

# MAT governance: the future is local

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Sam Henson





# 1. NGA's view

Local governance within multi academy trusts (MATs), or the local tier as we have come to call it, forms the bridge between the trust board and its schools. According to NGA's 2021 annual governance survey findings, local governance remains integral to the governance of the vast majority of MATs. Just 3% of those governing MATs said they have no form of local tier. Yet consideration and appreciation for the full potential of the local tier remains relatively unexplored. NGA is one of the few sector voices that has consistently been an advocate for local governance in MATs, and a key player in facilitating emerging good practice.

NGA champions local governance in MATs because it provides:

- more strategic thinking where trust boards draw on the intelligence gathered at school level
- a better understanding of the trust's role and how individual schools fit into the trust's structure
- more diverse views adding to the richness of discussion and challenge
- a positive contribution to the checks and balances of trust governance
- more active engagement between the school and its wider community
- more support for individual schools and the trust from stakeholders
- a local focus on accountability, keeping the trust grounded in the realities of the localities
- challenge and support to the trust board and central team

## 1.1 Explored territory

In 2019 and 2021, NGA released two reports looking at the development of MAT governance

While there is potential for local governance in MATs to take different forms, the picture to date follows a relatively well rehearsed pattern. MATs have largely followed a model that closely resembles what was put forward through the DfE's early guidance and model articles of association: a local governing body at school level. NGA was eager to see how MATs would move beyond this model, and how effective different models would prove to be.

Over time many trusts altered their approach to delegation at local level. However, the overall model remained the same. Perhaps the most significant change was the shift from a formal delegated decision maker to an often largely advisory role. Yet many trusts still operate a heavily delegated local tier today. A more significant trend has been MATs retaining a committee at school level to fulfil the local tier function; many trusts are committed to this for the long term. This tried and tested model has remained functional and pragmatic for the majority of trusts but getting it right and refining it has been dependent on several factors.

What we have learnt from successful local governance [Article 1.2 \(/TT122 TfJ 0.00](#)

9. The trust CEO and executive team include input from the local tier, namely the performance management school head.
10. The trust values and seeks engagement from the local tier in the recruitment of new heads, including the local chair in the recruitment process.
11. There is a whole trust governance development plan which also encourages governors to learn from schools outside their trust.
12. The trust maintains a clear distinction between accountability through governance (by the trust board and its committees) and accountability through line management (by executive leaders).
13. The local tier retains a contribution to school improvement and is aware of what the school's budget is and the plan for how it is to be spent.

## 1.2 Unexplored territory

At various points during the last decade there have been suggestions that trusts could achieve a more innovative approach, through mechanisms such as cluster hubs, but this has never materialised at scale. The success of hub or cluster models has been limited to some outlier trusts. Such a model could in theory be used where academy committees (or equivalent) are delegated functions related to more than one school within the trust. These hubs might be established on the basis of grouping a number of schools within the trust, based on phase or a regional or localised focus, for example

While NGA among others has been keen to explore more potential innovative approaches this has not developed in the way we expected. This leads us to the conclusion that the lack of advancement in a seemingly more innovative approach to MAT governance may not become part of the sector's story. Perhaps we instead need to both celebrate and focus more on the strengths of an enduring tried and tested model

While practice remains constrained, there have of course been some exceptions. For example, one well known trust pays its chairs, while others rely on a heavy executive presence to fill the positions around the local table. Neither have gained traction as a universal approach, and both are problematic, giving rise to conflicts, the danger of lack of transparency and both present a move away from what is one of the most treasured aspects of school governance: the role of volunteers. While some trusts have operated a form of cluster or hub, this has largely been in addition to school level committees. This risks the hub or cluster model resulting in duplication rather than innovation, or it means it has simply become a communication channel between the local tier and trust board, with the chairs of LGB's coming together to join with trustees and/or executives. In itself it has not created a convincing case for replacing school level committee.

Other trusts have adopted a model with a much reduced remit for local volunteers, where they come together in a more informal setting, with a singular responsibility to listen to and feedback on behalf of the community to help shape board strategy. While a crucial role most appropriate to the local tier, it is questionable if on its own this form a meaningful and legitimate layer of governance.

Meanwhile a small minority of trusts have continued to claim the most innovative option is through the removal of the local tier altogether. NGA disagrees that this presents a meaningful way forward. Indeed where this approach has been tried, it has quickly been reversed in some cases. What's more, we know the department is committed to not only retaining, but strengthening local governance, as a vehicle for MATs connecting to communities and for schools to retain their individual identities. Such a move therefore would seem at odds with both central policy making and the evidence that shows that when done well, local governance pays back decisively.

### 1.3 Connection to strategic priorities

Some MATs are looking at different approaches to how they are connecting the role of the local tier and the trust board. We have seen a number of trusts looking to bring together their local governors into priority groups, with clear attachments to trust-wide strategic priorities. They still form a collective group at school level but there is a dual focus that goes beyond this. These individuals carry focused links and connect on a routine basis, through virtual means, with other school-level volunteers across the trust who are also attached to that same specific area in their school. This builds on the popular 'link governor' method of contributing to governance duties a long running feature of the sector taken to the next level. These links to priority areas build cross trust practice and intelligence, developing a more holistic picture for the trust board on how strategic priorities are progressing across the entire MAT.

In reality, innovation has only been around a few years, and it has taken significant time to get to this point. While slow, this is a significant step and the lack of new approaches to the local tier is perhaps not altogether surprising. Local governance within MATs is very different to maintained school governance. In itself it is a new form of school governance, which comes with governing more than one school. Many MATs are happy to admit they have taken some time to get it working well for everyone across the trust.

Multi-tiered MAT governance presented a huge shift to the way schools were grouped and governed, and it has taken over a decade for much of the sector to simply come to terms with the different roles within the MAT governance structure. With more than half of individual schools yet to make the move to being part of a MAT, it will continue to take some time before MAT governance feels normal.

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The rest of this paper draws on a wider evidence base to provide an informed account of both the value of the local tier and its barriers and potential future direction.

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## 2. Views from the sector and beyond

MATs that engage positively with a diverse local voice through the local tier achieve better governance. This can result in a collective sense of understanding and active support for decisionmaking across the MAT. As a post-COVID-19 era beckons, the local viewpoint on strategic priorities will be sought both to assess the longer term implications of the pandemic and to respond to the rapidly changing external environment at school. There is now a substantial history to the MAT governance story that the sector must pay attention to and continue to learn from. The local tier, when implemented well, is valued by all those within the trust's governance and leadership structure, will pay back dividends. The last decade reveals a pathway to getting the most out of it, while also carrying warnings of what to avoid.

### 2.1 Treading carefully

A reimagining of the local volunteer role has the potential to maximise the strategic thinking of the trust board. Yet some trusts have felt prevented from taking a new approach to the local tier, wanting to tread carefully in delicate circumstances. Some boards have expressed to NGA over the years that their hands felt slightly tied. Evidence points to a new approach being handled most effectively when misconceptions of power are dealt with, where the remit of the local tier is trimmed of duplicated activities already being fulfilled by either the trust board or executive tier (Greany, 2018). This has proven liberating for trusts, freeing the local tier to help trustees achieve a connected community strategy, but also retaining a specific focus and school improvement related role. However, as observed by Baxter, this has proved difficult for some trusts, but notably through a lack of consultation with the local tier (Baxter, 2015).

Yet there is a distinct lack of conversation around the role the local tier will play in this drive, as observed by NGA CEO Emma Knights writing for Schools Week in 2016 as “a governance revolution, arguably as fundamental as devolving local management to schools after the Education Reform Act 1988”. Most sector voices remain focused on the executive or trustee role in the ‘self-improving school system’, neglecting to explore the potential of the local tier, fuelling an argument that the system has not been crafted with “locally based governance mind” (Breslin 2017).

The challenge remains that individual school communities now face a deeply complicated picture of how the school system is governed, and this confusion can be highly problematic for schools looking to join trusts (Gibson & Outhwaite 2021). Those communities have always been so vital in establishing and replenishing the stream of volunteers needed for school governance to be sustainable, and this complicated picture has sometimes led to those key individuals being put off because they are not aware of what they are entering into. We continue to hear of major volunteer recruitment challenges particularly at local level within trusts (NGA Annual Governance Survey 2021), but clarity of role has proven to be an essential element to retaining volunteers at local level. This was a point raised by the former national schools commissioner in his 2020 book *Leading Academy Trusts* which highlighted this as a fundamental issue. School governance was no longer easy to understand, both for the general public and practitioners alike, where “societal understanding of how it operates is many years behind”.

## 2.2 Lines of accountability and decision making

Part of the challenge in delivering clarity over the local tier is that governing at academy level within a MAT differs enormously from trust to trust with varying powers or none (Riddell,





Incorporating yet going beyond engagement means finding an approach to centralisation that still provides an element of “support and challenge for HTs in single schools, whilst feeding back into the MAT Trust Board's strategic aims” (Vinall, 2021). In practice this may include the local tier being responsible for

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## 2.5 Trust identity and the democratic deficit

The complexities of a system leaving so much to the autonomy of the trust itself exacerbated organisational identity issues. MATs Moving Forward identified the significant

Community-minded MATs carry a local focus and therefore easily engage in beneficial activities such as trust-wide sharing of staff and CPD. School-led, community-centred MATs are a cultural, strategic choice, reflecting both ethos and approach to growth. Muijs

The strength of the local level is found in how it is utilised to enable trustees to retain a strategic focus without getting buried beneath excessive information and unrealistic requirements. The local tier including stakeholders within it ensures MATs can take into account multiple realities (Ehen & Godfrey 2017), when making a value judgment. Thus, local tier fulfils a key role in strengthening external accountability systems, heralding a renaissance of meaningful engagement of communities and parents in influencing the governance of schools

MAT trust boards need to be proactive in raising awareness of limitations and the legitimate mode of influence local stakeholders as a mainstay of the local tier have authentic influence over the character of the trust. They will go some way to open the door to schools who so far resisted fearing governance would no longer be specific to their school and locality (Coates, 2015).

## 2.8 The local tier in response to a pandemic

Evidence gathered for Ofsted's 'Governing in unprecedented times' research report suggests a major positive for MATs during the COVID pandemic was their ability to harness central decisionmaking across the trust to support individual schools. The MAT structure being key to this (Ofsted, 2020). The local tier benefited from clear central decision making and direct support from the trust.

"The MATs were able to say right in our schools this is what's going to happen. The LA, I think with the best intention in the world, didn't give a clear strategy for how to open. It was down to heads to make the choice in the end." (Ofsted, 2020).

A strong desire from stakeholders and communities remains to secure governance specific to their school and locality" (Coates, 2015). The realities of those localities shifted significantly in recent times. The COVID19 pandemic and more broadly the fast paced change of the external context in recent years has pushed some MATs to explore the known boundaries of local MAT governance to keep up with evolving needs against this backdrop (Ofsted, 2020).

Being part of a group of schools, under a formalised governance structure, has become a source of comfort to many schools during difficult times. Many of those governing at school level were positive about their MAT. 73% of those governing at local level agreed that their voices were heard by executive leaders and trustees in the decisionmaking process, compared to 57% in 2019 (NGA)

Communication between the layers of governance continues to be a barrier in getting the governance relationships right. Clear engagement through effective communication channels enhances the voice of the local tier this can assist trust boards to develop a collective sense of understanding and direction, championing decision making across the trust and within their communities (Ofsted, 2020). Setting out the relationship between the local tier and trust board, with open channels of communication to promote upward accountability is crucial to getting the layers of governance working (Vinall, 2021).

Any lack of coherent communication systems between governance tiers casts doubt over the ability of trusts to meet community needs, breeding misconceptions within the governance structure (Baxter and Cornforth, 2019) Many MATs have used successful communication strategies to help deal with this including cross MAT networking groups that support the local tier alongside investment in a senior governance professional role to coordinate the work of the local tier and trustee visibility with local volunteers. The COVID-19 pandemic brought the widespread introduction of virtual governance (Ofsted, 2020) helping to introduce new, dynamic and easier communication channels for such networks

### 3. Conclusion

There is no shortcut or quick fix to MAT success. The great local tier experiment not only survived, but in many cases has finally demonstrated its worth during a pandemic and beyond. Many trusts have proved they can cope with the unpredictable flexibility within their structure has helped them. The local tier has endured instability through the last decade but has not become a disbanded part of the system as some suggested it would (Male, 2019). The future of the MAT movement relies on the wealth of learning from MATs established for the best part of a decade. That learning tells us MATs that engage positively with local voice achieve better governance. When 003 ng0.005 Tcv(ns)1 (tr)4 crime all; .3nstrv(e)-2 (1 b)7 (ec)]TJ -19

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