



Department  
for Education

# **Academies Insight Project: understanding system capacity**

**Research report**

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**Social Science in Government**

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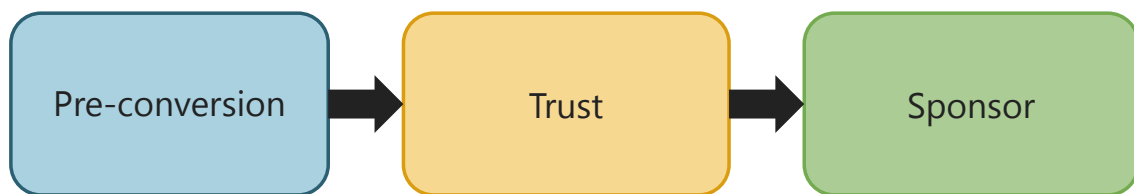
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# 1. Introduction

Improving school standards and tackling underperformance is a Department for Education (DfE) commitment and priority, and a key element of their strategy to provide a good school place for every child (DfE 2016b, DfE 2017c, DfE 2017d). This has meant a strong focus on quality and raising standards for all students (particularly the most disadvantaged) in a diverse school system.

The school system is diverse, with one in three schools now being an academy. Single Academy Trusts (SATs), Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and sponsors operate in the academy sector. Schools can move from maintained status to academy status through academy conversion, becoming a SAT or part of a MAT. Trusts can apply to become a sponsor. If sponsor status is awarded they can take on underperforming schools and support them to improve. This three-stage journey from maintained school to sponsor can be conceptualised as shown below:

**Figure 1: Three-stage journey**



The Academies Insight Project was commissioned in January 2017 to engage with good and outstanding schools, trusts and sponsors throughout the school system to gather a deeper insight into the academy sector and this academy-sponsor journey<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This work was carried out to ISO 20252 standards.

## 2. Objectives

Within its broad remit to gather insights from the school system about the academy sector and this academy-sponsor journey, the Academies Insight Project aimed to provide the DfE with a greater understanding of the reasons why schools choose to continue with maintained status or move to academy status, and why SATs/MATs choose to remain as a SAT/MAT or become a sponsor.

The specific objectives of the research were therefore:

- To explore the motivations, concerns and attitudes amongst schools, SATs/MATs and sponsors about moving into the academy sector and/or along the academy-sponsor journey;
- To gather a better understanding of the decisions that schools, SATs/MATs and sponsors take when moving into the academy sector and/or along the academy-sponsor journey;
- To understand the barriers that prevent schools from moving into the academy sector and SATs/MATs from moving along the academy-sponsor journey;
- To identify and profile the different school, trust and sponsor types in the school system; and,
- To explore the effectiveness of the DfE's current sources of information for schools, SATs/MATs and sponsors about the academy sector.

### 3. Overview of report

The Academies Insight Project was commissioned to provide insight into schools, trusts and sponsors from across the current school system, with a particular focus on their motivations, concerns and attitudes towards the academy sector and the academy-sponsor journey. For the purpose of this research the academy-sponsor journey was conceptualised as having three stages: pre-conversion, trust and sponsor.

Findings from the project, taken from a descriptive online survey and followed up with in-depth interviews, have been arranged into four sections; the first three reflect the three stages of the academy-sponsor journey and the fourth cuts across these stages to discuss information needs.

- The **Pre-conversion** section considers both good and outstanding maintained schools who are eligible for voluntary conversion, with a distinction drawn between those who have stated that they are not looking to become an academy and those who have stated that they are interested in becoming an academy.
- The **Trusts** section provides the views of SATs and MATs who do not have sponsor status, with results split by trust type where possible.
- The **Sponsors** section explores the opinions among trusts with sponsor status.
- The **Information** section reflects on the information needs and habits of all groups in relation to academies and sponsorship. It discusses where school leaders go to get information, their experiences of communication with the DfE, and areas where information is lacking at the moment.

A series of thirteen different profiles were also identified through qualitative thematic analysis and into which most participants fell (table 1). The biggest differentials between these profiles were: i) attitudes towards the academies system; and ii) perceived need to change based on both an assessment of future direction of travel and the local area context in relation to capacity, demand and network of other local schools.

The report also contains a series of wider reflections and a conclusion. These sections include thoughts on future steps regarding policy delivery and communication, suggestions for additional research in the area, and a summary of findings about perceptions of the academy system and the academy-sponsor journey.

**Table 1: Profiles overview**

	<b>Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy</b>	<b>Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy</b>	<b>Trusts</b>	<b>Sponsors</b>
No perceived desire to change/grow	<p><b>Ideologically opposed</b> These head teachers are less likely to believe in the merits of the academy system. They are likely to see limited or no benefits to pupils and are put off by their perception that academies are business-like.</p>	N/A	<p><b>Comfortably observing</b> These school leaders are happy to remain a SAT and have no desire to be a MAT or sponsor. Some are cautious about losing their ethos or autonomy if becoming part of a MAT. <i>These are mostly SATs.</i></p>	<p><b>Comfortable sponsors</b> These sponsors may already sponsor a school or have set up a free school, but do not have plans to grow and are happy to remain as they are.</p>
No perceived need to change/grow	<p><b>Practically opposed</b> These are mostly outstanding schools (and in interviews stress the fact that they are doing well). They already feel they experience the benefits of the academy system and feel they have nothing to gain but perhaps something to lose by converting.</p>	<p><b>Cautiously interested</b> These head teachers are interested, yet afraid of a perceived loss of autonomy and the financial implications of becoming a SAT, forming a MAT or joining a MAT. <i>These are mostly primary schools and other (e.g. SEN) schools.</i></p>	<p><b>Cautiously engaged</b> These school leaders are engaged in the sector and about becoming a sponsor but risk averse, including being concerned about the capacity necessary to grow or sponsor.</p>	<p><b>Supporting on own terms</b> These school leaders are community champions and may be 'informal sponsors' on top of their formal sponsoring. They would grow but are concerned about capacity drain.</p>
Perceived need to change/grow	N/A	<p><b>Reluctantly engaged</b> These head teachers feel obliged to become an academy as they would otherwise feel left behind without a choice. They want to become an academy on their own terms rather than being forced.</p>	<p><b>Growing on own terms</b> These school leaders are keen to grow as a MAT, but not become a sponsor. They are concerned about standards slipping and the financial implications of sponsoring.</p>	<p><b>Sponsor philanthropists</b> These are school leaders who feel that they need to sponsor in order to help underperforming schools.</p>
Desire to change/grow	N/A	<p><b>Inspired and keen</b> These head teachers are engaged and can see the benefits to both staff and pupils. Often, they have submitted an application to convert or are in the process of doing so.</p>	<p><b>Academy champions</b> These school leaders are 'believing forerunners' and eager to sponsor. It can feel too complicated or there have been matching issues which have stopped them so far.</p>	<p><b>Wanting to grow</b> These are mostly sponsors who would like to grow but have not yet been matched or have experienced matching issues.</p>



## 4. Methodology, participants and interpretation

### Methodology

Research for the Academies Insight Project was conducted over two stages: a descriptive online survey and in-depth interviews with school leaders.

- Descriptive online survey (7 February 2017 – 23 March 2017)

A descriptive survey, hosted online by Ipsos MORI, and completed by 145 school leaders. The survey was not intended to replicate a quantitative survey methodology, but instead designed as a vehicle through which to reach a broader number of schools in order to gain an indication of weight of opinion. It also acted as a tool for recruitment and to inform follow-up in-depth interviews. The sample included good and outstanding maintained schools, SATs, MATs and sponsors. It also comprised maintained schools who had withdrawn an application to convert. Responses were received from a wide range of school leaders, including head teachers, chief executive officers (CEOs), executive heads and principals. It should be noted that this range of roles gave a variety of different and equally valid perspectives.

- In-depth interviews (20 February 2017 – 31 March 2017)

Follow-up in-depth interviews conducted by telephone with 55 school leaders including head teachers, CEOs, principals and deputy principals, all of whom had completed the descriptive survey and stated they were happy to be contacted for an interview. Quotas were set by phase, type, region and stage along the academy-sponsor journey to ensure a broad spread of characteristics.

### Participants

Table 2 provides a breakdown of participation in the descriptive survey and in-depth interviews. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to confirm their school type, and state whether they were interested in, or had submitted an application to, convert to an academy or become a sponsor.

**Table 2: Sample**

	<b>Number of completes to the descriptive survey</b>	<b>Number of in-depth interviews</b>
Pre-conversion, not looking to become an academy	37	7
Pre-conversion, interested in becoming an academy	50	15
Trusts without sponsor status	37	20
Sponsors	21	13
Total	145	55

## **Interpretation of findings**

### **Descriptive online survey**

Results from the descriptive survey are incorporated throughout this report. They are based on all respondents to the survey unless otherwise stated. Please note that data has not been weighted and that, given the small base sizes, results are presented as raw numbers and not percentages. The results of the descriptive survey, including any comparisons between respondent sub-groups, should therefore be treated as indicative only. As such, findings should be used to give a broad indication of the most common responses, and a flavour of weight of opinion. Further research is required to generate results that would allow for robust statistical analysis.

### **In-depth interviews**

Qualitative research approaches (including in-depth interviews) are used to shed light on why people hold particular views, rather than how many people hold those views. It is used to explore the nuances and diversity of views, the factors which shape or underlie them and the ideas and situations in which views can change. The results are intended to be illustrative rather than statistically reliable. Given the qualitative nature of the data collected from the in-depth interviews, this report aims to provide detailed and exploratory findings that give insight into the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of people, rather than statistical evidence from a representative sample.

It is not always possible in qualitative research to provide a precise or useful indication of the prevalence of a certain view, due to the relatively small number of participants generally involved. Therefore, the views of proportions of the qualitative group should not be extrapolated to the population at large. The qualitative report therefore states the strength of feeling about a particular point rather than the number of people who have expressed that thought. Having said this, it is sometimes useful to note which ideas were discussed most by participants, so we also favour phrases such as "a few" or "some" to

reflect views which were mentioned infrequently and “many” or “most” when views are more frequently expressed. Where views apply only to a subset of participants any proportions used in our qualitative reporting (e.g. a “couple of” participants), should always be considered indicative, rather than exact.

Verbatim comments have been included in this report to illustrate and highlight key points, i.e. those views either shared by a large number of participants or reflecting the strong views of a smaller subset. These comments present the attitudes, experiences and perceptions of participants. Where verbatim quotes are used, they have been anonymised and attributed by geographical location and group/respondent-type (e.g. Primary, North of England, Pre-conversion and interested in converting).

## 5. Findings

The following findings from the research are presented in four sections: **Pre-conversion**, **Trusts**, **Sponsors** and **Information**.

In the **Pre-conversion**, **Trusts** and **Sponsors** sections, findings have been grouped by respondent and their place on the three-stage journey from pre-conversion to trust and sponsor as outlined in the introduction. **Information**, the fourth section, pulls together findings from across the range of respondents and details how they gather information about the academy sector and this journey.

### A. Pre-conversion

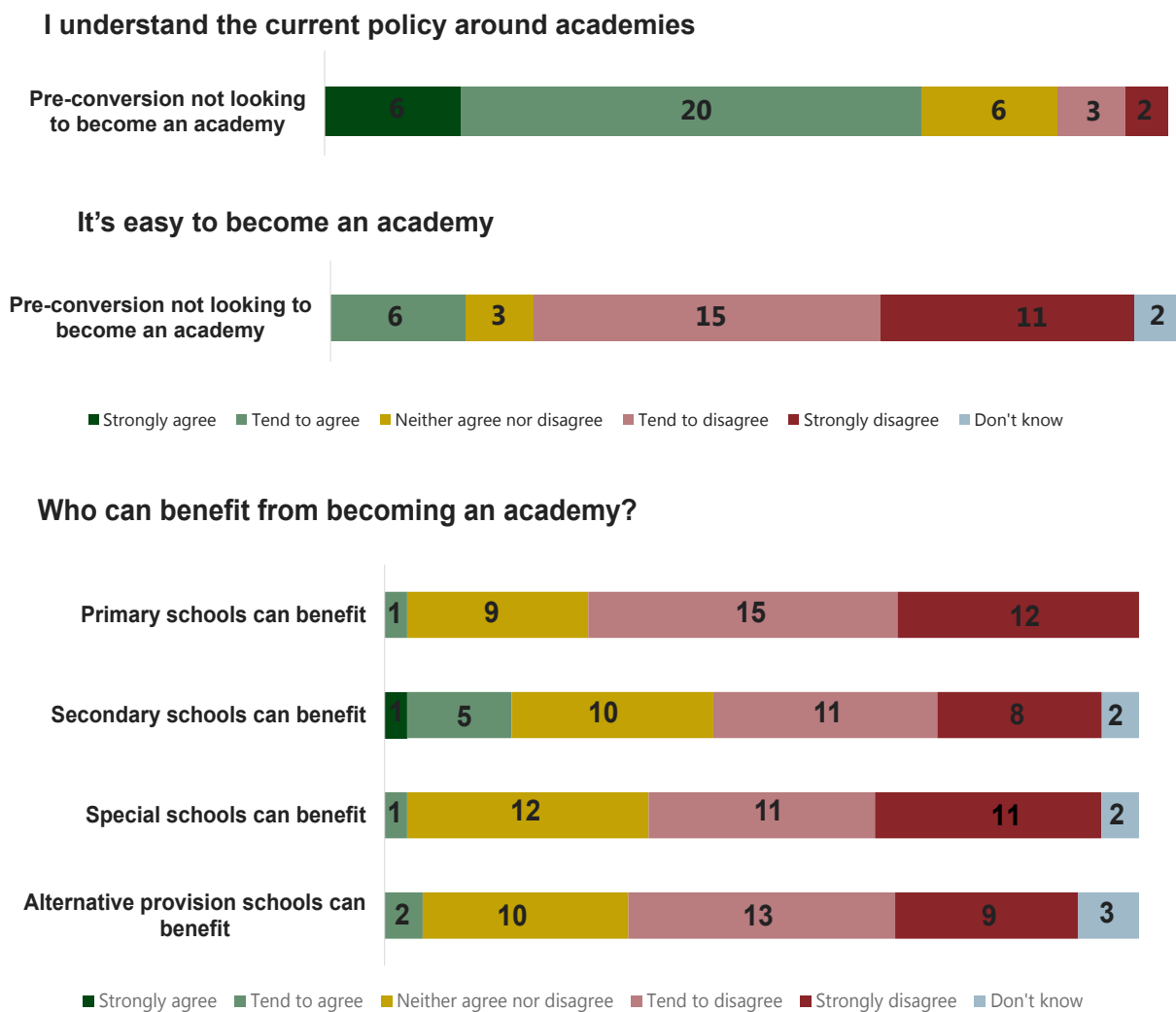
#### i. Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy

This chapter presents findings and analysis from head teachers in good and outstanding maintained primary and secondary schools who stated in the descriptive survey that they were not looking to become an academy.

##### **Attitudes towards academies**

As outlined in figure 2, the majority of school leaders in this group responding to the descriptive survey said they thought that they understand the current policy around academies, but this was still the lowest proportion out of all groups of school leaders. However, the majority said they disagreed that it is easy to become an academy and said that they tended to disagree or disagreed that primary, secondary, special or alternative provision (AP) schools can benefit from becoming an academy. This disagreement was the highest among all the groups of survey respondents.

**Figure 2: Understanding and ease of becoming an academy, and who can benefit – pre-conversion not looking to become an academy**



Base: Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy (37) Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

Participants were asked for the top three words that came to mind when thinking about academies. These associations underpinned many of their attitudes, perceptions, experiences and actions relating to the academy system. The most commonly cited words from pre-conversion not looking to become an academy were: ‘business’, ‘pointless’, ‘unnecessary’, ‘forced’ and ‘privatisation’. These associations were explored further during in-depth interviews and are synthesised below:

- **Business:** was mentioned by heads of maintained schools due to the structure of academies being likened to a business. There was a perception that, in becoming an academy, head teachers’ job roles change to include taking greater responsibility for the business aspects such as pay roll or HR, and trusts have the new business-like position of CEO.

- Pointless: some maintained school head teachers did not perceive there to be any educational benefits in becoming an academy compared with their current structure and viewed converting as pointless.
- Unnecessary: similarly, this was related to the feeling that their schools already experience the benefits of collaboration and were well supported by their local authority, resulting in there being no perceived need to convert.
- Forced: was used partly in recognition that some underperforming schools are forced to become academies through an academy order<sup>2</sup>; and because some felt that becoming an academy was inevitable and would be forced on all schools in the future in some form.
- Privatisation: like 'business', this related to the reduced role of local authorities in the academies system, the observation that some academies had relationships with private sector organisations, and the perception that they were managed as a business rather than a school in a more traditional sense<sup>3</sup>.

## Appetite

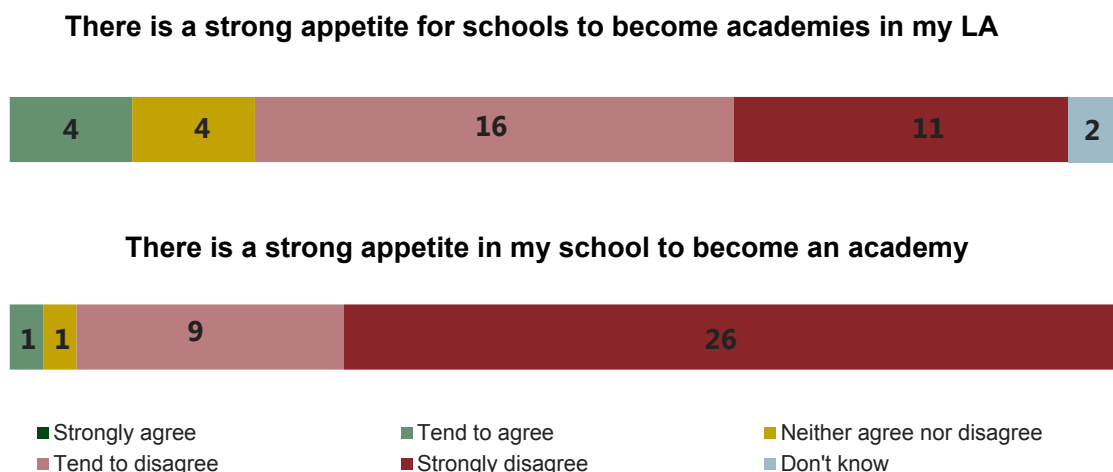
As could be expected, participants who were not interested in becoming an academy felt there was not an appetite within their schools, nor their local authority, to convert.

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<sup>2</sup> DfE (2016a:8) guidance states that, "The Secretary of State has a duty to make an academy order in respect of any maintained school that has been judged inadequate by Ofsted, to enable it to become an academy".

<sup>3</sup> All trusts are exempt charities whose charitable objective is the "advancement of education for public benefit". As such, trusts and sponsors are non-profit organisations (DfE 2014:7).

**Figure 3: Appetite to becoming an academy – pre-conversion not looking to become an academy**



Base: Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy (37)  
Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

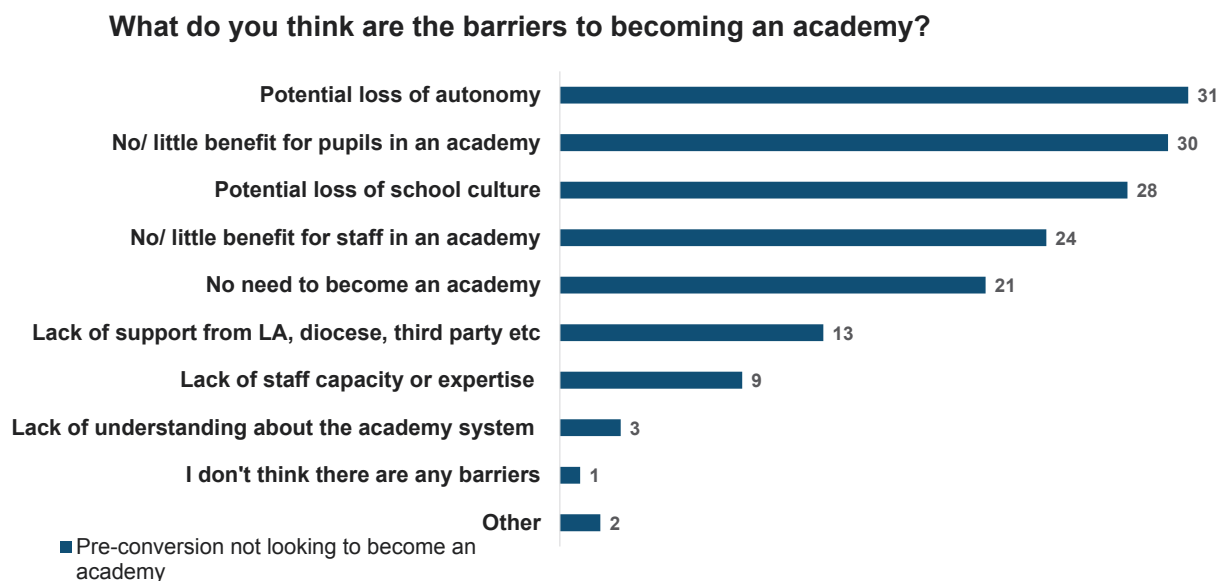
Findings from the in-depth interviews with head teachers suggest that head teachers and their staff in these schools were primarily against becoming an academy due to their opinion that the academy system does not guarantee improved educational outcomes for pupils. Furthermore, interviewees reported that governors were concerned about their role in the school, the educational outcomes of pupils and the potential loss of the school’s ethos if entering the academy sector. Schools at this stage also tended to have a strong and positive relationship with their local authority, and already worked well in close collaboration with a network of other schools. As such, it seemed that some of the benefits perceived by academies of those with academy status – for example increased collaboration – may not be as relevant in this context. Indeed, some participants noted a sense of wanting to feel ‘loyal’ to their local authority.

Our local authority is very supportive and we have a strong family of schools, we don't need to become an academy to work together, we already do. (Primary, North East London and East of England)

I am starting to become aware of some advantages of becoming an academy, particularly a MAT with our primaries, but staff will be very negative about any change unless it can be proven to be totally the right move for the children - rightly so. Even then they will not trust the process and will worry about... new contracts etc. (Secondary, South London and South East England)

As figure 4 shows, the two most commonly cited reasons by head teachers in this group in the descriptive survey for not converting were the perceived potential loss of autonomy and a perception of no or little benefit for pupils.

**Figure 4: Barriers to becoming an academy – pre-conversion not looking to become an academy**



Base: Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy (37)  
Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

Parallel to this, the three most cited reasons to remain a maintained school were i) already collaborating informally with other schools ii) good educational outcomes in the current structure, and iii) sufficient autonomy already. For the pre-conversion schools not interested in converting, there was therefore a sense that there were no benefits in the academy system that they did not already have and so saw no reason to change. Indeed, some respondents were very strong in their opinions about this and, personally, they were not aware of the benefits:

Academies are a massive distraction and there is no evidence to suggest they have an impact on standards or progress. They are purely about political dogma and the privatisation of education. Improving teaching and the status of teachers should be the focus, not school structures, ideology and vested interests. (Primary, North East London and East of England)

No advantage in becoming an academy with a large top slice<sup>4</sup> of income lost for services. No evidence to show they do any better than maintained schools. (Secondary, South London and South East England)

<sup>4</sup> MATs and sponsors can choose to 'top-slice' a percentage of funding from their schools' budgets. This is taken from revenue streams such as the General Annual Grant (GAG) and, on average, MATs top slice 4.6% from each of their academies for central services (DfE 2017a:7).



A number of head teachers in this group also explained that they would be more interested in becoming an academy if they could become a SAT and retain their independence from other schools. However, they felt that this was not an option.

In addition, head teachers – especially those of primary schools – had pre-conceptions about and were mistrusting of the perceived need to give finance to a pooled central resource, and perceived there to be too great a focus on finances over educational outcomes. Furthermore, despite trusts having to publish their accounts and reports (DfE 2014:7; DfE 2017b), some school leaders were concerned about how the money is spent.

The more I hear about the corruption and money wasted in the academies and free schools programme, the more vehemently I am opposed to the whole idea. When I speak to head teachers of academies, I am struck by the lack of autonomy they have; ironically this is one of the many myths peddled about academies. (Primary, North East London and East of England)

I would very much like schools to become standalone academies so that they are not led by a CEO but by their own head teacher. I have had four and a half years' experience as a head of a sponsored school. I would not particularly relish the idea of being part of a growing MAT where money seems to be more important than the children. (Primary, North East London and East of England)

When asked how potential barriers could be overcome, the majority of head teachers in this group reported feeling that these, in their opinion, were fundamental issues that could not be rectified.

### **Emerging profiles**

Those head teachers of good and outstanding maintained schools not interested in becoming academies largely fell in to one of two broad groups: those ideologically opposed to conversion, and those who pragmatically did not feel the need to consider conversion. If they could more clearly see the positive impact of academies on educational outcomes for the pupils in their schools, however, both would be more likely to consider conversion.

**Table 3: Profiles – pre-conversion not looking to become an academy**

Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy	Ideologically opposed	Practically opposed
Description	These head teachers are less likely to believe in the merits of the academy system. They are likely to see limited or no benefits to pupils and are put off by their perception that academies are business-like.	These are mostly outstanding schools (and in interviews stress the fact that they are doing well). They already feel they experience the benefits of the academy system and so feel they have nothing to gain but perhaps something to lose by converting.
Driven by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A desire to see evidence that academies improve educational outcomes</li> <li>• A belief that a school's focus should be on the pupils and education, and less on 'business-like' functions such as payroll</li> <li>• A belief that a head teacher's role is not to manage the finance and HR, but to focus on school improvement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some concern among governors as to what becoming an academy would mean for them</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A concern that becoming an academy would mean loss of autonomy and school culture if asked to join with another school under a MAT structure</li> <li>• A positive relationship with, and receive good quality services from, their local authority               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent existing partnerships and collaboration with other schools                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perfectly happy as they are</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Tend to be distrusting of partnerships, for example primaries fear 'secondary takeover' and SEND schools fear their needs won't be recognised</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Future	These head teachers would only become an academy if they were persuaded by evidence of improved outcomes under an academies system, or if there was no option to remain a maintained school.	These head teachers would consider becoming an academy if existing partnerships and services from the local authority changed or deteriorated, if they were convinced by evidence of improved educational outcomes, or if they could find another school who matched their ethos and vision with whom to form a MAT.
Illustrative quotation	Why are we doing this [converting to academies]? The last people to benefit are the children. The quality of teaching and leadership is so important – why would you send your best teachers to another primary school? You can share ideas, which is great, but we already do this now. (Primary)	Primary and secondary run very differently. Continuous education will happen if there is one head teacher. Secondaries should be 'MAT'ed' together. Primary and secondary have different issues. I don't go to a secondary head with my issues. (Primary)

## **ii. Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy**

This chapter presents findings from good and outstanding maintained schools who stated an interest in becoming an academy in the descriptive survey but who have yet to apply, and those who had already submitted an application to become an academy.

### **Attitudes towards academies**

Like those not interested in conversion, the majority of head teachers in this group again agreed that they understand the current policy around academies but tended to disagree that it is easy to become an academy (figure 5). These respondents were more likely to strongly agree that secondary schools, followed by primary schools, can benefit from becoming an academy. However, their conviction was less strong compared with school leaders in existing trusts and sponsors.

**Figure 5: Understanding and ease of becoming an academy, and who can benefit – pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy**

**I understand the current policy around academies**

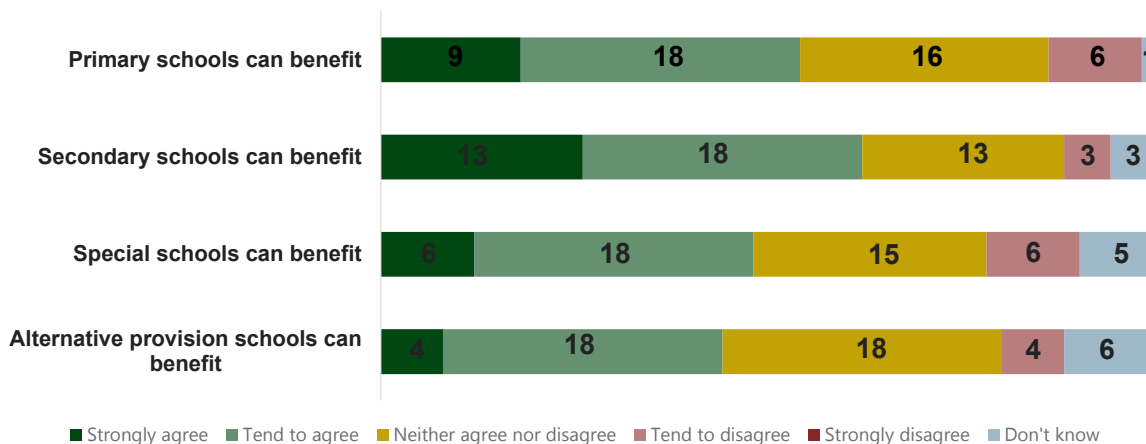


**It's easy to become an academy**



Legend: Strongly agree (dark green), Tend to agree (medium green), Neither agree nor disagree (yellow), Tend to disagree (light pink), Strongly disagree (dark red), Don't know (light blue)

**Who can benefit from becoming an academy?**



Base: Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy (50) Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

When asked for their top word associations with academies, the most commonly cited words among primary, secondary and special school head teachers who have *stated an interest* in becoming an academy but have not applied were: 'business', 'pointless', 'unnecessary', 'forced' and 'privatisation'<sup>5</sup>. The most common words cited among primary, secondary and special schools head teachers who have already *submitted an application* were: 'collaboration', 'opportunity', 'independence', 'scary' and 'innovation'.

<sup>5</sup> These words are the same as those that were most commonly cited by head teachers not interested in converting.

These associations underpinned the attitudes, perceptions, experiences and actions relating to academies and were explored further during in-depth interviews and are synthesised below:

- Collaborative: was used in both positive and negative contexts. Positively in relation to the potential for greater collaboration by working together in a MAT; negatively due to concerns that when schools join or form MATs, they might stop collaborating with schools outside the MAT<sup>6</sup>.
- Opportunity: related to the feeling that academies were operating more strategically and could open new doors and possibilities such as procuring services independently or professional development opportunities for staff.
- Partnership: the narrative around partnership was associated with the ability to collaborate and work closely with other schools, creating better opportunities for the school, teachers and pupils.
- Control: in some cases, control related to the new freedoms such as control of curriculum and finances. However, it was also associated with some heads' perceptions of losing control where decisions could instead be made by business managers or CEOs rather than the head teacher or head of school.
- Business: as with the not interested group, this was mentioned due to the structure of academies being likened to a business. This was, again, due to the perceived change in head teachers' job roles including taking responsibility for the business aspects such as pay roll or HR, and the new business-like position of CEO.
- Independence: related to the positivity about being independent and autonomous from their local authority.
- Scary: was mentioned with regard to concerns about the 'scary' responsibilities that would come with independence and accountability of the head's new role as trust leader.
- Innovation: like opportunity, related to the feeling that the academies system is innovative, and opens the possibility of innovative solutions to existing and future issues.

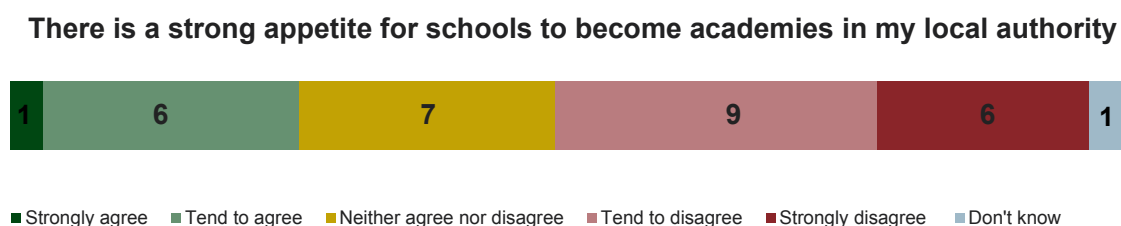
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<sup>6</sup> However, in the DfE Academy trust survey (2017a:28), two thirds of MATs stated that all individual academies within their MAT have regular relationships with schools outside it, and a further 16% said most of them do. In total 83% of MATs say they collaborate with schools outside their trust, with only 4% saying none of their academies work with schools outside their trust.

## Appetite

When asked in the descriptive survey if there was an appetite for schools to become academies in their local authority, the results among this group were mixed. Head teachers reported that while some local authorities were open to the concept of academies and were proactive in encouraging their schools to consider the options that were best for them, other local authorities had stated a preference for conversion within a set number of years. On the other end of the spectrum, however, some local authorities were reported to be less positive about their schools converting into academies.

**Figure 6: Appetite to becoming an academy – pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy**



Base: Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy (50): Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

The in-depth interviews indicated a more positive outlook overall: head teachers did not feel forced to consider conversion but were able to take their time in considering their options. It was reported that governors, who are key decision makers within schools, wanted to be well informed before making a definite decision, with head teachers presenting them with clear benefits and drawbacks to get governors on board. A number of head teachers described the detailed lengths at which senior staff and governors would agonise over which was the right conversion process and model for them.

## Reasons for becoming an academy

### *Evolving motivations*

Motivations to convert for head teachers in maintained schools interested in becoming an academy differed from those who had already converted. The top three motivations identified by head teachers of maintained schools interested in becoming an academy in the descriptive survey were related to pupils and teachers: i) better educational outcomes for pupils; ii) collaboration with other schools/academies with a similar vision; and iii) professional development opportunities for staff<sup>7</sup>; while the reasons given by respondents from schools who had already converted to academy status were related to better

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<sup>7</sup> These were in particular contrast with head teachers not interested in converting who selected 'no/little benefits to pupils in an academy' as the second most common concern in becoming an academy.

running of the academy: i) increased autonomy; ii) ability to procure own services; and iii) financial benefits.

Having worked in a model of collaboration with other schools for 3 years, I can see the benefits and can share data and go to each other for advice, rather than the local authority. Schools can share best practice. (Primary, North East London and East of England)

There is benefit for pupils through raising standards through joined up vision and practice... [We can] streamline resources. I have 60 staff with no admin or HR support. ... My staff are already getting CPD. Taking the best of what we already have and using it better. Raising standards for pupils and quality CPD, peer to peer work. (Primary, West Midlands)

Among head teachers who expressed an interest in joining the academy system, their reasons for wanting to do so were grounded in two separate ways of thinking. They either i) felt there were potential benefits of conversion; or ii) wanted to convert on their own terms for fear of otherwise being forced to accept an unfavourable conversion at a later stage in the future.

### ***Potential benefits***

The main potential benefits of becoming an academy were perceived to be enabling a smoother transition between school phases, collaboration through access to resources and sharing good practice, and choice of commissioning services.

Academies enable schools to improve on current practice through collaboration with other schools. You can do activities you couldn't before. (Primary, West Midlands)

Access to services is a big one for us, quite often in our local authority it can take an awful long time to get access to services. Sometimes I need those services at point of crisis not in 6 weeks' time. Being an academy would give me control of services, quality and the right time to access them. (Primary, South West of England)

### ***Sense of inevitability***

In contrast to recognising the benefits, some head teachers felt it was inevitable that they would have to become an academy at some point, seeing it as “the way it is going to go”, and as such sought to become an academy on their own terms rather than eventually being forced. Linked to this, some also had concerns about the implications of the national funding formula for their schools if they waited.

The local authority told schools they needed to think about what they were doing... We wanted to make sure we had the right set of partners who had

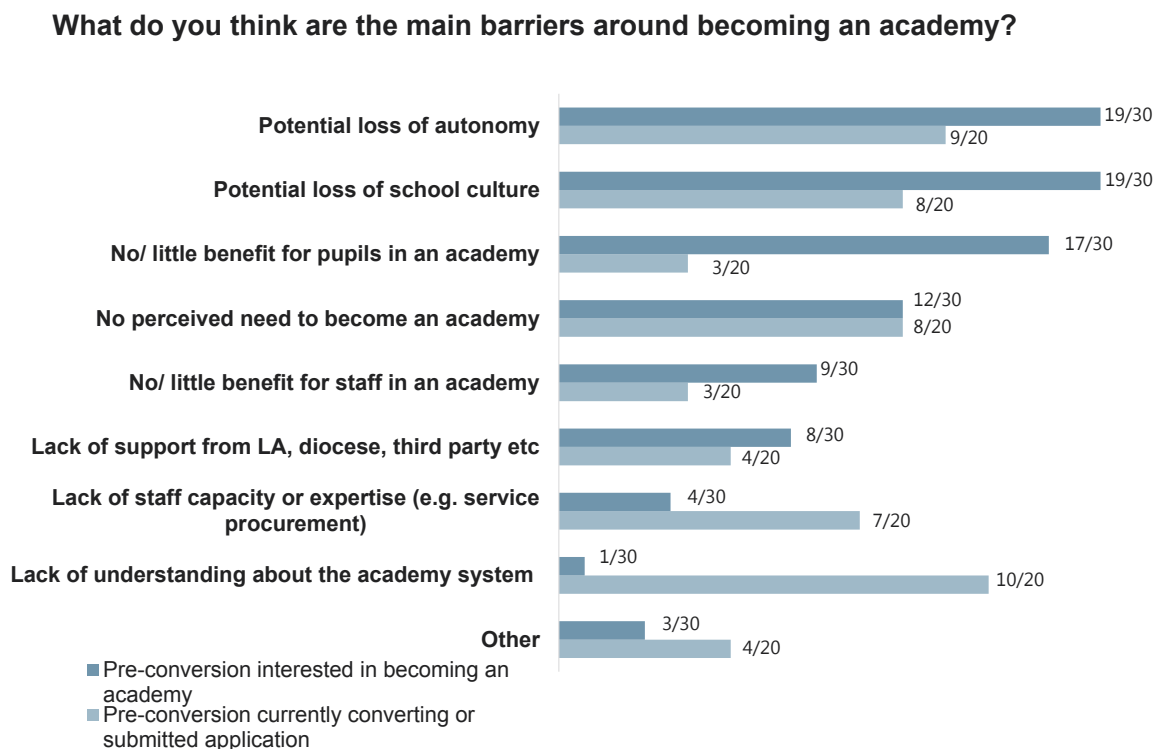
the shared vision and value for openness and collaboration, and not left with the remainders. The local authority contracted so much, there was no reason to stay with the local authority. (Primary, West Midlands)

My main motivator is to ensure stable school in times of poor funding for rural schools. (Primary, North East London and East of England)

### Barriers to conversion among those interested

For head teachers interested in their schools becoming an academy, or who have submitted an application, there were a range of perceived barriers to conversion. These included the perception of life as an academy and the practicalities of conversion. Both were often informed by the experiences of other head teachers or school leaders in academies as opposed to official DfE information.

Figure 7: Barriers to becoming an academy – pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy



Base: Pre-conversion interested in converting (30); Pre-conversion currently converting (20); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

The most commonly cited reason not to convert in the descriptive online survey was potential loss of autonomy since many head teachers felt they already had sufficient autonomy within the running of the school. Further practical reasons mentioned in interviews were that head teachers wanted to remain under the umbrella of their local authority, which was providing a good and efficient service already, and hence having ‘no reason to convert’ or ‘no perceived need to become an academy’. Furthermore, due to the governance structures of MATs, some were concerned about the extent to which



head teachers would no longer be responsible for all decision making, and so were concerned about losing autonomy.

The second most cited reason not to convert in the online survey was potential loss of school culture. This was reflected in interviews as both a practical and perceived barrier where head teachers felt there was no critical mass of schools in the local area with which to become a MAT. They were either feeling vulnerable as a small (and commonly primary) school to be taken over, not having a suitable school to join in the area, or not finding a MAT with the same ethos. There was a perceived fear that by joining a MAT, schools would risk losing their ethos or small and local school 'feel' and consequently unwillingly change.

Another barrier to conversion raised by head teachers, especially in primary schools, was that they perceived a lack of evidence around improved pupil outcomes. There was also a fear of the unknown, fuelled by myths or bad experiences they had heard about from colleagues or witnessed with local schools. For example, based on experiences of others, some head teachers were reluctant to convert due to a perceived lack of financial and staffing capacity if they did so and having to run a "business" rather than a school. This fear was exacerbated, especially in primary school head teachers, by the perception that a business manager in a MAT would make a budgetary decision (especially "top slicing"). There were also concerns amongst SEND and primary schools that their voice would not be heard in a new structure.

Huge risks. You are much more exposed; the job is very different. You rely on partnerships, but you should avoid partnerships based on head teacher personalities and focus on ethos. There are challenges and risks with that. Concern on financial resources and risk of losing autonomy. (Primary, West Midlands)

The secondary-school-led MAT were active in making sure we would join and had two tiny primary schools as part of the MAT, but part of their vision and ethos... they didn't really understand the difference between primary and secondary. Now they have lots of secondaries and only three primaries. In their senior leadership structure, all are secondary. Everyone making decisions are secondary, you need a balance, need a voice. (Primary, South West of England)

## **Emerging profiles**

A key difference to draw out in this group of maintained schools who are interested in becoming academies are those head teachers who are looking to become academies because they see clear benefits for their schools and pupils, compared with those who are looking to convert in a voluntary capacity before they will be forced to convert, which they believe to be inevitable.

**Table 4: Profiles – pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy**

Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy	Cautiously interested	Reluctantly engaged	Inspired and keen
Description	<p>These head teachers are interested, yet afraid of a perceived loss of autonomy and the financial implications of becoming a SAT, forming a MAT or joining a MAT. <i>These are mostly primary schools and other (e.g. SEN) schools.</i></p>	<p>These head teachers feel obliged to become an academy as they would otherwise feel left behind without a choice. They want to become an academy on their own terms rather than being forced.</p>	<p>These head teachers are engaged and can see the benefits to both staff and pupils. Often, they have submitted an application to convert or are in the process of doing so.</p>
Driven by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An awareness that there are benefits of becoming an academy such as collaboration or CPD for staff</li> <li>• The financial implications of becoming a MAT, forming a SAT or joining a MAT. Some are concerned about top-slicing, while SEND schools are concerned that others would not appreciate their unique financial needs</li> <li>• A concern that they will lose autonomy if they join a MAT</li> <li>• Negative experiences of others, which have made them apprehensive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A feeling of inevitability that sooner or later all schools will be forced to convert to academies, but are not necessarily convinced of the benefits</li> <li>• A desire to find appropriate schools to convert with or a MAT to join, who have a similar vision and shared ethos, rather than be forced to join a MAT that is not right for them</li> <li>• A feeling that their local authority is in decline and can no longer provide them with the support they need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A positive outlook on academies</li> <li>• An awareness of the benefits of academies including being able to procure their own services, professional opportunities for staff and being able to closely collaborate and work with other schools</li> <li>• A frustration with the process that has prevented them from converting so far. Some have disappointingly had their application rejected and are unsure why, while others are frustrated due to lack of clarity about the application process and being told their proposed academy structure will not pass</li> </ul>
Future	<p>These head teachers might consider becoming an academy more seriously if they could keep their autonomy and if their financial fears were addressed.</p>	<p>These head teachers are often in the process of becoming an academy, or are actively seeking schools with whom to become a MAT. However, most do not want to be rushed into any agreement, but take time to find the right school(s) for them.</p>	<p>These heads are often in the process of becoming an academy and would consider growing in the future. However, they need clear and consistent communication as to whether they can be a SAT/MAT or the size of a MAT they could form.</p>
Illustrative quotation	<p>Huge risks. You are much more exposed; the job is very different. You rely on partnerships, but you should avoid partnerships based on head teacher personalities and focus on ethos. There are challenges and risks with that. Concern on financial resources and risk of losing autonomy. (Primary, West Midlands)</p>	<p>It is because it feels as if we have no choice other than to become an academy as so many schools in our local authority have already converted. We are looking to join a MAT now so that we can join one of our choice before our local authority completely collapses and there is less choice and/or time to properly research things. (Primary, South West of England)</p>	<p>Wanted to develop into a primary MAT – a big one as big schools and then join secondary later on when we have a bit more power... the RSC changed, said didn't want lots of MATs... Had Ofsted, [who] suggested to go back to looking at local option as message about not having small co-op chains not necessarily true. (Primary, South West of England)</p>

## **B. Trusts**

This chapter presents the findings and analysis from the descriptive online survey and interviews with a range of school leaders within primary and secondary SATs and MATs. The chapter mostly reflects views of school leaders who have not expressed an interest in becoming a sponsor (mostly SATs) and school leaders (both primary and secondary, as well as SATs and MATs) who were interested in becoming an academy sponsor, but had not yet submitted a formal application. Two school leaders (both primary MATs) had submitted an application to become a sponsor, and an additional one had withdrawn their sponsorship application. Findings here are presented with regard to respondents' interest in growing as a trust through more schools joining as well as growing by becoming a sponsor.

### **Attitudes towards academies**

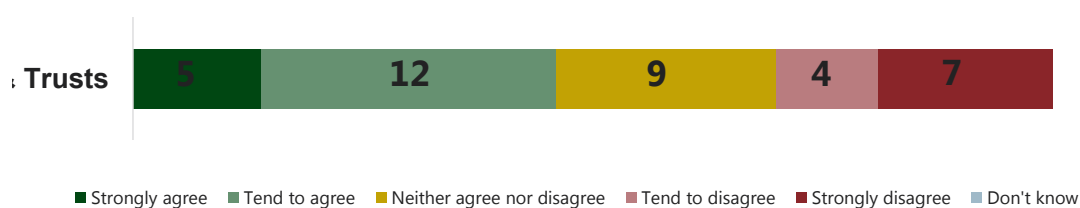
The large majority of school leaders in this group said they understood current policy around academies, and the majority felt that all types of schools could benefit from becoming academies, with the perception being that secondary schools are able to benefit most. However, there was a mixed response regarding whether it was easy to become an academy: just under half of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this but nearly a third disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 8: Understanding and ease of becoming an academy, and who can benefit – trusts

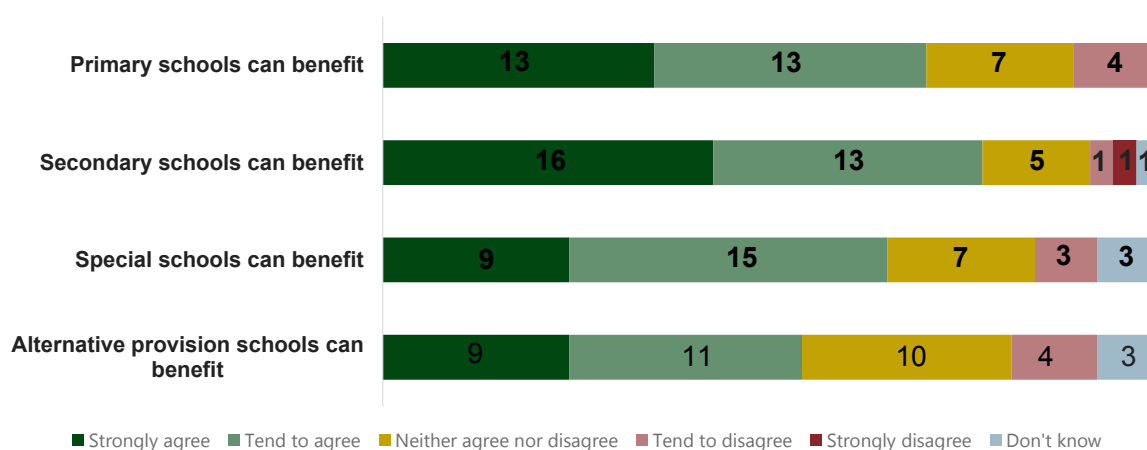
I understand the current policy around academies



It's easy to become an academy



Who can benefit from becoming an academy?



Base: Academies & Trusts (37) Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

When asked for their top word associations with academies, the most commonly cited words among trusts without sponsor status were: 'freedom', 'autonomy', 'independence', 'accountable', and 'finance'. These associations underpinned perceptions, attitudes, experiences and actions related to academies and were explored further during in-depth interviews and are synthesised below:

- **Freedom:** this word related positively to the new freedoms associated with trusts such as finance, but also negatively to the disappointment with the lack of freedoms such as limited ability to move from the national curriculum in reality.
- **Autonomy:** likewise, despite there being positive feelings about not being dependent on to the local authority, there was also a feeling or concern of loss of autonomy, especially with regard to joining a MAT.

- Independence: as with the pre-conversion interested in conversion group, this related to the positivity about being independent and autonomous from the local authority.
- Accountable: this feeling related to school leaders' new roles with increased financial and pupil outcomes accountability, a responsibility many were not used to from leading maintained schools. This also included referred to accountability for results of others in a partnership or in terms of sponsoring an underperforming school.
- Finance: financial freedoms and independence were regarded positively, such as the ability to achieve economies of scale. However, there was also a concern about being fully responsible for the schools' finances – for example, with no financial safety net if finances went into the red.

## Visions for growth

Trusts had a range of perceptions and attitudes relating to growth as a trust and growth by becoming a sponsor. These are outlined in detail below.

### Sense of perspective

School leaders in this section could be divided into those who had a 'growth' perspective, were positive and keen to work with and support other schools by becoming a sponsor, and those who were ambivalent about growth or concerned about the negative effects that growth – either through increasing the number of schools in a MAT or sponsoring underperforming schools – could have on their school's culture and pupils' educational outcomes.

Those with a 'growth' perspective had a sense of altruism about potential growth by becoming an academy sponsor. These respondents shared a strong perception that it was their moral obligation to help and support other schools. They believed that all children deserve a good education and school leaders should use their school improvement strategies to help others to reach their maximum potential. In contrast with those concerned about growth, these school leaders, often in more established SATs or MATs, did not feel that their own trusts would suffer from sponsoring an underperforming school. They viewed collaboration, especially with other schools in the trust, as mutually beneficial. Furthermore, alongside benefits to pupils, collaborating with or sponsoring another school was seen to create professional opportunities for staff who would be able to grow into future leaders, while retaining these within the trust.

We wanted to collaborate. We are exceptionally good at offering a glittering curriculum and can work with external partners now and want to offer this to other schools. For example, we have opportunities to work with scientific organisations and drama organisations and their curriculum can be flexible.

Achieve high levels of attainment and offer something to others. (Primary, MAT, South London and South East England)

In contrast, other school leaders, especially in smaller academies with fewer (perceived) resources, felt that the pupils and educational outcomes of their own academies were the highest priority and felt that becoming a sponsor would compromise standards, especially based on the necessary capacity needed to do so. This included having enough resources to put into another school, or having to take highly qualified or skilled teachers out of their own school to go to the sponsored school. The perception and concern about sponsorship taking the focus away from their own school was also reported to be held by both parents and governors. There was also an additional fear that their reputation would be at risk if they were unable to raise standards in a school of which they had become a sponsor<sup>8</sup>.

### **Importance of finding a good match**

Whether choosing to join with another academy/other academies or sponsor a school, many school leaders in SATs and MATs perceived shared vision and ethos to be an important factor when working with others. They believed that partnering should not be based on head teachers' personalities, but instead on what is right and suitable for the school. Also, as partnerships in MATs and sponsor arrangements are tight it was seen as vital to be in a MAT with or sponsor schools with the same attitudes and priorities rather than one with a different style. This is in line with the DfE Academy trust survey (2017a:15-16) which found that a shared vision and ethos was the most commonly cited main reason for choosing to join a trust.

Some SAT school leaders were concerned about being part of a large, perceived as 'soulless', MAT and instead believed there needed to be common values unifying them. This was underpinned by a perceived 'empire building' strategy of some other trusts and sponsors, rather than having the pupils and educational outcomes as their guiding principles, making them wary of collaboration and feeling in competition instead.

We are very conscious that the environment is to become or join a MAT, don't want to be the last standalone. But we need to be careful, want to share ethos, it's not about who your friends are, because friends will come and go but the MAT will stay. (Primary, SAT, South London and South East England)

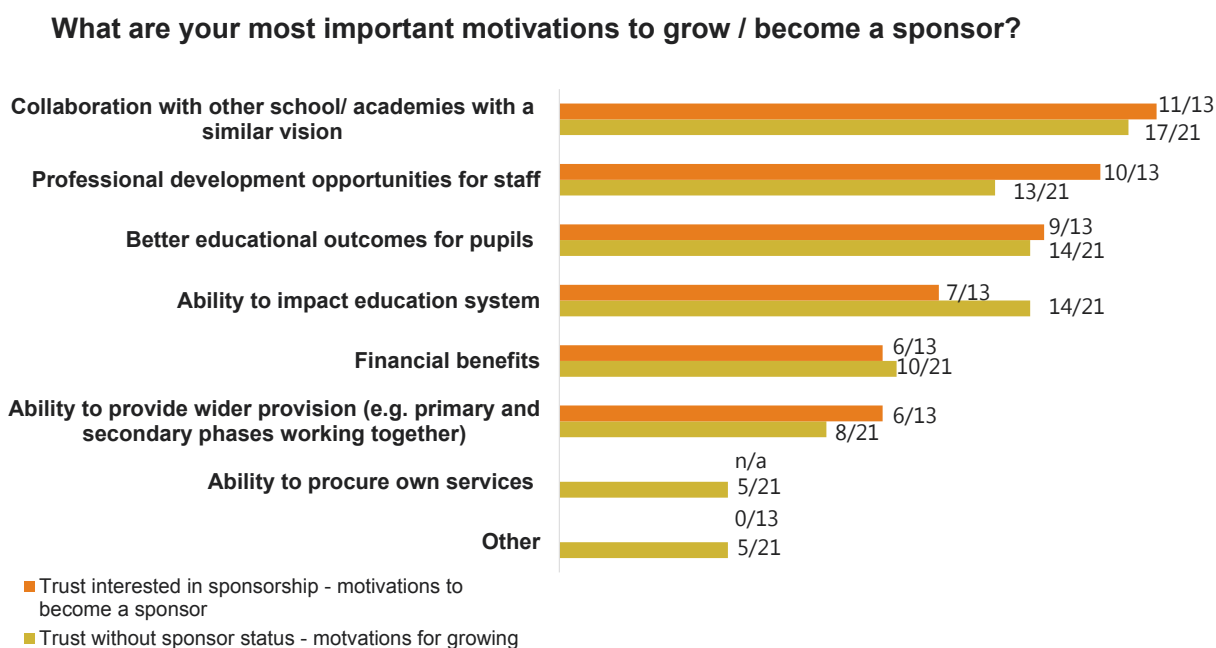
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<sup>8</sup> Under the new short inspection model, sponsored schools are exempt from Ofsted inspection for three years (Ofsted, 2015).

## Reasons to grow

School leaders interviewed as part of this group pointed to a range of reasons that would motivate them to grow – either in their current form as a trust without sponsor status or by becoming a sponsor – largely based on both internal and external outcomes and opportunities.

**Figure 9: Motivations to grow / become a sponsor – trusts**



Base: Trusts interested in sponsorship (13); Trust without sponsor status (21); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

One identified benefit of growth included joining with other outstanding schools who all have their own individual strengths. There was a sense of this providing opportunities to share good practice, learn from and support each other, while working with like-minded head teachers to make good decisions, for example about staffing or CPD. This was reflected in the descriptive online survey where collaboration with other schools was the most commonly selected reason to both sponsor and grow. The DfE Academy trust survey (2017a:9) supports this, having found that 96% of MATs believed the structure facilitated collaboration, and that a benefit was “school improvement, helping teachers and school-to-school support”. Similarly, some trusts were motivated by an altruistic outlook and wanting better educational outcomes for pupils in their own school and externally, with some mentioning a desire to impact their local area.

There is an opportunity for middle leaders to take more ownership by working together, and having more confidence when making decisions by

working with another head – for example going out to tender together.  
(Secondary, MAT, South West of England)

Altruism and impact geographical area but only when own school has capacity to do so without standards dropping. (Primary, SAT, Lancashire and West Yorkshire)

Participants also explained that growth as a trust – either in their current form without sponsor status or as a sponsor – would create benefits and opportunities for staff in terms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and career progression. Indeed, this was a particularly important motivation to sponsor other schools as, often, staff were trained as future leaders to be able to take on senior roles in other schools within a MAT, sponsoring or setting up a new free school. This not only benefited staff but also schools by retaining teachers.

Opportunity for our leadership teams to step up for example as Associate Heads. That's how you grow your future leaders. Succession planning – I need to grow leaders to take over high level positions – training ground at sponsor school. Joint CPD, training, seeing your own systems in another setting would test them out. (Secondary, MAT, West Midlands)

More opportunities for our staff. From our point of view, we think it would give our staff amazing opportunities to develop further than they are at the minute. We know we're doing a good job but to work with another school, you get so much back. (Primary SAT, South London and South East England).

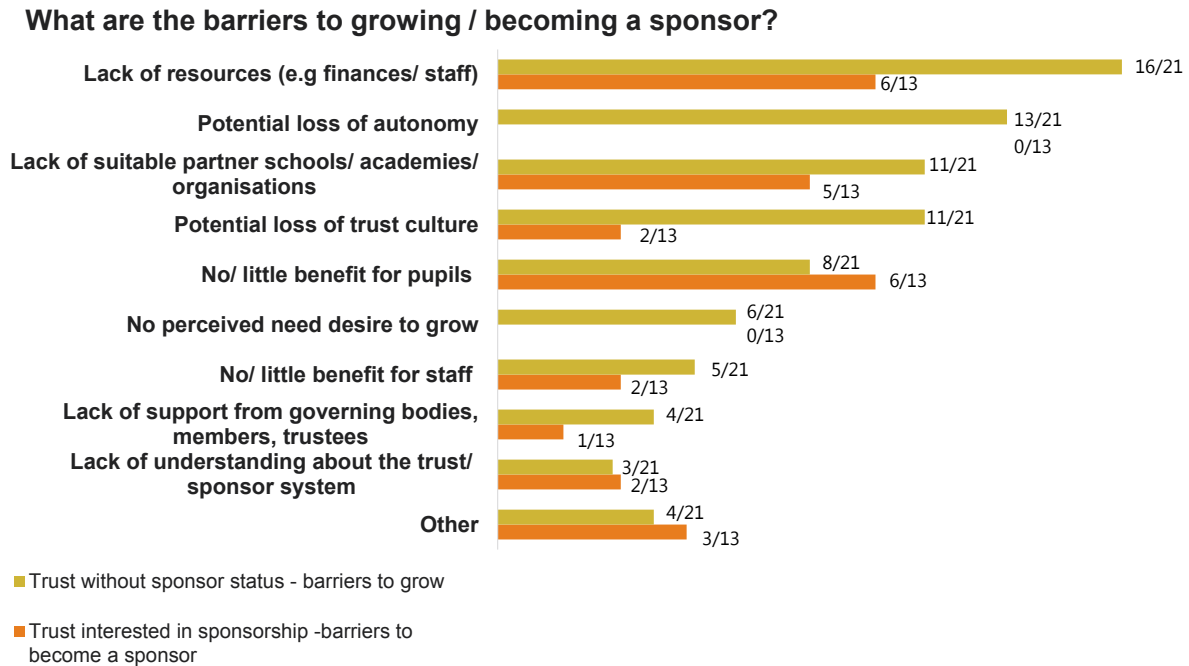
Have a positive impact on the educational system. Academies allow system leaders to be the first voice at the front of education rather than to leave it to the people at local authority level. (Primary, MAT, South London and South East England)

## **Reasons not to grow**

From the descriptive online survey, lack of resources was cited as the most common barrier to growth as a trust and/or becoming a sponsor by this group. For growth, potential loss of autonomy and trust culture, as well as the practicality of finding a suitable partner, were also significant barriers. Finding a suitable partner was also seen to prevent academies from sponsoring as did the perception that there was no or little benefit to pupils. These reasons were explored in more detail during in-depth interviews and are outlined further below.



**Figure 10: Barriers to grow / become a sponsor – trusts**



Base: Trusts interested in sponsorship (13); Trusts without sponsor status (21); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

## Attitudinal and practical reasons for maintaining current size

Reasons for not growing as a trust or growing by becoming a sponsor could be broadly split into two themes: attitudinal reasons, where there was a fear of declining standards under expansion (especially when growing by becoming a sponsor); and practical reasons where there were physical elements stopping trusts from doing so.

**Attitudinal reasons** included not wanting to sponsor an underperforming school for fear of risking their own outcomes or reputation. Regarding sponsorship, some trusts were not willing to take responsibility of another school due to concern of not having the capacity to improve it while maintaining their own high standards. Furthermore, some participants associated (further) growth and sponsorship with an increased workload and having to run a ‘business’. They believed there to be more meetings and paperwork, something they felt they would not have the time or capacity to do, based on a shift they already experienced from becoming an academy compared with being a maintained school. Other respondents expressed the feeling that they would not be able to do justice to their sponsored academy.

To sponsor, I become responsible for their outcomes. I have to get them to be a better school, move to good or outstanding. [There is] pressure to do this. I don't have the capacity. My school would suffer – taking my teachers out, I could manage this but not in the current unstable environment, there's too much turnover. (Primary, SAT, South London and South East England)

I am concerned about the capacity to improve another school without own suffering. That's the difference between being a sponsor and growing as a MAT, it's the reason we haven't [sponsored]. (Primary, SAT, Lancashire and West Yorkshire)

**Practically**, capacity was also mentioned as a significant reason not to grow or sponsor, especially in SATs. Many school leaders felt they did not have enough resources or staff to be able to sponsor a school and, therefore, did not feel to be in an appropriate position to do so.

Sponsoring was also felt to require a new skillset, both in terms of the running of the 'business' and being able to suitably support and nurture another school. In addition, lack of funding was a key concern. Participants noted the small funds they had available to them, and feared that this may reduce further in the future. They did not feel they had the capacity in terms of resources, financial stability, staff or skills to be able to successfully sponsor an underperforming school. This was highlighted in the descriptive survey where lack of resources was the most frequently selected barrier to sponsor and grow.

The skills needed to set up and run a MAT are quite different from the skills of the head teacher of a single school... Need for finance, capacity, training. (Secondary, SAT, North West London and South Central England)

At first we received 7% extra funding and this semester it will be 0% funding. We're being asked to do more for less money... We are now worse off financially than if we were a maintained school. (Secondary, SAT, North of England)

The need to find a suitable partner with a shared vision was also cited as a barrier to growth and sponsorship as many trusts felt they needed to have the same ethos and equal representation across their academies for partnerships and sponsorship relationships to be successful. This could be particularly challenging between primary and secondary schools who often had different priorities and did not want to join a MAT where they felt their phase would be under-represented. There was also a concern among academy heads that growing would result in a loss of autonomy for them and their trust culture would be lost if joining with others. Moreover, geography plays a significant role, since many trusts did not want to join formal partnerships with schools outside their locality because of concerns over the practicalities and logistics involved. Participants also cited some confusion as to who should have responsibility for finding a suitable school to partner with or to sponsor.

The last plan for the RSC [office] was about expanding to become a MAT, but in their area there are a lot of MATs with sponsorship status but still have no one to work with... Primary schools do not want to form formal

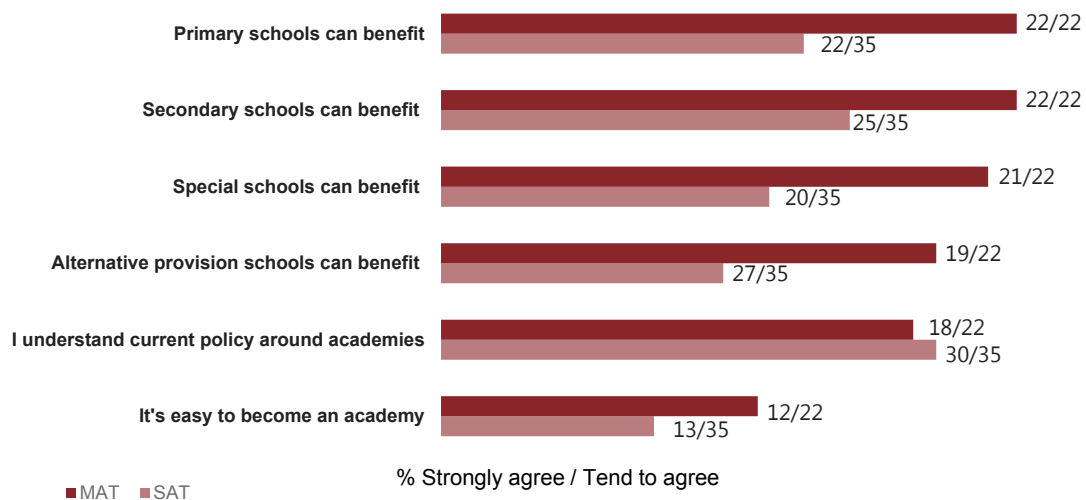
partnerships with secondary schools and they are setting up MATs.  
(Secondary, SAT, East Midlands and Humber).

## MAT vs SAT comparison

With regard to outlook on the academies system, the descriptive survey showed that MATs tended to be more optimistic than SATs about the benefits of academies, with all respondents from MATs believing that both primary and secondary schools can benefit. Despite this, slightly more SATs agreed that they understand current policy around academies, but fewer agreed that it was easy to become an academy. This perception that the conversion process is not easy could potentially influence SATs' decision not to grow further.

**Figure 11: SAT vs MAT comparison of who can benefit from becoming an academy**

### Who can benefit from becoming an academy? SAT v MAT



Base: Single Academy Trusts (35), Multi Academy Trusts (22): Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

However, despite having a different view of the academy system regarding ease of converting, understanding the system and who can benefit, in-depth interviews with school leaders in both SATs and MATs reported similar motivations and barriers to sponsor. Both their motivations were driven by the potential for collaboration and an altruistic vision to better pupils' outcomes in their own and other local schools. They also both saw benefits for their staff, for example, with CPD. Furthermore, they shared a concern about capacity to sponsor and would require more financial support and incentives if they were to do so. While this study's base sizes were not large enough to draw a direct comparison between SATs and MATs, the DfE Academy trust survey report found MATs' main motivation for initially converting was opportunities for collaboration, while SATs' motives focused on funding-related reasons (DfE 2017a:13).

## Emerging profiles

While trusts were generally supportive of and recognise the benefits of academy policy, their visions for growth vary. While some had an altruistic approach and wish to sponsor, others were concerned about capacity and thought growing as a trust, especially by becoming a sponsor, would have a negative effect on their own school.

**Table 5: Profiles – trusts**

Trusts	Comfortably observing	Cautiously engaged	Growing on own terms	Academy champions
Description	These school leaders are happy to remain a SAT (or sometimes a smaller MAT) and seem to have no desire to sponsor, grow or become a MAT.	These school leaders are engaged in the sector and about becoming a sponsor but risk averse, including being concerned about the capacity necessary to grow or sponsor.	These school leaders are keen to grow as a MAT, but not become a sponsor. They are concerned about standards slipping and the financial implications of sponsoring.	These school leaders are 'believing forerunners' and eager to sponsor. It can feel too complicated or there have been matching issues which have stopped them so far.
Driven by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A feeling that they are doing well as they are and there is no need to change</li> <li>• A concern that by joining or growing as a MAT they will lose their autonomy or their school's character or ethos</li> <li>• A concern if they join a MAT they have to give a large top slice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A desire to maintain their outcomes and reputation, something that could be compromised if they sponsored or joined a MAT with lower performing schools</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An apprehension that although they are on board with sponsorship they do not feel that it would be worth the risks</li> <li>• An assumption or knowledge that to sponsor or grow you need a large amount of additional capacity</li> <li>• A feeling that they would not have the capacity to successfully sponsor or grow without there being a negative impact on their own school</li> <li>• An absence of an exit route should a match be unsuccessful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A desire to grow with other like-minded and high-performing schools, from whom they can learn</li> <li>• A concern that they do not have the capacity in terms of staff, skills, resources or finance to be able to sponsor another school without their own standards slipping</li> <li>• A lack of funds and no additional financial incentive to sponsor</li> <li>• Parents and governors who are concerned that the focus will be taken away from their school</li> <li>• A risk that their reputation would be compromised if they failed to improve the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An altruistic vision to better the education system for all</li> <li>• A desire to help and improve another school</li> <li>• A commitment to support the geographical area and widen provisions</li> <li>• A frustration that they are an outstanding school but have had their application declined</li> <li>• Inconsistencies in the requirements and moving of goalposts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding a suitable school to sponsor and a lack of clarity whether it is necessary to have one prior to applying</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Future	These school leaders would only be likely to grow if there were changes in their SAT (or, less often, MAT) that would not make it sustainable by itself.	These school leaders would consider growing with additional support or reassurance about capacity necessary to grow and sponsor.	These schools would be more likely to grow if they could find suitable people to grow with. Although they are unlikely to sponsor, they might be more inclined to if there were measures in place to ensure their standards do not slip.	These school leaders would grow if the matching process was not perceived (or experienced) to be difficult.
Illustrative quotation	Growing into a MAT is something we have considered but it needs to be right for us as SAT status generally works well for us. Sponsorship is something that we have never been approached about. (Primary, SAT, South London and South East England)	Under the proposed NFF, we will lose another 1%, and will continue to have to fund pay rises. We inevitably therefore have a very lean staffing model and a small leadership team – we simply can't afford the capacity we would need to start a MAT. We also can't afford to join a MAT because we can't afford the top-slice. (Secondary, SAT, North)	Reputation/performance – we are a national support school anyway and do a lot of outreach and do it on a short-term basis for specific and broad things for many schools. But to sponsor, I become responsible for their outcomes. (Primary, SAT, South London and South East England)	Rejected [from becoming a sponsor] because we didn't name a school. It says you can be an empty school. Don't encourage us to be sponsors then reject us. 9-10 months licking our wounds. (Primary, SAT, South London and South East England)

## C. Sponsors

This chapter outlines survey and interview findings from academies and trusts with sponsor status. Some respondents in this group had already sponsored or were currently sponsoring, while others had not yet been matched. The majority of school leaders in this group were based in MATs, with only a third representing the view of SATs.

### Attitudes to academies

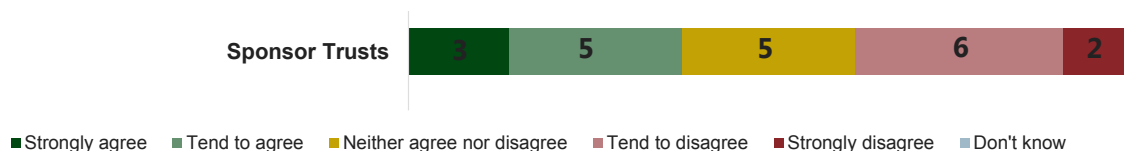
The majority of sponsors said that they understood current policy around academies; they were also the biggest advocates for academies in agreeing that all schools can benefit from conversion (figure 16). However, like trusts, they had mixed opinions about the ease of becoming an academy.

Figure 12: Understanding and ease of becoming an academy, and who can benefit – sponsors

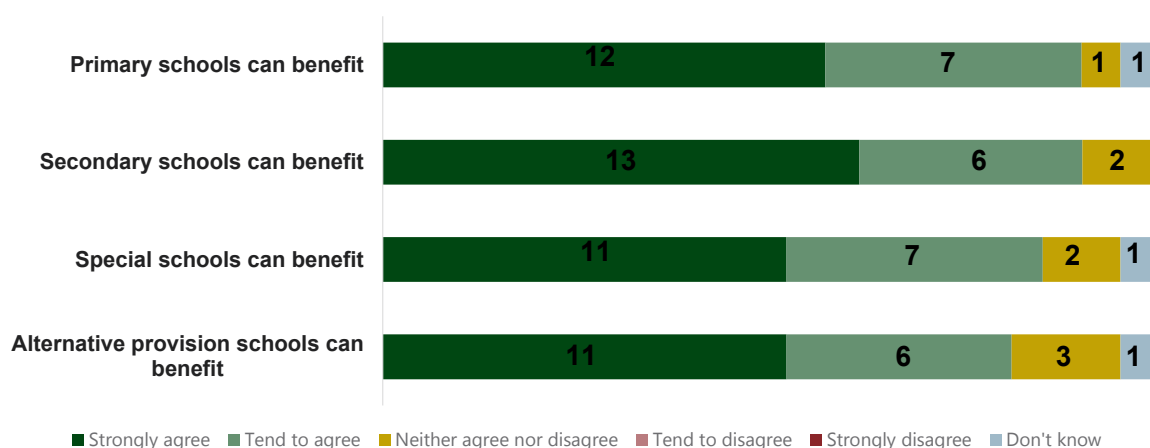
#### I understand the current policy around academies



#### It's easy to become an academy



#### Who can benefit from becoming an academy?



Base: Sponsors (21); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Source: Ipsos MORI

When asked for their top word associations with academies, the most commonly cited words among sponsors were: 'freedom', 'autonomy', 'collaboration', 'opportunity' and

'accountability'. These associations underpinned perceptions, attitudes, experiences and actions related to academies and sponsorship, and were explored further during in-depth interviews and are synthesised below:

- Autonomy: was mentioned with mixed feelings; while some felt they have more autonomy by being independent of their local authority, others reported experiencing a loss of autonomy in growing from a SAT to a MAT.
- Freedom: although many were positive about the new freedoms they obtained with being a trust, such as finance, some were disappointed with not having the freedoms they thought they would when first engaging in the process.
- Collaboration: reflected sponsors being positive about the opportunity for greater sharing of knowledge and practices within a MAT.
- Opportunity: some respondents saw academies as more strategic, being able to open new doors and possibilities such as procuring services independently, as well as the opportunities provided by more freedoms and collaboration.
- Accountability: reflected the experience that head teacher's new roles meant an increased amount of financial accountability, which was a responsibility they had not necessarily been used to before starting the conversion journey.

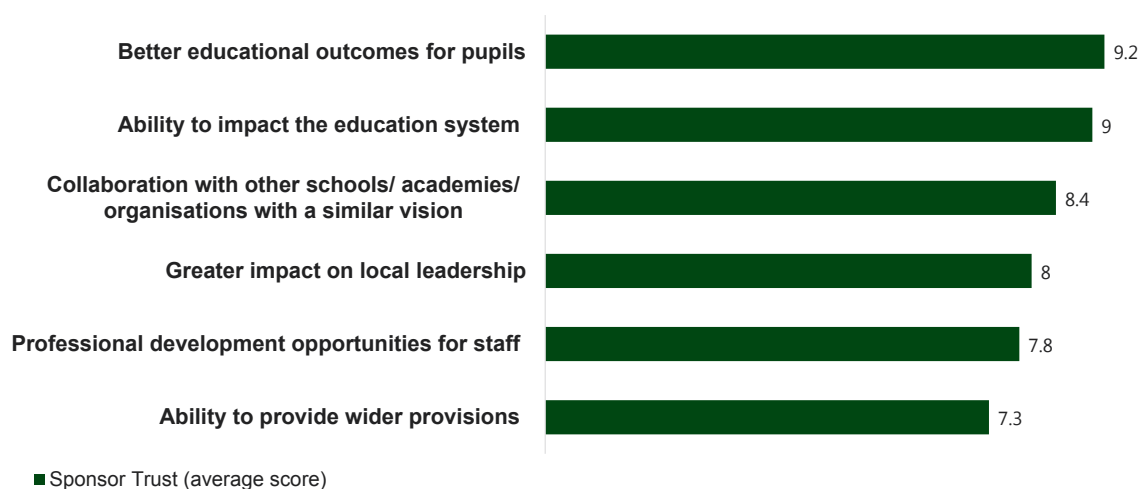
## Reasons to grow

As with trusts without sponsor status who were looking to grow, motivations for existing sponsors to grow were largely altruistic. Interestingly, however, sponsors often viewed themselves as philanthropic and focused on the educational outcomes for pupils whereas they often perceived other sponsors as being profit-driven. This may be because there have been financial incentives for sponsorship.

Ability to impact the education system – setting up a free school, additional provision in the area, designed specifically for this area, know what the local population want, new school to appeal to broad local area, provide places based on shortfall of overall places in the area. (Secondary, SAT, North of England)

**Figure 13: Motivations to become a sponsor – sponsors**

On a scale of one to ten, how important were these motivations to sponsor?



Source: Ipsos MORI

Base: Sponsor Trusts (21); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

Motivations to grow as a sponsor for this group included better educational outcomes both in their own and the sponsored school. Academy heads and CEOs wanted to attract like-minded schools with a shared vision and ethos to join their trust. They, like leaders in trusts without sponsor status, also had a local focus and wanted to support the community by widening provision and creating more good school places. In line with improving educational outcomes, school leaders were also concerned with raising aspirations, and saw growing as a sponsor to be an opportunity to support this:

We want all of the children in the local authority to have higher aspirations and higher opportunities. Family aspirations are low compared to other local authorities for various reasons. The demographics are quite interesting and we wanted to influence this positively, for example talking to young people about going to university. (Primary, MAT, North West London and South Central England)

Do best by all students. Improve students' life chances – what social mobility is all about. (Secondary, SAT, North of England)

It's about the education system being able to support itself. We tend to expect things to be done for us and to get orders from above. There's a lot of expertise in our schools and we want to share that. I believe in the school-to-school support. Always trying to do things to help us grow. (Primary, MAT, North East London and East of England)



## Visions for growth

Having established themselves as a sponsor, a number of school leaders in this group, especially those in MATs, had expansive visions for growth beyond 10+ schools. This MAT size appeared to be a (perceived) critical mass for making the most of economies of scale, being able to withstand most key risks in taking on underperforming schools and the potential associated financial burden (depending on the school to take on)<sup>9</sup>.

The MAT will grow to five schools in 18 months. Want to go to about 10 schools in the MAT. We only take in free schools with low quality education, or failing schools – we are very mission driven... But in the end the decision lies with RSC, not me – all about agreement around need. (Secondary, MAT, Lancashire and West Yorkshire)

The vision of others interviewed focused on the ability to provide all-through provision as a sponsor and to provide an all-through educational experience for children from younger ages through to higher education, with a smooth transition between phases.

Our vision is to be a local sponsor MAT with 12-15 schools including a special school and four SEND unit provisions, and with at least one all-through school with integrated special school provision impacting on over 6,000 local children. (Primary, MAT, North West London and South Central England)

Not all agendas for growth included visions to take on schools that required improvement, or persuading existing schools to join the MAT. Some academy heads and CEOs had decided instead to establish new free schools to meet local demand and feed into the growth plan for the trust.

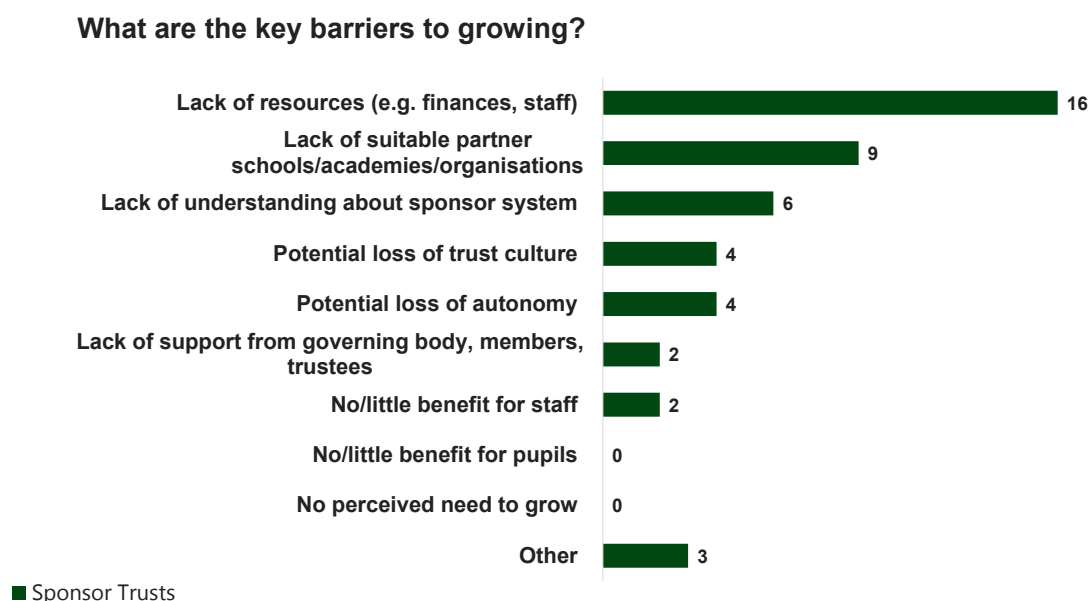
## Reasons not to grow

Although many sponsors were not opposed to growth in principle when interviewed, participants in this group suggested that there were limitations to their willingness and ability to grow. The most commonly cited barrier to growth or sponsoring underperforming schools was finance. This related either to financial capacity for managing an expansion project, or financial capacity to help to turn around an underperforming school.

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<sup>9</sup> The EPI (2017:4) found that medium sized MATs (6-10 academies) tend to spend slightly less on back office costs than smaller MATs (5 or fewer academies) though this correlation is weak. However, standardising various practices or tendering certain services across schools “notably reduced marginal costs once clusters of schools reached a ‘critical mass’ of around 3-6 schools.”

**Figure 14: Barriers to grow – sponsors**



Source: Ipsos MORI

Base: Sponsor Trusts (21); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

If we could have been guaranteed finances, then we would have gone ahead with sponsorship, so that remains a key barrier. (Sponsor, Secondary MAT, North East London and East of England)

All [the] legal stuff that has to be undertaken is borne by us – it is expensive, lawyers are expensive – you want us to become [a] MAT and sponsors and to grow, but no financial backing to be able to do this. (Sponsor, Secondary MAT, North East London and East of England)

Notwithstanding the financial and staffing implications, some school leaders also felt that opportunities in their local areas for sponsoring were exhausted or unsuitable, and were unwilling to expand to geographies further afield. However, these sponsors were considering alternative routes to growth – i.e. not in their capacity as a sponsor – such as taking on converter schools or free schools as part of the MAT.

Very early on my local authority was pushing schools to become academies and a few schools had joined MATs already. Also looking for converter schools – but most already are, so not many opportunities. (Primary MAT, North West London and South Central England)

Like pre-conversion and trust leaders, interviews with sponsors also suggested that a fear of losing the school or trust culture held true as a barrier to growth.

Potential loss of trust culture – the way we are set up is around creativity, learning and teaching, innovation but that ethos is very strong... and everyone is involved. Just being really clear that everything we do doesn't lose that ethos. (Primary MAT, North West London and South Central England)

## **Emerging profiles**

Emerging profiles of sponsor are 'comfortable sponsors' who do not want to change their current position, 'supporting on own terms' sponsors who do not see a need to change their current sponsoring arrangements (e.g. through informally giving advice), 'sponsor philanthropists' who are willing to sponsor yet reluctant mainly due to financial implications, and 'wanting to grow' sponsors who have a vision to grow their trusts to ten schools or more.

**Table 6: Profiles – sponsors**

Sponsors	Comfortable sponsors	Supporting on own terms	Sponsor philanthropists	Wanting to grow
Description	These sponsors may already sponsor a school or have set up a free school, but do not have plans to grow and are happy to remain as they are.	These school leaders are community champions and may be 'informal sponsors' on top of their formal sponsoring. They would grow but are concerned about capacity drain.	These are school leaders who feel that they need to sponsor in order to help underperforming schools.	These are mostly sponsors who would like to grow but have not yet been matched or have experienced matching issues.
Driven by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A feeling that they want to concentrate on the school(s) in their current trust</li> <li>• A concern that growing could risk losing the trust's culture</li> <li>• Not wanting to be associated with underperforming schools and compromise their reputation</li> <li>• A reluctance to be part of a MAT with an opposing agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A desire to help their community and meet the needs of any gaps in local provision</li> <li>• Sharing good practice to raise pupil outcomes in local area <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A need to preserve their own trust's success and ethos by using their resources carefully to avoid capacity drain</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A need to help underperforming schools to benefit children, families and whole communities</li> <li>• Opportunities to aspire to be the best, to provide the best opportunities and outcomes for children</li> <li>• The principle that more can be achieved together than on their own, and taking the best practice from schools and making it trust practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A desire to support schools locally and help improve underperforming schools</li> <li>• A positive outlook on collaboration</li> <li>• A willingness to sponsor, but no contact from the DfE since they have been given sponsor status</li> <li>• Difficulties in finding a suitable school to sponsor, whom they feel they could really help</li> </ul>
Future	These school leaders are unlikely to grow or sponsor further, unless something in their current situation changed.	These school leaders are more likely to sponsor than 'comfortable sponsors' and would consider it if something in their current situation changed. A primary concern for these head teachers is the potential capacity drain that can accompany sponsorship.	These sponsors would grow if there was local need for them to formally sponsor a school.	These school leaders would be willing to sponsor schools and grow, if they were supported in the matching process with a suitable school to sponsor.
Illustrative quotation	We're not expecting to grow beyond setting up this school. There is already a local MAT and they are looking to increase in size. We had a conversation about whether we would join that MAT but we don't want to join a MAT, because we don't want to be associated with underperforming schools and don't want to be part of their agenda. (Secondary, SAT, North of England)	We would consider sponsoring a school but now is not a good time because we have schools in the midst of joining our MAT. Would certainly consider it looking ahead. Drawbacks for me are time, capacity and finance – we were previously supporting other schools without funding, so the drawback was a lack of funding and leadership capacity being stretched too thinly by overseeing the schools. (Primary, MAT, North East London and East of England)	I wouldn't want to encourage schools to become sponsors if they don't know what they are taking on or if it's not for the right reasons or if they are not in the right place to do it. My advice is to know what you are taking on. The drain on six schools to improve one school is significant. It's not a walk in the park – you can't expect a school to improve without a plan, a strategy, finances, etc. (Primary, MAT, North West London and South Central England)	We became a sponsor back in September and never expected to have a flood of offers, but for there to be no communication about prospective sponsorship, I understand schools struggling locally, [we're] well placed to work with others. No communication in five or six months is disappointing. (Secondary, MAT, North East London and East of England)

## 6. Information: sources, experiences and needs

This chapter explores how schools and trusts said they gather information about the academy sector and the academy-sponsor journey. It includes discussion of sources of information, experiences of and channels for receiving information, and key information needs, as well as suggestions for support that school leaders would like to receive.

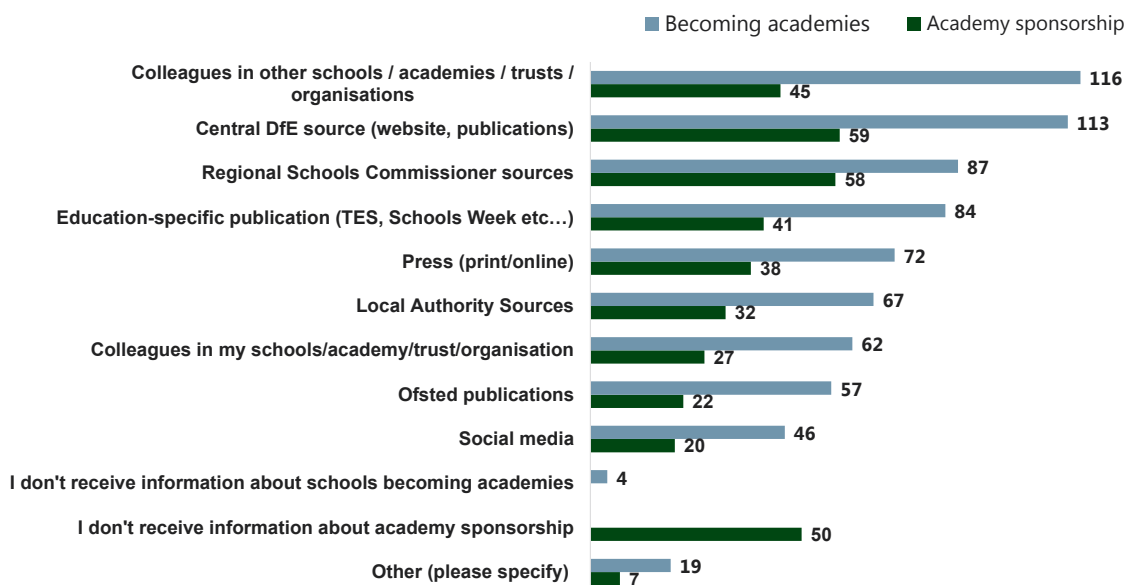
### Sources of information

School leaders said they draw on a wide range of sources of information to learn about policy and process within the academy sector. Though DfE and external colleagues were among the top sources of information about becoming an academy and academy sponsorship, the DfE Regional Schools Commissioners' (RSC) offices were more commonly used as a source of information for academy sponsorship than for academy conversion. This may be explained by the fact that school leaders will work increasingly with DfE RSC offices as they move and progress along the academy-sponsor journey.

Figure 15: Sources of information

From which sources do you receive information about schools becoming academies?

From which sources do you receive information about academy sponsorship?



Source: Ipsos MORI

Base: All (145); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017

The findings from the descriptive survey were further supported in the in-depth interviews and additional sources of information were identified. For example, colleagues in other schools were frequently cited as valuable sources of information across all points of the

school and academy system. Many participants felt that colleagues would present an unbiased view of the real benefits and challenges, and offer sound practical advice. In contrast, advice from DfE (and some advisory services) was sometimes perceived to be influenced by political agendas rather than necessarily in the best interests of their particular school/trust or of the school system as a whole. The desire to engage with other external colleagues who have been through the process was further evident in common requests for case studies as discussed further below regarding key information needs.

I'd like to have an opportunity to speak to people about what you need in place that you don't think about beforehand, 'don't forget this', 'think about that', 'ring us up because you'll need to do this'. Want someone to tell us these things. You can only find out from those who have done it or those leading people through it. (Other, North East London and East of England)

I would trust talking to a local head who had done it, or was living it. A friend who could provide advice and was not led by a mission to persuade me to convert. (Secondary, South London and South East England)

## **Experiences of, and channels for, receiving information**

Participants had a mixed experience of engaging with national DfE sources of information. Some were very positive about the gov.uk website and felt that this had improved over the last few years, was comprehensive, and a good starting point for further discussion. Others found it difficult to navigate in order to find the information they required.

Experience of DfE RSC offices as a source of information was also mixed. A number of participants reported a highly positive experience of tailored, individual support and advice from DfE RSC offices throughout their journey to conversion and appreciated their understanding of the local contexts and needs. Others said that they found it difficult to either access support or get the information they required in a timely manner – in one isolated case, for example, one participant had set aside time at half-term to consider conversion but received an automated email reply saying that the DfE RSC office would reply in 3 weeks' time. As a result, she felt frustrated that she had lost her window and would struggle to return to the idea of converting until the end of term.

Moreover, some of the school leaders interested in converting were concerned by what they perceived to be discrepancies between DfE RSC offices, and between DfE RSC offices and central advice, particularly about whether it was possible to convert as a SAT, or as a MAT but without any immediate partners. Some expressed frustration that the requirements were not published more clearly so that they could be considered at an earlier stage of the process. They welcomed any opportunity for further publication of the

vision for local areas that would give clarity on what models of conversion should be considered.

I've been to an academy show and spoken to other RSCs from different regions and given one amount of info, then been to another one with their RSC and been given another bit of info. It's confusing about what would be allowed and what wouldn't. The amount of children they want to see in a MAT changes depending on who is presenting. Also should an academy trust have exec head or CEO? (Primary, South West of England)

We need a single source of most current information online. It's currently getting lost in translation. (Primary, South West of England)

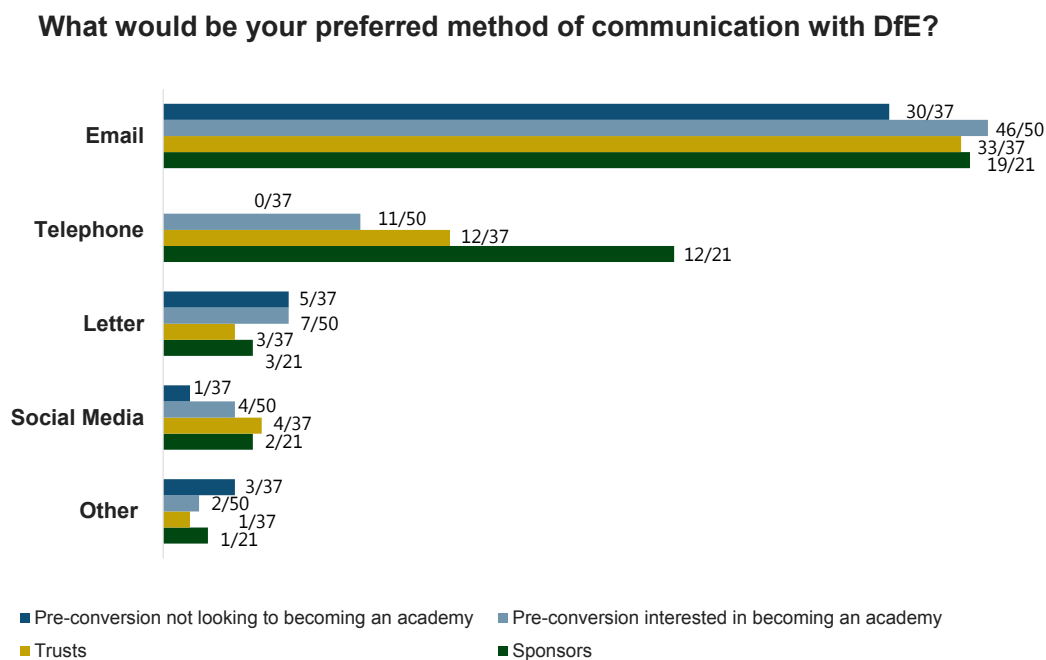
At the moment the message is not clear, you hear one thing from one person then you go to another meeting and hear something else from there. (Primary, South West of England)

Local authorities were a more common source of information among pre-conversion school leaders (both those who are and are not interested in converting), and just as prominent to them as central DfE sources. Participants reported mixed experiences in how helpful or neutral local authorities were in providing advice and support. For example, staff from some local authorities had visited schools and governors to present on the process and to offer advice about the different options for conversion; other participants reported that they had been told that the local authority would be unlikely to provide education services in a few years (as more schools in the area become academies) and therefore asked them to consider alternative governance structures with little support.

Other sources of information included consultants and third party organisations such as Freedom and Autonomy for Schools – National Association (FASNA), National Governance Association (NGA), Teachers School Alliance, Education Funding Agency, the Key, teaching unions, and conferences and exhibitions such as the Academy Show.

As illustrated in figure 16, the vast majority of school leaders stated that email remained a crucial channel of communication with DfE. For most, this was a pragmatic or reluctant view, acknowledging email as a modern and effective way of reaching individual schools. However, some were more positive and noted that email allowed them to consider the detail in their own time, and share information easily with colleagues.

**Figure 16: Preferred method of communication with DfE**



Base: Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy (37) Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy (50), Trusts (37), Sponsors (21); Field work dates 7<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 Source: Ipsos MORI

Despite the volume of emails received daily, there was broad consensus that the DfE brand was important and stood out among email traffic. However, not everyone engaged with content to the same degree – for example, some pre-conversion school leaders also acknowledged that they had only fully engaged with email communications about academies after they became interested in converting.

Findings from the descriptive survey suggest that telephone becomes a more important way of engaging with schools as they become interested in conversion, sponsorship or wider growth. This was borne out of the need to have a more bespoke, tailored individual conversation about the position and progress of the school in their application. However, during the in-depth interviews, participants from pre-conversion schools who were not currently interested in converting shared a desire to have one-to-one conversations to help to clarify policy and processes, but were unsure how best to have that conversation or with whom. This suggests that telephone or face-to-face contact may also remain an important mode to tap into for those not currently considering conversion, perhaps in conjunction with email.

Head teachers stated their perceived lack of a confidential go-to person to answer questions before being able to present ideas about conversion to their governors. In rarer cases, some head teachers reported being informed by their DfE RSC office that their proposed model for conversion would not meet approval criteria. As a result, in these (rare) cases, an application for conversion was never made despite having undertaken a considerable amount of work to get to a point where senior leads and governors at the school were comfortable with that specific solution.



A smaller number of school leaders were more enthusiastic about receiving information through social media, particularly through Twitter. These participants tended to have alerts and feeds set up to flag content from DfE, and would look to these for key policy announcements and publications.

## Key information needs

The most common requests for information were among maintained schools and trusts looking to expand. The requests were often for: i) evidence of how the academy system can help to raise standards and bring about school improvement above and beyond a local-authority-led system; ii) clarity in the direction of travel, and whether it will be feasible to stay as a maintained school in future; iii) clarification as to the type of models of MATs that would be allowed; and iv) case studies of both structures and processes to provide inspiration for how others might go about conversion. Regarding the final point, a number of schools, trusts and sponsors felt that case studies provided a real-world example of the success and challenges involved in the process:

Case studies would be interesting. You learn as much from failure as from success. DfE only ever focus on successes. I'm interested in where things went wrong, how to avoid pitfalls, what structures were in place and sustainable over time. (Primary, Lancashire and West Yorkshire)

It's quite difficult to understand the ways in which MATs are forming and growing and to keep up to date on what MATs are out there and how things are working. You also need to know quite a lot – a list of SAT/MATs is not enough, we need to know how they grew and how successful they've been... I'm conscious that I need to understand a bit more about what MATs exist. I was really interested when MATs from within Oxfordshire came and spoke about their MATs but I want to know what else is happening around us in neighbouring counties too. (Secondary, SAT, North West London and South Central England)

Among those considering sponsorship, the most common requests related to clarity over the responsibility for finding a 'match' to a school to be sponsored, and a call for more to be done to make the case for sponsorship.

I don't know anyone else who wants to [become a sponsor]. From the outside they can't see why they should, is it just a club? What does being a sponsor mean? If I'm already a good school, why would I take on others? Being asked to improve another school is quite a big ask, with additional accountability and responsibility, but the incentives aren't really there. (Other, North East London and East of England)

## 7. Summary of findings

This chapter presents a summary of the findings for each group from the Academies Insight Project.

### **Pre-conversion not looking to become an academy**

The Academies Insight Project found that this group of school leaders is not persuaded by the current case demonstrating the value of joining the academy sector. They are also largely sceptical of building formal partnerships with schools through trusts, and often have existing informal partnerships that work well for them already.

In light of this, there is a need for wider circulation of proof of better educational outcomes, that tell a clearer, more nuanced story about the benefits of becoming an academy, in order to increase this group's likelihood of engaging with the system. They would also welcome clarification as to whether it was possible to convert as a SAT, and demonstration of different models that allow for the maximum amount of autonomy to be retained for individual school heads.

Further generational research into the aspirations, skills and expectations of current head teachers may also be fruitful and help to further understand current opposition within this group to the changing role of headship.

### **Pre-conversion interested in becoming an academy**

This group is largely reluctant to join existing MATs and many are struggling to find a conversion model that works for them. They would welcome congruence between central and local information on what models are permissible, and more information from RSC offices on their vision for the local area so as to avoid embarking on a path that is unfeasible.

This group are also the most likely to benefit from case studies; both in the ability to learn from others on how best to navigate the process, and the different structures in which they could convert.

Given the importance of a shared ethos, and concern that their voice won't be heard, many of those interested in converting with other schools as a new MAT are looking only at scenarios that allow them to convert with schools in the same phase (particularly within primary) and only with others that are good and outstanding.

## Trusts

Improving processes, support and information, especially for the 'comfortably observing' and 'cautiously engaged' profiles may lead them to consider growing outside their current comfort zones.

Many SATs share the same concerns as pre-conversion schools; they are cautious about the loss of ethos and autonomy through joining a MAT. Thus consideration may be given to how SATs can support each other in sharing templates, plans and approaches to CPD that help academies to remain largely independent while growing and consolidating. However, despite MATs being more convinced of the benefits of academies, there were few differences regarding motivations and concerns to be a sponsor between SATs and MATs.

Further information that highlights the incentives and benefits of being an academy sponsor is important in reaching those trusts looking to 'grow on their own terms'; however, capacity and finance remain practical concerns in their ability to sponsor underperforming schools.

## Sponsors

A number of sponsors are yet to be matched or are not currently engaged in seeking out new schools to sponsor. Some are expectant on others to find schools to sponsor and would welcome clarification on how this could best be facilitated.

As with trusts, there is also a concern about capacity and finance when taking on another school to sponsor. Promoting case studies of how best to navigate this successfully would help reassure some that further growth is feasible. This includes highlighting CPD opportunities to help retain the best staff.

## Communication

School leaders used a wide range of sources to gather information on trusts and sponsorship. For information on becoming academies, school leaders from maintained schools most commonly used colleagues in other schools, who they found to be unbiased, and central DfE sources. These school leaders felt they would benefit from talking to someone who had been through the process and case studies with evidence of how academies were able to raise school standards. Those looking for information on sponsorship, however, used central DfE sources and the DfE RSC offices.

There were mixed experiences regarding the DfE sources and DfE RSC offices, asking for clearer sign-posting and timely information from DfE RSC offices. Furthermore, there were sometimes discrepancies between different RSC regions and central government

advice. These school leaders would welcome clarity in the direction of travel and what model would be approved, and a named face-to-face or telephone contact who could support and advise them. For those considering sponsorship, clarity was needed on whose responsibility it is to find a 'match'.

Email continues to be the preferred method of communication and, despite the high volume received, most participants would read an email from DfE. There was also some interest in using Twitter for key policy announcements and publications, which might lend itself as a communications channel to develop further.

## 8. Conclusion

This report has outlined the wide range of motivations, concerns, attitudes and perceptions towards the academy sector and the academy-sponsorship journey, based on policy directives, direct experiences and opinions of pre-conversion schools, trusts and sponsors. These factors – and the interactions between them – are summed up as a map of key considerations (figure 18). Informed by the experiences of school leaders, this map shows a variety of ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors identified that shape decisions on whether and how to move into the academy sector and along the academy-sponsor journey.

Becoming an academy or a sponsor takes time and careful planning. Shared ethos and vision appeared as a primary consideration for schools joining or creating a MAT, planning to grow as a MAT and sponsor a school. On deciding to become an academy, schools tended to explore many options, thinking about geography, phase and religion, with shared ethos being the most important factor. These considerations were echoed by sponsors when matching with a school to sponsor, though school leaders were primarily concerned with the trust’s resources to sponsor a school depending on the needs.

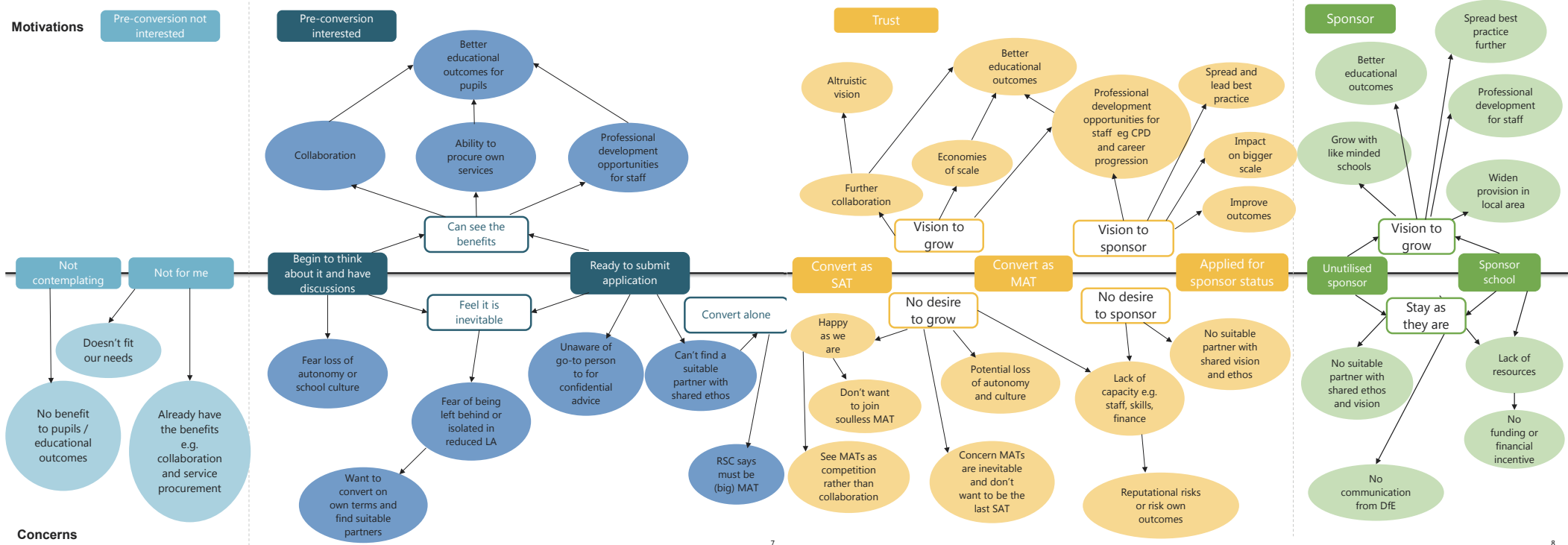
Perceived barriers to converting to an academy or becoming a sponsor can be categorised as practical reasons and attitudinal reasons. Practical reasons typically involved considerations of resources (financial and staff) and the suitable matching to a MAT or potential sponsor school. Attitudinal reasons included views among pre-conversion schools that becoming an academy would not have added benefits compared to their current situation, and among trusts that becoming a sponsor could result in a loss of their trust culture. While some school leaders are willing to take steps to explore options including the perceived risks associated with the decision (e.g. capacity drain; culture loss) and ways to mitigate these risks, others, who may be in the same situation, are not prepared to do so. School leaders expressed interest in case studies that are open about both successes and failures in the process. This would help school leaders to work out what works best and how to develop their own schools.

Many school leaders claimed to understand current policy around academies and sponsors. However, there also seemed to be some widely circulated misconceptions, such as the perception that academies and sponsors are profit orientated rather than having the pupils and educational outcomes at the forefront. Indeed, pre-conversion school leaders who were not interested in becoming academies believed there is little or no benefit to pupils as a result of academy conversion. In contrast, sponsors identified better educational outcomes as a driving factor to become a sponsor. Despite this, a number of sponsors viewed other sponsors as being more driven by finances compared with their own philanthropic motivations. Clearly, as schools move along the academy-sponsor journey they begin to view the benefits of academies more favourably, but some negative views remain and are open to different interpretations across the system.

School leaders also identified disparities in the information provided about the academy-sponsor system across different regions and compared with central DfE communications. For example, it was perceived that models that were accepted in some RSC regions were rejected in others. School leaders felt a need for greater clarity and consistency around the system.

Through consideration of the differing needs of pre-conversion schools, trusts and sponsors at different decision-making points in the academy-sponsor journey, this report shed light on ways to optimise communication about the academy-sponsor system. In addition to ensuring clear and consistent information and guidance, it will be key to share the learning and best practice to demonstrate the benefits of the system, particularly those relating to better educational outcomes for pupils within a diverse school system.

Figure 17: Map of key considerations about the current academy sector



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