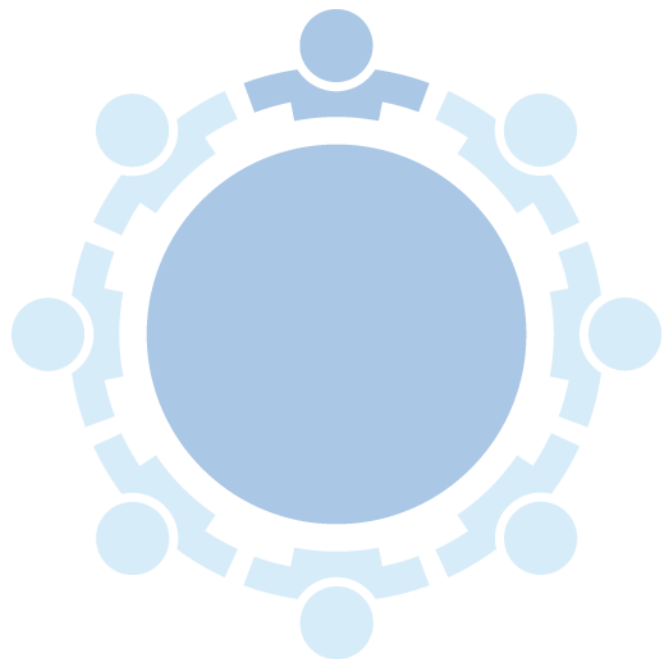


Multi-academy trusts: lessons learned in their journey so far

The Spring Partnership Trust

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About this case study

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

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

To carry out this case study, NGA visited The Spring Partnership Trust (TSPT) and interviewed the chair of trustees, the chief executive, the trust services manager, the chief finance officer and two local academy committee chairs. In addition, NGA also analysed key documents (including trust board minutes and the scheme of delegation) to supplement the data from the interviews.

NGA would like to thank the TSPT board of trustees, executive leaders and local committee members who gave up their time to speak to us about their MAT.

National Governance Association

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

T: 0121 237 3780 | E: governorhq@nga.org.uk | www.nga.org.uk

Creation and development of The Spring Partnership Trust (TSPT)

The Spring Partnership Trust (TSPT) is a multi-academy trust (MAT) situated in Bromley, Kent. The trust was founded in 2014 when Hayes Primary School, an Ofsted rated 'good' Primary School with 650 pupils, sponsored St Mary Cray Primary School (subsequently, St Mary Cray Primary Academy), an Ofsted 'requires improvement' school with 225 pupils. The trust expanded in September 2016 to incorporate Castlecombe Primary School and Dorset Road Infant School, both Ofsted 'good' schools at the time of joining, with 200 and 75 pupils respectively. Very shortly after, in December 2016, a further two Ofsted rated 'good' schools - Midfield Primary School (400 pupils) and Leeson's Primary school (300 pupils) - were incorporated into the trust. Today the trust consists of six infant/primary Schools, all located within a 20-30 minute drive of one another, with a combined roll of approximately 1,850 students. In terms of governance, the trust board currently consists of ten trustees – one of whom is the chief executive officer (CEO). Each school has its own local committee which assists the CEO in holding the headteacher to account and feeds information up to the trust board.



Timeline of creation and development

Formation of the MAT

- 2010
- Hayes Primary School in Bromley, Kent appoint a new headteacher, who has a fresh and clear vision for the school, following the retirement of the predecessor.
- Matching trends in the local area, Hayes become one of the first primary schools in England to convert to academy status in 2011. At the same time, the headteacher and governors identify that the school could perform better and instigate improvements.
- Hayes is judged 'good' by Ofsted in 2013. The governing board recognise that the school has a number of excellent potential leaders whom they wished to retain and use to support schools in considerably more challenging areas of Bromley. This is part of the trust's aim to turn the vision of 'all pupils having an excellent education' into a reality beyond Hayes.
- Looking to retain staff and to make a difference in the wider education system, the Hayes governing board agree to their headteacher working at a local primary school in need of improvement, St Mary Cray, as an executive headteacher for a few days per week.
- 2014
- The headteacher informs the Hayes governing board of the challenges she faces in her new role as executive headteacher of St Mary Cray. In particular, St Mary Cray has a much higher level of disadvantaged pupils than Hayes. Spurred on by a moral imperative, Hayes develop a vision to support as many children as possible in the local area.

Rapid expansion

- 2014
- Looking to offer St Mary Cray more sustainable support, the Hayes governing board agree to sponsor St Mary Cray (subject to due diligence) and establish The Spring Partnership Trust (TSPT) in consultation with Bromley local authority. The headteacher of Hayes who is also the executive headteacher of St Mary Cray becomes the lead executive of the new MAT.
- Although TSPT had no immediate plans to expand beyond two schools, the trust soon realises that a two school MAT will struggle to sustain an additional tier of executive leadership above the headteachers of each school.
- In line with TSPT's vision, the lead executive offers her support to two other local schools, Castlecombe Primary and Dorset Road Infant School. In Castlecombe this is in an advisory and school improvement capacity and, in Dorset Road, as a part-time acting headteacher.



The lead executive of TSPT brokers an arrangement with the local authority for Castlecombe to be expanded in years 3 to 6. This is to alleviate concerns of a lack of local school places for pupils leaving the nearby Dorset Road at the end of KS1. Those governing at Castlecombe and Dorset Road look to formalise their relationship with TSPT by joining the MAT.

At the same time, due to most of the primaries in Bromley converting to academy status, several stand-alone primaries are also looking to join a MAT.

After listening to a presentation from the lead executive of TSPT, and hearing reports within the local community, those governing at Leasons and Midfield approach TSPT to consider joining. In particular, governors at Leasons and Midfield are attracted to the vision propagated by the trust.

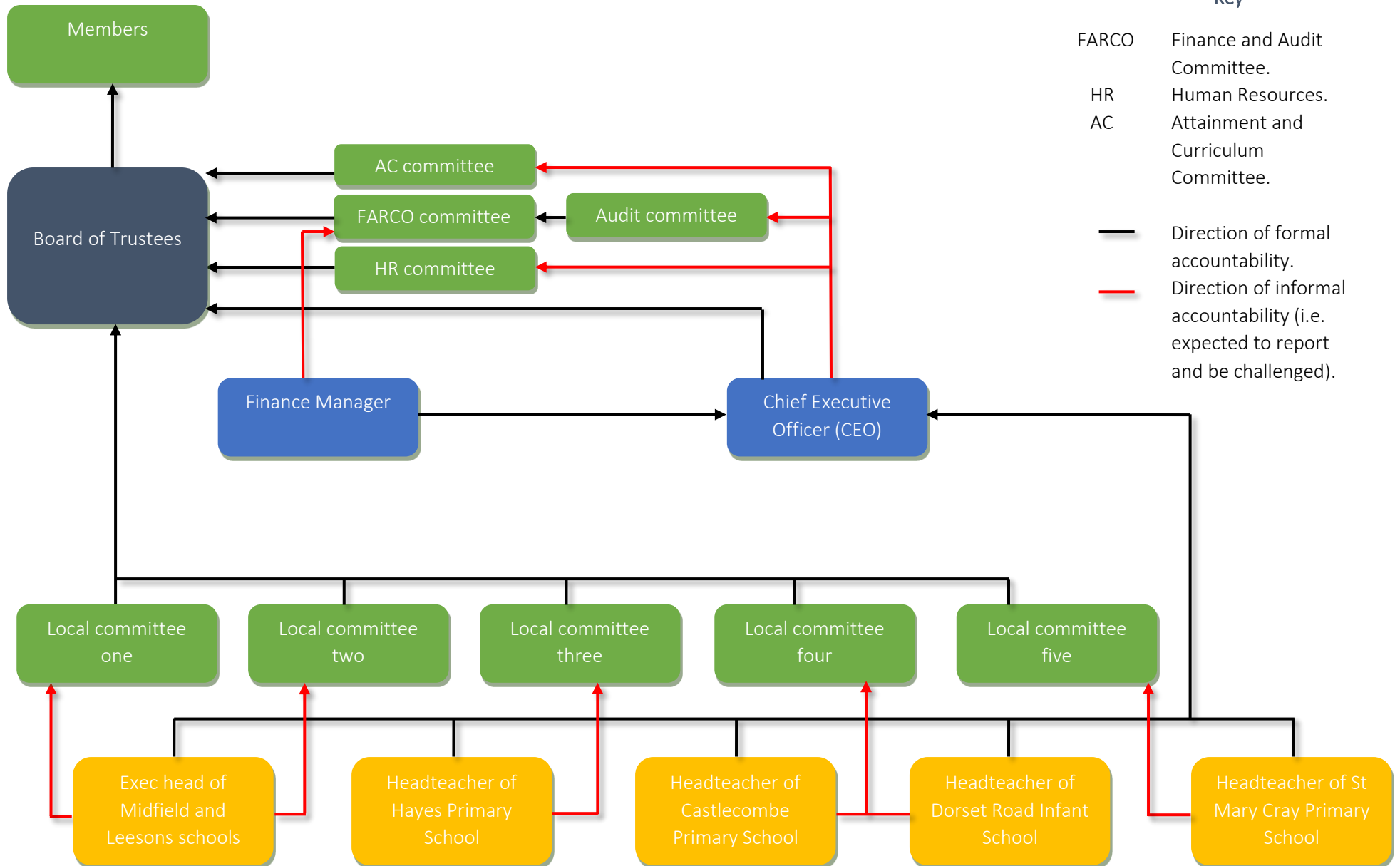
2016 After a lengthy due-diligence process, Castlecombe, Dorset Road, Leasons and Midfield join TSPT.

Looking to the future

2017 Going forward, TSPT are looking to expand to between 10 and 15 schools by 2020. In line with their vision, they would prefer to expand in the Bromley area but are open to branching out further. If this occurs, those governing would establish a second 'governance hub' to provide more localised support.

Current TSPT governance structure

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





The MAT's governance structure consists of members, the board of trustees (referred to as Directors by the trust) which holds the executive tier to account, and local committees at school level. There are four committees of the board of trustees: the Finance and Resources Committee (FARCO), the Achievement and Curriculum (AC) Committee, the Audit Committee, and the Human Resources (HR) Committee.

The use of the term 'local committees' rather than 'local governing bodies' is very much a deliberate decision on the part of TSPT, recognising the fact that the committees do not have the same legal responsibilities as a governing body in a maintained school.

Lessons learned

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

Lesson one: Changes to the scheme of delegation are part of the process of growth

When the MAT was formed, the trust board initially chose a fairly centralised governance structure with little delegation at local level. This reflected the size of the trust, as the trustees felt able to maintain a close overview of the initial two schools, as well as complementing the dynamics of the initial partnership (with one high performing school and one school in need of support). As the trust expanded by taking on higher performing schools an increasingly devolved structure developed, particularly with regard to academy performance, curriculum, and teaching, though many decision-making functions remain with the trust board.

From the outset, the trust board has viewed the scheme of delegation (SoD) as an evolving document:

'For a period it used to appear at every single trust board meeting, because there would be some change or another. That was a positive thing... being able to be flexible about that, and not dogmatic, was really important.'

The chair of trustees and the chairs of the local committees hold termly 'chairs' meetings' which provide, amongst other things, an opportunity to review and make updates to the SoD based on experience of what is working well and what problems have occurred. This is not a finished process, with it being recognised that a SoD is a working document that continues to be reviewed.

Initially, trustees were more comfortable that decision-making in local committees should be limited (i.e. closer to the NGA's academy council model) and, as so often is the case with developing MATs, the trust recognised that the questions over the actual role of the local committees has given rise to uncertainty at various points.

'We definitely went through a patch where people in the local committee were saying, if it's really just a talking shop, or it doesn't have any power, what is the point in me volunteering to do this role?'

As the trust has developed, and in response to this uncertainty, the trustees have been comfortable with delegating more authority to local committees (broadly similar to NGA's academy committee model).

Lesson two: Communication between the layers of governance is challenging but crucial

Ensuring effective communication between the layers of governance has become more complex as the trust has grown. A key part of the transition from being a two school MAT to a six school MAT has been the



evolving nature of the trustee role. Several of the trustees had been on the journey from a single school governing board through to governing six schools; this has meant learning to let go of some of the more detailed monitoring of school life. Understandably, this has not always been a comfortable process but was acknowledged as a necessary part of the trust board moving towards a more strategic way of working.

'Part of the whole journey has involved a cultural mind-set shift for the [trustees], where the [trustees] have been used to knowing everything about two schools and have been reluctant to let go of that level of knowledge of schools...'

Interviewees identified the way the board of trustees communicates with and oversees the work of the local committees as a work in progress. Recently, trustees had been named as respective 'links' to local committees and a dialogue with local chairs is maintained through the regular 'chairs' meetings' and also regular one-to-one meetings between the chair of trustees and local academy committee chairs. Despite these meetings, it is acknowledged that effective communication in the MAT relies on the principle of trust between those involved.

Local committee meeting papers are shared with the central trust team, with these papers also shared with the relevant trust-level committees. Minutes of these committees are also shared and fed back through local committee meetings.

The MAT has made a concerted effort to standardise the work of the local committees so that the trust board, finance and resources committee, and achievement and curriculum committee, receive information at the right point and in a consistent format. The trust board organise a business planner (in effect a comprehensive pro-forma agenda, for all committees, trust wide) and calendar of meetings, which coordinates all layers of governance in the MAT.

Where there has been continuity of individuals between the local committee and the predecessor school's governing body, this can present an additional challenge, with one chair of a local committee remarking that:

'It's just actually dawned on me that what I have been trying to do is fit the Spring agenda into our agenda, and actually what I should have been doing is chucking ours out and doing it the other way around.'

Lesson three: Moving from a 'my school' mind-set to a single organisation mind-set can be challenging

The management of the trust's reserves has provided an example of the need to balance the expectations of individual schools with the wellbeing of the trust as a whole. Overall, the six schools have between them unrestricted reserves of £900,000 and, whilst legally owned by TSPT (as the only corporate legal entity), schools tend to have an expectation that the unrestricted reserves which they brought into the trust should be used for them exclusively.

'[When they join the trust] the schools still, to some degree, think, "it's my money" – but we're working on that with the idea that the more we pool the money together ... the more economies of scales we [can] achieve [and] the bigger projects we can do per school'.

Whilst it would have been easier to amalgamate unrestricted reserves and administer them from the centre, this would have been unpopular with the individual schools, something the trust board feel they need to respect. However, in order that schools may benefit from bulk purchases and cost savings on trust wide projects, schools have agreed to a 'per capita' levy on their unrestricted reserves (on top of their 'top slice'



contributions) to fund various projects that will benefit all. With hindsight, the trust feels that at the time of the formation of the trust it would not have been possible to insist that joining schools' unrestricted reserves come under the sole aegis of the trust board. The trust believe that this would have acted as a disincentive for some schools to join the trust; for the most part, the formation of the trust was a collaborative venture. This issue has been broached at trust level, with a general consensus that TSPT needs to be clearer with new schools joining the MAT that their unrestricted reserves may, depending on the circumstances, be pooled together into a collective budget. Trustees have recently approved a new reserves policy to clarify the issue.

Aside from issues around school reserves, an important issue has been to encourage and support schools to work together (e.g. through joint planning and staff continuing professional development). On the one hand this is to promote the benefits of working together (e.g. sharing of expertise and 'cross fertilisation' of knowledge) and, on the other hand, to avoid schools feeling isolated within the trust. The learning point here has been that this takes time. First, simple human relationships have to be established between staff at different schools where, initially, there were none. Then processes and systems need to be developed to enable these staff to work together. Very often, this needs to be driven by a middle leader who is looking to demonstrate leadership in readiness for a senior leadership role.

However, not every middle leader either can or wants to take on this new way of working. In addition, staff in individual schools have been naturally inclined to support their school over supporting other schools. The trust has spent time developing an ethos of 'us' rather than 'them and us' throughout the trust and continues to do so.

Related to this was an initial concern that Hayes (which was the first school in the trust) would be seen as the 'lead school' with preference over the others. However, this concern has faded over time, partly because the trustees were drawn from a wide group of stakeholders and not just from Hayes.

The position of Hayes and the experience of its staff and wider community has needed some attention. As the founding school, initially in the position of sponsor for St Mary Cray, it was fully accepted at the outset that Hayes would be giving something of itself to another school in severe difficulty. As such, Hayes staff have been used to supporting other schools in the trust while Hayes itself has maintained its standards. As one interviewee outlined, although Hayes has had to offer teaching staff to other schools, they should also be proud that they have '*seriously supported two schools [St Mary Cray and later Castlecombe] which were in... trouble. One's now very, very good and the other's improving*'. However, as time has gone on, Hayes has become more of an equal partner with other schools and less of a sponsor school. As a result, it has become important that Hayes too feels that it gets benefit from the trust, rather than being the school that simply 'gives'.

Another key issue has been developing an understanding that, rather than the trust being a separate entity operating apart from the schools, all six schools are encouraged to proactively collaborate, share and lead for the benefit of all. In a very real way, the schools are the trust.

Lesson four: As a MAT grows, the skills and experience required on the board of trustees will change

There was a feeling that, as the MAT has grown, there has been a shift in the skills that the board of trustees need and that this would continue as the trust expands further. The current chair suggested that recruiting people with experience of governing or managing larger organisations would be a priority moving forward.

'We [will] need people who [have] had big jobs, because they understand the strategic issues involved and can address the whole organisation from that perspective.'



The extent to which existing trustees had felt comfortable with the growth of the organisation had varied, with some trustees finding the increased scope of the role more challenging.

The chair of the trust board is currently committing a significant amount of time to the role, reporting that he spends around 20 hours a week on governance related work. This includes up to 12 visits to the schools every term (two to each of the six schools) which is regarded as critical to developing a sense of cohesion and 'belonging' amongst the individual schools and the centre. While this signals a strong commitment to knowing the schools and to what the chair described as his '*ambassadorial role*', it is recognised that this is not a sustainable way of working in the long term. The chair conceded that it would not be possible to sustain this frequency of visits if the trust continues to expand. Ensuring that visits are strategic (including not duplicating the work of the executive team), sharing the responsibility with others on the board, and utilising good relationships with local committees will be important as the trust matures.

Lesson five: Accept some risk associated with expanding a MAT regardless of due diligence

Governing boards ultimately need to accept that there is an element of risk associated with joining or forming a MAT, or incorporating a new school into an existing MAT, that cannot be offset completely by due diligence. Due diligence is, however, a vital part of the joining process.

Given that the headteacher of Hayes worked at St Mary Cray for a few days per week before the 'sponsor' arrangement in 2014, this made the due diligence process easier, with the headteacher already having a good understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and potential problems with the school. Nevertheless, those governing still undertook a rigorous due diligence process when Hayes 'sponsored' St Mary Cray. As part of the due diligence process, trustees looked at health and safety, finance, safeguarding, buildings and educational attainment at St Mary Cray. The governing board also carried out parent and staff consultations.

The academic due diligence was initially done by the executive headteacher, with link governors for each aspect of academic achievement who issued reports to the governing board. The trust also negotiated heavily with the local authority around the state of the building and, in terms of external support, Hayes used a firm of solicitors to help them with the process, bringing external legal oversight to the process (including adapting the solicitor's own due diligence questionnaire).

When the trust expanded from two to six schools, a more rigorous due diligence process was completed with more emphasis placed on governance. Delving into governance can often reveal where the issues in the school lie. Getting to grips with who those governing are and how they work is therefore vital, even though the trust will ultimately be 'taking over' governance of all the schools that join. Moving from two to six schools, due diligence was led by an 'expansion group working party', with individual trustees responsible for specific areas of due diligence.

One of the key messages from TSPT was that, regardless of the amount of due diligence completed, it is still not always possible to get to the bottom of all of the problems in a school until it is incorporated into the trust.

'I think that no due diligence can ever be thorough enough. The more you know, the more you can then get a completely full picture of the school that you're taking in. But, at the same time, no matter how thorough it is ... you can't get the full picture until you get to know the people and the dynamic and the "what's actually going on?"'

Once all six schools were established in the trust, and the CEO and chief finance officer (CFO) could 'get into' schools properly, a range of issues, some serious, became apparent. In hindsight, while the '*warning bells*



were there, but we didn't respond to them at the time' and other imperatives drove the expansion. The chair suggests that a learning point might be to recognise the need for excess capacity within the trust to deal with time-consuming and expensive difficulties that might emerge following any expansion.

Lesson six: Do not underestimate the importance of having a clear vision

Each MAT will have a different idea of what it considers to be a 'viable' size. However, starting out with two schools, and a combined roll of 875 pupils, trustees and executive leaders at TSPT felt they needed to grow in order to increase the capacity of the central team and do so quickly. One of the keys to their expansion was having a vision to which schools could 'buy-in' with confidence. There can be no doubt that investing in the vision and strategy paid dividends in terms of attracting new schools. The chair of Midfield local committee, who was also chair of governors at Midfield before her school joined the trust, related that the governing board had approached a number of other partners before deciding upon TSPT. One of the main reasons why Midfield governors chose TSPT, the chair outlined, was because the vision was simple, aspirational and, above all, flexible – giving wide scope for potential partners to 'buy-in' to the aims of the organisation.

Lesson seven: There needs to be one 'executive leader' and the role changes as the MAT grows

TSPT has learned that managing expectations is tough. The interviewees noted the importance of being clear from the beginning what new schools could expect from the central team and vice versa. On the one hand, the interviewees noted the importance of working with, rather than against, the schools in the trust through regular headteacher meetings. They also stressed the importance of communication between the trust board and local committees.

This aside, one of the most important things is to make it clear from the beginning that there is a hierarchy within the MAT; the headteachers of TSPT schools are answerable to the CEO and the trust board is accountable for all the schools and the performance of the trust as a whole. Indeed, Hayes had prior experience of being part of a large 'umbrella trust' (registered charitable companies set up to provide school improvement or support, but not under formal cross school governance arrangement) where there was insufficient authority at the centre to effect meaningful change and thus were determined to avoid this in the new MAT.

'This idea that there was one accountable lead was something that we decided on very early on and had stuck to, and I think it's absolutely right. Loose collectives don't work'.

Being clear about who is in charge is vital to avoid a potential impasse over certain issues. As outlined by TSPT interviewees, if there are any issues which cannot be resolved by mutual agreement, the decision ultimately rests with the CEO and/or trust board.

The role of the executive leader has changed significantly as the MAT has grown from two to six schools, and has brought considerable new opportunities and challenges. Before the trust was formed, the current CEO was the headteacher of Hayes, before becoming the executive headteacher of Hayes and St Mary Cray, and then, finally, the CEO of six schools. This later change occurred so that the CEO could take a more strategic role while additional staff were recruited to add capacity to the central team. These additional appointments were designed to absorb day-to-day operational management which was taking up too much of the CEO's time.

Today, the CEO's work revolves around:

1. Line managing headteachers in each of the schools within the MAT.
2. Acting as an ambassador for the trust and forging relationships in the local community.



3. Brokering school improvement within the trust and intervening in or supporting schools that need additional help.
4. Working with the board of trustees to steer the trust in the right direction.

Trustees, especially the chair, have provided more support to the trust than would normally be expected of those governing. This has been to support the organisation in its journey from being a single school to a broader 'educational business' requiring a full range of business skills.

Lesson eight: Reasons for growth can change as a MAT develops

Once Hayes and St Mary Cray joined to form the trust, the trustees invested time in developing a coherent strategy and vision for the future, built around moral purpose and the desire to support as many children as possible to realise their potential.

Trustees acknowledged that the headteacher of Hayes (now CEO of TSPT) had been the early driving force behind academisation and indeed the creation of the MAT, the latter particularly on the back of her experience supporting a school in trouble. Once the MAT was created, growth from two to six schools was seen as both a necessity and a strategic decision linked to the trust's vision. It was the view of both trustees and senior leaders that a small, two school MAT was simply unsustainable in the long term. Yet the trust was still prepared to take on more challenging schools that other trusts had not.

'Our focus is on every individual child reaching their personal aspirations and academic goals through appropriate challenge and a broad range of tailored opportunities in the wider curriculum'.

The initial two schools had different strategic priorities, which required trustees to work alongside local committee members to formulate a coherent approach across the whole trust. In March 2016, the trust board set up a series of 'THINK' meetings to consolidate the strategic plans across the trust. In addition, trustees directed an expansion group working party to *'consider the content of both a trust moral statement and vision statement'*. This involves being clear about what being in the MAT entails and how a school looking to join the organisation would benefit.

In the initial years of MAT growth, the central team at TSPT found itself in a precarious position. With many of the roles growing out of leadership positions within Hayes, there were some initial fears that, unless the trust expanded, these roles would not be sustainable. Reflecting on the development of her role, the CEO of TSPT outlined that:

'I knew that I'd be out of a job within 18 months if I didn't bring in more schools, because two schools alone can't support another leader - we were very careful not to overpay anybody [at trust level], we all stayed on the same salaries for that period of time'.

Today, the central team finds itself in a more sustainable position, supported by a 7% 'top-slice' from each school's yearly general annual grant (GAG).

Lesson nine: It is possible to achieve benefits in terms of school improvement, staffing and financial efficiency

Governance and accountability

Several interviewees commented that the school improvement services provided by the MAT add value to the schools. This included providing expert advice and challenge to drive school improvement and to help schools achieve the best Ofsted outcome. Facilitating best practice across the trust has also been of key importance:



'You get better by working with other people, and seeing what other people are doing, and sharing.'

The trust has made a number of tough decisions including disbanding a local committee following an assessment by Ofsted that it had not held the previous headteacher to account. The local committee was replaced by an 'interim board' made up of trustees. This is distinct from an interim executive board (IEB) which is a statutory form of intervention in maintained schools. These boards do not take on executive functions in the way that traditional IEBs do. The terms of reference for the interim board were '*much wider and more encompassing*' than those of a normal local committee and, as all those involved were also on the trust board, it can be more properly understood as an extension of the trust board. When the interviews for this case study were conducted in December 2017, the interim board was in the process of transitioning back into a normal local committee, with new volunteers being recruited. The level of delegation to the local committee was once again the same as in other schools in the MAT.

In another case, where the trust and the school in question felt governance was in need of additional support, two trustees volunteered to sit on the local committee in order to strengthen it until further recruitment could be undertaken.

As well as 'positive' interventions such as supporting schools to improve outcomes, the trust (through the CEO) has also ensured that all staff are held properly accountable. There have been a number of occasions when schools (and/or the original governing bodies) have not, prior to joining the trust, ensured proper accountability. Rigorous accountability, previously avoided, has led to a (small) number of capability type situations.

Driving school improvement

Aside from the formal interventions outlined above, the trust has also provided school improvement support on an ongoing basis. As the CEO is an Ofsted lead inspector, suggestions for improvement are rooted in up-to-date, thorough and wide-ranging experience leading to sustained improvement and rigorous accountability. Prior to Midfield achieving its Ofsted 'outstanding' judgement (it had previously been graded as 'good'), the trust had, ahead of the Ofsted inspection, provided support to help with the school self-evaluation form. The school found this support invaluable and outlined that they '*don't think [they] would have got ... outstanding*' without it. One local committee member related that among the benefits of the school improvement brokered by TSPT was that it had challenged the '*entrenched systems*' that had been in place for a long time.

Similar support was provided at other schools within TSPT, with the trust's biggest 'success story' being the improvements made at St Mary Cray: '*St Mary Cray started ... [as] a really, really difficult local school, and as you will know has recently been graded good by Ofsted, with two areas outstanding ... It's the first time in the history of Ofsted that St Mary Cray have got anything other than requires improvement*'.

Financial and operational improvement

Being larger, the trust has been able to employ an experienced, qualified (FCA) accountant as CFO. This has brought an unprecedented level of rigour and experience to driving improvements in all financial and operating procedures and systems which would not be available to small stand-alone schools. Nevertheless, instigating trust-wide procedures and systems has required considerable attention.

One benefit currently being realised by TSPT centres around achieving financial efficiencies, created through economies of scale and the centralisation of essential services. For TSPT, centralising the finances has already led to a '*40 per cent saving*' in auditing costs for the six schools as well as savings on external contractors.



As previously mentioned, one of the original motivations for setting up TSPT was the ability to provide career progression for teaching staff. The primary benefit of this was to provide opportunities within the organisation for key leaders who may otherwise have left the organisation and moved on. This has been realised across the trust, with senior leaders from Hayes and Midfield both stepping into more senior positions in other schools in the trust.