

NGA insights

The schools system: the voice of MAT trustees

November 2022



The expert organisation for
school governors, trustees
and governance professionals

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National Governance Association

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

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

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

Context

In March, the government published a [white paper](#) setting out its vision for the schools system in England. The white paper's vision has been progressed via consultations and the introduction of the Schools Bill.

In May, the Department for Education (DfE) released more detail on its plan to deliver a fully trust-led system by 2030. [Implementing school system reform in 2022 to 2023](#) set out the Department's first steps to deliver its proposals.

The future of the Schools Bill, given recent political turmoil, remains unclear. It had a rocky passage, facing widespread criticism from both Conservative and Labour peers in the House of Lords. It was then stripped of its first 18 clauses after staunch opposition to the proposed academy trust standards from many quarters.

These standards are also being considered by the regulatory review group, chaired by Baroness Barran, the minister for the schools system, who has survived two changes of Prime Minister and four changes of Secretary of State for Education. At the time of writing, there continues to be speculation on whether the Schools Bill will be scrapped and exactly what this means for the conclusions of the regulatory review. Indeed, recent events have placed other proposals within the white paper under question. It remains unclear what will and won't re-emerge due to the upheaval in government personnel.

Despite this uncertainty, NGA has continued to contribute to the ongoing development of the policies set out in the white paper via various channels of engagement with the DfE. Through these conversations, NGA has endeavoured to reflect the range of perspectives of the entire governance community. The furore presented to the Lords did not completely align with the conversations we had been having with trusts, but we needed to test that further.

Understanding your views

In order to both understand the views of those governing, and feed those views into the development of the key issues set out in the white paper, NGA has been listening to our members and the wider governance community via:

NGA's annual governance survey which covered academisation, multi academy trust (MAT) growth, satisfaction with the MAT model, and local governance. You can [view survey reports](#) on the NGA website.

NGA's leadership forums and MATs Network which were all attended by DfE representatives, allowing delegates to put questions and feedback directly to the Department. The structure of NGA's separate leadership forums allowed those governing in particular structures (SATs, maintained schools, MAT trust boards and local tier) to focus on issues relevant to them.

Regular support offered to schools and trusts. This includes [external reviews of governance](#), NGA consultancy services, and NGA's [GOLDline Advice Service](#), including 'MAT Chats' with schools considering academisation and trusts considering growth.

Taking the temperature

Building on this engagement, NGA conducted a survey of MAT trustees in August to September 2022, asking questions relating to the white paper, Schools Bill and regulatory review. We were delighted to receive detailed responses from over 100 trustees, with 99% of responses coming from unique MATs, providing valuable insight. It is, of course, important to recognise that the attitudes of MAT trustees might differ from those governing in other settings, especially around issues such as academisation.

There has been much debate on the level of oversight and intervention needed to fine-tune the MAT system since the publication of the white paper. Many see the freedoms for MATs to innovate and act autonomously as a real strength in the system, but our findings suggest trustees do not see autonomy as preventing accountability or transparency.

Rather than fighting against accountability and regulation, the MAT trustees we heard from were generally welcoming of the idea of increased scrutiny and oversight of MATs, as proposed by the white paper. Almost three quarters of respondents told us they agreed that the standards used to hold trusts to account should be more stringent, and trusts should be more transparent in demonstrating how they meet these standards.

It is well known that the government's proposals for a trust-based system have not yet persuaded everyone outside MATs. However, just over half of our MAT trustee respondents supported the commitment to a fully academised system by 2030; far lower than might be expected from this group. There was also resistance to the idea of allowing both local authorities (LAs) and dioceses to apply for academy orders for their schools against governing body objections, with just 42% in agreement.

The DfE emphasis on the growth of existing trusts has existed for a number of years, and we have addressed the topic in our work over that period. The 2022 white paper marked a change in DfE thinking, with the aspiration for trusts to be on a trajectory to serve at least 7,500 pupils or ten schools. This proposal prompted mixed reactions from our respondents.

In this paper we report feedback from and views of MAT trustees on the following topics:

1. **Oversight and regulation**
2. **Trusts and inspection**
3. **Size and shape of trusts**
4. **Commissioning**
5. **Trust strength and strategic governance**
6. **The shape of the future system**

1. Oversight and regulation

How would you describe the current oversight of MATs by central government?

Respondents’ opinions about the status quo were clearly mixed; there was no consensus view on whether there are too many requirements and too much intervention. This is consistent with the picture given by delegates at NGA’s MATs Network and MAT Leadership Forum.

View on current oversight of MATs by central government	Percentage of respondents
Too much – there should be fewer requirements set centrally and less intervention in the running of trusts	24%
Just right	21%
Neutral	31%
Too little – there should be a more prescriptive set of trust standards set centrally and more intervention in the running of trusts	20%
Unsure	5%

“The standards used to hold trusts to account should be more stringent, and trusts should be more transparent in demonstrating how they meet these standards”

More than twice as many survey respondents agreed with this statement than disagreed. This is significant given the narrative cited during Schools Bill debates.

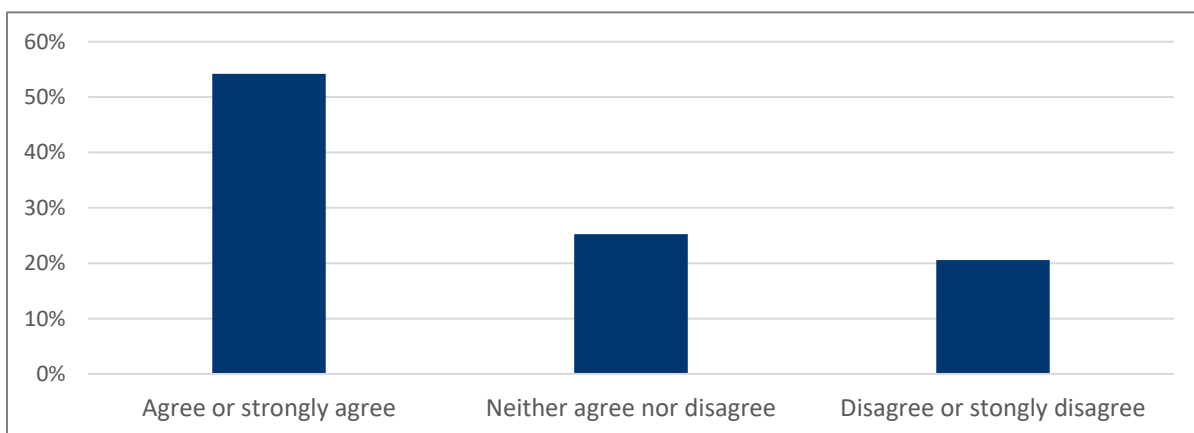


Figure one, extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with more stringent standards

2. Trusts and inspection

Should Ofsted inspect and grade entire MATs?

A significant majority of trustees (64%) supported the proposed inspection and grading of MATs as an entity, compared with only 13% against. This mirrors much of NGA's intelligence gained from talking to those governing in various settings: governors and trustees value external sources of validation to check their organisation is performing well. Respondents provided detailed explanations for their responses. Those in favour of MAT inspection and grading argued that the trust was the accountable body, so should be the focus of inspections.

"...the MAT has power. Power should mean responsibility. Those with responsibility for using public money should be accountable."

Supportive responses also saw inspecting entire trusts as providing positive incentives for schools in trusts to support each other, and for trusts to focus on all schools rather than those where an inspection was imminent.

"A MAT inspection regime would recognise more consistently where work across schools/trusts is working to the benefit of students and staff".

Others worried that grading a trust as a whole could disincentivise trusts from taking on struggling schools. One respondent said, "to suggest that the MAT has an overall grade will most likely have the impact of MATs becoming 'risk adverse' towards taking on the schools most in need of support, as these schools could bring down the overall MAT Ofsted grade".

There were also a number of concerns raised about Ofsted's ability and capacity to inspect trusts effectively, without being overly burdensome for trusts. The idea of a trust-led system in itself raises questions about the inspection framework currently focused on the school level. One respondent said simply: "Ofsted do not have the required skills". As such, it is fair to summarise that trustees were generally supportive of MAT inspections in principle, but aware that significant time and energy would need to be devoted to how to do this effectively.

NGA is of the view that only a substantially reformed Ofsted would be capable of inspecting MATs. A MAT is very different from a single school; inspecting one would require Ofsted to move beyond quality of education and school leadership to detailed inspection of governance, financial management and workforce (three of the DfE's five pillars of a strong trust.)

3. Size and shape of trusts

Do you agree that trusts should serve at least 7,500 pupils or 10 schools?

Our survey engaged with trusts of a range of sizes, and less than half (39%) agreed with this proposal. A clear message was sent that trustees of smaller MATs did not want to be forced to grow. It is worth noting that the white paper does not include any proposals to force growth. These aspirations will still be set by trust boards, although not all of those growth aspirations have been achieved to date, as shown in NGA’s annual survey.

Those opposing the proposal felt the figures were arbitrary and did not recognise differences between trusts. One trustee said, “it depends on location; in rural areas this may not be in the best interests of the children”. The sentiment of ‘quality not quantity’ was quoted in a number of responses – it was felt more important to have a shared culture, ethos and community.

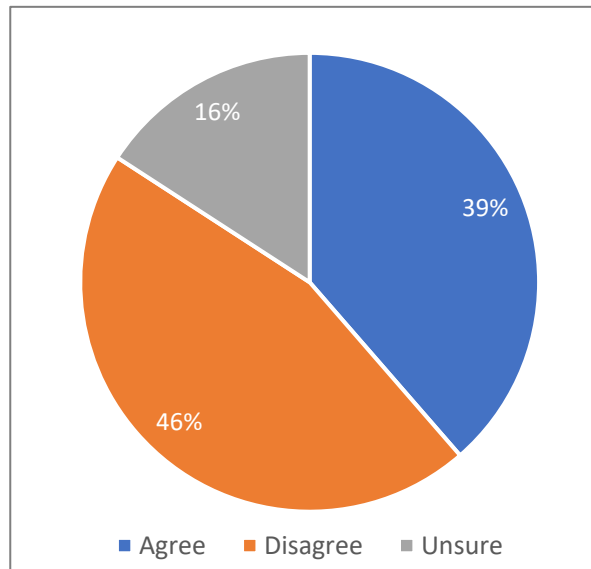


Figure two, extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed that trusts should serve at least 7,500 pupils or 10 schools.

“...the geographic distribution is important here. Where possible [schools within a MAT] should be located together. More care should be given to common ethos and values of the family of schools as well as the pupil numbers/number of schools.”

Respondents raised concerns about large trusts, despite this not being the focus of the question. Many respondents suggested a maximum size, citing the importance of maintaining community links and local knowledge. One respondent said “there needs to be a maximum cap and a proximity ruling. To have a school in Cornwall and another in Northumbria doesn’t make sense.” This supports our anecdotal evidence that trustees do not support a system of bigger trusts, particularly where this means expansion beyond a certain geographical proximity.

Those who supported the proposal accepted the Department’s argument that a minimum size was necessary to enjoy many of the benefits of the MAT model. One respondent said, “MATs do need to be a certain size to provide good central services”, while another said enough pupils were “critical to support an appropriate business model and gain the benefits of collaborative working.” A third argued “trusts need to have sufficient resources to provide the right level of service and support to their schools”.

Trusts in the locality

Do you agree that the proportion of schools in a local area served by an individual trust should be limited?

We asked about the white paper’s view that the proportion of schools in a local area served by an individual trust should be limited in order to avoid monopolies. Once again, respondents were split, with 39% supporting a limit and 36% against.

Respondents raised a number of points, including the definition of a local area. LAs cover much larger regions in rural areas, with individual pupils having far fewer schools within easy access. Those who agreed with the proposal argued that “local monopolies are dangerous” due to “the huge variability in the quality of provision from one trust to another.” Local diversity was also seen as a way “to preserve a degree of parental choice.”

However, other respondents emphatically disagreed. The language of parental choice and monopolies was seen as attempting to engineer competition between publicly funded bodies. Trustees also emphasised the importance of community links and local accountability, which this proposal was seen as potentially degrading. This proposal, combined with the vision for a minimum size, was interpreted as compelling many trusts to work across large geographical areas, reducing trusts’ connection and commitment to the communities they serve.

“There are a great number of benefits which can arise from locality based MATs and where a trust is effective and is making a real difference, why should they be prevented from expanding in their local area.”

Others suggested proposed limits would “further corrode local accountability” and “create unnecessary competition between schools for pupils”.

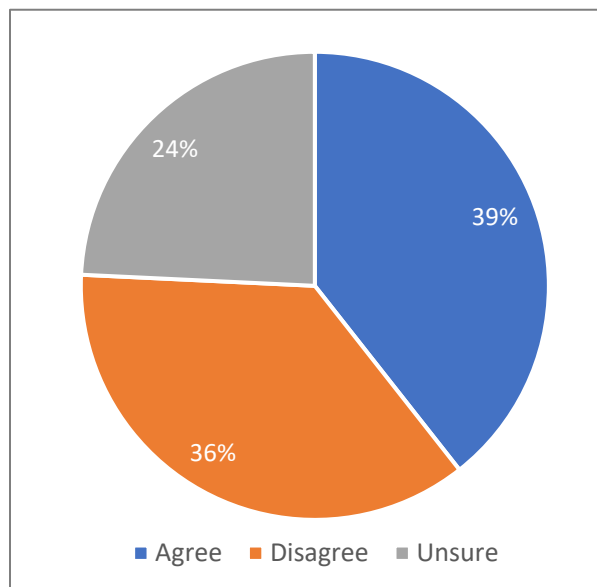


Figure three, extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with setting limits

Who takes the decision?

Do you agree with the proposal outlined in the Schools Bill for LAs and dioceses to request academy orders?

We asked about the bill’s proposal for LAs and dioceses to request academy orders for maintained schools despite governing body objections. Respondents were given a link to the DfE’s [briefing paper](#) which explained the rationale for the proposal. However, respondents were not convinced with just 42% in support.

Supportive respondents highlighted the need to move on “stragglers” who the LA or diocese could no longer support.

“As more schools academise, the LA support available for the non-academy schools dwindles and becomes inadequate. It is entirely reasonable for an LA to choose to withdraw from supporting schools. However, the individual schools should be given a free choice of which MAT to join...”

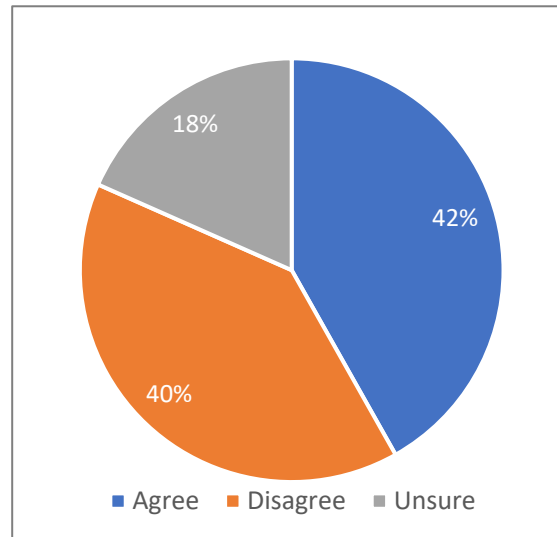


Figure four, extent to which respondents agreed with the proposal

There were also suggestions that governing boards were not always entirely objective, so it was necessary to go beyond the board’s wishes in exceptional circumstances. One respondent said that “where governance is weak it could be useful for LAs and dioceses to have such powers.”

However, other trustees argued maintained school governing bodies were “best qualified” to know their school’s particular context, and so make the right decision for their organisation.

“This is taking away autonomy, responsibility and accountability from those best qualified to have the school’s and pupils’ best interests at heart.”

Some trustees reiterated the suggestion that forcibly academising schools against the opinions of local stakeholders and without an adverse Ofsted finding as a justification would make transition difficult for whichever trust took on the school. One respondent said it could “create a hostile atmosphere and a negative approach to the trust they are required to join.”

Trustees who were unsure also made suggestions. One idea was to emphasise transparency when this power was used – forcing LAs and diocese to account for any decision to override the governing body – in the hope this would ensure it was used sparingly.

4. Commissioning

The Department’s current system for commissioning trust growth – or determining which schools are placed within which trusts – has regional directors at the centre of the decision-making process. The regional director and their team will usually be a trust’s main point of contact when taking on new schools or merging with another trust. At NGA’s leadership forums with Department representatives this summer, we heard a variety of feedback from delegates, with contrasting experiences of their interactions with their regional director. In particular, we noted a suggestion that smaller trusts were in danger of being overlooked.

Have you had any experience in discussing these questions with your regional director?

These findings mirrored those from our other work: some trustees were complementary of their interactions with the regional director while others were critical. Positive comments described the regional office as being “easy to approach”, with “very open and transparent conversations”. Others suggested meetings were “positive, helpful and supportive”, including one trustee who had been forced to engage with the regional director following a notice to improve but had found the process to be useful.

However, other trustees shared negative experiences. Some claimed the process led by regional directors was “arbitrary” and “biased” in favour of particular trusts. Others said that their regional director lacked knowledge of particular towns, so could not make informed decisions based on local dynamics.

The most common criticism was a lack of clarity and transparency in decision-making. One trustee said, “they are seen as being secretive and very much reliant on back room negotiations.” Another respondent reported:

“Our recent experience in attempting to add our first secondary after supporting them for a number of years has been rather shambolic. A lack of communication between ESFA and regional director team resulted in a lot of wasted effort by our team and harm to the school.”

Lastly, it is worth noting that a number of trustees said they had not interacted with the regional director directly, as they left this engagement to their CEO. Boards need to ensure that they are at the heart of strategic decision-making around trust growth and mergers.

5. Trust strength and strategic governance

The Department’s vision of “strong trusts” raises the question of how trust strength should be defined and measured. We asked trustees about their views, quoting the definition from paragraph 143 of the white paper which sets out five pillars:

high quality and inclusive education
school improvement
strategic governance
financial management
workforce

Do you agree with the DfE’s definition of strong trusts?

Respondents were generally supportive of the definition, although there was a recognition that the key issue would be how these criteria were measured. Others highlighted the lack of reference to trust members and to a broad and balanced curriculum. There were also comments about areas where detail was thought to be lacking, for example the question of what constitutes “a robust governance structure that involves schools”.

“I think there should be mention of a strong trust having a good understanding of and adapting its practice to the individual contexts of its schools. A one-size-fits-all approach will not lead to success for pupils.”

We asked for suggestions as to how the criteria in the definition could be measured. Respondents recognised that quantitative data was rarely definitive, with culture and other qualitative insight being just as relevant. There was also scepticism about the capacity of external bodies such as Ofsted to be the sole determinant of trust strength, with some trustees suggesting an emphasis on “service users” – pupils, families and staff.

On the specific issue of measuring the quality of governance, respondents proposed better access to external reviews of governance as the most obvious solution. NGA has suggested to the DfE that National Leaders of Governance (NLGs) are well placed to determine whether or not a trust has strong strategic governance. This is what the NLG programme was reformed to do and the independent audit of its first year shows it is performing well.

Local governance arrangements

Do you agree that all trusts should have local governance arrangements?

Responses to this question were the most definitive: 87% of trustees were in favour of trusts having local governance arrangements. This finding is consistent with NGA’s 2022 annual governance survey but is particularly notable given that all respondents were trustees.

While local governors are very likely to support local governance arrangements, the support of trustees, who delegate some functions to the local tier while retaining accountability, is a significant vote of confidence.

Respondents highlighted the value of the local oversight and community links provided by the local tier. Trusts were seen as being inevitably “more remote”, so local boards were necessary to focus on a specific school, understanding its strengths and the needs of the local community.

“Every school has its own individual context and therefore needs its own governors who understand the local circumstances.”

The local tier was seen as a bridge between the trust and the school, acting as its eyes and ears and so strengthening scrutiny and oversight.

“local governance is key as it is only the local governors who really know their school and needs of the community.”

In the context of the government’s overall vision, one respondent argued:

“Any proposal to move to larger, more remote multi academy trusts will be set up to fail if there is a lack of local oversight. Understanding of local communities needs feeding into the governance system.”

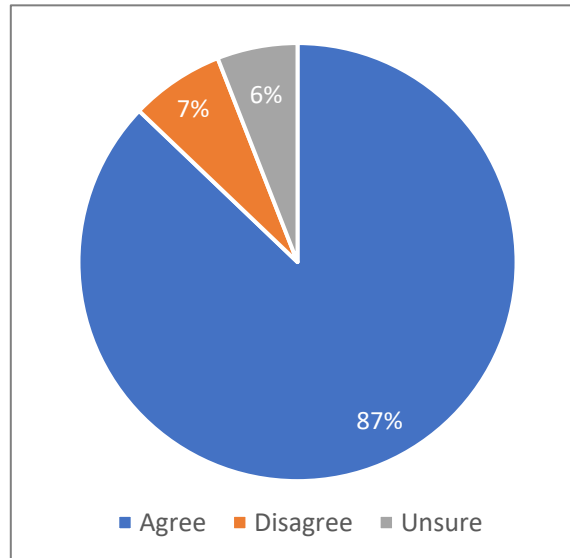


Figure five, extent to which respondents agreed that all trusts should have local governance arrangements.

6. The shape of the future system

Do you support the commitment to a fully academised system by 2030?

The white paper’s headline commitment in chapter four was a fully academised schools system by 2030, with all schools “in or joining a strong trust”.

51% of respondents support the commitment to a fully academised system by 2030; a notable finding given that all respondents are MAT trustees. The evidence from our [2022 governance survey](#) is that those governing in SATs and maintained schools are more sceptical about this commitment. For example, 60% of maintained schools and 31% of SATs had not considered joining a MAT in the last year, while a further 17% of schools had considered joining a MAT but decided against it.

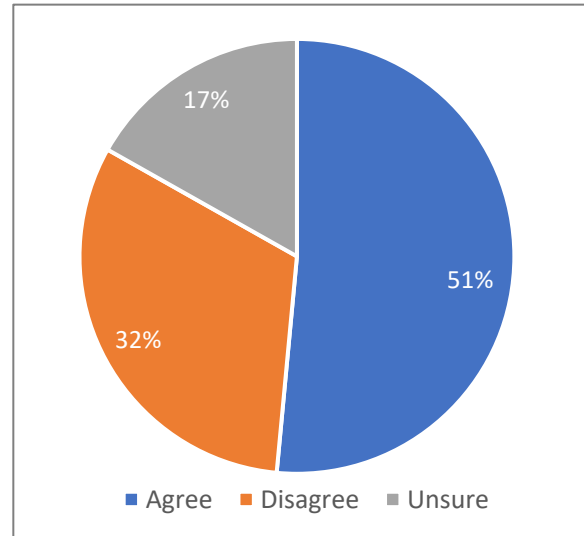


Figure six, extent to which respondents support the commitment to a fully academised system.

The explanations provided by respondents add clarity to these findings. There was very little reference to arguments about the inherent advantages of the MAT model compared to an LA-maintained sector. Instead, most comments focused on the confusion and complexities caused by the current “mixed economy”, with a trust-led system seen as the most likely way to provide consistency and sustainability.

“The current fragmented system is not viable in the long term” ...“running two systems will become inefficient over time.”

Those who opposed this vision raised concerns about how this would be achieved in practice, with compulsion seen as self-defeating. One respondent stated, “as the leader of a MAT, I don’t want to have good schools joining reluctantly and without commitment to the group”. Another stated that “forced academisation of good schools in the face of local opposition seems to me to be pointless.” Others believed a fully academised system would inevitably involve more large trusts which was viewed as a negative development.

Large trusts were seen as being akin to the LAs they sought to replace, but without democratic accountability.

“The bigger the group the more difficult it is to establish accountability and the same communities always suffer.”

The views of those sceptical of the government’s vision were perhaps best exemplified by one respondent who said:

“Schools, leaders, governors and parents need to be involved in decisions which are best for the children. Just insisting schools join MATs is not the best way forward. If MATs are successful, that will be the best way to recruit other schools. The evidence base that MATs are more successful than non-MATs is not by any means conclusive.”

The final question of the survey focused on how the white paper has affected board discussions so far. This question was also asked in the NGA annual governance survey, but it was useful to build on this data and focus on how trust boards specifically have reacted to the proposals.

While the picture was by no means universal, it was clear that the white paper had stimulated discussions about trust growth in many MATs. One trustee reported “added pressure to potentially speed up the rate of growth and include more schools”, while another said the white paper “has confirmed and accelerated our resolve to grow and/or merge”.

Some trustees saw the new focus as a positive, with one reporting “it has cemented our feelings around doing things right and for the right reasons”. However, in contrast, another said “we feel compelled to merge with another trust to make up the required numbers but not necessarily benefit pupils”.

There were exceptions where trustees said the white paper had not influenced their plans, or that they remained focused on COVID-19 recovery. Others said they did not want to commit because it was “only a white paper”. The current instability in government was cited as a reason for feeling the white paper’s vision might not endure in the long-term. The other recurring theme for those whose plans had not changed were finances – some trustees said they could not consider growth until MATs were given the resources to facilitate it.

Conclusion

There are a variety of views among trustees on many structural aspects of the white paper.

Our survey findings highlight that trustees of MATs did not express clear support for many of the white paper's headline proposals. This was demonstrated by respondents' significant scepticism for the proposal for a fully academised system by 2030. Only 51% supported the government's ambition – a notable finding given that these views come from those governing the trusts which the DfE hopes will lead the system.

There was, however, significant support for local governance within MATs. This popular element of the government's vision for trusts needs to continue to be writ large in the next stage of the DfE's thinking.

A majority favoured more stringent trust standards and greater transparency.

Our survey sought views on the idea that a trust-led system requires inspection and grading of MATs, not only schools. Perhaps most surprisingly, a small majority (54%) favoured more stringent trust standards as well as greater transparency. This is particularly notable as this area is under review in light of strong, almost universal opposition from other sector voices during the passage of the Schools Bill.

This challenges the narrative that trusts are opposed to oversight and robust standards.

NGA has always been aware of the variety and nuance of trustees' views, and these findings confirm NGA's long-held view that most trustees understand the need for clear standards, scrutiny and greater transparency. We urge the DfE to take note of the diversity of views within the MAT sector.

Issues of locality, size and impact on pupils need to be more thoroughly examined.

MAT trustees would be expected to be the part of the governance community most likely to support the white paper's vision. Our findings should therefore cause the new Secretary of State for Education much reflection. The responses support the case made over the past few years by NGA that the issues of locality, size and impact on pupils need to be more thoroughly examined, listened to, and reported on transparently and in an evidence-based manner.

Further clarity is vital given that the white paper has already stimulated reflection and in some cases action at trust board level. Even some of those who oppose the DfE's vision reported feeling compelled to seriously consider growth as a result when in fact the white paper as it stands does not contain any element of compulsion.

There does not appear to be sufficient support in the sector to prioritise pushing on immediately with the full vision, especially at this time when other issues, in particular around funding, staffing and SEND, are so pressing. We hope that this report adds to the evidence the Secretary of State is considering and we look forward to continuing the discussions with the new ministerial team.

Thank you for reading this report. If you have any feedback you'd like to share, please email kcfeedback@nga.org.uk.

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