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Exploring school collaboration and workload reduction

Research report

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Aims and approach

This study aimed to explore how school-to-school collaboration can affect teacher and leader workload, including whether and how multi-academy trusts (MATs) make use of their structures to collaborate and to what extent schools outside of MATs are able to take advantage of collaboration to similar ends.

Depth interviews were conducted from May to June 2022, with senior leaders from 12 schools (6 secondary and 6 primary).¹ They included 5 MATs, 6 single academy trusts (SATs), and one local authority maintained school.²

As a small qualitative study, the findings cannot be considered generalisable to all schools or academies.

1.2 Key findings

Purpose of collaboration

According to the senior leaders interviewed, collaborative arrangements were driven by a clear purpose, centred on the benefits that could be accrued around common or more individual needs. These needs broadly focused on school improvement and improving pupil outcomes, but also for example, wellbeing support for headteachers. This was particularly identified with reference to managing the challenges of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Senior leaders also noted the strategic and operational importance of workload reductions, and that working with other schools might help secure these.

In most cases, school leaders directed the extent of collaborative activity, based on factors such as their individual school needs and organisational capacity to participate. The extent to which collaboration centred on developing shared systems and approaches was primarily dependent on school leaders' perceptions of their value in terms of impact and/or applicability to their context.

¹ This includes one group interview with 4 senior leaders from 4 collaborating primary schools.

² A screening survey was conducted from 10 May to 30 June 2022 to recruit a sample for the interviews. This briefly asked about schools' collaborative practices and reported impacts on leader and/or teacher workload. In total, 24 valid responses were received.

Types of collaboration

Findings suggested that schools engage in a range of collaborative practices across several areas or school functions. These included the following six areas mentioned by interviewees:

- leadership
- finance, administration, and school management
- curriculum leadership
- pupil assessment
- continuing professional development (CPD)
- pupil behaviour management, welfare, and shared provision

Reducing workload

Workload reduction was referred to across most of these areas, with workload defined by interviewees in two ways:

- the amount of time needed to carry out an activity
- the cognitive and/or psychological demands required in carrying out one or more activities or a role

These were both included in senior leaders' references to how mutual support offered opportunities to share expertise, practices, and decision-making, and how it improved their wellbeing and ability to manage workload.

Senior leaders in some MATs referred to centralised services and structures, and how these supported workload savings through reducing duplication of systems and processes. Similarly, some senior leaders talked about securing efficiencies and policy development outside of MATs. Shared systems using online technology were associated with a reduction in workload either through reducing use of paper-based systems, or through making shared planning and resources instantly accessible.

Senior leaders acknowledged that collaboration can lead to increased workload, whether in the short, medium, or long term. However, the benefits of such approaches were reported to outweigh the drawbacks, such as shared planning reducing teacher workload and contributing to better pupil outcomes in the longer term. Having a greater number of contributors allowed schools to draw upon their collective capacity and prevented isolated planning. Leaders would therefore assess whether increases in workload were worth the added investment and commitment.

Measuring impact

Monitoring the impact of collaboration on workload was more anecdotal than based on any systematic approach to data collection. However, interviewees were largely positive about the benefits of collaboration in general. This included reference to how it can increase capacity to achieve school improvement, as well as the potential transferability of collaborative practices, such as reducing duplication of policy writing.

Barriers and enablers to collaboration

Several enablers to collaboration were reported, with key themes being:

- geographical proximity (with recognition of the benefits of using technology to support communication)
- lack of competition between collaborating schools
- commonality of vision and purpose
- securing staff buy-in to engage in collaborative practices
- building tailored relationships to meet specific needs
- collaborative structures, systems, and ways of working

These enablers were underpinned by school leaders' drive to maximise the benefits of schools working together.

There were two key barriers reported:

- competition between schools, such as for school places or driven by accountability frameworks
- geographical distance affecting travel distances and having potentially negative implications for logistics

There were limited responses in relation to the suitability of collaboration according to different school characteristics. However, responses reflected that there should be equality in the system and also recognition of equity, meaning that some schools may want or need more support at different points than others.

Some suggested that schools could be encouraged to work more collaboratively through communicating the potential benefits of this, including for pupils and staff workload. This could draw on examples of effective collaboration through case studies and communication forums to allow schools to share experiences.

An implication of this research is to consider how best such benefits and practices might be shared. This could include, for example, through gov.uk, social media, events, a toolkit, as well as through making links to existing resources.

Considerable research is already available around workload reduction, school collaboration and partnership working, which might inform a set of resources to support effective approaches that address key barriers and levers. These resources could be enhanced by recent case studies and used to communicate the potential impact that collaboration can have on teacher and leader workload. This could also inform and add to the evidence base of professional development provision such as, national professional qualifications (NPQs).

As this study was based on a very small number of interview responses, the evidence base on this topic would benefit from further research to inform any strategies going forwards.

2. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) is committed to addressing excessive and unnecessary teacher and leader workload, with the [Recruitment and Retention Strategy \(2019\)](#) placing a reduction in workload as a core strategic priority. The [Education Staff Wellbeing Charter](#), published in May 2021 and which all schools and colleges have been encouraged to sign up to, reiterates this commitment.

Since publication of the [Workload Challenge](#) in 2015, there has been a rise in research around understanding teacher workload and opportunities for workload reduction.³ The DfE, however, recently identified a gap in evidence around how schools collaborate to promote efficiencies in teacher and leader time, including how multi-academy trusts (MATs) use their economies of scale and communities of practice to reduce workload.

Research focused on school partnerships has explored the nature of inter-school collaboration, providing insights into the approaches taken and models of partnership working, rationale underpinning collaboration, and the enablers and challenges involved.⁴ There is limited and unclear evidence, however, around the benefits and impacts that can result from collaboration between schools, particularly in relation to teacher and leader workload.

2.1 Aims and objectives

This study aimed to explore how school-to-school collaboration can affect teacher and leader workload, including whether and how MATs make use of their structures to collaborate and to what extent schools outside of MATs are able to take advantage of collaboration to similar ends.

The objectives were to:

³ See for example: Churches, R. (2020). [Supporting teachers through the school workload reduction toolkit](#). Education Development Trust; Robinson, C. and Pedder, D. (2018). [Workload challenge research projects: overall summary, Research report](#). NCTL; Lynch, S., Worth, J., Bamford, S., and Wespieser, K. (2016). [Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention](#) Slough: NFER; Ofsted (2019) [Teacher well-being at work in schools and further education providers](#) July 2019, No. 190034; Walker, M., Worth, J., and Van den Brande, J. (2019). [Teacher workload survey 2019](#) Research report. NFER; CooperGibson Research (2018) [Exploring teacher workload: qualitative research report](#).

⁴ See for example: Armstrong, P. W., Brown, C., and Chapman, C. J. (2021). *School-to-school collaboration in England: A configurative review of the empirical evidence*. [Review of Education](#). Vol. 9, No. 1, February 2021, pp. 319–351 DOI: 10.1002/rev3.3248; Armstrong, P. (2015) Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: a review of the evidence Research report; Robinson C. and Pedder, D. (2018). [Workload challenge research projects: overall summary, Research report](#). NCTL; Ellis, G., Bell, P., Buckle, L., Sherlaw, A., and Shenton, A. K. (2018). [Reducing teacher workload: Research report into shared planning. Whitley Bay High School](#); Gu, Q., Heesom, S., Williamson, R., and Crowther, K. (2018) [Reducing teachers' unnecessary workload: the promise of collaborative planning](#). Transform Trust and Teaching School Alliance.

- understand how and in what areas schools collaborate with one another to achieve resource efficiencies (for example, in the sharing of material resources, the strategic use of specialist or supply staff across schools, and curriculum sharing)
- explore how and why collaborative arrangements might differ by school characteristics
- understand how the DfE could support and promote collaboration, where appropriate
- provide examples of good practice in collaborative working in the context of workload reduction that other schools and trusts could learn from

2.2 Methodology

A qualitative approach was used, primarily through telephone or virtual depth interviews, with fieldwork taking place from May to June 2022.

In total, 12 schools were involved in the research. This included 5 MATs, 6 single academy trusts (SATs), and one local authority maintained school. Of the academies, 3 were sponsor led and 8 were academy converters⁵.

Individual interviews were conducted with senior leaders (headteacher, principal, head of school, vice principal, or deputy headteacher) of 6 secondary schools and 2 primary schools. In addition, one group interview was conducted with 4 senior leaders from 4 collaborating primary schools.

Schools were located across urban (9) and rural (3) locations and generally had Ofsted ratings of 'good' or 'outstanding' (with one rated 'inadequate').

2.2.1 Sample recruitment

A screening survey was sent to a sample of schools from 10 May to 30 June 2022. The screening survey included questions on:

- key functions / areas that schools collaborate on
- a brief description of their collaborative practices

⁵ Converter academies are schools whose governing bodies have opted to convert to academy status. Sponsor led academies are schools within a multi-academy trust (MAT) that works with an academy sponsor - an organisation or person who has received approval from the DfE to support an underperforming academy or group of academies.

- reported impacts of their collaborative practices, including on leader and/or teacher workload
- willingness to participate in a follow-up interview and/or focus group

The screening survey was shared via email with 400 schools, selected from the Get Information About Schools (GIAS) database, using a random stratified sampling approach. The sample was weighted towards MATs given their focus within the study, while ensuring that a range of schools were included:

- MATs (240)
- SATs (60)
- local authority maintained schools (60)
- schools within federations (40)

The sample had an even phase split and had reasonable coverage across key school characteristics such as region, geographic location, Ofsted rating, school size, MAT size, and length of operation.

The survey was sent to a further purposive sample of 102 schools, including schools within a large MAT and some schools known to the DfE, due to issues with response rates.

Response to the screening survey was low (see methodological considerations below) with 26 schools submitting a response (including 24 valid responses).⁶ Details of the profile of schools responding to the screening survey, and an overview of responses, are provided in Appendix 1. Of the 24 respondents, 13 agreed to take part in an interview or focus group and 12 interviews were completed (one respondent did not respond to follow-up requests).

2.3 Methodological considerations

There are a number of methodological considerations to note when considering the findings provided in this report:

- there was a low response to the screening survey and only one-in-two respondents agreed to further contact meaning that the qualitative fieldwork was limited to 12 interviews - the reasons for low participation were thought to be:
 - the survey and interviews were taking place at a time of significant upheaval for schools, when they were coping with the continuing COVID-19

⁶ One school did not agree to participate in the survey and another stated that they did not collaborate with other schools. Both responses were rendered invalid.

- pandemic, staff and pupil absences, catch-up, and preparation for exams and the summer break
- follow-up activities were limited to 3 reminder emails due to concerns about these burdens on schools
 - low interest in the project or limited benefits for their participation (with schools already working collaboratively or managing workload), and cautiousness about policy around MAT development and growth
 - to minimise burden and disruption, the interviews were limited to 30 minutes which had an impact on the extent and depth of data that could be obtained around different collaborative arrangements and how these impact on workload
 - the project was, by design, a small-scale study and as such, the maintained sector was under-represented
 - as a small qualitative study, the findings cannot be considered generalisable to all schools or academies - caution should therefore be exercised when interpreting the findings
 - schools responded voluntarily to the screening survey, which may have led to self-selection bias
 - interviewees were school leaders which meant that the main emphasis of their responses was on collaboration at a leadership level, consequently, this might not necessarily include all collaborative activity and could potentially mean that responses held some bias towards leaders' actions

3. Collaborative arrangements, practices, and purposes

This section sets out the collaborative arrangements and purposes for collaboration cited by interviewees, supported by brief analyses of the screening survey. Appendix 3 includes 4 case studies illustrating examples of collaborative practice.

Leaders reported a continuum of collaborative arrangements; these ranged from internal collaboration within MATs to informal collaboration between schools. Some schools adopted more formalised approaches, for example, in the form of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) that established member representation and commitment (see for example, case study 4 in Appendix 3).

Collaborative arrangements were largely found within group structures strategically established to address priority areas, such as subject leader groups. There were, however, examples of school-to-school support identified, but these were less prevalent. Together, these represent a blend of arrangements: whole group, part group (for example, for phase-based curriculum development), and school-to-school support.

Table 2 (Appendix 2) summarises the main collaborative arrangements that interviewees stated had either been established or were in development.

3.1 Purpose of collaboration

Collaborative models were driven by a clear purpose, centred on the benefits that school leaders felt could be accrued from them, including mutual support around common or more individual needs. These needs were mostly focused on school improvement and improving pupil outcomes but there were other examples, including peer support for headteachers which aided wellbeing and so was seen to indirectly affect whole school improvement.

School leaders made decisions on their school's collaborative activities and groups that might be formed to help achieve their school's strategic goals, including school improvement, financial efficiency, and workload reduction. As a result, collaboration was reported to mainly start at senior leadership level and then grow to include other staff to meet strategic and operational needs (see, for example, case studies 2 and 4 in Appendix 3).

It started with heads, then we set up a meeting between deputy heads to focus on things like curriculum, now we have a Designated Safeguarding Lead [DSL] Group. Now subject leaders too. -
Secondary headteacher, MAT

According to those interviewed, school leaders often directed their school's collaborative activity based on factors such as their school's needs and organisational capacity to participate. The extent to which collaboration centred on developing shared systems and approaches was primarily dependent on leaders' perceptions of its value in terms of impact and/or applicability in their school. For example, one MAT's systems, while stated to be fundamentally the same, were carried out in slightly different ways to suit different settings.

However, there were examples of bottom-up collaboration, such as between teachers in first schools with mixed age classes.

In most cases, collaborative arrangements - whether formal or informal - were localised. This might reflect historical relationships between feeder and receiving schools within a locality, as well as a common purpose to provide quality education to pupils within a distinct area. Being local also offered the opportunity for accessible school-to-school support. Wider collaborative arrangements were also represented, including an umbrella trust working across regions and a primary MAT with membership from across a region. For some MATs and formalised collaborations, their formation had been designed to help choose the schools' collaborators within a policy backdrop of MAT expansion.

MAT status did not necessarily preclude membership of other informal arrangements; for example, a sole secondary school within a mixed MAT found additional, phase-based collaboration beyond the MAT beneficial (see case study 2 in Appendix 3).

Although the majority of teaching schools have been de-designated following the move to the teaching school hub model, in some cases collaboration remained with formerly designated teaching schools around, for instance, professional development provision. Additional collaborative engagement was in some cases represented within Diocesan networks and local services (for example, police and social care).

3.2 Focus and functions of collaborative working

To initially explore the nature of collaboration, schools were asked – via the screening survey – if they collaborated with other schools in a range of areas (Table 1). The survey findings indicate that each school worked with other schools on a range of areas,⁷ the most commonly reported being curriculum planning and sharing, staff professional development, and school systems / whole school management. The least reported area was around staff deployment.

⁷ Leaders responding to the survey reported that their schools collaborate on an average of 7 of the areas shown in Table 1, ranging from 3 to 11 areas. However, the small sample size means that this finding should be treated with caution.

Table 1: Schools areas of collaboration

School functions / areas	Number
Curriculum planning and sharing	22
Staff training / continuing professional development (CPD)	22
School systems and whole-school management	19
Development of teaching materials / resources	17
Pupil assessment and marking	16
General administration	14
Human resources and staff support (for example, wellbeing support)	14
Behaviour management	14
Pastoral care and pupil support	14
Data management	12
Staff deployment (for example, specialist teachers)	8
Other ⁸	5

Source: Screening survey (sample = 24)

The areas in which schools work together were further explored with senior leaders in the interviews. Among the interviewees, collaboration largely centred around:

- leadership
- finance, administration, and school management
- curriculum leadership
- pupil assessment
- continuing professional development (CPD)
- pupil behaviour management, welfare, and shared provision

These areas are explored further below.

3.2.1 Leadership

In all cases, collaboration between school leaders was identified, such as half-termly meetings for headteachers. In some cases, this collaboration was set within MAT models

⁸ Other mentions were: benchmarking, supported self-evaluation, headteacher wellbeing support (2), headteacher meetings to share expertise and best practice, INSET days, moderation (2), procurement (2), plans for subject leads to meet around best practise and joint working.

or established structures within or across local authority areas. Interviewees reported that these meetings provided opportunities for information sharing and mutual support, including around current leadership challenges they were facing. The meetings also provided the opportunity to consider school improvement priorities and identify strengths that could be shared across the group, including through school-to-school support. Reported collaboration success factors included an individual's willingness to support other colleagues and the expertise found within the diverse schools represented.

You need the people in charge who are not about their own power, their own authority - the best leaders are not doing it for themselves... It could change, all you need is 4 or 5 headteachers to come in who are all about themselves and don't want to work collaboratively and you could lose it. - *Secondary headteacher, formal collaboration*

Some interviewees also said that informal communication was important, for example for a new headteacher who was facing a specific challenge and could benefit from advice from more experienced peers. Leaders reported using informal communication forums during the COVID-19 pandemic to share resources and help inform decision-making (see for example, case study 2 in Appendix 3). This included use of video conferencing platforms and social media messaging services. In a few cases, leadership forums had been extended for groups, such as deputy headteachers, SENCOs, and DSLs.

Practice example

In a formal cross local authority collaboration, DSLs attended a managed transfer meeting for pupils at serious risk of permanent exclusion. This used to be attended by headteachers, but decision-making powers have since been delegated to DSLs. The meeting served a dual function as it provides a CPD opportunity to discuss best practice and jointly consider solutions to challenges, and ask how pupil needs are managed in different settings:

You put all the best people to deal with that in a room together, we are only on our third meeting of that and it has been an absolute lurch forward. - *Secondary headteacher, formal collaboration*

Informal collaboration also raised awareness of products or services that might match their own school or pupil needs and which had been 'road tested' in other schools, for example, a support service for staff that offered counselling. In a few cases, references were made to leaders' use of peer reviews, which allowed individuals to co-create and offer recommendations for development. In one case, a newly appointed safeguarding

Specialist Leader of Education (SLE) was invited – through existing connections – to visit a partner school to conduct a safeguarding review as a precursor to doing this with other schools. This aimed to support the SLE’s role development and also provided the partner school with valuable feedback on its practices.

3.2.2 Finance, administration, and school management

Interviewees reported using half-termly network meetings for finance and administrative staff. Within one non-MAT collaboration, this centred around sharing policies and resources (see case study 1 in Appendix 3), and supported good financial decision-making, including securing savings through joint procurement. Within two of the MAT structures, centralised approaches were used for finance and administrative functions. This included co-funding services, such as human resources (HR) and payroll. In two cases there was reference to centralised recruitment processes and in one of these, portability of contracts which supported filling vacancies.

3.2.3 Curriculum leadership

Curriculum leadership was an evident priority area for collaboration among the interviewees, both within MATs and non-MAT models. In all cases, structures and processes had either been established, or were planned, to support curriculum leadership and development, for example, half-termly subject leader meetings (see case study 3 in Appendix 3). In some instances, collaboration was being evolved over time. For example, one primary MAT started with collaboration in core subjects and was in the process of extending collaboration opportunities to foundation subjects.

The purpose of these arrangements included sharing effective practice and resources, developing curriculum planning and, for cross-phase models, developing learning continuity and progression. In one informal model, the interviewee recognised that meeting such expectations of participation and contribution could not be insisted upon but could still be achieved. Such purposes had implications for reducing workload as set out in section 4.

3.2.4 Pupil assessment

In a few cases, interviewees referenced cross-school moderation activities for pupil assessment. They also cited the importance - in the case of a few MATs - of the need for consistent assessment approaches and systems across schools to support reporting and analysis or interpretation.

3.2.5 Continuing professional development (CPD)

CPD provision included more formalised opportunities such as collaborative INSET days, found within both MAT and non-MAT models, as well as more targeted provision to meet specific school improvement needs. For example, interviewees cited subject or leadership-specific support through school-to-school support systems, including through drawing on previous teaching school links.

If you have a member of staff struggling, if you have got new leaders, we don't have to worry about how we will train them, as we have leads in the other schools, a maths lead, an English lead or a music lead that we can go [to] and share their expertise. – *Primary headteacher, formal collaboration*

In some cases, schools bought a package of specialist training (for example, related to pupil behaviour) for all or some schools in a collaborative group so that costs could be shared between them. In one case, behaviour CPD was developed collaboratively.

Practice example

One small MAT's Teaching and Learning Group has drawn on a body of evidence behind effective teaching practices and their application in monitoring pupil behaviour and relationships. Within this overall theme, there was a choice of 7 potential foci and each school selected the one most appropriate to their needs. In one school, this was 'using positive framing of behaviour management statements', as on return from COVID-19 related school closures, there was a view that staff were overly using negatively phrased statements.

3.2.6 Pupil behaviour management, welfare, and shared provision

In an example of formal collaboration, schools worked together to provide pupil support. This approach centred on 2 strands of activity:

- creating localised teams with representatives from key support services, such as social care
- reducing permanent exclusions in particular circumstances through liaison with other local secondary schools and pupil referral units

In another case of formal collaboration, several primary school leaders were considering how they might, as a group, procure education welfare support for pupils in light of this no longer being provided by the local authority.

There were other examples of collaboration around provision for pupils, such as sharing specialist staff via a service level agreement (SLA). It was suggested that costs can be a barrier to pupils experiencing face-to-face shared provision and that technology offered potential solutions. However, one example offers an illustration of curriculum provision that was devised collaboratively to create a shared experience.

Practice example

Pre-pandemic, a primary trust devised an enterprise project where children from each school in years 5 and 6 visited local employers and businesses and learnt about the world of work.

It was trying to develop the children of the trust rather than because you live in particular postcode you get better opportunities – so getting equal access across the trust. -

Primary headteacher, MAT

4. Workload reduction through collaboration

Where comparisons were drawn, workload reduction was felt to be secondary to a focus on improving pupil outcomes. However, senior leaders acknowledged its strategic and operational importance within the interviews.

While there was a greater emphasis on workload reduction within MAT leader interviews, the overall sample size (9) means that no conclusions around significance can be drawn from this.

Everything that we are doing, we are questioning or we are saying: 'how will that work workload-wise?' - *Secondary headteacher, MAT*

Workload reduction is becoming smarter - what do we need to do and don't we really need to do...It is not a case of, 'well we are a MAT and therefore all HR is done at one level.' We are a bit different to that, always balancing what we are doing is important. That way, we make ourselves smarter, listening to others, balancing. You could go after lots of new initiatives, you have to ask if it is a good idea really. – *Secondary headteacher, umbrella trust*

Based on the senior leader interviews, the case studies in Appendix 3 provide examples of school collaboration and how working together can help to reduce workload.

4.1 Defining and interpreting workload

Workload was defined by interviewees in two ways.

- the amount of time needed to carry out an activity
- the cognitive and/or psychological demands required in carrying out one or more activities or a role

References to time spent on unnecessary tasks were less common, although some did comment on how they had streamlined processes and systems, including around marking and planning. Moreover, senior leaders readily referred to sharing the burden, reducing the emotional strain, supporting each other, knowing that there is someone available to ask a question of, and improving their wellbeing and ability to manage workload.

The following quotations illustrate common interpretations of the term workload, with its emphasis on cognitive and psychological demands.

Workload is really hard to quantify, sometimes it is not just the physical time taken to do something, it's your brain space. It [collaboration] frees up my brain space because I don't feel alone. - *Secondary headteacher, formal collaboration*

That goes to the heart of workload; workload isn't about what we are doing timewise, it is about ensuring that we are all capable of being able to continue with our work, being there for each other - this group is the best thing in place for my personal mental health. - *Primary headteacher, formal collaboration*

4.2 Examples of workload reduction

Similar to section 3, reported examples of workload reduction can be categorised under the following headings:

- leadership
- finance, administration, and school management
- curriculum leadership
- pupil assessment
- technology

4.2.1 Leadership

Informal communication among senior leaders – for example, via email – around areas of common or individual concern was seen to help to contribute to workload reduction. Being able to draw on a wider pool of leadership peers offered opportunities for information sharing, utilising collective or individual knowledge and experience, and shared decision-making. This helped to save individuals' time, reduced feelings of isolation, gave surety to approaches taken, and supported individual wellbeing in managing the demands that headship brings (see case study 4 in Appendix 3). This was highlighted with reference to the demands acutely felt in managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has reduced workload because you can have a quick answer from someone who has done it. It has reduced isolation. It has improved my wellbeing, welfare, ability to manage an unmanageable workload. With the collective approach you can share the burden. It is my sanity and ability to survive... It can be lonely for a headteacher, you have to have a network. - *Secondary headteacher, MAT*

Such communication also provided opportunities to ask about approaches used in each other's schools. For example, in one formal collaboration, these enquiries were used to identify an appropriate phonics scheme that was subsequently purchased.

4.2.2 Finance, administration, and school management

There were references among some MATs to centralised services and structures, which were seen to support workload reduction through reduced duplication of processes. One MAT leader cited the creation of centralised policy and risk assessment processes, which saved individual leaders' time in developing these (see also case study 1 in Appendix 3).

Although we are individual schools, the trust principals have meetings and the trust board develop policies in areas such as health and safety, things that you as a principal, you may be floundering trying to find or spend time researching...so that does reduce workload of senior leaders. - *Primary principal, MAT*

Policy development – either sharing or creating - was also found outside of MATs, as shown in the quote and practice example below.

Our school business managers work together as a separate committee that feeds into our collaborative working. This organisation allows us to make good financial choices and increase our buying power. We also have access to policies and resources (human and physical), free of charge from our colleagues. - *Primary headteacher, formal collaboration*

The headteacher of one small primary school within a MAT also noted the benefits of centralised access to financial and site management support, as it meant the school had access to expertise that could not be budgeted for in-house. A further example of the benefits of collaborative financial approaches can be found below.

Practice example

A group of non-MAT primary schools were collating their use of contractors so that they could collectively consider whether efficiencies might be gained through joint procurement.

At the moment we are setting up our contracts spreadsheet - that will take some time - but once it is done it will save loads of time in terms of contracts, so you just need to set it up, you have to invest some time to that. - *Primary headteacher, formal collaboration*

4.2.3 Curriculum leadership

Curriculum leadership groups were seen to help reduce workload through shared planning approaches and resource development (see case study 3 in Appendix 3). For example, the collaborative development of curriculum knowledge organisers for pupils across one non-MAT group of schools enabled curriculum materials to be produced more quickly and to be tailored to individual school contexts.

Practice example

In one case, a lone secondary school within a MAT was also a member of an informal group of other secondary schools. Within this group, subject leaders were paired up with peers at other schools for support and to share ideas. Through this, knowledge organisers were created. Sharing good practice across the group helped to develop ways to reduce the burden of marking.

Someone somewhere will have thought of an easier way to do it. If we would have done it individually, we would have been missing a trick. We put in less effort and get a bigger return by sharing. -
Secondary headteacher, MAT

Overall, having a greater number of contributors allowed schools to draw upon their collective capacity and prevented working in isolation, which impacted positively on workload reduction. For example, in one MAT, several teachers from first schools were collaboratively planning the curriculum. Time invested in cross-phase liaison to support curriculum continuity and progression was also seen as beneficial, compared to the alternative.

I would have thought that the workload spent on something like that is worth it compared to the workload of dealing with kids coming through having done different things. – *Secondary headteacher, MAT*

Practice example

In a primary MAT, core subject forums led by SLEs meet regularly to resource and develop curriculum planning tools and curriculum ideas. These are not for 'one size fits all' application across all schools, but to provide shared support and reduce workload for subject leaders.

It reduces the pressure, it doesn't do everything for them, it takes some of the emotional strain out of having to do it alone. - *Primary headteacher, MAT*

In a small secondary MAT, they had considered aligning history curriculums. Senior leaders felt this alignment might support workload reduction in the long term, but it was decided against due, in part, to the potential for short term increases in workload for some teachers, who would need to learn new specialisms. This example represents the potential trade-off between short term workload increases and potential long term workload reductions.

4.2.4 Pupil assessment

As highlighted in section 3.2.4, collaboration for assessment was related primarily to moderation, which was not identified as a tool for reducing workload but rather contributed to quality assurance of judgements and improving standards. However, a few examples of assessment approaches that aimed to reduce workload were identified. In one MAT, collaborative writing of common assessments at key stage 3 was being planned, and the following example reflects a whole-MAT revision of marking and feedback practices.

Practice example

One primary MAT used training from a national organisation to address its approach to marking and feedback in line with its aim of 'trying to reduce workload and have maximum impact on children's development.' This has now improved substantially with a shift towards greater use of verbal feedback and technology-based feedback, compared to physically marking books. Centralised direction for senior leaders in individual schools has also helped by providing a mandate around the expected amount of marking, as well as planning and preparation.

4.2.5 Technology

Shared systems using online technology were associated with a reduction in workload, either through replacing less efficient paper-based systems or through making shared planning and resources instantly accessible. In addition, reference was made to using online safeguarding software, which was seen as more efficient and timesaving.

Practice example

Joint planning and associated teaching resources and materials are hosted on the MAT's online platform so that all documents and files are shareable. This has improved ease of use that has saved time and had 'a huge impact on workload'.

I have a saying – do it centrally, do it once – it is a phrase I use a lot, it has implications everywhere. - *Headteacher, mixed MAT*

4.3 Workload increases from collaboration

Most interviewees acknowledged that participation in collaborative activities can lead to increased workload, whether in the short, medium, or long term⁹. Examples given included:

- peer review processes with their associated preparation and reporting
- school-to-school support projects
- securing consistent usage of school systems
- time spent investing in relationships to support collaboration

However, the interviewees reported that the benefits of such approaches outweighed the drawbacks. For example, the time spent developing shared curriculum plans resulted in subsequent reduced workload and contributed to better pupil outcomes.

I couldn't say at the moment that any decisions we have taken have reduced teachers' workload in the classroom currently, but over time it will... It is like anything, if you want to redraft your scheme of work, short term it is more work, but long term you have saved yourself, that's the hill you go over to hopefully see the utopia on the other side. - *Secondary headteacher, MAT*

Senior leaders also reported valuing meetings with their peers; the time spent in meetings added to workload in one respect, however it was seen to alleviate it in others. Several interviewees commented that they were maintaining approaches begun during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social media communication and virtual meetings, and that these contributed to workload reduction; however, there was one reference to a return to face-to-face meetings potentially being a step backwards:

...the school coordinating them [meetings] now want them to be face-to-face again because it is more powerful, but as soon as it is face-to-face, attendance has dropped because one hour is now 2 hours [due to travel]. I don't think we have quite in education, quite learned what we might do from the power of digital, going back to face-to-face is not necessarily the right thing. People are resentful of travel time now. - *Secondary headteacher, formal collaboration*

⁹ Similar to the interview feedback, a small number (3) responding to the screening survey mentioned additional time and workload required to attend meetings, implement new approaches, and conduct impact assessments. They also mentioned increases in time to find solutions or come to a decision due to the need for dialogue with more people. Individual comments were made about collaborative activity not reducing workload but enabling schools to work more efficiently and that developing consistent systems can increase workload initially but was worthwhile in the long term.

4.4 Monitoring impact

Monitoring the impact of collaboration on workload was anecdotal, rather than based on any systematic approach to data collection.¹⁰ In one mixed MAT, its size was seen to be conducive to feedback and evaluation:

We are on such a small scale, I would know if it wasn't working, we would tell each other. – *headteacher, mixed MAT*

In a small secondary MAT, while there was some evidence of specific teaching practices being used, the challenges of more scientific measurements were identified:

We know from students and student voice, how teachers have used positive framing [for behaviour management] and where it has been embedded, but we have no quantitative data. That is the hardest thing in education. – *Secondary headteacher, MAT*

In a mixed MAT, collaborative curriculum redesign was said to have had a positive impact on the effectiveness of teacher planning, and subject deep-dives conducted by commissioned external providers provided positive feedback on this.

However, some processes that contributed to monitoring and evaluation were cited, including:

- MAT board representation on collaborative groups
- curriculum group leaders (SLEs) reporting back to the MAT board
- MAT board representatives meeting with headteachers and conducting school visits
- cross-collaboration headteacher meetings
- gathering perception data through pupil and staff surveys, interviews, and focus groups

¹⁰ Similarly, most (15 of 24) of schools responding to the screening survey said they do not have any evidence (of any kind) of the impact of collaboration on school leader and teacher workload. Of those who do have some evidence (9), this was mainly informal feedback / anecdotal evidence (9) and perception data from school staff, such as surveys, interviews, and focus group feedback (7). More formal feedback did not appear to be used within the sample.

5. Transferability: key factors

Interviewees were largely positive about the potential for transferability of collaborative practices and of the benefits of schools working together more broadly.

5.1 Enablers

Several enablers to collaboration were cited by interviewees. Underpinning these was a broader emphasis on the importance of leadership that supported collaboration. This included acknowledgment of the need for appropriate leadership structures and also leaders' efforts to maximise the impact that collaboration can have. The following are a list of enablers cited by interviewees.

5.1.1 Location

- geographical proximity, where being closer enables face-to-face meetings, for example, for school-to-school support work
- interviewees also felt there were benefits to online working which could be built upon through hybrid (face-to-face and online) models of collaboration

5.1.2 Lack of competition

- interviewees felt the absence of competition between would-be collaborators supported openness to share - this was reflected in comments from leaders in collaborative models comprising upper, middle, and first schools

Feeder schools take away a lot of the competition, it brings a non-competitive element, and so a genuineness, you can work together more effectively. - *Headteacher, mixed MAT*

For true collaboration, there will be schools who are stronger at some things and some less strong. And you have got to be able to be vulnerable. I wouldn't want to be vulnerable in front of people who I thought might want to gobble me up because I think they could use that vulnerability against you. - *Primary headteacher, formal collaboration*

5.1.3 Commonality of vision and purpose

- having a common purpose where schools have an invested interest in working together as they serve the same community and/or receive pupils from a feeder school

- having a common vision, for example, schools forming models with like-minded schools/leaders

As an ethos and core value, it [collaboration] is a good place to start. It is also not sunshine and rainbows all the time, working in education is a hard job. Not every collaboration goes perfectly, some people don't like change – you have to put all that in the melting pot. - *Headteacher, mixed MAT*

- there being a common view between schools on the values and ethics behind effective collaboration, such as, trust, openness, goodwill, and a willingness to share and support as 'professional friends'
- retaining identity, autonomy, and exercising choice, according to school context, of when and on what to collaborate

I am struggling to think of barriers and that is interesting. It is the flexibility to choose what you do...Once you realise that the barrier is 'that we should be doing the same thing' and that is not going to happen, it enables us to embrace different ways of working. - *Primary headteacher, formal collaboration*

5.1.4 Securing staff buy-in

- securing staff buy-in to engage in collaborative practices, through communicating their potential benefits

If people believe that their collaboration will reduce workload, that will be favourable. But in the teaching profession, people do the best they can for the kids, if you present collaboration as a benefit to young people and that it gives them better chances, you will get buy in. - *Secondary headteacher, mixed MAT*

- aiding subsequent buy-in through school staff seeing the benefits of collaboration which supports further commitment to working together - this helps create a positive culture

5.1.5 Building tailored relationships to meet specific needs

- retaining or pursuing phase-specific collaboration where this does not exist (for example, a sole secondary school within a MAT collaborating with nearby secondaries – see case study 2 in Appendix 3)
- making use of existing links where appropriate, such as with former teaching schools

5.1.6 Structures, systems, and ways of working

- creating collaborative structures, such as groups for different staff that can enable effective sharing, and co-development of, for example, curriculum plans
- creating Memorandums of Understanding where appropriate, for example, to support commitment and realise the potential of collaboration
- central teams within MATs that support shared functions, such as information technology (IT), HR, finance, pupil welfare, and site management
- financial support – such as schools contributing to fund collaboration

It all comes down to money. Until schools are genuinely thinking about financial collaboration, they are not really unlocking their full potential. - *Headteacher, mixed MAT*

- having a clear understanding of context and the appropriate attitudes and skills to provide school-to-school support:

What works in one school won't work in another, when you go in you have to be humble enough to know that. You go in and listen... Some schools are in challenging circumstances, you have to have real humility dealing with real complex needs, or staffing. - *Secondary headteacher, umbrella trust*

5.2 Barriers

Interviewees cited two key barriers to collaboration:

- competition between schools, for example between nearby receiver schools in securing pupil admissions or driven by accountability frameworks, which could affect genuine collaboration where activities could help a competitor

It doesn't work if you are in competition, if you see collaboration as giving away your secrets, and you think 'don't tell them that or they will be better than us', that is the biggest obstacle. - *Secondary headteacher, formal collaboration*

- geographical distance, which affects travel distances and poses logistical challenges; for example, school-to-school support which requires those providing support to be out of class for longer periods, and financial costs for in-person or pupil-to-pupil collaboration

Other barriers referred to by one or more interviewees included:

- dependency on individual leaders' commitment to collaborative activities
- the potential for changes of leadership to adversely impact existing collaborative arrangements
- relationship building/maintenance, which requires an investment of time
- informal collaboration which does not have the same levers for compliance as a MAT
- lack of funding, for example, in rural contexts

5.3 Contextual factors

Responses about the suitability of collaboration according to different school characteristics were limited. However, they did reflect that there should be equality in the system and also recognition of equity, meaning that some schools may want or need more support at different points than others.

In one case, the interviewee felt that funding streams were targeted more at urban or coastal areas where there was deprivation, and that the area within the local authority in which the respondent's MAT was located was 'slightly the forgotten land'. They commented that funding would help address this:

With a bit more money we could be even better and a flagship but capacity-wise we are at capacity in terms of staff deployment so there isn't that capacity spare to go on and do. - *Secondary headteacher, MAT*

Another comment similarly concerned capacity to collaborate but centred on size of school and the extent of the improvement need:

I could make the argument, but if you think about the big picture of design and a two-form entry school in which 2 teachers converse through doorways, they benefit from working with others outside their settings. For the smaller schools or schools with a longer improvement journey, it is access for experts that improves the baseline. - *Headteacher, mixed MAT*

6. Conclusion

The findings highlight a range of collaborative approaches used by schools, both formal and informal. Collaboration was primarily targeted at school improvement and improving pupil outcomes, with clear perceived benefits. These included: securing efficiencies, sharing effective practice, drawing on collective capacity to achieve tasks, and the importance of mutual support at leadership level.

In the examples discussed by interviewees, collaboration generally began with senior leaders and expanded across the school to meet needs at strategic and operational levels. The formation of collaborative groups with specific purposes (for example, curriculum planning) was central in many cases, although there was also some reference to the use of school-to-school support.

Workload reduction was interpreted as both time-related and in terms of the cognitive and/or psychological demands of carrying out a role or activities. There were benefits reported in terms of workload reduction at different organisational levels, with evidence that leaders considered how structures and systems might be used to achieve this. Collaboration at senior leader level also supported leaders in managing their challenging roles. Interviewees recognised that collaborative activities needed to add value in some form to warrant investment in them and that this might be required over an extended period to achieve anticipated benefits.

A series of enablers were identified, such as a common vision and exercising choice to ensure collaboration met school needs. Potential barriers to collaboration were identified, chiefly competition between schools and geographical location. However, there was also evidence of the use of technological solutions to mitigate issues around location, drawing on experiences of remote working during the pandemic.

Interviewees made limited reference to specific strategies for encouraging the sector to work in collaboration. However, some interviewees suggested that communicating how collaboration would secure benefits, including for pupils and staff workload, may be helpful, with the potential to draw on examples of effective collaboration through case studies and communication forums to share experiences.

An implication of this research is therefore to consider how best such benefits and practices might be disseminated. This could include, for example, exploring how schools which are geographically distanced collaborate effectively and manage barriers. As this study was based on a very small number of interview responses, the evidence base on this topic would benefit from further research.

7. Appendix 1: Screening survey responses

Sample profile

There were 24 valid responses to the screening survey, 12 of which were primary schools and 12 were secondary schools. Survey respondents held senior roles within the schools as follows:

- 19 headteachers, principals, or heads of school
- 3 executive headteachers, executive principals, or chief executive officers
- 1 vice principal or deputy headteacher
- 1 school business manager

The sample included:

- schools ranging in size from around 60 to 1,400 pupils
- schools representing a range of deprivation levels, indicated by proportion of free school meal pupils, ranging from 3% to 46%
- schools across all regions of England, with higher proportions from the East of England (6), the South East (5) and Yorkshire and the Humber (4).
- more schools were located in urban areas (15), compared to rural locations (9)
- most schools had either good (16) or outstanding (3) Ofsted ratings, one was rated as requires improvement

Most respondents (20) were from academy trusts and 4 were from local authority maintained schools¹¹. These included:

- 12 MATs and 8 SATs (in addition, 2 were supported by a federation)
- 14 academy converters, 6 sponsor led academies
- MATs ranging in size from 3 to 29 schools
- newly established to longer term MATs (operating for less than 5 years up to 32 years)
- academies within MATs which had joined recently (8 months previous to the interview) to those which had been in their MAT for 17 years

¹¹ 2 community schools, 1 foundation school, and 1 voluntary controlled school.

Collaboration arrangements

When asked for more detail about their approaches to collaboration, the most common survey responses were:

- networks, joint peer meetings on common areas of practice, and peer communications and support, often at senior leadership and management levels (senior leaders, school business managers, pastoral leads, and some wider staff, such as administration teams, early career and newly qualified teachers, subject leads) (18)
- school-to-school improvement support, audits, self-evaluation, and quality assurance checks (8)
- observations of practice across schools and school-to-school moderation (6)
- sharing of resources, including equipment, staff deployment, and sharing of specialist support staff, such as play therapists (6)
- curriculum leadership, curriculum and resource planning, and development (5)
- shared staff training and CPD (5)
- sharing best practice across schools (5)
- shared or central services (for example, finance systems and HR, which can save costs) (4)
- shared procurement (4)
- behaviour support and intervention, including managed moves (2)
- assessment, marking, and standardisation (2)

Examples of workload reduction

Most (16 of 24) respondents to the screening survey stated that their collaborative arrangements with other schools had reduced workload. Just 4 said that workload increased and 4 stated that there was no change.

In terms of reducing workload, the survey respondents mentioned that they saved time through:

- sharing resources, such as schemes of work and planning, and school policies so that they were reducing time spent developing these resources and were not 'reinventing the wheel' (11)

Subject leaders have been able to share resources therefore reducing workload, for example, one will source songs for collective

worship for a term and then another will do it the following term. –
Senior leader, primary, MAT

- sharing expertise, knowledge, and skills (5)

It has enabled staff to take on the research already undertaken by other schools (and vice versa) for a speedier solution to complex needs. – *School business manager, local authority maintained secondary school*

- sharing and delegating tasks (3)

Saves time. Shared expertise around policy updates/new initiatives so not everyone is having to read everything all the time. – *Senior leader, primary academy*

- shared assessment processes which reduced the amount of marking (2)

- professional dialogue and sharing good practice (3)

Professional dialogue has meant that teachers can pick up the phone and ask a colleague in the same year group how they have addressed something. – *Senior leader, primary, MAT*

Other individual mentions of where workload was reduced included: signposting, giving reassurance to staff, shared CPD, managed moves, finding quicker solutions through central or shared services, and information sharing which informed procurement decisions by reducing time needed to research or observe new schemes in action.

8. Appendix 2: Summary of collaborative arrangements

The following table summarises the main collaborative arrangements that interviewees stated had either been established or were in development. It focuses on the collaborative groups which work together on largely a regular basis.

Table 2: Examples of collaborative arrangements

Type of arrangement	Established collaborative groups	Examples of key functions / purposes
MAT (sponsor-led)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers 	School improvement, sharing practice, joint CPD, policy development alongside trust board, informal mutual support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy headteachers • Administration and finance teams 	Securing efficiencies, such as centralised risk assessments, but tailored where needed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core subject leaders 	Curriculum planning; sharing good practice; standards moderation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation subject leaders (in development) 	Curriculum planning, sharing good practice
MAT (sponsor-led)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior leaders 	Strategy and operational matters
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders 	Sharing design and planning
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	Sharing planning; joint assessment processes and CPD
MAT (sponsor-led)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phase-based senior leaders 	Strategy, operational matters, school improvement, and CPD
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders 	Phased-based sharing of resources

Type of arrangement	Established collaborative groups	Examples of key functions / purposes
MAT (converter)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All staff levels • Headteachers 	Joint provision of projects and resources, such as shared education psychology service support and joint CPD
Secondary school from the MAT above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers 	School improvement; sharing knowledge and expertise, peer review; informal mutual support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy headteachers 	Curriculum development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated safeguarding leads 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders 	Sharing good practice in peer pairings
MAT (converter)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive leadership team, including 3 headteachers 	Strategy and operational matters, informal mutual support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and Learning Group 	Identifying CPD needs and how to address these across and within schools
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders 	3 core subject leader groups exploring good practice on fulfilling the subject leader role
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Performance Group (leaders/specialists) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment and Reporting Group 	Developing standardised assessment criteria and reporting of these
Umbrella trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers 	School improvement

Type of arrangement	Established collaborative groups	Examples of key functions / purposes
Formal collaboration MoU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers 	School improvement; sharing resources / provision / policies; informal mutual support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School business managers 	Securing efficiencies, such as joint procurement of services
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders (in development) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers 	Moderation of assessments
Formal collaboration MoU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers 	Sharing expertise; considering and developing local provision; informal mutual support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) 	Sharing good practice
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated safeguarding leads 	Sharing good practice; considering provision, such as managed transfers of pupils
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders / Curriculum • Deputy headteachers 	Sharing good practice
Informal collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers 	School improvement, curriculum planning; mutual support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject leaders 	Curriculum planning; sharing resources

Source: Interviews and focus group

9. Appendix 3: Case studies

Case study 1: Collaborative strategies in a primary MAT focused on sharing good practice

This large multi-academy trust (MAT) is formed of several primary schools located across a region, focused on the importance of sharing ideas and good practice, and improving efficiencies through the MAT's structural organisation and systems.

They introduced a series of trust-wide policies (for example, relating to health and safety), which a senior leader thought had reduced their workload because it saved time developing individual school policies. Similarly, a health and safety officer working across the MAT wrote centralised risk assessments during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which were shared with site staff. These policies and approaches were adapted by individual schools to meet school-specific contexts. In addition, a safeguarding online platform used by all schools had reduced workload by replacing less efficient paper-based approaches, and central human resources (HR) and payroll services created efficiencies.

There were a range of sub-groups or opportunities for staff from schools across the MAT to work together. A senior leader felt these had proven beneficial and contributed in many cases to workload reduction:

- MAT leaders and deputy headteachers met half-termly (in separate groups) to, for example, work on school improvement, including MAT-wide continuing professional development (CPD) provision
- a group of administration and finance staff collaborated to refine procedures to reduce workload
- core subject leaders met half-termly to plan their curriculum and resources, share ideas, and to moderate assessment in some areas (such as, reading and writing)
- site staff met termly with the health and safety officer to, for example, review risk assessments
- those responsible for physical education (PE) within schools had formed a group to, for example, arrange sports events across the MAT
- plans were in place for foundation subject leaders to meet to share planning and good practice
- joint CPD focused on addressing marking and feedback efficiency
- an external consultant had supported peer reviews of schools' provision (although valuable, this was considered to add to workload)
- teachers used virtual planning approaches

As a trust, we have developed different ways of planning, for example, doing it virtually...this saves time – if you plan and prep at the same time – it is two jobs in one. – *Principal*

The MAT also encouraged pupils to have shared experiences from different schools, for example, this included an enterprise project where children from each school in years 5 and 6 visited local employers and businesses and learnt about the world of work, in addition to concerts, virtual collective worship, and sporting events (although these present logistical challenges and have been hampered by the pandemic).

Being able to reach out to peers within the MAT was also viewed as highly beneficial.

One of the biggest positives in the trust [...] is the support you get from each other. Just being able to ring up a colleague at another school and ask ‘how do you deal with this?’ takes so much of the pressure and stress away. I am new to the [principal] role. Every other day something comes up that I haven’t dealt with before. I have a central team to call and speak to and a mentor. – *Principal*

Case study 2: Collaboration beyond the MAT to meet phase-based needs

This converter multi-academy trust (MAT) was formed through historical connections, for example, a secondary school working with its local feeder primary schools. Collaboration within the MAT happened at a range of levels from curriculum design to securing organisational efficiencies, such as joint service procurement.

However, the MAT did not meet the secondary school's phase-based collaboration needs. Instead, it found these through an informal collaboration of several schools across two neighbouring local authorities. These schools were facing similar challenges around changing from a three-tier to two-tier system and preparing to offer General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) provision for the first time. Forming a collaboration created a group of 'professional friends'; schools in a similar position that were able to support each other in managing these changes well, for example, in providing reassurance to pupils, staff, and parents on their implications.

Collaboration has been beneficial to meeting a range of member school needs, not least managing provision during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. During this time, the group helped with considerations of how teaching and learning could be provided effectively and efficiently, for example, through timetable revisions, and how logistical health and safety challenges might be met.

It was helpful to phone or email others to see how they were doing it. We were getting DfE [Department for Education] updates frequently; each time there was a minor change but it was significant for us. But when the whole team is looking at it, someone picks it up and they would say...'have you noticed this?' – *Secondary headteacher*

The senior leader felt this informal collaboration had helped to improve workload as colleagues could answer each other's questions quickly, which also helped to reduce isolation and support wellbeing. Half-termly headteacher meetings focused on school improvement but similarly included designated time to consider current challenges and how these might be met.

It is an informal opportunity to exhale in a professional way. It is a safe place to discuss, provide solutions and share experiences. – *Secondary headteacher*

Collaboration within this informal collaboration has extended beyond headteachers to include deputy headteachers, designated safeguarding leads (DSLs), and subject leaders. Subject leaders, for example, were paired with colleagues from across the collaboration to share ideas. This resulted in positive outcomes, such as: devising knowledge organisers, understanding pedagogical stages within a lesson, and reducing

the burden of marking. These have been tailored by member schools to suit their contexts. This reflected a wider view within the collaboration of valuing the individual identity and diversity of each school, and what each school brings to the collaboration.

If we would have done it individually, we would have been missing a trick. We put in less effort in and get a bigger return by sharing... No one school followed them wholly, they were all tailored, but it has taken less time to get to the finish point. – *Secondary headteacher*

Case study 3: Collaboration in curriculum, teaching, and learning

This relatively new multi-academy trust (MAT) of secondary schools was formed in response to MAT expansion. Its founding schools decided to work together on the basis of having a similar ethos, and they sponsored another school which was in special measures.

The executive leadership team (involving the chief executive officer, headteachers, school improvement officer, financial director, and business manager) met fortnightly to discuss strategy and weekly to discuss operational management. Other collaborative groups drawing together peers from across schools met half-termly; these included an Assessment and Reporting Group, Teaching and Learning Group, and Student Performance Group.

In their regular meetings, the Teaching and Learning Group considered topics including:

- the continuing professional development (CPD) offer within individual schools and across the MAT
- pedagogy, such as what independent learning looks like across schools
- support for early career teachers (ECTs) and initial teacher training (ITT)

There was an emphasis on sharing practice and considering either:

- where benefits might be gained through close alignment of provision across the MAT (for example, in the case of supporting ECTs and ITT trainees), or
- where provision might differ due to school context but align in terms of underpinning principles

This similarly reflected the MAT's central strategy to improve teaching and learning through using evidence-based strategies, while improvements needed to focus on specific school needs.

The MAT also provided opportunities for the schools' subject leaders for mathematics, English, and languages to collaborate over the course of a year, exploring how best to fulfil their roles. Senior leaders were mindful that decisions on whether to align provision to improve workload should not inadvertently increase workload burden. For example, leaders thought that aligning exam boards across schools could reduce workload but for a humanities subject, it might mean increased workload for teachers.

We have not done it [become a MAT] to just all do the same things in order to make our workload easier, that wouldn't meet the needs and specialist areas of our staff, and for some of our staff it is an increase in workload for their specialist areas. – *Headteacher*

Case study 4: Tailored school improvement and mutual support in a formal collaboration

This collaboration of primary schools has evolved through a history of working together within a local authority. The schools chose to collaborate as local authority support shrank and multi-academy trusts (MATs) expanded. They did this primarily to maximise their respective strengths in leadership and schools' practices, retain outward-facing perspectives, and maintain autonomy and flexibility in meeting school needs.

We are very strong as a partnership and team, but we have that autonomy to walk away and say 'no thank you' when it doesn't suit you, and it might be that three schools do something and the others don't. – *Headteacher*

A Memorandum of Understanding has now formalised the relationship and a senior leader likened it to 'a marriage with mutual commitment'. The headteachers met frequently, school business managers also met as a group, and collaboration between subject leaders and teachers is evolving. For example, teachers have started joint moderation of writing which has also created a valued opportunity for informal dialogue and sharing of practices.

The headteachers have produced a document identifying member schools' respective strengths and needs. This helped them to identify peers' practice they could draw on and provided a springboard for collaborative, school-to-school support, for example, for new or existing subject leaders. Informal email exchanges also helped leaders make requests to find out about each other's practice, such as for early career teacher (ECT) provision. This sharing supported workload reduction.

The headteacher workload, the deputy workload, the class teacher workload: it is knowing there is someone else who may have an answer or an example or an experience, [which] actually frees up the frustration of 'where do I go with this?' – *Headteacher*

Collaboration on provision across the schools has also been introduced, for example, through the joint procurement of contracted services to secure efficiencies. This again has been on an opt-in basis according to school priorities and capacity to participate. The workload benefits of such collaboration were expected to be realised once put in place, although leaders acknowledged it is initially time-consuming.

Key enablers for this collaboration have been lack of competition, shared vision, and being able to exercise choice, with one headteacher stating how collaboration has 'embraced the diversities and the differences within our schools.' Headteachers were able to seek out peers' views and reduce workload through gaining valued advice or

wellbeing support. As a new headteacher, one of the interviewees stated that being able to seek advice from more experienced colleagues when encountering new situations was highly valued. Another echoed the benefits of accessing colleagues' knowledge as well as how such contact could support wellbeing:

I enjoy knowing I have seven heads who I can ask a stupid question of, they will ask if I am okay, how are you feeling, or say 'pop in.' –
Headteacher



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