenges in delivering that vision over the next few years?
- How is this likely to be impacted by our funding?
- Might partnering with other schools help?
- What opportunities might this create?

- What concerns do we have about this?
- What might happen if we did nothing?
- Are there other local schools that we might like to work more closely with, or existing MATs that we might consider joining?
- What restrictions might there be on our school partnering with others?

### Step 2: Set up a working group

Bring together a working group of interested governors and staff to explore possibilities. This group can:

- Research and identify different options open to you.
- Consider the pros and cons of these options.
- Consult bodies with authority over your school, e.g. your LA and any relevant religious authority.
- Meet potential partners to discuss the idea of partnership and, if appropriate, start to consider what a partnership might look like.
- Consult informally with key stakeholders, including staff, pupils and the wider community, to explore their views on possible options.



## Step 3: Convene a full governing board meeting

Organise a board meeting for the working group to report back on its work and to agree your preferred way forward. The agenda might include:

- a presentation of the working group's findings, followed by an opportunity for questions

- a recommended way forward, with an explanation of the likely implications for pupils, parents, staff and governors
- an explanation of why the group thinks this would be the best decision for your school
- time for discussion and debate.

You should aim to end this meeting with a firm agreement on the preferred option and next steps, with a clearly defined timeframe.



# What happens next?

## Six outcomes

There are six likely outcomes of this decision-making process. You might decide to:

1. **stay as you are** for now, see how things develop in your area, and revisit the discussion later
2. **work more closely with other like-minded schools**, with a view to possibly partnering with them at some point in the future
3. (for maintained schools) seek to convert to academy status as a **single academy trust**, with a view to possibly converting to a MAT and inviting other schools to join you later
4. seek to convert to academy status (if you're currently a maintained school) and **join an existing MAT**
5. seek to convert to academy status (if you're currently a maintained school) and **set up a new MAT with other schools**
6. seek to convert to academy status (if you're currently a maintained school) and **set up an 'empty' or 'shadow' MAT** on your own, with the potential to sponsor or invite other schools to join you later.

The final decision on whether a school will be permitted to undertake any of options 3 to 6 above will be taken by your Regional Schools Commissioner. It's worth bearing in mind that they won't approve all applications, and that new single academy trusts or 'empty' MATs are now rarely being approved. The RSCs will take many factors into account when making a decision, and there are no set criteria used to do so. The following observations may, however, be helpful.

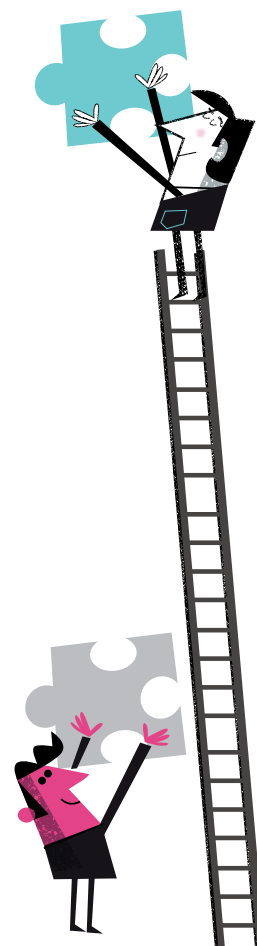
### Performance

A school in an Ofsted category below 'good', or which has performance below the floor standard and/or within the 'coasting' definition, is highly unlikely to be able to convert as a single academy trust or an 'empty' MAT. In addition, if a school in this position plans to join an existing MAT or form a new MAT with other schools, the RSC will want to feel confident in the capacity of

that MAT to support the school to improve. In some cases, the RSC may direct an underperforming school to join a particular MAT, or be sponsored by a particular sponsor, though they should always be willing to listen to a compelling alternative proposal.

### Size

A small school is unlikely to be judged as having sufficient capacity to convert as a single academy trust or an 'empty' MAT. For this purpose, 'small' is often used to mean schools with fewer than 1200 pupils. Groups of schools seeking to form a MAT which collectively have fewer than this number of pupils are also unlikely to be viewed as sustainable in the long term by the RSC, though they won't necessarily be expected to reach this number immediately. Equally, when forming a MAT you will need to think about size and sustainability in terms of numbers of pupils across the MAT as a whole. Two large secondary schools each with 2000 pupils is very different to having five small primary schools with just 100 pupils in each.



## Finances

A school with a current or predicted deficit budget, or which is deemed lacking in financial expertise, is highly unlikely to be able to convert as a single academy trust or an 'empty' MAT. Schools in this situation seeking to form or join a MAT will need to talk to their RSC about how they can do so in a way which is fair both to them and to their new partners. The RSC will expect to see a credible recovery plan to address the deficit before approving the proposed change.

## Religious character

The DfE has agreed memoranda of understanding with both the Church of England and the Catholic Church which determine what options are available to schools with these religious characters. These documents include a great deal of detail, but the main message is that, in the vast majority of cases, Catholic schools will only be permitted to form or join Catholic-led trusts, and CofE schools will only be permitted to form or join trusts "with governance arrangements that reflect, at member and director level, no dilution of the level of church governance and involvement as it was immediately prior to conversion". In most cases,

for voluntary controlled CofE schools wishing to join MATs, this means the church will require a minimum of 25% representation among the MAT's members and trustees. It is expected that voluntary aided CofE schools will usually join church-led MATs.

# Conclusion

We are living in uncertain times. Education policy is changing at a sometimes bewildering pace and attempting to keep up can sometimes feel like a full-time job.

School leaders and governors need to look beyond the headlines in order to consider the long-term future of their school. While all of this can, understandably, feel like a distraction from the core business of teaching and learning, many schools have found the process of thinking about their vision and ethos, and considering how they might work more productively with other schools that share those same values, exciting and invigorating. We hope this guide will help you to embrace these decisions in that spirit.

# Further reading

## Useful resources

DfE (2016), *Convert to an academy: a guide for schools*  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools>

Guidance for maintained schools about how to apply to convert to academy status.

Education and Skills Funding Agency (2018), *Academies financial handbook*. London: ESFA, © Crown Copyright 2018  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academies-financial-handbook>

A handbook issued by the Education and Skills Funding Agency that describes financial requirements for academy trusts.

ASCL guidance papers  
<http://www.ascl.org.uk/help-and-advice/guidance-papers/>

More detailed guidance from ASCL on forming or joining a multi-academy trust.

### About the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

ASCL aims to be the first choice professional association and union for all school, college and system leaders. It works to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to members and deliver first class professional development.

Find out more about how ASCL supports primary school leaders [here](#).

## Oxford University Press resources



School Improvement Pathways provides the structure, the research and the resources to drive improvement forward in your school – in an easy-to-use online system. There are over 20 Pathways, each guiding you through four key steps to address a different school improvement. [Find out more about School Improvement Pathways](#)



## Endnotes

- 1 DfE (2016) *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. London: DfE, © Crown Copyright 2016. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere>
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- 7 Pearson/RSA (2013), *Unleashing greatness: Getting the best from an academised system. The Report of the Academies Commission*, page 10. January 2013. <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/unleashing-greatness-getting-the-best-from-an-academised-system>, accessed 30 September 2016.
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- 9 DfE, *Convert to an academy guide: for schools*, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools>, accessed 27 September 2016.
- 10 DfE, *Application form to become a multi-academy trust*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-to-become-a-multi-academy-trust>, accessed 27 September 2016.