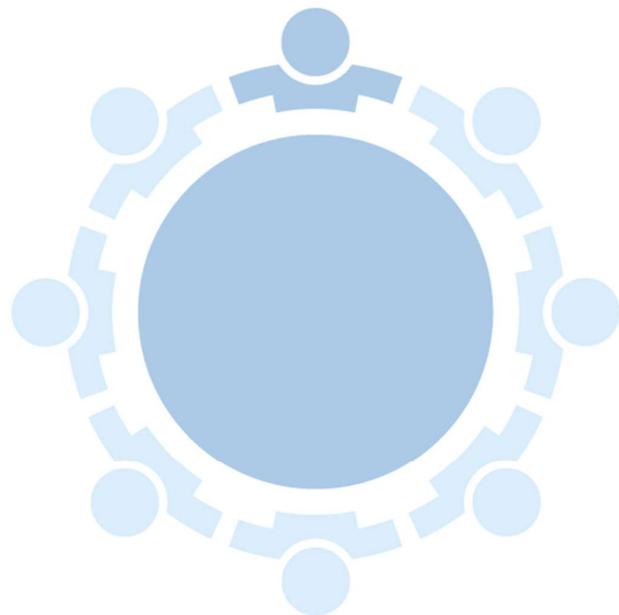


Multi-academy trusts: lessons learned in their journey so far  
Faringdon Academy of Schools (MAT)

May 2019





### About this case study

This document is part of a series of case studies undertaken by the National Governance Association (NGA) exploring the barriers groups of schools have faced in their respective journeys since inception and what those governing and executive leaders have learned along the way.

This study does not make a judgement on the quality of governance or leadership across the trust. Instead, it shares the experience and key learning points offered by the interviewees themselves; where possible, in their own words.

To carry out this case study, NGA visited Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT and interviewed the chair of trustees, the chief executive, a local academy committee chair, the chief operating officer and the academy secretary for the MAT. In addition, NGA also analysed key documents (including the scheme of delegation and the MAT strategic plan) to supplement the data from the interviews.

NGA would like to thank all those who gave up their time to speak to the project team.

### National Governance Association

NGA is an independent charity representing and supporting governors, trustees and clerks in maintained schools and academies in England. NGA's goal is to improve the wellbeing of children and young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. It does this by providing information, guidance, research, advice and training. It also works closely with, and lobbies, UK government and educational bodies, and is the leading campaigning national membership organisation for school governors and trustees.

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## Creation and development of Faringdon Academy of Schools (MAT)

The Faringdon Academy of Schools multi-academy trust (MAT) is situated in Faringdon, Oxfordshire. The MAT grew out of the "*Faringdon Partnership*", a school-to-school collaboration which looked to create a collaborative approach to education provision in the local area. The MAT was formed when three of the schools within the partnership formally joined together in 2012. This consisted of Faringdon Community College, the only secondary school in Faringdon with around 1,170 pupils, Faringdon Infant School with roughly 275 pupils, and Faringdon Junior School with roughly 320 pupils. The trust expanded again in 2013 when it was joined by five other primary schools that were part of the "*Faringdon Partnership*". These other schools were Watchfield Primary, John Blandy Primary, Buckland Primary, Longcot and Fernham Primary, and Shrivenham Primary. Today, the trust has a total of eight schools and a combined pupil roll of over 2,800 pupils – with seven schools providing primary provision and one secondary school with a sixth-form college. In terms of governance, the MAT has members, a board of trustees and what the trust call "*local governing bodies (LGBs)*" in each of the eight schools.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT use the phrase "*local governing body (LGB)*" to refer to academy committees at an individual school level that carry out delegated governance functions on behalf of the board of trustees.



## Timeline of creation and development

### Before the MAT was created



Schools within and around Faringdon are part of the “*Faringdon partnership*”. At its core is Faringdon Community College (the only secondary school within Faringdon), which works with 10 others primary phased schools in the local area to coordinate education provision.

### Establishing the multi-academy trust

2012 Due to population growth and an upcoming housing development in the local area, school capacity is expected to reach a critical point within the next three years. Aware that the local authority is looking to create more primary provision, the Faringdon Partnership explore options to retain and build upon the “*exceptionally high level of collaboration*” they have built up in the local area and avoid adverse competition between primary schools.

Looking to strengthen their position within the community, Faringdon Community College set up a working party to discuss plans for a federation with Faringdon Junior School and Faringdon Infant School. However, funding restrictions mean that school improvement support from the local authority (LA) is rapidly dwindling and the MAT programme gains ground. As such, the schools decide instead to join together as part of a three school MAT with a view to providing some of the LA services. Three schools in Faringdon, Faringdon Community College, Faringdon Infant School and Faringdon Junior School therefore decide to establish the Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT.

The headteacher of Faringdon Community College becomes the executive headteacher over the newly formed MAT (retaining his substantive headship over Faringdon Community College but becoming the lead executive across the whole trust). Furthermore, the trust board is originally set up with two representatives from each of the schools.

While executive leaders and trustees have a clear vision for inviting the other schools within the wider “*Faringdon Partnership*” to join the MAT, trustees and executive leaders feel that “*there [is] an element of learning that [needs] to take place before they looked to expand*”. Nonetheless, the newly formed MAT looks to continue the Faringdon Partnership through so-called “*Academy Leadership Team meetings*”. All the primary schools, which act as key feeder schools for Faringdon Community College, are given the opportunity to access and appreciate “*some of the school improvement work that [the newly formed MAT is] doing*”.

2013 The MAT believe that it is time to invite the other schools within the original “*Faringdon Partnership*” into the MAT. Five of the schools ask to join the MAT (Watchfield Primary, John Blandy Primary, Buckland Primary, Longcot and Fernham Primary, and Shrivenham Primary). Subsequently, the Faringdon Partnership of Schools MAT grows to eight schools. Three of these schools held voluntary controlled (VC) status before they become part of the MAT and this drives some changes at trust board level. Indeed, the revised articles of association require “*the diocesan board of education ... [to] ... appoint no fewer than three*” trustees, but no more than 25% of the total number of trustees.

### Development of the MAT

2016 With eight schools within the MAT, both the board of trustees and executive leaders accept that they need to adapt further to reflect the changing nature of the trust.



On the one hand, trustees move away from a model in which each school has two representatives on the trust board, acknowledging that this is not sustainable with an eight school MAT.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that the MAT and Faringdon Community College need their own independent leaders. As such, from September 2016 the executive headteacher relinquishes his substantive headship over Faringdon Community College to focus on the leadership of the MAT. In August 2018, when the executive headteacher retires, the board of trustees then look to appoint a chief executive to reflect how the role has grown and developed.

Running alongside these developments, the MAT also look to centralise key services. Largely as a result of this, other key roles begin to develop across the trust, including a chief operating officer and director of education.

- 2017 The MAT has a clear vision to create a “*seamless*” education from nursery all the way through to post-16. With only one secondary school within the MAT, executive leaders and trustees outline that further secondary provision will enable them to fulfil this vision. As such, Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT looks to merge on two occasions with another MAT in the local area. However, due to subtle differences in vision and ethos, as well as more significant differences around governance and leadership structures, it is not possible to progress either merger to a successful conclusion.

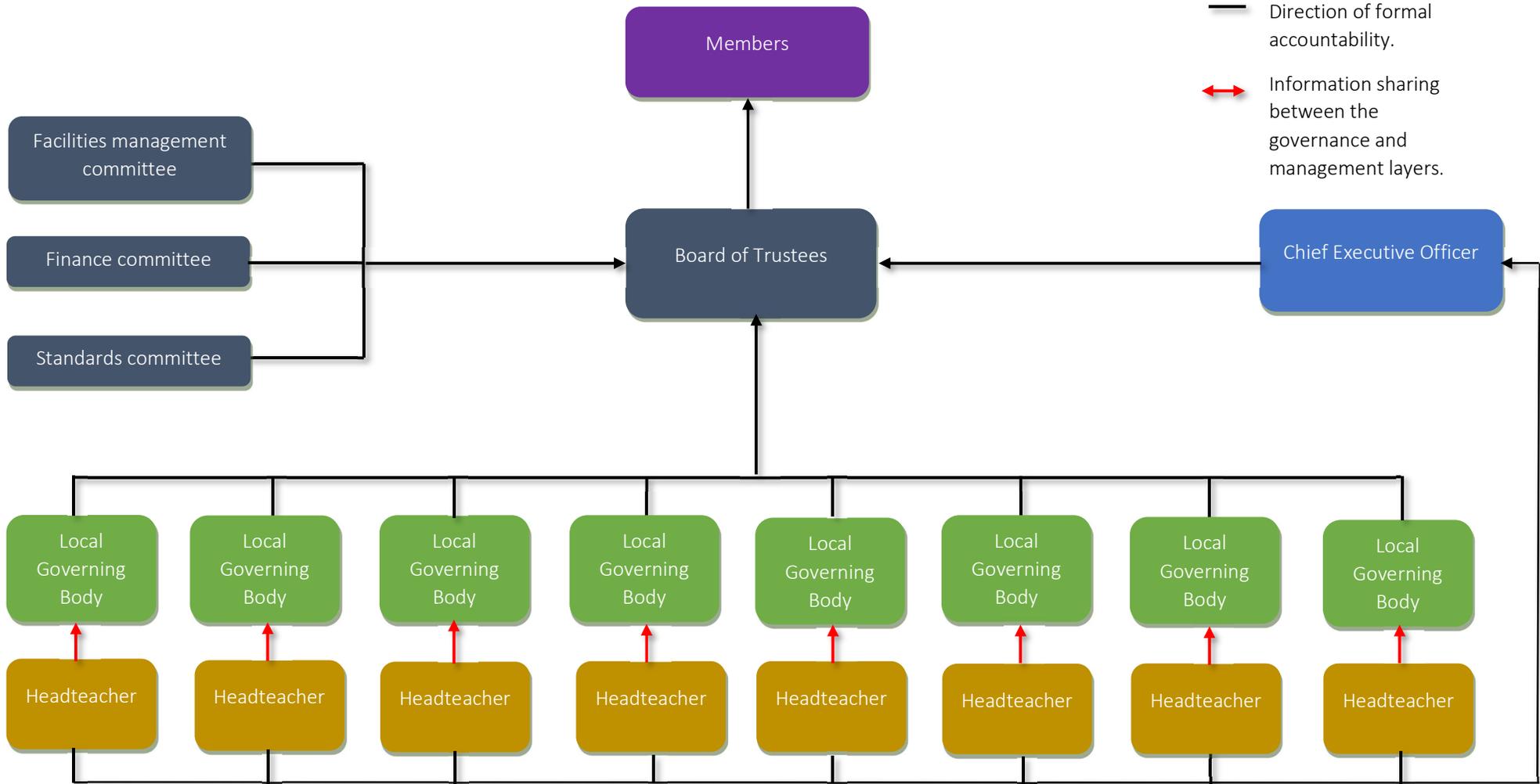
#### The future

- 2019 The MAT remains committed to their vision for “*seamless*” all-through education. However, the trust is also considering the option of incorporating standalone secondary schools into the trust to grow organically, as well as primary schools who wish to join.

Executive leaders and trustees also outline that they will also remain committed to partnerships with others schools in the local area that are not part of the MAT.

## Current Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT Governance Structure

The diagram below shows the formal and informal lines of accountability between the layers of governance and the executive leader.





## Governance within the Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT

Governance across the trust consists of:

- Four members: one with a background in primary education, one with a background in secondary education, one individual representing the corporate sponsor (the diocese) and the chair of trustees.
- Eight trustees: who are appointed by members. The members look to ensure that two have experience governing in secondary schools, two have experience governing in primary schools, with an additional four appointed for their skills and experience.
- An “*ex-officio*” position reserved for the chief executive.
- Three appointed by the diocesan board of education.
- Eight school “*local governing bodies (LGBs)*” (one for each school): each LGB consists of nine/ten members.

As part of the trust, there are also a number of trust board committees – the safety and facilities management committee (which has oversight of premises and estates), the performance and standards committee (which has oversight of pupil outcomes, safeguarding, SEND and pupil groups), the resources committee (which oversees finances and staffing), and the independent audit committee (which reports to the board and has no directors sitting on it). As discussed in lesson eleven, some of those governing at a local level also sit on these committees.

## Lessons learned

From the interviews with those involved in leading the Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT, a number of lessons emerged that can inform others involved in MAT governance. Some of these reflect the benefits that have been realised while others relate to challenges that those governing have faced.

### Lesson one: It is important to balance having a clear vision and values across the trust with respecting the individual characteristics of schools.

While there is a common vision and shared values across the Faringdon Academy of Schools, executive leaders and trustees are also of the belief that no two schools within the trust are the same. Thus, getting a careful balance between having a shared vision and ethos across the trust, and respecting the individual character of each school, is important.

On the one hand, each school within Faringdon Academy of Schools is required to “*focused on ... four ... [visionary and strategic] ... aims*” which are:

*The first one is learners first, understandably. It's all about the children. The second one is about [all schools working together to] support, challenge, and collaborate [with each other] ... the third strand is all about ... nurtu[ring] and develop[ing] our people, because we're very much a people organisation ... Then [the fourth strand is] to finally strengthen and grow .... because we know the strength that we have from the primaries working together, we want something more official with the secondary schools.*

As part of their vision and strategy for the schools within the MAT, the chief executive outlined that all schools should strive to achieve an Ofsted outstanding grade. The MAT is clear that Ofsted should not be seen as a threat but as an aspirational benchmark. According to the chief executive, Ofsted has a role in terms of “*validat[ing] what effective schools do*”. Furthermore, the MAT wants to create strong provision



across all phases and aims to achieve *“seamless education ... [from] ... when children start nursery right the way through to when they leave after completing their A Levels”*.

This strategy and vision underpin much of what the trust does to support its schools, including its work around school improvement (see lesson two), creating a seamless 3-18 education offer (see lesson three), and training and retention (see lesson eight). A common strand across all of these themes is an emphasis on school-to-school collaboration.

Yet while all schools within the trust are expected to follow these four overarching principles, the MAT does not want schools to *“replicate process, systems, procedures, people or behaviours”* across the trust. This is because executive leaders and trustees respect that each school should be able to retain its own culture and ethos while still adhering to the wider strategy and values of the MAT. A clear example of this can be found in how the trust organises its schools’ websites. While the trust logos are present on each school website, each school still retains a sense of its own unique character.

Nevertheless, although the MAT will allow schools to retain their own character, the MAT does invest resources in ensuring that schools within the trust have a healthy culture. As the chief executive of the trust outlined: *“I think if you don't get your organisational culture right and then your school culture right ... you'll never achieve outstanding outcomes ... That takes time, and that takes the right people and the right approach. I think it's also that ... shared vision and approach”*. To achieve this, the trust has recently introduced a *“culture health check”* to assess the quality of culture in individual schools: *“as a trust ... our role [is] to ensure that the right ... unique culture ... exists in each school for everything to be aligned to get the best outcomes”*. Interviewees outlined that part of the reason for focusing on culture, particularly in MATs, is that publicity is too negative and there are numerous reports in the media about what MATs are not doing or ethical failings. This is why, although the trust has kept its brand simple, the MAT has started to invest time in getting its marketing and PR right.

### **Lesson two: For Faringdon, school-to-school collaboration is at the heart of their success and provides a cost-effective and well received solution to school improvement.**

Closely linked with this shared vision and strategy, Faringdon Academy of Schools want each of its schools to embrace the opportunity for collaboration and forge meaningful links. This is because being in a MAT opens up important school-to-school opportunities, including improved school improvement functions and opportunities for pupils to engage with other schools within the MAT. Faringdon Academy of Schools also continues to work closely with schools not in the MAT.

According to interviewees, much of the school improvement function of the MAT revolves around collaboration and networking between staff across the trust. The MAT has a very collegiate approach to decision making, with headteachers working together and getting involved in budgeting, strategy setting and school improvement. The chair of trustees noted that the headteachers across the MAT meet regularly to *“agree strategy”* and ways forward in order to support each other and plan events for the coming year.

The MAT also put collaboration between headteachers at the heart of their school improvement approach. As outlined by the chair of trustees, the school improvement model means that headteachers across the trust do not have to operate *“in isolation”*. Instead, the MAT operates a *“take and give”* model in which the headteacher of one school will lead school improvement with the expectation that, should their school need support in the future, the help will be reciprocated. As outlined by the chair of trustees:



*“We have a very strong school improvement provision ... apart from a director of education, which is a paid role within our trust, all the other activity that takes place is on a ... ‘I’m going to take from you today, but I will give back tomorrow’ [basis]. So, we have members of staff ... [and] ... headteachers who will go in and work with others in other settings, without charge, because they know that they will get something ... back. So, we’ve been able to develop a very strong provision with very little additional cost”.*

Interviewees outlined that, if headteachers are having any issues with the running of their school, the level of support they are offered is significant. The school improvement model employed by the MAT means that, where necessary, it is possible to get a support team into a school within fifteen minutes. Furthermore, the collaborative model also means that headteachers receive extensive emotional support and advice. Beyond the urgent issues, the school improvement model also encourages the local governance function or executives to identify specific weaknesses for the network to act upon. The trust can then draw upon, and draft in, expertise from other schools within the MAT who have *“cracked it”*. The MAT is clear that, with their model, even the smallest school in the trust can teach others about good practice. This means that there is no *“lead school”* within the MAT as all can *“learn from each other”*.

Interviewees noted that their focus on collaboration saves the trust money as the school improvement function is done by headteachers themselves without additional charge: *“I know that there are some MATs that have got very large, paid school improvement provision ... when finances are challenging, you have to find alternative ways of working”*. Furthermore, according to interviewees, the headteachers have *“been completely won over with what the trust can support them with”*. This school improvement function is also seen as important in terms of attracting new schools to the MAT – offering interested parties *“the opportunity to work closer together ... and to benefit from a close relationship with the other schools”*.

*“The real strength of the multi-academy trust, is that the ...schools that are part of our MAT, and indeed the partnership schools that ... are not actually part of that MAT ... all benefit from ... a lot of interaction.”*

While interviewees outlined that their school improvement model has worked particularly well for the seven primary schools within the MAT, they acknowledge that there is less school improvement capacity for the one secondary school. The next step for the MAT is to generate the same school-to-school support enjoyed by the primary schools for the secondary school, Faringdon Community College. As outlined by the chief executive *“we know the strength that we have from the primaries working together, we want something more official with the secondary schools”*. This is one of the reasons why the MAT is looking to take on another secondary school in the near future (see lesson eight).

### **Lesson three: Mixed MATs should look to coordinate their provision in order to make transitions between key stages easier for pupils and realise some of the benefits of all-through education.**

As well as providing a cost-effective and successful school improvement function, an emphasis on collaboration has also allowed the Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT to integrate both primary and secondary school education and ensure that the transition between key stages is well managed. As part of this integration, the trust is currently looking at the curriculum and deciding how to embed learning to make the biggest difference when pupils get to secondary school. The trust also does a lot to encourage collaboration between their pupils and translate being into a MAT into real *“opportunities for the children”*.



Indeed, the pupils from the college help with the activities in the primary schools (such as arts week), while the MAT also host a range of multi-school events including sports, public speaking and singing.

**Lesson four: It is important to choose the right partners, and ensure that the trust has capacity to support the schools it is taking on, before expanding.**

As outlined above, two of the key elements of the MATs vision for the future is to increase school improvement capacity for their secondary school (Faringdon Community College) and to create a seamless education from primary to secondary school (see lesson three). To bring this vision to life, the MAT is keen to take on another secondary school. However, one of the key learning points for Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT revolves around not rushing into expansion and thinking carefully about the reasons for taking on new schools.

From observing other MATs across the country, interviewees noted that some MATs grow to alleviate financial pressures or resolve challenges around school improvement capacity. However, rapid growth can often have a detrimental effect, with some MATs ultimately exceeding their capacity to support schools when they incorporate them into the trust. Instead, Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT believe that it is important to be confident that the MAT can support all of the schools it absorbs and that they have a strong reason for expansion which is linked to a sustainable vision for the future. Part of this is about completing a robust due diligence process to make sure the trust has the capacity to support any school they are taking on and to ensure that the MAT is secure before expanding.

This is why Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT has been very careful about taking on new schools. One example of this can be traced to the inception of the MAT, where the board of trustees and executive leaders made a “*conscious decision*” not to invite the other schools within their local partnership (see the timeline) into the trust immediately because “*there was an element of learning that had to take place before ... [they] ... looked to expand*”. Furthermore, as outlined in the timeline, Faringdon seriously considered a MAT merger on two occasions. On paper, interviewees outlined that the merger was an excellent idea; with both MATs sharing similar models and philosophies. However, it was outlined that “*on both occasions it was the ... new merged trust leadership team that ... could not be agreed upon*”. In addition, there were some issues with the governance structure of one of the MATs that Faringdon Academy of Schools was looking to merge with and interviewees outlined that it was difficult to find a “*middle ground*” in terms of “*character and identity*” that all parties could relate too.

*“So, we identified a local trust that was very similar to us, had a similar ethos and we thought a good way forward ... was to actually merge with them.*”

*So we put an awful lot of work and effort into that, but it did not come to fruition because I think what we ended up realising was that one of the biggest challenges was [that] both trust[s] ... [were] strong and effective ... with a very distinct character and identity, trying to find a medium ground that both ... could live with proved to be a stumbling block.”*

Because of this, both MAT mergers were stopped before financial and academic due diligence could be completed in earnest.

The MAT is, however, still committed to expansion as their last strategic aim is to strengthen and grow, particularly in the secondary sector (see lesson two). When thinking about which factors are important when



looking to expand, interviewees outlined that, while they believe that their trust model could be rolled out to other areas of the country, Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT is essentially built upon the strength of local partnerships and, therefore, expanding outside of the local area is challenging.

On a final note, due to the fact that the MAT is quite “*late to the arena*” in terms of expansion, they are finding it more difficult than they envisioned. Any future growth, they outlined, would most likely need to be built around organic development – such as taking on individual schools which match with the vision and values of the MAT. However, while Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT has a vision underpinned by school collaboration (see lesson two), one of the surprising aspects of working within the wider sector has been the view from some schools and trusts that it is not possible to learn from others.

**Lesson five: Key leadership roles within the trust will inevitably change over time and it is important to remain flexible to facilitate growth.**

Another key lesson for Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT is that leadership positions within the trust change as the MAT grows. Specifically, interviewees outlined that the number of staff employed by the trust as part of the “*central team*” increased over time and key roles have developed. Furthermore, the trust has also been very careful to maintain flexibility within the executive team to ensure that there is room for change should the MAT adapt further.

Currently, there are three people within the executive team working across the whole of Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT – the chief operating officer (COO), the director of education (DoE), and the chief executive officer (CEO). The trust is also trialling a safeguarding lead to work as part of the central team across all of the schools to alleviate some of the burden on headteachers who are “*being ground down by significant safeguarding issues*”.

The current executive structure means that the COO is in charge of anything non-educational within the trust. This role first evolved out of a business manager position in Faringdon Community College (the MAT’s secondary school) before becoming the “*director of business and finance*” and then, finally, the COO role. Predominantly, the trust looked to move away from just “*business and finance*” due to the fact that the role now “*oversee[s] all the support service area for the trust*”. Today, the COO oversees centralised finance, HR, IT, governance and operations teams based in one location.

In addition to the chief operating officer role, interviewees acknowledged that the director of education role has also “*morphed*” over time. The current CEO, who was previously the director of school improvement and deputy headteacher of the secondary school, outlined that for the first few years of the MAT he completed an “*unofficial*” school improvement role, which eventually became a formal position (as part-time director of school improvement) for one day a week and then two days a week. Now, the director of education works in a clearly defined role which involves identifying best practice and facilitating the roll out of school support in collaboration with headteachers.

Finally, the role of the MAT’s lead executive has also changed over time. When the MAT was first formed, the headteacher of the college became the lead executive in the form of an “*executive headteacher*”, retaining their substantive headship in the secondary school but also having overarching responsibility for the trust. However, it soon became apparent (particularly as the trust grew) that this model was not working. On the one hand, the MAT “*deserves to have an individual leading it whose ... focus is across the whole trust*”. Similarly, trustees and executive leaders also felt that a full-time headteacher was needed at



the college. As such, the executive headteacher eventually gave up his substantive headship and, for the last few years of their tenure, was only the lead executive of the trust.

This is why, when the then executive headteacher retired in 2018, the trust looked to appoint a chief executive. They did this because they wanted someone solely focused on pulling people together across the trust to foster school improvement, leading on strategy implementation and taking a more holistic view of the “*whole organisation*”. To recruit a chief executive, trustees went down the internal route – with a pool of potential candidates from the central team as well as headteachers. The trust appointed the then director of school improvement as the CEO. The current CEO’s background is well-suited to the role as he is a trained accountant, an Ofsted inspector and has experience of school improvement across the MAT.

Of note, trustees have appointed all of the executive team on an interim basis. This is to retain flexibility because they are aware that a potential merger could affect job roles and key position within the trust.

**Lesson six: By centralising services MATs can not only realise benefits in terms of economies of scale, but also free up schools’ leaders’ capacity to focus on school improvement.**

One of the key reasons that the management structure within the trust has needed to change is that executive leaders and trustees have taken the decision to bring key services “*in-house*”, “*such as finance, HR, ICT provision and operations management*”.

This centralisation has allowed the MAT to provide schools with a “*menu of central services*” that they buy into. The trust outline that, in the past, there has been some tension in the past around how much money central services should receive.

*“When we decided to go down the centralisation route, I know there was some reluctance at both headteacher level and ... [LGB] ... level”.*

Interviewees outlined, however, that centralising services has freed up the capacity of headteachers so that they do not need to focus on issues such as building maintenance or the procurement of services. In addition, it has allowed schools to achieve some level of economies of scale – particularly for the smaller schools who “*do not have purchasing power*”.

*“Our philosophy is to serve our schools, support and challenge them, but in essence we are here to help the headteachers provide the most effective education for their students. So, we have got to support them with that”.*

Furthermore, interviewees argued that there is an element of necessity associated with centralising services. Significantly, the MAT acknowledge that they have needed to replace some of the services that used to be provided by the local authority, particularly in terms of “*organising, managing and running the school provision*”. The trust has also invested resources in replacing the local authority clerking network across the trust, see lesson eleven for more details.

Looking to the future, the trust is also looking to centralise staff recruitment so that this is done at a MAT-wide level. Not only will this relieve some of the administration burden currently upon schools, but the trust acknowledge that they have had some difficulties over the years recruiting to key posts. The trust outlined that, by centralising recruitment, this gives scope to potentially facilitate job-share opportunities and to be more creative in terms of advertising positions (see lesson eight for more on recruitment and retention).



### Lesson seven: Finances are often a point of contention, particularly when it comes to reserves and the redistribution of resources.

Despite centralising services, and having a cost-effective school improvement service, executive leaders outline that they face significant issues in terms of funding, both in terms of the lack of investment from the government as well as competing demands on services arising from pupil growth and changing needs.

On the one hand, the COO outlined that the lack of investment meant that the trust was “*firefighting all the time*”. The trust has been trying to do more with less money and, as a result, has had to make difficult decisions around key areas, such as investment in premises and IT. While the MAT outline that “*fiscal challenge*” is not necessarily unhealthy, interviewees noted that the MAT is struggling for money in certain areas. Furthermore, one school, outlined that it had cut too deeply in order to save money – reducing the number of teaching assistants (TAs) employed within the school. While this helped the school to balance the books, they have needed to reappoint a number of these TAs to support pupils with particular needs.

This has meant that the trust has needed to redistribute resources, including school reserves, around the trust to support those schools in the most need. Nevertheless, the idea that school reserves sit with the trust can be a “*difficult pill for some of the schools to swallow*”. Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to get schools to understand that, even if they have paid more for a specific service (i.e. because of pupil numbers), other schools who have paid less may need to use it more.

To combat this, executive leaders and trustees emphasise that Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT is built upon the idea that all schools are part of a family and, therefore, all schools need to understand and embrace the fact that the reserves belong to the trust and may be used to support another financially struggling school. Furthermore, the trust makes it clear that, if a school is in need of a service, they should receive it regardless of their contribution to the central pot. Much of the work around getting individual schools on board with these ideas is linked to lesson one; with the trust working to embed a shared vision and values and promoting healthy culture in each school.

### Lesson eight: Investing in in-house staff training has a significant pay-off in terms of recruitment and retention down the line.

The MAT has put a lot of work into developing a holistic training offer across the MAT. This links in with their vision to nurture and develop people within the trust and, according to interviewees, has become a central pillar of their recruitment and retention.

When the MAT was first formed, executive leaders and trustees acknowledged that they did not have an annual training plan or a coordinated approach to training, relying instead upon *ad hoc* training opportunities. However, linked with the vision (around nurturing and developing those within the trust) the MAT has invested time and resources in creating a training centre based in one of the primary schools.

According to interviewees, the training centre also acts as an important “*sell*” in terms of staff recruitment. Furthermore, it offers existing staff new opportunities - making them more likely to stay within the trust. Through the training centre, the trust outline that they are also able to “*grow their own*” future leaders. The trust acknowledge that they do have a lot of work to do going forward, with one interviewee outlining that the next phase of the trusts’ training offer will focus on initial teacher training and apprenticeships. Furthermore, the MAT is looking to enhance its training offer to focus on leadership, good quality teaching



and aspects of school life. The MAT is also considering the procurement/development of an e-learning platform to train staff.

## Governance specific lessons learnt

In addition to the lessons outlined above, the MAT also has a number of specific lessons to share in terms of governance – particularly around using local governance effectively, establishing meaningful communication, getting the right people at the right levels, and investing in training for those at a local level as well as trustees. These lessons are outlined below.

### Lesson nine: Governance must adapt as a trust grows in order to remain sustainable and effective.

When the trust was first set up, the MAT had local representation on the board of trustees in the form of each headteacher and each local governance chair from across the original three founder schools. However, as the trust grew, the MAT realised that this was not sustainable as it was not good practice to have eight headteachers and eight local governance chairs on the same board. Now, the trust board consists of twelve individuals and the governance structure is reviewed every year. The trust board has overall responsibility for *“spotting issues, trends and ... providing the strategic direction”*. The trust is also keen to give trustees scope to focus on the curriculum and the quality of teaching and learning.

In terms of how the work of trustees translates into time, trustees acknowledged that the commitment can be significant. The chair of trustees said that they were fortunate in that they did not have to work. However, for some trustees the time commitment was difficult to fulfil because of their working commitments. In terms of how long it takes the chair to govern, over a busy period she reported spending a whole day a week on governance – which included *“attending meetings, doing support work with governing bodies, visiting the various schools, [and] meeting with the headteachers”*.

### Lesson ten: Those governing at a local level have an important role to play in ensuring that the trust is governed well and, if used effectively, they can alleviate much of the work required of trustees.

Interviewees acknowledged that, because the trust consists of eight schools, it is not possible to adequately scrutinise the work of each headteacher at trust board level. As such, the MAT delegate a lot of responsibility to those governing at a local level. Interviewees outlined that those at a local level operate in the same way as maintained schools in terms of what responsibilities are delegated to them. The key roles of the local governance tier at Faringdon Academy of Schools MAT consists of:

- overseeing schools’ budgets and ensuring that funding needs are targeted appropriately and that forecasts are within budget
- scrutinising teaching and learning and putting into place *“link governors”* to oversee specific areas, to liaise with teachers, and feed back to others governing locally
- to input into the headteacher performance management (although this is prominently led by the chief executive as the headteachers’ *“line manager”*)
- deliberating upon and adopting policies, most of which are taken from Oxfordshire County Council

While the trust board set the order of business for local governance each year, those governing at a local level are allowed to decide how often they will meet and to decide whether, and in what format, they will



use committees. In addition, those governing at a local level also have responsibility for appointing their own members and lead the headteacher recruitment process (in consultation with executive leaders of the MAT).

Encouragingly, interviewees outlined that, while there was some hesitation to giving up autonomy to a board of trustees, the current set-up does not make those governing at a local level feel disempowered. Indeed, one chair governing locally outlined that *“initially, when we were having the discussions as to whether we should join the ... MAT ... there was some reticence within the ... governing body, inevitably, I think, because of course, you're ceding your responsibility to the academy, at that point. But since then, I don't think there's been any concerns ... because of the way that we run the MAT, in that delegated authority very much sits at the local level”*.

**Lesson eleven: Getting communication right between the layers of governance and management is vital but challenging. It involves putting into place a number of different approaches.**

With much of the governance responsibly delegated to those at a local level, Faringdon Academy of Schools acknowledged that it is imperative that trustees and those at a local level communicate effectively. However, communication is something that the MAT has struggled with and has invested significant time in trying to get right.

Like many MATs, Faringdon Academy of Schools has relied upon overlap between the layers of governance and management for communication purposes (see page six for a breakdown of governance within the MAT). Interviewees acknowledge that this creates issues in terms of conflict of interest and accountability. Indeed, the trust acknowledge that they still have some more work to do in terms of separation of powers: *“we are not divorced enough to be completely impartial”*. Currently, three of the members are also trustees which leads to a *“weird process”* where *“you are checking your own homework ... [and] then double demonstrate that you are doing so”*.

With the MAT coming around to the idea that overlap between the layers of governance is not an ideal situation, the MAT has invested time and resources in facilitating communication in different ways. Some of the learning points the MAT can share around communication include:

- The MAT employs an academy secretary with a broad oversight of governance. While the academy secretary is also the personal assistant (PA) to the chief executive, the role she was employed to do has changed in order to adapt to the MAT landscape. The academy secretary administers the trust board and committees, coordinates the clerking network and plays a key role in terms of maintaining communication across the trust. As such, the academy secretary takes on much of the responsibility for ensuring that those governing at a local level are up-to-date.
- Having a good and clear scheme of delegation (SoD) is important. The MAT outline that the SoD is constantly evolving. While this document is *“pages and pages long”* the feedback is that *“it is really clear and transparent”*. The SoD clearly details what decisions will be made at a trust board level and what will be delegated down to a local level.
- There needed to be some consistency in the minutes produced by those at a local level. This is to make it easy for trustees and other stakeholders to absorb the information.
- Brokering regular meetings between the different layers of governance and management is important. The chair of trustees and chairs from each individual school meet at least twice a year to talk about general issues and challenges across the trust. Furthermore, in order to assess and



monitor the effectiveness of local governance, the trust host an annual meeting where they focus on effectiveness, communication and development at a local level, as well as performance management and data.

- Interviewees acknowledged that receiving papers was not enough for trustees to understand their school. As such, trustees are strongly encouraged to undertake structured school visits to understand the context of their schools and to ensure they can offer appropriate challenge.

Finally, another important element of communication across the trust revolves around clerking. In the early days of the trust, the MAT relied upon a variety of sources to clerk governance meetings at a local level, including purchasing clerking from the LA. However, the trust felt that, by doing this, there was significant inconsistencies in the quality of the clerking support. As such, the trust has done a lot of work to create an “*in-house*” connected network of clerks. There are now four to five part-time clerks across the trust at a local level, while the full board of trustees is clerked by the academy secretary. The academy secretary also oversees the wider work of the clerks and shares information through termly meetings. In order to provide the right level of support to the trust board and those governing at a local level, clerks are encouraged to go on NGA’s accredited clerks training.

**Lesson twelve: Getting skilled, impartial and dedicated volunteers, with the time to commit to the role, is important at both a local governance and trust board level.**

The trust wants volunteers with the right skills, commitment and values on the trust board and at a local level. However, the trust outline that recruiting the right people is a significant challenge, particularly in terms of the board of trustees.

In terms of the skills needed, interviewees outlined that it is important to attract people who understand school funding, provision, premise, statutory requirements, education policy, governance and business practice. As the chief executive outlined: “*you ... need the right people with the right approach, but at this level ... we also need people with certain specialities to complement other people within the team*”. In terms of the skills need at a local level, one interviewee noted that it was important to have individuals who fully understand governance and how the local governance tier fits within the MAT structure. For trustees, interviewees emphasised that, while having people with education knowledge is important, it is also key to have individuals with experience in management, organisational structure, oversight and accountability. In this respect, it is helpful to have trustees with a management background so that they understand the key functions and processes needed to grow and develop an organisation.

In terms of recruitment, the trust has done a lot of work to “*formalise*” the recruitment process for those at a local level. Interviewees outlined that, three years ago, those governing locally were recruited by word of mouth and the trust struggled, at times, to attract suitable individuals. However, the trust now has a much more formal process which, they suggest, has helped with recruitment. Now, for local governance posts, the trust work closely with the diocese, put out notices in newsletters and adverts in local publications to increase the number of nominations received. Nevertheless, the trust has had less success with trustee positions. By its nature, the trustee role is removed from the schools that the board serves. This makes the role quite “*intangible*” from an outsider’s perspective and it can be hard to know that it exists. The trust outline they currently use Academy Ambassadors to attract the right people but still find recruitment a significant challenge.



**Lesson thirteen: Training for those governing at all levels is vital for helping them understand their roles and responsibilities.**

Finally, linked to getting the right people around the table, it was acknowledged that those governing at all levels across the trust were not entirely clear on delegation as well as roles and responsibilities when the MAT was first formed. For instance, some of those at a local level were not aware that power was invested in the trust board. Interviewees outlined that much of this confusion has been cleared up with effective induction and training. On the one hand, the induction programme is delivered in-house by the academy secretary who covers roles and responsibilities and the role of the chair. All new trustees and individuals governing at a local level are required to undertake this induction training. Furthermore, all individuals involved in governance of the MAT can access a range of in-house and external training courses, continuing professional development (CPD) and networking opportunities. The academy secretary also outlined that all trustees and those governing locally complete an annual skills audit.

In the last year a rolling programme of governance reviews which sits alongside the school and culture health checks has been introduced to support effective reflection by those governing at a local level of the strengths and weakness of each LGB and to help them target areas for governance development.