Building strong academy trusts

Guidance for academy trusts and prospective converters

May 2021

Contents

Overview

This publication provides non-statutory guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) on creating and growing academy trusts.[1]

Summary

We will update this guidance when appropriate. For example, following the publication of the outcome of the SEND review[2].

Who is this publication for?

This guide is for academy trustees and academy school and trust leaders within the academies system. It also offers advice to governors and school leaders within local authority maintained schools who are considering joining the academies system. It will be particularly relevant for these audiences:

- Existing academy trusts considering future growth
- Existing academy trusts, including single academy trusts (SATs), which would like to merge with another academy trust
- Maintained schools considering conversion by joining an academy trust
- Maintained schools considering conversion by forming a new academy trust

Main points

This document sets out the department's vision and design principles for the academies programme. Central to this is the importance of strong academy trusts. The document is in three sections:

Section one sets out the department's ambition for all schools to be part of strong academy trusts, in strong families of schools. It explains the benefits schools can access from being part of that structure. Linked annexes contain further reading, case studies and examples of best practice, drafted in collaboration with the sector.

Section two sets out the key factors that academy trusts should consider when assessing whether to grow, as well as matters prospective converters will need to consider.

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[1] The term academy trust is used throughout this guidance. In Church academies, the term academy company is used. Please refer to the role descriptors for additional information.
[2] This update will provide further advice for special and Alternative Provision (AP) schools and academies on how they fit into the strategic direction outlined in this document.

Separate advice is provided for faith schools under the Church of England and Roman Catholic Church, as per the memoranda of understanding with those churches.

Section three provides regulatory information for schools, local authorities (LAs), and academy trusts on the criteria Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) use in decision-making, as well as the role of Headteacher Boards (HTBs). Linked annexes provide further information on the support available to schools and academy trusts from the department.

Our vision – strong families of schools

1.   The government's vision is for every school to be part of a family of schools in strong academy trusts. Today over 50% of pupils in state-funded education study in academies. Through the support of strong academy trusts, we have seen many underperforming schools transformed after becoming sponsored academies. As of August 2020, 75% of sponsored primary and secondary academies that have been inspected are 'Good' or 'Outstanding' compared to only around 1 in 10 of their predecessor schools.

2.   Academy trusts exist to advance education. This purpose is cemented in the academy trust's Articles of Association, and the activity to advance education for the public good is contracted through funding agreements between academy trusts, and DfE and ESFA. Academy trusts are established as charitable companies, regulated by DfE, inspected by Ofsted and subject to independent financial audit.

3.   Strategic governance is one of the defining characteristics of academy trusts. By operating under a single governance structure, a strong board of academy trustees can effectively oversee the strategic direction of the academy trust and hold executive leaders to account for the outcomes of all pupils within the academy trust.[3] This structure goes much further in promoting shared practice than other collaborative structures, such as federations or alliances.

4.   The benefits of the academy trust model have become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] Through effective leadership, strong academy trusts have swiftly directed resources to schools in need, allowing schools to remain focused on frontline teaching. Many academy trusts have gone even further, supporting schools outside their academy trust to improve standards for all pupils locally.

5.   We know what makes schools successful: an evidenced-based approach to curriculum, behaviour and teaching, underpinned by sound governance and financial management. Any school can achieve this, but groups of schools working together in a single governance and accountability structure are hardwired to do this. Academy trusts are set up to do just one thing: advance education in their group of schools. Strong academy trusts support school leaders to share and implement the latest evidence-based practice by directing resources through a shared structure. Strong structures (groups of schools) can facilitate better professional development and thus better teaching and improvement for pupils.

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[3] Ofsted (2020), 'Fight or flight? How 'stuck' schools are overcoming isolation: evaluation report', GOV.UK

[4] Ofsted (2021) 'The trust in testing times: the role of multi-academy trusts during the pandemic', GOV.UK

6.   As we move towards all schools becoming part of a family in strong academy trusts, it is important that all academy trusts mobilise the best research and evidence and focus relentlessly on knowledge-building.[5] This means:

- Delivering a well-sequenced, balanced and broad curriculum, ensuring pupils have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life – every school in the academy trust should have a clear curriculum intent, with teachers demonstrating a firm and common understanding of what they teach (the curriculum) and how they teach (pedagogy).
- Creating a culture where good behaviour is the norm, reinforced consistently by all staff, so that classrooms are calm, orderly environments in which to learn – strong academy trusts have clear and consistent approaches to improve attendance and behaviour and use data effectively to identify pupils at risk, so that they can provide additional support.
- Creating the conditions for the best professional development – strong academy trusts lead evidence-based practice, including mastery teaching in English and maths, and deploy this evidence to develop the quality of teaching.
- Supporting or enabling the delivery of high-quality and evidence-based initial training for teachers, in line with the Core Content Framework and early career teachers in line with the Early Career Framework – academy trusts are uniquely positioned to give teacher trainees experience in different schools and settings.
- Creating the conditions to enable teachers and staff to be deployed more flexibly – allowing staff to move between schools within the academy trust, sharing good practice, taking on increased responsibility for specialist subjects and acting as coaches.
- Enabling a manageable work-life balance and paying close attention to wellbeing at all levels, supporting staff to progress and remain in the profession.

7.   By bringing schools together under a common framework in a single legal entity, academy trusts can provide significant support for teacher development, recruitment and retention. The structured and diverse career pathways that academy trusts can offer can help to facilitate career progression and teacher retention. Research from the Ambition Institute indicates that 'teachers and middle leaders tend to achieve promotions earlier in large academy trusts than elsewhere.'[6]

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[5] Bauckham, I. and Cruddas, L. (2021) Knowledge-building – School Improvement at Scale', The Confederation of School Trusts

[6] Ambition Institute (2019) 'People Power: Six Ways to Develop and Retain Educators in Multi-Academy Trusts'

8.   For our most vulnerable pupils, academy trusts can pool resource and expertise to make the interventions needed to improve outcomes. They can offer effective special education needs and disabilities (SEND) support and pastoral care, ensuring no pupil is left behind. Indeed, for [academy trusts running more than one school (measured in 2018)](), disadvantaged pupils made significantly more progress in writing and maths by the end of primary school than the national average for disadvantaged pupils.[7] Strong academy trusts can use the opportunities of school-to-school partnerships to provide rich, rewarding opportunities for children, promoting their wider spiritual, moral, cultural and social development.

9.   Finally, academy trusts can make the most effective use of centralised processes and back-office functions to empower schools to focus on teaching and knowledge-building.[8] Strong academy trusts ensure all staff and functions are focused on improvement, so that central functions empower teachers and leaders to focus on advancing education. The academy trust structure allows administrative functions, policies and financial management to be delivered centrally, allowing school leaders to prioritise education.[9]

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[7] National Statistics (2018) 'Key Stage 2 and Multi-Academy Trust Performance.'
[8] Bauckham, I and Cruddas, L. (2021) 'Knowledge-building – School Improvement at Scale', The Confederation of School Trusts
[9] Greany, T. (2018) 'Sustainable Improvement in Multi-School Groups', DfE Research Report

Building a strong academy trust system

10.   For the reasons set out in section 1, it is our ambition that every child should benefit from the high-quality education that strong academy trusts can provide. We want the academy trust system to continue to grow and develop, with outward-facing academy trusts engaging the whole sector, more schools in strong academy trusts and existing academy trusts becoming stronger.

11.   To achieve this ambition, we will support:

- Maintained schools to join an existing academy trust or to collectively establish a new one

- Strong academy trusts to grow and take on and transform schools with low educational standards in areas of long-standing need. We will also support academy trusts to determine when to grow and when to consolidate, as well as providing the best support to schools already within their academy trust

- Standalone academy trusts (those containing single schools) to join an existing multi-academy trust (MAT) or work with other schools to establish a new one

- Dioceses to work closely with RSCs to implement their own academy strategies

12.   This section provides a practical guide for how schools and academy trusts can make that happen. Additional resources, including the department's offer of support to build and grow strong academy trusts, are listed at Annex B. Annex C provides case studies that may prove useful on specific elements.

13.   This section will be updated over time, with more information for special schools and alternative provision following in the Autumn, after the publication of the outcome of the SEND review. In the meantime, RSCs will advise any maintained special school or pupil referral unit that wishes to explore conversion in advance of this update.

Converting to become an academy

This section provides an overview of the general steps applicable to most conversions. The conversion of church schools follows a different process, in accordance with the relevant diocesan strategy. Church schools should consult their diocese at the outset when considering conversion. For more on the different approach required for church schools, see the section on diocesan conversion.

Essentials

14.   Conversion to academy status is ultimately the decision of the governing body, in consultation with school staff, parents and the local community.

15.   When converting to an academy there are two routes:

- Joining an existing academy trust

- Establishing a new academy trust in collaboration with other schools

16.   To help decide which route is right for you, you should review the academy trust landscape in your local area and communicate with school leaders in similar positions to yourself. More broadly, talking with those who have already been through the conversion process might provide an insight into the required steps.

17.   When making any decision about the future direction of the school, governors should always evaluate:

- What is in the best interests of the children and young people and the wider community

- What is in the best interests of the staff and leadership team of the schools to develop and sustain great teaching and leadership

- What the school can bring to the academy trust, and share with other schools, which would help them all to develop further

- What the school can gain from an academy trust, including what it needs to be able to sustain and improve educational outcomes and financial sustainability

18.   You should seek the support of your local RSC's office, which will be able to advise you on conversion, other academy trusts in the area and the opportunities for your school.

Joining an existing academy trust

19.   Any standalone academy or maintained school can join an existing academy trust. In doing so, the school chooses to be accountable to the academy trust board, which can help build improvement capacity and ultimately improve the overall quality of education. Many good schools also make the decision to join existing academy trusts, bringing their skills, expertise and resource to the wider academy trust.

20.   In most cases, the prospective school and the academy trust make a joint decision as to whether the school should join the academy trust. The governing body and senior

leaders should consider carefully what the academy trust presents for the needs of its community, children in the school and staff, as well as what it can bring to the academy trust. Leaders should evaluate the academy trust options available locally and talk to leaders of other schools about their plans and vision for the local area. Where it is an underperforming school that is looking to join an academy trust, the department would encourage these discussions to happen at pace – but it is most important to establish a clear process of decision making and timescales, keeping the community and academy trust informed.

Some steps to consider include:

1. Any school looking to join an academy trust should contact their RSC's office. They will support you throughout the transition and provide additional advice.

2. The RSC's team can advise which academy trusts it might be worth contacting and may also indicate which academy trusts to avoid considering at this time. This may be because the academy trust already has multiple schools joining them or because they do not have the capacity to support your school. Whilst your school and the academy trust will indicate their preference, the RSC can say no if they feel the academy trust does not have the capacity to support you. RSCs cannot decide that you should join another academy trust unless your school has been judged Inadequate. More information on RSC roles is set out in part 3.

3. As you weigh up potential academy trusts it can be helpful to communicate with the leaders of local academy trusts you are interested in to discuss how they might improve the quality of education in your school. You might also want to talk to other leaders of schools who have joined the academy trust.

4. While carrying out your due diligence or options appraisal it is also important to include your school community in the decision-making process – parents, staff and others. This can be done by inviting parents in to discuss your proposal, writing an open letter, or providing updates on your school website. The department requires a formal consultation period for stakeholders, and in addition involving stakeholders early improves the likelihood of a smooth transition. The Confederation of Schools Trusts has published guidance for maintained schools considering joining academy trusts, which is available here.

5. When you are ready to apply to join the academy trust, your governing body should formally review the options and decide to submit an expression of interest. The academy trust will take the decision to the RSC. Once the RSC has made a decision, the academy trust and school will begin a further process of due diligence and proceed to develop legal agreements, the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) and land transfers. Once these are complete, a formal decision is made by both boards and ratified by the RSC before transfer.

21.   For details specific to your type of transition, please see the following four examples of conversions.

A single maintained school wanting to join an established academy trust

22.   As a maintained school looking to join an existing academy trust, you will also need to begin the process of converting to academy status as set out in Convert to an academy: guide for schools.

23.   This step is easy to complete and the department has recently implemented a new digital process for academy conversion. You will need to factor this process into your conversion timelines and should consider early consultation with your staff and local community.

> ### Trust Partnerships
>
> Trust Partnerships allow local authority maintained schools or academies with only one school to trial membership of a particular academy trust and were initially developed by the sector in response to demand from schools. To encourage more academy trusts and schools to consider running trust partnerships, the department has produced a model trust partnership agreement, in close consultation with trusts and schools that have run partnerships in the past. Schools eligible for the Trust and School Improvement Offer might be eligible for funding to support the partnership. Details are provided in Annex B whilst the full guidance can be accessed here.
>
> The trust partnerships model can be adapted to support a range of scenarios. The model service level agreement can be tailored to the needs of each situation.

A single academy trust wanting to join an existing multi-academy academy trust

24.   The process of a SAT joining an existing multi academy trust is not altogether different. Whilst a SAT will not need to convert to academy status, you must complete a process to transfer your funding agreement to the academy trust you are joining. You should also share this form with your new academy trust: Application form to become a multi academy trust. You may then dissolve the pre-existing SAT and integrate into the new structure.

A group of maintained schools or single academy trusts wanting to join an existing multi academy trust

25.   A group of SATs or maintained schools may also choose to join an academy trust together. Joining an existing academy trust as a group requires a slightly different approach to joining as a single entity. If the schools are serving a new area together – which might form a 'hub' of the academy trust – there are opportunities to design the group, including how the schools work together locally as well as under the direction of the academy trust board. For example, you may work with the academy trust to decide an appropriate regional governance structure, which will allow local schools within the hub to deliver services together.

26.   The academy trust, the ESFA and the RSC's team will want to ensure a balance of schools who are strong (and able to support others) and those who would benefit from support, within each locality of the academy trust. Each school's governing body should take its own decision and undertake its own due diligence engaging with their community, parents and governors.

A diocesan school wanting to join an existing academy trust

27.   Most dioceses have their own academy strategy and schools should work closely with their diocese to decide whether it is appropriate for them to convert. For Catholic schools, the school will be required to join a catholic academy trust. Further information on the role of the diocese and the RSC is provided in section 3.

Establishing a new academy trust

When is there a case for establishing a new academy trust as opposed to joining a current academy trust?

28.   Often, the best option for a school is to join an existing academy trust. However, in some parts of the country there is a need for new MATs to be created by good or outstanding maintained schools or SATs. This is especially important in areas where standards are low and demand for strong trusts outstrips supply. Increasingly, new academy trusts are established with support from the leaders and academy trustees of another academy trust (known as a 'spin off trust'). The department is actively supporting the creation of new academy trusts, especially where they are supported by existing academy trusts, through an annual series of capacity funds (see our policy section at Annex B).

29.   We would encourage any school wishing to set up a new academy trust to talk to their RSC office about whether there is a need for new academy trusts in the area, or whether it might be preferable to consider joining an existing academy trust.

The principles for academy trust formation with schools in the Catholic Church and Church of England are set out in their respective memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the department, linked to [here](#).

As with academy conversion, diocesan schools should consult the diocese on their strategy closely before considering establishing a new academy trust.

To support the creation of new church academy trusts for diocesan schools, the department has launched the Diocesan Trust Formation Pilot, supporting 8 diocesan academy trusts across England in areas of need.

A group of maintained schools or, a mix of maintained schools and single academy trusts, wanting to form a new non-diocesan academy trust

30.   If there is a clear need for a new academy trust in your area, you should begin by establishing a shared plan. This plan will ensure you have a unified approach to the other fundamental building blocks of your academy trust, such as governance, finance, and leadership. RSCs and the ESFA will review the plan for the academy trust when assessing an academy trust's sustainability, as part of their decision making.

31.   Following this, you will need to carefully consider the membership of your academy trust board, as they will be accountable and responsible for establishing the new academy trust, setting the strategic direction and appointing the chief executive officer (CEO). Before formally applying to an RSC for approval, you will need to have identified your members and most of your academy trustees. You should use the [Governance handbook](#) to ensure you are following best practice in establishing your academy trust. [Help to find appropriate academy trustees and members](#) is available through the department.

32.   It is important to consider the relative strengths and areas of need in each of the schools in the academy trust, including teaching staff, curriculum models or in organisational culture or engagement with the community. It is also important to understand the financial, legal and capital position of the schools. You should carry out your due diligence as a group to assure the feasibility of your new academy trust. Once assured, you should submit an application to convert and establish an academy trust.

33.   If approved, you must then complete the memorandum and articles of association for your new academy trust and submit them to the RSC. Templates for this are held here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-model-memorandum-and-articles-of-association Once confirmed with the department you should register your new

academy trust with [Companies House](#). Then you are ready to appoint the allocated academy trustees and launch your academy trust.

34.   If you or one of the schools in the group is a SAT you can consider converting that SAT into a MAT using this [form](#). In this instance the other schools in your group can then join the new academy trust once they have converted.

35.   If you are a maintained school, or there are maintained schools within your proposed group, you must also begin the process of academy conversion, set out in [above](#) and with more detail in this guidance: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools/3-prepare-for-conversion

Growing existing academy trusts

36.   Academy trusts must strike a balance between supporting additional schools and maintaining standards at the schools they already manage. When considering whether to grow, an academy trust will need to consider the geographical fit of schools, as well as the educational, financial and capital risks. The process of considering these factors, before agreeing to a school joining a trust, is often referred to as due diligence, further guidance on which can be found [here](#).

37.   As with the creation of new academy trusts, the growth of church academy trusts will be in accordance with the wider diocesan strategy. Academy trusts and dioceses must work closely with their RSC office when considering growth.

38.   To support academy trusts to grow, the department has offered a series of annual capacity funds. The latest of these, the Trust Capacity Fund 2021-22, was announced in April 2021. Further information is available [here](#).

Essentials

39.   To ensure you are best placed to take on new schools, talk to your RSC office about the possibility of growth. They will want to be sure that you are first able to meet the needs of the schools within your academy trust and to understand your motivations for growth. Similarly, the ESFA will provide advice on your financial plans, to ensure that growth will not impact upon longer-term financial sustainability.

40.   It is the responsibility of the academy trust to seek out the opportunities for growth. The RSC may also offer suggestions. When exploring whether a school might want to join your academy trust you will need to consider the opportunities and risks for both school and academy trust.

41.   The decision about whether a school joins your academy trust should first be taken formally by both the governing body of the school and then your academy trust board before being taken to the RSC for a final decision.

Sponsoring a school

42.   You may be approached by your RSC team to consider sponsoring a vulnerable school where they have served a non-diocesan school with an Academy Order. This means that the school must join an academy trust with the capacity to support it with urgent and sustainable improvement. The Academy Order means that whilst the views of the school are taken into consideration, the decision about which sponsoring academy trust they join ultimately lies with the RSC. The department's aim is that the time from issuing of an Academy Order to transfer should be no more than 9 months. If a church school has an Academy Order, conversations will instead take place between the RSC and the diocese as per the MOUs between the churches and the department.

43.   You will need to be assessed as a sponsor to do this if you are not already, through which RSCs will assess your academy trust's track record of driving improvement. Information on the sponsor process, including approvals, is available here, and the assessment can take place at the same time as the decision about the school with the Academy Order joining your academy trust. You should consider both the short- and long-term needs of the school and work with the LA and RSC on any immediate short-term support to be provided by the LA whilst it remains a maintained school. Once the decision is made about which academy trust will sponsor the school, the academy trust can become more involved in the direct improvement work, finance and governance support, or decisions about staffing often through a contract with the LA. There are also funded tariffs to support schools with an Academy Order once they have joined an academy trust which your RSC will talk to you about.

Converting a school

44.   Non-diocesan academy trusts that have capacity to grow should be active in engaging schools in their local area that may be interested in conversion. To support academy trusts and prospective converters, the department advocates Trust Partnerships, a sector-led initiative which allows schools to collaborate with trusts as a means of determining whether conversion with that academy trust is right for them.

45.   Both parties should consider the short- and long-term needs of the school and academy trust when deciding whether to grow through voluntary conversion. You should also be clear on the opportunities growth presents to both parties, as well as the capacity you will need to support schools joining, what the school(s) bring or what they need from the academy trust, and how the academy trust board or leadership may need to adjust once the school is in the academy trust. For further discussions about growth and

planning, please contact your RSC's office, and/or the ESFA as appropriate, using [the online contact form](#).

Academy trust transfers and mergers

46.   MATs can grow by consolidating with other academy trusts (trust transfers). Increasingly small academy trusts are choosing to join (or merge) together to form a bigger academy trust which can effect greater change across the area. Three sample case studies that highlight the different approaches and considerations of MAT mergers are provided at Annex C.

47.   In legal terms most academy trust transfers, or mergers, involve the academies from one academy trust legally joining another, rather than establishing an entirely new legal body with associated costs. This is particularly true where a standalone academy trust transfers into a larger MAT or where a smaller academy trust or academy trust with very vulnerable schools joins a stronger academy trust. But where two academy trusts of equal size or capacity are coming together in a voluntary merger, there may be a wish for both trusts to present more of an equal merger of academy trusts – for example, through a consultation on vision, a name change, some changes to academy trustees and review of leadership structures.

48.   When considering consolidation, academy trusts should:

- **Discuss merger options with academy trustees and contact at the RSC's office:** Talk to your relationship lead at the RSC's office about your plans and ensure you work with them to develop your proposal and any critical timescales. Your RSC lead will be able to advise you on the timelines for RSC consideration and approval as well as any further work you might need to do to strengthen the merger proposal.

- **Establish the right way of working:** Establishing positive and transparent ways of working with your future colleagues early in the process is key.

- **Think about governance and leadership:** Growth of any kind brings with it changes at various levels of governance. Think carefully about the changes and efficiencies you might make to these roles as part of your merger. You will also want to consider whether there is the need for any interim governance or shared working group to oversee the merger process.

- **Consider the academy trust's financial situation and plans:** The academy trust's three-year budget forecast, which is provided to the ESFA, will be a good indicator of the academy trust's financial pictures over the

coming years. You can contact the ESFA [here](#) if you would like to discuss what your finances might mean in the context of consolidation.

- **Get the right legal advice:** Model documents for academy transfers are published [here](#), but getting legal advice early in the process helps academy trusts understand any risks, sensitivities and issues early. Developing an MOU between the two academy trusts has proved valuable in some of the most successful mergers to date.

- **Think about your community:** Think carefully about how you are engaging your staff and talking to them about the opportunities that will arise.

RSC decision making and departmental support

49.   Building on the principles outlined in section one, this section sets out the department's ways of working and decision-making processes that govern academy trust growth, conversion and intervention. Academy trusts and prospective converters should familiarise themselves with this regulatory guidance, as a crucial part of how the department will build a strong academy trust-sector.

What is the role of departmental and non-departmental bodies in the academy trust sector?

Regional School Commissioners

50.   The remit, powers and core functions of RSCs are set out in the [RSC decision making framework](#). The Secretary of State's powers set out within this framework are exercisable by RSCs in the Secretary of State's name.

51.   RSCs escalate decisions to the National Schools Commissioner or the relevant minister that are: sensitive, raise issues of interpretation of government policy, or relate to urgent safeguarding or extremism concerns.

52.   In addition to their core functions RSCs can:

- facilitate intra- and inter-regional collaboration between academy trusts

- work closely with a number of partners, including leaders from the education sector, Ofsted, local authorities and local dioceses

- make strategic decisions on academy trust growth and consolidation (in recognition of the fact that, in a maturing academies sector, not all strong academy trusts can continue to grow)

- support diocesan academy trust strategies and ensure they are implementable

- make strategic decisions on the formation of new academy trusts

- work with academy trusts and schools on strengthening their internal capacity, including making decisions on which academy trusts should benefit from particular programmes of support

The role of the Headteacher Board

53.   RSCs take decisions within the delegated framework. Each RSC can seek advice from an HTB. HTBs are made up of experienced headteachers, CEOs and other sector leaders who can provide advice to RSCs on the decisions they make.

54.   The HTB members are non-executive; the members' role is to provide advice to the RSCs. Decisions are ultimately for the RSCs to take, but they can be informed by the views of their HTB. Some of the members of HTBs are elected by their peers and they should contribute their local and professional expertise. Specific care should be taken when advising on diocesan academies and RSCs should consider introducing additional expertise to provide HTB advice on these decisions.

55.   A record of all HTB meetings is taken and published, including a register of interests. Where a HTB member has a conflict with a decision being made, they will not be part of the discussion or receive any related papers.

56.   Each HTB provides advice to support their RSCs on key decisions based on members' prior experience and local knowledge. This can involve assessing school performance data (where available), reviewing the governance structure of a new academy trust or challenging a school's improvement plan. RSCs and HTBs also make use of local networks to gather information to ensure a robust decision is reached.

57.   In addition to advice from HTB members, RSCs will receive and review representations from parents, teachers and the local community, prior to making decisions. When working with church schools and academy trusts, RSCs will closely work with the diocese to support and inform diocesan academy strategies.

58.   HTB minutes, agendas and other papers are now available on GOV.UK.

The role of the ESFA

59.   The ESFA oversees the arrangements that provide Parliament with assurance that academies operate to high standards of propriety and regularity. The ESFA oversees the Academies Financial Handbook and academy trusts' compliance with its requirements and can sanction academy trusts for any breaches against these.

60.   At all times, the RSC works closely with the ESFA. The ESFA will routinely share information about academy trusts with RSCs and the ESFA is consulted by the RSC on all decisions around academy trust growth.

Academy trust oversight by the RSC and ESFA

61.   The department and the ESFA have responsibilities to oversee both the performance of trusts and their finances. RSCs and their officials meet regularly with

academy trusts, providing both the department and the ESFA with important oversight of a trust's circumstances. When working with diocesan trusts, meetings between the trust and the department will always include diocesan representation.

Educational statement and values

62.   A common, clearly articulated educational statement or vision and values for its pupils and its communities is an essential component of all academy trusts.

To this end, RSCs may test whether, and the extent to which, an academy trust:

- has a clear, quality-driven educational vision, which is embedded into their curriculum and school improvement models and communicated clearly to pupils and parents

- considers and shapes the life-chances of their pupils beyond their time with the academy trust

- has leaders that have a clear understanding of excellent teaching practice for all pupils, including those with additional needs such as special educational needs, or those with English as an additional language

- has the capacity to deliver sustainably, that is within the budget, staffing, and other resources available to the academy trust

- has a clear view of the profile and needs of the workforce, including professional development and managing workload and wellbeing;

- has clear medium and long-term development plans for how they build capacity within their academy trust and their schools

What do RSCs look for when assessing academy trusts and making decisions?

63.   All academy trusts are expected to have the capacity to run strong and improving schools, implement good leadership structures and sustainably manage finances. Before approving a decision about growth, RSCs will consider the evidence about the educational and financial capacity of the academy trust. In doing so, they will consider the particular circumstances and maturity of the academy trust.

64. The following box sets out the essentials that RSCs and the ESFA will consider in relation to decisions around academy trust expansion, academy trust creation and school conversion. These essentials only apply to non-diocesan academy trusts and schools. In diocesan cases you must instead work closely with your diocese and always factor in the broader diocesan strategy for trust expansion and school conversion.

Essentials:

In an established academy trust looking to grow RSCs and the ESFA will consider whether the academy trust has a:

- clear vision for its pupils and community of schools

- strong governance structure that can effectively adapt to the challenges of bringing in a new school

- great record of pupil attainment and progress

- well-proven school improvement model including principles of teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment

- clear vision for the workforce, including professional development and managing workload and wellbeing

- sustainable financial structure

- good fit with schools in the local area that could be brought into the academy trust

In converter or academy schools looking to join an academy trust the RSC will:

- consider whether the proposed academy trust is suitable considering the unique circumstances of the new academy and capacity of the academy trust

- encourage communication between the academy and the academy trust leaders to ensure there is clarity on both sides of the process

- support the integration of the school into the shared governance structure of the chosen academy trust.

In the process of becoming a new academy trust the RSC will consider whether:

- the school has a clear enough vision to consider exporting it to other schools

- there are other strong academy trusts in the region which the converter could join, rather than begin afresh

- the school is likely to be able to support schools in need in the local area

65.   The following section considers in more detail, the key questions RSCs will consider when assessing an academy trust's capacity and suitability for growth.

Governance

66.   The department places stringent standards of governance on members and academy trustees. These requirements are set out in the Academies Financial Handbook and Governance Handbook, both of which are overseen by the ESFA. Links to these are provided in [Annex B](#).

67.   Additionally, the department publishes two competency frameworks for governance and clerking. These [documents](#) set out the skills, knowledge and behaviours which sit beneath the six key features of governance and lead to effective governance.

68.   All academy trust boards must have a governance professional/clerk who is able to provide informed governance support and advice to the chair and the board, as well as providing administrative functions required to ensure the board is compliant in its duties.

RSCs and the ESFA will expect an academy trust's governance arrangements to be in line with any mandatory requirements before approving any new academy arrangement. They will pay particular attention to whether and the extent to which:

- academy trustees understand the core features of effective governance and have the skills to deliver them in line with the seven principles of public life (the "Nolan Principles")

- the board and the academy trust executives can clearly articulate how the board sets the vision, ethos, and strategic direction of the academy trust (the board and the academy trust executives will not serve this role in Catholic diocesan academy trusts)

- the board has sufficient skills and diversity to perform its role effectively

- executive leaders are held to account sufficiently for the performance of schools, teachers and pupils

- there are clear arrangements in place to oversee the financial performance of the academy trust and make sure public money is well spent;

- the academy trust has a clearly defined and published scheme of delegation which sets out the split of responsibility for governance functions between members, the board, executives, and any local governing bodies or other committees (the scheme of delegation and what it means in practice should be well understood by the academy trust board and senior leaders in the academy trust and its schools)

- the governance of the academy trust is informed through effective mechanisms to listen to, understand and respond to the views and needs of key stakeholders, including parents, carers, staff and the communities which its schools serve

- the board has conducted a thorough (preferably external) review of its own effectiveness and readiness for growth, and in particular has a clear view of the skills it will need in its next phase of growth and robust plans in place to fill any gaps through training or recruitment

- there are effective procedures in place to identify, monitor and mitigate risk at both school and academy trust level, and an academy trust's

> scheme of delegation makes clear what risks are managed at what level so no issues 'fall between the gaps'
>
> - the academy trust has a clear idea of how the way it manages risk may need to change as the academy trust grows and has made a balanced assessment of the risks and opportunities expansion might pose to its existing schools

Performance and accountability

69.   An academy trust must demonstrate the ability to achieve good pupil outcomes, achieve strong pupil progression, and enhance pupils' life-chances.

> **To this end RSCs will consider how an academy trust:**
>
> - uses information and intelligence to hold leaders to account for performance against the government's key performance metrics
>
> - is making effective use of any additional metrics or measures within the organisation
>
> - understands the needs of different student groups being educated within the academy trust
>
> - ensures that information about children's progress at school is well understood and acted upon throughout the organisation
>
> - applies common information management and reporting standards and processes across all schools in the academy trust to enable comparison and aggregation of data at all levels of the organisation.

School and academy trust improvement model

70.   When agreeing whether an academy trust has the capacity to grow, RSCs will want to explore with the academy trust that its model for school improvement is embedded within the organisation and is not overly reliant on individual establishments or personnel.

71.   In diocesan cases the RSC will first discuss this with representatives of the diocese, before communicating directly with the academy trust. The relationship between the diocese, their schools and RSC is set out in the MOUs between the department and the:

- [**Catholic Church**](#)

- [**National Society of the Church of England**](#)

> ### RSCs will therefore consider how an academy trust:
>
> - improves the schools within the academy trust, and whether this practice is underpinned by a clear school improvement model
>
> - assesses the needs and development challenges for all the schools within the academy trust, irrespective of their current performance levels
>
> - undertakes internal scrutiny such that the depth of the operational and strategic challenges it faces are fully understood
>
> - understands how the roles of individual leaders will need to change as the academy trust grows
>
> - has systems in place that support the development of each and every member of its staff and manages the talent within their organisation
>
> - manages staff workload and wellbeing
>
> - manages opportunities for flexible working
>
> - is clear on what age-related expectations are, good teaching principles, curriculum and assessment principles and other forms of best practice throughout the academy trust
>
> - will contribute to wider system improvement by developing and retaining good links with other academy trusts, teaching schools and a wide range of stakeholders

Finance

72.   For an academy trust to be successful and deliver a diverse curriculum and strong results for its pupils, it must have strong and sustainable finances.

RSCs and the ESFA will want to see evidence that enables them to assess whether:

- there is sufficient financial expertise to oversee the academy trust's financial operations

- an academy trust's operating costs have been effectively benchmarked against those of other academy trusts

- financial planning is integrated within the academy trust's overall strategy for its school(s)

- the academy trust's vision remains deliverable and resilient to operational changes in income, such as changes in pupil numbers or characteristics, or the implications of the introduction of a national funding formula (scenario or sensitivity analysis can be used by trusts to evidence this)

- there are robust contingency plans in place, with clear triggers for enacting these plans

- the academy trust's accounting officer has sufficient oversight and control of their finances to enable them to achieve value for money and ensure propriety with public money

- any plans to grow the size of the academy trust are credible – and the academy trust understands that while growth can bring about economies of scale, there are also costs associated with centralising functions

- centrally delivered functions achieve value for money for constituent schools when they are delivered effectively locally

- auditor's reports demonstrate that the academy trust's financial processes are robust

Strategic fit

73. An in-depth understanding of an academy trust's vision, governance, performance and accountability, improvement model and financial position is necessary for an RSC to have an accurate sense of an academy trust's capacity and readiness to grow.

74. When working with diocesan academy trusts it is still important for the RSC to consider their vision, governance, performance and accountability, improvement model

and financial position but the strategic fit of the academy trust within the region is not a factor as diocesan trusts will only configure their own schools into the academy trust.

In addition to and separate from this assessment, **RSCs need to consider the strategic fit of the academy trust with the region** in which it operates or plans to operate. To this end, when considering the growth or consolidation of academy trusts RSCs will examine

- the existing profile of academy trusts operating within an area, and whether further growth to one academy trust may prohibit future developments, such as the future entry of an alternative high-performing academy trust into the region

- how to avoid the geographical isolation of individual schools within an academy trust, which may lead to performance or financial difficulties

- how to support academy trusts to develop geographical clusters of schools, if they think there is capacity to do so effectively

- how to avoid arrangements which leave a single academy trust running all or an overly significant proportion of schools within a local area

- how to avoid individual schools – especially small ones in rural areas – becoming isolated outside of an academy trust, with limited options for joining an academy trust in future

Annex A – further reading

This guidance document is indebted to a vast and pre-existing research base on which the points that have been made are founded. Much valuable work has been undertaken by experts and professionals in the sector, which we strongly recommend academy trust leaders, teachers and academy trustees engage with. A sample of some of the available resources are linked to below though this list is not exhaustive.

School improvement

- Bauckham, I. and Cruddas, L. The Confederation of School Trusts (2021) Knowledge-building – School Improvement at Scale'
- Ofsted (2020) 'Fight or Flight: How Stuck Schools are Overcoming Isolation'

Curriculum

- Ofsted three phase curriculum research (2017-2018) Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3
- Ofsted's (2019) School_inspection_handbook_-_section_5.pdf
- GOV.UK (2015) Examples of good curriculum planning at key stage 3: Ofsted key stage 3 curriculum survey 2015: 8 good practice case studies
- Education Endowment Foundation, EEF Teaching and learning toolkit: Teaching and Learning Toolkit

Teaching

- ITT Core Content Framework (2019)
- Early Career Framework (2019)
- Coe, R., Aloisi, C., Higgins, S., & Major, L. E. Durham University, (2014) What makes great teaching. Review of the underpinning research.
- Coe, R. Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, (2013) Improving Education: A triumph of hope over experience
- Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., Saunders, L. & Coe, R. (2015) Developing Great Teaching
- Davis, P., Florian, L., Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Farrell, P., Hick, P., Rouse, M. (2004) Teaching Strategies and Approaches for Pupils with Special Educational Needs: A Scoping Study
- Education Endowment Foundation (2018) Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit
- Education Endowment Foundation (2016) A marked improvement? A review of the evidence on written marking.
- Mccrea, P. (2018) Expert Teaching - What is it, and how might we develop it?

- Rosenshine, B. (2012) Principles of Instruction: Research-based strategies that all teachers should know in *American Educator*, 12–20.
- Stoll, L. (2015) 'Three Greats for a Self-Improving School System: Pedagogy, Professional Development and Leadership: Executive Summary'
- National Foundation for Educational Research (2017) Teacher Retention and Turnover Research, Research Update 2: Teacher Dynamics in Multi-Academy Trusts
- Behaviour
- GOV.UK (2020) Behaviour and Discipline in Schools
- Bennett, T. (2017) Creating a Culture – How School Leaders Can Optimise Behaviour
- Education Endowment Foundation (2018) Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit
- Sibieta, L., Greaves, E. & Sianesi, B. (2014) Increasing Pupil Motivation: Evaluation Report.

The Benefits of the Trust Structure

- Muijs, M. and Sampson, K. (2021) The Trust in Testing Times: the role of multi-academy trusts during the pandemic'
- Ofsted (2019) Multi-Academy Trusts: Benefits, Challenges and Functions
- National Governance Association, Association of School and College Leaders and Browne Jacobson (2019) Taking the Next Step: Joining a multi-academy trust
- Greany, T. (2018) 'Sustainable Improvement in Multi-School Groups'
- Armstrong, P. (2015) 'Effective School Partnerships and Collaboration for School Improvement: a review of the evidence'
- Chapman, C. and Muijs, D. (2013) 'Does school-to-school collaboration promote school improvement? A study of the impact of school federations on student outcomes'

Professional development

- Ambition Institute, (2019) 'People Power: Six Ways to Develop and Retain Educators in Multi-Academy Trusts'
- Kennedy, M. (2016) How does professional development improve teaching? *Review of Educational Research*

Organisational advantages

- Charlotte Woods, et al. (2013), 'Perfect Partners or Uneasy Bedfellows? Competing Understandings of the Place of Business Management within Contemporary Education Partnerships'

Annex B – departmental resources and guidance

Trust Assurance Framework

The department's Trust Assurance Framework is a self-assurance tool designed to help academy trusts understand their current capacity to support and drive school improvement. The framework looks at several areas based on research about what works in trusts and similar networks of schools internationally. The framework serves as a useful prompt to use in improvement planning. You can access the current version of the framework.

Trust Capacity Fund 21-22

In April, we announced the third round of our successful Trust Capacity Fund. This competitive grant scheme will provide up to £24m funding over the 2021-22 financial year to help trusts develop their capacity to grow, with a focus on areas of higher need.

It will help support more schools – particularly underperforming schools – to be part of a family of schools in strong academy trusts, so that every child can benefit from the high-quality education that these provide.

Detailed guidance has been published about what the fund is for, who can apply, how to apply, and how applications will be assessed.

Trust Partnerships

Trust Partnerships are a sector-led arrangement where academy trusts work together with schools, testing whether a formal partnership will benefit both parties. These arrangements are principally aimed at schools which want to trial membership with a particular academy trust ahead of formally joining them, accessing academy trust networks and services at an agreed cost. The guidance, including a list of possible services to be provided, can be accessed in full on GOV.UK.

Trust Partnerships are not a replacement for converting to academy status or a routine preliminary step before conversion takes place. Instead, they are designed to provide an opportunity for schools to work together with a nearby academy trust on a time limited basis before formally joining the academy trust.

ESFA resources

The ESFA oversees the arrangements that provide Parliament with assurance that academies operate to high standards of propriety and regularity. The ESFA oversees the

Academies Financial Handbook and academy trusts' compliance with its requirements and can sanction academy trusts for any breaches against these.

See the following:

- [Academies Financial Handbook](#)

- [Academy Trust Financial Management Good Practice Guides](#)

- [Due diligence in academies and maintained schools](#)

- [School resource management](#)

Governance resources

The ESFA also oversees academy governance. An outline of the standards to follow is set out in the following:

- [Governance Handbook](#)

- [Academy Trust Governance – Structures and Role Descriptors](#)

- [A Competency Framework for Governance](#)

- [Clerking Competency Framework](#)

- [Academy trusts: governance](#): links to relevant guidance and resources

Behaviour hubs

Behaviour hubs will enable schools and MATs with exemplary behaviour cultures and practices to work with partner schools and academy trusts that want and need to improve pupil behaviour.

The Hubs programme will provide senior leaders in over 500 schools over the 3-year programme with support to bring about improvements to pupil behaviour. For academy trusts, the offer includes one-to-one support to consider academy trust-wide approaches to behaviour management.

For more information, please visit [behaviour hubs](#).

Annex C – case studies

1. Ensuring effective teaching in every classroom: **The Durrington Academy Trust**

2. Curriculum planning: **Outwood Grange Academies Trust**

3. Curriculum intent and practice: **Dixons Academy Trust**

4. Finance: **First Federation**

5. Diocesan trusts: **Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust**

6. Trust Partnerships & associate membership: **Potteries Education Trust**

7. Behaviour: **Maiden Erlegh Trust**

8. Trust Merger 1: **Westcountry Schools Trust**

9. Trust Merger 2: **Epworth Education Trust**

10. Trust Merger 3: **Anglian Learning**

1. Ensuring effective teaching in every classroom

The Durrington Academy Trust has taken a 'simple and focused' approach to school improvement allowing teachers and leaders to focus on their core purpose – to ensure that teaching is effective in every classroom, every day. The academy trust has identified six evidence-informed pedagogical principles, which contribute to great teaching:

- challenge

- modelling

- explanation

- practice

- questioning

- feedback

Teachers are expected to implement these principles well in their lessons, but in a way that best suits their teaching style.

Subject teachers have identified the form of feedback that best suits their subject and then use these principles to state what effective feedback will look like in their curriculum area, rather than following a generic policy. As a result of this, there is now a greater emphasis on 'live marking'; that is, teachers giving pupils formative, short, written (or oral) feedback in the lessons as they are doing their work, meaning that teachers do not always need to take home sets of books to mark.

Not only has this reduced teacher workload, but it has proven itself to be an effective form of feedback, as it is in the context of the lesson; experience to date is that pupils are responding well to this immediate feedback.

The senior leadership team keep these approaches under constant review. They question what they are asking teachers and leaders to do and if it is taking them away from their core purpose. In this culture, teaching and learning constantly drives all that they do.

2. Curriculum planning

The Outwood Grange Academies Trust adopts a model of collaborative planning across its seventeen secondary and five primary academies. It leads the Yorkshire and Humber Maths Hub working with multiple partners across all phases and is involved in the Teaching for Mastery programme, including the textbook programme.

The maths leads from all their schools work together, which provides the means for them to develop a deep understanding of the conceptual levels required in each maths area which they can then pass onto the teachers in their own schools. All secondary teachers then contribute to the design of the materials to teach the concepts in key stage 3 and 4. The primary teachers have the support of a high-quality textbook scheme. Whilst methods for teaching the 'required standard' content is discussed and agreed between maths leads, it is left to individual teachers to exercise their own professional judgment and skills in delivering the lessons. Planning sessions act as effective continuous professional development and collaborative working also means that workload is shared.

This means there is a coherent maths programme across the academy trust, with a consistent standard but teachers are free to teach in a way that can be adapted, according to their professional judgement and to pupil needs.

3. Curriculum intent and practice

At Dixons Academies Trust, the curriculum aims to achieve equity for all, by taking students beyond their own experience and exposing them, regardless of background, to knowledge that was once reserved for society's elite. At Dixons, the curriculum principles include challenging social inequality by instilling shared and powerful knowledge, verifying this knowledge through learned communities and all with the aim of enabling children to better understand and interpret the world. Skills and understanding are seen as forms of knowledge. At each Key Stage, the curriculum focuses on closing gaps, early intervention, and developing the core literacy and numeracy skills for success at that level. Curriculum breadth and cultural capital are key.

The curriculum at Dixons is led by, collaborated on and delivered by high-quality subject specialists. Dixons ensure the grammar of each subject is given high status this means that the specifics of what students learn matter and the traditions of subject disciplines are respected.

At Dixons, teachers are held to account for delivering purposeful and informative lessons, designed to equip students with knowledge. Dixons develop teacher talent through disciplined, deliberate and intelligent practice and coaching. For example, they practise key techniques collectively as a staff twice every week during morning meetings and engineer more tailored practice during one-to-one coaching sessions. Teachers plan and practise their approaches together – just as they do for their curriculum.

4. Funding central functions and services

First Federation does not have a '**traditional top-slice arrangement**' – its six schools' contributions range from 3-5% proportionate to its **'need'**, as defined by the academy trust. Of its total budget, the academy trust uses 3% to pay for '**central functions**' meaning the executive principal, a business manager and a central administrator. The senior teaching leadership roles have been redefined, so that they are focused on improving teaching and learning and remain free from wider bureaucracy. At the same time the central office and business arm is kept lean and streamlined so that the maximum amount of funding can be directed to supporting teaching and learning.

To realise savings, all major contracts for services are negotiated as one academy trust, as opposed to six smaller schools. At individual school level, each school is allocated a budget for consumables, curriculum resources, professional development and supply cover. Schools can then bid to the **'centre'** for further money for maintenance projects, who will tender for the best price on their behalf.

By avoiding a large back-office business structure, the academy trust is able to reduce the amount of top slice for central costs. This enables it to put more money into the front line making small primary schools (90-100 pupils) sustainable and viable.

5. Diocesan trusts

Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust, formerly Carmel Education Trust, is (as of April) an academy trust of 26 schools that will grow to 35 schools (5 secondary and 30 primary) within the next 12 months in line with diocesan policy. Established in 2011 as an academy and a MAT in 2013, the academy trust has gone from strength to strength with all schools moving to good or outstanding when inspected by Ofsted after joining the academy trust. The academy trust has a school-centred initial teacher training programme research school, maths hub, computer hub and a science learning partnership.

The academy trust is built on the principles of 'Subsidiarity', 'Solidarity' and to 'Serve the Common Good'. It highly values professional agency and collaborative leadership where decisions are centrally developed and locally delivered. All leaders have a voice, and a sense of humour is highly recommended. The CEO, deputy CEO, chief operating officer and governance manager always make themselves available to provide ongoing support, advice and direction. During the pandemic they gave the opportunity to non-trust heads to join their daily briefings so that they felt supported during a time of crisis.

One of the academy trust's initiatives was to improve the learning environment and IT connectivity in a small, designated rural school. They established a new high-speed broadband connection within the school's village using funding from the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's initiative. Investment in classroom computers and a new wifi network improved the overall quality IT experience for staff and pupils. This resulted in a better learning environment for staff and pupils and provided the whole village with improved connectivity.

Ofsted inspections reflected the strong support given by the academy trust:

- 'The trust provides excellent support to the school'

- 'School leaders are quick to take advantage of the considerable expertise within the trust'

- 'The school receives targeted challenge and support from the trust, which has been very effective in supporting the interim head of the school to drive forward improvements.'

'They (leaders and staff) appreciate the support and professional development they have received from leaders within the school and from the trust. Consequently, the school has a culture that is aspirational to all pupils and staff.'

6. Associate membership

The City of Stoke-On-Trent Sixth Form College (16-18 Academy converter, Ofsted Good, April 2015) established Potteries Educational Trust (PET) in September 2017. At the same point, Biddulph High School, a standalone academy converter located in Staffordshire, joined the newly formed academy trust as an associate member.

PET view their associate membership as the first step in joining the academy trust, providing schools with the opportunity to join the community, find out everything they need to know about the academy trust, and begin to plan for transition to full membership.

The scheme offers the following, free of charge, to associate members:

- an 18-month period during which both school/academy and the academy trust are able to assess whether they are a good fit for each other through effective and longer-term due diligence

- no formal governance of the associate member school

- an opportunity for the associate member school leadership team and governors to participate in academy trust committees and leadership forums

- access to shared resources, learning communities, and professional development opportunities alongside our full members, including joint teaching and learning events, trust-wide CPD days and safeguarding teams who are provide help and guidance

- during the response to Covid-19, the academy trust has also provided support and guidance to current associate members

Associate members can also gain access to specialist services at a reduced cost through service level agreements.

During their time as an associate member, Biddulph High School worked collaboratively with the academy trust to develop curriculum areas together through shared teaching as well as shared use of each other's facilities. The school went on to apply to transfer and joined the academy trust as a full member in September 2019.

A further two schools in Staffordshire, Werrington Primary School (Ofsted Good, October 2012) and Moorside High School (Ofsted Good, January 2017) are currently associate members of the academy trust and have both recently submitted applications to convert and join the academy trust as full members.

7. Behaviour

Maiden Erlegh Trust is an example of how having an executive team with a clear, specific vision can engender a sense of purpose and direction in all schools across the academy trust. For example, the academy trust has a single behaviour framework underpinned by shared values and a commitment to positive relationships, and each school expresses these values within their own environment meeting the needs of their children. This means the policy can encompass new or arising issues within a school population, but still remain consistent.

For example, one school within the academy trust increased supervision during unstructured break time and lesson transitions in order to respond to incidents of poor behaviour. This process might not be necessary at another school within the academy trust, but it was implemented with the same language, values and ethos that underpin the behaviour framework in order to maintain consistency.

Further, the academy trust utilises behaviour and attendance data from all its schools to inform trust-wide improvements. For example, identified patterns of disruptive behaviour and persistent absence led to the development of an internal alternative provision unit and the expansion of the academy trust attendance team. Data-informed approaches ensure that any issues are identified quickly and accurately, leading to the development of specialised support for those that need it. Their use of evidence-based systems to combat challenging behaviour helps them to support schools that are new to the academy trust who might face a variety of challenges, achieving consistent results.

In addition to evidence-based initiatives, fostering positive relationships was a key factor in facilitating rapid improvement in Maiden Erlegh School, and continues to be essential to its ongoing success and adherence. In focusing on relationships in this way, Maiden Erlegh Trust has built a culture of mutual respect and care and created an environment that allows teaching and learning to happen without impediment. Pupils, teachers and school staff understand what good behaviour is and, importantly, they can *see* why it is good.

8. Trust Merger Study 1

Operating across the South-West, Westcountry Schools Trust (WeST) was established as a MAT in 2010 and has since grown to 22 schools across the South-West (7 secondaries, 15 primaries) through voluntary conversions, sponsorship and MAT mergers.

On 1 September 2019, WeST welcomed all five academies in the Plym Academy Trust as part of a strategic voluntary merger process. Following conversations between both academy trusts and the South-West RSC office, it became clear there was a strong strategic narrative behind the benefits of merging both trusts together: increased opportunities for pupils and staff, a greater depth of school improvement capacity and a more robust, single operating structure.

Within these merger discussions, another key consideration was the future role of Plym Academy Trust's CEO. By reviewing the opportunities created through the merger, Plym Academy Trust's CEO was appointed as WeST's Director of Primary School Improvement, taking responsibility for all primaries within the academy trust. This role created significant school improvement capacity within WeST and retained the expertise of a skilled CEO.

In early 2019, the RSC for the South-West approved Plym Academy Trust's merger with WeST at a headteacher board meeting. Following this approval, the South-West RSC team continued to work closely with both academy trusts to deliver the merger, ensuring the academies were part of the same trust structure in time for the start of the 2019/20 academic year.

As part of WeST, the five academies previously in Plym Academy Trust remain Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding and have provided much valued primary capacity within WeST's new trust structure.

9. Trust Merger Study 2

Epworth Education Trust was established as a multi-academy trust with a Methodist designation in November 2020 following the voluntary merger of two smaller multi-academy trusts: Wesley Methodist Trust and Acorn Trust. Epworth Education Trust now operates five Ofsted rated Good and Outstanding primary academies across the North-West, having sponsored the sixth school into its academy trust on 1 December 2020.

Wesley and Acorn's CEOs met as part of leadership training in 2018 and the two academy trusts began informal discussions about mergers as a way to consolidate and strengthen the capacity of both trusts. These discussions led to a working party from both academy trusts, consisting of staff and trustees, to explore the challenges and opportunity a merger would present.

For both academy trusts, the alignment of vision and values, central trust functions and governance structures were vital, as was finding a way to champion the Methodist designation of one of the pre-existing trusts. They agreed a Methodist designation would underpin Epworth's ethos and become a part of the master funding agreement and Articles of Association. The Methodist characteristic can also be seen in the Epworth's governance model, as three out of the academy trust's five members hold a Methodist office and were appointed as members by the Methodist church.

Bringing together the expertise and capacity of Wesley and Acorn via a voluntary merger has enabled Epworth to champion its new academy trust ethos to be '*where the need is most'*. This ethos now governs the work Epworth undertakes with its academies and their communities in the North-West as it grows with both faith and non-faith schools.

10. Trust Merger Study 3

Established in 2016 and operating across Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk, Anglian Learning is a multi-academy trust of 14 academies working across both primary and secondary sectors. Since 2016, Anglian Learning has been involved with a variety of growth projects, the most recent of which was its voluntary merger in 2020 with Chilford Hundred Education Trust (CHET) – a multi academy trust operating four primaries and one secondary in Cambridgeshire.

In 2018, Anglian Learning and CHET began working together on local teacher training initiatives. At this time, CHET was talking to several academy trusts about a possible merger, considering each academy trust's approach to governance, school improvement, leadership and central trust functions to see whether it aligned with its own core principles. Following these inquiries, CHET identified Anglian Learning as an academy trust which shared similar aims and values, along with the capacity to develop school improvement and effective leadership structures across its academies.

In the year before the merger was completed, CHET and Anglian Learning worked together through a range of leadership meetings, joint trust inset days and community engagement. This helped both academy trusts develop a clear understanding of what a merger would mean for the trusts, their academies and their communities. During this time, both academy trusts collaborated on sharing best practice across a range of school improvement initiatives, allowing the capacity within both academy trusts to be developed, strengthened and celebrated.

Anglian and CHET's considered approach to a voluntary merger has resulted in successful working partnerships, a stronger single academy trust structure and greater long-term benefits for the academies and their communities.

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