

MAT governance: the future is local

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The expert organisation for
school governors, trustees
and governance professionals

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National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

1. NGA's view

Local governance within multi academy trusts (MATs), or the local tier as we have come to call it, forms the bridge between the trust board and its schools. According to NGA's 2021 annual governance survey findings, local governance remains integral to the governance of the vast majority of MATs. Just 3% of those governing MATs said they have no form of local tier. Yet consideration and appreciation for the full potential of the local tier remains relatively unexplored. NGA is one of the few sector voices that has consistently been an advocate for local governance in MATs, and a key player in facilitating emerging good practice.

NGA champions local governance in MATs because it provides:

- more strategic thinking where trust boards draw on the intelligence gathered at school level
- a better understanding of the trust's role and how individual schools fit into the trust's structure
- more diverse views adding to the richness of discussion and challenge
- a positive contribution to the checks and balances of trust governance
- more active engagement between the school and its wider community
- more support for individual schools and the trust from stakeholders
- a local focus on accountability, keeping the trust grounded in the realities of the localities
- challenge and support to the trust board and central team

1.1 Explored territory

In 2019 and 2021, NGA released two reports looking at the development of MAT governance and its impact on the sector. [Moving MATs Forward 2019](#), and its follow up report – [MATs Moving Forward 2021](#) – were derived from a varied and extensive evidence base, using NGA's unique access to MAT governance, NGA's [Annual School Governance surveys](#), MAT external reviews of governance, [MAT case studies](#) and five years' worth of NGA's MAT governance network. Combined, this has provided a robust evidence base to draw the conclusions featured in this paper.

In 2021, we concluded that the power of local governance had overcome the suggestion of its demise. But it was, and still is, by no means the finished article; far more needs to be done to explore its full potential. The pandemic started to galvanise MATs, who had held rigidly to a set agenda at local level, to embrace a fresh approach. Specifically, a good number of MATs were further exploring how they could use the local tier as a vehicle for bringing trust board decision making and the needs of communities together.

While there is potential for local governance in MATs to take different forms, the picture to date follows a relatively well rehearsed pattern. MATs have largely followed a model that closely resembles what was put forward through the DfE's early guidance and model articles of association: a local governing body at school level. NGA was eager to see how MATs would move beyond this model, and how effective different models would prove to be.

Over time, many trusts altered their approach to delegation at local level, however, the overall model remained the same. Perhaps the most significant change was the shift from a formal delegated decision maker role to an often largely advisory role. Yet many trusts still operate a heavily delegated local tier today. A more significant trend has been MATs retaining a committee at school level who fulfil the local tier function; many trusts are committed to this for the long term. This tried and tested model has remained functional and pragmatic for the majority of trusts but getting it right and refining it has been dependent on several factors.

What we have learnt from successful local governance:

1. Communication, communication, communication – two-way communication is crucial; that means regular meetings where the trust board chair can connect with chairs at local level.
2. Separation, separation, separation – MAT governance has three layers for a reason, and those layers must remain distinct with separation between each – members should not be trustees, and trustees should not sit on the local tier.
3. Investment in professional, expert support – there must be a lead governance professional in any MAT, to guide the work of local committees and the trust board and to facilitate communication.
4. An awareness of who is who and how you fit together – local governance enhances trust board accountability as its eyes and ears at school level. The local tier does not have its own committees – an academy committee or LGB is in itself a committee of the trust board.
5. A meaningful, welcome and accepted role in support and challenge – where it is understood by all, including the trust board, that you do not remove the local committee simply for being challenging. There is a formal process which is followed for removing governors which includes an appeals process.
6. A local tier formed by local volunteers – executives do not attempt to control the conversations or attempt to fill the seats around the table.
7. Clear delegation – a good scheme of delegation is essential to ensuring harmonious working between the layers of governance within the trust.
8. Trust boards are visible and accountable to the local tier – local governors are invited to hear of the work of the trustees on an annual basis through the AGM or via other means.

9. The trust CEO and executive team include input from the local tier, namely the chair, in the performance management of school heads.
10. The trust values and seeks engagement from the local tier in the recruitment of new heads, including the local chair in the recruitment process.
11. There is a whole trust governance development plan which also encourages governors to learn from schools outside their trust.
12. The trust maintains a clear distinction between accountability through governance (by the trust board and its committees) and accountability through line management (by executive leaders).
13. The local tier retains a contribution to school improvement and is aware of what the school's budget is and the plan for how it is to be spent.

1.2 Unexplored territory

At various points during the last decade there have been suggestions that trusts could achieve a more innovative approach, through mechanisms such as clusters or hubs, but this has never materialised at scale. The success of hub or cluster models has been limited to some outlier trusts. Such a model could in theory be used where academy committees (or equivalent) are delegated functions related to more than one school within the trust. These hubs might be established on the basis of grouping a number of schools within the trust, based on phase or a regional or localised focus, for example.

While NGA, among others, was keen to explore more potential innovative approaches, this has not developed in the way we expected. This leads us to the conclusion that the lack of advancement in a seemingly more innovative approach to MAT governance may not become part of the sector's story. Perhaps we instead need to both celebrate and focus more on the strengths of an enduring, tried and tested model.

While practice remains constrained, there have of course been some exceptions. For example, one well known trust pays its chairs, while others rely on a heavy executive presence to fill the positions around the local table. Neither have gained traction as a universal approach, and both are problematic, giving rise to conflicts, the danger of a lack of transparency and both present a move away from what is one of the most treasured aspects of school governance: the role of volunteers. While some trusts have operated a form of cluster or hub, this has largely been in addition to school level committees. This risks the hub or cluster model resulting in duplication rather than innovation, or it means it has simply been a communication channel between the local tier and trust board, with the chairs of LGB's coming together to join with trustees and/or executives. In itself it has not created a convincing case for replacing the school level committee.

Other trusts have adopted a model with a much-reduced remit for local volunteers, where they come together in a more informal setting, with a singular responsibility to listen to and feedback on behalf of the community to help shape board strategy. While fulfilling a crucial role most appropriate to the local tier, it is questionable if on its own this can form a meaningful and legitimate layer of governance.

Meanwhile a small minority of trusts have continued to claim the most innovative option is through the removal of the local tier altogether. NGA disagrees that this presents a meaningful way forward. Indeed, where this approach has been tried, it has quickly been reversed in some cases. What's more, we know the department is committed to not only retaining, but strengthening local governance, as a vehicle for MATs connecting to communities and for schools to retain their individual identities. Such a move therefore would seem at odds with both central policy making and the evidence that shows that when done well, local governance pays back decisively.

1.3 Connection to strategic priorities

Some MATs are looking at different approaches to how they are connecting the role of the local tier and the trust board. We have seen a number of trusts looking to bring together their local governors into priority groups, with clear attachments to trust wide strategic priorities. They still form a collective group at school level but there is a dual focus that goes beyond this. These individuals carry focused links and connect on a routine basis, through virtual means, with other school-level volunteers across the trust who are also attached to that same specific area in their school. This builds on the popular 'link governor' method of contributing to governance duties – a long running feature of the sector – taken to the next level. These links to priority areas build cross trust practice and intelligence, developing a more holistic picture for the trust board on how strategic priorities are progressing across the entire MAT.

In reality, innovation has only been around the edges, and it has taken significant time to get to this point. While slow, this is a significant step and the lack of new approaches to the local tier is perhaps not altogether surprising. Local governance within MATs is very different to maintained school governance. In itself it is a new feature of school governance, which comes with governing more than one school. Many MATs are happy to admit they have taken some time to get it working well for everyone across the trust.

Multi-tiered MAT governance presented a huge shift to the way schools were grouped and governed, and it has taken over a decade for much of the sector to simply come to terms with the different roles within the MAT governance structure. With more than half of individual schools yet to make the move to being part of a MAT, it will continue to take some time before MAT governance feels normal.

The rest of this paper draws on a wider evidence base to provide an informed account of both the value of the local tier and its barriers and potential future direction.

2. Views from the sector and beyond

MATs that engage positively with a diverse local voice through the local tier achieve better governance. This can result in a collective sense of understanding and active support for decision making across the MAT. As a post-COVID-19 era beckons, the local viewpoint on strategic priorities will be sought both to assess the longer-term implications of the pandemic and to respond to the rapidly changing external environment at school level. There is now a substantial history to the MAT governance story that the sector must pay attention to and continue to learn from. The local tier, when implemented well and valued by all those within the trust's governance and leadership structure, will pay back dividends. The last decade reveals a pathway to getting the most out of it, while also carrying warnings of what to avoid.

2.1 Treading carefully

A reimagining of the local volunteer role has the potential to maximise the strategic thinking of the trust board. Yet some trusts have felt prevented from taking a new approach to the local tier, wanting to tread carefully in delicate circumstances. Some boards have expressed to NGA over the years that their hands felt slightly tied. Evidence points to a new approach being handled most effectively when misconceptions of power are dealt with, where the remit of the local tier is trimmed of duplicated activities already being fulfilled by either the trust board or executive tier (Greany, 2018). This has proven liberating for trusts, freeing the local tier to help trustees achieve a connected community strategy, but also retaining a specific focus and school improvement related role. However, as observed by Baxter, this has proved difficult for some trusts, but notably through a lack of consultation with the local tier (Baxter, 2019).

There have been well documented cases where the relationship between the trust board and the local tier of governance has been subject to significant growing pains. Tensions can arise through inappropriate expectations of the local tier as well as through mismanagement and miscommunication. Some at local level have also wrongly believed in the autonomy rhetoric that full local decision making is a given and would always be retained. This is highly problematic, especially as the desire for local autonomy continues to be such a major barrier for schools in their decision to join a MAT, as emphasised in the DfE's 2021 research, *Schools Views: benefits and obstacles to joining academy trusts*. When eventually this is shown not to be the case, the local tier can quickly lose faith in a MAT.

The relatively undefined remit of local governance within MATs provides room to harness the power of local voice within the structure itself, to deal with lingering concerns schools are now run by powerful distant groups alienated from school communities. As MATs seek demonstrable accountability to the public, they are being more forthcoming about how they can respond to the needs of local context (Forrester and Hetherington, 2021) while addressing the criticism aimed at them of harbouring a "community disconnect" (Gibson & Outhwaite 2021). An increasing part of sector commentary is that there is growing appetite emerging among trusts to further engage with communities, to being rooted in them with a clear sense of 'place', giving a voice to communities, parents, and pupils.

Yet there is a distinct lack of conversation around the role the local tier will play in this drive, as observed by NGA CEO Emma Knights writing for Schools Week in 2016 as “a governance revolution, arguably as fundamental as devolving local management to schools after the Education Reform Act 1988”. Most sector voices remain focused on the executive or trustee role in the ‘self-improving school system’, neglecting to explore the potential of the local tier, fuelling an argument that the system has not been crafted with “locally based governance in mind” (Breslin 2017).

The challenge remains that individual school communities now face a deeply complicated picture of how the school system is governed, and this confusion can be highly problematic for schools looking to join trusts (Gibson & Outhwaite 2021). Those communities have always been so vital in establishing and replenishing the stream of volunteers needed for school governance to be sustainable, and this complicated picture has sometimes led to those key individuals being put off because they are not aware of what they are entering into. We continue to hear of major volunteer recruitment challenges particularly at local level within trusts (NGA Annual Governance Survey 2021), but clarity of role has proven to be an essential element to retaining volunteers at local level. This was a point raised by the former national schools commissioner in his 2020 book – *Leading Academy Trusts* – which highlighted this as a fundamental issue. School governance was no longer easy to understand, both for the general public and practitioners alike, where “societal understanding of how it operates is many years behind”.

2.2 Lines of accountability and decision making

Part of the challenge in delivering clarity over the local tier role is that governing at academy level within a MAT differs enormously from trust to trust with varying powers or none (Riddell, 2019). This varied approach contributes to the already mixed economy of the system.

The trust board is legally accountable for the decisions made across the trust; it can decide to delegate decisions to executives and volunteers at a local level, but it cannot delegate overall accountability. Local tier operation historically followed a model affording maximum delegated decision making to these local committees of the trust board. As identified by Toby Greany in his 2018 research – *Sustainable improvement in multi-school groups* – and by a number of MATs within NGA’s case studies series conducted in 2018 and 2019, this is not without risk, especially where duplicating scrutiny between the local and executive tiers emerges. Being clear on what is and isn’t delegated, and managing local expectations is key.

“One of my key principles [as chair of trustees is that there should be] ... no overlap between the [different governance and management] bodies...Recognising the need to avoid duplication, each individual involved in governance or management at the Evolve Trust is given a resource pack containing the trust’s strategy, details about the different layers of governance”.

NGA MAT Case Studies 2018

The risks are increased if those serving at a local level remain unaware of the trust board's ability to remove or change the remit of the local level at any time. This wasn't always well disclosed, but MATs can choose to review and alter that role at any time, including what they call their local committees. But it is this "rate of change" that some worry is causing "turbulence in the system that makes it difficult for effective governance" (Gibson & Outhwaite, 2021).

2.3 Names have meaning and power

Many trusts have simply opted for the default name for the local tier included in the DfE's longstanding model articles of association: local governing body (LGB), with those serving on LGB's being known primarily as governors. However, this terminology has often been used without much consideration given to the misunderstanding it may cause (Vinall, 2021). The continuation of the term local governing body has frequently been interpreted at local level as a retention of powers akin to maintained school governing bodies. It also does nothing to reinforce the facts; that LGB's are not separate from the trust board, but inextricably linked to it as committees of the board.

While this may sound trivial, it is a key detail in getting MAT governance right. Many within the local tier are known by a name which bears no resemblance to their actual role, with "no substantive powers concerning governance" (Courtney and McGinity, 2020). The common practice of LGB's establishing its own committees has further complicated the picture. More attention needs to be drawn to the simple fact that regardless of name, the local tier is formed by having committees of the central trust board placed at school level as its eyes and ears; these do not require further committees of their own.

2.4 Delegation

A prevalent problem over the last decade has been the "haphazard development of governance arrangements and a variety of approaches to schemes of delegation" (Vinall, 2021). When approached and implemented well, a good scheme of delegation has proven to help demonstrate "a commitment" to the local tier (Forrester & Hetherington, 2021). Despite significant improvements in recent years, some MATs still fail to bring the layers of governance together in a harmonious way, where the scheme is not "followed in practice" (Browne Jacobson 2020).

More thought needs to be given to what is delegated in order to avoid models that "create mistrust and division" (Gibson & Outhwaite, 2021). While the local tier is ideally placed to be involved in "measuring levels of satisfaction and engagement" (Pain, 2019), the practice of making it the only role for the local tier dilutes its potential and significance.

Incorporating, yet going beyond, engagement means finding an approach to centralisation that still provides an element of “support and challenge for HTs in single schools, whilst feeding back into the MAT Trust Board's strategic aims” Vinall, 2021). In practice this may include the local tier being responsible for:

- being a point of consultation and representation in the development of trust strategy and policy
- being recipients of detailed information about how their school is managed
- scrutinising management information and providing assurance to trustees that the school is operating within the values, agreed policies and targets of the trust
- engaging with stakeholders and acting as an ambassador for the trust
- channelling the views of the school and its stakeholders and offering challenge to the trust
- a meaningful contribution to school improvement, scrutinising pupil progress and attainment
- monitoring strategies such as safeguarding and pupil premium
- carrying out panel work when required
- contributing to the recruitment and performance of key leaders including the head

Many trusts now manage finances centrally. But the local tier does need assurance of strong and effective financial management. The local tier can also play a key role in ensuring the trust’s financial decisions are well informed by local context. This will help to push back against common but damaging rhetoric of “privatisation” which is still prevalent today (Allen & Gann, 2022). While many trusts pool GAG funding, some only pool elements and leave the rest to local control. Other funding streams, such as pupil premium, may also be more effectively controlled locally than centrally.

One area where there has been a lack of clarity is the performance management of headteachers at school level. In MATs, headteachers are held to account through line management and many CEOs – or other senior leaders – undertake the performance management of their headteachers. This will often be alongside the chair of the relevant LGB – but not always. A 2021 research article by Caroline Vinall included findings from a sample of heads within one MAT, reporting that heads “expressed concern” where LGBs had been “shut out of HTs’ PM” and “a sense of frustration in the futility of having an LGB at all if they were not part of their PM” (Vinall, 2021).

2.5 Trust identity and the democratic deficit

The complexities of a system leaving so much to the autonomy of the trust itself has exacerbated organisational identity issues. MATs Moving Forward identified that the significant identity struggles some MATs faced was closely linked to how it engaged with stakeholders. The 2016-17 House of Commons education committee enquiry provided one of the first opportunities to assess the role of the local tier at national level. The evidence presented an emphasis on the “‘diminished’ role of stakeholder voice” and it being “unclear how local communities can get voice”. As MATs have grown, geographical boundaries have expanded. Coupled with the increased number of stakeholders created through the scale of growing MATs and the unrelenting focus on skilled, high calibre people at trust board level, community links have weakened for some schools within trusts (Breslin, 2017).

Toby Greany concluded in his 2018 study that the challenges of the system require MATs to “operate as learning organisations” and this is achieved by listening to stakeholders “through a process of sound governance” (Greany, 2018). Baxter helps to explain this further, as the trust board commission the local tier to obtain “the views and ensuring influence around stakeholder views and perspectives” (Baxter, 2019). This points to the confusing picture of “chaotic centralisation” matched with “diminishing local knowledge” in part being addressed through reimagining the local tier, its value and purpose with stakeholder engagement at its core (Greany and Higham, 2018).

There are fears that detachment of schools from existing democratic processes – a so called “democratic deficit” (Allen, 2017) – has removed lines of local accountability to local democratic government. The concentration of power to a select elite have left some questioning how legitimate the MAT system is as an enabler of local accountability. In answer to this, Riddell draws attention to the “increasingly recognised role in local governance arrangements” within MATs and their “contributions to the broader challenges faced by council areas” (Riddell, 2019). Authentic use of the local tier is a uniquely palatable option for the sector offering a half-way house to addressing some concerns, where widening of MAT membership, which would offer an actual solution to plugging a democratic deficit, has so far proven too controversial to gain traction.

2.6 The emergence of the community-minded MAT

Sir David Carter, the former national schools commissioner, stressed the virtue of the local tier, warning against its removal – “you cannot have a credible vision that talks about supporting and developing school communities if you do not give them a voice”. The local tier spread across multiple geographical boundaries is key to the board’s knowledge and understanding, helping the trust make the best decisions, keeping governance “rooted in the communities that it serves”, helping place its schools at the centre of “community life” (Breslin, 2017).

Community-minded MATs carry a local focus and can therefore easily engage in beneficial activities such as trust wide sharing of staff and CPD. School led, community centred MATs are a cultural, strategic choice, reflecting both ethos and approach to growth. Muijs observes the community mindset and “reluctance among parents and governors” to accept the mutual benefits of collaboration when there is no obvious local link (Muijs, 2015). Collaboration in the school sector can be hindered without local sense of ownership from stakeholder voice. This can be summed up by a CEO, contributing to NGA’s MAT case studies, whose strategy was to remain “locally relevant...with a desire to maintain a small and compact feel across the trust” to maximise school-to-school collaboration (NGA, 2018/19).

The sense of belonging to a place is one of the great motivations for those who govern within trusts at local level. Local volunteers are largely driven by wanting to give something back into the community they care about and have a connection to. Trusts need to maximise this motivation and put it to good use, not create a role that is at odds with it, that will ultimately lose the attention and eventually the commitment of those volunteers. Forum Strategy’s New Narrative for a new decade put it nicely – “the professionals – young and old – who want to give back and to help govern organisations with a big stake in their communities”.

This paper argues the local tier is made most meaningful and most successful when local volunteers with strong local connections can see the actual influence upon trust board decision-making that local voice is having through them. The lack of influence afforded to many local tiers, as observed by Greaney and Higham (2018), ‘neutered’ power at local level and has brought local influence into question. Using the local tier as a vehicle for community focus and influence gives weight to the idea that the community “should influence the education inside it” (Gibson, 2015). It also fits well with flexibilities afforded to the MAT governance structure.

2.7 Equipping and influencing centralised goals

While MATs remain highly committed to maintaining a form of local tier, many apply a more centralised approach (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019). The pandemic ushered in a new era of schools recognising the support they get from the trust’s central team. The local tier can play a key role in providing challenge back to the central services and central team of the trust. Evidence suggests that MAT growth brings a move towards centralisation including the “increased control over school governance” (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017). But even with this increased control, if this is aligned to the trust boards strategic priorities, it can be used to harness specific intelligence. One can argue this is itself part of the revolution; a realisation of greater strategic governance achieved as boards access the information they need.

Governance is the mechanism for establishing how power over decision-making is distributed and making sure that power is used well. This means tackling power struggles identified by NGA in 2016 (House of Commons, 2017) head on to avoid the manifestation of “problematic governance relationships” (Greaney, 2018) that prevents the refinement of transparent, ethical MAT governance.

The strength of the local level is found in how it is utilised to enable trustees to retain a strategic focus without getting buried beneath excessive information and unrealistic monitoring requirements. The local tier including stakeholders within it ensures MATs can take into account multiple realities (Ehen & Godfrey 2017), when making a value judgment. Thus, the local tier fulfils a key role in strengthening external accountability systems, “heralding a renaissance of meaningful engagement of communities and parents in influencing the governance of schools”.

MAT trust boards need to be proactive in raising awareness of limitations and the legitimate mode of influence: local stakeholders as a mainstay of the local tier have authentic influence over the character of the trust. This will go some way to open the door to schools who so far resisted fearing governance would no longer be “specific to their school and locality” (Coates, 2015).

2.8 The local tier in response to a pandemic

Evidence gathered for Ofsted’s ‘Governing in unprecedented times’ research report suggests a major positive for MATs during the COVID-19 pandemic was their ability to harness central decision-making across the trust to support individual schools – the MAT structure being key to this (Ofsted, 2020). The local tier benefited from clear central decision making and direct support from the trust.

“The MATs were able to say right in our schools this is what’s going to happen. The LA, I think with the best intention in the world, didn’t give a clear strategy for how to open. It was down to heads to make the choice in the end.” (Ofsted, 2020).

A strong desire from stakeholders and communities remains to “secure governance specific to their school and locality” (Coates, 2015). The realities of those localities have shifted significantly in recent times. The COVID-19 pandemic and more broadly the fast-paced change of the external context in recent years has pushed some MATs to explore beyond the known boundaries of local MAT governance to keep up with evolving needs against this backdrop (Ofsted, 2020).

Being part of a group of schools, under a formalised governance structure, has brought a sense of comfort to many schools during difficult times. Many of those governing at school level were positive about their MAT: 73% of those governing at local level agreed that their voices were heard by executive leaders and trustees in the decision-making process, compared to 57% in 2019 (NGA, 2021). This demonstrates significant progress for a relationship that has proved incredibly difficult to get right in the past.

Communication between the layers of governance continues to be a barrier in getting the governance relationships right. Clear engagement through effective communication channels enhances the voice of the local tier – this can assist trust boards to develop a collective sense of understanding and direction, championing decision-making across the trust and within their communities (Ofsted, 2020). Setting out the relationship between the local tier and trust board, with open channels of communication to promote upward accountability, is crucial to getting the layers of governance working (Vinall, 2021).

Any lack of coherent communication systems between governance tiers casts doubt over the ability of trusts to meet community needs, breeding misconceptions within the governance structure (Baxter and Cornforth, 2019). Many MATs have used successful communication strategies to help deal with this including cross MAT networking groups that comprise chairs of the local tier alongside investment in a senior governance professional role to coordinate the work of the local tier and trustee visibility with local volunteers. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the widespread introduction of virtual governance (Ofsted, 2020), helping to introduce new, dynamic and easier communication channels for such networks.

3. Conclusion

There is no shortcut or quick fix to MAT success. The great local tier experiment not only survived, but in many cases has finally demonstrated its worth during a pandemic and beyond. Many trusts have proved they can cope with the unpredictable; the flexibility within their structure has helped them. The local tier has endured instability through the last decade but has not become a disbanded part of the system as some suggested it would (Male, 2019). The future of the MAT movement relies on the wealth of learning from MATs established for the best part of a decade. That learning tells us MATs that engage positively with local voice achieve better governance. Where a diversity of voices are heard, MATs accommodate better community engagement and buy-in from individual schools.

The mechanisms for definitive local accountability offered through MAT governance has not had the attention it deserves, but it is a growing conversation. With the DfE's white paper set to strengthen the requirements and purpose of local governance in MATs, more thought and interest on the local tiers' future is on the horizon. This comes at a time when trusts grapple with how to maintain an ambitious vision during the onslaught of challenges schools have faced in recent years – the local tier is key to achieving trust ambition, for being held accountable for achieving it and for realising a new era of the community minded MAT.

The evidence explored in this paper establishes that getting governance right is the key to ensuring a sustainable MAT system that delivers in the interest of children and young people. MATs Moving Forward (2021) sets out the evolution of MAT governance, both before and during the pandemic. The need for trusts to engage and work with their communities, and the way in which they do it, also needs to evolve. The push for more intelligent accountability, wrapped in the roar of stakeholder voice, feels closer now than ever.

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