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Research and analysis

How multi-academy trusts are involved in school inspections

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Applies to England

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Executive summary

This report explores multi-academy trusts' responsibilities and how we evaluate their work in our inspections of their schools. It presents a picture of how inspectors and trust leaders view the role of the trust in the school inspection system.

We analysed responses from a survey of 105 His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) who had recently inspected schools within trusts. We also carried out 11 semi-structured interviews with trust chief executive officers (CEOs) or their representatives. This report does not represent the ways in which every trust has been involved in inspection, as there is wide diversity in how trusts operate.

This report shows that trusts are an important part of school inspection and have some involvement at each part of the process. The trusts we spoke to saw their role

in inspection as supporting the school's senior staff. However, the extent of this varied according to how much support they deemed that the school needed. Inspectors and trust leaders valued their interaction during inspection, and through this interaction it was possible to explore some of the trusts' work across the areas of the education inspection framework (EIF).

There are several ways that trusts are involved with their schools, such as strategic leadership decisions, curriculum development, managing behaviour and enhancing pupils' personal development. However, school inspections only evaluate the school and not the trust. Therefore, there is a limit to the extent to which inspectors can report on the work of trusts, and they cannot always explicitly acknowledge the influence of a trust in a school inspection.

Summary of findings

Conversations with trusts are an integral part of a school's inspection: every school inspection of an academy includes discussions with trust leaders on the leadership and governance of the school. All trust leaders saw their role as supporting the headteacher and senior leaders during an inspection.

However, the fact that Ofsted's legal powers require inspection to operate at school level can leave the role of the trust in inspection unclear, causing frustration for trust leaders and inspectors.

Trust leaders and inspectors highlighted that inspection at school level does not hold the trust sufficiently accountable or attribute enough credit to the trust's work.

Inspections showed the wide-ranging **leadership** role of trusts that reflected the diversity of aims, structures and responsibilities in the trust sector. Trust leaders said that they were always involved in strategic school leadership decisions, regardless of their operating model.

Inspections cover the influential role that trusts have in the **quality of education** in their schools. The trusts we spoke to were always involved in designing the curriculum. Trust leaders worked with school leaders to develop a curriculum that worked for the school, regardless of their operating model

Inspectors recognised the role of many trusts in setting expectations for teaching, and in reinforcing and managing **behaviour**. Trust leaders emphasised the benefits of being able to use experts employed by the trust to manage behaviour throughout trust schools.

Trusts often set the strategic vision for **personal development** and use trust resources to provide opportunities for pupils. Trust leaders emphasised the role of the trust in the community.

In 2019, our research in 41 trusts found that some trusts had very little involvement in overseeing the quality of education. [\[footnote 1\]](#) This new research found that trusts were increasingly working across their schools to develop their curriculum.

How we carried out our research

We surveyed 172 inspectors who led inspections of trust schools between September 2021 and April 2022, to identify the role of trusts in their evaluations of those academy schools. We had 105 responses to the survey, a response rate of 60%. We then held semi-structured interviews with a sample of 11 trust leaders. The trust leaders we spoke to in this research were mostly CEOs, but included some trustees.

We acknowledge that our sample of trust leaders is small and therefore our findings cannot represent the views of trusts as a whole. Our sample covered trusts with a range of characteristics: trusts with mostly secondary schools, primary schools, special schools, or faith schools; national trusts; a range of geographical spreads; or a range of numbers of schools.

The current context

Since the Academies Act in 2010, England has seen a rapid expansion in the proportion of academy schools and multi-academy trusts. There are 1,346 multi-academy trusts in England, as of 30 January 2023. In 2022, trusts were educating about half of all pupils in England. The Department for Education (DfE) continues to promote growth in academies and encourage schools to become part of trusts.

The trust is responsible for the overall effectiveness of every school in the trust. Trusts receive funding directly from the DfE. Trusts vary in size from 1 to 79 academy schools. The largest trusts often operate across regions and/or phases.

Trusts can have different structures, but some things are common to all. For example, in all cases, the trust board is the accountable body for its schools. The leaders of the trust, such as the CEO, are appointed by the board.^[footnote 2] Inspectors are required to understand how the trust is governed, when inspecting a school. Trusts can implement practices and policies that can be followed by all or some of their schools. Some trusts have a more hands-off approach, allowing their schools to choose their own ways of working. Some trusts use a mix of the two, to best suit the needs of the schools and their pupils. In this research, we acknowledge the different ways trusts operate and do not have a preferred approach for how trusts work with their schools. The Association of School and College Leaders and the Confederation of School Trusts previously asked Ofsted to consider how to make use of MAT leaders on inspection to relieve pressure on headteachers.^[footnote 3]

School inspections give parents and policymakers comprehensive information about the quality of individual schools and raise standards through an evidence-based inspection framework, professional dialogue on inspection and aggregation of insights from many thousands of inspections per year. Every school will have been inspected under the EIF by September 2025.^[footnote 4] However, Ofsted does not and cannot inspect the effectiveness of the trust itself. This leaves a gap in parents' and policymakers' knowledge.

Ofsted carries out a small number (12 per year) of summary evaluations of education and leadership in a trust. However, these are voluntary, so trusts can choose not to take part.

Nevertheless, trusts, and the decisions their leaders make, are an important part of a school's inspection evidence. The views of trust leaders are routinely sought by inspectors, and the impact of their decisions is to some extent shown through school inspection judgements.

In this research, we spoke to inspectors and trust leaders to gain a deeper

understanding of how trusts are involved in inspection. We aimed to exemplify the extent of trusts' responsibilities and how their work is explored as part of school inspection. We also aimed to give an account that combines the perspectives of trust leaders with Ofsted's views.

Conversations with trusts are an integral part of a school's inspection: every school inspection of an academy includes discussions with trust leaders about the leadership and governance of the school. All trust leaders saw their role as supporting the headteacher and senior leaders during an inspection.

Every inspection of a school that is part of a trust includes discussions with the trust CEO or their delegate, as well as those who are responsible for the governance of the school and for overseeing its performance. During the pre-inspection call, the school is consulted to establish who is responsible for leadership and management and governance, according to the governance and leadership model in that trust. All the trust leaders we spoke to agreed that they are involved in every inspection of their schools.

Although trust leaders are asked to share a high-level overview of how their trust works, some trusts wanted inspectors to better understand their scheme of delegation.^[footnote 5] This included responsibilities for governance in their trust.

A member of the trust leadership team is always involved in the discussion that contributes to the evaluation of inspection judgements. Inspectors also discuss with trust leaders how well they understand the quality of education that the school provides for its pupils.

No trust leaders we spoke to expected to be involved in all inspection activities at school level. Discussions between inspectors and subject leaders and teachers, and visits to lessons, were seen as the responsibilities of the individual school. However, inspection evidence highlights that occasionally employees of the trust asked to sit in on all meetings and inspection activities.

All trust leaders saw their role during an inspection as supporting the headteacher and school senior leadership team. This ranged from taking an active role in discussions during feedback meetings to providing a background presence to support the inspection, such as covering classes to free up time for school staff to speak to inspectors. Trust leaders were less likely to be involved in inspections when the headteachers were more experienced or schools had previously been judged good or outstanding.

Where trust leaders were more closely involved in school inspections, it was largely because the school was previously graded inadequate or requires improvement. This meant that inspectors were interested in what the trust had done to improve standards in the school. Trust leaders were also more involved where there were safeguarding concerns, where a school had recently joined the trust, or where there was a diverse range of schools in the trust.

Most inspectors and trust leaders had positive interactions with each other during school inspections. In particular, trust leaders valued being involved in the feedback and daily inspection team meetings. Trusts saw the detailed verbal feedback from the inspection team as helpful. Feedback helped to celebrate the successes and to improve the school, as it was 'information we wouldn't normally get at [a] quality that is hard to come by' (Trust leader, interview 7).

Inspectors could identify at least some of the wider impact of the trust on school improvement, although this was not routinely discussed as part of the school inspection process. For example, some trust leaders described how they set the

culture and ethos of the trust, such as outlining trust-wide principles that they expected to see in their schools.

All the trusts we spoke to described some common functions and trust-wide approaches, regardless of size, diversity or specialist status. This varied from some wholly unified curriculums, behaviour and attendance policies to others only using the same ways of holding schools to account.

The fact that Ofsted's legal powers require inspection to operate at school level can leave the role of the trust in inspection unclear, causing frustration for trust leaders and inspectors.

Although trusts are an integral part of school inspection, Ofsted does not have the legal responsibility to inspect the effectiveness of the trust itself.

Ofsted is required by law to inspect the school and not the trust. Inspectors and trusts found this distinction problematic. Inspection aims to acknowledge that 'the trust is one entity, and ... leaders and managers of the MAT [multi-academy trust] are responsible for the quality of education provided in all the schools that make up the MAT'. [\[footnote 6\]](#) However, a few trust leaders were frustrated that school inspections separate the leadership and management of the school from the trust. They believed that schools cannot be separated from the trust, as many trust leaders work so closely with school leaders.

"Inspection is of the schools, but the trust is part of the jigsaw. If the school feels that it has been able to make progress because of the support and challenge provided by the trust, this will be reflected in an abstract way ... in the leadership and management judgment. Leadership and management of the school is a result of the school, but also a direct result of the trust which has managed and supported them." (Trust leader, interview 8)

Trust leaders and inspectors highlighted that inspection at school level does not hold the trust sufficiently accountable or attribute enough credit to the trust's work.

Inspection being designed at school level leaves the role of the trust in inspection unclear. Both parties have difficulties getting this right, while upholding the purpose of school inspection and how it should be carried out. For example, a few trust leaders told us that how much they were involved in inspection activities depended on the individual inspector. Some trust leaders wanted to be more involved in meetings and have greater opportunity to discuss their role and views from a trust perspective as well as from a school leadership perspective.

Inspectors explained that they can identify where strengths or weaknesses are attributable to the trust, but the need to focus the report on the individual school can make it difficult for inspectors to include these.

Trust leaders we spoke to wanted clearer recognition of the impact that trusts have on the 'journey of school improvement' of their schools. Some schools join trusts and then quickly benefit from the trust's expertise in improvement. Trust leaders wanted inspection reports to better reflect the full extent to which trusts are involved in improving their schools. Likewise, trust leaders said that they wanted trusts to be held accountable when schools are not doing so well.

Typical discussions with trust leaders in the school lasted for a maximum of 30

minutes. A lack of time on a school inspection was the greatest barrier to fully exploring where trusts' involvement in their schools was relevant to school inspection judgements. A common view from trusts and inspectors was that school inspections cover a lot in the 2 days allocated for the inspection, but a lack of time means they cannot explore in detail the work, influence and impact of the trust. This was seen as negative by trust leaders, as there was so much that trusts do that the school inspection could not explore in depth. Because inspection is focused at school level and constrained by resources, it is not always possible to involve the trust to the extent that trust leaders would like.

Inspections showed the wide-ranging leadership role of trusts that reflected the diversity of aims, structures and responsibilities in the trust sector. Trust leaders said that they were always involved in strategic school leadership decisions, regardless of their operating model.

As part of the leadership and management judgement, inspectors explore the influential roles that trust leaders, alongside school leaders, have in schools and the sector as a whole. These include:

- how trusts have developed the leadership in the school, investing in professional development, providing support to leaders and facilitating collaboration between schools
- how trusts foster the culture of well-being, and monitor the workload of leaders and staff
- trusts' oversight of the curriculum or trust-wide approaches to curriculum and teaching
- trusts' support for specific circumstances in the school: for example, new or changing staff, performance issues, weaknesses in the curriculum or complaints from parents

Inspection looks at governance within a school. As part of their evaluations, inspectors highlight the trust board's role in setting the strategic direction of the school. Additionally, inspectors evaluate how the trust holds school leaders to account for the performance of the school and the oversight of school finances. Inspectors explore how the trustees challenge and support school leaders and how well they know the quality of education in the school, and check that statutory duties are being met. For example, inspectors in our survey reviewed the training and development provided to new and existing governors and trustees.

Inspectors always evaluate how well those responsible for governance perform their statutory duties, such as safeguarding, during school inspection. All trust leaders we spoke to were well informed of their statutory duties and were able to explain how they ensure that safeguarding is effective throughout their schools. This was true even when the trust had delegated its responsibilities to school governing bodies.

It was common for trusts we spoke with to employ a safeguarding lead. One of the trusts we spoke with had recently completed an internal safeguarding review, which leaders referred to during the inspection to demonstrate how the trust's policies and procedures were robust. The CEO reflected that their involvement in this meeting strengthened the school's safeguarding practice with evidence of trust-level involvement.

Our inspection approach acknowledges that different leaders in the trust make decisions about the education in their schools. Inspectors in our survey identified that some trusts make many leadership decisions centrally, while others give schools more autonomy to make individual decisions. This depended on the differing needs of the schools. Inspectors always met with trust leaders or their representatives

during the school inspection as part of their leadership and management evaluation. Even when trustees have delegated their responsibilities to school governors, inspectors still meet with trustees.

Our interviews with trust leaders highlighted the extent to which trusts were involved in leadership decisions, for example where a trust leader, who was headteacher of another school, provided expert leadership for a struggling school in the trust. Where trusts were less involved in school leadership, decisions included the trust giving their school leaders 'earned autonomy'. These trusts focused their support on their weaker schools.

Inspectors believe inspections cover the influential role that trusts have in the quality of education in their schools. The trusts we spoke to were always involved in designing the curriculum. Trust leaders worked with school leaders to develop a curriculum that worked for the school, regardless of their operating model.

Our inspection handbook acknowledges that trusts are responsible for the quality of education provided in all of their schools. Inspectors explore leaders' aims and ambitions for the quality of education and what children should know. These leadership decisions are reflected in the quality of education judgements in a school inspection.

Curriculum design was the area in which inspectors could most easily see the influence of the trust on the school. Inspectors explored the trust's:

- vision and values for the curriculum
- trust-level curriculum or pedagogy
- extent of involvement in designing the school's curriculum alongside school leaders

School inspection recognises the importance of schools' and trusts' ability to choose their own curriculum approaches. Trust leaders told us that they were always involved in curriculum design to an extent. This was regardless of their operating model. Trust leaders explained that they often worked with school leaders to develop a curriculum that works for the specific school and that this collaboration differed between each school. Struggling schools were often provided with more structured support to build a curriculum.

Some trust leaders chose to implement a common curriculum, to ensure that there was a high-quality curriculum in all of the trust's schools and to help with monitoring outcomes.

A number of trust leaders referred to ensuring that the curriculum is appropriate for the individual school community. In most of these instances, the trust referenced broad-brush curriculum principles that set the vision and values that the schools are expected to consider. These included principles such as 'every child must achieve,' and their schools were able to implement this in their own way.

"We have curriculum principles which exemplify excellence. The bullet points which we have created with all our headteachers are the goals that the headteachers are working toward in terms of teaching and learning quality." (Trust leader, interview 8)

Inspectors also explored a range of ways in which trust leaders supported a high quality of education, such as providing:

- staff support, professional development and training, including for curriculum leaders

- support in recruiting and developing teachers
- curriculum expertise throughout the trust, including employing central curriculum staff
- finance, and resources such as reading schemes
- professional development teams to develop trust-wide processes to improve the quality of education in different subjects

Many trusts had built common functions to monitor the quality of education in their schools. Trusts we spoke to discussed the benefits of having common assessment frameworks and systems, and opportunities for staff development.

Trust leaders told us that the decision to implement a common curriculum often came from internal curriculum quality reviews run by the central trust team. In the reviews, trust leaders looked at how the subject was planned and taught, how this was adapted for all learners, and how successful it was in terms of pupils' learning. Inspectors in our survey often reported positively on this internal monitoring work.

Inspectors recognised the role of many trusts in setting expectations for teaching, and in reinforcing and managing behaviour. Trust leaders emphasised the benefits of being able to use experts employed by the trust to manage behaviour across trust schools.

Inspectors explored trusts' role in schools' behaviour and attendance policies and procedures. This included trust-wide behaviour policies and approaches.

Trust-level behaviour policies were the most common centralised practices seen by inspectors. Trust leaders explained the circumstances in which they think that centralised behaviour policies are appropriate. Inspectors noted that many trusts implemented trust-wide behaviour policies or principles, including rewards and sanctions.

To develop successful approaches to managing behaviour, some trusts used expertise from throughout the trust. For example, one academy used experts to support mental health practices. Trusts referred to creating behaviour networks and school improvement groups to share best practice.

Another trust supported schools by employing teachers with strong behaviour management training and experience. These teachers worked between schools to provide guidance and support for staff.

Trusts and inspectors acknowledged the trusts' central role in monitoring attendance and exclusions. All trust leaders we spoke to took an active role in monitoring attendance in their schools. This was often monitored from a central database. Some leaders created data dashboards for reporting this information to the local governing body, trustees and trust leaders, for example by sharing the number of pupils who were persistently absent and the number of pupils who were late in the different schools in the trust. Leaders also explained that they used the data to focus support on the schools that needed it most.

Inspectors recognised that trusts often take a supportive role in this judgment area by using experts employed by the trust. Trusts highlighted how the experts are used collaboratively throughout the trust to support behaviour and attendance from school to school.

Trusts often set the strategic vision for personal development and use trust resources to provide opportunities for pupils. Trust leaders emphasised the

role the trust has in the community.

When evaluating a school's personal development offer, inspectors make a judgement on how the wider curriculum provides broader development, develops pupils' characters and prepares learners for future steps and life in modern Britain. The personal development judgement touches on the broad leadership role that trusts have in setting the strategic vision for the wider curriculum and using trust-wide resources to provide opportunities for pupils.

Inspectors identified that aims and ambitions for the personal development of pupils are often set by the trust. Inspectors explored how trusts promote diversity and expand pupils' horizons. Trusts we spoke to valued a strong culture of equality, diversity and inclusion. Trusts leaders were committed to inclusion in every sense, from representation in the curriculum to ensuring that all children are given the support they need to achieve.

Inspectors explored trust-level extra-curricular and development opportunities and resources that trusts provide. For example, trust leaders spoke about using the trust's connections to provide wider development programmes for all pupils. One trust ran careers days for all pupils in Years 10 and 11, sourced by one school, using a link to a local university.

Trust leaders believe that trusts have a central role as a community hub. They spoke about wanting to support children to understand their position as part of the community, their purpose in the world and how they can add value. Trust leaders described charity work the schools have been involved with, as well as central trust roles such as family liaison officers. However, at present this cannot be recognised publicly through school level inspection.

In 2019, our research in 41 trusts found that some had very little involvement in overseeing the quality of education.^{[\[footnote 7\]](#)} This research found that trusts were increasingly working across their schools to develop their curriculum.

In 2019, we found that all trusts in our research fulfilled a number of common functions. These included 'back-office support' such as finance, building and premises support, and training in health and safety. Most schools were able to create and implement their own behaviour policies, which were aligned to the trust's overall principles and values. However, few trusts had a standardised curriculum across their schools, although many schools in the trust were working together.

Four years on, our analysis of inspection activity shows that trust leaders have a more influential role in the quality of education at their schools. This includes more involvement in developing the curriculum, either as a whole-trust approach, or with individual schools.

Methodology

This research explored how multi-academy trusts are involved in school inspections.

We reviewed inspections of trust schools from September 2021 to April 2022 (172 multi-academy trust schools, from 101 trusts, were inspected during this period). We surveyed all the lead inspectors about the decisions they explored in evaluating the schools. The survey asked about how trust leaders' decisions contributed to the

school's overall effectiveness, the quality of education, leadership and management (including safeguarding), behaviour and attitudes and personal development. The survey also asked about aspects of the trust's leadership decisions and actions that inspectors could not explore fully within the current school inspection model. 105 inspectors responded, a response rate of 60%.

We subsequently interviewed 11 trust leaders who had taken part in one of these inspections, covering 34 inspections between them. We combined the findings from the inspector survey with the views of trust leaders.

We acknowledge that trusts are diverse, and our sample for the interviews with trust leaders is small; therefore, our findings cannot be taken to represent the views of trusts as a whole. Although we used a convenience sample of the trusts able to take part, we aimed to capture a diverse range of ways of leading trusts and of experiences of school inspection. Our sample covered trusts with a range of characteristics: trusts with mostly primary, secondary, special or faith schools; national trusts; a range of geographical spreads; or a range of numbers of schools. Trust leaders who took part were most often CEOs. On occasion, they were joined by or replaced by their deputy, a school improvement partner or a trustee.

We asked trust leaders about:

- their experience of inspection as a trust leader
- the decisions and actions they made that were relevant to the 4 key inspection judgement areas
- their reflections on how well school inspections capture their roles as trust leaders, as well as any aspects of the school that inspections are not designed to explore

Our research and evaluation team carried out a thematic analysis of the interview notes using qualitative analysis software.

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1. ['Multi-academy trusts: benefits, challenges and functions'](#), Ofsted, July 2019↔
 2. ['Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child'](#), DfE, March 2022↔
 3. ['Intelligent Systems of Accountability'](#), Confederation of School Trusts, 2021↔
 4. ['Guidance: School inspection handbook'](#), Ofsted, September 2022↔
 5. A scheme of delegation is a reference document showing what authority the trust board has delegated to committees, other volunteers, or to its staff under the powers of its governing document. It will also mention where further details of the delegations can be found.↔
 6. ['Guidance: School inspection handbook'](#), Ofsted, September 2022↔
 7. ['Multi-academy trusts: benefits, challenges and functions'](#), Ofsted, July 2019↔

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