

Welcome to Forming a MAT part 8

Identifying your Partner Schools



“I’m not sure that ‘Coco’s School of Fun’ would be a good fit for our MAT”

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Identifying your partner schools

Those of you seriously considering forming a MAT will have a fairly good idea of what you want to achieve and the vision for how it may work. However, if you haven't had detailed conversations with other schools, there are a number of things you will want to consider, and that evidence shows, affect successful operation of the partnership.

If a representative has visited you from the Regional Schools Commissioners Office they will probably have discussed joining or forming a MAT and may well have suggested a suitable Trust or some potential partners. Remember that whatever you eventually apply to do will have to be approved by the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) and Head Teacher Board (HTB).

If you are already in a 'family' of schools, 'pyramid' or existing 'cluster' then these schools would seem the most obvious group to start discussions around forming or joining a MAT. Alternatively, if you are a faith school you may already be in discussions with the diocese about forming a MAT with other VA or VC schools.

Forming or joining a MAT

The inspection category of the school will, to a large extent, determine how much influence you may have within a group of schools moving towards a MAT or alternatively the choice you will have on which MAT to join and when. There is still an impression, among governors and senior leaders of some schools that are not yet academies, that it is still a solution for schools needing support. While this isn't the case for the majority it may well be that if your school 'Requires Improvement' the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) will already have triggered the move towards joining a successful MAT. Even if this is the case the points made in this article around due diligence and cultural fit are still relevant.

For 'Good' and 'Outstanding' schools there are benefits available in forming a MAT structure, including:

- sharing teaching and learning approaches amongst a group of like-minded schools and developing a common culture and ethos, thereby improving the overall pupil experience;
- sharing staff who can be moved between schools more easily providing support to other staff and greater professional development opportunities;
- cost efficiencies as key service contracts can be re-negotiated and functions like finance, HR and administration can be centralised across all the schools or, individual schools can take responsibility for specific functions dependent on their in-house expertise or capacity; and
- smaller schools can benefit from better cash flow.

We suggest that in addition to the standardised elements of Academy conversion or MAT development there are a number of other aspects you will want to carry out among the partners as part of your **Due Diligence**.

The due diligence referred to in a conversion to Academy status or in joining a MAT usually refers to employment and financial information and is a fairly formal process. However, if your school/academy is joining an organisation where close working and joint responsibility is implicit you should be clear that the organisation you are joining is the right one.

As mentioned, the Regional Commissioners Office will have a view on whether the MAT has the track record and capacity to support a school such as yours or for you to deploy your capacity in the right way to support other schools. Either way, it's probably a good idea that your governors or Directors have satisfied themselves that the academies you are partnering with are a good fit in terms of culture and capacity to work together.

Much of this starts with the discussions around vision and ethos. If the partners cannot answer the question, "what are the benefits of being in this MAT?", you perhaps need to rethink how the partnership is developing

Vision, Culture and Ethos

National policy is now favouring geographically or regionally discrete groups of academies. In many ways this supports development of a shared vision, a common ethos and joint purpose more effectively than a diverse network of schools. Coupled with an appropriate model of governance it allows Trusts to have a much clearer view of how their academies are operating and performing.

Dependent on how you join a MAT you can have greater or lesser influence over the development of the vision. If you are joining an existing MAT it is likely that the Trust already has a strong culture and clear vision for operation. However, that doesn't mean it isn't important for your school and governors to determine and assess what that culture is.

There is emerging evidence of the benefits of co-operation between schools^[1] particularly relating to school improvement and the models seem to increasingly favour the school-to-school support that is the ambition of many MATS.

In a MAT the governance arrangements are key to success. The Trust is the employer of staff and has the accountability, through the Funding Agreement, to the Secretary of State for effective leadership, management and outcomes. As you will be aware, there are several models for governance of the individual schools. Many MATs opt to have an overarching Trust with Local Governing Bodies that have the local responsibility for application of the Trust strategy and policy in their own Academy. Yet others have one responsible Trust Board and Local Advisory Bodies in the academies that have a monitoring role for issues such as standards and resourcing the curriculum but no real responsibility for leadership.

Based on recent experience, we believe there are some other key questions relating to vision and ethos that schools collaborating in the formation of a MAT need to consider at an early stage. Even if you are considering joining an existing MAT it is still important to have a clear view of how the management and leadership works. These questions may seem like common sense but it is easy to find schools that have overlooked them and then find it's too late to do anything about them.



[1] *Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: a review of the evidence, Dr Paul Armstrong (October 2015), DfE London.*

- Is the vision grounded in reality?
- If you are joining an existing MAT what evidence is there that the vision is having an impact on academies across the Trust?
- Is the vision really shared across the individual academies and how is it embedded? In some MATs the vision is the preserve of the leaders who have a clear view of the direction of travel but it is not adequately shared among the other stakeholders.
- Is there a clear view on what success looks like and how everyone will play a part in that success?
- How is the culture expressed?
- Will individual academies have the opportunity to retain some of their local character?
- Can governors answer the question about how the ethos and priorities for the MAT impact on individual Academies? The benefits of being in the MAT should be clear but that doesn't mean every school has the same priorities.
- What are the plans for expansion? With the rush to academisation there is pressure to convert more and more schools into MATs. Is the strategy for the MAT clear in this regard and is there current capacity for further expansion?
- If you are a school needing support, how has the sponsor Academy (academies) supported other schools in the existing MAT, how has that worked and what were the outcomes?
- What does the governance of the MAT look like e.g. who are the Trustee/Directors and how do they select governors for the LGB or LAB?
- Indeed, are Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) or Local Advisory Boards appointed?
- Is the role of the members clear e.g. will they hold Trustees to account over the vision?
- Is there an appropriate distinction between the Trustees and the members?
- What does the schedule of delegation look

like e.g. what does the LGB / LAB have responsibility for? Does the decision-making around recruitment extend to involvement in the appointment of staff, particularly the senior team?



- What does the senior leadership of the MAT look like and, if you are involved at an early stage of development, what opportunity do you have to influence developments?
- What do the senior officer roles in the MAT look like e.g. is there a CEO, Chief Operating Officer (COO) and who is responsible for the finances?
- How does this senior structure impact on the Senior Leadership team of individual academies?
- How does line management work e.g. are there Executive Principal or Director of Education roles and will your school have the opportunity to contribute individuals to these positions?
- A major benefit of collaboration that is often quoted is the sharing of best practice, so how does that work in reality? Is time allowed in the term or school year for formal opportunities for staff to learn from each other or work together outside of any scheduled peer-to-peer support?

- Are shared planned training programmes and professional development objectives aligned to the needs of your school?
- Some MATs have a commitment to the locality with the support for families and communities at the heart of the vision. If this is the case, how does it manifest itself and is the approach proven to impact on educational outcomes?
- What is the curriculum approach of the MAT? Is it driven by a commitment to the mastery of core skills, developing pathways to further and higher education, a creative curriculum or entitlement to a range of broader curriculum experiences?
- Is there a particular focus on styles of teaching and learning and will this be harmonised across the MAT e.g. what will it mean for your existing staff's professional practice?
- How will the governing bodies share information about the application of policies and procedures and how will the Trust monitor that these policies and procedures are appropriate and being applied consistently? This is very important as there have been some recent cases of MATs having been found wanting in this area with the result that a notice to improve has been issued. In the race to convert or join a MAT some of these fundamental areas around leadership and governance are often overlooked.
- If governors of individual academies are to be members of the Trust, distributing budget, making decisions on which academies get development funding or allocating intervention support, what do they know of the other schools? How will they be "inducted" to understand the culture and needs of the constituent schools?
- What are the plans for harmonisation of policies across the MAT, what will the timescales be and the plans for consultation with staff?

Employment Information

This is the area most often referred to in terms of **due diligence** on conversion and is closely linked with TUPE. We don't propose to go into too much detail here as it is a fairly standard process that your TUPE adviser will cover but essentially the key areas are listed below.

- Requesting due diligence information from the Transferor. If you are a community school this will be the LA, for a VA school it will be the existing governing body or if you are already a stand-alone Academy it is your own Trust.
- Scrutiny of transferring staff employment information to include:
 - your present job descriptions and roles of individual staff;
 - the current salary and "band" of each member of staff;
 - the numbers of staff in each pension scheme (e.g. TPA and LGPS) and your present employer contributions;
 - has an appropriate consultation been carried out by the Transferor, since 2014 if staff are transferring on the same terms and conditions the need for consultation has been reduced, however, if you are joining a MAT and there will be harmonisation of contracts and policies at some point it is likely you will need to consult with staff;
 - any grievances that could potentially end in an Employment Tribunal;
 - the number of employees are on long-term sick leave; and
 - the number of employees protected under the Equality Act..

- Are safer recruitment procedures in place?
- Is there an appropriate disciplinary policy and procedure in place?
- Is there an agreement covering Union involvement and collective bargaining?
- Is production of a Due Diligence report to be included in the Commercial Transfer Agreement?

With regard to staffing, it is also a good idea to give careful consideration to the staffing structure as you develop or join the MAT. There will be a number of roles that are duplicated across the MAT e.g. school business managers. Linked to whether the MAT will provide centralised services, including finance, you will need to consider whether these individuals are all needed in delivering the duties they do presently or, whether some sort of specialisation could be achieved. We have covered the issues around these roles in a previous, more detailed, paper available on the website.

Finance and operations

Again this is an area that most established MATs have a well developed process for and is designed to expose any liabilities to the Trust going forward. If you are in a group of schools partnering to form a MAT you will expect transparency from your partners around financial and any contract or leasing liabilities and will need to ensure that the new systems can be aligned to the requirements of the Academies Financial Handbook. If you are coming new to this process it is probably a good idea that some work is allocated to developing a standard procedure for the MAT that will cover any subsequent conversions of schools into it.

The converting school, or developing MAT will need to consider the provision of centralised services. What will this look like i.e. what services will be covered? Financial support is an obvious element as not all schools, particularly smaller primary schools can necessarily afford a fully qualified accountant to manage the MAT finances

A financial due diligence report will need to cover the following as a minimum.

- School/Academy cash flow and budget projections.
- Staffing costs and ratios of costs for e.g. senior roles, support staff, etc.
- VAT and Corporation Tax issues.
- Training and Governance for the school Governors and Senior Management Team.
- Payroll / HR / IT implications, who supplies them, are they appropriate to the MAT operation and what would need to happen to migrate the services elsewhere?
- Statutory accounting implications and present reporting requirements and how these will need to develop to accommodate the MAT reporting requirements.
- What is the present status of internal and external audit functions and actions required to align this to Academies Handbook and MAT requirements.
- Any financial implications of land transactions or transfer.

Another key area might be contracts. How does the school(s) presently deliver catering and cleaning/ facilities management? Will this become a centralised service or a centralised contract under the new arrangements? If so what are the implications for migration of contracts over a period of time. This may also apply to HR and payroll, IT and maintenance.

Another area that often ends up costing more than originally imagined is IT software. Schools may have specific licensing arrangements which could be more cost effective if they were procured across all the MAT academies.

Finally the Management Information System (MIS) is critical in providing the individual academies and the MAT with the sort of management information that supports effective leadership and so careful thought should be given to selecting an appropriate tool.

Whatever your plans we summarise here some of the main issues for consideration.

Considerations

- Seek appropriate advice.
- Do not underestimate the scale of the task and make sure all the schools involved are doing it for similar reasons.
- Have a clear vision of what being a MAT means, sessions together to make this explicit are important and do not assume that all the schools understand.
- Be absolutely clear about the ethos and philosophy of the MAT and ensure this is clearly communicated to everyone involved, including LGBs and all staff.
- Although you may wish each school to maintain its own identity, make sure you have a joined up approach to your thinking as a MAT.
- Have a skills-based Board of Trustees and, where appropriate, LGBs.
- Be clear about roles early on in the process, especially leadership roles such as a Chief Executive Officer, and learn from others about approaches they have taken.
- Appoint a Business Director or Chief Operating Officer who will be focused on the business side of the MAT, including the finance functions and systems.
- Ensure your back office teams e.g. finance team have the appropriate finance qualifications and resources to deal with the various compliance and financial reporting requirements.
- Focus all your development on what is best for children and families and the sound basis for enhanced educational outcomes.



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