

MATs Moving Forward: the power of governance

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“ Governance determines who has power, who makes decisions, how other players make their voice heard and how account is rendered. ”

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Introduction

A lot has happened since the publication of *Moving MATs Forward: the power of governance in June 2019*. Today, over 44% of volunteers involved in school governance are now governing academies, and the lion's share of those (85%) are within multi academy trusts (MATs). MATs have continued to evolve and adapt, and there is more practice to share and learn from. As we compare findings from the last two years against the assessment of the issues identified in that first report, we have found some evidence that in key areas there has been considerable progress, but less in others.

The prospect of a pandemic was in no one's consciousness in 2019; looking back on 2020 in particular it may feel at first glance like a lost year. However, responding to COVID-19 did bring a period of time where the flexibilities of all schools were tested enormously in a way they hadn't been before, and that includes MATs in the English system. As a result, we know more than we did two years ago about the way MAT structures can react in a time of crisis to provide support and leadership to their schools.

Facing up to the difficult issues

Moving MATs Forward accumulated intelligence from a wide evidence base, taking account of MATs of all shapes and sizes – this report has followed suit. For both reports, evidence was collected through high-level conversations with other education and policy organisations and the Department for Education (DfE), including a number of roundtables used to test current and developing thought. Discussions with NGA's MAT Governance network have continued throughout lockdown, its reach extended by using digital technology. Since 2016 this network has acted as a space for practitioners to share governance challenges, successes and good practice and for NGA to test out new ideas and approaches to effective MAT governance.

NGA also gleans learning from those involved in governing MATs through:

- the NGA GOLDline and other daily contact with those governing MATs or supporting boards as governance professionals;
- NGA's [annual governance surveys](#);
- NGA's consultancy programme;
- the Leading Governance board development programme; and
- good practice from the NGA Outstanding Governance Awards

The insights in *Moving MATs forward 2019* also drew on:

- A detailed review of twenty-nine MAT NGA External Review of Governance (ERG) reports;
- A series of [MAT in-depth case studies](#) of the governance experiences and lessons learned by trusts; and
- A survey of 93 chairs of MATs exploring the time it takes to chair a MAT, since updated in January 2020 with the full research report [Time to chair?](#) Exploring the time commitments of chairs of multi academy trusts.

This report provides an update – and affirmation – that trust governance is moving forward in the right direction, while outlining the areas NGA has identified as still needing development. As with any evolving system, there is a certain amount of trial and error. By sharing what we are finding, we hope that others may be able to shortcut some of the trials and become more effective more quickly.

In 2019, we identified 11 key issues which impact the board's ability to carry out its core functions and required particular attention by MATs:

1. Getting the right people around the table
2. One organisational identity
3. Ethics, culture, behaviour and relationships
4. Who does what?
5. Community engagement and accountability to stakeholders
6. The future of the local tier
7. Communication and information management
8. Due diligence, risk management and finance
9. Growth, location and sustainability
10. Oversight, review and holding trusts to account
11. System leadership and collaboration

In 2019 we covered governance professionals within 'who does what' but in this report we have identified it as a separate issue.

Government policy

Government policy on MATs in 2021 is very similar to that of 2019, with MATs remaining as the preferred vehicle for securing school improvement, especially for schools in difficulty. The decisive general election result in December 2019 ushered in a largely new ministerial team at the DfE, but it quickly became apparent that growing the number of schools in MATs continued to be a departmental priority.

In March 2021, Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson stated at the FED National Education Summit that more schools becoming part of a MAT was “something we want to see more of because it shows time and again how the MAT model consistently improves outcomes for pupils”. What he did not make clear was exactly what evidence base is being used to make such a conclusive argument, as the consistency of MATs to improve outcomes for all pupils over all other options is still widely debated. This was followed by the commitment that by 2025 the government want to see far more schools “residing in strong families than we do today”

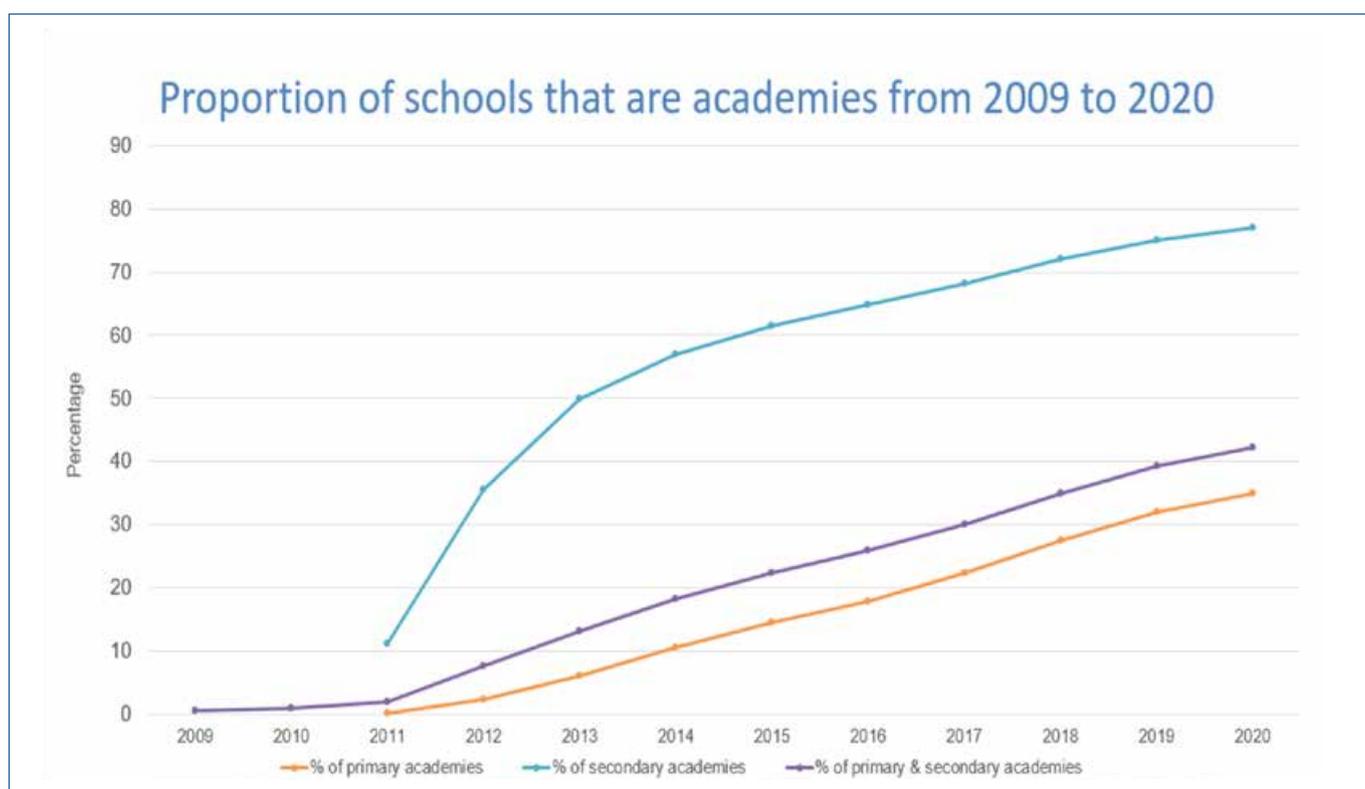
and that the DfE was “actively looking at how we can make that happen”. All indications to-date have been that the DfE are considering incentives, rather than repeating the unsuccessful proposal made in the 2016 white paper [Educational Excellence Everywhere](#) to make joining a MAT compulsory.

The number of pupils educated within academies has continued to grow. However, this follows a subdued period of time in terms of academisation during the pandemic. Figures 1 and 2 show the rise in the number of schools in trusts has slowed.

Figure 1

Number of academies and pupils in academies, 2015/16 to 2019/20						
		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of schools	Academy	5,425	6,345	7,469	8,398	9,041
	LA Maintained	16,552	15,639	14,527	13,606	12,988
Headcount – total	Academy	3,017,849	3,386,775	3,794,964	4,157,953	4,421,118
	LA Maintained	4,958,662	4,699,037	4,358,261	4,080,856	3,892,370

Figure 2



NGA's 2020 annual governance survey found that many local authority maintained school governors and single academy trustees reported a lack of interest in joining a MAT. Over half of those surveyed (54%) had not considered joining a MAT during the past year, with single academy trustees slightly more likely to report that they had compared with maintained governing bodies. Primary governors/trustees were also more likely to report that they had not considered joining a MAT (57%) compared those governing special schools (52%) and particularly with those governing secondaries (41%). Over three quarters of respondents whose schools had considered joining a MAT reported that they had ultimately decided against it (77%) up from 70% in 2019.

However, the number of single academy trusts and 'empty' MATs does continue to fall, accounting now for approximately 15% of academies. Academies are now most likely to be within trusts of 11-30 schools, whereas in 2019 more academies were still in small trusts of 2-5 schools: see figure 3.

Governing though the pandemic

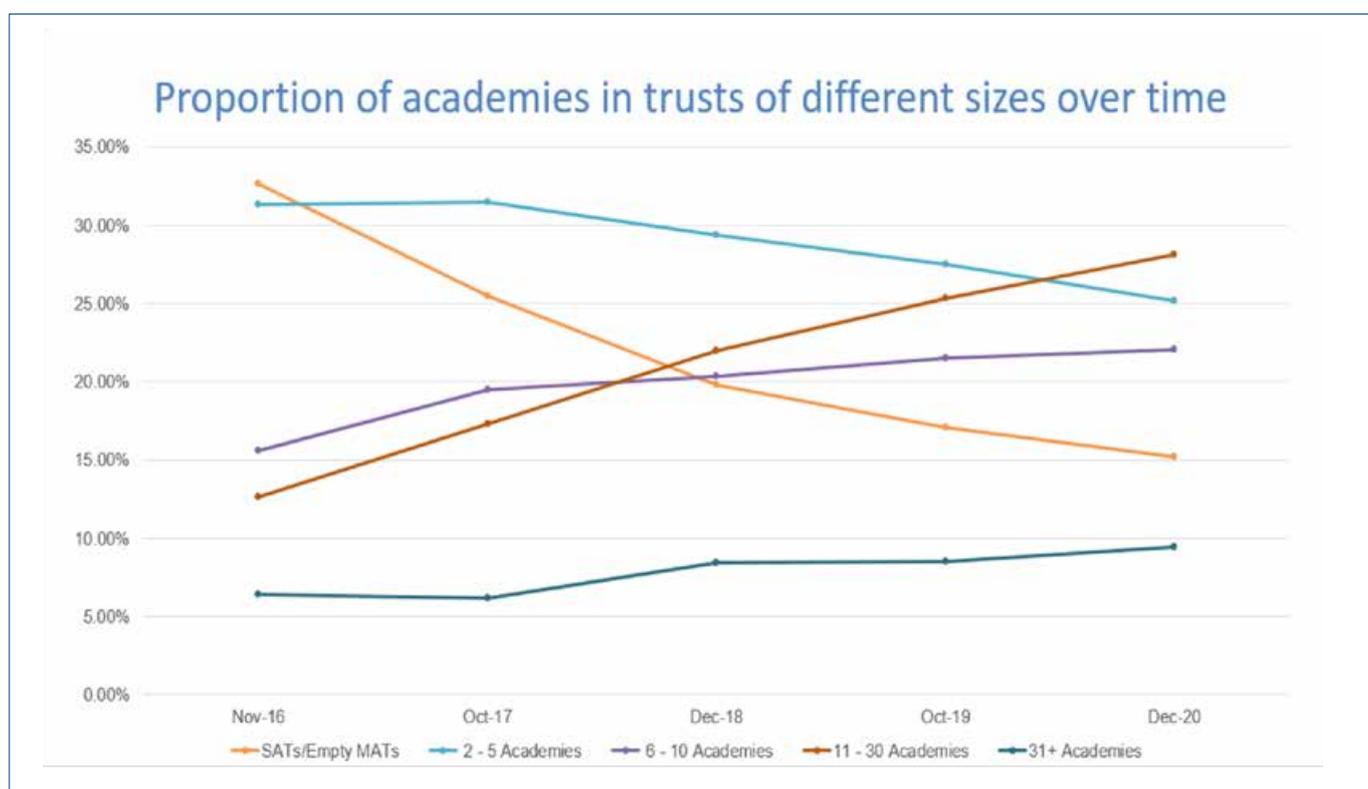
By and large governing boards, with the crucial support of their governance professionals, have moved to meeting virtually well, and carrying out much of their monitoring function without making face-to-face visits. Indeed this has been so successful,

often with increased attendance and more focussed discussion, that many boards will keep some activities virtual. For the last year governing boards moved very much into support mode. If the rate of COVID-19 infections allow the full return to school to be maintained, now is the time for governing boards to reconsider the priorities and emphases, and return to their full range of responsibilities.

The pandemic undoubtedly gave the impetus to MATs to explore different ways of governing, and pushed some to carry out an overdue review of their governance which was needed anyway, but could no longer be overlooked. For some trusts, the pandemic also provided an opportunity to adapt their governance models and their schemes of delegation. It provided a reason to depart from some historical and rigid ideas of what MAT governance should look like, giving more flexibility to liberate them to find ways of using the local tier of the governance structure to greater effect.

Doing things differently has led to a more streamlined structure for some, removing duplication and offering more clarity, yet at the same time providing greater influence to local volunteers in the process. During the pandemic those individuals serving at local level were by and large very understanding and receptive to their MAT reviewing ways of doing things. NGA did however

Figure 3



hear some contrary views to this where some MATs halted local governance with no clear or communicated rationale, or where changes to the role were not articulated well.

Focus groups held for NGA's and Ofsted's '[Governing in unprecedented times](#)' research after the first lockdown suggested that a positive for MATs was their ability to harness central expertise and capacity to support individual schools during the pandemic. Ofsted carried out further investigations in its visits during the following term and reported in their own blog '[trust in testing times](#)' that "leaders in schools that were part of multi-academy trusts (MATs) told us that the support they received from their trust was invaluable". School leaders valued "a strong trust-wide approach to managing risk assessment and planning".

NGA's MAT governance network events in 2020 decisively revealed that local governance had paid dividends during COVID-19, providing community intelligence and helping schools to be responsive to local contexts. The Ofsted blog verified this stating that "this central support went hand-in-hand with a degree of local autonomy so school leaders could tailor policies to their own context".



What MATs can learn from each other – the issues updated

1. Getting the right people around the table

2019

Getting the right people in the right roles is the first of NGA's eight elements of effective governance and we recognised it as an urgent issue for MAT boards, which also needed to pay attention to diversity.

2021

This remains as fundamental an issue. Although it is generally accepted by MATs as a vital component of effective governance in MATs, that does not always translate to recruitment of volunteers being consistently targeted with sufficient intensity.

There is also better acceptance that the relentless focus on business skills must not come at the expense of finding people with education expertise or with deep and meaningful links to the communities served. In response to this issue, NGA instigated the Educators on Board campaign to encourage educationalists to govern at other trusts which has contributed to trusts thinking differently about board recruitment. Getting someone with education expertise and experience on a trust board can help in supporting and challenging executive leaders better, with the board benefitting from specialist skills and knowledge, more of which can add valuable perspective to trust board discussions and decisions. Education professionals can help shape the culture and policies of a trust with a view on how they may impact practice.

There had previously been a serious lack of debate over whether there is a deficit of local knowledge at trust board level and since 2019, though this debate hasn't gained enough national traction, there has certainly been a growing collective voice on this issue with some trusts taking matters into their own hands.

NGA has been making the case for diverse boards for many years, and the DfE's Governance Handbook 2020 states that boards should "welcome and thrive on having a sufficiently diverse range of individuals, viewpoints and/or experiences,

since open debate leads to good decisions in the interests of the whole school/trust community". To achieve that diverse range of perspectives, MATs need to go beyond business skills and should look towards the merits of parental experience, those living and breathing the local community and crucially avoid the trap of having an over familiar group of like-minded individuals. There are ways of capturing these different viewpoints and backgrounds across the different tiers of governance within the trust, and there are different considerations for the trust board and the local tier.



Right people around the trustee board

65% of MAT trustees responding to NGA's annual governance survey in 2020 said it was difficult recruiting to the trust board, representing a 15% rise from 2015. Some boards still struggle to get trustee recruitment right, with some having more or less the same uniformity of individuals on the board as they did a number of years ago. We know from the NGA annual governance survey 2020 that 56% of MAT trustees reported being female, compared to 60% overall from all school types/structures. However there has been progress with the leadership roles on the board: in 2018, the proportion of chairs of MATs who were female was 42%, but in 2020 this had gone up to 50%.

Several groups remain significantly underrepresented, particularly people from Black, Asian and minority ethnicities and people under the age of 40. In response to NGA's 2020 annual governance survey, just 9% of trustees on MAT boards reported being under 40 while only 4% reported being Black, Asian or a minority ethnicity.



Right people – the local tier

In 2020, academy committee members were the most likely to agree with the statement "we find it difficult to recruit to the governing board" at 68%. The annual governance survey also revealed that those sitting on academy committees/LGB's were the youngest marginally (13%), compared to LA maintained schools (12%) and MAT trust boards (9%).

There has been a growing acceptance that recruiting new trustees and governors who are reflective of the ethnicity of the pupils the organisation serves will help the board make better decisions; however many more Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) volunteers are needed. NGA has continued the Everyone on Board campaign with Inspiring Governance while working with other partners, in particular BAMEed and Diverse Educators, to promote this opportunity.

The lack of ethnic diversity within governing boards remains a persistent, historical issue which affects all school structure types, but is slightly more prevalent on MAT trustee boards.

In 2019 the DfE commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to investigate school and trust governance. That research found that over three-quarters of respondents from MATs reported one or more vacancy on their board. Also of concern is the two-thirds of the interviewees who identified that their board experienced retention issues and pinpointed this on ex-governors and trustees having a change in personal circumstances or being unable to fulfil the time commitment of the role.

NGA's annual surveys demonstrate that governance volunteer recruitment is more difficult than it was five years ago. This is set against a backdrop of volunteering rates remaining generally stable across civil society before the pandemic. There are also some fears that the pandemic will shrink the wider voluntary sector, at least in the short term. The National Council of Voluntary Organisations has suggested that it is likely there will be significant changes in terms of how people volunteer and who volunteers. One cause for optimism however rests in the shift to virtual governance which creates a more accessible pathway for many into the role and for attendance. MAT boards need to consider how this might be used to appeal to those who have not traditionally volunteered.

The DfE supports the recruitment of trustees and local volunteers currently through two contracts, one to Academy Ambassadors and the other to Education and Employers for the Inspiring Governance platform. In the coming financial year the 2021/22, due to increased expenditure on other areas owing to the pandemic, the funding for governance recruitment is being cut substantially.

At a glance

Without developing this diversity of thought, governing boards are at risk of suffering from groupthink. It is also crucial that governing boards reflect the diversity of the community they serve and of wider society.



2. Organisational identity

2019

NGA identified that a failure to understand the MAT as a single organisation had been one of the major hurdles for the MAT sector since its inception. More trusts and the schools within them needed to recognise they are one entity, and promote that they are driven by a common set of values with a shared vision. Failure to create a 'one organisation' mentality can undermine the authority of the executive team and trust board and can lead to misunderstandings surrounding who is accountable and in charge of individual schools.

2021

There has been considerable progress, possibly on this issue more than any other. A number of trusts have chosen to change their name from that of the founder school or sponsor to break the link with the 'lead school' mentality. There is much more talk about and understanding of the trust's values and ethos applying to all. There is still some way to go with sharing resources and moving from the language of a top slice.

Today many more MATs are clearer with their individual schools that autonomy and the freedom to self-govern are not on offer, as accountability rests with the board of trustees. There will always remain the debate as to how much decision-making is to be delegated to local level, but it is now usually done with the understanding that the trust board retains the ability to overrule any local decision making if it has to.

There is the related debate about how much individual identity can be retained by schools – this will vary from MAT to MAT depending on their values, culture and vision for pupils. Some MATs do continue to struggle if the focus on individual identities and local contexts of schools acts to negate the focus on trust-wide belonging and the efficiencies of trust-wide policies. This better understanding means many more governing boards of schools considering joining a MAT now do take time to consider whether the trust's values and culture is right for them. Now that more MATs have become established, there is more choice for schools considering conversion and they can take the decision in the knowledge of where the power and decision-making will sit in the future.

At a glance

There has been considerable and possibly more progress on the issue of needing to recognise, develop and communicate organisation identity for MATs than any other issue. There is still some way to go with sharing resources, but the sector is on the right track.



3. Ethics, culture, behaviour and relationships

2019

NGA highlighted cases of unethical behaviour, summarising how it is the rare but detrimentally high-profile cases of trusts operating unethically which have led to negative press and public perceptions about MATs.

2021

Since the 2019 report, there have been fewer high-profile cases of trusts operating unethically. There is possibly more understanding that trustees are unpaid.

NGA and others in the sector had been asking that the DfE take a stronger line on excessive executive pay. The DfE listened and in October 2019, the chief executive of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) wrote to trust chairs saying:

“Please note that a list of academy trusts issued with this letter will be published on GOV.UK on 17 October 2019. This forms part of our ongoing campaign to challenge academy trusts with high levels of executive pay. Last year I wrote to 212 academy trusts that reported paying salaries in excess of £100,000. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) challenges academy trusts paying salaries that seem disproportionate to the size and/or level of challenges faced by the trust. Since this activity began in December 2017, around 25% of the trusts we have engaged with have reported salary reductions.”

However, in March 2020, Schools Week reported that of the 58 trusts that had received two letters on this matter, only a quarter had reduced salaries. This is an area where benchmarking with other public sectors, eg the NHS, local authorities and housing associations, would be beneficial, as we have done in our guidance on executive pay.

In general the negative press stories of misconduct that the academy sector had become infamous for has gradually reduced. Accounts of rogue CEOs, irregular financial activity, related party transactions and conflicts of interests have lessened. The sector cannot afford to be complacent on these issues, and controls and checks as directed by the ESFA’s Academies Financial Handbook (AFH) are now more rigorous. Although there are some who complain at this level of regulation, NGA welcomes this and finds the AFH to be a useful document.

How a board behaves is a hugely important aspect of effective governance. Although progress is difficult to assess when there are so many trusts, there is little evidence to suggest that the way in which board meetings are handled has improved. NGA continues to hear reports of dominant chief executives who speak throughout the meeting and/or trustees who are not asking the challenging questions.

Many trusts are reluctant to thoroughly review their governance, instead choosing safer and less challenging development activities. The DfE’s Governance Handbook says “An objective independent external review of the effectiveness of the board can be a more powerful diagnostic tool than a self-evaluation” and recommends “commissioning external reviews of board effectiveness, particularly at key growth or transition points, to gain an independent expert assessment of strengths and areas for development”. It has not yet become common practice to open up to an external process and we challenge MATs who haven’t done this within the last two years, to make a decision that such a review will be commissioned to take place in 2021.

At a glance

While some unethical and irresponsible decision making continues to impact the MAT system, an increased central focus on the probity in the use of public funds and the need for transparent governance and ethical decision making has made a positive impact. More needs to be done to encourage trust boards and CEOs to be proactive in reviewing the effectiveness of their governance.



4. Clarity on who does what

2019

One common obstacle to securing effective governance in MATs was prevalent confusion about roles and responsibilities, and where delegated functions sit at different levels across the trust.

2021

There are many resources produced on roles within MAT governance, not least by NGA, but more effort is needed to ensure all are aware of this.

The role of trust members

2019

Key issues included those at trust governance and executive level not being clear who their members were in the first place, and members not understanding their place within the organisation.

2021

NGA has welcomed the increased focus on trust members, from the ESFA in particular, with a stronger line on increasing the number of members, albeit to just five. However Get Information About Schools confirms significant numbers of trusts do not yet have five members. In 2020 NFER reported that 25% of trust boards described members as a 'difficult' position to fill, with 22% reporting vacancies. Despite an increased conversation, there continues to be confusion about the role of trust members, with NGA's comprehensive guidance first published in September 2018, updated in November 2019 and again to coincide with this report.

Unfortunately some trusts have interpreted current DfE guidance as an instruction for members to get more involved in the work of the trustees. Staying very much at arms-length can be particularly difficult for founder members who have given enormous amounts of energy and commitment establishing their trust and its vision. Instead, members should be provided at the AGM with a report on the quality of governance, but this is still not common practice.

Trustees and delegation

The big challenge in governing a MAT is not charity and company law, which is well established and can be advised on by the trust's governance professional, but in knowing how much the trustees can and should delegate to the local governance tier, usually at academy level, and how much the board of trustees must see and decide for themselves.

2019

A prevalent problem was having a poorly written scheme of delegation with confusing references, disjointed and contradictory delegation and, in some cases, key duties being duplicated or missed off entirely.

2021

This has seen significant improvement. There is some danger that the focus on schemes of delegation has waned as this is now considered a less urgent issue.

The scheme needs to be kept relevant to the developments of the MAT, reviewed and adapted but in a transparent way which demonstrates the trust's commitment to building trust.

While most MATs now accept the importance of a concise scheme of delegation, there is still a lack of evidence that shows these are universally well communicated across the trust. A quick search of MAT websites reveals several trusts that had not updated their scheme of delegation in the last three years and some that do not publish their scheme on their website. For governance to work well, trusts must continue to get buy-in from those at different levels of governance and management, making sure roles and responsibilities are understood by all involved.

Separation of functions

2019

NGA asked the DfE to focus more on greater separation between members and trustees. The local governance tier should also consist of a different set of people from the trust board to provide effective, objective decision making.

2021

The Academies Financial Handbook has strengthened its instructions, requiring all trusts to have significant separation (the majority of members different from trustees), noting that members sitting on boards can reduce objectivity for exercising member duties. The guidance could still be stronger, but it is moving in the right direction.

With the current wording now in the most recent iteration of the Academies Financial Handbook, it should be clear to all that employees can no longer be members, even if a trust's outdated articles of association permit it. The trust is contractually obliged to comply with the handbook regardless of what their articles may say.

Yet considerable numbers of MATs still do rely on overlapping layers of governance in which people serve on more than one layer: 54% of MAT chairs that responded to NGA's annual governance survey were also a member of their trust and 33% of other non-chairing trustees say the same. One third of MAT trustees reported that some trustees on the board also govern at local level.

Central support

Many schools recognise that the support they get from the trust's central team can be expert, responsive and worthwhile in day-to-day management matters such as drafting policies, managing finances and premises, and providing expert oversight on safeguarding and health and safety. This came to the fore during the pandemic with support sourcing personal protective equipment and IT equipment, remote recruitment, and crucially with developing remote learning. While increased centralisation within MATs had provoked some of the fiercest debate in the past, in 2020 it was seen by many at local level as a real benefit, and what is more, it did not have to mean a lack of local expression and decision making. It was found to be possible to retain enough local freedom for leaders to adapt resources to their school's context.

The executive tier

2019

More work was needed to learn from the different roles in different MATs of different sizes and cultures.

2021

This area is still largely unexplored. The National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL) has been a welcome addition to the NPQ suite and has just been reviewed again. However, the time allocated to training in governance has been minimal, often led by fellow executive leaders rather than governance experts, with the result that there is a sharing of experience, rather than good practice or problem solving. Many senior executive leaders report to us that more input on this important part of their role would be beneficial. However it has been pleasing to see some frameworks/programmes are reflecting the governance angle quite substantially. For example, Forum Strategy's Being The CEO is one of the main frameworks for the CEO role in existence and has a whole pillar dedicated to relationship with governance – which is a chapter in the book and a full day on the programme.

Heads of school

2019

A common outcome was confusion with accountability through both executive leadership (essentially line management) and governance at academy committee level. Not only can this lead to duplication of reporting and challenge, it can be demoralising for school leaders. Conversely it can create gaps in accountability where no one is sure who is holding whom to account for what – and there are examples of this even being the case with critical responsibilities such as safeguarding.

2021

Heads and their academy committees have reported working more closely together during the COVID-19 period than previously, building further respect and with local governors aiming to offer support to overstretched school leaders and challenge proportionately.

MAT chairs

Being a chair of a MAT is an extremely significant voluntary role with duties such as maintaining effective governance and engaging with lead executives (described in detail in NGA's [Chair's Handbook](#)) taking up a significant amount of time. The annual governance survey 2020 told us MAT chairs were the most experienced of all chairs with a quarter of them reporting that they had previously been a chair of governors/trustees at another school/trust.

Since the original report in 2019, NGA published its study on how MAT chairs spend and manage their time. Chairing a MAT, on average, takes just under 50 days a year. Over half of MAT chairs are retired or semi-retired and spend significantly longer on their governance roles and responsibilities, devoting almost a third more time to their role than those in full-time employment. While the significant majority of chairs had put strategies in place to manage their time more effectively, over a quarter (28%) reported having not done so despite their hefty workload and they are sometimes reluctant to use tactics to make their role more sustainable. Additionally, some chairs noted a reluctance from others on the board to step forward into the chairing role in the future. Over half (56%) did not have a succession plan.

In 2020 we published Chairing a board: developing governance, sharing leadership with tips for managing this significant role. These include the possibility of sharing the chair and also calling on the vice chair more. Despite it being covered in the DfE's Governance Handbook, MATs do not always even appoint vice chairs and this needs to become a standard expectation.

At a glance



Delegation and clarity of roles and responsibilities within MAT governance has seen some significant improvements, with more trusts operating with greater transparency and clearer lines of accountability. Yet there is some danger that the focus on reviewing schemes of delegation has waned. There also continues to be substantial confusion about the role of trust members.

5. The role of the governance professional

2019

We recommended that this role should be given more prominence. The expectations placed upon these individuals include helping the board carry out its core functions, advising on the decision-making process, facilitating debate and using their influence to promote effective governance practice.

Governance professionals are a crucial component in setting high expectations for trust governance, making an invaluable contribution to efficiency and effectiveness.

2021

The roles of MAT governance professionals have evolved at a fast pace and take many different forms, but there will often be a governance professional who oversees all aspects of governance effectiveness and compliance within the trust, often also clerking the board of trustees. NGA has produced a model role description for this critical job, but although it is now common practice for MATs to employ their own governance specialist, this is not the only option. Not all MATs have chosen to make a significant investment in the governance professional role. A key relationship – and communication channel – to be managed is that of the trust board and the lead executive. Governance professionals who are also members of the executive team can help ensure governance is not forgotten in executive conversations.

However, these developments have raised fundamental questions about exactly how to define the role, with some MATs still grappling with its purpose and its breadth, and its relationship to other roles and responsibilities within the central team. A good rule of thumb is that the responsibilities outlined in NGA's role description are more likely to be divided between multiple people as the size of the trust increases, with different clerks at academy level. There is then the important task of overseeing the clerking arrangements across the MAT and the lead governance professional acting as the link between academy committees and the trust board. Consistency of clerking practice at school level is something that a trust wide governance professional should work to ensure, monitoring the standard of clerking across the organisation.

Managing the work of a wider governance team, where required, creates further opportunities for innovative solutions, beginning with appropriate delegation, particularly in times of expansion or growth. That role can be pivotal in contributing to rigorous methods of self-review and thereby securing sustained effective governance across the trust.

At a glance



Governance professionals are a crucial component in setting high expectations for trust governance, yet not all MATs have chosen to make the same level of investment in the governance professional role. Investment in a trust wide governance professional can help ensure MAT governance communication channels are enhanced, and trust wide roles and expectations are understood.

6. Community engagement and accountability to stakeholders

2019

We reported the significant struggle some MATs were facing engaging with stakeholders. Some MATs had not been sure of how to deal with the strong desire from communities to engage with their school while the trust at best remained meaningless to their locality or was even seen as having ‘taken over’ their school.

A common criticism of MATs was that they preside over diminished local knowledge, which is devalued by their central – and centralising – agenda. Stakeholders want their locality to be seen and understood, and it is the role of governance to ensure this happens. National or regional focused MATs, or even MATs that spread from one town to the next, created a tension with schools being not just part of the community, but both leaders in the community and accountable to it. For some this change felt like a loss of local ownership and control, which compared with a single standalone school it is. An academy committee of a MAT board has less decision-making ability than a single academy trust or maintained school.

2021

Stakeholder engagement is a wider issue than governance but ensuring stakeholder voice is heard is part and parcel of good governance and therefore good decision-making. In 2020 NGA formally identified ensuring other players voices are heard as the fourth core function for governing boards.

The pandemic has very much reinforced the crucial role of schools as pillars of their communities, especially against a backdrop of other pivotal community services being scaled down. It has been widely observed that schools are increasingly finding that they need to provide basic provisions and services to mitigate disadvantages in their communities. This applies irrespective of the governance structure of the school. Schools have been widely recognised as the important institutions they are, working with other civic organisations – local authorities and public health agencies – to ensure the welfare of local families, often being the glue sustaining and keeping communities together.

Towards the end of 2019, Michael Pain, CEO of Forum Strategy wrote about a “new narrative for a new decade”, exploring the role of MATs being at the heart of their communities.

The piece stated that “this is how we can redefine the academy trust sector – as one that demonstrates a commitment to community, sustainability, being an employer of choice, and togetherness”. The rhetoric around community for MATs has continued to gather pace. More and more MATs, of varying sizes and geographical spread, have begun to be more open about the importance of place and to recognise those who had from the beginning, been determined to remain clearly rooted in their communities, with no wish to expand beyond. For these MATs there was no struggle with knowing how to achieve a balance of being one robust organisation with a strong brand and identity, while acknowledging the importance of local community and context for it was hardwired into their values and vision.

COVID-19 placed more emphasis than ever on engaging well with parents. Schools have done this with increasing confidence over the course of the year, ending up possibly at a highpoint in many parents’ eyes. However, the role of MATs in strengthening parental engagement is less straightforward; and even before the pandemic, this was being explored.

Discussions at a roundtable in February 2020 made the appetite to establish strong engagement with parents very clear, but the added value of the MAT in this arena was less clear. Everyone present acknowledged the limited understanding parents had about what MATs are and how they are perceived when spending the school’s money. Although schools are the gateway to establishing engagement with the MAT, it was not clear whether parents would want to engage directly with the trust and when that would be necessary. Parental – and community – engagement can be captured in the values of the trust, as well as in the way the central services, the executives and governance arrangements support this value and help turn it into a reality. The passion for taking this forward was heartening and NGA is committed to supporting this, working in partnership with MATs who are also proactively looking for what works to strengthen engagement.

Trustee boards have in the past struggled to tackle this from a central perspective, but the understanding has grown of the importance of commissioning the local tier of governance to obtain and share local views and the board of trustees affording influence to the feedback received. The local tier is almost always better placed in a MAT to develop the listening to stakeholders aspect of governance. This is not the only route to stakeholder engagement, which must go beyond the realms of governance activity; some MATs have responded by appointing trust-wide members of staff with stakeholder engagement roles and expertise and even community organisers.

The community engagement role within local governance tends to be highly valued by most MATs we speak to, but this has not always translated into each trust board considering how well they utilise the intelligence captured by the local tier in their decision making. The communities and their needs will vary significantly from school to school within the trust. It is vital that trust boards have a chance to reflect on how the needs of different communities fit within their strategy.

Accountability is a large and important concept with many dimensions, meaning different things to different people. The trust board of a MAT acts as the custodians of the trust's schools, using public money to the benefit of local pupils and accountable for their performance. As well as being legally accountable to the Secretary of State for Education, the trust board is accountable to wider community, and it is that aspect of accountability that provides the legitimacy to govern. Being able to provide answers on issues that matter, to the people that matter, in the places that matter to them, is acknowledged as a challenge by many MATs, but there are ways in which these complex, multi-site organisations can work with and through their schools to do this, impacting thousands of lives. Alongside ambitious vision-setting, governing boards are responsible for the values that guide the culture of the organisation – values that speak to every member of every school community. Trustee boards can only achieve that if they listen to what those communities – pupils, parents, staff, local employers and other local services – are saying. The actions of the MAT and its schools then must be seen to uphold those values and vision.

Larger MATs face a compounded challenge in that they are likely to be working with communities that have experienced the impact of the pandemic in different ways. While the pandemic has forced some organisations to be more outward looking, this can be more difficult when the geographic spread of some trusts straddle local government boundaries and other pre-existing partnerships. However, during the last year there have been some significant steps forward, with many MATs becoming more actively engaged with local authorities and other local services, and encouraging their schools to work collaboratively in the established civic life of the local area. Many of the schools were already engaging with other locally outside their own MAT, but this was by no means true of all. The COVID-19 crisis has reminded more isolated educationalists of the importance of public services working together and the complementary skills and knowledge which each brings to the table. These relationships, built on trust and mutual respect, provide a good basis for future working as society recovers from the pandemic.

At a glance



MATs, particularly larger MATs and those with extended geographical focus have previously struggled to engage with each community they serve. But MATs do have enormous potential to use their trust wide vision to strengthen numerous communities, impacting thousands of lives. The focus on stakeholder engagement is generally on the increase from a MAT wide perspective.

7. The local tier of MAT governance

2019

Over the years there had 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 arose through inappropriate expectations being placed on the local tier, mismanagement and miscommunication with some wrongly believing the autonomy rhetoric and that full local decision making was a given. Far more attention needed to be given to the role of the local tier of MAT governance, and how those volunteering locally can be used to best effect to influence trust decisions and make a difference to the pupils in the school they govern. There were so many examples where academy committees, often called local governing bodies (LGBs), were being used ill-advisedly, sometimes being under-utilised and at other times given tasks without the necessary decision-making authority. This related again to the point that schemes of delegation need to be crystal clear.

2021

Positive progress has been made. Most MATs retain local governance, as figure 4 taken from the annual governance survey 2020 shows. A minority of MATs suspended local governance at the beginning of the pandemic, mostly with a clear rationale and communication of why delegation had changed, but other communication was done less well (as we return to with issue 8). Most re-established the local tier when the immediate uncertainty of the first lockdown lifted and when it became clear academy committees could continue to carry out much of their role virtually.

While there is no legal requirement on MATs to have a local tier, there is a now strong commitment to it among the MATs we speak to, with many trustees telling us that during the

Figure 4

	2 to 5 academies	6 to 10 academies	11 to 20 academies	21 academies and over
Academy committees for each school	87%	80%	69%	68%
Cluster/hub committees for groups of schools	6%	10%	14%	11%
No local committees	2%	2%	8%	11%
Unsure	5%	7%	8%	10%

pandemic they could not have managed their responsibilities with risk assessments without the contribution of academy committees who knew the staffing structures, the premises and the community. For some MATs the pandemic provided the evidence once and for all, of the importance and validity of their local governance model. For other trusts, the pandemic pushed them to review the impact of their governance structure, with trustee boards, very much with CEOs' support, being driven to maximise the local intelligence through the local tier.

Although the local tier is alive and well, its role and level of influence varies enormously. Sir David Carter stressed in the 2020 publication *Leading Academy Trusts* 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" (Carter and McInerney, 2020).

The trend in our annual governance surveys has been for the satisfaction of those governing locally to increase. In 2018, over a third (35%) of academy committee members felt that the MAT added no value to the school. In 2019 62% said that they felt part of a single organisation and just 57% said that they felt their voices were heard by executive leaders and trustees. In 2020 there were clear signs of improved perceptions of their MAT: 73% of those governing at local level said their voices were heard. This is significant progress for a relationship that has often proved difficult to get right. It may be reflecting that being part of a formal group of schools providing central services and a unified governance structure has brought a sense of comfort to many of those working in and governing schools during a deeply troubling crisis.

However, this issue of clarity of purpose is not yet solved everywhere. We are still seeing MATs where those governing locally feel that although they are expected to question and challenge as well as support, there is no indication as to the purpose of this scrutiny. There is understandably frustration, as well as confusion when they see that real holding to

account of headteachers is carried out by senior executive leaders through line management. In the worst cases, they are questioning whether they are only there to be coached prior to an inspection and in effect are being 'wheeled out' for Ofsted. As discussed earlier, the pandemic has created some valuable thinking space and permission for trusts to think differently about how they implement and future proof their local tier.

There have been considerable advances in the approach to schemes of delegation with many trusts adding terms of reference and establishing handbooks which convey the relevant information clearly and succinctly. Many MATs hold an annual conference to include those volunteering locally, and others have made more of effort to consider the induction and professional development of their volunteers. There are other MATs who are yet to invest in the time and resources necessary to provide the required level of support, but the indicators are that the sector is moving in the right direction. There are some boards of trustees who feel that they are rather beyond needing training, and this rings alarm bells. No matter how experienced someone may be in their own business sphere, there is a need to understand schools and education generally as well in their own trust. We have seen too many occasions when a list of eminent people has failed to act together as a team to govern well.

The pandemic has led some trusts to think differently about the value of community focus and the importance of place, leading them to the realisation that by using the local tier as a vehicle for community focus, rather than seeing it as something they should have to keep the peace, they can harness that influence to the advantage of all.

Recruitment of volunteers to the local tier continues to be an issue which some MATs are now proactively driving, understanding that they need to look further than business skills, but also to diversity of views, the inclusion of local life experiences, community knowledge and the ability to influence locally.

At a glance

Local governance within MATs has resisted any suggestion of its demise. The pandemic has galvanised a fresh approach to the local tier and many trusts are increasingly exploring how they use it as a vehicle for bridging the gap between trust board decision making and the communities they serve.



8. Communication and information management

2019

The importance of good communication was identified as one of the biggest concerns of those governing trusts. Progress was not being made.

2021

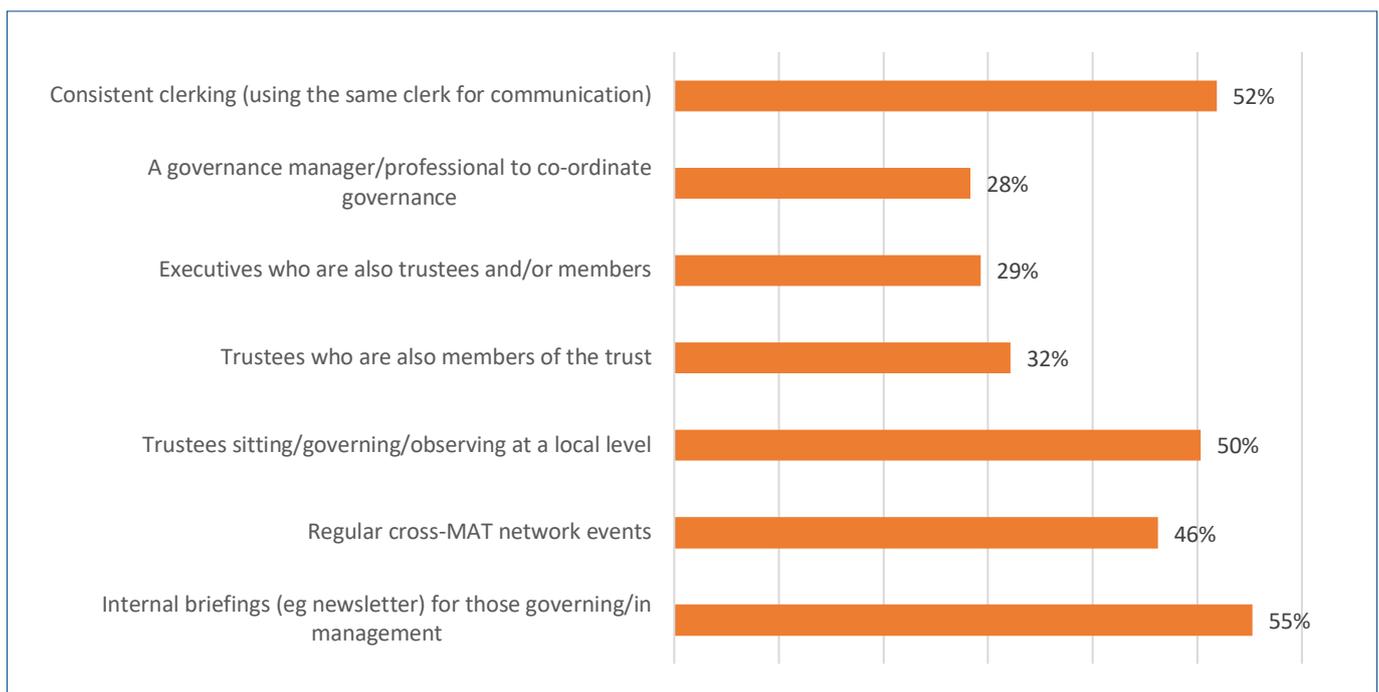
There have been some limited but notable cases of MATs not communicating well with individual schools within their trusts during the pandemic, including some where the work of the local tier was halted. One key criticism aimed at those MATs has been their treatment of local volunteers who received little or no information about the trust’s plans, with some even reporting they were unsure if this was a temporary or permanent change.

However, a much more common experience has been the instigation of regular chairs’ meetings, where the chairs of academy committees or equivalent are gathered with the chair of the board of trustees to update each other to exchange information, share ideas, practice and plans, and to gather views. While NGA has been encouraging trusts to do this to enhance communication for a number of years, it had still not become common practice. The ability to meet remotely has been transformative, and it is now likely that this will continue after COVID-19 subsides. This has not only had top-down and bottom-up communication advantages, but has also enabled academy committees to learn from each other. Vice chairs also being invited spreads both the immediate learning further but also shares the leadership with the chair, and may well aid succession planning.

Figure 5 shows the different ways in which survey respondents reported communication was actually taking place before the pandemic, and it was often using people to carry out more than one task – whether executives, trustees or members.

Good communication must not depend on duplicating roles with individuals governing at several levels acting as a conduit for disseminating information. Good governance requires a separation of roles to ensure objectivity, lack of conflicts and some individuals ending up with undue power and influence. Many trusts have heeded this and instead established formal communication pathways, including termly governance briefings as well as the chairs’ forum.

Figure 5



Sir David Carter and Laura McInerney in Leading Academy Trusts confirm our findings, identifying that communication between the layers of governance is a barrier to getting governance relationships right. Clear engagement through effective communication channels enhances the voice of the local tier. This can assist trust boards develop a collective sense of understanding and direction following the impact of the pandemic, championing decision-making across the MAT and within their communities (Ofsted, 2020). It in turn gives MATs a way of promoting issues which are of most importance to them, for example, leaders whose trusts had monitored and supported the health and wellbeing of all trust staff noted particular benefits. Those trusts which have communicated well during the pandemic are the ones which have won the loyalty and support of their stakeholders.

Success is, as it has always been, dependent on getting communication right, especially when trusts have taken on new schools and retain their governors within a local tier setting. Lack of coherent communication systems from one governance tier to another casts doubt over the ability of MATs to meet community needs, breeding misconceptions (Baxter and Cornforth, 2019).

The pandemic has prompted new communications channels and ways of maximising governance business for all governing boards, with the virtual board room becoming the norm for the last year. The combination of carrying out business virtually, and the increasing prominence of MAT governance professionals with oversight of how the trust is governed, should mean this is an area that continues to make strides forward. MAT governance professionals should be integral to enhancing communication. As the trust evolves, communication across the different layers of governance needs to be reviewed to ensure it remains effective, with the governance professional having a key role in carrying out this review. We expect some governing business to remain virtual while other will return to face-to-face.

At a glance



Communication between the layers of governance remains key to getting the governance relationships right. The pandemic bringing virtual governance to boards has prompted new communications channels and ways of doing business for trust boards. The ability to meet remotely has been transformative, providing solutions to some communication issues that have plagued the MAT system for the last decade.

9. Finance, risk and due diligence

2019

These fiduciary elements of governing boards' business were not happening as well as they should. NGA made a plea for better due diligence and more focus on risk management and especially the board's role in determining risk appetite.

2021

During the last year risk management has taken on a profile that none of us could have predicted. The review of risk assessments has become a more prominent part of trust board business than ever before, with trustees seeking assurances from executive leaders about the quality of the assessments being carried out in preparation for reopening, and assurance that relevant policies are being updated. Trust boards have also grown more accustomed to addressing parental, pupil and staff concerns about risks, providing confident messaging that a robust risk assessment process has been followed, and prioritising reassurance on the specific measures being put in place to reduce risks in schools.

The language and familiarity with the concept of risk assessment and mitigation may help MATs – both the executive and the non-executive – better integrate the practice into the business of education management and governance in future. Effective risk assessment helps ensure the right strategic priorities are chosen, and that they are pursued in the best way possible. There will also be other risks associated with the pandemic that will impact MATs for some time to come, including economic, societal, technological risks as well as internal issues. For example, a growing number of commentators are predicting an exodus of exhausted executive leaders and headteachers, bringing retirement and other career changes forward once schools are fully and sustainably returned. Trust boards will need to ensure that risk of losing staff has been assessed.

The expectations placed on boards to meet to discuss and discharge their financial governance duties has increased since 2019, with trustees now encouraged to meet at least six times a year and that the board is satisfied that the trust remains financially sustainable and therefore is a going concern. While the AFH requires management accounts to be shared with the chair of trustees every month irrespective of the trust's size, many trusts are reporting that their finance committee is now having shorter sharper monthly meetings to cover this requirement.

NGA’s 2020 annual governance survey revealed that while balancing the budget is the biggest issue facing MAT trustees and academy committee members, as it for those governing any school type or structure, it is significant that the percentage of those in MATs choosing it (34%) is lower than the 43% of those governing maintained schools. That suggests that the advantages of financial management and governance across a group of schools may have materialised, at least for some. This is confirmed by the finding that just over half of MATs with 10 or fewer schools who plan to grow have taken financial advantages into consideration.

Baroness Berridge, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System stated in 2020 that “the great majority of trusts have reported a cumulative surplus against their budgets and have received an unqualified opinion from their auditor”. With trusts now equipped with enhanced guidance and more trusts using tools such as the resource management self-assessment tool, there are some green shoots of improvement.

The centralised role of MAT finance, both governance and management, has been much debated, with many schools within trusts reluctant to give over the control of their finances to the central MAT function. The trust does not have to seek permission but the level of opposition from schools – often both leaders and those governing locally – has led trusts to choose not to fight this battle. Against this backdrop, the 2020 NGA annual governance survey presents an interesting shift from just the year before. More respondents now support the idea of sharing their individual school’s resources across the MAT than oppose it: nearly half are in favour of pooling resources with other schools within the MAT (49%), whereas only 28% oppose it and 23% have no view. MAT trustees have also been more likely to report that they are expecting to balance to overall budget of the organisation, though our evidence suggests this is partly based on size of the trust.

MAT boards are more accustomed to hearing directly from their chief financial officer (CFO), with just under 90% of the MAT trustees we heard from saying this is the case. There is still

work to do as clearly this number should be 100%. The AFH is more forthright in prescribing its expectations around the CFO role, stating that the CFO must be appropriately qualified eg with recognised accountancy qualifications. It makes it clear that the CFO should be playing a leadership role as well as a technical role, providing advice and direction to their boards.

Despite the positive trend, a few trusts continue to mismanage their finances or fail to follow the rules without the board of trustees rectifying this. The number of financial notices to improve and investigation reports has risen (see figure 6), and some of these not only make for sorry reading, but also serve as a warning for trusts who do not take their fiduciary duties seriously. Public shaming seems to work, as the number of trusts who submit two or more financial returns late is reducing, following publication of their names.

Finances remain a key part of the work of central team and the board of trustees with financial oversight being a core function of governing boards. DfE public messages on GAG pooling, centralised procurement and integrated curriculum financial planning have subsided somewhat during the pandemic, but they have not disappeared. Individual schools and those governing locally may still express concerns about such matters, particularly where MATs fail to communicate their rationale well, and how this aligns with the trust being a single organisation pursuing a shared vision.

Overseeing the finances of a MAT is different to overseeing the finances of a maintained school and is different again from a single academy trust. Cash flow is more critical given the way funds are distributed, and with bigger numbers, the consequences of things going wrong financially are greater, affecting more pupils. Sourcing business experienced trustees has in many cases strengthened financial oversight, but there continues sometimes to be issues with their understanding of education-specific aspects, such as how trusts are funded and the requirements of the AFH. The quality of auditing (internal and external) is not always at the standard it should be to

Figure 6

Published	2018	2019	2020
Financial Notice to Improve	22 7 still open	78 5 still open	63 16 still open
Investigation reports	2	2	8
	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Late reporting of two or more financial returns	88	43	23

alert boards of potential pitfalls, so the role of questioning by trustees as always remains absolutely central to getting financial oversight right.

At a glance



There has been an increase in scrutiny and expectations placed on boards to discharge their financial governance duties since 2019. While balancing the budget remains the biggest issue for many, evidence is emerging to suggest the advantages of financial management and governance across a group of schools may have materialised. There is a greater level of support from individual schools regarding sharing individual school resources across the MAT. Despite the positive trend, a few trusts continue to mismanage their finances.

10. Sustainability, growth and mergers

2019

Most MATs were still small, and the evidence of success being linked to size was missing. The ramifications of some trusts growing too quickly were still being felt. NGA recommended that the DfE should share practice on how trusts are encouraged to grow, and we anticipated an increased emphasis on MAT mergers which require careful consideration around cultural compatibility and governance.

2021

The lessons hard learned by those who did not manage growth well seem to have permeated the sector with far fewer reports of trusts growing exponentially, and governing boards instead taking time to consider what is best for their pupils and if they have the capacity to share what they are doing well with others.

42% of respondents to NGA's annual survey reported that their MAT had grown in size within the last year and those that reported expansion tended to be larger already (over 10 schools) and were more likely to report planning to grow again in the near future (64% vs 54%). It is the smallest trusts – below six schools – which were least likely to have grown. NGA now also hears less by way of contrasting messages in relation to MAT growth from DfE officials, but it would be welcome to hear that regional schools commissioners (RSCs) are open to working more with those smaller trusts and considering them first as a destination MAT, rather than taking the easier option of the better known MATs.

During the pandemic structural change has not been at the top of anyone's agenda, but with the Secretary of State saying incentives were being considered for schools joining MATs, the conversations may begin again. There is an increasing view among those who govern that a knowledgeable and responsive central team can act as more than a safety net, providing high quality, agile support to school leaders when they need it. Their expertise on finance, premises, human resources and risk has been appreciated, especially where it is coupled with respect

Figure 7

	Empty MAT	2 to 5 academies	6 to 10 academies	11 to 20 academies	21 to 30 academies	31 academies and over
Has increased MAT size within the past year	15%	35%	53%	67%	59%	57%
Has <i>not</i> increased MAT size within the past year	81%	63%	40%	23%	20%	16%
Don't know	4%	2%	7%	9%	20%	27%
Planning to increase the number of academies	58%	62%	59%	53%	36%	35%
Not planning to increase the number of academies	22%	12%	10%	10%	20%	11%
Don't know	20%	26%	32%	37%	43%	54%

Figure 8

	5 academies and under	6 to 10 academies	11 to 20 academies	21 academies and over
Improving outcomes for more pupils	76%	78%	63%	73%
Growth is part of the trust's strategy	76%	54%	41%	58%
Finance and resourcing considerations	55%	51%	29%	23%
Wanting to reach 'optimal' size	55%	50%	25%	27%
There are suitable schools which wish to join	35%	54%	51%	62%
Asked by the RSC and/or DfE	19%	16%	27%	12%

for local knowledge and context. Support to provide remote education at short notice has also highlighted the benefit of a central team, facilitating the sharing of expertise across schools.

In 2020, the main reason reported to NGA by MAT trustees for having a strategy for growth was improving outcomes for more pupils, and then for finance and resourcing reasons. It is interesting that some MATs have an idea of what an optimal size might be for them and that this is linked to financial sustainability. The DfE tried for a number of years to model the financial sweet spot, conclusive work on this has not emerged. While in some parts of the sector there is a growing consensus that somewhere in region of 10 to 20 schools, or between 5,000 to 10,000 pupils offers financial and operational sustainability, the evidence is still lacking to make absolute statements. Moreover, many larger MATs do have a strategy for continued growth, and about a quarter cite financial considerations to us as a driver. The last minister for the schools system Lord Agnew agreed that 10 to 20 schools was a good number on the basis it was the number of heads you could get round a table to have a conversation; this is the number of schools currently in the Inspiration Trust of which he is once again a trustee. For a minister so well known for this interest in financial efficiency to look at this issue from such a human scale point of view is interesting. His predecessor Lord Nash would speak of keeping schools within half an hour's travel of each other, although the trust he founded now has two hubs, one in Hertfordshire and the other in Pimlico, London. Travel times post-COVID may no longer be seen as such a critical factor, albeit that local knowledge should still be a consideration.

Some MATs opened with elaborate plans for growth that haven't materialised, largely because of the legacy of single conversion and a lack of strategic planning when national policy moved to preferring MATs. Some have turned further afield to try and realise the ambition of growth, spanning beyond geographical locations they originally felt comfortable with.

There are still issues with so called 'orphan' schools, often bringing with them a legacy of poor pupil outcomes, entrenched budget issues and some with punishing PFI contracts. Without additional funding from the DfE, it is understandable that trustees who wish to fulfil their charitable object in the most ethical manner will be reluctant to compromise their own trust's sustainability (and their reputation) by agreeing to a risky expansion.

A few trusts have taken over smaller less successful MATs, but mergers between equals are not yet common. However MAT mergers can, if done well, offer a way of securing the desired outcomes. This rests on a presumption that a larger organisation will be more capable of leading and managing a group of schools than a smaller one, but this needs testing in each case. Becoming larger may bring more efficiencies and offer greater influence, but it can also lead to loss of agility and diseconomies of communication. We do expect to see more mergers in the future, but it may take some time to convince some trusts this is a genuinely helpful way forward. The merging of established individual organisations is never simple. The research report Sustainable Growth in MATs published in 2020 highlighted that "those interviewed for the research reported they would be less likely to adopt growth strategies focused on merging with other school trusts".

The reality is that the drivers for mergers are rarely simple, and the context for each of the trusts looking at merging will be different. Just getting both organisations on the same page in understanding what each is looking for can be difficult. Most of the learning for the merging of organisations will come from the third sector as the most closely aligned sector, and that unfortunately is littered with cases of failed merge attempts. In 2020, Hilary Barnard, NGA consultant, wrote about the complexities of mergers in Governing Matters, noting that the process of merging itself has an impact on whether or not the

benefits come to fruition. There are some key considerations to help clarify if merging is the right way forward:

- the search stage should facilitate honest dialogues, including to what extent values and ethos are shared between the partners;
- there should be a thorough due diligence process to establish bona fides, leadership, and financial and organisational viability;
- consultations should take place to establish how the merger will serve the needs of students, staff and the wider communities;
- people, systems and processes must be aligned in the merged organisation;
- the transfer of staff to the merged organisation needs to be carefully managed with regular information and proper consultation;
- the transfer of assets and liabilities must be comprehensive.

In summary, although mergers can potentially offer a way forward for some trusts, they are not a quick fix. They are challenging, and must be given adequate time, assessment and openness.

At a glance

Over half of MAT trustees (53%) reported to NGA that their board plans to increase the number of academies in their trust with only 13% reporting they definitely were not planning to expand their MAT. This growth will not be achievable without RSCs proactively considering the needs of smaller MATs as well as some mergers which will take time and care.



11. Oversight

2019

NGA was frustrated by the perceived lack of coordination between RSCs and the ESFA, with different messages sometimes given with attention to governance falling between the two arms of the regulator, the DfE.

2021

Despite the pandemic which has meant that RSCs have not been able to carry out their regular annual conversations with trusts this academic year, there have been significant strides in key areas. ESFA publication of financial returns made on time, investigations and financial notices to improve continues to provide a level of transparency and opportunities for learning to all those in the sector.

The centrality of governance to many of the causes and subsequent solutions to the common problems MATs face has been understood by the sequence of government ministers with responsibilities for the school system. But we now see that understanding of the role of governance translating into the machinery of oversight more, although some historical issues hinder this, for example outdated articles of association and poorly constructed governance structures set up via original constitutional requirements.

It is evident that financial governance is of interest to the DfE, albeit primarily through regulation via the AFH. What started out as a document focused on financial oversight, now makes clear the government's expectations of governance structures and practice. For some trusts, compliance with these expectations has meant adopting new articles of association; for others it has prompted a review of the role of the trust's governance, particularly to tackle the issue of individuals operating over multiple layers of governance. There are still some MAT boards that are not as familiar with the AFH as they should be. However, the AFH is largely seen as a comprehensive yet practical guidance document that offers MATs clear instructions; it is widely used by the sector and appears to have had an impact. ESFA should be mindful of this when reviewing its format and content.

The DfE overall has continued to engage on the topic of MAT governance, and has been more mindful of the specific needs of governance within MATs. Conversations are also being had with stakeholder representatives about the role of governance professionals, but those about board leadership and the all-important role of chairs are being neglected. RSC offices are setting up networks for chairs of trusts which is welcome, but not necessarily in a way which builds on the work of the DfE Governance Unit nor draws on the expertise and knowledge in the sector.

Despite the rhetoric, there has not been a strong enough steer on some basic expectations, such as the need for professional development of trustees and external governance reviews for MATs. This is understandable during the pandemic, although both those activities have continued remotely. DfE has removed funding for board development with no announced alternative, meaning that any replacement funded activities are unlikely to be in situ for at least a year. Baroness Berridge has made it clear on a number of occasions that “effective governance is crucial to a self-governing school system”. With the tide of work required for COVID-19 recovery, there is a risk that this stated priority could remain muted with a lack of visible leadership, drive and focus. In 2019 we urged RSCs to actively appoint individuals with governance expertise to sit on headteacher boards. In 2021, as well as encouraging more RSCs to review the skills around the table for these groups to ensure governance expertise is included, the name of these advisory board may now be due a refresh in order to accurately reflect their remit and composition.

Ofsted has continued to improve its understanding of MAT governance structures and its ability to correctly identify and engage with the lines of accountability within MATs. NGA’s 2020 research report published just as the first lockdown began – [A view from the board: Ofsted’s new Education Inspection Framework](#) – found that inspectors are increasingly understanding of the different nature of governance within MATs. Almost 75% of inspectors spoke to both the MAT trustees and those governing locally. That said, the same report carried the overriding finding that for schools within any school structure, the implementation of the new inspection framework led to the role of governance being diminished within the inspection process. Just 17% of respondents said the inspection had helped them to a great extent in terms of improving governance. NGA continues to discuss this reduction of visibility on governance with Ofsted.

At a glance

There has been progress in the oversight of MATs by DfE with governance taking a more central part. More remains to be done after the pandemic to ensure that knowledge of MAT governance continues to increase within the DfE and across the sector. Given there is agreement that improving governance is a high priority for the MAT sector, resourcing its development should be given the priority it deserves.



12. System leadership and collaboration

2019

NGA asked for greater clarity from the government about the future of MATs and the role they are to play in collaborating outside their own trusts to improve other schools. Government policy had meant that some MATs were increasingly disincentivised to take on challenging schools. The financial incentives that MATs used to receive to support struggling schools had also reduced, and some MATs were understandably unwilling to take on those struggling schools as this may have a detrimental impact on the other pupils within their trust.

2021

It is now clear that the government will continue to encourage maintained schools and single academy trusts to join MATs. What is less clear is the Secretary of State’s vision for MAT leaders to engage in wider system leadership, how this will be incentivised, and how MATs will be held to account for this, given that board of trustees are only legally accountable for the performance of schools within their trusts.

However as already noted and recognised by many others, the pandemic has made the benefits of collaboration with other public services and civic players clearer, and the engagement of MATs and their schools with others has increased. Civic society refers to the activities of leaders – from all sectors – along with citizens in a local area. This poses a problem for MATs that are geographically spread out. Given that MAT executives or trustees are unlikely to have the profile, local knowledge or established relationships, engagement in these civic activities or partnerships might have to be left to local school leaders. This makes absolute sense and does not pose a problem, unless that collaboration is not supported by the MAT centrally, leaving headteachers being pulled in two different directions.

Sharing expertise is not always as simple as newcomers to the business may think: for example we didn’t continue NGA’s 2018-19 MAT case-study series. Although these make for useful reading for newer MATs, we decided there were more efficient ways of using the learning. We hope that this publication, alongside all our resources for MATs and our network events, now virtual, provide as much learning as possible on MAT governance. We would like to pay tribute to

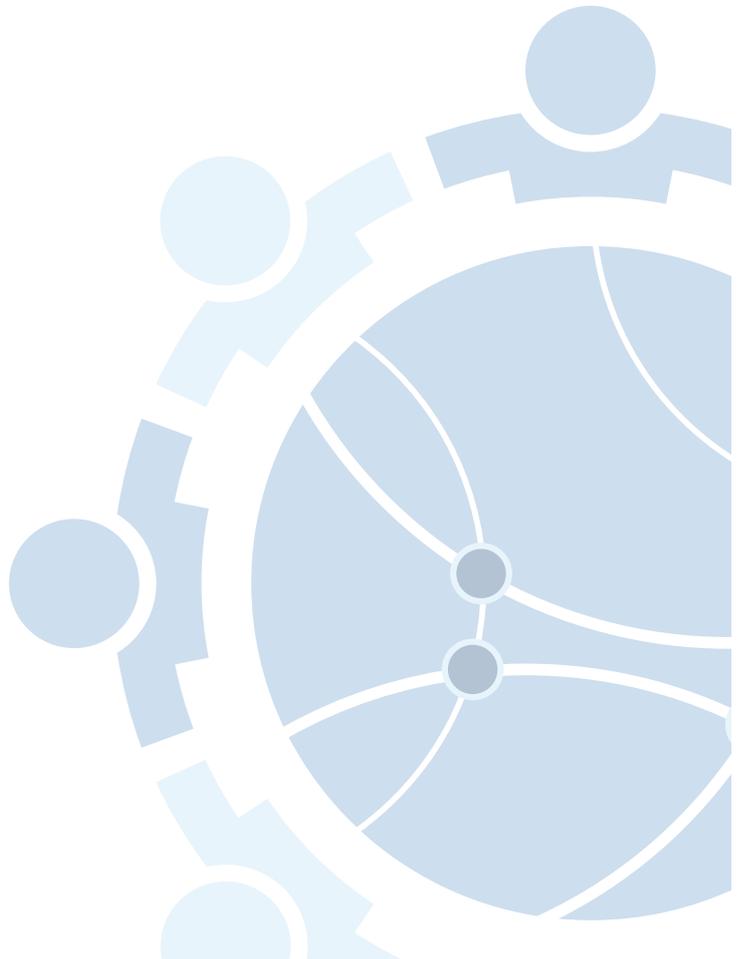
other organisations, such as Forum Strategy, who similarly provide resources and networks for MAT executives. By working together we can make sure non-executives and executives are receiving the same messages and learning.

In terms of systems leadership on governance itself, the DfE established an expert group to review the National Leadership of Governance scheme, and NGA was part of those discussions. The delivery and impact of those changes from a volunteer scheme to a professionally rewarded scheme with some quality assurance remains to be seen.

At a glance



Collaboration outside trusts has improved over the past two years, and there now appears to be the will to continue this, sharing learning across the sector. It is pleasing that this has largely been school and trust-led, but there is a role for the DfE to play in incentivising and rewarding this activity.



MATs moving forward – changing the debates

In 2019 we introduced four key debates we felt were important to move the MAT system forward, but had been neglected. While most of those debates are still required, some have shifted focus. Learning to do business remotely during the pandemic has changed some of geographic restrictions, as not all collaboration and learning needs to happen face-to-face, reducing the inefficiencies previously being worked into the system through hours of travelling. However, the importance of needing to know your communities is of greater priority, so we have reframed the debate from geographic spread to the role of the local tier of governance.

We have added here a fifth debate about governance professionals: this discussion has been had for many years as part of NGA's Clerking Matters work, but finally is now being had more widely within the governance community with the DfE recently setting up a working group to consider the role. However, it is a debate that is largely invisible from the wider MAT sector.

Debate one: too much power in the hands of too few people?

The role of trust members continues to exercise thought. With some articles of association not even requiring an AGM, the role can be invisible to some and unwarranted by others. In fact the members hold considerable power as by agreeing the articles of association, they set out the rules for how the trust is governed, and can appoint the majority of the trustees and, regardless of who appointed the trustees, dismiss them all.

The concentration of power emerges when the members themselves are in effect appointed by an individual (eg a sponsor) or a body (eg a diocese) thus increasing the risk of a single voice holding sway, not only at member level, but because the members appoint the majority of trustees, at board level too. NGA has long advocated that trusts should be allowed to pilot different memberships models, for example the parents of all the pupils in the trust being members. This would involve them electing a number of trustees and holding the board to account through an AGM. Undoubtedly this would mean more administration with members' registers being updated, but this should be manageable through existing data collection systems. As was the case when annual meetings

with governing boards to parents were required, overwhelming numbers attending the AGM would be unlikely unless there were issues, in which case it is right that the parents have a legitimate avenue to express these.

Increasing the number of members to this extent could well also increase their diversity, which in turn might act to increase the diversity of trustees more quickly than is currently happening, leading to better decision-making. We appreciate that some boards fear that large memberships might not be as well-equipped to hold trustees to account. It is step into the unknown, whereas at NGA we are familiar with this model as our board of trustees reports to all our thousands of members via our AGM. This model also fits well with championing the voices of all, one of our organisation's values. Moreover, it increases the legitimacy of the trust governance model by building in both a feedback-loop which has teeth and an element of democracy, which is important for public services. It is a better answer to the question 'whose school is it?' than just the board of trustees. We are aware that it is highly unlikely that powers will relinquish their control voluntarily, but we leave this argument here for the record.

On a related issue of power and influence, we will, in the meantime, continue to argue vigorously for complete separation of power between governance layers and roles. This includes the removal of executive leaders from academy committees. They should, of course, attend meetings to report and be held to account, but should not be doubling up as local committee members which can lead them to have even more power and influence than they wield by virtue of their day job.

Debate two: is the local tier being used effectively and meaningfully?

An overarching criticism has been that the mechanisms for definitive local accountability offered through governance structures had not been sufficiently explored despite the House of Commons Education select committee stating exactly this – that trust structure should allow for both "upward accountability and local engagement" (House of Commons, 2017). MATs that engage positively with the local voice through the local tier are governing more effectively – diverse voices are being heard, and better community engagement is being accommodated

and encouraged, along with improved 'buy in' to their MAT from the individual schools and their stakeholders. This can result in a collective sense of understanding and active support for decision-making across the MAT.

We can see how the local tier is standing the test of time in one form or another, in all but some of the largest MATs. There is some evidence that MAT growth brings a move towards centralisation including the "increased control over school governance" (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017); however a wide consensus has emerged among MATs which appears to have been strengthened during COVID-19 that the engagement of those associated closely with each of their schools is valued, and the rationale for local scrutiny and challenge is understood. It provides an additional perspective that adds value to the management function of the executive.

Some trustees settle on engaging with parents, staff and local communities through their executives. However this does not add to the checks and balances which exist when trustees engage directly with their local governance committee members. This ability for the board of trustees to triangulate has been helped by virtual meetings making it easier and more efficient for them to get together; these meetings need to remain part of ongoing practice. With that needs to come a real culture of listening, so those academy chairs who are more vociferous are not just removed as being too difficult to work with. It should be a case of winning hearts and minds, not simply changing the personnel when they are seen to be awkward.

Volunteers cannot be expected to give up their time unless it is time well spent. Some trusts have made significant strides in making the local tier role meaningful, rather than a talking shop without decision making power or influence, and we hope that this progress is seen in the entries to this year's Outstanding Governance Awards.

There remain challenges, not just with the extent of the role, but in how well the role is understood by all. By all we include senior executive leaders, headteachers, and Ofsted inspectors.

Debate three: when is big just too big?

Despite the reduction in failure stories in the press, we are not yet convinced that MATs, particularly large MATs, have achieved public acceptance. There has been no public policy debate and little academic scrutiny as to the pros and cons of a system dominated by large MATs. There has never been a political statement that such a system is the end goal. Nevertheless, it would appear to be the direction of travel, albeit a very slow journey. Trusts are unlikely to be thinking of the sustainability

of the whole system or even the local system, but simply complying with their legal responsibility of sustaining their own trust. Board of trustees do not have any responsibility for pupils outside their own schools.

There is a concern in some quarters that the distance between the decision makers and those most affected by those decisions is widening, which relates to our first debate on the concentration of power. This is not only likely to be perceived to be the case with bigger trusts with headquarters elsewhere, but especially when combined with a greater likelihood that there is no local tier of governance. An option for debate is almost the opposite of mergers: regional or locality hubs with stable leadership allowed to 'float off' as a new, separate MAT. This would show real system leadership with larger MATs incubating success but then giving it up to its autonomous future as befits its local context. This will be controversial suggestion for larger MATs as power is hard to relinquish, but it would certainly help combat the accusation of empire building.

Debate four: supporting leadership development

When the headteacher standards were revised in October 2020, the advisory group of which NGA was part raised the issue of roles being different in MATs. Although there was no consensus as to whether standards would be helpful for executive leaders, the group did recommend that DfE learns more about the needs of executive leaders before considering what would be helpful in supporting high quality trust leadership. This is outstanding work, which would be useful for ensuring professional development is well-targeted. Our survey work tells us that organisational management skills, including financial literacy, need to be fine-tuned for some moving from headship to chief executive.

Governing boards themselves have a role in ensuring senior executive leaders are developed. In research carried out for the DfE by NFER in October 2020, 89% of executive leaders agree that they feel adequately supported and 91% agree that they feel adequately challenged and scrutinised by their board. This survey was carried out pre-COVID and NGA's work has shown that since then, relationships between governing boards and senior leaders have tended to become stronger than before. The support provided by boards, especially their chairs, to leaders over this exhausting year has been much appreciated.

It appears that board leadership is fading from the DfE agenda. A good chair of a board is probably the most important of NGA's eight elements of effective governance (a good chair makes sure all the other elements are in place), and our

research has shown just how much time good MAT chairing takes. NGA has been leading the work in the sector to change the culture of succession planning with some success, but as recruitment to the board becomes more difficult, this is a precarious situation which requires more attention than is currently receives. Instead DfE investment in this area has been removed for 2021/22 with no indication of the manner or size of a future contribution. There would never be a wise time to take this step, but now with increasing challenges this could appear to be bordering on the cavalier and certainly to be taking for granted those volunteers who are giving so much to trusts.

Debate five: how can we promote the value of skilled governance professionals?

The value of a skilled governance professional cannot be overestimated and is another of our eight elements of effective governance. As well as ensuring good governance, it also makes the volunteers' role manageable. Many MATs have found that investing in a governance expert who can also act as compliance manager and company secretary is money well spent. On the other hand, trusts where governance goes wrong often do not have a dedicated and specialised governance professional. Routes into this career have been somewhat limited and would benefit from structure, recognition and accreditation.

Guidance – both the DfE's Governance Handbook and the latest edition of the AFH – makes it clear that a governance professional is required to provide guidance to ensure the board works in compliance with the legal and regulatory framework, and advice on procedural matters relating to operation of the board as well as administrative support. The DfE has recently set up a working group to explore this issue with the governance community which is very welcome. However, those outside what others consider to be a rather niche world have yet to understand the importance of this role, and some other routes are needed to convince the MAT sector that this a priority for ensuring strong and effective governance across their trust.



Conclusion – Visible governance in MATs?

At the core of this report is a positive message: MAT governance has evolved, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience of virtual governance will provide some longer-term advantages for doing business. The ability of the MAT's chair and vice chair to meet regularly with the chairs and vice chairs of academy committees has been game-changing for many who had not been doing this face-to-face before the pandemic. As a post-COVID-19 era beckons, the community perspective seen through the eyes of those governing locally will be sought by the board of trustees assessing the longer-term implications for their pupils and their schools.

There has also been a growing level of acceptance that the expansion of the MAT system should not mean that schools are run increasingly by powerful distant groups alienated from communities. As MATs seek demonstrable accountability to the public they serve, they need to understand and engage with those communities, being rooted in them with a clear sense of place, giving a voice to communities, parents, and pupils. The push for more intelligent accountability, wrapped in the roar of stakeholder voice, feels closer now than it has for some time. The pandemic has highlighted how much families and society need well-led and well-governed schools that keep communities going. Schools at the hearts of their communities have offered an assurance, a form of normality and security; and their trusts have supported them to do so.

The relationship between this local tier of governance and the trust board has continued to be widely discussed, but the tide of understanding has turned for the majority of MATs. Encouraging though it is to see how MAT governance is moving forwards in some aspects, there continue to be several areas which need further development. Although all of these can and will be supported by NGA, they also need others to reinforce the good practice, but most importantly the importance of good governance itself.

The future success of the MAT movement relies on building on the wealth of learning from established MATs and adapting it for the coming decade. NGA is a listening organisation, and is well placed to help make this happen. We will further the challenges and debates with our growing MAT membership and with partners. But we also need the DfE – the regulator of

academy trusts – to become more vocal about the requirements of MAT governance as we recover from COVID-19. Not all these discussions can happen behind closed doors; there needs to be a head of steam built up to force the reluctant to improve.

Back in 2019 we asked for more recognition of effective governance being a key foundation for success: as we have said for some time, *'organisations with strong governance do not fail'*. This is repeated endlessly to those of us who already believe this to be the case; but it needs to be called out loud and clear to those who do not. Some MATs remain sluggish in their approach to reviewing governance of the trust - their complacency needs to be challenged.

The purpose of governance in MATs – or indeed any organisation – is to ensure that their mission, their charitable purpose is delivered, and for MATs it is to ensure in young people are provided with the best possible education, so that they can flourish. That means equipping them to take their place as citizens in the local, national and global communities. We hope that in two years' time when we next revisit the state of MAT governance, there will be much more talk about the impact good governance can have on the lives and futures of the pupils in state schools.

Power of governance – recommendations

1. Recommendations for MAT boards of trustees

- Set a culture for equality, diversity and inclusion in order to thrive; setting an example from the top down, acting a catalyst for achieving inclusion at all levels. As part of this, under-representation at board level should be challenged.
- Carefully consider the role applied to the local tier, named appropriately, cherishing its influence and its independent perspective.
- Build on the possibilities opened up by virtual governance, for example, maintaining the regular meetings of chairs and vice chairs with chairs and vice chairs of their local tier.
- Trust boards need to be outward looking and embrace the benefits of working with the wider sector. This includes MAT boards working closely to support and learn from others in an open and transparent way.
- Adopt the good practice of annual self-review annually and at least three yearly external review of governance.
- Recognise the limited and distinct role of members as the guardians of the governance of the trust – considering this role carefully using NGA's latest iteration of Academy Trusts: the role of members. This includes the expectation of members holding an AGM where they ask to see the annual review of governance.

- Invest in and give more prominence to a governance professional.

2. Recommendations for multi academy trusts

- Place community at the heart of your vision and values for the trust as a whole; the move to a MAT need not come at the cost of removing local connectedness and engagement.
- Community perspective as seen through the eyes of the local tier should be harnessed in the post COVID-19 era to help assess and monitor the longer-term implications of the pandemic at school level.
- Continue to prioritise spending time establishing and communicating organisational identity and value with stakeholders, taking the opportunity to listen at the same time.
- Build on the positive collaboration achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing to collaborate with other trusts, local authorities and others across the sector to enhance the level support at the heart of an expanding and improving the system.

3. Recommendations for the sector

- Governance must be accepted by all as a foundation underpinning the health and future success of the education sector – getting governance right is the key to ensuring a MAT system that is sustained and delivers in the interest of children.
- Debates need to be embraced on the big questions arising from our report:
 - too much power in the hands of too few people?
 - is the local tier being used effectively and meaningfully?
 - when is big just too big?
 - supporting leadership development
 - how can we promote the value of skilled governance professionals?

4. Recommendations for the Department for Education

- Continue to maintain the greater focus on MAT governance in conducting the oversight functions, joining that activity of regional teams with the resources, policy and knowledge developed centrally.
- The DfE's reduction of investment in recruiting, supporting and developing governance volunteers and those who lead boards needs to be reassessed and resurrected as soon as possible.

- Increase the sharing of practice on how trusts are encouraged to grow, and what happens when there are fewer schools looking to join MATs. This may lead to increased emphasis on MAT mergers and careful consideration is needed around the governance and cultural compatibility of those organisations.
- The move to governance through third sector practice should be emphasised and the values of the third sector not underplayed – the promotion of the charity governance code should be considered for the MAT system.
- The DfE should be more robust about the separation of roles, and continue to develop and communicate a clearer distinction between the role of members and trustees, while being open to debating the future of the role of members.
- RSC's should make a commitment to being open to working with more smaller trusts and considering them first as a destination MAT, rather than taking the easier option of the better known MATs.

NGA will:

- Continue to argue vigorously for complete separation of power between governance layers and roles. This includes the removal of executive leaders from academy committees.
- Continue to engage and debate with the DfE and the sector to further develop and improve the lines of accountability offered through the role of members.
- Champion the importance and value of the role of the local tier of governance, working with trusts to promote the levels of influence afforded to the local contributor to MAT governance.
- Facilitate ongoing networking and intelligence throughout the sector on good governance in MATs, seeking to share knowledge and practice to the benefit of all trusts.
- Review the 21 questions for MAT boards to ask themselves.

NGA GOLD and MAT members already receive our induction guides, including Welcome to a Multi Academy Trust, but we are extending the free offer to include an accompanying virtual induction session to help what appears to be a gap in provision.

Twenty one questions



In 2015 NGA developed 21 questions for multi academy trust (MAT) boards adopted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Education Governance to help ensure that their governance structure is fit for purpose. They should be used to support MAT board self-review against these key areas:

- Vision, ethos and strategy
- Governance structures
- Trustee board effectiveness and conduct
- Engagement
- Effective accountability of the executive leadership
- Impact on outcomes for pupils

Allocating sufficient time to the process of self-review and reflection is key to any MAT boards ensuring good governance. These questions should form an integral part of the board's review process which is reported to the members at an AGM.

nga.org.uk/21questions



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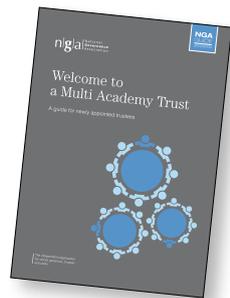


NGA resources

As the leading organisation representing governance in the state-school sector, NGA can play a key role in helping MATs overcome the challenges identified in this report. If you are a trustee, academy committee/council member, or executive leader and are looking for some resources to help you overcome challenges in your MAT, NGA can help.

NGA guides

NGA's *Welcome to a Multi Academy Trust* offers a detailed overview of what it means to be a trustee or academy committee/council member in a MAT. It is useful as both an induction guide for new volunteers and a reference guide for those who are not new to MAT governance.



NGA also offers *The Chair's Handbook* and *Welcome to Governance* to help those governing understand their roles and responsibilities.

Details of how to purchase NGA guides can be found here: nga.org.uk/publications

Knowledge Centre

NGA has a wealth of resources to help MATs overcome the challenges identified in this report. These are all available to NGA members at nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre. For resources specifically aimed at MATs, visit: nga.org.uk/MATs

- Taking the next step – considering joining or forming a group of schools: Written in partnership with the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and Browne Jacobson, this guide is an update of the *Forming or Joining a group of schools* and aims to help those governing and senior leaders of standalone schools stay in control of their destiny. As opposed to previous versions, this guide includes more information on mergers between MATs. nga.org.uk/taking-the-next-step
- Members of the academy trust: this resource provides an in-depth introduction to the role of members in a trust, outlining the purpose of the members, their roles and legal duties. nga.org.uk/matmembers
- Model schemes of delegation: to help those governing in MATs decide the best governance structure for their school/s in order to be effective. The models also suggest what to delegate and to whom, with a number of given scenarios. nga.org.uk/matschemes

- Executive pay: this comprehensive guide is available to help support governing boards of academy trusts in setting a framework for the pay of their executive leader. nga.org.uk/executive-pay
- Trustee role description and person specification: this resource will help trustees understand their duties, roles and responsibilities. nga.org.uk/trusteeole
- Process for changing articles of association: getting the articles of association right is a key part of gaining clarity around roles and responsibilities. The process for doing so is explained in this guidance. nga.org.uk/changing-articles
- Being strategic: A guide for governing boards: getting the MAT's vision and strategy right is a key element of establishing a whole organisation identity. NGA's *Being Strategic* guide can help governing boards get these principles right. nga.org.uk/beingstrategic
- Framework for ethical leadership in education: currently in its pilot phase, this framework provides guidance and resources for those governing to change the culture in their organisation and embed ethical values. nga.org.uk/ethicalleadership
- NGA model skills audit and skills matrix: this document will help MATs ensure that they have the right people, with the right skills and commitment, around the table at a trustee and local level. nga.org.uk/skills-audit

Cannot find an answer to your question or challenge in the Knowledge Centre?

Join NGA as a GOLD member and receive unlimited bespoke confidential, strategic, independent legal, procedural and problem-solving advice on any topic revolving around governance in your MAT. NGA's service is also available to academy committees/councils at an academy level. Visit the NGA website to find out more: nga.org.uk/GOLDline



Research

NGA has produced a number of research reports which have illuminated the roles and responsibilities in MATs and the challenges and benefits associated with the MAT system. This includes:

- **Executive headships** (2016): exploring the role of the executive headteacher. This is useful for MATs looking to get their executive management structure right.
- **NGA's MAT case studies series** (2018-19): these detailed case studies explore the lessons learned by five MATs in their journey since inception.
- **The time it takes to chair a multi academy trust** (2019): this research is used to provide evidence of the time it takes to chair a group of schools and, if possible, identify strategies which chairs can employ to carry out their role more efficiently.
- **Moving MATs forward: the power of governance** is a comprehensive report which assessed the context, oversight and practice of MAT governance in 2019 and provided recommendations for improvement to those governing MATs and policymakers.

The entire suite of NGA research can be found at: nga.org.uk/research

MAT Governance Network

NGA's MAT Governance Network brings together MATs of all shapes and sizes to share experiences and best practice. The network is open to those governing at all levels within trusts, and benefits from the diverse viewpoints this brings.

NGA Governance Leadership Forums

These forums provide a networking event for those governing and leading schools in similar situations to share their experiences and future plans. For MATs, we have two Forums, one focussing on Trust Boards and one for local academies, giving both a platform to discuss the issues they face.

For more, nga.org.uk/MATs

E-learning and board evaluation

NGA also has a number of tools MATs can use to help them evaluate their own performance, including:

- **The All Party Parliamentary Group on governance's (APPG's) '21 questions a MAT board should ask itself'**. This resource consists of 21 questions designed to help ensure that governance structures in MATs are fit for purpose: nga.org.uk/21questions
- **NGA's online self-evaluation tools**, including the MAT board appraisal evaluation package: nga.org.uk/appraisals

NGA's bespoke consultancy and professional development service

NGA undertakes external reviews of governance of trusts of all sizes and context. A NGA review begins with building good relationships with the board and senior leaders, and aims for an astute diagnosis of the areas where improvement should be focused and realistic recommendations that will rapidly effect change. Our professional development service extends to offering training bespoke to your trust's governance structure, facilitated sessions on developing your vision and strategy and access to governance expertise on an ongoing basis. Contact consultancy@nga.org.uk for an introductory conversation.

NGA's bespoke consultancy service offers MATs a range of products to suit their needs, from external reviews of governance to sessions revolving around vision and strategy. For MATs, the NGA external review of governance includes: astute diagnosis of the areas where improvement should be focused; skilled workshop style development for the board and senior leaders; realistic recommendations that can form the basis of an action plan for the coming year; and the option to book a progress review after two or three terms. For more, visit: nga.org.uk/consultancy



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- copies of Governing Matters magazine to the home of every trustee
- access to members' only content in our online Knowledge Centre containing a wealth of governance resources
- a weekly e-newsletter featuring the latest education news and policy updates
- free places at our conferences and events, including the Summer and Annual Conferences, MAT Governance Network, Clerks' and SEND Networks
- NEW: free places at governance leadership forums
- access to NGA's webinar and podcast series
- representation at a national level through our lobbying and campaign work

Benefits for your academies

NGA membership provides your academies' local governing committees with access to a wealth of governance resources and tools. Trust boards can choose between Standard or GOLD membership for your academies' local governing committees:

GOLD committee membership	STANDARD committee membership
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Access to confidential, independent legal, procedural and problem-solving governance advice through our GOLDline advice service■ A free Chair's Handbook, complimentary copies of Welcome to Governance for all new governors/trustees and discounts on additional NGA guides■ NEW: induction sessions for new governors/trustees■ Copies of Governing Matters magazine to the home of every academy committee member and a copy to the academy■ Access to the online Knowledge Centre■ Members' e-newsletter■ Free places at our conferences and events, including the Summer and Annual Conferences, MAT Governance Network, Clerks' and SEND Networks■ NEW: free places at governance leadership forums■ Access to NGA's webinar and podcast series■ Representation at a national level through our lobbying and campaign work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ NGA guides available at a discounted rate■ Copies of Governing Matters magazine to the home of three academy committee members and a copy to the academy■ Access to the online Knowledge Centre■ Members' e-newsletter■ Free places at our conferences and events, including the Summer and Annual Conferences, Clerks' and SEND Networks■ NEW: free places at governance leadership forums■ Access to NGA's webinar and podcast series■ Representation at a national level through our lobbying and campaign work

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