

# SHAPING THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAT SECTOR TO 2030

## WHITE PAPER

### KEYSTONE'S AGENDA FOR A MATURING SECTOR

#### FACING INTO THE KEY ISSUES

Identifying the key issues facing the Government and the sector over the coming years and laying out strategic initiatives that clarify the challenges, drive momentum and enable change.

#### SUPPORTING OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE

Enabling the Multi Academy Trust network to unleash their potential and face the future with confidence and unbridled ambition as we head towards 2030.

“Unlocking Schools’  
potential through  
strategic leadership  
support”

## Keystone Knowledge

Keystone is a trusted partner to the MAT sector, and we champion the *#ArtOfThePossible*. Established with a vision to help unlock schools’ potential, Keystone provides multi-faceted support, with real experience of school operations.

We believe in the power of education, we believe that every child deserves the very best schooling opportunity and we believe that great quality trust leadership enables the magic to happen in classrooms.

Keystone are not just a provider of services to trusts. We are committed to helping drive innovation and improvement, understanding that schools should be places where those traits thrive.

Built on a deep **knowledge** of effective trusts, our team are rooted in having worked in schools and MATs. Our **passion for improvement** shines through in all we do, and we blend academic theory about organisational management with the real life complexities of school and MAT operations. We are **trusted** by those we work with to be a partner to them, and are welcomed into their teams - we take that responsibility incredibly seriously and deliver an approach which is inclusive, focussed and centred around improving outcomes.

Our core services include:

- **interim finance, HR and executive level roles**
- **internal scrutiny**
- **due diligence and conversion**
- **professional service retainers**
- **online training**

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## Introduction

Keystone Knowledge are delighted to present our paper setting out some of the key issues impacting on the Education Sector. We hope this will stimulate debate and a call for action within the Multi Academy Trust (MAT) network who have, over the past fifteen years, developed a strong, agile system that is focussed on quality improvement. With all major political parties endorsing the MAT strategy, the sector continues to expand as we head towards 2030.

Government policy regarding MATs is now set. The academy agenda would be difficult to unwind, even if there was a political will, and the move towards academisation has been a relative success within the myriad of other failed Government initiatives. Both of the major political parties can take credit in either inventing the idea of academisation or promoting it post 2010 to where it is now.

Furthermore, the sector has matured well, and there has been (relatively) little in the way of major adverse publicity on a system wide scale. Given the changes that have occurred, and how academy operations have finessed and become more nuanced over time is testimony to the level of control exercised within the sector itself and the commitment of the professionals within it to do 'what is right' for the pupils and parents they serve. This should never be forgotten. There are thousands of incredibly brilliant and passionate people who call this sector their vocation, and as a country we are immensely privileged that these colleagues give so much of themselves for the benefit of our collective children. We own them a debt which can never be fully repaid.

“...that academy operations have finessed and become more nuanced over time is testimony to the level of control exercised within the sector itself and the commitment of the professionals within it”

## Introduction cont...

We have recently crossed the significant milestone of having more academies than not, with 11,142 academies open at time of writing (1). There are currently 639 primary schools and 76 secondary schools in the conversion pipeline (2) and with 54.8% of primary schools remaining within the Local Authority structure, and 17.1% of secondary schools (3), there is still opportunity for MAT growth. Nearly half of special and alternative provision settings have already converted to academy status (4).

As a leading consultancy business in the sector, we are increasingly hearing the narrative that MATs are becoming mini LEAs and substantial businesses in their own right. There are now over 2,000 MATs and Single Academy Trusts (SATs) in England (5) and with larger MATs reporting over £100m turnover; this is a growing sector of some significance. The challenge will be for MAT leaders to determine how best to grow, and where they can source quality support from.

This paper identifies what we believe to be some of the key challenges facing the Government and the sector in the period leading to 2030 and proposes some pointers on how these can be addressed. This paper is promoted to spark debate and to encourage further work to support the sector as it grows and matures further over the next six years or so. I look forward to those conversations with you over the coming weeks.

With best wishes



Stephen Mitchell  
CEO, Keystone Knowledge

“This paper is promoted to spark debate and encourage further work to support the sector ”

## Executive Summary

This White Paper outlines the seven key themes that MATs face as the sector heads toward 2030. With MATs now an integral part of the UK's education system, and set to include the vast majority of schools by the end of the decade, the sector must focus on seven critical areas to ensure sustainable growth and educational excellence.

First, **recruitment and attracting talent** will be fundamental to MAT success. Attracting, retaining, and developing high-quality staff across all roles requires flexibility and proactive strategies. Second, **leadership and capacity building** must be a priority, with MATs investing in robust leadership development programs to address future demands.

**Financial reserves** present both an opportunity and a challenge. MATs need clear strategies for managing reserves, balancing short-term needs with long-term investments. Fourth, **effective governance** is crucial. By strengthening governance structures and introducing paid non-executive roles, MATs can ensure better oversight and accountability as they grow.

**Efficiencies of scale** offer the potential for operational improvements, but MATs must also guard against diseconomies of scale that could erode these benefits. The fifth priority is ensuring **strategic mapping of schools to trusts**, with a transparent and logical process that focuses on enhancing student outcomes.

Finally, implementing **effective schemes of delegation** remains a key feature of the MAT model. Trusts should refine their balance between centralised control and local school autonomy to maximise educational impact.

“With MATs now an integral part of the UK’s education system....the sector must focus on seven critical areas to ensure sustainable growth and educational excellence.”

“MATs are recognising the need to invest in non-teaching roles, such as finance, HR, and operations leaders, at levels equivalent to teaching professionals.”

## Recruitment and Attracting Talent

Recruitment and attracting talent are fundamental to the long-term success of the Multi Academy Trust (MAT) sector. Schools, being people-driven organisations, allocate over 75% of their resources to staffing, including both teaching and essential non-teaching roles. The ability to attract, retain, and develop high-quality staff across all levels is therefore critical to ensuring MATs continue to thrive.

However, the sector is facing several pressing challenges that must be addressed with urgency and foresight: The rising costs of salaries, and particularly pensions, are placing a significant financial strain on MATs. This issue needs immediate attention, with strategic approaches to manage these costs without compromising the ability to attract top talent. Interim grants for teaching staff are welcomed, but, there is still a paucity of funding for non-teaching roles, and the very different financial models of special schools are not served well by the current funding.

Many MATs are recognising the need to invest in non-teaching roles, such as finance, HR, and operations leaders, at levels equivalent to teaching professionals. This investment is critical to building a robust infrastructure that supports MAT growth and performance.

The sector must confront the reality that MATs often struggle to offer the same flexibility as other professions, particularly in terms of remote work. Addressing these disparities will be key to attracting a younger workforce that values flexible work environments.

## Recruitment and Attracting Talent cont...

With the pandemic re-establishing schools as critical providers of childcare and development, parents increasingly expect consistent physical attendance for their children. However, balancing this with the need for flexibility in staffing models, including the potential for remote teaching in secondary education, remains a challenge.

Like many sectors, education is facing a wave of retirements, particularly among senior leaders, while also struggling to attract new entrants into support roles such as teaching assistants. Competitive pay and more flexible working conditions in other sectors are drawing talent away from MATs.

### Keystone advocates for:

#### Develop Flexible Employment Models

MATs should actively explore ways to offer greater flexibility for staff, such as hybrid working arrangements for non-teaching roles, and innovative schedules for teachers. This will make MATs more competitive with other sectors in attracting young talent.

#### Invest in Leadership Pipelines

To address the growing leadership gap, MATs must develop targeted leadership development programs, from early-career staff through to senior management. These programs should focus on both teaching and non-teaching roles, leveraging initiatives such as the Apprenticeship Levy to fund comprehensive training pathways.

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“MATs should prioritise the recruitment and development of non-teaching leaders, including finance and operations professionals, at competitive pay levels.”

## Recruitment and Attracting Talent cont...

### Centralise Pension Reform Discussions

Keystone advocates for MATs to collectively engage with the government on pension reforms, pushing for centrally funded pension schemes (similar to the protective services professions). This could alleviate financial pressure on MATs while maintaining competitive compensation packages for staff.

### Strengthen Non-Teaching Leadership Roles

MATs should prioritise the recruitment and development of non-teaching leaders, including finance and operations professionals, at competitive pay levels. Keystone supports benchmarking these roles against other sectors to ensure that MATs can offer attractive career paths for such essential roles.

### Incentivise Entry-Level Positions

To address recruitment challenges at the entry level, MATs must review pay structures for support staff, especially teaching assistants, and administration staff, and consider offering additional benefits such as career development opportunities and pathways to higher-skilled roles.

### Monitor Workforce Demographics

Keystone advocates for MATs to regularly assess their workforce demographics, identifying trends in retirements, leadership gaps, and talent shortages. This data can be used to create long-term workforce strategies tailored to individual trusts' needs.



## Leadership and Capacity building

MATs are growing in size and in many instances represent significant businesses, both in term of turnover, size and complexity, with multi site operations and rapid growth, aligning culture and differing standards.

It is admirable that the sector has risen to the challenge and that leaders in the sector have been able to cope with such growth without the consequences that often arise from widescale merger.

The DFE undertook an impact assessment of college mergers in September 2019 and identified some significant issues that had arisen, which haven't been reflected in the academisation programme. A key finding from that study was that there was no strong statistical evidence of college mergers leading to an improvement or deterioration of college performance (6). A report from the Education Policy Institute published in 2023 draws a parallel conclusion within the academy sector (7), however this data is arguably skewed by the forced conversions of underperforming schools.

What is clear, is that the legal structure of academies does not in and of itself afford a direct improvement to educational outcome. Schools are, as above, people organisations and to improve our educational outcomes, we must invest in the leadership and capacity of our school leaders. Many trusts are doing exactly that, and we are seeing some strong resilience in the sector, notwithstanding significant financial pressures, and some excellent stories of transforming life chances for young people.

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“...the biggest challenge is yet to come with over 10,000 more schools to be integrated into the system over the next decade. ”

## Leadership and Capacity building cont...

However, the sector must not be complacent. There are still a wide number of MAT's that are very small and which will still be going through the growth curve over the next 3-5 years. Growth and operational efficacy do not follow a linear path. We know that there are numerous inflection points on the journey of growth, where trust operations needs to be re-thought, re-energised, and in some cases, restructured.

In addition, some medium sized MATs will grow to become significant businesses in their own right and we will inevitably see the expansion of others through merger which will present even greater challenges for system leadership. This isn't some academic ambition, it is the stark reality of recognising the economics. What was a very 'fractured' sector, with thousands of independent smaller organisations, inevitably sees consolidation and the economies of scale that come with it. Indeed, it is evident that the DfE cannot have a 1:1 relationship with 10,000 trusts, and therefore there is a political will to support the continued rationalisation that we have begun to see.

So, in our view, whilst the successes that have been achieved so far is commendable, the biggest challenge is yet to come with over 10,000 more schools (8) to be integrated into the system over the next decade.

As with all businesses, leadership is key to success and having a pipeline of new leaders growing with the system is essential. Leadership of a MAT is not leadership of a school on a larger level; it requires a different skill set, complementary to be sure, but different.

## Leadership and Capacity building cont...

We suggest more work should be done by DfE and others to assess the skills gaps for the medium term and how these can be met. An ageing workforce and issues with recruitment at the entry level into the profession will only exacerbate this position unless a skills strategy is put in place for the network.

As with all businesses, leadership is key to MAT success and having a pipeline of new leaders growing with the system is essential.

If the sector is to continue to grow and innovate, we need to be enabling and empowering the leaders of our trusts. Domain specific training courses are not necessarily the answer. For a sector which promotes learning we sometimes fall into very restrictive practices, thinking only about the answers coming from within our own sector. Innovation happens because new ideas are embraced, and there are a range of training courses which are not sector specific but are very relevant with transferable skills and knowledge, such as MBAs and professional qualifications that can take add real value.

We see large challenges and opportunities for trusts in developing career pathways for colleagues across their organisations. The sector talks about 'growing our own', and to some extent this is done well for teaching colleagues, but the route for developing leaders, at all levels, across other aspects of the organisation is still in its infancy. Trusts would be well served by considering the career pathways for all roles across their organisations, particularly with the opportunities that scale can bring for innovating the way that they work.

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## Leadership and Capacity building cont...

### Keystone advocates for:

#### Evaluating Skills and Capacity Gaps

Sector-wide collaboration to assess and address the leadership and operational skills gaps expected over the next decade.

#### Establishing Comprehensive Leadership Programs

MATs should develop a robust management training program for current and aspiring leaders, including using the Apprenticeship Levy to fund these programs.

#### Proactively Planning for Growth

MATs must prepare for future growth by restructuring operations at key inflection points and anticipating the need for new leadership roles to manage expanding portfolios.

#### Facilitating Peer Learning

Encouraging greater collaboration between medium and large trusts to share best practices in leadership development and capacity building, avoiding common pitfalls during growth.

## Financial Reserves

The majority of MATs are financially stable and many of them in a very strong position. Numerous benchmarking reports show strong levels of reserves, and one of the successes of the MAT movement has been the build up of reserves to enable more effective medium term planning and as a contingency for the future. MAT leaders are to be commended for this, but we do see the pareto principle at play, where the majority of reserves are associated with the minority of trusts. It may not be the 80:20 rule, but, the principles are very much evident.

However, this financial prudence and management does lead to the question about what is the right level of reserves a MAT should carry – increasing reserves deprives resources to those children on roll now, to the benefit of those in the future, but, it also reduces risk, and allows for longer term strategic planning.

As such, a careful balance needs to be struck, and debate needs to be had about what is the correct balance. In our experience trustees too often follow the lead of the executive leadership team rather than determining this independently, and the position taken forms a core part of trustee responsibility in approving the budget each year.

Where schools are under local authority control, the general mindset in evidence is about spending this year's budget to benefit the learners of today. This results in much short termism and a lack of medium term investment and in some instances this has left academy leaders in a position where there is an almost paranoia with building reserves at the cost of learners today.

“...financial prudence and management does lead to the question about what is the right level of reserves a MAT should carry.”

“Planning horizons should, we argue, be considerably longer than the 3-5 year window in which many trusts currently plan.”

## Financial Reserves cont...

As the scrutiny around the levels of reserves held increases, this will become a wider issue, balancing the debate of adequacy of funding for schools with the MATs generating not insignificant surpluses.

The DfE and MAT movement could undertake some worthwhile analysis of what metrics can be used to assess the adequacy of revenue reserves within a MAT. This will provide trustees and indeed senior leadership teams with some objective data from which they can then make more informed decisions.

MATs often have 125 year leases on their land and buildings, if not owned outright. Planning horizons should, we argue, be considerably longer than the 3-5 year window in which many trusts currently plan, and often struggle to put together a meaningful picture of the medium term.

Schools and MATs have a tremendous impact on children, and the future life chances of those in their care. Pretty much everyone working in the sector wants it to be the best it can be, and we see this goodwill in the sheer amount of extra activities that have become part of the core work of MATs in recent years. This inevitably touches on life outside of the school gates. However, most MAT Articles are very prescriptive about what the trust is empowered to do, through its Objects. These are largely around promoting education, and often, use of facilities for recreational benefit.

## Financial Reserves cont...

Trusts with significant reserves could be using those assets for very tangible benefits; setting up of charitable foundations to support not only their young people, but their communities, would have a significant impact. Take for example, a trust that could invest £3m in a long term deposit, yielding 4% per annum. This would be £120k, every year, without touching the underlying capital, which can be used to support life experiences, social enterprise, sports and extra-curricular activities which would have a transformational impact outside of the core business of schooling.

Current regulations, however, are not clear that trusts could 'gift' that interest to charities, because it is outside of their stated Objects. Of course, that £120k could be spent on additional resources for schools, and in many cases it could or should be, but, if trusts can realise some additional funding, then, there are significant opportunities available. On a lesser scale this is still possible by working to establish an independent foundation, and having that fundraise from the local community.

This raises the question of how do trusts effectively use their reserves? Many trust boards are risk averse, and significant cash deposits do not keep pace with inflation, meaning that trustees are actively not maintaining value for money with taxpayer funds. We encourage trusts to take a strong review of how they are investing their reserves, and how the time value of money can be a drag on trust efficacy.

“We encourage trusts to take a strong review of how they are investing their reserves, and how the time value of money can be a drag on trust efficacy.”

“MATs with substantial reserves should consider setting up charitable foundations to support wider community projects.”

## Financial Reserves cont...

### Keystone advocates for:

#### **Refining the Use of Clear Metrics for Reserve Management**

Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning (ICFP) principles should be more actively considered and embedded in active management conversations rather than being a singular process that is visited occasionally as part of a formal review.

#### **Encouraging Long-Term Financial Planning**

MATs should extend their financial planning horizons beyond 3-5 years to ensure sustainability, especially considering long-term leases and large capital projects.

#### **Reassessing Investment Strategies**

MATs should review how reserves are invested, focusing on achieving a balance between risk, return, and maintaining value for taxpayer funds.

#### **Exploring Community-Focused Initiatives**

MATs with substantial reserves should consider setting up charitable foundations to support wider community projects, including extracurricular activities and social enterprises, to enhance their broader impact.

#### **Greater freedoms for Boards to act proactively.**

We would like to see greater emphasis for Boards to manage levels of reserves, and strategic expenditure. A passive approach to treasury management that returns below inflation is destroying taxpayer funds, and a review of Objects to allow trusts to use reserves for other purposes that support the young people they serve would be beneficial.



## Effective Governance

Governance is key to ensuring transparency and accountability of the executive and providing oversight and feedback to parents and other stakeholders including the DfE and Ofsted.

When governance is effective it is a 'supportive challenge' mechanism to the executive, but where governance is not effective is simply a nod to the actions of said executive. This is not an issue within the MAT movement in isolation.

Effective governance is key to all business, whether it be in the Public and Private Sectors. Where it works well, the organisation operates effectively; where Governance fails, the repercussions can be significant such as that recently experienced with the Horizon scandal.

Failing governance is one of the areas of greatest risk in the MAT model. Most MATs are now significant businesses, which require a strong Chair with the necessary skills and time to provide the oversight and guidance. This risk will only get bigger as MATs grow. Too frequently, we still see the lack of any real effectiveness at committee sub-structures, considering such matters as:

- Academic quality and standards
- Finances and resources
- IT and infrastructure including premises
- Overall risk

With such complex, multi site operations, the need for adequate consideration and review by skilled professionals supporting the executive team will become even more important in the future.

“Failing governance is one of the areas of greatest risk in the MAT model.”

“It has been disappointing that the coverage of MAT reviews by Ofsted has been not developed enough so far over the past 15 years, and we’d encourage the new Secretary of State to give enhanced inspection power”

## Effective Governance cont...

The sector has to be given the ability to recruit high quality Chairs and trustees through being able to remunerate those positions. The appointment of paid Non Executive Chairs (as is the case within Health Trusts) should, in our view, become the norm in order to attract higher quality and to ensure there is time devoted to their role.

This should also supported by the increased focus by Ofsted on MAT inspections because the key reputational impact on the sector will be a failure of a MAT itself, not a single school. It has been disappointing that the coverage of MAT reviews by Ofsted has been not developed enough so far over the past 14 years, and we’d encourage the new Secretary of State to give enhanced inspection powers, and requirements, to Ofsted in that regard.

In our opinion, there also needs to be greater clarity on the role of members and trustees of MATs. Whilst the nature of legal structures requires the differentiation, there is often confusion as to the respective roles. It is important that there is reduced risk of such confusion.

Finally, enhancing annual reporting on the issue of governance, the rotation of trustees to refresh boards in accordance with strong corporate governance best practice, and greater internal scrutiny requirements around governance should be introduced as mandatory requirements over the next 24 months.

Effective governance is key to reducing risk to a MAT and much more focus needs to be given to this area.

## Effective Governance cont...

### Keystone advocates for:

#### Introducing Paid Non-Executive Roles

Implementing paid Non-Executive Chair positions in MATs to attract high-calibre governance professionals, similar to practices in the healthcare sector.

#### Enhancing Ofsted's MAT Inspection Role

MAT inspections should be brought forward – there has been nascent development over many years, but now is the time to celebrate best practice and to call out where MATs aren't supporting the schools in their trusts appropriately.

#### Clarifying Trustee and Member Roles

MATs should simplify and clarify the roles of trustees and members to avoid confusion and reduce governance risks.

#### Mandating Governance Best Practices

Governance structures should align with corporate best practices, including board rotation policies and stronger internal scrutiny, to ensure transparency and accountability.

“...now is the time to celebrate best practice and to call out where MATs aren't supporting the schools in their trusts appropriately.”

“It has been no mean achievement to successfully integrate organisations who have been established for decades into a new structure.”

## Efficiencies of Scale

There can be no doubt that MATs have provided a more efficient approach to delivery of services compared with their Local Authority equivalent who were too distant from the delivery to effect beneficial change. This has been an undoubted success of the academisation model so far.

Growth brings challenges, rapid growth exacerbates those challenges, especially where newly acquired schools come with their own systems, cultures, operating practices and behaviours. It has been no mean achievement to successfully integrate organisations who have been established for decades into a new structure.

However, as MATs continue to grow, there is a risk of the mini LA syndrome appearing, especially where some MATs are widely dispersed on a geographic level, with little connection between schools and ‘HQ’. Such issues have played out in the FE sector with the Newcastle College Group which went through a rapid expansion, merging Colleges across the country, only latterly to re-consider this approach given that it was proving difficult to manage the whole organisation effectively. This has also been seen, to some extent, within the MAT sector, with AET reducing the number of schools that it runs after recognising the ‘geographical isolation’ of some schools.

Matters such as system integration, strong procurement practices, IT strategy development, resource utilisation including the cost of temporary labour and most importantly significant capital programmes are all areas where, in our experience, much more needs to be done to ensure that efficiencies of scale are realised and the private sector do not take advantage of the MAT sector’s relative immaturity on procurement, particularly on capital projects.

## Efficiencies of Scale cont...

This is an area where the MAT movement needs more support from the DfE, from within the model itself and through sharing good practice across the sector. Without further development, there is a real danger that diseconomies of scale will emerge and with it significant waste. There is, however, an associated risk if the support is that of restrictive practice, and directed guidance. MATs should still be able to take advantage of operational freedoms and seek innovation in the way they work.

### Keystone advocates for:

#### Systematic Integration of New Schools

MATs should focus on integrating newly acquired schools efficiently, ensuring alignment with trust-wide systems and processes.

#### Strengthening Procurement Practices

MATs need to establish rigorous procurement practices to avoid overspending, particularly on capital projects and temporary labour.

#### Implementing Comprehensive IT Strategies

Developing cohesive IT strategies across all school sites to streamline operations and improve data management.

#### Maximising Resource Utilisation

MATs should regularly review resource allocation and reduce reliance on temporary labour, ensuring that economies of scale are realised.

#### Maintaining Operational Freedoms

The DfE must ensure that MATs retain the flexibility to innovate, rather than enforcing restrictive practices in response to growth challenges.

“Without further development, there is a real danger that diseconomies of scale will emerge and with it significant waste...MATs should still be able to take advantage of operational freedoms and seek innovation in the way they work.”

“... more work needs to be undertaken around the strategic positioning of schools within individual trusts to ensure there is greater transparency”

## Strategic Mapping of Schools to trusts – the role of the regional boards

In our experience, the ‘award’ of schools to MATs through the regional approvals process can appear to lack rigour or even logic with regard to individual schools. This leaves questions about the extent to which there is a clear strategy for the distribution of Schools to MATs that will support the learner experience through their academic life.

As such, Keystone believes that much more work needs to be undertaken around the strategic positioning of schools within individual trusts to ensure there is greater transparency to the ‘homing’ of individual schools. This is not in our opinion about efficiency of resources or capacity of the individual trust but more about the extent to which the child will benefit from being part of that individual family of schools.

### Keystone advocates for:

#### Enhancing Transparency in the Assignment Process

The process for assigning schools to MATs should be made more transparent, with a clear rationale for each decision to foster greater trust and alignment. The trust quality descriptors are welcomed, but more visibility about usage would generate deeper trust in the system.

#### Improving Geographic Cohesion

Trusts should consider geographic proximity when acquiring new schools, which can improve cohesion, enhance the whole school life of the child, reduce operational inefficiencies, and foster stronger community ties.

## Effective Schemes of Delegation

The fundamental concept of academisation was the value that greater autonomy would provide to individual schools, impacting directly and positively on learners. This autonomy at MAT level has worked in many respects, witnessed by improved Ofsted and value added scores, and the many positive stories emerging from across the sector. Such freedoms give MATs the ability to distinguish themselves and to establish a MAT culture and way of working.

It is less clear that autonomy has increased at an individual school level. Indeed, many have argued that for individual schools, their control over their future has diminished by being part of a trust. This is particularly true of large trusts, where there is a very tight scheme of delegation.

This has significant implications for the effectiveness of governance at school level, the ability of leaders to exercise flexibility in terms of vision and strategy and the overall impact at school level. There is a question to be asked of whether such tight organisations de-skill middle and senior leaders in schools, who become so ingrained in working in a particular way because this is the X trust way of doing things, that when they move trusts, they lack the dexterity to be effective and respond to the schools and culture in front of them.

There are numerous models across the MAT system of central control v earned autonomy but, in our opinion, little has been done to understand fully what works best. Whilst there will never be a 'one size fits all' solution to this, much work and energy has been devoted by individual MATs to experimenting and refining models which should be shared across the sector.

“...many have argued that for individual schools, their control over their future has diminished by being part of a trust.”

“Whilst it remains for MATs to determine what is appropriate to provide the necessary central services and important trust wide support to facilitate systematic improvement, there does need to be greater transparency on what the top slice is spent on...”

## Effective Schemes of Delegation cont...

In our opinion, there are significant strengths with retaining local leadership and strong governance but it will be increasingly difficult to attract high quality local school governors if, in essence, they have little control over the future of the local school for which they take responsibility. As trusts grow, the emergence of regional governance models are being introduced, aiming to combine the strengths of strong central governance and vision with the strength of local autonomy – sharing governance and maintaining the ability to retain strong governance leadership.

There is a word of warning here; the development of regional grouping may result in local boards, themselves grouping together to exercise greater influence through the role of parental voice and, in some cases, prejudiced views on the future of education for their children. This needs to be monitored with great care, particularly in trusts where they have a very broad cohort, where separate interest groups could emerge and cause significant issues for MATs in the medium term.

The issue of GAG/reserve pooling and the appropriateness of ‘top slicing’ has come to prominence in the sector press recently. Whilst it remains for MATs to determine what is appropriate to provide the necessary central services and important trust wide support to facilitate systematic improvement, there does need to be greater transparency on what the top slice is spent on, how central budgets are controlled and importantly the value for money obtained.



## Effective Schemes of Delegation cont...

### Keystone advocates for:

#### Commissioning Research on Governance Models

The DfE should fund research into the effectiveness of different governance models in MATs, particularly the balance between centralised control and school-level autonomy.

#### Increasing Transparency on GAG Pooling

MATs should provide detailed reports on how General Annual Grant (GAG) pooling funds are allocated and undertake formal value-for-money reviews to ensure that these funds are being used effectively.

#### Exploring Governance Flexibility

MATs should experiment with governance models that retain strong local leadership, ensuring that school-level leaders have sufficient autonomy to innovate while maintaining alignment with trust-wide goals.

#### Setting GAG Pooling Limits

Following further research, the DfE could consider placing reasonable limits on GAG pooling to prevent potential over-centralisation and ensure fairness in resource distribution.

“MATs should experiment with governance models that retain strong local leadership, ensuring that school-level leaders have sufficient autonomy to innovate...”

“The future for MATs is full of promise as the sector prepares for significant growth by 2030. While there are challenges ahead, MATs are well-positioned to capitalise on their successes.”

## Conclusion

This paper has explored seven critical areas that will shape the sector’s trajectory. **Recruitment and attracting talent** present opportunities for MATs to attract top talent and build a strong workforce through innovative approaches and flexible work models. MATs that invest in **leadership and capacity building** will develop the next generation of leaders capable of managing increasingly complex organisations.

**Financial reserves** offer MATs a unique advantage, allowing them to plan for long-term sustainability. By refining investment strategies and using reserves strategically, trusts can make lasting impacts on both current students and future generations. In terms of **governance**, the sector is evolving positively, with the potential for stronger oversight through paid non-executive roles and clearer trustee responsibilities.

MATs are also poised to harness **efficiencies of scale** as they grow, improving operational effectiveness through better procurement and technology strategies. With a transparent and thoughtful approach to **strategic mapping of schools**, the sector will ensure that new schools are integrated seamlessly, supporting better educational outcomes.

Finally, the principle of **effective schemes of delegation** continues to be key for MATs, allowing them to innovate while maintaining central alignment. By embracing these positive aspects, MATs are on course to thrive, shaping the future of education with confidence and sustainability.

The future for MATs is full of promise as the sector prepares for significant growth by 2030. While there are challenges ahead, MATs are well-positioned to capitalise on their successes.

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## Shaping the Structure of the MAT Sector to 2030

Keystone Knowledge are delighted to present our paper setting out some of the key issues impacting on the Education Sector between now and 2030, and some proposed solutions.

We hope this will stimulate debate and a call for action within the Multi Academy Trust (MAT) network who have, over the past fifteen years, developed a strong, agile system that is focussed on quality improvement.



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