For Schools & Trusts

Creating connections

An exploration of school collaborations

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Megan Tate, Senior Policy and Research Officer

Insight

A research study by the
National Governance Association

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the governance community for generously sharing their experiences, which have helped shape the conclusions of this report.

With over 80,000 members, NGA is proud to engage with a growing community through surveys, networks, forums, and conversations via our Gold Advice service.

Special thanks to those who contributed case studies to this report. These examples demonstrate successful collaborations and inspiring approaches that we hope others can learn from.

Foreword

Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education, has been clear that the key to "achieving and thriving for all our children, is collaboration", explaining: "I expect all schools, regardless of type, to support each other, to drive a self-improving system". And while the government is yet to set out a clear pathway to enable increased partnership working, NGA's latest insights suggest that this is already happening. Our research also reveals that central support and recognition would help collaboration to flourish in the way our schools, trusts and communities deserve it to.

In recent years, the education landscape in England has undergone significant change. Amid shifting structures, evolving policy priorities, and growing financial pressures, schools have continued to adapt, often by working together. This report shines a light on how schools across the country are collaborating to improve outcomes, strengthen leadership and support the wider system, regardless of government agendas and formal structures. It offers timely insights into how partnerships are working in practice and what more can be done to unlock their potential.

What emerges is a picture of collaboration already happening at scale, not only through formal structures like multi academy trusts (MATs). Many schools and trusts collaborate informally, driven by local relationships, shared values, and a commitment to mutual improvement for the benefit of the local communities they serve. These partnerships, though often less visible in national discourse, provide meaningful professional support, improve the pupil experience, and help schools navigate increasingly complex needs in an increasingly complex system.

NGA members participating in our research were enthusiastic about the many benefits of working together. These included the ability to share expertise and best practice across teaching, leadership and operational management. Unsurprisingly, a key driver for collaboration is cost efficiencies, which boards tell us they have achieved through joint procurement, shared staffing, and resource pooling. Professional development has also become more accessible through peer mentoring and joint training. Importantly, these partnerships have also enhanced opportunities for pupils by broadening curriculum access, improving transitions, and enabling access to specialist facilities they would otherwise not have had.

Schools and trusts have been creative with their connections, and the collaborative activity described is diverse in form and function. But working together also presents some real challenges we cannot ignore; schools often reflected on practical and financial barriers to initiating and sustaining partnerships. Time, capacity, and funding emerged as the most frequently cited barriers, with schools often unable to free up staff capacity or the resources required to fully plan, participate and capitalise on collaborative working. Informal partnerships, while less bureaucratic and flexible than other arrangements, are shown to be particularly vulnerable to changes in leadership or shifts in school priorities.

We also heard that collaboration can be harder to sustain when schools differ significantly in ethos, size, geography, or governance structure. Some NGA members have highlighted an 'us and them' mentality, particularly between schools in different parts of the system such as MATs and local authority-maintained schools. Others noted that inconsistency in engagement, often due to staff turnover or differing leadership approaches, can undermine progress even in long-standing or more formal partnerships.

Despite these challenges, the message from school leaders is clear: collaboration works, and it matters. But to be effective and sustainable, it must be better recognised and supported. Our research revealed a demand for practical tools such as model agreements, case studies, and peer networks, as well as targeted funding to support joint activity. Research participants also called on the Department for Education to formally recognise the value of collaboration outside the MAT model, ensuring that all partnership models are treated with parity and supported through policy as a valid route to improvement.

This report highlights that collaboration – structural or otherwise – is powerful. Across the country, schools are coming together in creative, pragmatic and impactful ways. As education policy continues to evolve, it is vital that these efforts are recognised and protected. We therefore ask that as a minimum, policy is shaped to enable ALL forms of collaboration to have equitable chances to bring about school improvement. The connections schools are making for the good of their communities must be enhanced and enabled through funding or facilitation to create the capacity our members tell us is much needed.

Emma Balchin, NGA Chief Executive

> "This report rightly highlights the importance and value of collaboration between schools, from supporting pupils to access a broader curriculum, to professional development for school staff and making the most of resources in a challenging financial climate."
>
> **Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the Local Government Association's Children and Young People Board**

> "Across England, thousands of educators are quietly working together. Both this report and FED's National Education Futures 2025 Report tell the same story: goodwill is plentiful but the infrastructure that sustains it is thin. 42% of governing boards report depending on informal, goodwill-based arrangements that can unravel the moment a leader moves on."
>
> **Dr Carl Ward, Founder and Chair of the Foundation for Education Development**

Key findings

1. Informal partnerships dominate school collaboration models Most respondents reported that their school collaborates through informal partnerships, including peer-to-peer support and local networks, rather than formal agreements or structures.
2. Local authorities play a key role in enabling and supporting collaboration Respondents frequently cited their local authority (LA) as an enabler of school collaboration. This included coordinating local networks, facilitation and brokerage, and offering services that supported joint working across different structures.
3. Perceived divisions between school types create barriers to partnership Collaboration was reportedly hindered by an 'us and them' mindset, particularly between academies and maintained schools. This contributed to mistrust and hindered joint working.
4. Staff expertise, development and resource management are key collaboration areas The most common collaboration areas were exchanging knowledge and experience, joint professional development, and sharing resources such as facilities, staff, and equipment.
5. Sharing expertise and professional development drives improvement Respondents overwhelmingly highlighted the value of exchanging best practices across teaching, leadership, and operations. Joint training and peer support also made professional development more accessible and cost-effective.
6. Collaboration delivers significant financial benefits and resource optimisation Respondents reported cost savings through joint procurement, shared leadership roles, and pooled funding for services. Partnerships also enabled access to specialist facilities and equipment, reducing duplication and improving resource use.
7. Partnerships enhanced pupil experience while preserving school identity Despite working together, schools were able to retain their individual ethos, while also broadening curriculum access, supporting smoother transitions between phases, and improving enrichment opportunities for pupils.
8. Practical and financial barriers continue to limit collaboration Respondents identified staff capacity and funding constraints as key obstacles. Limited time for planning, difficulties in arranging cover, and a lack of dedicated resources for joint initiatives made it harder for schools to sustain collaborative activity.
9. Diverse contexts and inconsistent engagement can hinder sustained collaboration Differences in size, setting, ethos, and priorities sometimes made aligning goals difficult. Respondents also pointed to inconsistent leadership commitment and staff changes.
10. Collaboration outside MATs requires practical support and funding Respondents expressed a need for tangible support – like model agreements, peer networks, case studies, and funding – to build and sustain effective partnerships. Without these, meaningful collaboration is often difficult to start or maintain.
11. Legitimising diverse collaboration models requires policy alignment and support There is a clear desire among governors and trustees for the DfE to formally support collaboration beyond the MAT model. Respondents also highlighted structural and policy barriers, including misaligned funding cycles, and workforce pressures. Addressing these issues could enable a wider range of collaborative approaches.

Introduction

School-to-school collaboration plays a vital role in driving system-wide improvement. The exchange of professional expertise, effective practice and resources helps to build collective capacity and support sustainable progress. Evidence indicates that when schools work together, they are better positioned to address common challenges, reduce performance variability, and improve outcomes for pupils. Collaboration can also contribute to the professional development of leaders and teachers, encourage innovation, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. As such, strengthening and enabling effective school partnerships should be a central pillar of any national strategy aimed at raising standards and promoting equity.

However, the way in which this vital collaboration takes place has shifted significantly over the past decade, shaped by evolving political priorities and structural reforms within the education system. In 2015, at the beginning of the sole Conservative government, 75% of schools were under LA control and typically relied on those authorities for collaborative support. Since then, building on Michael Gove's academisation agenda, the government has accelerated the expansion of the MAT model. By 2025, only 47% of schools remain under LA oversight (DfE, 2025), while 51% are academies. Of these, 47% operate within MATs, which now act as formal vehicles for collaboration. Meanwhile the remaining 4% are single academy trusts (SATs) and must independently develop their own partnership models. This shift in governance has profoundly altered the landscape of collaboration, positioning MATs as the dominant mechanism while leaving SATs and maintained schools to seek alternative, often less formal, pathways to work together.

This research is therefore timely given recent changes in political leadership and a renewed emphasis on system diversity. While the previous government focused on expanding formal MAT structures, the current administration has indicated a more flexible and agnostic stance. This policy shift presents an important opportunity to explore, understand and elevate alternative models of collaboration that are already demonstrating impact across the sector.

Research scope

While MATs have become the dominant framework for structured, formal collaboration over the past decade, many schools continue to operate outside this model, leveraging alternative methods to communicate and work together. This study draws on a bespoke NGA survey and case study data to explore these alternative approaches, examining their advantages and challenges, and the cultural, logistical, and financial dynamics that influence their adoption.

The study focuses on a range of collaborative practices, including federations, partnerships facilitated by LAs and independent schools, as well as paid-for services. Designed to support decision-makers, LAs, and school leaders, this research aims to enhance understanding of the diverse ways in which schools are already collaborating outside the MAT system. By analysing these approaches, it seeks to inform national strategy and provide practical insights for school leaders pursuing sustainable, non-structural partnerships.

Methodology

This research drew on both primary and secondary sources. The primary research consisted of an NGA-led survey and anecdotal intelligence gathered through NGA events, some of which informed the development of case studies. The secondary research included additional case studies, which were either developed by NGA staff or shared with us with permission for inclusion in this study.

Over 120 individuals engaged in the NGA survey, which was conducted via Smart Survey between 17 January and 18 February 2025.

The survey was self-selecting and promoted through various NGA communication channels, including our newsletter and events. It comprised seven questions designed to gather feedback on school collaboration practices. Most respondents governed in a single maintained school.

School type	No.	%
Single maintained school	95	78%
Federated governing board	16	13%
Single academy trust	11	9%
Total number of respondents	122	

Table 1: What type of governing board do you sit on?

Terminology

Throughout this report we describe different models of collaboration.

Formal collaboration refers to any arrangement in which two or more schools are bound by a legal agreement, a memorandum of understanding (MoU), or a paid service contract. This includes, for example, federated governing bodies or commissioned external support.

Informal collaboration refers to any ongoing or occasional activity where two or more schools share resources, expertise, or professional support without a formal written agreement. These arrangements are typically built on trust, mutual benefit, and shared professional interests, rather than legal or contractual obligation.

What types of collaboration exist?

Categorising collaboration is complicated owing to the true diversity of approaches, as discussed in Effective School Partnerships and Collaboration for School Improvement: A Review of the Evidence (Armstrong, 2015: 3):

> "The landscape of inter-school collaboration is complex, encompassing a wide range of different types of collaborative activity both formal and informal (sometimes a combination of both) and involving schools of different phases and types. Moreover, schools collaborate for a multitude of reasons over different timelines and with varying degrees of success in terms of impact and sustainability."

Despite the nuances, broad collaboration frameworks and definitions have emerged. For example, while focusing on independent–state school partnerships, the Schools Partnership Alliance (2025) helpfully outlines the following types of collaboration.

- **Connection**: a school shares its available resources and facilities for the benefit of one other school.
- **Collaboration**: two or three schools collectively address a shared need or opportunity by combining resources.
- **Alliance**: a collaborative partnership, broader in ambition and scope. Combining diverse resources in an ongoing, multi-school partnership.
- **Integration**: longer term, formal partnerships (some involving non-school stakeholders) to improve the potential for all children to thrive at school and beyond.

Measurable data on collaboration is therefore hard to quantify. The only method of formal collaboration regularly updated by the DfE is federations (made up of two or more schools), with current records showing there to be 483 active federations (Get Information About Schools, 2025). In comparison, there are 1,256 MATs.

NGA (2025) undertook a small survey to explore collaboration methods. Informal methods were the most common amongst respondents (42%). This included being part of informal school partnerships (25%) and other school to school support (17%). Formal methods accounted for 32%, with 15% saying they were part of a federation and 11% having another formal arrangement in place. A further 6% used a paid-for organisation. Respondents also named the LA as a major source of support in their efforts to collaborate (25%) through offering specific services or facilitating other dedicated support.

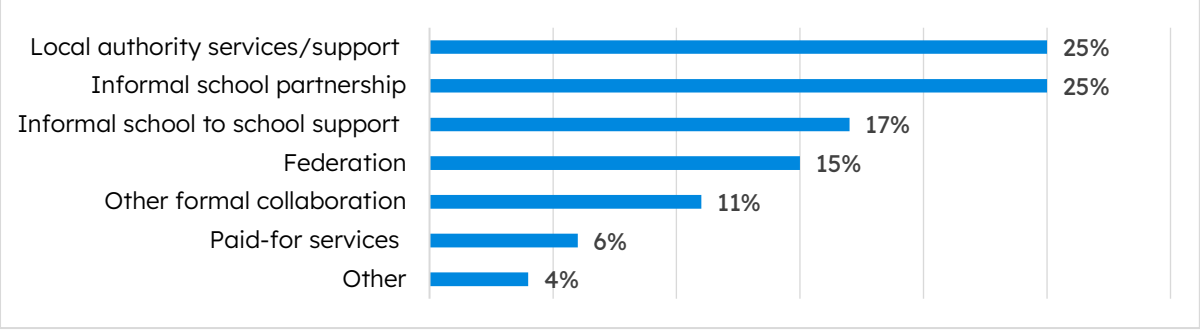

Figure 1: What formal or informal collaboration models does your school participate in?

> "Our school was the driving force for setting up a collaborative for the remaining maintained Primary schools within the borough. Our school also works collaboratively with several local Voluntary Aided schools and a nearby Grammar school."

> "We have created our own informal collaboration model working with local schools (with a range of governance structures) and also nationally, based on our existing professional links and where we have identified areas for focus."

> "We have an agreed collaboration between other secondary schools subject to the terms of an MoU."

Although 93% of schools reported collaborating in some form with others, 7% did not. Respondents were most likely to say that collaboration did not happen due to an 'us and them' mentality both because of different school structures (such as a MAT and an LA) but also differing local reputation. Unsurprisingly, lack of time and lack of capacity were also among the top cited reasons for not collaborating.

Spotlight: Local authorities

Anecdotal information gathered at NGA events has indicated a pattern of LAs exploring a range of collaborative models outside the traditional MAT framework, often through clusters, federations, and informal partnerships. For instance, Norfolk is using zonal working groups that bring together both academies and maintained schools. Sheffield and Oldham are encouraging locality-based collaboration, and in Wandsworth the Wandle Learning Trust is offering teacher and curriculum development services. These models are often seen as positive because they allow for flexible, school-led cooperation without the administrative demands or financial deductions associated with MATs.

Despite the benefits, challenges have also been reported to us. For example, when collaboration is imposed rather than encouraged organically, it has met resistance in some cases. This has been the case in places like Brighton and Hove where federations were introduced with limited early support from staff or governors. In more rural areas such as Cumbria, logistical barriers made joint working more difficult, especially for small or isolated schools. Additionally, competition between schools has in some cases limited the actual or perceived willingness to work together. While a few enforced collaborations have led to some forms of success, many LAs have signaled that the most sustainable partnerships are those that develop naturally.

What are schools collaborating on?

According to our survey, an overwhelming 90% of schools cite sharing knowledge and experience as the biggest element of collaboration. This was closely followed by professional development and sharing resources, each highlighted by 77% of respondents. While curriculum and learning benefits were noted by 29%, fewer schools recognised advantages in other forms of school improvement (15%), economics (15%), or governance support (11%). Though less frequently mentioned, these areas still demonstrate the far-reaching potential of partnership in strengthening schools.

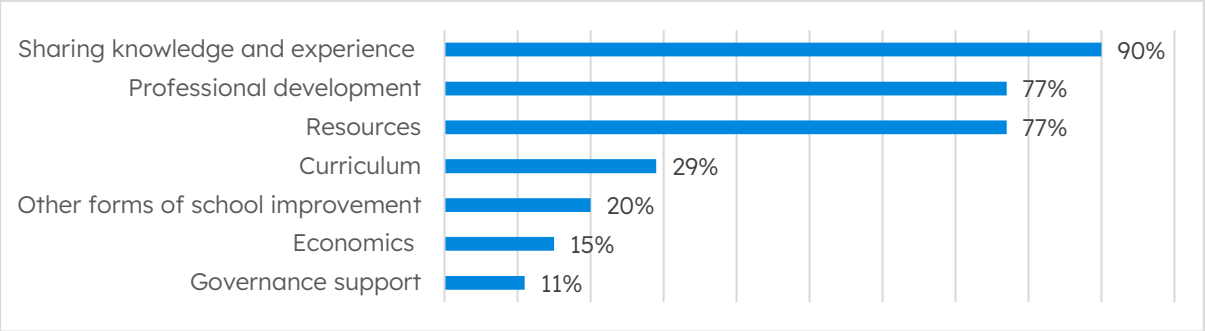

Figure 2: In what ways do you collaborate?

> "We integrate as much as possible whilst allowing each school to retain its own identity. We combine curriculum, professional development, admin, facilities management, health and safety."

> "We [are] a cluster of schools in [the] local area, sharing resources, lead for curriculum subjects, CPD for staff and Educational Psychologist costs."

> "Professional development, support, sharing information and development. Sharing and working on updates e.g. curriculum, policies, systems, assessment. We provide staff and resource support for each other when possible. Share support and training for governors."

> "4 secondary schools, a shared inset day, peer to peer support for departments and behaviour/safeguarding, coaching, support for heads and inter federation competitions and joint days for students starting this year."

Spotlight: Essex local authority

In 2015 the LA in Essex worked with all interested parties to set up collaborative partnerships of schools as part of developing a schools-led improvement system across Essex to avoid possible fragmentation across the system.

10 years on, partnerships remain strong, largely due to the LA embedding them into its school improvement strategy, offering support days to facilitate the partnerships' growing maturity. A robust governance structure, led by an Assistant Director of Education, underpins this approach. School improvement leaders work directly with partnerships to support their development, reinforced by investment in research, training, and events promoting collaboration. Ultimately, strong leadership and clear accountability have driven the partnerships' success.

Today, Essex LA see partnership working as business as usual. It is integral to everything they do. Their current strategy is to mature partnerships into accelerators of school improvement and to enable partnerships to become enablers and drivers of education strategy.

Spotlight: ConnectEd

ConnectEd is a paid collaboration service that supports over 100 member schools. It provides traditional forms of collaboration, including professional development, early career training, regular networking opportunities and safeguarding support.

One of the advantages of this model is the professional management and coordination it offers. Membership includes the facilitation and organisation of events and networks, which is likely to be valuable given that a lack of time and capacity was frequently mentioned as a challenge in our research.

Member schools also access financial initiatives such as the maternity, paternity, and adoption pooling scheme, which helps schools manage one of the most significant costs related to staff absence.

The benefits of collaborative working

Collaboration between schools has delivered a wide range of benefits, strengthening both individual schools and the education system as a whole. Across all forms of collaboration, respondents reported a common set of advantages, including:

- **Sharing of best practice (71%)** – Respondents reported exchanging effective strategies across a wide range of areas, including teaching approaches, leadership, pastoral care, and operational management. Schools learnt from each other's strengths and felt that this enhanced their overall effectiveness and drove continuous improvement.
- **Improved school finances (29%)** – Respondents reported financial gains through collaborative procurement, joint budget planning and pooled funding for shared services (e.g. educational psychologists). These approaches helped reduce operational costs and enabled more efficient use of resources. Some schools also improved cost-effectiveness in staffing by sharing senior leadership roles, such as joint headteachers.
- **Professional development (26%)** – Joint initiatives provided staff teams with opportunities for mentorship, peer support, and other professional development. By pooling together, respondents reported being able to reduce the cost of training and consultancy, making professional development more accessible and cost-effective.
- **Resource sharing (20%)** – Schools reportedly gained access to more facilities, such as science labs, sports grounds, and libraries, which might otherwise be unavailable. Sharing specialist equipment, digital tools, and learning materials also reduced costs and improved efficiency.
- **Better pupil experiences (20%)** – Respondents highlighted improved opportunities for pupils through broader subject choices, access to specialist teaching, and joint enrichment activities. Aligned timetables across partner schools enabled pupils to attend lessons at different sites, while partnerships with independent schools allowed access to facilities such as swimming pools. Collaboration across different educational phases also supported smoother pupil transitions.
- **Governance support (10%)** – Schools benefited from a broader pool of governors, enabling better support for panels and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities.
- **Retain school identity (8%)** – Despite working within collaborative structures, respondents reported that their chosen method of collaboration allowed schools to maintain their unique ethos, values, and community ties. Autonomy in day-to-day operations ensured that individual schools felt their cultures were preserved.

> "The ability to learn from good practice at another school. Having a trusted colleague in a similar role to talk through problems with (especially for Heads and Chairs)."

> "The benefits have been immense in refining and developing our teaching practice, growing the expertise of our staff and creating a better understanding of both the local and national context. We firmly believe, as a Single Academy Trust, this model gives us the flexibility to target and maximise the benefits of collaboration."

> "… main benefits have been to utilise the other schools' governor availability when there hasn't been enough governors available in the school holding the panel

Spotlight: Independent schools

Partnerships between independent and state schools are also creating new opportunities. In recent guidance, the Schools Partnership Alliance (2025) explores collaborations ranging from resource and facility sharing to more formal, structured agreements. Examples include the joint use of swimming pools and joint theatre productions between schools. Schools also collaborate on shared Oxbridge application preparation, helping students navigate the competitive admissions process. In some cases, partnerships have extended to establishing free schools, with an independent school acting as the lead educational partner.

Beyond practical advantages, these partnerships were found to have a profound impact on local communities. By working together, schools can extend their reach, foster a stronger sense of community, and clearly demonstrate their role in shaping local development. Ultimately, such collaborations can enhance the reputation and influence of all involved.

The DfE provide guidance and templates to support these partnerships but "strongly encourage" partner schools to formalise their arrangements in order to clarify the activities and benefits for all involved.

The challenges of collaborative working

Working together across schools offered numerous benefits with respondents recording more of these overall, but it did present some challenges:

- **Planning and preparation (11%) –** Respondents cited logistical challenges in implementing collaboration, particularly around securing staff time and arranging cover. These issues were more common in informal partnerships but were also reported in formal arrangements.
- **Finance (9%)** – Respondents highlighted limited funding as a barrier to collaboration, noting both a lack of dedicated resources for joint working and broader budget pressures that made it difficult for schools to prioritise collaborative activity.
- **Contextual differences (8%)** – Differences in priorities, leadership styles, and school contexts such as size, location, and faith status made it difficult to reach consensus or sustain momentum. These differences affected pupil needs, priorities, and working practices, reportedly making it harder for schools to align goals and build effective partnerships.
- **Resistance to change and varying commitment (8%)** – Establishing and maintaining collaboration was often challenged by inconsistent levels of commitment across schools. Staff turnover, changes in headteachers, and contrasting school cultures also disrupted continuity. While respondents valued collaboration for reducing isolation, sharing expertise, and joint problem-solving, some noted that misaligned goals and limited engagement from senior leaders made it more difficult to build trust and maintain effective working relationships.

Less frequently mentioned reasons also included challenging relationships with the LA, losing partner schools when they join a MAT, and collaboration not fitting DfE expectations.

> "Staff collaboration face to face not as extensive as wished but this is due to pressures on staffing and freeing up time."

> "Small schools so lack of capacity - Really tight budgets so tricky to commit financially - tight budgets so challenging to release staff."

> "Getting an agreement across all schools in the cluster. At face value all schools offer the same to pupils and families, but the reality is widely differing. A priority at one school is the opposite at another. We have a number of church / faith schools in the cluster which can also hamper agreement given their differing ethos to maintained schools

Recommendations for the DfE

Our survey asked respondents to identify one change or initiative they would like the DfE to introduce in order to better support collaboration outside of joining a MAT. These included:

1. **Practical resources (41%)** - Accessible tools including best practice case studies, model memorandums of understanding, and facilitated knowledge-sharing groups to foster meaningful collaboration.
2. **Funding (28%)** - Both increased overall school funding and specific financial support earmarked for collaborative activities.
3. **Recognition and acknowledgement (21%)** - The DfE should recognise and promote existing forms of collaboration that occur independently of MAT structures. This requires a shift in narrative that values diverse forms of partnership across the education sector.
4. **Wider structural and policy change (10%)** – A smaller number of respondents suggested:
    - Aligning financial years across all school types
    - Embedding collaboration more explicitly within the Ofsted inspection framework
    - Addressing staff capacity through improved recruitment and retention initiatives
    - Moving toward a more unified school system, such as standardising school governance under either academy or local authority status

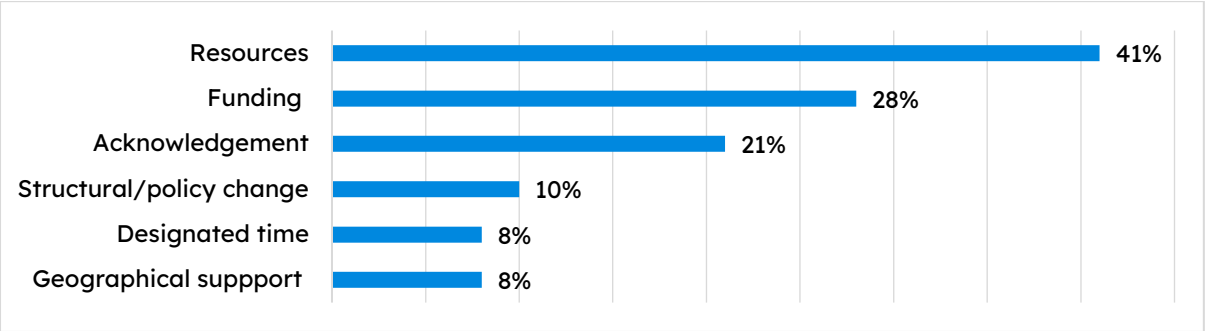

Figure 3: If you could recommend one change or initiative to the DfE to support collaboration outside of a MAT, what would it be?

> "MATs should not be perceived as the gold standard and SATs who have, like us, successfully created their own collaboration model should be recognised and celebrated."

> "They could provide model collaboration agreements and action plans. HTs won't meet and collaborate unless they see benefits in doing so and/or it's made easy."

> "Pay schools properly so there is more capacity to release staff to attend collaboration events."

Spotlight: Lighthouse Federation

The Lighthouse Federation is a nine-school federation based in Walsall, and it stands out nationally for its distinctive structure and progressive leadership initiatives. It is currently the largest federation (in which two or more schools operate under a single governing body) in England. Each of the nine schools retains a Local Federation Committee, all of which are overseen by an Executive Board which allows for governance that balances local responsiveness with strategic cohesion.

One of the most distinctive features of the federation is its traded services model. Leveraging internal expertise, the federation aims to offer high-quality school improvement and safeguarding support not only to its member schools but also to external schools seeking targeted, professional input. This model demonstrates a self-sustaining approach to system leadership, scaling up impact while also reinvesting in the federation's own capacity.

Another innovative element of the Lighthouse Federation's work is its commitment to developing future leadership from within through the Emerging Lighthouse Leadership Programme (ELLP). This programme was developed to address a growing issue in the primary sector: early-career teachers (ECTs) being quickly appointed to subject leadership roles without adequate training or mentorship.

ELLP is an eight-stage course tailored specifically for post-ECT teachers. Delivered in three-hour sessions every four weeks, the programme sets out to provide structured, manageable development that runs alongside teachers' day-to-day responsibilities. It focuses on essential leadership areas such as curriculum design, subject knowledge, effective communication, and feedback strategies.

The ELLP programme is designed to create a confident and capable leadership pipeline. Graduates are equipped with a clear understanding of their role, skills relevant to subject improvement, and an awareness of the support available for their professional development.

Conclusion

Despite a government drive for formal groups of schools under the MAT structure during the course of the last government, school to school collaboration continued in a variety of formats, across a variety of contexts, often achieving significant success. Under the current Labour government, education policy continues to build and focus on strengthening the academy trust-based system. However, the government now has a more 'structurally agnostic' focus and is keen to encourage other forms of schools working together. This report touches on the options available, the benefits, challenges and key learning opportunities. It shows that many of the benefits of MATs can also be achieved through other collaborative means, and that many schools have simply taken it upon themselves, often supported by the LA, to cement a sense of partnership and working together outside of government directives and policy preferences.

The evidence explored reveals that in many places, collaboratives not only work well, but can potentially help to create a blueprint for a more universal approach to partnerships. In order for that to happen, a more formalised recognition of practice and benefits needs to be adopted.

For example, the success within some of the federations explored within this research points to the importance of 'enabling conditions' for ensuring collaboration success. These include stable leadership, strong local networks, and access to internal expertise. This raises a broader question: to what extent can similar federations be replicated in areas without these foundational elements? Such models may offer inspiration, but also highlight the need for tailored, context-sensitive approaches to collaboration. In order for these questions to be addressed more thoroughly, the DfE should seek to conduct further research that can aid a nationally recognised approach. As part of this, we also suggest that the government should be more forthcoming in acknowledging and celebrating the benefits and successes of collaborative efforts outside of MATs.

NGA continues to be an advocate of schools working together as a group, both through the MAT structure, but also, as this report shows, championing other opportunities and approaches – many of them proven to lead to significant gains, at much lower cost and administrative burdens compared to some of the complexities within the MAT system. Collaboration should not be limited to one type of structure, and NGA's view is that schools can and should explore new forms of collaborative workings with other schools, particularly those geographically close, even if they already are a part of a MAT that the other local school(s) are not part of.

Ultimately it is revealing that several of the main challenges identified in this report were about the ability to enter into collaboration rather than collaboration itself presenting negative impacts. This should be a push for policy makers to address these barriers and enable the overwhelmingly positive models of collaboration to flourish. To better support meaningful and sustainable school collaboration, it is therefore essential to understand the conditions shaping its development on the ground.

The following reflections highlight key systemic factors that are enabling or constraining collaborative practice across different contexts:

- **Collaboration has enabled further governance support**. Collaboration between schools has highlighted greater opportunities to share governance capacity, particularly for panels and governor CPD. Panel work – including exclusion reviews and complaints panels – remains a consistent pressure point for many governing boards, often contributing to high workload and difficulty in recruitment. By working together, schools are better able to distribute responsibilities, reduce strain on individual governors, and strengthen governance through shared learning and support.
- **The impact of school funding is negatively affecting the ability to collaborate.** While collaboration continues across the school system, ongoing funding pressures and the complexities within the national funding formula are limiting its potential. A lack of financial resource hangs over many local initiatives, making it harder to sustain or scale effective models of joint working. Funding constraints also reduce capacity and contribute to a reluctance to formalise arrangements, particularly where deeper alignment or shared accountability is required. This challenge is compounded by concerns about equity, as schools without the means to buy into paid-for collaborative models struggle to access the same level of coordination and support, creating an uneven playing field. This suggests that while collaboration is flourishing in operational areas, it remains underdeveloped in areas that require deeper alignment or shared accountability.
- **The role of the LA should be championed as a key enabler of location-based collaboration**. The extent to which LAs support school collaboration varies widely across the country, influenced by differences in capacity, resources, and local priorities. In some areas, LAs have taken an active role in facilitating and brokering partnerships between schools, both within and beyond their geographical boundaries. In others, limited capacity has meant they are unable to offer meaningful support, leaving schools to coordinate collaboration independently or, in some cases, operate in isolation. As the national education landscape continues to evolve, many LAs are working to adapt and fill gaps where central support is lacking. This highlights both the potential of their role and the challenges they face within an increasingly diverse and decentralised system.
- **The DfE must recognise the significant influence its messaging and endorsement choices have had and continue to have on school collaboration.** Our research highlights a clear demand for DfE-assured resources and an acknowledgement of collaborative models that sit outside the MAT structure. It also demonstrates that LA's should be better equipped to facilitate collaboration regardless of a schools existing legal and structural status. However, current approaches risk reinforcing a divisive "us and them" mentality both between MATs and other schools, and among staff who feel their efforts in alternative collaborations lack legitimacy. A shift in DfE positioning could help reduce fears around change, validate diverse forms of collaboration, and extend proven benefits such as those seen in the lighthouse federation to more widely across the sector.

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External reviews of governance

An external review of governance provides an objective expert review of your governance practices and effectiveness. It is a supportive developmental process, not an audit or inspection.

An NGA review consists of:

- Review of evidence of governance effectiveness
- Review of the governance team and their processes
- Governance compliance review
- Board self-review
- Interviews and observations

Find out more

Consultancy

About us

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning to shape stronger governance. Together, we're raising standards and ensuring every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

For Schools & Trusts

102 Colmore Row
Birmingham B3 3AG

0121 237 3780

nga.org.uk

Charity number: 1070331

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