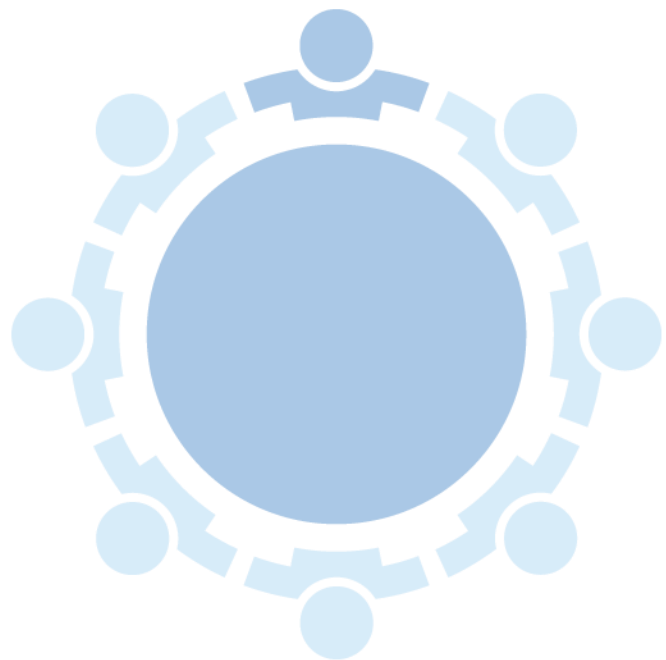


Multi-academy trusts: lessons learned in their journey so far
The Sidney Stringer multi-academy trust (MAT)

March 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 the Sidney Stringer MAT and interviewed the chair of trustees, the chief executive, a local academy committee chair, the business and finance director and the clerk 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 The Sidney Stringer multi-academy trust (MAT)

The Sidney Stringer multi-academy trust (MAT) is situated in Coventry, West Midlands. The MAT was formed in 2014 when Sidney Stringer Academy, a mainstream secondary school with around 1,350 pupils, was approached by the local authority to sponsor two struggling schools, a primary school with 230 pupils called Radford Primary Academy and a secondary school with 700 pupils called Ernesford Grange Community Academy.

The trust expanded again in 2015 when it set up a 420 pupil capacity free school, Sidney Stringer Primary School, on land previously owned by Coventry City Council. The same year, the MAT also sponsored a special school with 150 pupils called Riverbank Academy. Today the trust consists of two secondary, one special and two primary schools all located in the Coventry area. Overall, the trust has a combined pupil roll of over 2,700 pupils. In terms of governance, the trust board currently consists of four members, nine trustees and what the trust call "local governing bodies (LGB)" in four of the schools and an "interim executive board (IEB)" in one of the schools.¹

¹ Throughout this case-study, Sidney Stringer 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. The MAT also use the phrase "Interim Executive board (IEB)" to refer to academy committees in struggling schools that meet more regularly, and have been granted greater delegated responsibilities, in order to resolve issues. The use of the "IEB" in this context should not be confused with the IEB of a maintained school which has specific legal functions and powers.



Timeline of creation and development

Before the MAT was created

- 2007 Sidney Stringer Community School, consisting of around 1,350 11-19 pupils near Coventry city centre, is partially destroyed by fire and continued on the site in temporary classrooms.
- ↓
- 2010 While not in an Ofsted category as many other academy converters were at the time, the governing body felt that it had little choice but to convert to academy status if the school was to be rebuilt. Sidney Stringer Community School is renamed Sidney Stringer Academy and for the next *“three years all [the school do is] focus on working towards [Ofsted] outstanding”*.
- ↓
- 2013 Sidney Stringer Academy achieves its goal of getting Ofsted outstanding.

Establishing the multi-academy trust

- 2014 A few months after the Ofsted judgement, the local authority, with support from the department for education (DfE), approach the Sidney Stringer Academy trustees and executive leaders and ask them to take on two schools *“in a category and needing support”* – Radford Primary School and Ernesford Grange Secondary School. Both schools are *“being pushed towards turning into an academy and having a sponsor”*.
- When Sidney Stringer Community School became an academy it had four sponsors - Jaguar Land Rover; Coventry City Council; City College and Coventry University. When converting to a MAT, Sidney Stringer Academy is no longer sponsored but becomes the sponsor.
- The governing board and executive team at Sidney Stringer Academy are motivated to become a MAT to help other schools in the area and export their good practice. Although aware that academic outcomes at Ernesford Grange and Radford are poor, they *“naively”* assume that the finances are robust – which proved not to be the case.
- The Sidney Stringer MAT is formed, consisting of Sidney Stringer Academy and the newly renamed Radford Academy and Ernesford Grange Academy. This is the first MAT in Coventry with all of its schools within the City.
- The headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy retains her substantive headship in Sidney Stringer Academy but also becomes the executive headteacher over the other schools in the trust.
- Several of the trustees of Sidney Stringer Academy also become trustees on the newly formed MAT board. The chair of trustees at Sidney Stringer Academy also becomes chair of the MAT.

Development of the MAT

- 2014 The trust expands to become a four school MAT as plans are made to relocate the Alice Stevens School, a special school catering for young people aged between 11 and 18 in Coventry, to the site of Ernesford Grange Academy.
- ↓
- 2015 The Alice Stevens School reopens as the Riverbank Academy, the fourth school in the Sidney Stringer MAT.
- With one of the areas for improvement in Sidney Stringer Academy’s 2013 Ofsted report being for the school to *“work closely with the academy’s feeder schools to ... [ensure pupils are] ... equipped for the opportunities Sidney Stringer provides”*, the MAT decides to build its



own primary school under the “*free school*” initiative on the grounds of Sidney Stringer Academy.

Sidney Stringer Primary School opens and becomes the fifth school to join the MAT.

MAT leaders establish the Coventry SCITT (initial teacher training centre) with first intake for 2016.

2017 The executive principal becomes the chief executive having previously been headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy. The associate headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy becomes the headteacher.

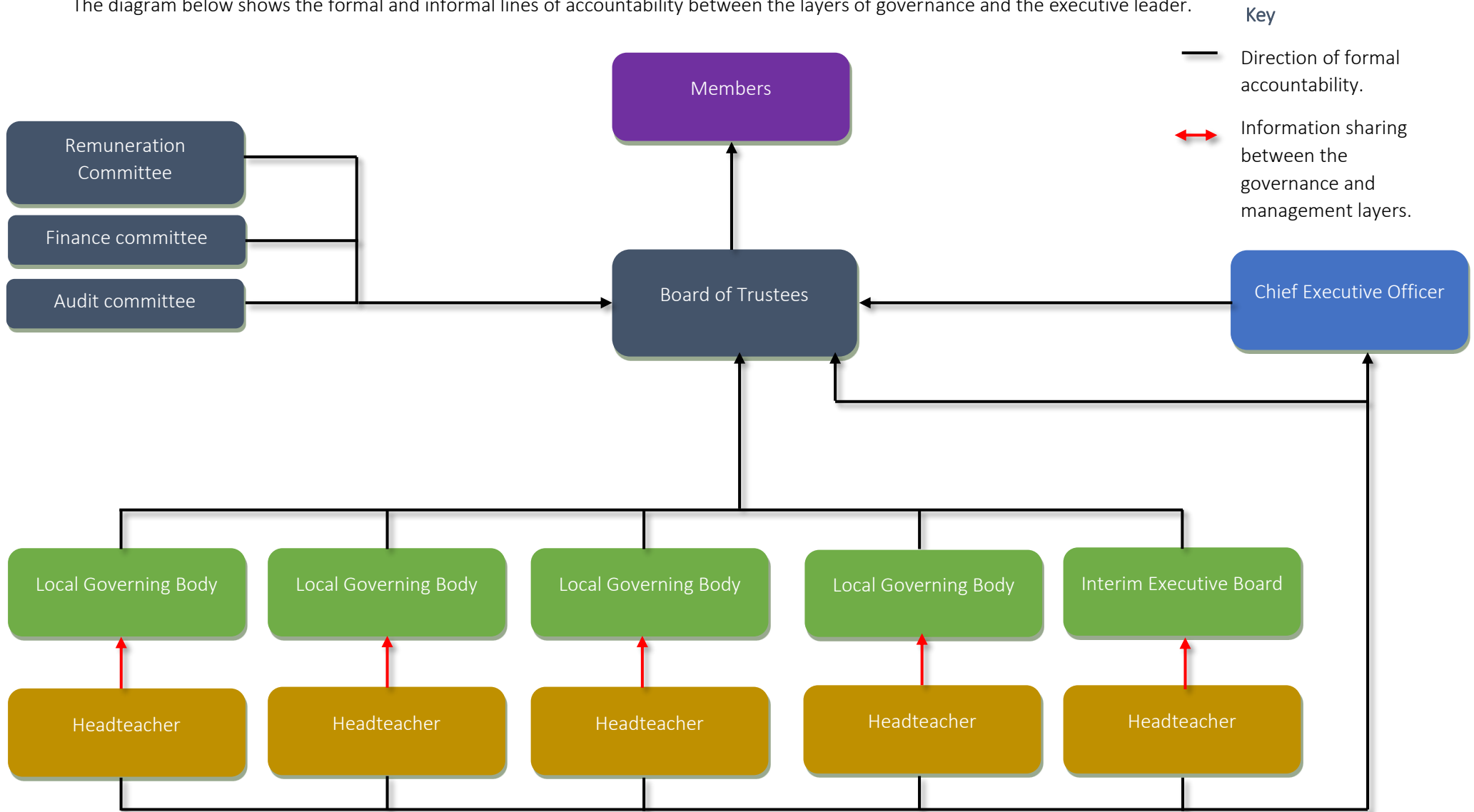
2018 The chief executive announces her retirement. Trustees try twice to find a replacement from a poor field of applicants even though they used both the usual routes and head hunters. At this point, the current executive headteacher agrees to stay on as the chief executive whilst the trustees try and see if they can “*grow their own*” chief executive from within the organisation.

The future

2018 Looking to the future, the MAT board of trustees has not ruled out the possibility of expanding. However, the MAT is conscious of how much time and money is invested into school improvement and will not take on additional schools with deficit budgets.

Current Sidney Stringer 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 Sidney Stringer MAT

The governance structure at Sidney Stringer MAT consists of:

- Four members, two who are also trustees and two who are independent of the trust board.
- A board of trustees consisting of nine trustees, including the chief executive. The trust board has three standing committees – finance, audit and remuneration.
- A local governing body (LGB) for four schools and what the trust call an interim executive board (IEB) for one school. In each school, there are roughly five or six individuals governing locally and each of the chairs governing locally is also a trustee.

While the MAT board retain oversight of finance, health and safety and human resources (HR) across each of the five schools, the local governance tier has a very specific task to *“monitor the performance of their students and the teaching in school and then send a KPI [key performance indicator] report to each MAT meeting where reports are thoroughly discussed”*. Those governing locally in Ofsted ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ schools meet at least once a term, while those governing locally in the schools in an Ofsted category meet at least half-termly.

Lessons learned

From the interviews with those involved in leading the Sidney Stringer 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 vital to be clear with schools on the “non-negotiables” and to intervene when a school falls short of expectations. To do this, it is important that those governing put in place a variety of mechanisms to generate an accurate picture of school performance.

“We're not a trust where it's Sidney Stringer in a box and everybody has to do everything the Stringer way ... but there are some non-negotiables. We've had to discuss and debate those non-negotiables, but it's [about] partnership.”

To function as a single organisation, the Sidney Stringer MAT has put in place some common policies and procedures which apply to all schools in the trust, including common safeguarding procedures as well as trust wide human resources, capability, competency, performance management and pay policies. Yet, despite these common policies and procedures, interviewees were clear that schools within Sidney Stringer MAT are allowed to retain a sense of their own individual character. While the trust does have its own logo, each school is allowed to have its *“own ... way of doing things”* and does not have to *“have exactly the same procedures for absolutely everything”*.

However, the trust has *“learnt ... the hard way”* about giving schools too much freedom and scope to operate entirely how they see fit. The chief executive said that, when the trust was first established, *“we [as a MAT] ... overpromised ... more autonomy than maybe we should have”*. This led to a situation where one of the underperforming schools that joined the MAT in 2014 was given freedom to put in place their own school improvement initiatives and run their own systems for two years. This is despite these initiatives and systems having limited impact. This led to the school achieving extremely poor results in 2016, with those governing at a local level and the MAT board of trustees *“criticised ... for not intervening quicker”*. In



response, the MAT converted the local governance level into what the trust call an “IEB” which had additional trustee representatives compared to the other schools within the trust.

Interviewees outlined that a key learning point from this was that those governing at both a trust board and local level were too trusting of the data presented to them by senior staff which did not show the true picture of the state of the school which, with hindsight, should have been investigated and more effectively challenged. Those governing now realise how much more challenging they should have been of senior staff, visited the school more often to see for themselves, and ensure that what they were being told was accurate, talking more to students, staff and parents and ensuring the school was going in the right direction.

In addition to knowing their schools well, it was also acknowledged that the trust *“should have pushed a lot harder than we did ... we didn't do enough ... in the early days ... we were not brave enough, quick enough, with some of the schools.”* Rectifying this, the trust outline that they are now *“quite willing to do whatever needs to be done in order to make sure that progress is made”*. Although allowing schools to retain an individual identity, schools within Sidney Stringer MAT are required to understand and embrace the fact that there is a collective focus on achieving the best for all children in all schools. This consists of all staff striving to improve outcomes for all pupils, regardless of background, and that all staff will work together towards getting all schools to Ofsted ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’.

Underpinning this, the MAT has a number of *“non-negotiables”* and will intervene where a school falls short of a set standard. The trust will work to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning across the trust is excellent and that schools within the trust get *“good outcomes for the children ... [they] ... are responsible for”* and *“go that extra mile to make sure ... students succeed”*. To facilitate this, the executive team and board of trustees ensure that the MAT has *“strong systems”* and is *“joined up in [terms of] teaching and learning”*. This includes having common terminology across the MAT in terms of teaching and learning and an insistence on collaboration across all of the schools.

Shared Sidney Stringer MAT values

The subtle compromise between giving schools freedom to retain their own individuality, whilst having a shared ethos, set of values and *“non-negotiables”* across the whole organisation, can be found in Sidney Stringer MAT’s values statement. Here, the MAT outline that:

- *“We are all committed to ensuring that all of the students in our schools make outstanding progress and have the highest quality support. This means that we expect staff to do everything that they possible can to ensure that students are successful.”*
- *All of our staff are valued and supported.*
- *We are committed to collaborating and supporting each other and realising that those with the greatest need should have priority.*
- *We are committed to sharing expertise across the Trust and identifying and developing leadership potential to support this as well as the training of future teachers through the SCITT.*
- *An understanding that although we are a Trust all of the schools are different and can operate their own systems where they work well.*
- *Developing innovative solutions to challenges and change.*
- *A commitment to sharing necessary services across the schools and financial prudence and sustainability.”*



Lesson two: Even with a broad ethos and set of non-negotiables, getting buy-in from schools can be challenging – particular for those schools that feel as though they have “given more” to the MAT than others.

While the MAT now accept that there needs to be shared values and a common ethos across the trust, executive leaders and trustees have worked hard to get schools and individuals to “buy-in” to all of these principles. One of the central issues in the early days of the MAT was that some of the schools felt as though Sidney Stringer Academy was “*trying to get everyone to do things the Stringer way*” – even though this was never the intention of the trustees or executive leadership team. Reflecting upon the formation of the MAT, the chief executive said that not enough thought was given to the name of their MAT and, in failing to consider this fully, other schools within the trust may have inadvertently got the wrong message: “*if you call your trust Sidney Stringer, the staff always think that Stringer is trying to get everyone to do things the Stringer way. So if you call your trust a neutral name ... it's ... far less intimidating for the other schools*”.

Aside from the new schools joining the trust, the board of trustees and executive leaders have had to work hard to get buy-in from the staff at Sidney Stringer Academy. This is because, while those Sidney Stringer Academy staff who have advanced their career within the trust can see the positives of being in a MAT (see lesson three for more details), others who have not directly gained often feel as though the school has given “*too much*”. As the chief executive outlined: “*What's in it for Sidney Stringer ... [is] ... a big ... question ... I can sell it to myself, I believe in it and the people that have directly benefitted from it by getting a promotion [believe in it] ... but everybody else says - what are you doing and why? What's in it for us?*” The interviewees outlined that it was crucial to find ways to ensure buy-in from all staff across the MAT rather than just the headteachers: “*You've got to get buy-in from staff at all levels ... and not just from the headteachers at the schools*”.

Lesson three: While being in a MAT has created opportunities for some staff to progress their career and export best practice, there is a finite amount of school improvement capacity within a MAT and it takes time and expertise to turn around a struggling school.

One of the reasons for taking on two struggling schools in the first instance was “*to roll out the outstanding features*” from Sidney Stringer Academy. However, while the trustees felt that this would be a straightforward task, they outlined that “*naturally it [is] never as easy as that. Both ... schools have struggled for different reasons. Both of them are getting there but it's taken a long time*”. As such, trustees and executive leaders realised soon after the MAT was established that “*it takes time to turn a school around*” and requires a substantial amount of capacity.

A consequences of exporting outstanding practice from one school to another has been a shift in staffing – with Sidney Stringer Academy staff completing “*dual roles*” across the trust or being moved to another school in order to facilitate improvement.

On the one hand, the MAT note that having the ability to share staff has been a massive benefit to the schools within the trust and has fostered an exchange of ideas, with staff around the trust “*learn[ing] better ways of dealing with whatever needs to be dealt with*”. Furthermore, it has allowed the MAT to retain their best staff and has led to greater opportunities for progression and

“Most of the people either work at Stringer as their substantive post and do a bit for the MAT, or they're based at Stringer and go to the other schools ... It was an expensive model, and also for those people it was quite a tough job because ... they were ... forever travelling. We're not far apart but you can never finish a job because you're always having to go and run off somewhere.”



promotion for school leaders: *“We had a really strong senior team, many of them were ready for the next level up. It provided opportunities for them to take up new posts”*. However, not only has this sharing of staff been a challenge in terms of Sidney Stringer Academy feeling that it has *“giving more”* to the MAT than other schools (as outlined in lesson two), it has also meant that staff can sometimes struggle for capacity, particularly with the travel time between schools. Interviewees also suggested that this arrangement is a significant drain on the MAT’s resources.

In addition, through moving staff around the trust, the MAT was careful to avoid moving *“outstanding practice”* out of the Ofsted outstanding school. As one of the chairs governing locally observed:

“What [MATs with struggling schools do] is they take all their good teachers from their good school and put them in the failing school ... what happens is both schools become average because one school comes up, the good school goes down. That is the wrong thing to do we believe ... [as this] ... denude[s] the teaching staff from your good school to support the failing school”.

Going forward, the MAT intends to think more carefully before taking on additional schools in need of rapid school improvement and ensure that, should any new schools join the trust, there is capacity within the system to support them.

Lesson four: Being the chief executive of a MAT is a very different role to being the headteacher of a school.

As outlined in the timeline, when the MAT was formed the headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy became the executive principal over the whole trust but retained her substantive headship. When the trust expanded to five schools, the members recommended to trustees that the MAT should adopt a chief executive model instead of an executive principal model - with the lead executive having no substantive headship in any of the schools.

From a structural perspective this made sense as the executive principal did not have the time or capacity to act as the lead for Sidney Stringer Academy. Even at the time, the then associate headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy, who is now the headteacher, was leading the school in all but name. As the chief executive outlined:

“When we first set up the trust I wasn't ready to let go of Sidney Stringer and ... in the first year I tried to carry on doing as much as I could, but I realised pretty quickly that I couldn't. So by the time we got to year three I wasn't really at Stringer very much and it seemed pretty unfair to remain the headteacher when the associate head was actually running the school and had been for the last few years”.

However, the chief executive did acknowledge that it was hard to *“let ... go”*. Specifically, she said that *“I miss working in the school, you know everybody, you know the teachers ... you know the children, and you have good relationships with people”*. However, she accepted that it was best for the organisation and the pupils that she step down as the substantive headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy.

Now working part time, the chief executive has recently reduced her work commitments to two days per week. She manages her reduced hours by prioritising schools in need of improvement over those that are achieving good outcomes for pupils.

When the chief executive agreed to stay two to three days per week instead of retiring, trustees found that it was possible for the role to be part-time or job share with the existing five schools. But if any more schools



were to join, and/or need improvement it would not be possible to continue that arrangement. Trustees are currently investigating the future options on the retirement of the chief executive.

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 communication between the different layers of governance and management, the time it takes to govern in a MAT, and how the MAT has made the role of trustee more manageable. These lessons are outlined below.

Lesson five: getting communication across the trust right is difficult, with MATs required to keep numerous different communication channels open at once.

The MAT describe having significant cross-over between members and trustees, trustees and those governing locally, and the chief executive and the board of trustees.

The trust acknowledge that, while this makes communication between the layers seemingly easier, it does create some issues – particularly in terms of accountability. The trust acknowledge that, going forward, *“for accountability ... there needs to be [more] separation”*. This is something the trust has invested time in getting right and, while there is still some overlap, the chair of trustees outlined that until recently *“there was quite a [lot more] duplication between [members, trustees and those governing locally] ... [and we were advised to create some separation] ... within the trust and so that's what we've done”*.

Aside from overlap between the layers, the trust do have different channels of communication between the trust board, the local governance tier and executive management. For instance, the MAT facilitate various meetings throughout the year to discuss outcomes and strategy across all of the schools. Each year the trustees, those governing locally, the chief executive and headteachers meet for a *“MAT planning day”* and once a year *“each headteacher ... present[s] their report of outcomes [for their school]”* to those governing locally, the trustees, the other headteachers across the trust and the chief executive. The chair of trustees also attends each schools' local governance meetings at *“least once a year”* as well as producing an *“annual report for [trustees and those governing locally]”*.

On a more regular basis, the chair of trustees will host termly meetings with *“each of the individual chairs”* governing at a local level. Furthermore, the board of trustees communicate with those governing locally by updating them on the work of the trust board through regular items on their agenda. This includes *“updates from committees”* or *“updates on finance”* and, if the trustees believe that there is something that needs to be communicate down, the clerk (who covers all trust and local governance meetings) will ensure that the update appears on the agendas for those governing at a local level.

Finally, looking specifically at how staff and the executive layers communicate, all of the headteachers and the chief executive *“meet regularly to discuss things that ... [are happening] ... across the trust and to make sure that [they are] all clear about what our agenda is”*. The MAT also host regular cross-school groups and training sessions, such as a *“MAT teaching and learning group”* and a cross-MAT *“inclusion group”*.

Lesson six: All those involved in governance of the MAT saw the time commitment as significant, with the chair of trustees spending between 10 and 20 hours a week on governance duties.

All interviewees acknowledged that being a trustee is a significant time commitment, with the MAT *“in the process [of ensuring that there is] enough resource at the board level so that ... [all of the responsibly] ... doesn't fall on two or three people to do everything”*. The time commitment has impacted on the MAT's



ability to recruit trustees and they have found it difficult to “*find people from ... a diverse background who ... have the time available to commit to being a [trustee]*”. The time commitment is made even more significant due to the large number of trustees also currently governing at a local level (see lesson five).

Significantly, but unsurprisingly, the time commitment is greatest for the chair of trustees. When interviewed, the chair of trustees outlined that the role takes between 10-20 hours a week to do effectively and she also suggested that it is only manageable for those not in full-time work or who are retired/semi-retired. This is because of the amount of time required to attend meetings as well as the amount of preparation that goes into planning for each meeting.

“Because the amount of time you put in during the day and in the evenings [chairing a MAT] is more than anybody could possibly do if they were working full-time.”

In addition to those governing, both the clerk and the chief executive have recognised that they are investing a significant amount of time on governance related activity. The chief executive has felt the need to reduce her governance “*contact time*” and, while she used to attend all of the local governance meetings, from “*this September [she] ... only ... [does] ... board meetings and ... meet[ings] with the chair*”. In contrast, while the clerk felt that her role is currently manageable, she did say that she is at full capacity, particularly as she is also responsible for school admission appeals and accountability meetings. Looking to the future, she said that five schools was the “*limit*” in terms of her personal capacity and any more would be difficult to manage alone.

Lesson seven: With the time commitment being significant, trustees need to find ways to make the role manageable.

Linked to the fact that governance in a MAT is time consuming, trustees have done a lot of work to make their roles manageable and to ensure that trust board meetings are “*more streamlined*”.

On the other hand, the MAT utilises the capacity and knowledge of those governing locally to “*dig deeper*” into school performance. For instance, as part of their performance oversight role, each individual governing locally will “*visit the school with a view to ... seek evidence ... [of a particular priority area] ... and then write a report back for [others governing locally]*”. This will then be fed-back to the trust board through the channels discussed in lesson five.

“I think we’ve been a lot smarter about how we conduct the meetings. I think we’ve had to work hard to make sure that there are systems in place that the ... [trustees] ... know what’s going on in all the schools.”

In terms of trustee meetings, the board of trustees has “*moved away from long presentations about how well people are doing*” with an expectation that meetings will last no more than “*two hours*” and trustees will have read the board papers and come prepared. All trust board meetings are carefully planned, with the chief executive and chair of trustees having a pre-meet “*before any [trustee] meetings, to plan ... [and] ... make sure the agenda is ... focused*”. Furthermore, all of the trustee meetings are structured around key performance indicators (KPIs) which include finance, attendance, behaviour and data – with trustees clear that their core role is to “*look at the health of the MAT, what resources are needed [and] what support is needed*”. On top of this, there is a KPI for local governance at each school as well as a KPI covering performance across all of the schools within the trust. The clerk of the MAT also outlined that “*minutes*” are far more streamlined than they used to be and “*over time relationships have improved, and [trustees are now] more confident [and] able to speak ... [their] ... mind*”.



Financial lessons learnt

Looking beyond governance, the trust has some important lessons to share with others in the education sector around finance, particularly in terms of due diligence and managing financial expectations in schools. These lessons are outlined below.

Lesson eight: Conducting rigorous and independent due diligence on all schools joining the trust, especially in terms of finance, is vitally important.

The key financial lesson shared by all of the interviewees was that, regardless of how a school comes to be part of a MAT, it is vitally important to carry out a robust due diligence process.

As outlined in the timeline, one of the original schools to join the MAT had serious budgetary issues and was in a large deficit. Reflecting on this, the chair of trustees argued that they were “naïve” at the time and should have done more in terms of financial due diligence: *“I think in hindsight we should have done more due diligence, financial due diligence, and we didn't. We trusted people and we didn't worry about the finances anywhere near as much as we should have”*. Interviewees outlined that, because the local authority had brokered the negotiations between Sidney Stringer Academy and the other schools, the trustees and executive leaders believed that the finances would be sound. Secondly, the trust’s growth was not driven by finance and, instead, the MAT was set up to export good practice – meaning that trustees and executive leaders did not take financial issues into consideration as much as they should have.

This has meant that the MAT inherited a school with serious financial issues. This has already led to the board of trustees refusing one potential school from joining the MAT due to their finances.

In terms of specific lessons to emerge from their experiences, the chair of trustees outlined that, although it is important to involve business and finance staff in the financial due diligence process, it is also important to get support from external auditors and financial experts. As the chair of trustees outlined:

“I would recommend ... get[ting] some professional help. It's ... not something that I think a school could do on its own.”

The interviewees also made it clear that, even if trusted or public organisations are brokering the arrangement for a new school to join the MAT, it is still vital to carry out robust due diligence.

Lesson nine: managing financial expectations across the MAT can be difficult and there is often tension concerning how much money each school is entitled too.

The financial difficulty in some of the Sidney Stringer MAT schools, as outlined in lesson nine, is compounded by the fact that headteachers and those governing locally have sometimes questioned the need to support the redistribution of funding across the trust to support schools in financial need.

“Using money from one school to help another ... [has led to] ... all sorts of interesting discussions and debates.”

The trust understand that, as one organisation, no individual school within the trust has any legal right to a set amount of funding. However, moral questions have been raised around the use of reserves as well as whether each school should be given the entire general annual grant (GAG) payment allocated to the trust for their pupils. The *“discussions and debates”* around this topic have meant that, as a compromise, the MAT has felt the need to use the language of school-to-school *“loans”* to support financially struggling schools,



with the expectation that schools which have needed additional money above their GAG allocation will “*pay back*” the funding once their finances improve.

Understandably, one of the issues that compounds this challenge to redistribute school funds across the MAT is that budgets are under significant pressure. As one of the chairs governing locally outlined, “*we're very conscious of how ... [difficult it is to] ... maintain and improve ... outcomes with a declining grant*”. Indeed, the interviewees noted “*we're going to get less per pupil than we have done in the past, yet we still want to achieve the outcomes that we want to achieve*”.

Of note, the special school within the MAT has felt significant financial pressure. This is partly because of annual budget fluctuation based on the characteristics and needs of pupils, with the language of “*cutbacks*” often unhelpful in a lot of circumstances. As the local chair of the special school within the trust outlined, the “*health and safety [needs] of some of the special needs children ... [is] ... disproportionately high and ... it's not a case of ... keep cutting in order to match the budget*”. The special school chair went on to outline that, if funding levels remain the same for the special school in the future, “*projections are that the reserves ... will zero out in three years' time*”.

“[One of the schools] has had financial difficulties because it's not full ... and as you know schools are not seen to be doing very well don't attract the numbers of students. So it's a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Lesson ten: economies of scale are possible within a MAT but they are not as easy to realise as some people assume.

Finally, looking beyond the financial challenges that the MAT has faced, interviewees also spoke about the financial benefits of being part of a MAT and some of the challenges faced in terms of converting financial ambitions into a reality.

To cover revenue and central costs, the MAT takes a yearly “*top-slice*” from each schools general annual grant (GAG) payment. This decision to fund the MAT through a top-slice came about through the need to “*pluck ... [funding] ... out of thin air*” and “*to cover ... costs*” such as the wages of central staff (including the chief executive and business and finance director), the “*audit fee ... [and] ... some of the software ... use[d] for budgeting*”. There is also a shared teaching and learning lead across the entire MAT as well as shared ICT services.

While some of the services remain consistent on a year-by-year basis, the top-slice is not a fixed fee. When the MAT was created, trustees estimated that the top-slice would stand at 4% but they soon realised that the MAT did not have the central function to warrant that amount of contribution. The top-slice was therefore reduced to 2.5%. While the fee has remained at the same level ever since, it is reviewed each year and negotiated by headteachers and those governing based on the shared costs and services across all of the schools. Where a service is shared across some schools, but not all, this is worked out separately from the top-slice contribution. For instance, not all schools make use of the Education Welfare Officer so their wage is only shared across those schools that use this service.

Some of the financial benefits realised by Sidney Stringer MAT have revolved around providing “*financial support for the heads and the business people in ... schools to manage their budget*” as well as the realisation of some savings across certain services so that “*more money ... [can be invested] ... into the chalkface*”. Specifically, in terms of economies of scale, the MAT has made a number of savings – with the trust doing “*insurance ... as one policy rather than five policies*” and having “*joint contracts*” for a number of services and products, particularly in terms of ICT.



One of the key lessons around economies of scale, however, is that savings “*do not just happen just because you have got the five schools*”. As the business and finance director outlined:

“I always think it's a slightly funny one, economies of scale ... there are certain things which you can do which do save some money, but it's not quite as straightforward as just saying, “oh, there's five of you, you can save a pot-load of money”.”

The director of business and finance did nonetheless note that the MAT had to provide services previously bought from the local authority. The most economical way of doing that was a central fund to provide those services, including providing for the chief executive as well as business and finance staff.