GUIDANCE PAPER

Forming or Joining a Group of Schools: staying in control of your school's destiny

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This guidance is for senior leaders and governors of standalone schools (maintained schools or academies), as they consider whether to form or join federations or multi academy trusts (MATs).

Information highlighting the different ways schools can form partnerships will provide assistance during the decision-making process and, ultimately, enable schools to remain in control of their destiny.

1 Overview

The school landscape in England is changing rapidly. As at September 2015, about 15 per cent of primary schools and more than 60 per cent of secondaries are academies, independent of their local authority. The role of local authorities is changing with many struggling to provide the level of support and challenge previously offered.

Schools are increasingly providing this support and challenge for each other through formal and informal partnership and collaboration. More than half of academies are now part of formal partnerships (MATs), and maintained schools are continuing to come together to form federations.

Many schools, particularly smaller schools, are finding it difficult to navigate this new terrain. Their leaders and governors are unsure about the options available to them, concerned about the time, commitment and knowledge required to properly understand these choices. They may be nervous about the changing expectations on schools and concerned that decisions may be taken out of their hands if they struggle to meet those expectations.

The benefits of collaboration

There is an increasing body of evidence for the benefits of close collaboration between schools. These include the following (Appendix 1 provides more detail on the evidence behind these statements):

- strong collaboration with shared accountability can lead to better progress and attainment for pupils, and help schools meet rising expectations
- school leaders and teachers can share thinking and planning to spread expertise and tackle challenges together
- governors can come together to share strategic thinking, to combine skills and to support each other during challenging times
- school leaders, teachers and other staff can be shared across more than one school, enabling schools to find different solutions to recruitment challenges, to retain staff by providing new opportunities within the group and to plan succession more effectively
- groups of schools can find it easier to find and fund specialist expertise (specialist teachers and specialists in areas such as data analysis, finance, health and safety) and provide richer curricular and extra-curricular activities
- shared professional development can more easily be arranged, whether led by staff from one of the partner schools or an outside body
- the economies of scale and collective purchasing made possible within larger groups can help schools cope better with shrinking budgets (Appendix 2 provides examples of areas in which financial efficiencies can be made)

These benefits are not, of course, automatic. Some school partnerships are much more effective than others (Appendix 3 highlights emerging evidence on the characteristics of effective school groups). The following sections of this guidance are designed to help you assess the options available to you and to choose a path that will give your school the best opportunity to realise these benefits.

2 Language and terminology

The language used to describe different school types, forms of collaboration and bodies with an oversight role in the state sector in England can be confusing. This section sets out to define these roles, before moving on to consider specific collaborative models.

Types of school

Maintained schools are overseen, or 'maintained', by the local authority (LA). Maintained schools must follow the National Curriculum and national teacher pay and conditions. There are four main types of maintained school:

- **Community schools**: the LA (through the school's governing body) employs the staff, owns the land and buildings and determines the admissions arrangements.
- **Foundation or trust schools**: the governing body employs the staff and sets admissions criteria. The land and buildings are usually owned by the governing body or a charity.
- **Voluntary aided (VA) schools**: set up and owned by a voluntary board, usually a church board, largely financed by the LA. The governing board employs the staff and controls pupil admissions and religious education. The school's buildings and land (apart from playing fields) will normally be owned by a charitable foundation.
- **Voluntary controlled (VC) schools**: nearly all Church of England (C of E) schools, but funded and run by the LA. The LA employs the staff and sets admissions criteria. The C of E owns the land and buildings, and usually forms a quarter of the governing body.

Academies are publicly funded schools, independent of the local authority, held accountable through a legally binding funding agreement with the Department for Education (DfE). Staff are employed by the academy trust. Academies have more control over curriculum design and staff pay and conditions. There are three different routes to becoming an academy:

- **Sponsored academies**: previously underperforming schools which were taken out of LA control and given by the DfE to an academy sponsor in order to provide support in improving pupil achievement and attainment.
- **Converter academies**: high-performing schools which have opted out of LA oversight.
- **Free schools**: new schools set up as academies.

Teaching schools are schools which play a role in system-wide leadership through training new teachers, leading ongoing professional development, identifying and developing leadership potential, providing support for other schools, designating and brokering specialist leaders of education (SLEs) and undertaking research and development. Teaching schools can be either maintained schools or academies. They must have an Ofsted grade of outstanding.

Types of collaboration

Federations are groups of maintained schools. Historically, the term 'hard federation' has been used for groups with a single governing body and 'soft federation' for more informal partnerships in which schools retain separate governing bodies. In this guidance we use the term 'federation' to mean a hard federation (this is also the legal definition).

Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are groups of academies that have come together to form a charitable company, with a single group of 'members' (who have an overview of the governance arrangements) and a single board of trustees or directors. Some MATs, confusingly, call themselves federations (for example, the Harris Federation), but if the schools involved are academies rather than maintained schools, they are legally MATs.

Teaching school alliances (TSAs) are groups of schools supported by a teaching school. These are loose collaborations with no shared accountability (though TSAs are strongly encouraged to take responsibility for school improvement locally by ensuring they contain at least one school which requires improvement).

Oversight bodies

Local authorities (LAs) consist of councillors (members) who are voted for by the public in local elections and paid council staff (officers) who deliver services. There are around 150 LAs in England, responsible for providing education for all children in their area and for the standard of maintained schools.

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) are relatively new positions, appointed to approve and monitor academies in their area. There are currently eight RSCs, who make decisions on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education. Their responsibilities include taking action when an academy is underperforming, making recommendations to the DfE on new free school applications and brokering agreements between underperforming maintained schools and academy sponsors. Each RSC is supported by a headteacher board, a group of academy headteachers who advise and challenge RSCs on the decisions they make.

Dioceses are regional administrative bodies within the Church of England (C of E) and Catholic Church. C of E and Catholic schools have a line of oversight to the diocese, as well as to their LA or RSC.

3 Partnership models

This section provides more detail on the two main forms of formal partnership: federations and MATs (that is, those that involve shared governance). It explains how these partnerships are structured, how they operate on a day-to-day basis and who is responsible for what. Under each heading, information for both types of partnership is provided together with points specific to either federations, identified as F, or MATs, identified as M.

This guidance focuses on formal partnerships for two reasons:

a) unlike with informal partnerships, there are specific legal requirements and restrictions involved of which schools considering entering into such partnerships should be aware

b) evidence suggests that formal collaborations, where there is shared accountability, are more likely than informal partnerships to deliver the benefits at the beginning of the paper. Looser collaborations do, of course, have an important role to play in a self-improving school system (and may often be a useful first step in moving towards more formal partnerships). However, formal partnerships are more likely to lead to long-term school improvement (see Appendix 1 for the evidence behind this).

It is worth noting at this stage several aspects that won't change if a school enters into either type of partnership:

- individual schools remain as separate entities, with separate names and DfE numbers
- individual schools still receive separate Ofsted judgements (though Ofsted are beginning to 'co-schedule' inspections of schools in some groups and to do some preliminary inspections of MATs)
- performance tables are still based on individual schools
- individual schools retain their existing religious (or non-religious) character

It may also be worth addressing the myth that partnerships are necessarily about a 'strong' school supporting a 'weaker' one. Many successful partnerships involve two or more good schools working together to become even better. Even in partnerships in which one school is ostensibly 'better' than another, most participants find that all schools involved benefit from the collaboration.

Eligibility and accountability

Both federations and MATs involve two or more schools coming together under a single accountable body. They remain as separate schools, but responsibility for all schools in the group ultimately rests with the single accountable body.

F All schools in federations are maintained schools. Federations are accountable to their local authority.

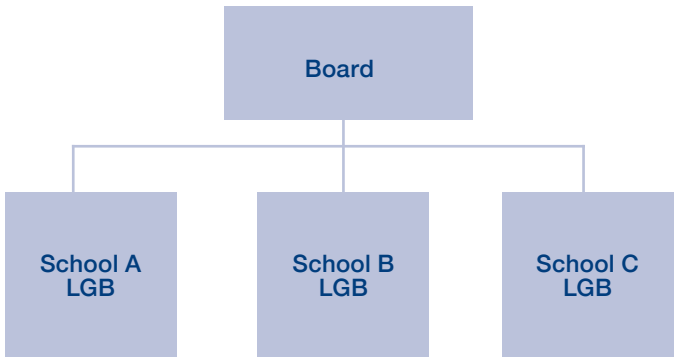
M All schools in MATs are academies. MATs are accountable directly to the Secretary of State through the regional schools commissioners. They are set up as charitable companies.

Governance

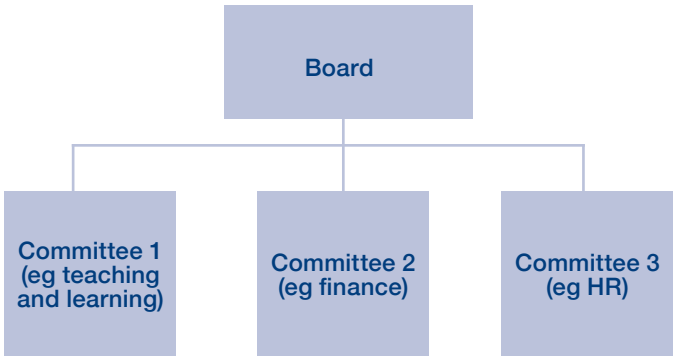
Schools forming or joining either type of partnership become accountable to an over-arching governing board which sets the strategic direction for all schools in the group.

Most groups, particularly as they get bigger, will also want to set up committees or local governing bodies (LGBs), that sit under the main board. These committees can be focused on individual schools or on specific areas across schools. For examples, see the following models.

Model 1: School-based committees



Model 2: Issue-based committees



F Federation governing boards must have a minimum of seven governors. The types of governor required are determined by the types of school that are federating. All federation governing boards must include:

- one parent governor elected or appointed from each school
- the headteacher of each school (unless there is an executive head of both/all schools)
- one staff governor
- one LA governor

There are additional requirements for schools with a religious character. See NGA's *Questions and Answers on Federations* for more details (link at the end of this paper).

Most federations opt for issue-based rather than school-based committees as this encourages governors to think strategically across all the schools in the group.

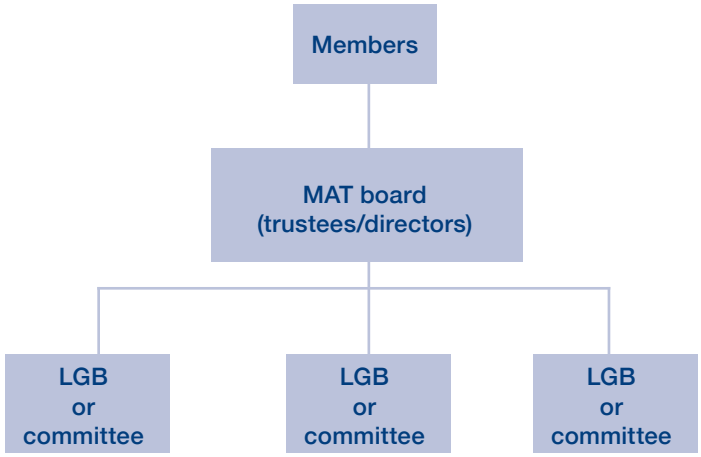
M As charitable companies, every MAT has articles of association, legal documents that set out the governance composition and procedures for the trust.

The governors on the main governing board of a MAT are known as trustees (or sometimes directors, as they are the directors of the charitable company). These roles come with specific legal responsibilities which include:

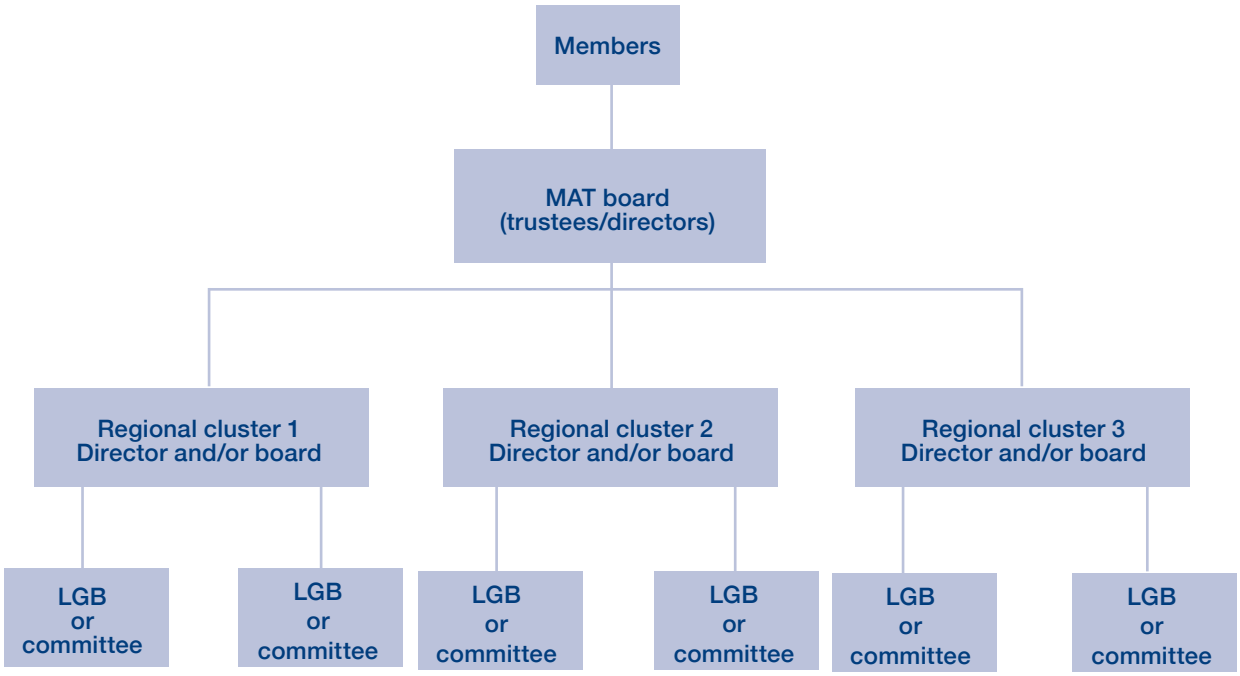
- ensuring the organisation remains solvent and spends money in accordance with its charitable objectives
- ensuring the schools in the MAT provide a good standard of education
- managing any conflicts of interest

MATs are also required to have a group of members who sit above the board of trustees. The members have a hands-off but significant role. They monitor the performance of the trust and hold the trustees to account. They will intervene if the board is not performing by making changes at board level. It is likely that the members will meet rarely, though they are able to meet more often if they wish.

The governance model in many smaller MATs therefore looks like this:



The smallest MATs may actually only have one level of governance, without local governing bodies (LGBs) or committees. As MATs grow, particularly if they become more geographically dispersed, many add in an additional layer between the MAT board and the LGB or committees, resulting in a structure more like this:



Responsibilities

It is up to the main board in both federations and MATs to decide how much day-to-day responsibility it keeps for itself and how much it delegates to committees or local governing bodies. In some groups, committees or LGBs have significant decision-making authority; in others they act in an advisory capacity. The structure and degree of delegation needs to take into account the number and size of the schools involved.

It is also possible to have different approaches to schools within a group, giving more autonomy to high-performing schools than struggling schools (sometimes referred to as an 'earned autonomy' or 'asymmetrical local governance' model).

M MATs are required to produce a 'scheme of delegation' (sometimes called 'terms of reference'), which outlines what decisions are taken by whom and at what level of the organisation. MATs must also comply with the *Academies Financial Handbook* which acts as the financial framework for academy trusts and sets out the financial governance requirements that all trusts must adhere to.

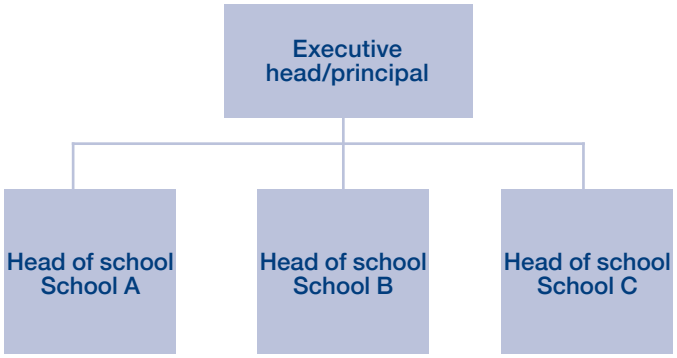
Role of the headteacher

There are a number of ways in which groups can approach leadership, depending on the size of the group and the skills, experience and ambition of the school leaders involved. Whatever management structure a group decides to implement, the governing board needs to be confident it will enable it to hold the heads of the schools accountable for the performance of their school and to take appropriate action if required.

There is no legal requirement for groups to have a single executive head although most choose to appoint one in order to have a single point of accountability (and there is evidence that this can lead to better outcomes – see Appendix 1). It is possible for the executive head to also be the substantive head of one or more of the schools in the group.

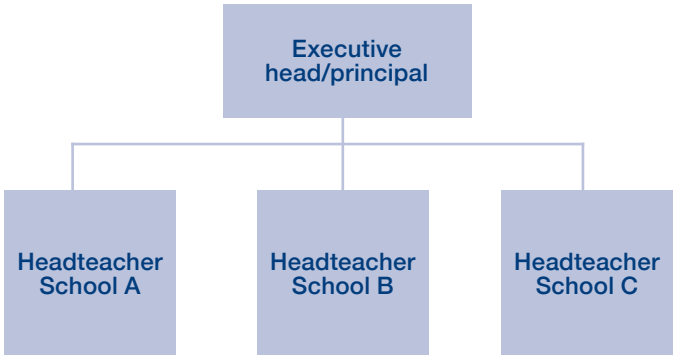
To follow are four possible leadership models, however, this is by no means an exhaustive set of possibilities.

Executive head or principal – pure model



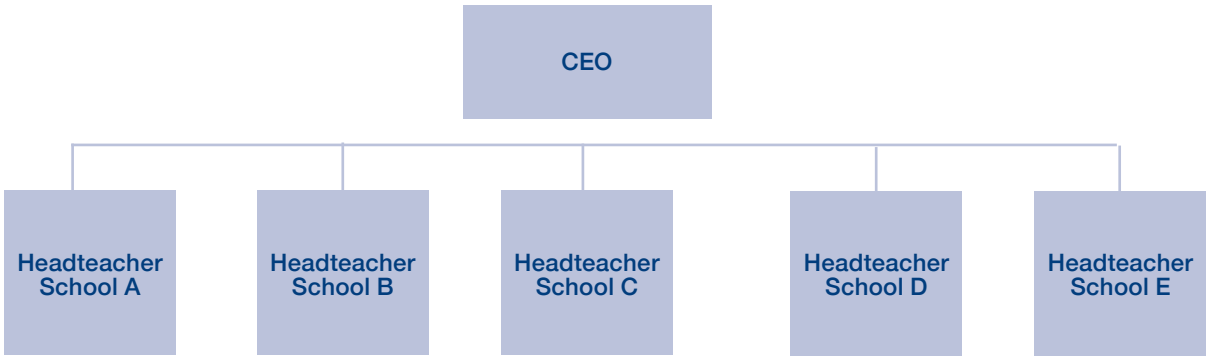
In this scenario, the executive head or principal is the substantive headteacher of all the schools in the group. They hold the legal responsibilities of the headteacher of all three schools. Day to day operational management is delegated to the head of school. The executive head or principal also has an overarching, strategic role for the group. In a MAT they usually have legal responsibilities as a company director and trustee if so appointed.

Executive head or principal – mixed model



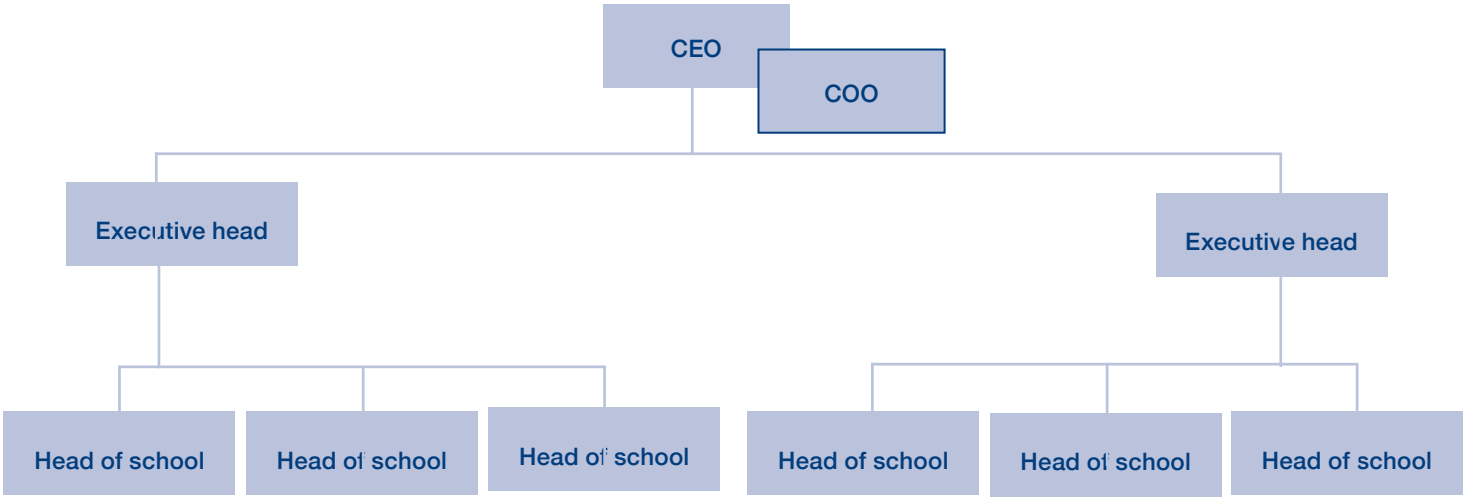
In this scenario, the executive head or principal is the substantive headteacher of one school in the group but has an overarching, strategic role for the group. In a MAT the executive head also usually has legal responsibilities as a company director and trustee. The headteachers of schools A and B hold the legal responsibilities of the head in the individual school, but are performance-managed by the executive head or principal.

CEO – pure model



In this scenario, each of the schools in the group has its own headteacher. The CEO has an overarching, strategic role without being the substantive head of any of the schools in the group. In this model, the CEO does not have the legal responsibilities of the headteacher, but is normally the line manager. They draw their authority from the board. They are likely to be appointed as a company director and trustee. This model may be more appropriate as the group grows beyond three or four schools.

CEO – mixed model



In this scenario for larger MATs, each cluster of schools has an executive head. In governance terms, the CEO has an overarching, strategic role without being the substantive head of any of the schools in the group. Some larger trusts also have a chief operating officer (COO). The COO is responsible for day-to-day operations.

Restrictions on who can join a group

Vision and ethos

There are a number of legal and practical considerations of which schools considering forming or joining formal groups should be aware. The most important consideration is the vision and ethos of the other schools involved and how successfully the group can create a shared ethos. This cannot be legislated for, but it is essential if the partnership is to be successful.

School type

F Only maintained schools can form or join a federation.

M Only academies can form or join a MAT. Maintained schools wishing to form or join a MAT can convert to academy status and join the MAT at the same time – there is no requirement to be a standalone academy first. Most established MATs will have clear procedures in place to help schools to do this. It is also possible for a group of maintained schools to come together as a federation first and then convert together as a MAT.

Geographical proximity

There is no legal requirement for schools in a group to be in close geographical proximity and there are a few examples of successful MATs with schools many miles apart. Emerging evidence, however, suggests that the benefits of collaboration are much easier to realise when schools are physically close (so much so that Lord Nash, the minister with responsibility for academies, has suggested that groups should ideally consist of schools between which staff could travel in ‘half a lunch break’).

F It is theoretically possible for schools in different local authorities to federate, but this is very rare and requires early coordination and agreement between the relevant authorities.

M MATs in which schools are geographically dispersed usually seek to introduce a tier of regional governance and oversight, through a regional executive role on the trust board and/or regional committees.

Phase

Groups can be primary-only, secondary-only or cross-phase and can include special schools. There is some evidence that cross-phase groups are more likely to be successful, although this is not universal (see Appendix 3).

Religious character

Schools with a designated religious character have some restrictions placed on them by their religious authority:

- Catholic schools can only federate with other Catholic schools or join Catholic-led MATs
- Church of England schools can usually join C of E-led groups or groups comprising both church and community schools, as long as the group accepts that an agreed percentage of its governing board will consist of governors or trustees appointed by the diocese. This 'mixed model' will usually only be appropriate for VC schools, and is the result of an agreement reached between the DfE and the C of E. Practice can vary across dioceses, though, as some Diocesan Boards of Education (DBEs) have their own local requirements in addition to the nationally agreed model. C of E schools wishing to form or join either federations or MATs should talk to their DBE early in the decision-making process to ascertain their views
- schools with other faith designations should talk to their relevant authority as early as possible to determine what is likely to be permitted

Forming or joining a federation or MAT makes no difference to the religious character of the schools involved which all keep their existing religious (or non-religious) designation.

M It is theoretically possible for academies to form what is known as an 'umbrella trust' in which they share some, but not all, governance. Such structures have, in some cases, enabled schools to overcome some of these restrictions. However, the inherently looser nature of these collaborations can make it harder for them to realise the full benefits of collaboration (the umbrella trust may not, for example, have the power to intervene when a school is failing). Consequently the DfE is currently unlikely to approve applications to form new umbrella trusts, though they may be open to the idea of bringing together existing MATs in this way.

Effect on school budgets

F Federations continue to receive funding from their LA. The LA can choose to either give each school within the federation its own delegated budget share or allocate the funding to the federation as a whole. Even where the local authority chooses to allocate funding to the federation as a whole, rather than the individual schools, the total funding should add up to the same as the individual schools would have received in their own right. The federation governing body is free to spend the money across the federation although an audit trail must be kept for each individual school budget.

M Academies are funded directly from the DfE. MATs can choose to pool a proportion of the budget each academy in their group receives to fund central services, such as finance and HR (often referred to as

'top-slicing'). Like federations, MATs can choose to vary the budget they devolve to each school in order to address particular needs.

Additional funding to help schools to form or join groups

F There is no additional funding to help schools to form or join a federation, however, there is also less regulatory change compared to that involved in forming or joining a MAT.

M There is no direct funding to help schools to form or join a MAT (the Primary Academy Chain Development Grant which provided funding to groups of primary schools forming MATs has now been withdrawn).

An *Academy Support Grant* to help maintained schools convert to academy status, essential if they wish to join or form a MAT, is available. Through this grant, the DfE provides £25,000 to each converting school to help with costs such as legal fees, stationery and signage. Schools can apply for this grant when their application to convert has been approved in principle. How this may be included during the broader process of deciding to form or join a partnership is discussed in the following section.

Grants are also available to help schools to sponsor other schools in special measures or, in some cases, those which are categorised as 'requires improvement'.

4 Making the right decision for your school

Whether or not to enter into a formal partnership with one or more other school, and what form that partnership might take, is a decision that needs to be taken by every school individually. What is right for one school may not be right for another.

There are, however, some key questions that we would encourage leaders and governors in every standalone school to ask themselves. This will help to clarify your purpose in considering a partnership, to better understand any specific requirements or restrictions on your school, to identify the most attractive options for your school and ensure as many people as possible are happy with the decision you take. Try to think ahead to the challenges you anticipate your school may face over the next few years and identify how a partnership might help you to meet those challenges.

This section suggests a possible process for making the right decision for your school. It links to a presentation that accompanies this guidance, suggesting slides you might want to use with different groups as you go through the process, together with specific questions you might want to ask yourselves and others (link provided in Further information).

This is not a formal legal process, rather a suggested approach to help you to decide on the best way forward for your school. If, at the end of these steps, you decide you would like to enter into a formal partnership with one or more other schools, a formal process will be required. Detailed advice on this is outside the scope of this guidance, however, an indication of what this is likely to involve is provided at the end of this paper.

You may be starting from a different place than that assumed by this process; perhaps after an approach from a federation, MAT or school to ask if you'd be interested in partnering with them. It is still important to ensure you go through a thorough decision-making and due diligence process before agreeing to go ahead although you may wish to take some of the steps in a different order, perhaps meeting your potential partner ahead of bringing together a working party and forming a joint working party across the schools.

Step 1: Raise the idea of partnering with one or more other schools at a full governing body meeting or at your annual strategy planning session (or convene a one-off meeting to do this) (slides a – f)

You might want to outline:

- the changing educational landscape
- the particular challenges your school is likely to face over the next few years
- the benefits of collaboration
- different types of partnership schools are entering into
- your proposed process for making the right decision

Slide f includes some questions you could use to guide an initial discussion on this issue.

Step 2: Bring together a small working party of interested governors to explore possibilities (slides g – j)

This group might want to:

- consider specific pros and cons of partnering versus remaining standalone for your school (see slide g for questions you might ask yourselves to identify these)
- talk to any bodies with authority over your school (for example, your LA and any relevant religious authority) (see slide h for questions you might want to explore with them)
- identify and research schools you might be particularly interested in partnering with, and existing federations or MATs that you might consider joining (see slide i for potential sources of information on schools and groups)
- meet potential partners to find out more about them and discuss the idea of partnership (see slide j for questions you might want to explore with other schools, and slide k for suggested questions for existing groups)
- hold informal discussions with key stakeholders about potential partnerships

Step 3: Convene a full governing body meeting for the working party to report back on its work (slide i)

Allow sufficient time for a full and open discussion. This might include:

- a presentation of the working party's findings
- a recommended way forward
- an explanation of why the working party thinks this would be the best decision for your school
- an explanation of the likely implications for governors, staff, pupils and parents
- an opportunity for the rest of the governing body to ask questions, raise concerns and make suggestions

You should aim to end the meeting with a firm agreement on the preferred option and, if that is to seek to enter into a partnership, the governing body's approval to move on to formal discussions about partnering with the identified school(s) or group.

Step 4: Talk to key stakeholders to let them know your plan and invite their comments

At this point, if you are considering entering into a formal partnership process, you may wish to let your stakeholders know the route you would like to pursue and to invite them to share their thoughts with you. Formal consultation will need to be done as part of any official process, but this is likely to go much more smoothly if people already know your plans and have had a chance to discuss them. How you do this will depend on your existing relationships with, and forums for talking to, staff, pupils, parents and the wider community but you might want to consider:

- a discussion at a staff meeting
- a question and answer session for parents
- a parent survey
- a discussion in assembly
- an article in a local newsletter

Your next steps, if you decide you want to enter into a partnership, will depend on the current status of your school and the type of partnership you wish to form or join. There is support available on converting to academy status and forming or joining a MAT from the DfE, and on joining or forming a federation from your LA. As mentioned earlier, detailed advice on these processes is outside the scope of this guidance. To give you a sense of what the process is likely to involve, however:

F **Maintained schools wanting to form or join a federation** should:

- continue the conversation with the schools with which you would like to go into partnership and ensure you are all keen to go ahead
- contact your LA to discuss the proposal and access any support they can provide
- conduct due diligence on the schools you're interested in partnering with, to ensure you fully understand their circumstances (your potential partners should also undertake the same process with regards to your school)
- formally consult with pupils, parents, staff and the wider community

More information on this process can be found in the National Governors' Association's *Questions and Answers on Federations* and the joint ASCL/NGA/Browne Jacobson guidance on *Leading and Governing Groups of Schools*.

M **Maintained schools wanting to join an existing MAT** should:

- inform the MAT of their desire to join, so that both parties can consider whether they want to work towards this partnership, and so the MAT can support you through the process (some will be very experienced in doing this)
- obtain written consent from any religious authority for the school to convert to academy status and join this MAT (and whether they will require the MAT to make any changes to the composition of its board before they allow this to happen)
- consider seeking legal advice to support you through the conversion process

- conduct due diligence on the MAT you're interested in joining, to ensure you fully understand its circumstances (the MAT should also undertake the same process with regards to your school)
- formally consult with pupils, parents, staff and the wider community

The DfE will appoint a project lead to support you through this process. See their *Guidance on Converting to an Academy* for more information.

Maintained schools wanting to form a new MAT with other schools should:

- continue the conversation with the schools with which you would like to go into partnership and ensure you are all keen to go ahead
- obtain written consent from any religious authority for the school to convert to academy status and form a MAT with these schools (and whether they will require a certain percentage of seats on the board in order to approve this)
- consider seeking legal advice to support you through the conversion process
- conduct due diligence on the schools you're interested in partnering with, to ensure you fully understand their circumstances (your potential partners should also undertake the same process with regards to your school)
- formally consult with pupils, parents, staff and the wider community

The DfE will appoint a project lead to support you through this process. See their *Guidance on Converting to an Academy* for more information.

Academies wanting to join an existing MAT should:

- inform the MAT of their desire to join, so that both parties can consider whether they want to work towards this partnership
- follow the process set out in Browne Jacobson's *FAQs for Single Academies joining Existing MATs*

Academies wanting to form a new MAT with other schools should:

- continue the conversation with the schools with which you would like to go into partnership, and ensure you are all keen to go ahead
- follow the process set out in Browne Jacobson's *FAQs for Converting your Single Academy Trust to a MAT* and read the joint ASCL/NGA/Browne Jacobson guidance on *Leading and Governing Groups of Schools*.

Appendix 1:
Evidence for the benefits of formal school collaborations

The Education Select Committee (a cross-party group of 11 MPs which monitors the work of the DfE) undertook two large-scale enquiries into school partnerships and structures in 2015, which together form a significant body of evidence for the benefits of strong collaborations and shared accountability between schools.

The first report, *School Partnerships and Cooperation*, found that "school partnerships and cooperation have become an increasingly important part of a self-improving or school-led system", and that "such collaboration has great potential to continue driving improvement to the English education system".

The report found there was "little doubt among school leaders that collaboration can play an important part in school improvement". Research commissioned by the National College of Teaching and Leadership found that 87 per cent of headteachers and 83 per cent of chairs of governors described partnership with other schools as "critical to improving outcomes for students".

It found significant evidence for the benefits of formal partnerships, including a report for the National College of School Leadership which concluded that schools in federations performed better than schools with apparently similar characteristics that had not federated. In addition, they identified federations adopting executive leadership structures (one executive head leading schools within the federation) as achieving better results than those which maintained traditional structures (one head teacher for each school).

The select committee concluded that: "We believe that school partnerships with clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation are more likely to be successful in achieving gains from collaboration."

The second report, *Academies and Free Schools*, set out to explore the impact of these new types of school. It found no evidence so far that academisation in itself raises standards. What it strongly identified, though, was a relationship between school-to-school collaboration and improved outcomes, quoting evidence from the Sutton Trust on the stronger performance of (sponsored) academies in chains over standalone academies, and from Ofsted on the higher likelihood of the performance of standalone (convertor) academies declining since their previous inspection, as compared to academies in MATs.

The report found that the benefits of being part of a formal group were particularly strong for primary schools, whose smaller size and greater reliance on local authority support often made standalone academy status more problematic. The report found that: "While some primary schools have converted to standalone academies, the requirements in terms of support staff, including business managers to ensure value for money for services previously supplied by the local authority and human resources, mean that the number of primary academies adopting this model remains low."

For primary schools the report concluded "the model of partnership … is less important than the level of commitment of the heads and teacher involved". This belief that it is the shared commitment generated by entering into formal partnership that makes the difference, whether a MAT or a federation, was clearly articulated by one primary head who told the committee that while becoming an academy had improved their practice and their school, this was primarily because of the advantages generated by the collaborative framework of a MAT: "We are accountable for each other, and therefore it is imperative we support each other to improve."

A 2011 Ofsted report, *Leadership of More Than One School: an evaluation of the impact of federated schools*, similarly identified some clear benefits from formal partnerships. The report highlighted the positive impact of federation on improvement in both provision and outcomes:

- in federations, where weaker schools had joined forces with stronger ones, the key areas of improvement were in teaching and learning, pupil behaviour and achievement
- those federations which had been set up to improve capacity among small schools had been successful in broadening and enriching the curriculum and care, guidance and support for pupils
- in the case of cross-phase federations, federation had resulted in stronger academic transition procedures between schools

Appendix 2:
Potential financial efficiencies

Bringing schools together is by no means a silver bullet in achieving financial savings. It is possible that in the beginning it may in fact generate additional costs. There are, however, a number of areas in which groups of schools are beginning, over time, to generate significant efficiencies.

The most fruitful areas for savings tend to be those which involve awarding and managing external contracts. These include:

- finance systems
- HR provision and support
- energy supply (every school's second highest cost after staffing)
- catering services
- premises/estate management
- data management
- IT services and support
- accountancy
- legal services
- training and professional development services

See ASCL's guidance paper on *Effective Procurement* for more advice.

Appendix 3:
Characteristics of effective school groups

Research into what makes an effective formal partnership between schools is still at a relatively early stage. There are, however, some findings beginning to emerge which you might find helpful when evaluating existing groups or considering how to set up your own.

A 2014 DfE-commissioned report, *What Does a High Performing Academy Sponsor Look Like?* offered the following advice to organisations setting up MATs and based on the performance of existing MATs:

Growth and development	Be aware of key transition points. Particularly the phase from 5-10 academies when there is a need to develop skills and infrastructure.
	Grow carefully, understanding your own capacity and the challenges and risks you take on – this might mean steady growth followed by a spurt.
Portfolio of schools	It's advisable to have a mixed portfolio of schools – specifically a balance of sponsored and converter projects. Chains with exclusively primaries also appear to find it tougher – although some primary specialists are thriving.
	When planning growth think consistently in terms of geography, plan your development in terms of clusters and understand the risks of adding isolated schools to your chain.
People and leadership	CEOs of high performing chains tend to be strong, ambitious and determined leaders with clear moral purpose – appetite to grow is healthy but focus on delivering great outcomes for the schools you have first.
	Make sure your vision and purpose is well understood throughout your organisation – branding can be a tool but it is collective ethos that counts.
	Having individuals with strong commercial skills at board level is crucial, and the importance of these skills increases when chains grow beyond 4-5.
	Nurture leadership internally and make the most of cross-chain CPD and progression opportunities. High performers are much more likely to do this.
	As you grow beyond 5, a full time financial director will be essential and you may need to recruit this person externally.
Governance and finance	Clear accountability and governance are vital. Small boards are more likely to be successful and strong board-school level governance links are healthy.
	Be proactive in finding innovative ways to achieve efficiencies.
	Formulate your business model carefully – and look at what others have done. There is no single formula for top-slice and central services.
	Strong financial planning is vital. If you have very strong school improvement and nothing goes wrong you may be lucky for a while but cannot rely on this.
School improvement	It is your choice on how prescriptive to be with schools in your chain that are performing well – but take swift and assertive action with failing schools.

Two Sutton Trust reports, *Chain Effects* and *Chain Effects 2015*, focused specifically on the impact of academy chains on disadvantaged pupils found few clear patterns, stating that "What probably matters most is the quality of the staff (at chain and particularly school level), the quality of teaching and learning, and the strategies used to improve this (whether across a chain or within a school)". The authors did, however, note that the groups with the best outcomes for disadvantaged pupils had two things in common: they had been running schools for a number of years, and had expanded slowly.

Finally, the 2011 Ofsted report *Leadership of More Than One School: an evaluation of the impact of federated schools* identified a number of common features in federations whose leadership was judged by inspectors to be good or outstanding. These were:

- a clear vision and good communication of the benefits that federation brought to pupils, driven by the headteacher but shared by others
- well-developed strategic plans with success criteria shared with all staff
- rigorous procedures for monitoring and evaluating the federation and holding staff to account
- well-established procedures for, and a belief in the importance of, developing and coaching leaders at all levels
- continued professional development of staff

Further information

1 NGA's *Questions and Answers on Federations*
http://www.nga.org.uk/Guidance/School-structures-and-constitution/Federations/Federation-QA-version-1-Final.aspx

2 *Academies Financial Handbook*
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academies-financial-handbook-2015

3 *Academy Support Grant*
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-support-grant

4 ASCL, NGA and Browne Jacobson *Leading and Governing Groups of Schools*
http://www.ascl.org.uk/utilities/document-summary.html?id=9228E9B5-29E2-4F5D-908C2F182C63D474

5 DfE *Guidance on Converting to an Academy*
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools

6 Browne Jacobson *FAQs for Single Academies Joining Existing MATs*
http://www.education-advisors.com/resource/faqs-single-academy-joining-existing-mat/

7 *FAQs for Converting your Single Academy Trust to a MAT*
http://www.education-advisors.com/resource/faqs-converting-single-academy-trust-mat/

8 *Schools Partnerships and Cooperation*
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmeduc/269/269.pdf

9 *Academies and Free Schools*
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/258/258.pdf

10 *Leadership of More Than One School: an evaluation of the impact of federated schools*
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413388/Leadership_of_more_than_one_school.pdf

11 ASCL guidance paper on *Effective Procurement*
http://www.ascl.org.uk/utilities/document-summary.html?id=5CE2C9C5-BE03-4D70-9A3E5C94842788E4

12 *Chain Effects*
http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/chain-effects-july-14-final-1.pdf

13 *Chain Effects 2015*
http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Chain-Effects-2015.pdf

Supporting documents

ASCL Presentation: *Forming or Joining a Group of Schools: staying in control of your school's destiny*
www.ascl.org.uk/gp-formandjoinpresentation

Association of School and College Leaders

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