

Multi-academy trusts: lessons learned in their journey so far
Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust

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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 the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) and interviewed the chair of trustees, the chief executive, the governor services manager, the chief operating officer/finance director, the director of schools and a chair of a local governing body. In addition, NGA also analysed key documents (including trust board minutes and the scheme of delegation) to supplement the data from the interviews.

NGA would like to thank all those at ODST who gave up their time to speak to us about their MAT.

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 the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust

The Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) is a multi-academy trust (MAT) comprised of 32 schools in Oxfordshire and Windsor and Maidenhead, the area which falls under the Diocese of Oxford. As of April 2018, the trust consists of 27 primary schools, three infant schools, one junior school and one middle school. The trust was formed in 2012 when one of the church schools in the Diocese was identified by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education at the time, as requiring an academy solution due to poor standards. The Diocesan Board of Education decided that a MAT sponsored by the Diocese was the best way to provide for that school and others in need of support at that time. The MAT then grew rapidly, with two additional schools joining in 2013, five joining in 2014, eight joining in 2015, and two joining in 2016. Eleven schools joined in 2017, making ODST the fastest growing MAT in the country in that year, and three additional schools joined in early 2018. There are approximately six thousand pupils attending ODST schools. In terms of governance, the trust board currently consists of eleven trustees, one of whom is the chief executive. Each school has an academy committee – referred to in ODST as a local governing body – and there are seven committees of the trust board.

Timeline of creation and development

Formation of the MAT

- 2011 John Henry Newman School, a voluntary aided school in the Diocese of Oxford, is identified as underperforming by the Department for Education (DfE): the school was one of three primary schools in Oxfordshire on Michael Gove's "200 list", a list of 200 "failing" primary schools whose pupil outcomes the DfE claimed would be improved by academisation.
- The Diocesan Board of Education begin work on setting up an academy trust. This work is led by the Director of the Board of Education.
- 2012 The Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) is incorporated in July 2012. From the start, the MAT is designed to be inclusive – the articles of association contain a clause allowing for the MAT to take on community schools as well as those with a religious character.
- John Henry Newman Academy formally joins ODST on 1 September 2012. Another school in the diocese, Wheatley Church of England Primary School, is identified as also needing a sponsor.
- Ofsted judge another school in the diocese to require 'special measures' and the expansion of ODST is put "on pause".

Development

- 2013 During this time, two 'good' schools approach ODST with an interest in joining the trust, which they do during the autumn term of 2013.
- 2014 Another school which has been in 'special measures', St Christopher's Church of England School, also joins. Wheatley Church of England Primary School is finally able to join ODST after negotiation with the local authority and DfE over complex land issues, bringing the number of schools in the MAT to five.
- Once again responding to the need for a sponsor for a struggling church school, ODST takes on St Peter's Church of England Middle School in Windsor and Maidenhead. Because it is fairly isolated from the other schools in the MAT, ODST recognises the need to take on nearby schools to support it, and two further schools in Windsor and Maidenhead join the trust.
- 2015 Finding that the MAT has a high proportion of schools in need of support, ODST shifts its focus towards bringing in more schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in order to increase its capacity to provide school improvement support.
- A West Oxfordshire hub of eight schools develops and it is agreed that the future growth of the MAT will be concentrated in three existing hubs: Oxford, West Oxfordshire, and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.
- 2016 ODST continues to consolidate these three hubs while two more schools join the trust.

Rapid growth

- 2017 The pace of growth increases significantly in 2017: 11 schools joined, making ODST the fastest growing MAT in the country across the year. The new additions fit into the existing hub structure.



A number of schools outside the areas in which ODST is concentrated express interest in joining the MAT. Rather than expand into these areas, discussion with the Diocesan Board of Education leads to the idea of a second diocesan MAT to serve schools in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. This is formed with two schools in autumn 2017. This second MAT is a completely separate legal entity to ODST.

2018 One additional school joins ODST at the start of 2018 and a further two join at the start of April.



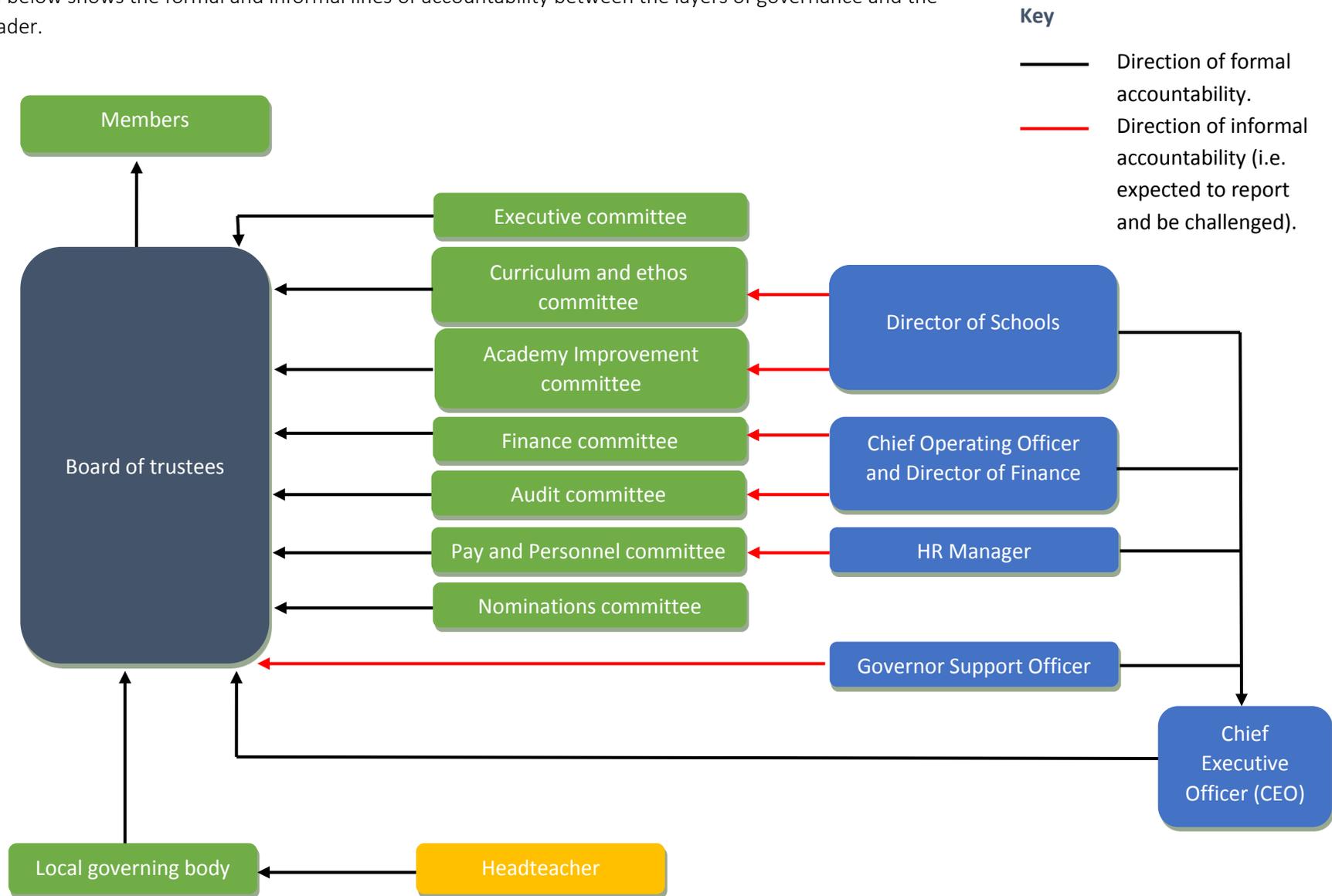
Looking to the future



There are also a number of schools in the 'pipeline' to join later in the year. If all those who are currently in the process of or discussing joining do so, ODST will grow to around 45 schools. The ODST board has decided in principle to bid for three free schools.

Current Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust 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 Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust

The MAT's governance structure consists of members, the board of trustees, its committees, and academy committees at school level which are referred to in ODST as 'local governing bodies' (LGBs). There are seven committees of the trust board, four of which meet regularly (academy improvement, curriculum and ethos, finance, and pay and personnel) and three of which meet less frequently (audit, nominations and executive committee as required).

The use of the term 'local governing bodies' in ODST reflects the high level of delegation to local level but it is important to remember that they remain committees of the board of trustees and do not have the same responsibilities as the governing bodies of maintained schools.

Lessons learned

From the interviews with those involved in leading ODST, 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 the challenges that those governing have faced.

Lesson one: High level of delegation to local governing bodies relies on robust systems of support and oversight

ODST is committed to preserving the unique character of the schools that join. While there are some non-negotiables for schools joining the trust, particularly systems of finance and assessment, significant decision-making powers are delegated to the local governing bodies (LGBs) by the trust board.

'What we say is [a significant amount of] decision-making is at local level, but you are accountable to the trust.'

The trust's commitment to local decision-making means that it sometimes finds itself *'trying to steer a path through'* dialogue about central control in MATs coming from the DfE and the national schools commissioner.

ODST's approach is illustrated by the degree of control that LGBs have over their schools' budgets. ODST takes a five per cent 'top-slice' which funds the central services that the MAT provides for schools. School staff are also paid centrally, though the staffing structure is decided by LGBs. The remainder of the budget is handled at local level.

ODST believes that this model works for it because of the robust system of support and challenge provided by the processes and structures within the MAT. A uniform financial system is used in all schools and when schools join the MAT the Chief Operating Officer (COO) works with them to put together a three year budget as part of the due diligence process. While LGBs set the budget for their schools, this is scrutinised by the MAT executive team and monitored during the year to ensure that spending remains within the budget. Benchmarking is carried out across all the schools' budgets and this is used to identify and challenge areas of high spend in particular schools. The COO and his colleagues often attend meetings of LGBs or their finance committees, facilitating a dialogue between school and trust level. Although decision-making sits at local level, through reports from the COO the trust board feels assured that the process taken to set the budget is robust and that funding is being used well. A similar system is in place for school improvement, led by the Director of Schools.



ODST also provides a range of training sessions for LGBs (as well as school leaders and other staff). This is another way to ensure that what ODST views as good practice is being carried out at local level and support those on LGBs to carry out their role effectively.

Where the trust judges that a LGBs does not have the skills or training required to drive a school with urgent need of improvement, ODST has developed a process for supporting governance with an 'executive' model. In situations where LGB members are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement, it also acts to replace the LGB with an 'interim academy committee'. This is focused on bringing about rapid improvement through detailed challenge. This is used when, for example, a school judged in need of 'special measures', and trustees recognise the risk of damaging relationships with local communities and schools if used frequently. The chair reflected that, when it comes to school improvement, *'the skill is taking the local governing body with you'*. The trust is considering reviewing the effectiveness of local governance arrangements in each school as part of its school improvement programme over the next year.

The Director of Schools noted that many MATs find themselves with a tension between the delegation of authority and local decision-making, and the direction of travel indicated by Sir David Carter (national schools commissioner) about 'standardisation' and more central control. He noted that use of the term 'governing body' has meant that the trust has to ensure local governing bodies were well informed about the differences between maintained school and academy governance.

The potential for lack of clarity was apparent from our interview with an LGB chair, who told us that, in her view, the LGB carried out the three core functions that would be expected of maintained school governing bodies (set out in the DfE's Governance Handbook) with the exception of making decisions about changes to the senior leadership structure which has to be approved by the trust. In this case, however, the chair saw developing relationships with the MAT's central team as vital and was committed to ensuring there were *'no surprises'* for executives or trustees.

Lesson two: Embedding a trust's values and vision takes work

ODST emphasises the importance of having a clear vision for the trust and a strategy for achieving that vision. While the chief executive officer (CEO) and chair both share the view that the vision is currently clear to the trustees and central executive team, the CEO spoke about the need for it to be further embedded so that all LGB members, headteachers and pupils buy into it and understand what it means for them and their schools.

ODST's vision is underpinned by its values and these are closely linked to the values of the Diocese of Oxford. The [vision](#) refers to a belief in educational excellence, creating *'places where children and young people develop and thrive intellectually, socially, culturally and spiritually'*, teaching a broad and balanced curriculum, sustaining high quality schools and providing support for improvement where needed, embodying the Christian experience of community, serving communities, and welcoming those of all faiths and none.

The trust's links to the diocese do not mean that only Church of England schools are welcomed into the trust. From the outset, ODST was set up to accommodate community schools that wished to join, with both the CEO and chair determined that the trust would be inclusive and serve the needs of the whole community. Several community schools who felt that their values aligned with those of the trust have joined.



The chair of trustees reflected that, in the early stages, the values underlying the trust's work had not been fully articulated externally but, despite this, they have remained constant. The belief in the *'whole education of the child'* is central to this.

ODST has one-year and three-year strategic plans, with each committee responsible for monitoring progress towards areas of the strategy. Reports on this progress are received from each committee at meetings of the trust board.

Lesson three: Financial challenges are not necessarily resolved by forming or joining a MAT

ODST is currently made up of 27 primary schools, three infant schools, one junior school and one middle school. As such, all the schools in the MAT are reasonably small, ranging in size from around 400 pupils at the top end to around 60 pupils at the bottom end. The budgets of small schools tend to be very tight and therefore this presents a significant challenge for the trust. While forming or joining a MAT is often seen as being a way of mitigating current or future funding challenges, the CEO told us that some schools are now finding that they are no better off in financial terms since converting to academy status. Despite this, through joining the trust they gain access to services that are no longer provided by the local authority.

The leadership of ODST is committed to supporting small schools that other MATs might be reluctant to take, with the CEO referring to the trust's commitment to *'do what is right for the community and not be driven by financial considerations but to make the finances work for the children and the communities we serve'*. This is not easy to do and a number of the schools in the MAT are having to carefully monitor their finances to avoid a deficit budget.

ODST is careful to keep central costs as low as possible, including keeping close reins on executive salaries. Economies of scale have been achieved through joint procurement of services such as energy and software. In some cases, deals have been done for some but not all schools, reflecting the delegation of decision-making to local level. For example, when around 10 schools in the MAT wanted a new provider for school meals the COO set up a tendering process and the schools voted on their preferred supplier.

ODST is looking at the possibility of forming "federation" type arrangements between schools within the MAT in order that one headteacher could lead more than one school while remaining accountable to one LGB with oversight of all those schools. In the long term, the chair was optimistic that ODST can help smaller schools to become sustainable: *'if you can bring those small schools together and get them working together and change their structures as appropriate, then you can make it work'*.

Lesson four: It is not always necessary to provide services in-house

ODST is notable for the level of services that it provides for schools and leaders identified this as a factor that attracts schools to the MAT. This is something that has developed as the trust has grown and accordingly ODST leaders suggest that other MATs should expect to adapt their approach at different stages rather than attempting to bring everything in-house straight away:

'At certain stages you might have a partnership [agreement with suppliers] and then later on when you're big enough decide to in-source it, but in the growth periods you can have a partnership.'

The COO spoke about the trust's approach to buying in services. He said that, while the DfE tended to emphasise the potential economies of scale achieved by buying in bulk from one provider, ODST has sometimes chosen to stick to multiple partnerships which spread the risk in the event of a supplier going out



of business or similar. The use of the term “partners” rather than “suppliers” reflects a holistic approach, with value for money and service balanced with the wider aims of the trust in procurement decisions. Buying in external services can also be used to add value to the wider work of the trust:

Lesson five: The trust has to be adaptable as it grows

ODST has grown rapidly at some points in its development and was the fastest growing MAT in the country in 2017. Leaders emphasise the importance of developing the systems of governance and infrastructure as you grow. Those we interviewed spoke about the way that the organisation had already adapted to growth and the plans in place to further adapt to future growth.

The chair used the term *‘hospital MAT’* to describe the relatively high proportion of sponsored academies in need of significant external support in ODST’s early days. Over time, trustees have strategically chosen to bring in more high performing schools to balance this out and no longer characterise the MAT in this way. However, the trust emphasises the importance of the core principles staying the same even as the operations adapt to the needs of a wider range of schools. ODST has previously turned down schools which the regional schools commissioner had asked them to take on, deciding that it was not an appropriate solution for either the trust or the schools at that time.

The initial business plan had six schools in it and the CEO was initially seconded from the Diocesan Board of Education on a part time basis. Initial growth was described as *‘organic’*, with word of mouth playing a significant role in creating interest, and systems have developed over time.

The growth and adaptation of ODST is not regarded as being a finished process and the trust is mindful of holding the core values and systems of the trust constant in future growth: *‘the things that matter need to look exactly the same even if the things that need to be responsive need to have responded’*. The CEO reflected that moving from five to 10 schools had been a significant period in the development of the MAT, because *‘five I could [keep track of] in my head and so could the trustees... when you go double you’ve got to start to put structures in place’*.

As a result of word of mouth, ODST has taken on clusters of schools in fairly close proximity to one another, which has allowed it to move towards a hub arrangement, with schools in the MAT organised into geographic areas; a couple of trustees are assigned to each hub to make it manageable for the trust board to know the schools well. There is no intention to devolve governance to committees across all the schools in each hub (though, as discussed above, LGBs may have oversight of more than one school if arrangements are made for a headteacher to work across more than one school). Instead certain resources, school improvement activities or joint training could be run more effectively in local hubs than centrally for the whole trust. This approach recognises the significant geographical area now covered by ODST and the difficulty of expecting every trustee to know 32 schools well.

There are a number of schools in the *‘pipeline’* to join ODST and the trust board has decided in principle to bid for some free schools – if these plans are realised, the trust will grow to around 45 schools and trustees are considering plans to develop the infrastructure to allow for more schools to join. The trust board has decided not to put a firm number of the eventual size of the trust and they will consider further interest from other schools based on how the school’s vision aligns with the trust’s as well as the school’s willingness and ability to fit into the hub structure that has been developed. The trustees have set out criteria for



schools joining the trust, which provide a guide to executive leaders in their initial discussions with schools expressing an interest.

Lesson six: Positive professional relationships are vital

ODST provides a lot of personal contact and support to schools in the trust and this is highly valued – one of the concerns expressed about growth was that *'it does become more difficult to give that sort of personal offering to schools'*.

Word of mouth was identified as an important factor in the growth of the trust, with schools expressing interest in joining based on the feedback from neighbouring schools already in the MAT. Leaders believe that schools appreciate being able to phone and speak to someone in the central team who understands the context of the school: *'it's not a helpline and it's not email, it's somebody that will return my call and will talk to me and help me. So it's very relational'*. Members of the central team offer to visit schools and attend LGB meetings to provide information and support as needed. A LGB chair told us that either the Director of Schools or a school improvement advisor attends meetings regularly.

The chair of trustees visits every school when it joins the trust and tries to follow up each visit, creating valuable visibility for the trust board. Another way positive relationships are fostered within the trust is through the leadership conferences and leadership briefings held once a term, which chairs of LGBs, headteachers and trustees are all invited to attend. These networking opportunities were valued by the LGB chair we spoke to: *'being a chair is a lonely existence... sometimes it's good to be able to talk to other chairs who may have good advice that you hadn't thought of'*.

The trust has strong links with the Diocese of Oxford which is its sponsor. The central executive team are based at the diocese's offices and the chair of the board of trustees sits on the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education. Those interviewed also reflected on positive relationships with local authorities and the regional schools commissioner.

Lesson seven: Getting the right people around the table matters

Having experienced trustees on the board from the early stages of the trust's development was regarded as valuable and the chair emphasised the importance of *'making sure you've got good trustees on board who know their schools'* as well as providing training for trustees, even when they have significant experience from their professional lives or have served as trustees in other organisations: *'although most of our [trustees have previously been] board members elsewhere they've not necessarily been in education... It's about people understanding education and understanding the wider brief of education'*.

At the point that ODST were putting together their executive team, local authorities were making cuts to their services and teams and the trust benefitted by being able to recruit a number of experienced people. The team has expanded with the trust and some roles have grown significantly; the Governor Support Officer was initially employed for a few hours a week and this is now a full time role which includes clerking the trust board.

The board of trustees works closely with the executive team. The chair and CEO meet once a fortnight on a one-on-one basis. The current chair estimates that she spends around three days a week on her role, partly through choice and reflecting her passion for getting the best for pupils.



Lesson eight: Be equipped to support school improvement and intervene when things go wrong

ODST has developed a school improvement structure to support schools. This begins as part of the due diligence process before a school joins the MAT, with the Director of Schools leading a *'quasi-inspection'* process identifying areas of strength and weakness. A report is then given to the trust board which includes a recommendation on whether the trust would be able to meet the school's needs and the support that would need to be put in place in order to do so.

Once they are part of the trust, all schools receive six school improvement visits per year, some of which focus on specific areas identified by the LGB and headteacher and some of which are uniform across the trust. The programme of visits is agreed up to a year in advance. Every school in the trust is given a categorised *'overall effectiveness'* judgement at the end of each school year, and where necessary additional support is provided. The academy improvement committee receives reports from the Director of Schools and his team and then reports a summary of this to the main trust board.

ODST is beginning to put in place school improvement arrangements organised around their geographical hubs. Each hub is given a small sum of money to spend on school improvement and the decision about how this should be used to have the greatest impact on pupils is made collectively by the schools in that hub. Many hubs are starting to use this to fund joint continuing professional development (CPD) or cover for staff to spend time in one another's schools; the Director of Schools hopes that organising school improvement in this way *'removes the control from the centre and engages schools in determining their CPD requirements'* it is not intended to replace the central school improvement monitoring which is a vital way the trust retains oversight of the quality of education schools are delivering.

Schools in which there is concern about performance receive more intensive support tailored to their needs and a detailed Statement of Action is drafted. The Director of Schools puts this together with the school leaders, LGB and trustees. When the LGB has not had the capacity to deliver improvement, ODST has replaced them with an 'interim academy committee' but, as discussed above, the preferred option is to take the LGB along on the improvement journey. In some cases, an 'executive committee' of five individuals drawn from the LGB have met monthly for a period of time to drive forward the improvement plan. However, in each case the emphasis is to return to properly constituted governance arrangements as soon as possible.

The chair of trustees identified the ability to use direct and indirect forms of intervention as a strength of the MAT model, when compared to local authorities: because LGBs are committees of the trust board, the trust can *'walk alongside as soon as we start to see it unravel'*.

As part of its school improvement support, the trust offers a programme of training for LGBs as well as leadership briefings to ensure that they have the information they need to plan agendas for the term ahead. This includes bespoke training which LGBs are encouraged to share with neighbouring schools.

The reduction in services provided by the local authority in Oxfordshire means that many schools were unable to access this level of support in the maintained sector and, in some cases, this offer had been a driver for schools joining the MAT. The trust leaders acknowledge that there have been difficulties with performance in a few schools; ODST is committed to working with them at operational and structural levels to ensure improvement.