



# Local governance here and now

Exploring practice on the ground

May 2023

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# Foreword

The mechanisms for definitive local accountability offered through MAT governance are still being worked out by some. There is one very obvious answer – a local tier, made up of local people, with a passion and commitment to their school and that community. I say ‘their’ very specifically. Regardless of a school’s name, its structural status, whether it is part of one of the largest or smallest trusts, schools continue, as they have always, to offer a sense of belonging to the children and young people who are part of their community.

The local tier of MAT governance has sometimes been viewed as a puzzle to be solved. There is no legal requirement for MATs to have it, and trusts can pretty much do with it what they want. This led in some places to very successful experiments where trusts have been brave and done something different which has worked and from which other trusts can learn. On the flipside, it has also meant that some poor practice has been allowed to thrive unchecked.

The strong commitment to it is reinforced by the MATs we speak to. Many trustees tell us that they can only fulfil their role as a trust board, being accountable for multiple schools, by being reliant on the local tier as their eyes and ears at school level. NGA’s pioneering work on the local tier for many years focused on making the case for retaining the local tier. We have never heard a well-reasoned or convincing argument for not having it, except in the case of trusts of only a couple of schools. The sector knows this – as our survey data tells us. Now that argument has been clearly made, we turn our attention to what it should actually look like.

Thanks to the white paper, in the last year we have seen a lot more thought concentrated across the sector on what local governance is and how it should work. But there are challenges with getting local governance working well which we shouldn’t shy away from. The remit of local governance is not set in stone, in fact many would argue it is ill defined.

But while the limitations and purpose of local governance might vary from trust to trust, there is now a wealth of knowledge to build on. It still is, by no means the finished article, but NGA set out with a plan in the last 18 months to raise the profile of the basics for success. NGA’s 13 expectations for making local governance meaningful reflect the things we have seen that have brought the most value to trust boards and the local tier alike over the last ten years.

Over the last year we have tested these expectations, using them as a basis for the interviews that underpin this report’s findings. The conclusion is that the 13 expectations have stood those tests and that, without inhibiting innovation or straitjacketing trusts, they provide a set of standards for local governance for all trusts which will strengthen their governance. This report draws on the real accounts of people volunteering in these roles, as well as those working with them via the trust board or as a trust governance professional.

Taken together, the findings in this report demonstrates the now indisputable role that local governance should have in the future of the trust-based system.

**Sam Henson, Director of Policy and Information**

This report was only possible due to the generosity of our interviewees from a range of trusts and their willingness to engage in the conversation.

NGA would like to extend our thanks to the individuals and trusts who volunteered their time to speak with us for this project:

- Anglian Learning
- Bedfordshire Schools Trust
- Cheshire Academies Trust
- Dartmoor Multi Academy Trust
- Exceed Learning Partnership
- L.E.A.D. Academy trust
- Magna Learning Partnership
- Nicholas Postgate Catholic Academy Trust
- Northern Star Academies Trust
- The Learning Alliance

## Executive summary

Last year, NGA’s annual governance survey settled a debate that has arisen at various points since the MAT system’s inception. Local governance is not only a ‘nice to have’, but a key feature of how the vast majority of MATs are governed. 98% of MATs operate with some form of local governance arrangements.

Local governance within MATs, or the local tier as NGA has come to call it, forms the bridge between the trust board and its schools. It is no longer an abstract concept but a lived, tried, and tested reality for the “overwhelming majority of MATs” (DfE, 2023). Other sector voices have released position statements, explaining that “the local tier of governance is absolutely essential to effective governance of a complex organisation in a multi-academy trust” (CST, 2021). NGA has long emphasised its importance, writing extensive research and thought pieces on its necessity.

This report and its insights are particularly timely because, despite promising signs last year with the release of the white paper, local governance is yet to be granted the prominence and focus it deserves from national policymakers. NGA wishes to bring the local governance story to life in a new way, building on our previous research. This report is based on in-depth interviews carried out with a range of individuals in different capacities including local chairs, trustees and governance professionals, to investigate how MATs utilise their local governance structure to achieve meaningful impact.

The report highlights key themes that emerged in our conversations with ten MATs of varying geographies, compositions, and sizes covering the following topics:

- delegated responsibilities
- stakeholder engagement
- communication between tiers
- recruitment of volunteers

# Key findings

- 1. The 4Ss (SEND, safeguarding, stakeholder engagement and standards) are the functions typically delegated to the local tier.** Intentional and purposeful delegation takes full advantage of local knowledge and expertise, facilitating meaningful, well-informed decisions of the trust board.
- 2. Headteacher performance management is an issue that creates the largest disparity in the involvement of the local tier among trusts.** Local chairs welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the appraisal of their headteacher and found that their ongoing communication throughout the year supported the development of objectives. Others found the transition to a central line management structure difficult, with an underlying sense of frustration at a lack of involvement in the process.
- 3. Effective communication channels between the trust board and the local tier are essential to amplifying local tier voices and the stakeholders they represent.** Communication is prioritised by the trusts we spoke to, but there is an appetite for improvement in the way in which information is presented. For example, engaging in debate and active discussion as opposed to exclusively top-down conversations.
- 4. Collaboration among local chairs is a beneficial addition to the MAT governance structure, but for those in non-leadership roles, it could go further.** Local chairs are regularly meeting at chairs forums, supporting each other and driving an increased sense of belonging and connection to the MAT. However, volunteers in non-leadership roles on the board sometimes felt more distant. MATs utilising additional forums (such as safeguarding forums) or taking part in buddying systems saw less disconnect from local volunteers.
- 5. Governance professionals (who may be governance managers with a trust-wide remit or those clerking for academy committees) are essential in ensuring meaningful impact occurs on the local level and within the wider governance structure.** They strengthened effective and compliant governance across the trusts we spoke with. They were essential to co-ordinating trust-wide governance communications and reporting. Considerations should be made about workload when trusts are going through fast periods of growth as it has put pressure on governance professionals we have spoken with.
- 6. The success of the local tier is limited by the challenges of recruiting local volunteers.** Although governance professionals are providing vital support in recruiting for co-opted governor vacancies, parental and foundation vacancies remain particularly challenging to fill. This is resulting in boards reverting to professional and personal connections to fill vacancies.
- 7. Succession planning for future chairs is often seen as a 'nice to have'.** With the main struggle for academy committees being volunteer recruitment, thinking long-term about local tier leadership is less prominent. Several chairs were appointed via a trust board's professional/personal connection because of this. The priority for existing chairs is on securing and building their board's initial governance knowledge.

8. **Local governance in trusts will benefit from greater collaboration with other schools and trusts.** Although in these trusts communication within the MAT is strong, academy committees could benefit from sharing knowledge and good practice to improve the quality of governance in the local community. This would be mutually beneficial and could aid in other areas such as governor recruitment where many boards struggle.
9. **The reputation and identity of the trust in the local area has a direct influence on the success and impact of the local tier.** Trusts with a strong image and positive reputation had better recruitment and stakeholder engagement in their local communities. This connection and visibility allowed for meaningful impact throughout the trust.

## The local governance landscape

Through our wide-reaching and unique evidence base (including our annual survey, case studies, governance networks, and external reviews of governance) NGA has, for over a decade, acquired evidence on local governance as part of the MAT system. Following a series of MAT case studies in 2018, we published [Moving MATs forward](#) (2019), a State of the Nation report looking at the role of MAT governance. We identified 11 key issues which impact the board's ability to carry out its core functions and required particular attention by MATs. One of these considered the future of the local tier, the value of which was disputed by some.

In 2021, the pandemic revealed mixed fortunes for the local tier – some MATs explored different ways of governing and utilised the local tier in particular. The events of the last few years have increasingly pushed some formerly resistant MATs to carry out reviews and revised approaches to their local governance approach. We captured this shift and the general mood change in our 2021 iteration of [MATs moving forward](#).

Over the years there have been well-documented cases of the relationship between the trust board and the local tier being subject to significant growing pains. While this still exists, albeit to a lesser degree, there is now a greater understanding of the basic requirements for making meaningful local governance work. This report uses the experiences of 10 different trusts to reflect on these.

### NGA champions local governance in MATs because it provides:

- more informed strategic thinking and decision-making where trust boards draw on the intelligence gathered at school level
- a positive contribution to the checks and balances of trust governance with challenge and support to the trust board and central team
- more diverse views adding to the richness of discussion and challenge
- an understanding of the trust's role and how individual schools fit into the trust structure
- more active engagement between the school and its wider community
- more support for individual schools and the trust from stakeholders
- a local focus on accountability, keeping the trust grounded in the realities of the localities

Our annual survey data continually shows a commitment to local governance. For example, 90% of local governors this year agreed that their trust board is committed to ongoing local governance arrangements. Additionally, 91% of MATs in our annual survey adopt a ‘one school one academy committee’ model with a further 6% operating under a hub/cluster model (figure 1). We were, therefore, keen to hear about the diversity and innovation happening within the most common model whilst also acknowledging the minority and how it works for them.

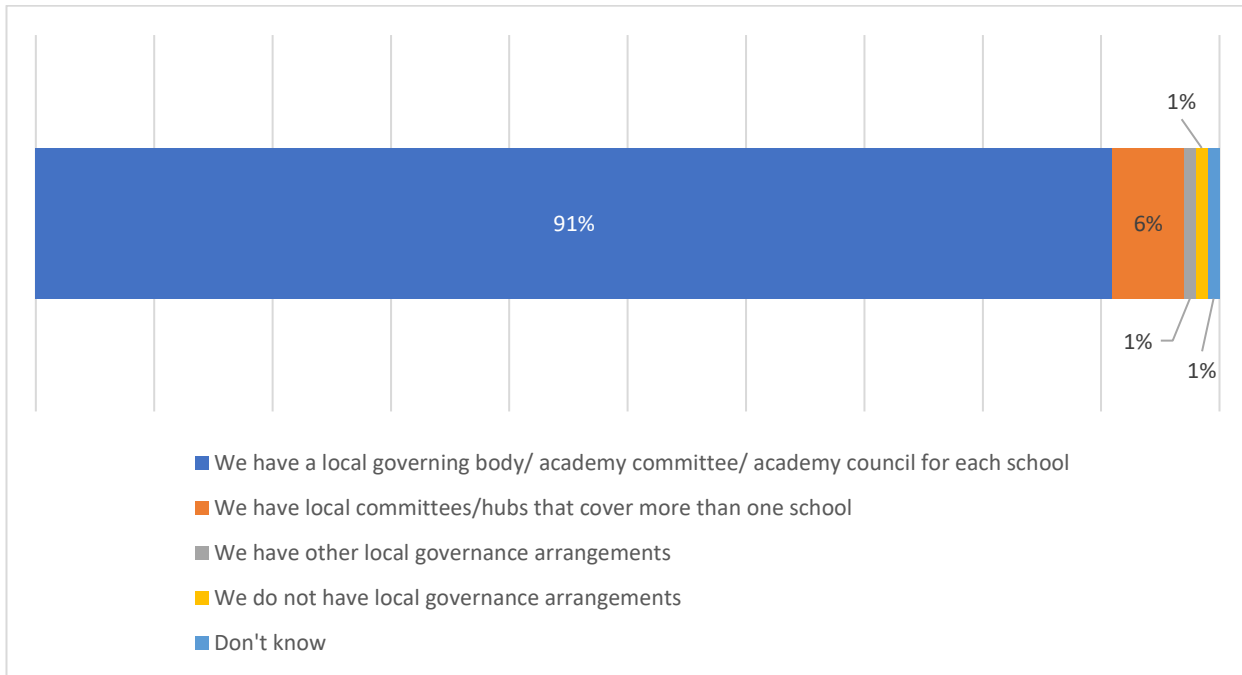


Figure 1: Annual governance survey respondents’ 2022 local governance arrangements

The concept of the local tier allows a huge amount of freedom for trusts to do things differently. The model articles of association contain very few restrictions and some trusts have exploited this well, others not so well. The research behind our 2018 case study series and the [Power of Governance reports](#) revealed that while lots of progress was being made, a significant number of trusts were facing obstacles as they made the same mistakes as other trusts had been making prior. While the flexibilities afforded to MATs to be innovative added to the degree of autonomy placed upon MATs as whole organisations, the lack of basic expectations and published learning points was continuing to prevent sector-wide advancement.

In 2022, NGA decided it was time to publish a clear and succinct set of expectations for making local governance meaningful. The insight, research, and thought leadership around these expectations were outlined in [The Future is Local](#).

The paper outlined 13 key features of good local governance built on our evidence base:

1. **Communication, communication, communication** – two-way communication is crucial; that means regular meetings where the trust board chair can connect with chairs at local level.
2. **Separation, separation, separation** – MAT governance has three layers for a reason, and those layers must remain distinct with separation between each – members should not be trustees, and trustees should not sit on the local tier.
3. **Investment in professional, expert support** – there must be a lead governance professional in any MAT, to guide the work of local committees and the trust board, and to facilitate communication.
4. **An awareness of who is who and how you fit together** – local governance enhances trust board accountability as its eyes and ears at school level. The local tier does not have its own committees – an academy committee or LGB is itself a committee of the trust board.
5. **A meaningful, welcome and accepted role in support and challenge** – where it is understood by all, including the trust board, that you do not remove the local committee simply for being challenging. There is a formal process which is followed for removing governors which includes an appeals process.
6. **A local tier formed by local volunteers** – executives do not attempt to control the conversations or attempt to fill the seats around the table.
7. **Clear delegation** – a good scheme of delegation is essential to ensuring harmonious working between the layers of governance within the trust.
8. **Trust boards are visible and accountable to the local tier** – local governors are invited to hear the work of the trustees on an annual basis through the AGM or via other means.
9. **The trust CEO and executive team include input from the local tier**, namely the chair, in the performance management of school heads.
10. **The trust values and seeks engagement from the local tier** in the recruitment of new heads, including the local chair in the recruitment process.
11. **There is a whole trust governance development plan** which also encourages governors to learn from schools outside their trust.
12. **The trust maintains a clear distinction between accountability through governance** (by the trust board and its committees) and accountability through line management (by executive leaders).
13. **The local tier retains a contribution to school improvement** and is aware of what the school's budget is and the plan for how it is to be spent.

These expectations formed the basis of the questions used in our interviews. We wanted to confirm that in 2023 the 13 expectations were based on real life practice, were achievable, and crucially, were effective in driving meaningful local governance that contributes positively to high quality governance in high quality trusts.



# The Department for Education

The Department for Education (DfE) set out a vision for the future of the schools system in the *Opportunity for All* [white paper](#). This stated that by 2030, “all children will benefit from being taught in a family of schools, with their school in a strong multi academy trust” as well as publishing a trajectory of growth for MATs. Following the significant opposition to and eventual scrapping of the schools bill, the specifics of these goals were dropped, but the government remains committed to the wider vision of eventually arriving at a trust based system. Something that has survived is the Department’s introduction of the five pillars of strong trusts, or now – high quality trusts.

Strategic governance was initially named as a standalone pillar, defined as “operating an effective and robust governance structure that involves schools and exemplifies ethical standards. Utilises the expertise and skills of its boards to oversee the strategic direction of the trusts effectively and hold leaders to account. Has a strong local identity, engaging effectively with parents and the wider community”. The white paper also included a specific commitment that “all trusts should have local governance arrangements”, which would be further discussed with the sector.

We are pleased to note the overwhelming majority of MATs now have local tiers; our focus is on ensuring all trusts engage as effectively as possible with their schools and local communities. However, the Department has recently published trust quality descriptions, which fail to specifically mention local governance. While there is reference to trust board decision-making being informed by meaningful engagement, listening to parents, schools, and communities, this is not equivalent to local governance. The DfE has always agreed with NGA on this, stating in their own Governance Handbook that engagement should “not be confused” with “representation on a board and neither should it be seen as a one-off exercise for organisations”. Ensuring successful engagement is only one function of the local tier.

NGA understands the DfE does not want to dictate a single approach to how MAT governance is carried out; indeed, any attempt to enforce how the local tier operates for the sector would be wrong. Yet it fails to understand and build on over a decade’s worth of learning from MATs across the country, recognising how local governance can and should feed into the strategic decision making of the trust board. To render invisible the commitment and time given by an estimated 80,000 local governors is a huge concern. This report is therefore significant in raising the profile of the local tier’s meaningful impact as the DfE has failed to do so.

## Naming the local tier

In this report, we use ‘local academy committee’ (academy committee) to refer to those governing locally. NGA uses this terminology as it ensures clarity on the reality of its role; academy committees are an extension of the trust board’s delegatory power and, by definition, committees of the trust board.

However, we are aware that many trusts refer to the academy committees as local governing bodies (LGBs) which is an adoption of the department’s preferred term, as set out in the model articles of association. Among the trusts we spoke to, other names included ‘academy governance committees’, ‘local stakeholder boards’, and ‘academy governing boards.’

## Delegated responsibilities

The extent and nature of delegation to the local tier varies between trusts and will depend on the specific circumstances of the MAT. Some trusts we spoke to saw a greater focus on school improvement due to schools joining in challenging circumstances, while others, due to a more stable backdrop, had greater freedoms and capacity in driving community-minded change such as environmental sustainability.

It is clear that a balance must be struck between local expression and central oversight, while simultaneously moving away from the view of academy committees as no more than stakeholder engagement tools. Delegating meaningful responsibilities can be key in attracting governors, with trusts needing to be mindful of the fact that isolation (stemming from a lack of robust delegated functions) can lead to mistrust and feeling undervalued.

This echoes a similar point raised in NGA’s, ‘The future is local’ 2022. Local volunteers are largely driven by wanting to give something back to the community they care about and have a connection to. Trusts need to maximise this motivation and put it to good use, not create a role that is at odds with it. From one interview, it was clear that the disempowerment of volunteers has wider implications around engagement and subsequently retention.

While the trust board retains oversight of each school, delegating certain responsibilities to the local tier ensures each school is meeting the needs of its pupils and the wider community.

**“Governors have very clear categories for sufficient oversight. In our academy, there is a demand on subject leadership, so governors have dual roles: trust strategic areas and assigned curriculum subjects at the school.”**

**Research participant**

## Scheme of delegation

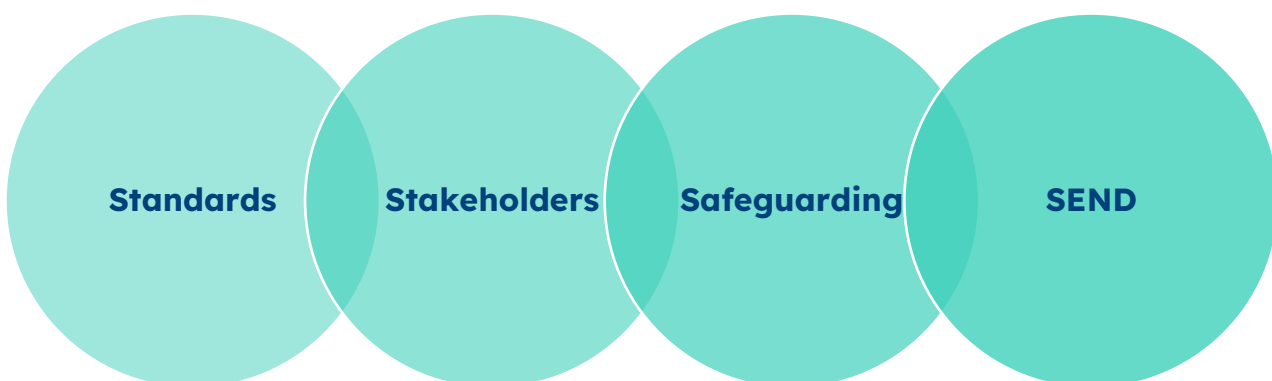
A trust’s scheme of delegation records the basis of the local tier’s remit, and the clarity of this document can mean the difference between success and failure. A concise document facilitates effective decision-making by defining lines of responsibility and accountability. It strengthens the notion of one organisation under one central body while giving individual academy committees the room to execute functions according to their context and development needs. However, the document must be regularly reviewed and is very likely to change as MATs grow and evolve.

Consultation with the local tier in this review hugely benefits understanding current practice and areas for a more refined document. When an interviewee first began chairing their academy committee, they expressed “frustration” about their scheme’s lack of focus on the safeguarding oversight function. Through much-needed liaison with the trust (facilitated by a central trust director), they responded by amending this point in their following iteration thereby consolidating the academy committee’s responsibilities overall.

Our discussions raised a crucial point regarding the benefits of a concise scheme of delegation. Describing their most recent scheme as “shorter yet digestible and accurate,” one local chair particularly appreciated the focus it brought to meetings and the subsequent effects this had on meeting duration. In having a simple document to refer to, that does not involve “trudging through pages of jargon”, local governors found that meetings were conducted in an “acceptable timeframe” which was not always the case previously. As explained by the interviewee, “governors are busy and are freely giving their time,” so the streamlined approach in meetings, borne out of a succinct scheme, was welcomed by all.

More schools joining a MAT may warrant the need for more or less centralisation. What remains true is the need for absolute clarity of the remit of each component making up the organisational structure. As “growing organisations, whereby reporting lines will constantly evolve,” trusts need to respond to such changes by developing a scheme of delegation cognisant of contextual needs. As well as being a formalisation tool, it forms the basis of locally directed change that builds bridges between levels of governance. As a result, the scheme of delegation needs to be clear, and regularly reviewed.

## The 4Ss



Irrespective of trust size and nature, we found that the local tier was carrying out similar core functions:

## Standards

- Monitoring school performance and improvement – regular review of performance data, including exam results, attendance rates, and pupil progress, to ensure that the school is meeting its targets.
- Working with senior leaders to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies to address them in line with the trust’s strategic objectives.

## Stakeholder engagement

- Ensuring the needs and concerns of all stakeholders are accounted for in the decision-making process and acting as a mouthpiece for their interests and voices at trust level.
- Achieved through effective communication channels, consulting key stakeholders, and working in partnership with the local community.

## Safeguarding

- Implementing the trust’s safeguarding policy and fostering a culture that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of all pupils and staff in their respective schools.
- Working closely with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to ensure the necessary procedures are in place, which can be supported through the appointment of a link governor.
- Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of the school’s safeguarding arrangements.

## SEND

- Ensuring adequate resources are provided to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) that support their educational progress.
- Seeking assurances that staff are trained to implement strategies and support plans.
- Working in partnership with other stakeholders, such as parents, external agencies, and the wider MAT community, to ensure that pupils with SEND are well-supported and included in all aspects of school life.
- Like safeguarding, this is usually primarily carried out by a specific link governor.

Considering this commonality, practice would suggest that the above is an effective guideline for trusts to utilise and NGA would expect all trusts to delegate the ‘4Ss’ to their academy committees at a minimum.

**“[The 4Ss] sum up exactly how we delegate our responsibilities ... in our trust, we have the ‘pillars of responsibility’ which cover [the 4Ss] and our agendas are reflective of this. It makes working through the meetings a lot easier.”**

Conversations with our interviewed trusts revealed that the identified four areas form the basis of their core responsibilities, but others included health and safety oversight, headteacher recruitment, and undertaking exclusion and complaints panel work. By no means are these functions an exhaustive list, but what is clear from our interviews, is that substantial and intentional delegation takes advantage of the extensive skills and expertise of volunteers. Even without a set of legally defined responsibilities, many academy committees largely see similar responsibilities delegated down. However, as we will see below, the evolution of particular governance functions are areas that may require further attention from trust leads.

## Finance

Through the course of our discussions, trust financial management generated particular interest. Many trusts manage school budgets centrally as a way to secure financial stability which was also true for our interviewed trusts. While this development has gradually shifted the remit for local committees, it is not construed as a negative for some. In fact, one interviewee explained that they “understand the rationale to streamline finances ... it gives you one less thing to worry about.” Some boards found this gave them greater capacity to scrutinise other areas such as school improvement and pupil wellbeing. On the other hand, some governors “struggled” with the financial aspect of their trust as information was not reported down from the central team at all.

### **“[Finance] is probably the most contentious part.”**

While some trusts operated through a fully centralised GAG pooling model, others retained an emphasis on ‘top-slicing’. Both reflect the sector’s gradual shift towards school budgets in trusts being increasingly approved and issued by the central trust team. Yet despite this, finance was not something that was necessarily removed from the local tier’s remit altogether.

Academy committees we interviewed continued to seek assurances when the budget was managed by the headteacher. This was achieved through “regular conversations with the school finance manager to review financial performance, expenditure, and any risks or issues” that may have arisen. Monitoring was particularly important when academies saw a change in staffing structure, for example when a new role was created.

### **“Even if a decision is in budget, there is an expectation that the local governing board is involved in conversations.”**

Despite the move by more trusts to increase centralisation, we have heard that academy committees, when given the opportunity, can play a key role in ensuring that the trust’s financial decisions are informed by local contexts. For example, the interviews revealed on several occasions that:

**“Local governors’ knowledge of the pupils they serve can inform a school’s ability to effectively streamline funding sources such as pupil premium to the initiatives that need it the most.”**

What is most important is that these decisions are not made in silo, with the trust board operating totally independently by avoiding sharing information, and instead, the trust board and the local tier work collaboratively to measure their impacts. This second layer isn’t about duplication, but enhancement from an alternative viewpoint – where financial oversight at the local level is encompassed by the school improvement remit often placed upon the local tier in “ensuring that expenditure is aligned to the individual priorities”.

## **Headteacher performance management**

Unlike in financial oversight where trusts have seen more homogeneity, our interviews revealed that the process of headteacher performance management varied quite significantly between MATs, with the level of centralisation sometimes generating concerns for local chairs. Under the existing structure of MATs, it is typically the senior executive leader tasked with the responsibility of headteacher line management, or in larger MATs, a director in the central team. While the ongoing line management responsibilities rightly lie with these individuals, the extent to which academy committees, particularly chairs, are involved in the process, differs.

Only three trusts informed us that the chair of their academy committee takes part in the end of year appraisal of the headteacher, collaboratively developing objectives, and recommending pay with their CEO or other central director.

**“It is very much a partnership [with a trust executive]. The trust also engages with an external performance management facilitator to manage the process for us ... [The process] is very collaborative”.**

A minority of interviewees displayed concern about the process – some local chairs felt they have been shut out from conversations. One governor explained the difficulty in reconciling the “time committed” and the lack of involvement in the process overall.

One interview raised the point that, especially in larger trusts, the chair of the academy committee may have more one to one contact with the headteacher, which lends itself to more ongoing support and challenge and potentially a better understanding of what the headteacher has been dealing with. The nature of this relationship can ultimately form a sound foundation for the headteacher’s appraisal, as it offers a glimpse into the everyday practices of the head, which may get lost when looking at the bigger picture.

**“Moving forward I would like to see governors play a key role in performance management, as we see [headteachers] consistently in the year – as opposed to three meetings a year with the trust.”**

In NGA's 2022 annual governance survey, 25% of local governors and MAT trustees said that their local tier does not have a role at all in the appraisal of their headteacher.

While practice differed across trusts, there was a consensus regarding the value of input from local governors, namely the chair, who often works closely alongside their headteacher. As a minimum, there is the expectation from some interviewees that the local tier should be approached during the course of their headteacher's appraisal cycle to provide direct feedback, grounded in the context and reality of the individual school.

## **Support and challenge: two sides of the same coin**

'Effective challenge' – we often hear this phrase in the sector, and we were keen to learn what this means in the complex landscape of MAT governance. In order to find out more, we asked the following question: "what does effective challenge mean to you?"

Our interviewees delved into the importance of fostering an open and constructive environment, where the systems in place and levels of trust built between tiers aid the decision-making process. One chair explained:

**“Decisions [made by school leaders] are not challenged, but the information used to arrive at those decisions.”**

A key example of this comes from an academy committee whose school experienced a shortage of STEM subject teachers. Local governors discussed how different recruitment strategies may be used. They challenged the processes the school used to recruit by drawing on governors' experiences outside of their volunteering role.

**“One of the things we looked at was the way adverts were being used. We were constantly offering fixed-term contracts, which are less attractive roles than fixed-term positions. This may have been why we were not getting the calibre of candidates we wanted.”**

Asking tough questions is sometimes necessary; those governing should not shy away from offering the required level of scrutiny. One interviewee explained that effective challenge is about probing:

**“As a governor, it is your job to unpick what your headteacher is saying. It is not necessarily about accepting things at face value but asking for examples and teasing out evidence.”**

Our interviews highlighted that the notion of providing effective challenge was inextricably linked with supporting the headteacher. It is clear that a collaborative and constructive approach is required, where those governing locally must establish strong relationships with their school leader, first and foremost, in order to provide the challenge that is required and fulfil their role as the "critical friend."

## Community roots

In a climate where many trusts are expanding, and trustees are scattered around the country, local ties and context-specific experiences are becoming a greater necessity for trust boards to remain attuned to their schools' needs. Trustees need to be able to triangulate the information provided to them by trust executives. The local tier spread across multiple geographical boundaries is key to the board's knowledge and understanding, helping the trust make the best decisions, and keeping governance informed by the communities that it serves.

Local volunteers care about, and feel connected to, their local community, providing motivation and ultimately securing the role of local governors as an indispensable component of the trust-wide structure.

Sir David Carter, the former National Schools Commissioner, stressed the virtue of the local tier, warning against its removal – “you cannot have a credible vision that talks about supporting and developing school communities if you do not give them a voice”.

All interviewees could not overstate the importance of the local tier enough. One local chair explained that “the passion and drive [deriving from a local connection] cannot be replicated and the community gains a sense of confidence” their local needs are being met from a tangible and present body.

**“The links we have with community groups have been very successful and raised the profile of the trust within the community, aligning with our organisational value as a community agent.”**

## Stakeholder engagement

Ensuring successful engagement is one function of the local tier, with stakeholders being one of the 4Ss. Meaningful engagement – listening to parents, schools, and communities, is a key role for the local tier but is not in itself the same thing as local governance.

Local governors are the trust's ambassadors in the community and indeed hold deep knowledge of the community and their specific needs. The most meaningful and successful outcomes can be seen in trust board decisions influenced by local intelligence.

An example of this can be seen in an academy committee that recognised the need for a pre-school provision after listening to their community. The trust board did not have pre-school provision on their agenda, but the academy committee challenged the trust board, highlighting the intelligence they had gathered. After much two-way communication, the trust agreed to alter its plans and invest significant capital into developing the provision.

As the bridge between trust boards and the pupils and communities they serve, the local tier plays an essential role in ensuring all voices across the trust are heard and recognised. It shows that despite forming part of a larger organisation, their individual views continue to be validated; a crucial detail as MATs expand.



It is evident that local governors provide insight into their communities and potential opportunities for development. Stakeholder engagement strategies included:

- parent forums
- attending school celebration events
- governor clinics with parents, staff and pupils
- business links to support careers fairs
- engaging with local religious and cultural organisations, particularly to promote diversity and inclusion on the board

**“Stakeholder engagement across our trust is patchy but we are overcoming this by cross-trust learning with several flagship schools that have managed to engage well with their community.”**

There was also an obvious difference in engagement with the academy committees of primary versus secondary schools – chairs of primary boards reported this function as easier to carry out. In addition, the demographic of the school area sometimes affected the success of engagement. In some areas, a severe distrust of the education system, for example, resulted in an action plan employed over a longer time scale.

## Communication between tiers

Two-way communication grounds a strong and cohesive relationship between the trust board and its academy committees; our interviewed trusts are a testament to this. Effective communication channels amplify the voice of the local tier to assist in central trust decisions regarding context-specific direction. But it also creates a sense of unity and cohesion across trusts through sharing knowledge and best practice. Impactful communication helps to break down barriers between layers of the organisation, moving away from a ‘them and us’ notion.

The following examples of communication channels were discussed in our interviews:

- chairs forums (one of NGA’s 13 expectations)
- governance newsletters (updates on training and current news)
- representatives from academy committees attending trust board committee meetings
- opportunities for agenda items to be fed into the trust board
- local governance reports produced by the governance professional
- annual governance conferences
- making the most of virtual/hybrid meetings

One interviewee maintains communication throughout their MAT in their role as link trustee for academy committees. This role also involves sitting in on local chair forums, devising materials like chairs handbooks, and leading a standing agenda item at trust board meetings.

**“Having been a local chair, I know what it’s like and I can bring that knowledge and perspective to the role [of link trustee for the local tier].”**

## Chairs' forums

Chairs' forums with local chairs, trustees, and central trust leads enable those chairing at local level to position academy committee meetings in a way that is reflective of the trust's values and ethos as a result of exposure to the trust board.

One trust in particular saw the benefits of these forums as their academy committee had a thorough understanding of the trust ethos, bred through regular communication. During the recruitment process for their school's headteacher, the final candidate was chosen due to an alignment with the trust's culture and trajectory. The information received from the chairs' forums essentially resulted in the chair of the academy committee recruiting a skilled individual suited to both their individual and trust-wide setting.

Some questioned the practicalities of such networks in larger MATs that may have upwards of 25 academies. With the number of attendees increasing, one interviewee alluded to the possibility of discussions being diluted. What was clear from our interviews was that local chairs in larger trusts valued the opportunity to meaningfully discuss their practices at length with each other, as opposed to simply listening to a colleague in the central team or a trustee deliver a presentation. In establishing these communication channels, cultivating an environment that encourages debate and open dialogue is critical.

## The governance professional as a catalyst

The role of the governance professional was a key point of discussion. We are increasingly seeing trusts invest in individuals (forming part of the central team) who oversee governance across the trust and manage those clerking at local level. Individuals are responsible for the **overall management of services and resources that support boards and strengthen the delivery of strategic challenge**. The [lead governance professionals](#) we have spoken to, and their teams, have formalised governance as a pivotal and professionalised branch of the trust-wide sector. They not only manage the role of volunteers but consider governance on a macro level by reviewing the recruitment and retention of governors, diversity on boards, and scope for future development.

### Organisation and management

Many governance professionals developed a local governance toolkit that supplemented the trust's scheme of delegation, including guidance, best practice suggestions, and signposted areas that would benefit from training. Most interestingly, some toolkits included examples of questions typically asked by local governors, demonstrating the strategic line of inquiry governors should aim for. Not only did it focus meetings and achieve consistency, but it also made the role more manageable and accessible, particularly for new volunteers.

### Fostering effective communication

The governance professional is a key driver in establishing effective channels. All of our interviewees cited their governance professionals as a source of information regarding policies and procedures, but they also facilitated communication between the layers of governance.

A governance professional explained their team meets to consolidate information discussed at trust board meetings and identify areas that would benefit the local tier. Their academy committees are further equipped with termly reports from the lead governance professional that outline ongoing trust priorities and updates. This model has streamlined conversations taking place at the local level and ensures local governors are kept informed of the trust's strategic vision and trajectory.

## **Building a strong team**

Managing volunteers is an integral responsibility of the lead governance professional. Up until now, this may have included providing training, facilitating recruitment, development opportunities, and ensuring that governors are clear on their roles and responsibilities. However, as trusts continue to develop, there seems to be a greater focus on co-ordinating trust-wide governance communications and reporting. Crucial to this is the role the governance professional plays in nurturing relationships and increasing governor visibility.

One trust informed us that they hold an annual governance conference, where governors are nominated to receive awards for their efforts over the year. The event is also used as an opportunity to share best practice from volunteers and recognise the achievements made by academy committees. By no means is this a must, but it is refreshing to hear the efforts of governors being recognised and rewarded which starkly contrasts the 'faceless boss' boss' stereotype we sometimes hear.

**“We have a very personal touch ... where our governors were once quite anti-trust, by having a human element of communicating and keeping them informed they are now onboard with us and support us.”**

## **Workload**

The efficiency of governance professionals can affect the impact local tiers have. We sometimes heard in our interviews that during rapid trust growth, governance professional teams can be under a lot of pressure until further capacity is sourced. This sometimes resulted in governance professional teams having to justify their need for more capacity to the trust board. It is vital to consider the workload put upon governance professionals, especially around times of growth, as without this the quality of local governance is at risk.

**“There’s not a lot [of] spare [capacity]... I struggle with my own CPD ... it’s difficult to find sufficient time”**

**“We are looking carefully at the central team so that we are ready for growth ... we know from experience it has to happen this way ... the capacity has to be there when you take schools on.”**

We also heard about the impact of academy committees experiencing periods of time without a clerk. This majorly impacted the workload of the chair and was a clear example of the benefits of formal governance services.

The coordination of governance in trusts – with the governance professional as the catalyst – ultimately allows for the following:

- communication
- consistency
- cohesion

## Consultation with the local tier

Local governors are key individuals during large MAT structural changes, as such changes undoubtedly affect existing academies in the trust. We asked interviewees if they felt consulted during times of significant change and received varying responses. Some believed their views were considered, where there was the opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns and seek additional information where required. Other local governors felt that information was presented to them, however, their views were not a factor of consideration. A minority were not aware of any structural decisions made by the trust board until they happened.

While the trust board is responsible for taking such decisions, consultation lends itself to a transparent process that promotes unity and acknowledgment of local voices. It also combats the perception of a centralised power in the trust unilaterally taking decisions without regard for the communities they serve.

## Volunteer recruitment and retention

The reality for our trusts, with a few exceptions, is that boards are struggling with recruitment and retention. This is unsurprising as 38% of respondents across all governance structures reported two or more vacancies on their board in our 2022 annual governance survey. Difficulty in recruiting jumped from 50% in 2015 to 63% in 2022. This trend is disappointing and when we explore board specifics, this year we found local governors nearly 10 percentage points more likely to struggle to recruit than trust boards (70% versus 61%).

Alongside this challenge is getting the right people around the table for effective governance. Having the right blend of commitment, knowledge, skills, perspectives, and backgrounds allows a board to govern effectively. Ensuring all of these factors are in place at once poses a real challenge to recruitment and retention. So, if boards are creating meaningful impact in their local communities, why are they struggling to recruit? We explored this challenge through our recruitment questions and found that issues revolve around three key areas: getting people onto the board, keeping them there, and progression into leadership.

### Recruitment

Struggles with recruitment included: getting an appropriate number of applicants and the correct category of governor, but also skills required of their board. When examined further, smaller boards, as expected, placed a greater emphasis on their need for skills in new recruits, with larger boards more forgiving.

For larger MATs even when one academy committee had an overly successful recruitment round, this did not extend to other boards within the trust as applicants were bound by their geographic location. In this instance, different MATs communicating within the same geographic regions could be utilised to aid in filling these vacancies.

Interestingly, governance professionals did not report as many struggles in recruiting and were a pillar of support for the local tier. This was for an array of reasons but particularly because of the avenues they were aware of and explored in advertising the roles. Some boards, for example, did not advertise parental vacancies at all. In these cases, or where recruitment was not successful, boards defaulted to personal and professional connections. For example, sometimes headteachers or the chair themselves would use their knowledge to initiate conversations with parents who were deemed as having the potential to contribute to a governing board.

One chair has taken to approaching parents directly to join the board:

**“We had a letter arrive signed by 15 sets of parents regarding a decision the school was making ... instead of replying, I set up a video call to hear from them. There were a couple of parents that were passionate and argued their case very thoughtfully, weighing up both sides so I contacted them. I invited them to join the governing body directly and successfully recruited a parent governor who reflected the local community demographic. They have been an excellent appointment and brought many skills to the board.”**

Aside from recruitment practices, the biggest influence for all trusts on recruitment was the school or trust’s reputation. Joining, or being a part of, a trust with an upstanding reputation amongst their local community resulted in successful recruitment. For these established trusts, schools benefitted from their reputation and so received interest for both parental and non-parental positions, even if in small numbers. It should also be noted that some boards struggled to recruit due to some parents’ lack of knowledge about governance and distrust towards the education system. This is taking time to negotiate but boards in this situation are working towards improving this using targeted interventions to improve visibility and communication.

One trust we interviewed does not experience the same struggles with recruitment as other trusts. Their lead governance professional at one stage had a waiting list for prospective governors/trustees. When asked why this was the case, they brought attention to the reputation the trust holds within their local communities. It also holds a national reputation for its work on environmental sustainability and so attracts volunteers who share the trust’s vision and values.

## Retention

Keeping governors on academy committees for the full term involves a series of factors including workload, confidence, and personal circumstances. Retention for our MATs varied. Those that were successful utilised the associate governor role well, attending meetings as an observer for a year before formally committing to the role. This worked two-fold – it gave visibility of what governance involves and built the confidence of associates in their governance knowledge and support/challenge. Governors recruited in this way had longer-term success.

Governor induction also greatly helped; those with a comprehensive induction experience saw higher levels of retention. A hurdle many academy committees could not resolve was resignation following children leaving the school.

Some full boards still experienced high levels of turnover on their committee meaning there were not enough established governors for knowledge exchange. This caused difficulty for the board as inexperience sometimes threatened morale and retention long-term. Where governors were mostly new, modelling governor behaviour was difficult and learning was pushed to take place outside of the board, if at all. This sometimes led to a lack of engagement during meetings and a low morale from the chairs which is a threat to retention in the long term.

One local chair was passionate about retention, and this began with purposeful recruitment. The recruitment process involved clear advertisement of the role: subject knowledge required, responsibilities and explained that applicants would be required to shadow for a year before formal appointment. This enabled people to have a solid understanding of the role and a substantial commitment to governance before officially joining the board. This has been a success for retention on their board.

## Leadership

The local chairs in our interviews were in leadership positions due to a mixture of succession planning and personal/professional connections. A successful local chair has a crucial role in leading their academy committee alongside communicating with the other academies within the MAT and the trust board. Therefore, ensuring a smooth transition between chairs allows boards to achieve continuity in governance. Any delay can negatively impact effectiveness, compliance, and relationships.

From our interviews, it was clear that succession planning varies amongst different trusts but also schools within the same trust. Boards struggling with recruitment unsurprisingly struggled to have a competent chair lined up. This resulted in personal and professional connections being used to source experienced chairs or those with education experience. In some cases, committees would over-recruit in hopes of having someone willing to take on chairing in the future. One chair, for example, was recruited to an academy committee and was then appointed chair within 3 months of joining the board due to being an ex-headteacher.

Other approaches used to increase the chances of a potential chair included:

- **Modelling** – the chair guiding and supporting governors on how to fulfil their role, including what to read and example questions to ask. This was more in-depth than normally covered during induction and was sustained for a considerable length of time. Generally, the approach was implemented when the majority of governors were new to the board.
- **Board buddying** – local governors being invited to observe other boards in their trust.
- **Empowerment** – giving governors the opportunity to chair elements of the agenda to build confidence and skills while also giving them the time to consider if chairing is for them.
- **Chairing courses** – a limited number of governors described completing a dedicated chairing course to improve their knowledge and skills.

The chair appointment process was similar among most interviewed trusts, with chairs voted for from among the local tier and subsequently ratified by the trust board.

## Innovation and development

Attempts to innovate the structure of the local tier have not materialised at scale, with 9 in 10 respondents having a local academy committee for each school, according to our 2022 annual survey. Therefore, when thinking of innovation, we have championed good practice happening within this widely adopted structure. Our interviews do however also highlight those trusts in the minority who operate a hub-style model.

### Horizontal collaboration

Ensuring a MAT achieves meaningful impact depends both on vertical *and* horizontal collaboration. Vertical collaboration involves ideas being communicated between layers of governance whereas horizontal collaboration is where those on the local level interact and learn from each other. Where both were present, it led to a stronger feeling of unity.

Chairs' forums, a typical feature for all our trusts, played a crucial role in local chairs feeling like they belonged to 'one MAT' as they gained a greater understanding of the wider MAT context. Unsurprisingly, morale was at times much lower for those in non-leadership roles as this horizontal collaboration was less prominent (sometimes only occurring at the annual trust general meeting).

Hub models exemplified this as they were already using horizontal collaboration (through holding safeguarding forums for example). This allowed those in non-leadership roles to share practice and knowledge, resulting in positive feedback and a greater sense of unity. Their vertical collaboration also allowed a local governor representative (who could be in a non-leadership role) to attend their trustee-lead quality of education committee. This offers regular cross-trust working and a form of innovation within local governance. Other trusts we interviewed were also looking to implement similar forums for SEND in the future.

## External collaboration

Although we advise that governance development plans include learning from trusts outside of the MAT, we did not always see this materialise through our interviews. If this was occurring, it perhaps did not flow through to the local tier and may have been isolated to trust-board level learning or awareness. This finding reveals an untapped resource that could be exploited.

Given the fluctuating levels of board capacity and governance skills, this could allow for greater knowledge sharing that is beneficial to many MATs, especially at the local level.

For those that did collaborate externally, it was found to benefit their reputation. For example, one trust pioneer work on environmental sustainability both in their trust strategy and day-to-day operations. This has led to schools contacting the trust for support both locally and nationally. Through working with other schools and trusts, the MAT is demonstrating the benefit of knowledge sharing and the expertise that is available through external collaboration.

## CPD

Training can act as a tool to empower local academy committees to fulfil their specific governance functions. The professional development used by our trusts occurred through usual means, such as via NGA and internal trust-wide training. Some boards also provided their own bespoke training sessions, but it was acknowledged that their size, and as such varied governance skills, made this possible. It should be noted that professional development was more weighted on leadership roles and there was a lack of knowledge as to the engagement in training of other local governors. Those who reported a larger workload were also less likely to have recently completed training.

Governance professionals again proved to be beneficial, in most cases organising and sometimes providing the training received by governors. Positively, the use of skills audits by local academy committees was common and fed into their training needs.

## Conclusions: looking to the future

In carrying out their delegated responsibilities, academy committees act as more than a parental voice but as vital channels of knowledge that can proactively support and challenge headteachers, executive leaders and trust boards in the best interests of the school's pupils and local community. Through delegation of the 4Ss, and other trust-determined responsibilities, local academy committees can ensure school information and progress are sufficiently scrutinised, bringing to life the concept of a community-minded MAT.

Of the delegated responsibilities discussed, headteacher performance management is an area that trusts may wish to consider when reviewing their scheme of delegation. Our conversations and intelligence received via other NGA platforms make clear that local involvement in headteacher performance management offers benefits to all parties, from a "full circle" position felt by local governors to a richer picture of school leader's performance.

Communication between tiers of governance is getting stronger, providing local leaders with a pathway to feedback that is facilitated by experienced governance professionals.



However, opportunity exists to expand communication to ensure it does not fall foul of being tokenistic. Instead, there should be a move to ensuring academy committees are not simply informed but consulted and collaborated with where appropriate. This is also true among academy committees themselves – ensuring those in non-leadership roles can collaborate with others through cross-MAT forums can increase their governance knowledge and skills.

It is clear that governance professionals play an important role in successful communication between the local tier and the trust board. Moving forward, trusts need to ensure they continue to be invested in alleviating concerns about workload, capacity and development. This should be a particular focus during times of rapid growth to ensure consistent communication is maintained.

We have seen that the reputation of schools and the wider trust influences the functionality of the local tier. Those with a better image experience easier recruitment, sustained parental representation, and strong stakeholder engagement. And although we celebrate the success of these boards, it is important for them to avoid being insular. Taking this further, it poses the opportunity for schools in the same geographic area to collaborate with each other to share their expertise and governor resources. As an essential part of the community, local schools working with each other will ultimately benefit children in their local area.

Our discussions have shown that the journeys to successful, meaningful local tiers are rarely, if ever, identical from one trust to another. Trusts across the country employ strategies that build on previous years of learning to develop a scheme of delegation (and its associated practice) that aligns with the organisation’s vision and ongoing trajectory. But as seen throughout our research, in harnessing the power of the local tier, trust governance truly flourishes. While the journey may differ, there is a wealth of experience and good practice that the sector needs to own and standardise.

The Department’s overlooking of the local tier in their recent publication of trust quality descriptions is a disservice to the efforts of the 80,000 local volunteers and a backward step for the sector as a whole. As one interviewee put it: “the strength of the trust stems from mutual cooperation” and without the voices of local governors (implementing trusts’ strategic priorities and acting as a mouthpiece for their stakeholders), the strength of a trust undoubtedly falters.

# Methodology

This research project involved conducting one-hour semi-structured interviews with local chairs, trustees and governance professionals regarding their local governance practices. In an attempt to capture a representative sample, we selected ten trusts of varying sizes, regions and religious characteristics.

We acknowledge that in comparison with national data provided by the DfE (Figure 3), some regions and trust sizes are slightly underrepresented. The trusts interviewed included:

Name	Region	Academies	Approx. pupil number
Cheshire Academies Trust	North West	6	2,000
Exceed Learning Partnership	Yorkshire and Humber	9	5,000
Northern Star Academies Trust	Yorkshire and Humber	9	4,000
The Learning Alliance	West Midlands and North West	9	5,000
Bedfordshire Schools Trust	East of England	10	5,000
Magna Learning Partnership	South West	10	4,000
Anglian Learning	East of England	15	8,000
Dartmoor Multi Academy Trust	South West	18	5,000
L.E.A.D. Academy trust	East Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber	25	11,000
Nicholas Postgate Catholic Academy Trust	Yorkshire and Humber and North East	37	11,000

Figure 2: MATs interviewed by region, size and pupil number

MAT Size	Academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs (excluding SATs)	% Academies (excluding SATs)	Multi academy trusts	% MATs
1 (empty MAT)	160	2%	160	12%
2 - 5	2088	23%	639	48%
6-10	2383	26%	313	23%
11-20	2420	26%	169	13%
21-30	809	9%	32	2%
31+	1313	14%	32	2%
Total	9173	100.00%	1345	100%

Figure 3: Department for Education data for open academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs March 2023.

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