

# NGA insights:

Central leadership teams in multi academy trusts

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The expert organisation for school  
governors, trustees, clerks and  
other governance professionals

## Contents

<u>Executive Summary</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Introduction</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>1. The role of governance</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>2. The central leadership team</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>3. Approaches to central leadership</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>4. The evolution of central leadership</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>5. Implications for the local tier</u>	<u>18</u>
<u>6. Conclusions</u>	<u>19</u>

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## National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and clerks of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and clerks at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

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## Executive Summary

One of the specific challenges faced by multi academy trusts (MATs) is designing effective central leadership teams. Unlike standalone maintained schools and single academy trusts, MAT leadership teams have responsibility for a group of schools. This creates additional challenges and opportunities, leading to unique roles and staff leadership structures not seen elsewhere in the education sector. For trust boards, who have ultimate responsibility for agreeing the central structure, this creates a complex and challenging context to navigate.

This study is intended to support trust boards by reviewing existing practice in the sector and making constructive recommendations about how trusts can best tackle this issue. It sheds light on the different leadership structures and roles being used by MATs and how these structures and roles evolve over time. It also considers the different approaches taken by trust boards to reviewing and designing their central structure, including the challenge in balancing the influence of their trust's senior executive leader, while benefiting from their expertise.

The report is based on a series of detailed interviews with 13 MATs. We spoke to a range of key figures including chief executive officers, chief operating officers, trust chairs and governance managers/professionals. These interviews were complimented by an online review of a further 88 MATs, which focused on more general issues such as the size of their central teams and their constituent roles.

### Dominant trends

Our findings identified three dominant trends in the evolution of MAT central teams. These trends were visible both as trusts grew and as consolidating trusts matured:

- An internalisation of functions – multi academy trusts increasingly do more themselves rather than contracting to third parties.
- A centralisation of functions – away from the academy level and towards the central team.
- A specialisation of functions – trusts increasingly recruit to specialist, defined roles over the broad 'catch-all' roles which are symptomatic of younger and smaller trusts.

However, our study also found that trusts navigated and influenced this evolution in different ways, some more effectively than others. The trusts who were the most positive about the effectiveness of their central leadership structure explained how their structure was carefully considered by their trust board, who ensured it was forward-looking and shaped by the trust's context and strategic priorities. In contrast, those trusts who had concerns about the effectiveness of their central structures explained how their central teams were usually a product of reactive thinking, rather than forward planning. In these cases, central leadership teams often reflected a trust board's lack of confidence and knowledge in reviewing the central structure, or an excessive dependence on particular individuals such as the senior executive leader.

## Core conclusions

Based on the trends and varied practice identified, this study culminated in three core conclusions:

**Central leadership teams are emerging as powerful drivers for realising many benefits of trust wide collaboration.** This includes advantages such as bringing services in house, employing individuals with specialist expertise, and centralising functions so that knowledge and resources can be diverted to the areas of greatest need.

**Central team power and influence continues to contribute to ongoing tensions between individual school expression and trust control.** Discussions about the central team must therefore consider these tensions, seek to resolve them, and include engagement with key stakeholders at the local level.

**Governance practice in relation to designing and approving central leadership structures is inconsistent.** Fundamentally, there remains a lack of sector-wide knowledge and confidence around the issue of central teams. This is a problem as the potential benefits are not being realised, but it also provides an opportunity for trust boards to drive further improvement in their trusts.

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### NGA resources for MATs

NGA has an [unrivalled offer](#) for MATs, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning. This includes our [Welcome to a Multi Academy Trust handbook](#), and bespoke [consultancy support](#), such as external reviews of governance. We also have an array of guidance in our Knowledge Centre, including on the considerations for trust boards in agreeing [executive pay](#).

This study is the latest in a series of [research and insight](#) pieces which draw on our members' experiences to provide evidence and perspectives on current practice in the MAT sector.

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## Introduction

The emergence and growth of multi academy trusts (MATs) has brought significant change to the education sector. One area of evolution is the need for central leadership teams with responsibilities for the executive leadership, management and operation of a group of schools. This has necessitated the creation of new roles within the sector such as chief executive officers (CEOs) and chief operating officers (COOs).

For those governing in MATs, central leadership teams present both challenges and opportunities. As the legal employer and accountable body, the trust board is responsible for agreeing the structure of the central leadership team and for recruiting its most senior staff. However, our conversations with trusts found that a significant minority believed themselves to be “making it up as we go along” when it came to their central teams, while a majority expressed at least a lack of confidence and general uncertainty in handling this issue. For trust staff and volunteers who had previously worked or governed in the maintained sector, forming an effective central team across a group of schools was a new challenge. This was compounded by the fact the MAT sector is still maturing within a mixed economy of schools, with a shortage of established best practice and accepted frameworks. As such, this lack of confidence and uncertainty is certainly understandable.

In order to support trust boards, NGA is publishing this insight report on current practice in the sector and forthcoming guidance for boards on designing and adjusting their central teams. This report is based on our findings from a series of detailed interviews with 13 MATs. We spoke to CEOs, COOs, trust chairs, governance managers and stakeholders to gain a detailed understanding of the central teams in these trusts. We discussed how their central teams had been designed and evolved over time, and where trusts felt they were getting it right or wrong. These interviews were complemented by an online review of a further 88 MATs, which looked at the size of these trusts, the size of their central teams, and the roles which made up their central leadership.

## 1. The role of governance

*The trust board's role in agreeing the central team structure is vital and comes down to an understanding of the role of governance in relation to an often powerful and inspirational senior executive.*

As the legal employer, and accountable body, trust boards are responsible for agreeing the central leadership team structure, and directly appointing and managing its most senior members. However, our research found a variety of situations existing in practice, ranging from active trust boards who carefully review their structure and consider a range of possible options for improvement, to those who effectively 'rubber stamp' the decision of their senior executive leader.

The role of the senior executive leader (usually titled the CEO) is central to an understanding of the trust board's role. As the trust's lead professional and accounting officer, and the individual responsible for managing the central team and running the trust on a day-to-day basis, the views of this individual are pivotal. Ultimately, the senior leader's ability to lead and manage the central team effectively is a precondition for the success of the trust as a whole. However, the trust board retain overall accountability, and responsibility for setting the trust's strategic direction.

Our interviews presented a mixed picture. In a number of trusts, the trust board were prepared to sign-off the senior executive leader's proposed changes to the central leadership structure without significant discussion. However, we also saw other trusts where the trust board was actively involved in discussions about the central team, sometimes instigating conversations and carefully scrutinising any proposals from the senior executive leader. The perspective of the trusts' interviewed was that an involved board was valuable; however, many of the trusts with less active boards were aware this was not ideal and were keen to take steps to get their boards more involved. The message from interviewees was that a lack of discussion usually reflected the trust board's lack of confidence when talking about central structures, and in challenging a confident, and occasionally even dominant CEO, rather than an unwillingness to be involved.

Our findings confirmed that trust boards should be directly involved in decisions on designing and adapting the central leadership team structure. This is an area where a diverse board with appropriate expertise can exercise its employer responsibilities effectively as well as its responsibilities for strategic direction and financial management. The central team will usually take up a significant proportion of the trust's central budget, and its structure should reflect the trust's ethos and be a key resource in ensuring the trust is able to meet its strategic aims. Examples we saw included the appointing of a director for behaviour and inclusion, the strategic priorities of the trust in question, and another trust consciously building capacity to facilitate future growth, its long-term objective.

The trusts which were most positive about the effectiveness of their central leadership structure explained to us how their board tried to balance financial considerations, teaching and learning implications and underlying strategic goals when considering their central teams. In some cases, the creation of specific roles such as “chief people officer” were explained by specific reference to the trust’s values.

The central role that inspirational senior executive leaders play in the development and growth of a MAT can make challenge and scrutiny difficult for trust boards. While those governing should quite rightly respect the expertise of these leaders, using their views and direction as a starting point for board decision making, trustees are ultimately responsible for taking a longer-term perspective, looking beyond the leadership capabilities and personality of one individual, being mindful of succession planning. Our evidence indicates that strong trust boards consider not just what structure works for their current leader, but what structure is sustainable and will facilitate continued improvement as leaders come and go.

In our interviews, we heard some examples of the challenges trusts can face in replacing a senior executive leader if there has not been sufficient future-proofing of the trust’s structures. The trust board’s role in agreeing the central team structure is therefore vital and comes down to an understanding of the role of governance in relation to an often powerful and inspirational senior executive.

Those governing in the local tier will not be directly involved in discussions about the central leadership team. However, they will need to be kept informed as the support, scrutiny and accountability process for headteachers at the academy level will depend on the central leadership structure above them.

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## **NGA LearningLink**

NGA’s e-learning platform [LearningLink](#) includes an array of modules relevant for those governing in MATs. Our [Effective MAT Governance module](#) supports trusts in tackling the key issues in trust governance.

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## 2. The central leadership team

For this report, we defined the central leadership team to be those responsible for the management and operation of a group of schools within the trust, usually all of them. This differs them from academy-level leaders such as headteachers, although how the central team interact with these academy-level leaders is a key part of their role.

Our interviews highlighted that trusts regularly used the distinction between the “educational” and “non-educational” teams which make up their central team. This essentially divided the central leadership team into those with operational oversight for teaching and learning, and those with responsibility for the day-to-day, operational aspects of the trust’s financial, employment and compliance functions. Although this dichotomy is perhaps overly simplistic (given that, for example, finances and staffing are highly relevant when considering strategies for delivering teaching and learning), it does provide a simple framework for splitting the central team by their primary function, and it reflects the organisational structure used by the majority of trusts.

### 2.1 The senior executive leader

By definition, the senior executive leader is the most senior employee in the organisational hierarchy and is directly recruited and line-managed by the trust board. The senior executive leader will in turn manage the trust’s most senior executives and, often in smaller trusts, all the headteachers. As such, the senior executive leader carries the responsibility for the trust’s day-to-day management, in terms of both teaching and learning, and financial and business functions. They should also be appointed, in writing, as the trust’s accounting officer. This essentially means taking on a personal responsibility to both parliament and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) for the trust’s financial matters.

Our research found that the most common title given to the senior executive leader was that of Chief Executive Officer (CEO). This was particularly common in larger trusts. Other titles included ‘executive headteacher’ and ‘executive principal’, with these being particularly common in smaller trusts, and ‘CSEL’ (Catholic senior executive leader) in Catholic trusts. Where the ‘executive head’ or ‘executive principal’ title was used rather than CEO, the role was more likely to be part-time and combined with being headteacher in one of the trust’s schools.

Through all of our interviews, the importance of the senior executive leader to the central leadership structure was evident. In part, this was tied to their role in proposing changes to the structure, as previously discussed. However, the evolution of the senior executive role itself, in terms of its responsibilities, was an integral feature of the ongoing evolution of trusts’ central teams. When implemented effectively, changes to the senior executive leader role were discussed and agreed proactively and reflected the trust’s wider strategic plans.



## 2.2 Educational roles

The 'educational' or 'teaching and learning' central team is the area in which we found the most variety in practice. In some trusts, especially the smallest ones, these roles did not exist. The senior executive leaders directly managed academy-level headteachers, or heads of schools, and there was no other central support for teaching and learning. However, the vast majority of medium or large trusts (those with around six or more schools, or a high number of pupils) did have roles of this kind, with an array of role titles and remits.

Central educational roles included phase directors (of primary or secondary), and regional directors (usually focused on a specific trust hub). These roles provide a tier in the organisational hierarchy between the senior executive leader and the headteachers. Usually, the senior executive leader manages the directors, who in turn manage the headteachers or heads of schools. However, this was not always the case, with some senior executives managing both directors, and headteachers, in sometimes unsustainable quantities.

Other examples we came across of trust-wide roles included directors of school improvement or education, and subject area leads. Directors of school improvement or education were generally explained to us as focusing their energies where it was needed most, for example schools which were new to the trust, or which were underperforming. Again, we saw scenarios where these directors managed headteachers, and others where the senior executive leader still handled direct management, and the director role was more around providing support and advice.

The creation of these roles was generally explained to us as arising from the trust's specific circumstances. One trust described the trust board's insistence on recruiting a specialist secondary director as being driven by the first secondary schools joining the trust and the CEO's background being only in primary schools. Another common influence was trust growth, and the resultant point at which it was no longer sustainable for the senior executive leader to manage all headteachers themselves, so an additional tier in the organisational hierarchy was required. The tipping point appeared to be reached around the points that trusts grew to between six and 10 schools in size, and so had the same number of headteachers. However, stipulating a definitive tipping point is impossible as the size of the respective schools is also relevant. Trusts with more pupils per school (usually secondaries) reached this tipping point sooner as their central team was already larger, with the CEO usually managing more staff in finance, business and governance roles.

## 2.3 Finance, business and governance roles

The other side of the central team is those roles with responsibilities for the trust's operation as an employer and charitable company. Many trusts described this aspect of the central team as "non-educational". However, despite the fact these roles are not directly concerned with teaching and learning, their responsibilities do ultimately have a significant impact on educational attainment. Indeed, one CEO explained to us that they see their central team as beginning with the finance and compliance roles, as these provide the solid foundation upon which teaching and learning could be improved.

The most senior non-educational role is usually titled the chief financial officer (CFO) or chief operating officer (COO). The [Academy Trust Handbook](#) specifies that in all trusts, the board must appoint a chief financial officer who is the trust's finance director. The CFO or alternative has both a "technical and leadership role", and needs to be appropriately qualified. In practice, the title of this role varies across the sector and will often be the COO. In a literal sense, the COO would be expected to have a wider remit than the CFO, focusing on all operating matters rather than purely finance. However, in practice, we found the titles used interchangeably, with CFOs and COOs often having identical functions with both leading the "non-educational" side of the central leadership team. The only clear separation between the CFO and COO roles came in the small proportion of trusts which employ both, with the CFO handling finance, and the COO responsible for other business functions such as human resources (HR), data protection and health and safety.

The key operational functions of this side of the central team usually include financial management, procurement, data protection, safeguarding, HR, estates, IT, health and safety, and governance. We saw examples of executive directors or managers with specific responsibility for each of these functions and also many cases of executive directors or managers with responsibility for a number of these issues. Quite often, this means individuals with a background in a specific area, for example governance or finance, taking on additional functions to fill any gaps in the trust's operational management. As trusts grow, central teams get larger, allowing for greater role specialisation, and for more of these functions to be brought "in house". As such, this half of the trust's central leadership probably provides the clearest examples of how the central structure can be the basis for delivering many of the widely discussed benefits of collaboration between schools.

### 3. Approaches to central leadership

*One of the key signs of effective trust boards is those who consider their central team structure to be continuously evolving rather than static. In these trusts, the central team structure is understood as being based on the trust's current context and challenges, with an awareness that changes to that context necessitate further changes to the central team.*

When considering trusts' existing approaches to reviewing and designing their central teams, our key finding was that there is no single consistent or dominant method. As already discussed, we saw a range of examples of the trust board's role relative to the senior executive leader. However, whoever was driving the process, there was also significant variety in when the central leadership structure was considered, and how this featured in wider discussions about the trust's strategic direction.

From our interviews, the trusts which were most positive about the effectiveness of their central leadership structure were those that planned ahead, while those who lacked confidence in their structure generally explained their decisions as reacting to problems as and when they arose. For the more effective trusts, this meant discussing changes to the central team alongside conversations about their vision for the trust and its strategic direction. Other useful triggers included taking the opportunity when staff moved on to evaluate the structure and consider whether any changes were needed, which would then shape the subsequent recruitment process. In contrast, in less effective trusts, the trigger tended to be problems arising, resulting in changes being made to the central team on a "firefighting" basis rather than as a product of forward-planning.

This study showed that one of the key signs of effective trust boards appears to be those who consider their central team structure to be continuously evolving rather than static. In these trusts, the central team structure is understood as being based on the trust's current context and challenges, with an awareness that changes to that context necessitate further changes to the central team. One trust explained to us that, after a period of growth, their priority was to get all schools to Ofsted "good", and they had a temporary structure in order to achieve this as quickly as possible. They were, however, already planning for how the central team would evolve in what they envisioned to be the subsequent consolidation phase.

However, a key limitation for all trusts is finances. We came across a number of trusts who had a clear vision for trust growth and the evolution of their central team, but explained that they needed to grow first to fund their desired changes to the central team. This can limit the ability of trusts to be proactive and build capacity for future change. Even in these situations, we still identified a clear difference between the trusts who grew with a clear-sighted vision of what this would mean for their central team and those who grew first and only considered the implications later. It is the former who appear to be more likely to navigate change successfully.

The final key consideration in approaching central leadership structures is succession planning. Even in the most forward-thinking trusts, discussions can still run the risk of relying on an implicit assumption that their influential senior executive leader, often in place since the trust's creation, will remain in post. However, leadership succession is inevitable, and the trust needs to be confident that its structure will be sustainable when this occurs. For trust boards and senior leaders, this requires the difficult task of considering their trust without the individual with whom the trust is often so heavily identified with, both publicly and internally. Once again, this reflects the importance of understanding both the opportunities and risks posed by having an exceptionally influential senior executive leader.

## 4. The evolution of central leadership

*The trajectory of the vast majority of trusts is clear: towards larger and more influential central leadership teams*

One of the key themes which came out of this study was the evolution of central teams. Those we spoke to described a journey of change which brought them to their current structure, and often a clear set of plans and priorities for future change. This continual evolution is unique to MAT central teams, differentiating them from the central teams in maintained schools or single academy trusts.

One of the most important explanations is the continual growth, and in some cases mergers, of MATs. As MATs expand, the demands on the central team change, requiring further evolution. Simultaneously, growth provides additional financial resources which can be used to fund expansion of the central team. However, we found that time and so the maturity of a trust also explain the evolution of central teams. Even in trusts which had not grown recently, and did not plan growth in the near future, their central teams are still in a process of ongoing refinement.

Our research identified two major explanations for this. Firstly, understanding and practice is still developing with the continuing emergence and maturing of the academy system. There is still no settled framework for what best practice looks like, so trusts continue to pioneer new ideas, learn from looking at colleagues, and react to their own trials, errors and successes. Further complicating matters is the fact that no two MATs are identical, so trusts are forced to adapt to not only an emerging national context, but also their own unique geography, size and organisational ethos. This notion of trusts "navigating in the dark" or "making it up as they go along" shone through in many of our interviews and seemed to be vital in understanding why central teams continue to evolve.

Second, the age of a MATs is highly relevant. Even though the notion of a multi academy trust is relatively new, the majority of the schools and people in them have a longer history. Many trusts explained their central leadership structures not as a construction on a blank sheet of paper, but as a question of how best to deploy and complement existing employees. One of the most common examples we heard was how central financial management structures were shaped by whether school business managers pre-existed the trust at the academy level.

Those sitting on the local tier (local governing boards (LGBs)/academy committees) and headteachers are also a key factor. Many trusts emphasised the difference between local governors and headteachers who previously led an autonomous maintained school, and may have been reluctant or forced to academise, and new LGB members and heads of schools who were brought in after academisation and had “signed up” to the trust structure and ethos. In these ways, the maturing of a MAT and natural turnover in personnel facilitate evolution in the central team structure, even if the trust as a whole chooses not to grow.

As such, the ongoing evolution of trust central leadership structures can be explained by both growth in the size of some MATs, and also the growing maturity of individual MATs and the multi academy trust sector as a whole. In this evolution, our research detected three fundamental trends. As always, there were exceptions, but the trajectory of the vast majority of trusts is clear:

- An **internalisation** of functions – multi academy trusts increasingly do more themselves rather than contracting to third parties.
- A **centralisation** of functions, away from the academy level and towards the central team.
- A **specialisation** of functions, trusts increasingly recruit to specialist, defined roles over the broad “catch-all” roles which are symptomatic of younger and smaller trusts.

All of these trends drive a move towards larger and more influential central leadership teams.

#### **4.1 Internalisation**

One of the dominant trends of central team evolution is the internalisation of key functions. This means bringing functions ‘in house’, and carrying them out as a trust, rather than contracting them out to third parties. In practice, carrying out functions as a trust means that they will be handled or managed by the central leadership team. In so doing, trusts can gain greater control over these functions, and potentially improve their efficiency and effectiveness. This reflects the increased centralisation within MATs more generally across the sector, particularly once trusts get beyond a certain size and are able to invest more money in a central team.

One of the most common areas where we saw evidence of internalisation was in HR. Our research found that HR is an area which is nearly always contracted out to an expert third party by the smallest trusts but is handled internally in the largest trusts. We spoke to two trusts who had recently managed to bring their HR in house, and another two trusts who saw internalising their HR provision as their trust central team’s “next step” in its development.

For all of these trusts, the main benefits to be gained from bringing the service in house are improved effectiveness and efficiency. They see internal HR provision as enabling them to better embed their trust's values and ethos in HR operations, and so realise their ambitions as an employer. They also feel that handling HR internally improves the speed and accuracy of HR services. Trusts explained that relying on an external service sometimes led to delays, or inaccuracies where information was lost in translation or advisors were unfamiliar with the trust's specific policies and processes. Internal provision allows the trust to prioritise what matters to them and ensures that the HR professional (eg, a HR director or manager) are experts in the trust's culture and policies.

These same principles apply to the other areas where central team functions can be internalised. Bringing functions in house will not always improve provision – sometimes an external perspective can be valuable, but there are clear opportunities for the trust to benefit if it can identify and afford to build sufficient internal capacity. Other examples identified in our interviews included developing an internal clerking team, and moving from external school improvement advisers to the trust's own improvement leads. We also saw examples of replacing externally contracted provision in catering, data protection, estates, IT and payroll. Again, internal provision can prioritise what matters most to the trust and ensure the service is adapted to the trust's needs.

## 4.2 Centralisation

Another dominant trend in central team evolution was the gradual centralisation of key functions and processes. In other words, an increasing number of functions and processes are carried out and determined by the trust's central leadership team rather than those operating within individual academies. This is an area which has provoked significant debate, both within trusts and across the sector, as trusts battle to find the right balance between delegation and control. However, as our recent report [MATs Moving Forwards: the power of governance](#) argued, centralisation of functions does not have to come at the expense of local expression and flexibility. Ultimately, there are both opportunities and challenges to centralising functions, and so the focus should be on centralising for the right reasons, while retaining the benefits of [local knowledge](#).

The message from this research is clear: trusts are gradually centralising functions as they mature and grow, and this has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While we saw very different MAT models, with some highly centralised and others very much decentralised, the direction of travel for almost all of those interviewed was towards a greater centralisation of functions at the trust level, increasing the central team's responsibilities. Indeed, one of the most striking findings from our interviews was that nearly all trusts saw centralisation as something which would happen as their trusts grew and aged. There was, however, a notable divide between trusts with a clear idea of what that centralisation would look like and, crucially, how it would benefit the trust, and other trust leaders who discussed centralisation as an inevitability without being able to articulate how and why it would improve their trusts.

One of the most common areas where we saw a push towards centralisation was in finance. A number of trusts described a gradual move away from academy-level financial management towards trust-wide decision-making. In terms of the central leadership team, this means the replacement of academy-level school business managers with finance-focused roles in the central teams. Again, job titles vary based on trust preferences, but one common model was a team of central finance managers who were managed by the COO or CFO.

Another common area of growing centralisation is in regard to curriculum alignment across the trust, via subject leads. In the smallest trusts, we found that individual academies often still have control over their curriculum, with no trust-wide direction or subject leads. This often develops into a focus on collaboration and sharing best practice, while leaving final decisions to individual academies. To facilitate this, we encountered a number of trusts who had named trust-wide subject leads, but these individuals are usually still teaching in their 'home' academy, with the "subject lead" role being an area of additional responsibility focused on co-ordinating and sharing knowledge and skills across the trust. The final stage in this centralisation is the alignment of the curriculum across the trust. Our interviews suggested this was usually facilitated by subject leads working from the centre and focused on curriculum development rather than teaching themselves. Again, the evolution and growth of the central team is accompanied by centralisation.

An interesting phenomenon identified through our interviews was the extent to which centralisation can be a self-fulfilling and self-reinforcing process, with the central team's evolution acting as both a driver of centralisation and a consequence. Trusts explained to us that the growth of the central team necessitated and therefore accelerated standardisation and alignment of academy-level processes. In their view, the central team (particularly a central finance director or HR manager) could not do their job effectively if every academy has its own systems such as different software, reporting mechanisms, policies and procedures, and so there is a necessity to align these across all the schools in the trust. In so doing, the growth and evolution of the central team, the usual consequence of MATs growing or maturing as already discussed, can in turn incentivise greater centralisation and so further growth in the central team. For trust boards, there is a need to be aware of this dynamic so they can take control of this evolution and shape it towards achieving their trust's strategic vision, rather than being passive participants in the process.

### 4.3 Specialisation

The final trend we identified as accompanying central team evolution was the specialisation of roles. In our interviews with smaller and younger trusts, we identified a number of central team members with ‘catch-all’ roles: broad job descriptions which expand to cover whatever the trust needs to be managed, often departing from the employee’s specialisms. This is especially common in the “non-educational” side of the central leadership team where, for example, those with a background in finance sometimes took on a role which covered health and safety or governance too. As trusts grow and age, we noted an increasing specialisation in central team roles. Indeed, some trusts interviewed identified specialisation as a key goal to be achieved.

Specialisation in the “non-educational” side of the organisation, with the replacement of “catch all” roles by those with specialist knowledge and professional qualifications, has the potential to significantly improve the service provided. Often, this means replacing a general “operations” or “business” position with specific roles focusing on finance, data protection, HR, safeguarding etc. One example we came across was a ‘central support manager’ evolving to becoming a ‘head of HR and governance’. However, it can also mean a move away from staff who hold a substantive post at an individual academy (often the trust’s largest or sponsor school) to a trust-wide role. As central teams evolve, there is a trend towards these dual-roles being replaced by a single, specialised trust-wide position.

The other key area of evolution towards more defined and specific positions is the role of the senior executive leader. In smaller and younger trusts, we came across senior executive leaders whose role was part-time, and often held alongside a substantive headship role at one of the individual academies within the trust. This could lead naturally to a greater focus on the teaching and learning side of the trust, rather than its finance, business and governance functions.

As the central team evolved, we found the senior executive leader role usually became a full-time position, leaving behind school or academy headship. In medium to large trusts, the role then evolved even further, with the senior executive leader no longer managing every headteacher; instead, a new tier is created with, for example, regional or phase directors who manage the headteachers. This often facilitated a transition to a more strategic, less operational role, with a more balanced focus on all sides of the organisation. Interestingly, we have encountered some senior executive leaders without an educational background, part of a sector wide trend also seen in some Regional School Commissioners.

This evolution of the senior executive leader role was often reflected in a switch from a title of “executive headteacher” to CEO. However, a change in job title is only significant if accompanied by a change in behaviour. One CEO was keen to tell us that they still thought of themselves as an executive head, and tried to act as one, despite their formal title changing.



It is clear that understanding the evolution of the senior executive leader role requires an awareness of the characteristics of those who make up trusts. The often part-time and dual role held by the senior executive leader in smaller and younger trusts tends to be tied to the dynamics around the transition from single schools to a MAT. Trusts explained to us that this less specialised role was a product of, first, the importance of reassuring the schools joining the trust, especially their headteachers, that they would continue to enjoy some freedoms while part of the trust; in other words that this was not a trust which sought to subsume the identity of individual schools with alien line management arrangements.

Second, the individual senior executive leaders themselves can be unwilling to let go of their headship role. We spoke to a number of CEOs who explained their reluctance to take on the role full-time, partly due to their emotional connection to a particular school (often one they had led prior to academisation) and partly as a result of their professional background which had started in teaching, and then progressed through the leadership tiers. The CEOs we spoke with explained how they valued simple things like “walking the corridors”, and day-to-day interactions with pupils. This therefore created an instinctive unwillingness to see their role evolve to the more “hands-off” senior executive position which is a feature of the larger and more established MATs. Trusts explained to us that this evolution usually only happens through necessity, when the demands of the senior executive role left no alternative other than it becoming a distinct full-time position.

For trust boards, the trend towards more specialised and distinct roles raises a number of aspects to consider. It can deliver important benefits to the trust if done effectively, providing some key efficiency gains. However, especially in regard to the senior executive leader role, there is often a reluctance to move to a more distinct role. As the accountable body and employer, it therefore falls on the trust board, as the key driver of the trust’s vision and strategy, to drive this process and so ensure that the trust is secure and sustainable. Acknowledging the challenges associated with this leads to a proactive approach which is more likely to ensure changes happen at the right time for the benefits to be realised. Waiting until problems arise, such as the senior executive leader being unable to carry out their role effectively because they also lead an academy and their workload is too much, or because they are directly managing too many executives or headteachers to oversee them all effectively, leads to specialising too late.

It is the really effective trust board that plans ahead, is willing to have tough conversations when necessary and thinks carefully about the demands of every role when recruiting. This approach can best drive improvement and even explore innovative practice such as employing a MAT CEO who does not have a teaching background.

## 5. Implications for the local tier

*“Local governance within MATs has resisted any suggestion of its demise. The pandemic has galvanised a fresh approach to the local tier and many trusts are increasingly exploring how they use it as a vehicle for bridging the gap between trust board decision making and the communities they serve.” (NGA’s MATs Moving Forward: The Power of Governance, 2021)*

The evolution of the central leadership team as the trust matures and grows has implications for those governing and working at the academy-level – a key element of effective MAT governance. The centralisation of functions towards the central team alters the responsibilities at the local level. One of the clearest examples of this is in regard to the management of academy headteachers or heads of school. As a standalone school, the headteacher would be managed by the school’s governing board. However, in the vast majority of trusts interviewed, the headteacher is now managed by a central executive team member, usually the senior executive leader in medium sized trusts, and, in larger trusts, executive directors of education. The only exception we came across was in the smallest trust interviewed (three schools), where the local tier still managed their own headteachers, a model which has now been all but phased out.

The introduction of executive line management structures – as is now generally seen as a requirement in MATs – has in the past left headteachers looking in two directions in terms of accountability: to their line managers and to their academy committees/councils. But as this study shows, the traditional headteacher/governing board dynamics have now conclusively altered within a MAT, due to the expanding role of a trust senior executive leader and their team. Similar examples of centralisation removing functions from the local level can be seen in areas such as curriculum alignment and the centralisation of finance functions. This process alters the focus and demands on the local tier but does not make it irrelevant.

In our conversations, we asked trusts to explain how their local tier had evolved in response to these changes to the central team, and so the local tier’s role in accountability. We asked how, when the trust employed directors of school improvement at the trust level with a responsibility for curriculum and standards, this changed the local tier’s role in these areas. Similarly, we asked how, when the trust centralised financial management and scrutiny, did the local tier’s role change in response. In many cases the answer was that it did not change, and local tiers continued with their original remit. Some interviewees explained that they are choosing to “avoid the battle” of trying to change the remit of the local tiers, rather than engaging with the local tier and designing a new role. This stems from a desire not to exacerbate the existing tensions between local expression and central control.

The consequences of this failure to engage were local tiers duplicating work being done by central leadership team members, without any internal procedures for feeding in their discussions to the central team. Therefore, because the trust had not thought to change their remit or had consciously decided to avoid making formal changes, the local tier’s time was being used inefficiently. This meant its focus on the areas where it could contribute to effective governance, such as stakeholder engagement, was reduced.

## 6. Conclusions

**Central leadership teams are emerging as powerful drivers for realising many benefits of trust wide collaboration.** The evolution of the central team allows functions to be brought in house; knowledge and resources to be diverted to the areas of greatest need; and those with specialist expertise to be employed. However, achieving these benefits is not inevitable, and requires the trust board to be proactive, to plan ahead and, in particular, to balance drawing on the senior executive leader's knowledge and experience with taking the decisions necessary to secure the trust in the best interests of the pupils it serves.

**Central team powers and influence continue to contribute to ongoing tensions between individual school expression and trust control.** Centralisation of functions and processes can drive the growth of the central team, and in turn this growth can lead to further centralisation. If trust boards are to shape this evolution successfully, they must consider both the efficiency and effectiveness of their central structure, and the attitudes and perceptions of those employed and governing within the trust. Too often, trust boards are avoiding difficult conversations with senior executive leaders, heads of schools and the local governance tier. The consequences are duplication, inefficiencies, and a lack of buy-in when changes do occur.

**Governance practice in relation to designing and approving central leadership structures is inconsistent.** Examples of long-term strategic planning are evident, but so is evidence of reactive decision-making where problems are mitigated rather than foreseen. This reflects both a lack of knowledge and confidence in designing central leadership teams. MATs, and the MAT sector as a whole, is still maturing as is evident by the absence of accepted best practice and shared frameworks. This inconsistency is a problem as many of the benefits of collaboration are not being realised which is hampering trust improvement and therefore better outcomes for pupils.

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