

Welcome to a Multi Academy Trust

A guide for newly appointed trustees



The expert organisation for school
governors, trustees, clerks and
other governance professionals

Contents

Foreword	4
National Governance Association	6
Using this guide	8
1 The schools system	9
2 Good governance – the basics	13
3 Governance in MATs – what makes it different	16
4 The core functions and governance responsibilities	21
5 The informed, effective trustee	26
6 How trust boards work	32
7 One organisation	36
8 Your organisation and its people	38
9 How MATs develop and grow	44
10 Working with external agencies	48
11 Core function one: Trust vision, ethos and strategy	53
12 Core function two: Accountability: knowing your schools and the educational performance of the organisation	56
13 Core function three: Finance and resources	61
14 Core function four: Stakeholder and community engagement	67
15 Resources	70
16 Glossary	73

What is a multi academy trust?

In simple terms, a MAT is where two or more schools have been joined together to form one organisation, governed by one trust board. That trust board is responsible for the schools (academies) within the trust.

The MAT is formed legally as a charitable company limited by guarantee. Academy trusts are not-for-profit companies and classed as exempt charities, meaning they are regulated by a principal regulator – in this case the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) (see chapter eight) acting on behalf of the secretary of state for education. While MATs are not subject to direct oversight by the Charity Commission and do not have to register with it, they are still charities and need to comply with charity law.

Academies receive funding directly from the government and provide a free education to pupils. Although academy trusts are classified in the regulations as ‘independent’, their boards are answerable to the secretary of state for education for their conduct and performance. The individual academies within a MAT are still inspected by school inspection agency Ofsted, and essentially follow many of the same rules as other state schools, including admissions, special educational needs and exclusions. When a MAT takes on a new school, that school legally becomes an academy, if it was not one already (ie a single academy trust).

What is a trust board?

The trust board is ultimately responsible for all of the schools within the trust. Those sitting on the trust board are both charity trustees and company directors and have responsibilities under both the Charities Act 2011 and the Companies Act 2006. These two sets of responsibilities result in similar but distinct duties that we cover later in this chapter. The role of the trust board is covered in chapter six.

Terminology

Throughout this guide we will refer to those sitting on the trust board as ‘trustees’. Whilst these individuals have dual responsibilities – as charitable trustees and as company directors, the term ‘director’ or ‘non-executive director’ can lead to confusion given that some senior MAT leaders are often referred to as ‘director’ – for example: education director, HR director or finance director. The use of ‘trustee’ also serves to highlight the overarching charitable purpose of the organisation.

The most senior employee in a trust is usually termed the chief executive or CEO, although sometimes in smaller MATs is still called the executive headteacher or executive principal, particularly when they also retain the headship of one of the academies in the MAT.

In this guide we refer to this senior executive leader as the chief executive and use the title headteacher rather than principal for those leading a single school (see chapter six for more on staffing).

MATs – how we got here

The original academies programme was intended to provide a completely different model of governance for schools that had suffered persistent, serious underperformance. While the establishment of the Academies Act 2010 brought an initial focus on academisation (the process of converting a school into an academy), the government gradually shifted its focus to schools becoming part of a MAT as the best route for school improvement, with the expectation that any school deemed inadequate by Ofsted would be converted.

While many schools have opted to academise and join a MAT of their own accord during the last decade, others have been forced to by the intervention powers which lie with the secretary of state, and are chiefly exercised by the regional schools commissioners (RSCs). These powers allow intervention in underperforming LA-maintained schools to force academisation through an academy order.

For a more in-depth exploration of the historical development of the MAT system, read NGA's 2019 report – Moving MATs Forward: the power of governance – www.nga.org.uk/moving-MATs-forward

Considering the complexity of your organisation

MATs come in all shapes and sizes, and each trust board will have a different set of challenges and considerations based on the identity and make-up of their trust.

The complexities of running MATs are often thought about in terms of the size of the trust. Trust size tends to be classified by the number of schools within it, but the number of pupils is also a pertinent consideration. For example, schools are funded on the basis of the number of pupils in schools, along with other factors. As such, when the board is considering financial performance, for example, the number

of pupils across the trust will be an important factor, not just the number of schools.

School phase within the MAT will also impact the overall size in terms of pupil numbers: a MAT that only consists of primary schools will likely have fewer pupils per school but may cover more sites when compared to a MAT that only consists of secondary schools. Pupil characteristics and geographical spread can also add to the complexity of the organisation.

Phase and school characteristic

MATs can include schools from different phases and with diverse characteristics: a single MAT could include primary schools, special schools, and secondary schools that are selective and non-selective. In some cases, individual MATs include schools that have a religious character and schools that do not. Different religious authorities, and indeed different diocesan bodies within the same religious authority (such as the Church of England), have taken different approaches to allowing schools to join a 'mixed MAT'.

Stages of education

Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 16. Across the UK there are five stages of education:

Age	Stage	School years	Features
3-5	Early years		Includes state (local authority-funded) nursery schools, nursery classes and reception classes within primary schools, as well as settings outside the state sector
5-11	Primary	Reception – year 6	Sometimes subdivided into infant and junior
11-16/18	Secondary	Year 7 – 11 (up to year 13 if the school has a sixth form)	There are also sixth form colleges just for year 12 and 13 students
Post-16	Further education Higher education		Post-16 education is not compulsory; however, young people must stay in some type of education or training until the age of 18. Work and study can be combined.

All-through schools take pupils from age 4 or 5 to 16 or 18.

Three-tier systems are used in some areas in England, with first school (reception to year 3/4), middle school (year 4/5 to year 7/8) and high school (year 8/9–year 13).

Types of school at a glance

Below we describe the characteristics of the most common types of state school.

Schools maintained and funded by the local authority (LA):	
Community schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ LA is the direct employer of school staff ■ governing board has some employer responsibilities (such as appointing the headteacher) ■ land and buildings owned by the LA ■ LA is responsible for pupil admissions and appeals
Voluntary controlled schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ usually have a religious character ■ LA is the direct employer of school staff ■ governing board has some employer responsibilities (such as appointing the headteacher) ■ land and buildings usually owned by a trust (often a religious body) – the trust can appoint members of the governing board ■ LA is responsible for pupil admissions and appeals
Foundation and trust schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ governing board is the direct employer of school staff ■ governing board is responsible for pupil admissions and appeals ■ land and buildings usually owned by the foundation or governing board

Schools funded directly by the government:**Academies and free schools**

- run by not-for-profit academy trusts
- independent from the LA
- have greater freedoms to change how they are run (eg can follow a different curriculum)

Includes:

- converter academies
- sponsor academies set up to replace underperforming schools
- University Technical Colleges, which cater for 14–19 year-old pupils and have university and employer sponsors

Other types of school:**Special schools**

- can be any type of maintained or academy school
- provide specialist education provision to pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or statement of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Grammar schools

- run by the LA, a foundation body or an academy trust
- select pupils based on academic ability and there is a test to get in

Pupil referral units (PRUs)

- funded by the LA
- cater for children who aren't able to attend a mainstream school or special school

Early years

There is no requirement for children below the age of compulsory schooling to attend school or nursery but many do. Many primary schools have nursery classes attached. Where this is the case, the nursery must follow the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS). The framework sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well.

Post-16

All young people are required to be in education or training until the age of 18. This can be in full-time education (at a school or college), an apprenticeship or traineeship, or part-time education or training combined with one of the following: employment or self-employment for 20 hours or more a week, or volunteering for 20 hours or more a week. There is no statutory national curriculum for post-16 pupils.

Trust boards need to ensure that their post-16 programmes of study are appropriate for their students. If the MAT has more than one school offering post-16 qualifications and these are in reasonable proximity to each other, it may be possible to offer a wider range of qualifications across the whole.

School characteristics

Schools/academies with a religious character:

some schools/academies are designated as having a religious character that may be attached to a particular denomination; eg Church of England, Methodist or Roman Catholic, or religion; eg Jewish. Where this is the case, there is a particular responsibility on the trustees to uphold the religious character of the school and it is likely to have a direct impact on what is taught in religious education lessons and also on how the daily act of collective worship is delivered. If a school has a religious character before it becomes an academy, that will be preserved after conversion.

Selective schools: the vast majority of non-religious state-funded schools are comprehensive schools that are not allowed to use any form of selection to determine their pupil intake up to year 11. However, there is a small but significant minority of secondary schools that are selective and an even smaller minority of selective primary schools.

Unless schools have been designated as being selective, they must not use any form of selection to determine which pupils are admitted. Some schools are selective for a proportion of their students with a particular aptitude for certain subjects, eg music.