



Department
for Education

Evaluation of the Regional Academy Growth Fund (RAGF)

Research report - November 2018

CooperGibson Research



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Glossary

CIF – Condition Improvement Fund

ESFA – Education and Skills Funding Agency

MAT – Multi-Academy Trust

MDIF – MAT Development and Improvement Fund

PSBP – Priority Schools Building Programme

RAGF – Regional Academy Growth Fund

SCF – Sponsor Capacity Fund

SSIF – Strategic School Improvement Fund

TLIF – Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund

Executive Summary

DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research (CGR) to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the Regional Academy Growth Fund (RAGF), to inform deeper understanding of the execution of RAGF, the outcomes of which could be used to inform the delivery of future funding strategies.

Methodology

In order to explore perceptions and experience of RAGF, a qualitative methodology was employed.

- 44 in-depth telephone interviews carried out with 71 individuals across MATs in England. These individuals undertook a range of roles including: Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Chief Operating Officer (COO).
- Site visits to five academy sites, involving face-to-face interviews with 17 individuals.
- Three telephone interviews with officials from regional DfE teams.
- Seven telephone interviews with representatives from MATs that were unsuccessful in their RAGF bids.

MATs participating in the fieldwork represented all Regional School Commissioner (RSC) regions and the three RAGF funding streams. Additional detail on the methodology and respondent sample can be found in section 1 of the main report.

Applying for RAGF

MATs participating in the fieldwork had applied most commonly via the Sponsor Capacity and MAT Growth funding streams; the majority received between £50,000 and £100,000.

Key aims of applying for RAGF funding, regardless of the stream, were related to recruitment and staffing (strengthening capacity/leadership), training (across all staff levels including CEOs, and for trustees and governors), installing infrastructure (such as new computer systems and hardware) and strengthening governance arrangements (to standardise approaches and ensure compliance).

Implementation of funding

Generally, participants felt that they had spent the RAGF award in accordance with initial plans, and the majority reported that they had achieved the aims set out during the application process. Almost all participants reported that the first activity undertaken was the appointment of key personnel. Other activities, such as developing leadership and

creating centralised processes and systems, then followed. Strengthening governance structures, including ensuring trust-wide compliance and consistency, was regarded as important by several interviewees. Several MATs noted that their activities would not have been undertaken without RAGF, or that progress towards improvement and/or growth would have been slower without it.

Many participants felt that 12 months had been adequate for implementing discrete activities such as recruitment and installing infrastructure, however they commonly stated that this did not provide enough time to demonstrate evidence of impact, or to expand the MAT as much as had been initially anticipated.

The level of support received from regional DfE teams was felt to be a factor in working successfully to the timescales. This included continual dialogue with regional DfE teams regarding the schools that are joining a MAT to ensure that there is clear communication about the issues that need to be addressed.

Disadvantaged cohorts

Where participants identified an impact of RAGF activities on disadvantaged pupils, this was commonly in relation to the installation of data tracking and progress monitoring/planning systems. It was felt that this had enabled schools to have a more informed view of pupil progress, so that interventions could be better targeted and applied more effectively according to specific pupil needs.

Several participants reported that they had focused on all cohorts with RAGF and were using MDIF funding to work specifically on improvements for disadvantaged pupils.¹ Consequently, they felt that RAGF had enabled them to create a foundation upon which to base this more focused work with specific cohorts.

Perceived impact

Overall, participants reported that they had made good progress against school improvement targets during the delivery of RAGF activities. Although most participants felt that this progress would have been made anyway, RAGF had made the rate of progress quicker. It was generally perceived as being too early to provide definitive evidence of impact against KPIs relating to outcomes data, attainment and progress. However, examples given related to schools' ability to monitor data more closely and the recruitment of additional staff increasing MAT expertise and capacity for improvement. Several participants felt that RAGF had enabled senior leaders to focus on teaching and

¹ Assessment criteria for MDIF applications included consideration of 'how your plans will improve the attainment outcomes and opportunities for disadvantaged pupils'. See: DfE, 'Apply to the MAT Development and Improvement Fund', <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-to-the-mat-development-and-improvement-fund#assessment-criteria>

learning, or for CEOs to have more capacity to provide strategic leadership and oversight, as core teams had been put in place to support business-focused functions.

Across all three funding streams participants commonly reported that the appointment of new personnel in key roles was the most effective of the individual activities funded through RAGF. Reasons given included increased capacity and developing expertise in a range of areas including facilities management, safeguarding, financial management, human resources (HR) and data management.

Sustainability

All participants said that activities implemented through RAGF were continuing. There were common reports that RAGF had ‘kick-started’ pre-existing plans and had ‘got the ball rolling’ in terms of enabling staffing appointments or the installation of new software. A small number of MATs were concerned about financial viability in the longer-term, for example where they had not grown as much as anticipated. There was a general sense among participants that school improvement takes time and for many MATs this meant between two and four years. As a result, it was noted by some that sustainability needed to be considered to ensure that activities designed during funding applications (or posts recruited as part of the programme) could continue.

Taking on and supporting additional schools

Regional DfE teams felt that where some trusts had anticipated taking on three or more schools in twelve months, this had been a considerable challenge. They perceived that trusts’ plans for growth had been overly ambitious in some cases and had not always taken into account the potential for complex issues to come to light during due diligence/conversion processes. It was subsequently challenging for trusts to evidence impact of RAGF if the KPIs for funding had focused narrowly on growth plans. This had led some regional DfE team representatives to identify the potential for more tailored KPIs that would focus on school improvement and building capacity and expertise so as to enable growth and sustainability in the future.²

RAGF compared to other funding streams

Overall, participants reported that RAGF was easier to apply for than MAT Development and Improvement Fund (MDIF), and they appreciated the flexibility of RAGF in terms of the types of activity covered and the potential range of impact of those activities across more than one school.

² Assessment criteria for MDIF focused specifically on school improvement and building capacity. See: DfE, ‘Apply to the MAT Development and Improvement Fund’, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-to-the-mat-development-and-improvement-fund#assessment-criteria>

Unsuccessful applicants

Of the seven MATs interviewed that were unsuccessful in their RAGF bid, most were surprised that they had not received funding through RAGF. Several said that they would have appreciated being informed of a reason why their bids were not successful, so that they could learn for future attempts. They requested more clarity and transparency in the process for selecting successful bidders and allocating funding.

Lessons learned

Overall, participants reported that they would not have approached RAGF differently. There were several comments as to how positive the experience of RAGF had been, from the application through to implementation, and participants noted their appreciation.

In terms of preferred models of funding delivery responses were mixed, although a preference towards an annual fund was slightly more common. Several interviewees reported that the most appropriate funding model depended on the context and setting. One-off or discrete funding was perceived to be useful in circumstances where specific investments for improvement were identified (e.g. training and installation of software). However, if a MAT was taking on an underperforming school or creating a new hub/cluster, it was felt that funding on a rolling basis (generally over three-to-five years) would help to improve and support schools so as to establish the sustainability of a hub.

Supporting underperforming schools

When asked what support was required for MATs to take on and improve underperforming schools, participants offered a wide range of suggestions. The most common were:

- Having the capacity and expertise to focus on school improvement, particularly at leadership level.
- Funding to assist with improving facilities, conversion costs, implementing infrastructure and curriculum resources.
- Ensuring tight due diligence and effective brokerage processes.

Conclusions

Overall, perceptions and experiences of RAGF among successful applicants were very positive. Perceptions are that RAGF awards have supported growth and a range of activities that have enabled progress against school improvement targets. Where growth has not taken place or has been slower than expected, the awards have enabled trusts to build capacity for future expansion and development. This was felt to be an important and

valuable outcome of the fund. A small number of participating MATs felt that they had not made as much progress as they would have wished, particularly in relation to growth. Plans for growth had been a considerable challenge for some and may have been too narrowly focused. Regional DfE teams suggested that KPIs could be tailored to take into account the range of activities focused on supporting and building capacity, rather than number of schools taken on. The majority of participants who had received funding reported that they had achieved their initial aims during the delivery of RAGF activities.

For the majority, the most effective activity implemented via RAGF had been the recruitment of key personnel. This was often related to the need to either strengthen capacity of leadership (including CEOs), strengthen governance or develop central systems to support operational functions. These were seen as priorities to enable MATs to grow and develop with suitable compliance, policies and procedures in place. This process was particularly important as trusts developed beyond three or four academies in size.

The need to ensure sustainability and building capacity for growth and improvement was clear throughout discussions. Several had used the RAGF award to ensure that they were growing sustainably, e.g. improving due diligence processes to ensure they were fully aware of potential risks to the trust. The balance between growth and school improvement was important and the two were seen as being interrelated.

Several participants felt that the appropriate model for funding delivery was dependent on context and setting. The availability of discrete annual funds was felt to be more appropriate for clearly defined individual activities, with set points for awards to aid planning and bid development. Funding offered on a rolling basis was reported as preferable for longer-term projects such as the development of a hub/cluster over three-to-five years.

1. Introduction

In 2016-17, Regional Academy Growth Fund (RAGF) funding was awarded to 350 academy trusts. Its aim was to support and help the best and most successful trusts to grow and to improve standards in underperforming schools. This replaced the Sponsor Capacity Fund.

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned CooperGibson Research (CGR) to conduct a qualitative evaluation of RAGF, to inform deeper understanding of the execution of the fund and to understand the experiences of trusts in their RAGF application and decision-making processes, as well as the use and effectiveness of funding. The outcomes of this evaluation will inform the successful delivery of future funding strategies.

1.1 Aims

The project aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of multi-academy trusts (MATs) in applying for, and delivering activities through, the Regional Academy Growth Fund.

1.2 Objectives

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

- Identify and understand the decision-making process within the trust; the source of funding awareness, the application process, the level and stream of funding applied for and decisions relating to the proposed allocation of funds.
- Explore any differences in the planned versus actual use of funds.
- Identify evidence of the impact of the funding, including the utility of the trust's key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure progress.
- Understand perceptions and experience of RAGF versus other available funding opportunities.
- Identify any challenges, lessons learned and suggested improvements to the RAGF funding model.
- Explore any differences relating to RAGF funding streams or trust characteristics.

1.3 Methodology

In order to explore perceptions and experiences of RAGF, a qualitative methodology was employed. 44 in-depth telephone interviews were carried out with 71 individuals across MATs in England, as well as five academy visits involving 17 individuals. In addition, three regional DfE teams were interviewed by telephone, and seven telephone interviews were carried out with representatives from MATs that had been unsuccessful in their RAGF bids.

Further details on the methodology and participant sample are provided below.

Initial contact

Working from a DfE database of 119 trust contacts, 10 trusts were removed from the main sample and used to trial the interview topic guide. The trial ensured that research instruments were clear and concise, and to identify any issues and make the necessary changes. From the remaining 109 contacts, trusts were split into the eight RSC regions to ensure representation from all during the main fieldwork.

An introductory email was sent to all trusts by the DfE to either the trust Chief Executive or Executive Headteacher (whoever had been the main contact with responsibility for the RAGF application), outlining the purpose, aims and approach for the research. This was followed up by an email from CGR that included further details and asked them to support the evaluation by allowing the research team to speak to two members of the trust who had been involved with the RAGF decision-making processes, application and activity planning.

Telephone interviews

In-depth telephone interviews lasting 45-60 minutes were conducted with two individuals per trust to provide a holistic view of the trust's experience with RAGF. These individuals were typically the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), or Chief Operating Officer (COO), or occasionally others such as Academy Head and Finance/Business Manager. Liaising with trusts determined the most suitable individuals to engage with since the structure of trusts can be variable, particularly with different size MATs.

In total, 35 trusts participated in the interviews, consisting of 44 interviews and 71 interviewees (see Table 1, section 1.4).

In addition, seven telephone interviews were carried out with academy trusts not successful in obtaining funding, primarily to explore their views of the fund, experiences of the application process and how they have managed capacity building and expansion.

Telephone interviews were also carried out with officials from three regional DfE teams to discuss their experience of administering RAGF, what they felt it had achieved, key learning outcomes and perceived longer-term impact. The three interviews with regional DfE teams involved seven individuals who oversaw RAGF delivery (including the assessment process for applications and monitoring progress) as well as those responsible for broader MAT strategy within the region.

Visits

The face-to-face visits allowed focus groups/group consultation to take place, where more than two staff members who were involved in the fund application and implementation process participated. Five visits were completed, involving seventeen participants, which covered RSC regions across the country. Two further trusts agreed to visits but could not accommodate this until early June 2018, when the fieldwork period had completed.

1.4 Sample of participants

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the main fieldwork participants (telephone interviews and site visits with successful RAGF applicants).

Table 1: Interview participants by job role

Job role	Number of participants (telephone interviews)	Number of participants (site visits)
CEO	29	4
CFO	16	3
COO	7	2
Finance Executive/ Director/ Manager	4	0
Director of Finance and Operations	2	0
Business Director	2	0
Senior Regional Director	0	2
Deputy CEO	1	0
CEO/Headteacher	1	0
Head of Operations/Finance	1	0
Standards & Finance Officer	1	0
Finance and HR Director	1	0
Director of Resources	1	0
Academy Support Officer	1	0
MAT Executive Director	1	0
Interim Executive Head	1	0
Deputy Director of Education	1	0
MAT Business Manager	1	0
CEO/Accounting Officer	0	1
Academy Head	0	1
Leader/Director of Governance	0	2
Learning and Achievement Director	0	1
Education Consultant	0	1
Total	71	17

Most MATs involved in the fieldwork were school-led trusts, but a range of other types of organisation were included in the sample of trusts consulted (Table 2).

Table 2: Participating MATs by organisation type

Type of organisation	Total
School-led trusts	23
Business Sector	1
Charitable Sector	2
Diocese/Archdiocese	8
Education Business	2
FE Sector	1
Prospective Academy Converter	1
N/A	2
Total	40

In terms of the size of academy involved in the fieldwork, there was one academy currently in the process of being established, three small MATs (1-2 schools), 22 medium MATs (3 – 10 schools) and 14 large MATs (over 10 schools).

1.5 Scope of this report

When reading this report, please note the following:

- References to regions in the report refer to the RSC regions.³
- The range of bids and awards being made simultaneously, or in close succession to one another, created some degree of uncertainty among a small number of participants as to which bid they were recalling when they provided their feedback. Where this occurred, their feedback was considered more generally in the analysis rather than being specifically counted as referring to RAGF.
- Questions relating to outcomes for disadvantaged cohorts tended not to be answered by participants working in non-teaching and learning roles such as Business Managers or Finance Officers, as they did not feel that they had the expertise or knowledge to respond to these questions appropriately. Findings related to these areas are therefore based on feedback from a smaller number of participants.

³ A list of the eight RSC regions and their geographical coverage, can be found at: [National and Regional Schools Commissioners: About Us](#)

2. Background and policy context

This section provides a summary background to the introduction of RAGF, an outline of RAGF criteria and priorities, as well as brief contextual information about other funding streams available to academies that were mentioned during the telephone interviews.

2.1 Characteristics of successful MATs

The 2010 Academies Act gave all publicly funded schools in England the authority to convert to academy status (known as ‘converter academies’). Others are sponsored to become academies by organisations and individuals (‘sponsor led academies’). Since then, multi-academy trusts (MATs) have developed ‘as a structure to support academies to collaborate and expand’.⁴ The number of MATs has grown exponentially, with 2,681 active MATs in England as of 1 May 2018 (compared to 1,121 in November 2016) – and the numbers are expected to grow.⁵ To ensure that MATs are able to support growth sustainably whilst also driving up performance and standards in teaching and learning, the House of Commons Education Committee identified six key learning points from early MAT development. These are characteristics that the Committee outlined ‘trusts must possess in order to be successful’.⁶

1. Recognition of teaching staff through enhanced opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) and career progression at trust level (including clear pathways to leadership).
2. Regional structures enabling schools to share expertise and resources, including cautious expansion within limited geographical areas.
3. Implementing mechanisms that allow for tangible accountability at all levels, with clear schemes of delegation.
4. Robust financial systems and controls.
5. Vision for school improvement shared across all schools, with strong leadership at school and trust level.
6. A commitment to improving performance and attainment across all student cohorts.

⁴ House of Commons Education Committee (2017), *Multi-academy trusts: Seventh Report of Session 2016-17*, p.4

⁵ Ibid; DfE (2018), *Open academies and academy projects awaiting approval: May 2018*

⁶ House of Commons Education Committee (2017), *Multi-academy trusts: Seventh Report of Session 2016-17*, p.3

2.2 Background to RAGF

In 2016 there was a change in DfE policy relating to academy conversion in order to focus on ‘building capacity in the system and encouraging schools to convert voluntarily’.⁷ To support this expansion in capacity, mechanisms were put in place to encourage MAT growth. This included a range of grant schemes to improve capacity across MATs (Table 3).

Table 3: DfE programmes to improve MAT capacity

Programme	Aim	Available funding
Sponsor Capacity Fund (launched 2012-13)	Supporting sponsors to take on at least one school	£52m between 2013 and 2017
Northern Fund (launched (2015-16)	Increase capacity in disadvantaged areas of northern England	£10m in 2015-16
Regional Academy Growth Fund (launched 2016-17)	Develop new and existing capacity, expand MATs and develop regional hubs	£31m in 2016-17
Multi-Academy Trust Development and Improvement Fund (launched (2017-18)	Support MATs to take on and improve underperforming schools	£53m in 2017-18

(Source: NAO 2018, p.49).

Although research has been undertaken into the implications of MAT growth, both economically and more broadly,⁸ the Sponsor Capacity Fund and Northern Fund were not individually externally evaluated. However, section 2.3 outlines findings from other research that helped to inform the development of this project.

⁷ UK Parliament (2016), *Technical and Further Education: Written statement – HLWS224*; [Parliament.uk: Technical and Further Education - Written statement](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-and-skill/written-statements/written-statements-2016-17/technical-and-further-education-written-statement-2016-17)

⁸ For example, Education Policy Institute (2017), *The economic benefits of joining, establishing or growing a multi-academy trust*; National College for School Leadership (2012), *The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership*

2.3 Outline of RAGF

Available to academies in the 2016-17 financial year, RAGF replaced the previous Sponsor Capacity Fund by extending the range of ways the fund could be used to support growing MATs and recruit sponsors. There were three streams through which the funding could be allocated:

1. **Sponsor Capacity:** to support and incentivise strong sponsors to drive school improvement and turn around underperforming schools.
2. **MAT Growth:** to support MATs looking to expand, aimed at the critical growth phase for MATs with 3-10 schools.
3. **New Hubs:** to encourage high-performing sponsors to open new bases in areas of low capacity.

Each of the eight RSC regions was allocated a minimum of £2m for RAGF, to cover the three streams, with up to £6m of additional funding to be used specifically in the first wave Opportunity Areas (OAs).⁹ Regional DfE teams had the flexibility to decide the split of their funding between the three funding streams according to their regional priorities, and MAT eligibility criteria differed across the three streams (Table 4).

RAGF funding was awarded to 350 academy trusts (selected from just under 600 applications) during the 2016-17 financial year. It was possible for MATs to receive funding via more than one stream.¹⁰ RAGF was superseded by the MAT Development and Improvement Fund (MDIF). MDIF grants were awarded for activities starting before 31 March 2018.

⁹ Opportunity areas were defined as those being ‘the most challenged when it comes to social mobility’. The first OAs were: West Somerset, Norwich, Blackpool, Scarborough, Derby and Oldham. DfE (2016), ‘Social mobility package unveiled by Education Secretary’: [Press release: Social mobility package unveiled by Education Secretary](#)

¹⁰ A list of MATs funded during the 2016-17 financial year can be found at: [Transparency data: Regional academy growth fund award recipients](#)

Table 4: The three RAGF funding streams

	Funding per MAT	MAT eligibility	Assessment criteria
Sponsor Capacity	£50k – £100k ¹¹	Approved academy sponsor (or in the process of becoming one); strong track record of improving schools; intending to take on at least one school in need of support within 12 months	Plans for use of funding to support an underperforming school; school improvement team and strategies; number of schools to be sponsored in 12 months post-funding; MAT aims; feasibility of expansion; knowledge of the needs in the area in which working
MAT Growth	£50k – £100k ¹²	Either a MAT consisting of 3-10 schools, intending to take on at least 3 schools within 12 months; or a MAT of small schools expanding to over 1,200 pupils; or the formation a new MAT of more than 3 schools with approval from the regional DfE team	Plans for use of funding to support expansion; offer to new schools and how MAT works with them during conversion; number of schools planning to take in in 12 months post-funding; MAT aims; feasibility of expansion; knowledge of the needs in the area in which working
New Hubs	Variable according to regional needs and quality of application	Approved academy sponsor; strong track record of improving schools	Prioritised areas – OAs and other new hub locations identified by regional DfE teams ¹³

2.4 Other funding streams

Other funding streams were available to recipients (or applications to them began) during the 2016-17 RAGF funding period. These included:

¹¹ Could be awarded higher or lower than this range in exceptional circumstances.

- **Condition Improvement Fund (CIF)**¹⁴ – launched 2014-15 and available to academies and sixth form colleges to address significant condition needs to keep buildings safe (e.g. addressing health and safety issues, compliance and building conditions). A small proportion of expansion projects for good or outstanding institutions are also funded.
- **Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF)**¹⁵ – launched 2017-18 and funds a range of school improvement activities, including improving leadership, governance, teaching methods and approaches and financial health and efficiency, with priority given to school-led activities.
- **Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund (TLIF)**¹⁶ – launched 2017-18 and available to support teaching and leadership development, by improving and stimulating demand for CPD provision in schools/areas facing challenge, and supporting the longer-term development of a sustainable market for CPD.
- **MAT Development and Improvement Fund (MDIF)**¹⁷ – launched 2017-18 and available for MATs planning to take on at least two new schools (or those intending to form a MAT of at least two schools). Its aim is to support the set up or expansion of a trust and its organisational structures. This includes legal costs, establishing robust reporting mechanisms to monitor pupil performance and identify specific development gaps, providing CPD for leadership, paying for teaching and leadership staff to work across the trust and providing accountancy, finance, business management or human resources (HR) advice.
- **Priority School Building Programme (PSBP)**¹⁸ – launched 2014-15 for capital funded projects, covering rebuilding and refurbishment projects for schools in most need of urgent repair works.

¹² Could be awarded higher or lower than this range in exceptional circumstances.

¹³ The list of new hub locations by region can be found at: [Transparency data: Regional academy growth fund award recipients](#)

¹⁴ DfE, *Condition Improvement Fund Guidance*: [Guidance: Condition Improvement Fund](#)

¹⁵ DfE, *Strategic School Improvement Fund Guidance*: [Guidance: Strategic School Improvement Fund](#)

¹⁶ DfE, *Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund Guidance*: [Guidance: Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund - applications](#)

¹⁷ DfE, *MAT Development and Improvement Fund Guidance*: [Guidance: Apply to the MAT Development and Improvement Fund](#)

¹⁸ DfE, *Priority School Building Programme Guidance*: [Collection: Priority School Building Programme \(PSBP\)](#)

3. The application process

This section of the report summarises the feedback received from interviewees, their perceptions of the application process itself and decisions regarding the allocation of funding received. It also provides a summary of the experiences reported by a small number of interviewees from MATs that were unsuccessful in their RAGF applications.

3.1 Level and streams of funding applied for

The MATs participating in the fieldwork for this evaluation had applied most commonly via the Sponsor Capacity funding stream, although applications to the MAT Growth stream had also been fairly common (Table 5). Note that it was possible for a MAT to apply for more than one funding stream.

Table 5: RAGF stream by region (all participating MATs)

RAGF Stream by Region	Sponsor Capacity	MAT Growth	New Hub/Cluster
East Midlands & Humber	1	3	3
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	2	2	1
North	5	4	0
North East London & East	4	1	2
North West London & South Central	4	4	1
South London & South East	2	1	1
South West	2	2	1
West Midlands	2	2	1

(Source: DfE data)

In terms of the levels of funding received, Table 6 shows that the majority of participating MATs had received between £50,000 and £100,000 via RAGF. Two received less than £50,000 and nine received more than £100,000. It was possible for MATs to receive funding via more than one stream.

Table 6: Funding received by region (all participating MATs)

Funding received	<£50k	£50k - £100k	>£100k
East Midlands & Humber	0	2	3
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	0	2	2
North	0	4	1
North East London & East	1	2	2
North West London & South Central	1	6	1
South London & South East	0	3	0
South West		5	
West Midlands		5	

(Source: DfE data)

Participants reported that the amounts applied for tended to relate to very specific activities being costed carefully, and mapping proposed activities against strategic plans and DfE criteria for RAGF awards. Section 4.3 discusses the changes to activity that were made in cases where these differences between application and award occurred, although overall the changes tended to be small.

3.1.1 Key aims of bids

When asked, fieldwork participants commonly stated that their key aims of applying for funding via RAGF, regardless of the stream that they had applied to, were related to recruitment, training, implementing infrastructure and strengthening governance arrangements. Thus, some felt that there was an element of crossover in the three different RAGF streams and this could have been simplified.¹⁹

- **Recruitment and staffing:** Participants commonly mentioned the aim to create a core or central team so that approaches taken across a MAT to a range of issues were consistent and compliant. This included the recruitment of senior personnel to oversee teaching and learning (e.g. subject leaders in core subjects, Directors of Education), school improvement leads, finance, HR, and personnel to oversee other processes and systems such as safeguarding and data management. Activities associated with staffing also related to strengthening capacity of leadership, such as recruitment of a headteacher so that the CEO could be freed up to oversee strategic leadership at trust level. For single academy trusts, the recruitment of staff (in both teaching and non-teaching functions) would enable them to establish a MAT.

¹⁹ The three separate funding streams in RAGF were removed when MDIF was launched.

- **Infrastructure:** Often coinciding with the recruitment of core personnel, many MATs aimed to update or install new computer systems and software packages (hardware as well as software) across schools to ensure approaches were consistent trust-wide. For example, allocating funding for MAT/hub/cluster-wide software licences (user fees) and implementing standardised approaches such as centralised data assessment for tracking performance and core systems for finance and payroll. This was particularly common among those MATs taking on, or increasing their support for, underperforming schools.
- **Training:** The delivery of continued professional development (CPD) across all staff types, and at governor and trustee levels, was a key area of development identified by many participants when they applied for RAGF. The development of specialist leaders of education (SLEs), core subject experts/lead practitioners and middle and senior leadership roles were common aims of MATs applying to any of the three funding streams.
- **Governance:** This included recruiting governance leads, or commissioning consultancy support to tighten up or standardise approaches to governance across a trust. The key aim for MATs in this respect was to ensure compliance and effective governance of progress, performance and standards.

Participants stated that their aims for proposed activities were generally decided upon during the bid development process, by:

- Referencing proposed activities against an overall MAT strategic plan, as well as the visions in place for individual schools. This included checking if there was a *'good area of common ground'* between grant criteria and the strategic aims of the MAT/school (CFO, North West London & South Central), or identifying appropriate funding streams that reflected the objectives of trust/school plans as part of self-evaluation processes.

'I am on the ESFA weekly update list and I would have seen it on there. When [DfE] launched the grant, I would have flagged it to the executive team and we would look to see if it fit in with our strategic plan. We reconcile any funding to see if it fits in with that - if it as an opportunity for us to enhance something in the plan [that] we have already identified, we will put a bid in'. (CFO, South London & South East).

- Identifying whether proposed activities could be implemented across the trust to promote efficiency. For example, this included maximising funding by ensuring appointments could be deployed across different schools within the MAT, thereby sharing expertise, or purchasing resources in bulk to streamline costs and create approaches that kept track of progress and highlighted gaps to individuals at trust level in terms of data/processes within/between individual schools.

'[The MAT] has to be of a certain size to survive and it takes time to do, we need seed funding to help... Our work identified the minimum infrastructure [required] to support a number of schools'. (CEO and CFO, West Midlands)

- Reviewing governance arrangements to identify clear lines of accountability across a MAT, rather than within individual schools, and at trust level.

'What we identified was that these [local governing] bodies had variable qualities, some were strong and some were weak...We also had a review of governance and looked at areas of development...[to] put another level of accountability into the trust'. (CEO and Head of Operations Finance, North West London and South Central)

3.2 Experience of the application process

Most MATs that the fieldwork participants represented had applied for MDIF as well as RAGF (Table 7). They were therefore able to provide feedback comparing the two application processes. A small number also offered feedback in relation to applications to SSIF.

Table 7: Number of participating trusts that also applied for MDIF - by region (all participating MATs)

	Applied	Did not Apply
East Midlands & Humber	4	1
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	4	0
North	4	1
North East London & East	5	0
North West London & South Central	6	2
South London & South East	3	0
South West	5	0
West Midlands	4	1

(Source: DfE data)

3.2.1 Overall perceptions

Commonly, participants reported that RAGF was easier to apply for than other funding streams. They also appreciated the flexibility of RAGF both in terms of the types of activity covered and the range of impact of those activities across multiple schools within a MAT.

'RAGF compared to other funding streams was great because we could tailor it for what we wanted to do as a MAT. It meant that we could start to grow the capacity for driving school improvement at more than one school at a time. When we're developing individual people and their abilities it's

good to know that we can do that, and then move them within the MAT to where their skills are required – we now have the flexibility to do that as a result of RAGF'. (Executive Director, North West London & South Central)

Compared to MDIF, there was a general perception among participants that there was scope to include a wider variety of proposed activities against RAGF criteria. However, for some this meant that MDIF was perceived to be more focussed in terms of its overall aims.

'The RAGF was more a generic bid and did focus on school improvement but it [was intended for broader improvements for] all children in all schools'. (CEO and Head of Operations Finance, North West London and South Central)

It was felt by many participants that the RAGF application process had benefitted from offering a streamlined and structured application form. MDIF, in comparison, was felt to be a more complex application process than RAGF, but several participants felt that the additional detail required as part of the MDIF bid had added a layer of rigour to the process.

'The MDIF bid process was much more detailed. The bid itself was a pretty large document, whereas the previous one [RAGF] was a shorter bid. The MDIF had a lot more detail and data required. The MDIF process was much more complicated, a much more rigorous process'. (CEO, South West)

3.2.2 Guidance and transparency

Where additional detail was required for MDIF, it was noted during several interviews that the guidance for the application form had been helpful and more so than the guidance available for the RAGF application. This perceived lack of guidance commonly focused on the level of detail around funding criteria and transparency as to what would be considered as priority activities when funding allocations were made, and what would not.

'The RAGF was more straightforward than the MDIF and definitely clearer than the SSIF. However, for the RAGF there was not enough guidance. We applied for three streams, but it wasn't clear if the limit was per stream and it wasn't very clear on what [DfE/RSCs] were looking for'. (CEO and Business Director, North West London & South Central)

Regional DfE teams discussed their decision-making process when they were allocating the funding. Their considerations included:

- Trusts operating in areas of high need.
- Encouraging future potential expansion into areas of high need.
- Maximising impact on Opportunity Areas.
- Noting clear evidence of a capacity to grow.

Regional DfE teams noted that new hub applications were more challenging to measure as the criteria were less specific. To be eligible to apply the trust had to be an approved academy sponsor (which has separate assessment criteria) and have a strong track record of improving schools. Beyond this, regional DfE teams considered the quality of the application and regional circumstances. It was noted that the twelve-month period felt too short for hub creation.

All regional DfE teams noted that in the time it takes to design, set up, deliver and evaluate the impact of a particular funding stream, policy objectives and strategic visions can change (from individual trust up to ministerial level). This was thought to mean that the aims and objectives being delivered through a funding stream could be out-of-line with the most up-to-date policy developments. A longer-term 'alignment of need' between policy and funding objectives was therefore felt to be required. However, they also reported improvements that had been made for MDIF, such as the amalgamation of the three funding strands, a stronger scoring and assessment process, and more rigor in terms of ensuring the financial viability of a trust's plans.

3.2.3 Application challenges

The time taken to receive RAGF funding was commonly felt to be challenge. Many participants noted that, in initial communications to inform them of successful RAGF bids, it had not been made clear when the MAT would receive the funds. This was thought to make planning more difficult.

A small number of participants suggested that there appeared to be a level of duplication across different award types (RAGF, MDIF, SSIF etc.). They felt that this could be streamlined into one larger fund that covered the range of activities that were included in the separate funds.

3.2.4 Relationships with regional DfE teams

Several interviewees noted that they appreciated being able to develop working relationships with the regional DfE teams during the bidding process.

'Having conversations with RSCs about the genuine nature of MATs has been the real step forward. When you can talk to someone like [the RSC] there is an understanding of how to create something from nothing – and

understanding of the space above and beyond the average Head, CEO and [can talk about] risk and capacity. You get an understanding of the constraints on RSCs too, and what they can and can't do... Understanding the pressure points provoked by the bid meant a bit of growth in conversation between practitioners and policy makers, which is important'.
(CEO, Director of Governance and Regional MAT Lead, North East London and East)

Others, however, reported a lack of engagement from regional DfE teams and felt that they would benefit from more regular contact and communication in terms of the priorities for the region and support for trusts showing keenness for growth. One suggested that this could take the form of a termly phone conversation or meeting between the MAT and the regional DfE team to share ideas and practice and identify where support may be available. Two regional DfE team members noted that some trusts require more development and support with bid-writing compared to others. It was perceived to be smaller trusts that required this support as they did not have the same capacity and/or expertise to construct the bids as the larger ones. This reflected feedback from a small number of MATs, also, in terms of having the capacity and experience to dedicate to bid development.

3.2.5 Feedback

Feedback received following RAGF application was commonly felt to be minimal. Participants often reported that they would have appreciated more information in terms of the positive aspects of their bid (so as to develop good practice) as well as the areas that could be improved. This was particularly important for participants where the MAT had not been allocated as much funding as they had applied for (see section 4.3), and for those that had been unsuccessful (see 3.3). They felt that understanding the reasons for these decisions would help them to learn and improve for future bids, but also ensure transparency across the bid review and funding allocation process.

3.3 Awareness of funding streams

A small number of participants appeared to be unaware of the streams through which they had been funded. For example, representatives from a trust that had received funding through both the Sponsor Capacity stream and the new hub/cluster stream seemed to be under the impression that all funding was awarded through the Sponsor Capacity stream. Others reported perceptions that they had received more than one RAGF award – for example, representatives from one MAT believed that they had received separate RAGF awards for each individual school rather than one for the trust as a whole.

Participations noted that they had submitted a number of bids for different funding streams in a relatively short space of time. Some therefore noted that applying for several bids had made it difficult to differentiate what budget was used for which activity, suggesting a need within MATs to set up systems to track applications and funding streams effectively. If they do not, this indicates an emerging risk that evaluating the impact of discrete funding programmes could become increasingly challenging.

There were several comments that the funding streams changing regularly created complexities in planning and that consistency in funding would be more helpful. Therefore, participants tended to suggest that they would appreciate an initiative such as RAGF becoming an annual fund. Although they were aware that this did not guarantee success in receiving funding, they felt that planning for and tracking applications could become more efficient.

'I would rather have funds like [RAGF being consistent] – the more you know in advance the more you can plan. Even though you have to bid for them, knowing that you have [same funding round] coming around at a certain point each year would be ideal'. (Business Director, South West)

3.4 Experiences of unsuccessful applicants

Most of the seven MATs that were unsuccessful in their RAGF bids and participated in the fieldwork had applied for funding to support school improvement. Several mentioned having taken on schools with a 'Requires Improvement' Ofsted rating and they had therefore applied to RAGF to help address the issues in these schools. One could not recall their RAGF bid specifically.

Key aims for RAGF among those that were unsuccessful generally reflected those reported by successful applicants (section 3.1). None reported receiving feedback on their bid, and most were surprised that they had not received funding through RAGF. This was particularly the case for those that said that they had liaised with regional DfE teams prior to submitting a bid and felt that they had been encouraged to apply. Several said that they would have appreciated being informed of a reason why their bids were not successful, so that they could learn for future attempts. They requested more clarity and transparency in the process for selecting successful bidders and allocating funding. Subsequently, and directly linked to the lack of feedback received, when asked directly the unsuccessful applicants reported that there had been few 'learning points' from the process. Nor were they able to identify areas that they would change or things they would do differently in the future. A small number of unsuccessful applicants mentioned that as a result of the RAGF application process they had a better understanding of the

amount of time and resource required to develop bids, not just for the writing phase but the research and networking required in advance.

'I think what has become apparent...is that you have to be working with a range of partner organisations, trusts or other teaching schools, or other partnerships wider than that, in order to show that you have really researched and checked the market [and] so that you are not duplicating [activities]...It is very time consuming. You can't underestimate the time it takes - all the research, the networking, the meetings and clarifying, pulling it all together and talking to other organisations. So that's a big piece of work for an already busy organisation'. (Senior Executive, Unsuccessful applicant)

Another of the unsuccessful applicants represented a SEN school, and reported that it could be difficult generally to fit within grant criteria (rather than this being an issue specific to their RAGF bid).

'One of our academies is in a social mobility Opportunity Area. In terms of curriculum development, teaching and learning, we took advice from the RSC's office and said, "where do we fit"? You can see [in RAGF] for mainstream [schools] it's quite straightforward and simple. It's a bit like for the [SSIF], it's very much focussed on mainstream priorities. It doesn't directly apply, or easily apply to Special Educational Needs in the same rigid way'. (CEO, Unsuccessful applicant)

A regional DfE representative agreed that special and alternative provision required 'flexibility' as it was felt *'not realistic [for these schools] to achieve the same KPIs as mainstream schools'*.

In terms of accessing other funding support relating to capacity building and school improvement, unsuccessful RAGF applicants most commonly reported that they had applied for grants via SSIF and MDIF. Two had applied for CIF, and one for the Priority School Building Programme (PSBP). There appeared to be a range of success rates with these bids, although success with SSIF was reported by most. When comparing the RAGF application process to other bids, respondents tended to suggest that the bids were all 'very lengthy to complete', and that time and resource invested into bid writing meant other priorities within schools were not being focused upon. One interviewee felt it was necessary to share bid-writing duties across key personnel so that they were not dependent on one person who had all the knowledge and skill, as this could create potential challenges should that key person leave the MAT.

4. Implementation and use of funding

This section details the activities undertaken via RAGF, and the changes that were made by MATs where less funds had been allocated compared to those for which they applied. Fieldwork participants were asked to describe the activities that they had delivered through the funding, and if there was a sequence to these activities so as to make their impact most effective. This included discussions as to whether there was a balance between activities that increased capacity, compared to those that focused on school improvement.

4.1 Delivery of activities

When asked to describe the activities undertaken via RAGF, generally participants felt that they had spent the RAGF award in accordance with initial plans outlined on the application form. Where they had not received as much funding as they had applied for, this had changed plans in some MATs (see 4.3.1 for details).

A small number of MATs had not taken on as many schools as initially anticipated due to a range of issues including unforeseen complexities during due diligence processes. This was also reported by regional DfE teams. This lack of growth in some MATs is discussed in more detail in section 5.1. Regional DfE team members were also positive that, overall, RAGF recipients had spent the funding reasonably in line with the initial objectives. They reported achieving the anticipated level of growth in terms of the number of schools taken on by MATs since March 2017.

'[RAGF has] been really positive – it has enabled [MATs] to achieve their objectives and improve capacity. We are monitoring whether they are spending in line with [their original] itemised list [in their application] and meeting their objectives. Where they are not, because of outside influences or things have changed, they have still been able to spend the money to improve, for example on HR, leadership, background office things - putting the infrastructure and systems in place. Overall [RAGF] is [achieving] what they wanted to do'. (Regional DfE team)

Table 8 outlines the activities completed according to each funding stream. Although the strands had different categories of aims (sponsorship / MAT growth / new hub), there tended to be little difference in the types of activities undertaken (as with those included in applications). Trusts appeared to have achieved delivery of activities in relation to the four key areas of recruitment, installation of infrastructure, training/CPD and improving governance (see section 3.1).

Table 8: Activities completed through RAGF - by funding stream

Stream awarded	Work completed through RAGF
Sponsor Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment of key personnel e.g. education directors, administrators, HR leads, bursars, buildings/facilities managers; senior leaders, expert consultants to advise on specific areas such as finance. • Creating dedicated central support for business services through these appointments, plus operational reviews and implementation of new systems and processes to create standardised approaches across MATs for: health and safety, HR, facilities management, finance. This included the installation of new systems/software packages for data management, progress tracking and performance management. • Developing training and attending CPD courses for senior and middle leaders, governors and trustees. This included CEOs/COOs where they felt they needed to develop skills to oversee leadership at trust level. One MAT was developing centres of excellence in best practice across different areas, including the deployment of specially trained staff and peer-to-peer mentoring across the MAT.
MAT Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking on and supporting schools joining the MAT. • Recruitment of key personnel e.g. for teaching and learning leads and school improvement leads. • Training/CPD delivery across the trust, including implementing trust-wide assessment systems for teachers to access. • Implementation of new infrastructure, e.g. ICT systems and developing governance support.
New hub/ cluster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment of key personnel e.g. education directors, HR support, regional directors. • Mentoring/CPD for existing staff to improve morale, target improvement in core subjects. • Improving governance structures. • Implementation of new infrastructure: e.g. data management system, finance and pay roll.

Several noted that some of these activities would not have been undertaken without RAGF:

'We have been able train up staff as not all have benefited from that in the past. This would not have been possible without the help of the funding'. (CEO and Business Director, North West London and South Central)

Participants were asked had RAGF funding *not* been available, would academy growth and improvement activities still have been undertaken. They tended to report that either this would have happened but at a slower pace, that activity would have been much more limited, or that undertaking the activities would have created a financial strain on the MAT.

'There would still have been growth but it might not have happened at the speed it did...It may have taken us six months longer to achieve and we might have been a bit more cautious about things'. (CFO, North West London and South Central)

'It becomes increasingly difficult to grow if no seed funding is available, we would have had smaller growth...without the RAGF funding'. (CEO and CFO, West Midlands)

Examples of where progress would likely have been slower were given as:

- Cutting back on the delivery of training/CPD.
- Not taking on additional schools (lack of staff capacity/expertise).
- Not being able to take on underperforming schools/support social mobility – i.e. successful schools would have been targeted first instead.
- Not rolling out new infrastructure such as data management or HR systems.
- Having to spread leadership capacity thinly.

One MAT awarded funding via the new hub/cluster stream reported that the cluster would not have opened without the RAGF award.

'Growth would have been slower, less effective; it would have slowed everything down and been detrimental to the efficiency and effectiveness of the trust'. (CEO and Finance Director, North)

A recipient of the MAT Growth stream also noted that growth would have been less likely to be sustainable.

'If [RAGF] hadn't been available, we wouldn't have had the robust and rigorous processes that we now have that mean that we can grow successfully and sustainably and make sure that our schools are continuing to stay all improved... I'm not sure that we were going in the right direction without [RAGF allowing us] to bring in the levels of expertise that we just couldn't have with just one or two people'. (CEO and COO, North West London and South Central)

One regional DfE team agreed that if RAGF had not been available, the aims would not have been achieved, particularly when it came to growth/building capacity; however, the two others felt that it was not possible to draw a direct correlation between RAGF and improvements and other activities taking place simultaneously to support MATs in growth and improvement.

4.1.1 Order/sequence of activities

Participants were asked if there was a specific order or sequence in which they carried out activities funded through RAGF, which enabled them to build capacity and take on schools. Almost all participants (regardless of funding stream) reported that the first activity undertaken was the appointment of key personnel, particularly those with specific areas of expertise that were related to areas of focus for improvement/growth. This included leads in school improvement, Directors of Education, core subject specialists and business personnel such as finance and HR managers.

'Having the right people at the right time has allowed us to drive forward all of these [activities]. It's definitely staffing led'. (CEO and COO, Northwest London and South Central)

As a result of appointing these key personnel, it was felt that MATs would develop capacity to enable the trust-wide rollout of core business functions, policies and processes so that operational structures and systems were consistent. This was perceived to be increasingly important the more that MATs expanded.

This was also felt to free up the capacity of leaders at trust level (e.g. CEOs) to oversee strategic development. One trust had recruited a COO to work across schools for this purpose, others had recruited additional senior school leaders such as headteachers or deputy headteachers so that CEOs could step back from performing these roles.

The small number of MATs that did not take this approach reported that they had delivered all activities at once – e.g. where funding had covered recruitment and installation of infrastructure, this had taken place in one MAT across the summer break. This meant that *'everyone and everything'* was *'in place'* for the start of the next academic year (CEO, CFO and COO, North).

Case Study: Recruitment of key personnel

A medium-sized MAT received funding via the Sponsor Capacity and MAT Growth streams. It had key aims for each stream.

Sponsor Capacity: increase capacity within the MAT so that when it took on two underperforming schools, the appropriate expertise and personnel would be in place *'right at the beginning, which was crucial for the trust to grow and support these new schools'*.

MAT Growth: in order to support this growth, there was a need to update and upscale IT, HR and finance systems alongside software to ensure that child protection, safeguarding, pastoral and welfare issues could be monitored consistently and rigorously across the MAT.

To achieve these aims, the MAT recruited senior leaders in core subject areas to drive improvement as well as a governance lead to *'maximise quality and impact of governance at academy level, through close working with headteachers and governors'*. In addition, new software and IT systems were installed.

Representatives from the MAT who took part in the telephone interviews felt that growth would have been *'less effective'* had RAGF not been available – *'[a lack of funding] would have slowed everything down'*. Instead, *'having the senior leaders on the ground at the beginning [was] invaluable in supporting the [joining] schools straightaway'*. Then, from the business perspective, *'getting the HR and payroll systems set up and buying in the... safeguarding package meant that school staff could focus on teaching and providing support, instead of administration'*.

They felt that there had been a balance needed in the implementation of RAGF activities between increasing capacity for growth and ensuring school improvement could take place. The recruitment of key personnel and concurrent installation of improved back office functions, related for example to HR, was therefore perceived to be important for ensuring that growth was achievable without any detriment to existing schools.

Recruitment to the senior leadership positions for teaching and learning was felt to be particularly beneficial as this helped improvements to be made quickly within the underperforming schools. Evidence for this had been recorded through observations that *'[pupils] are safe, marking and feedback is regular and meaningful, schemes of work are being followed, lessons plans are following...best practice'* whereas previously this had not been in place.

It was also noted that although recruitment was undertaken, new personnel and activities were *'[built] into our budgets going forward'*, to ensure that the development of the MAT was sustainable over the longer-term.

4.1.2 Balance between growth and school improvement

Participants were asked whether there was a balance in activities undertaken for capacity growth, and those focused on school improvement. It was common for participants to perceive that capacity for growth and school improvement were interrelated aims, and as a result they felt that the balance of activities was fairly equal between the two. For example, it was reported by participants that expert leaders in teaching and learning were required to drive school improvement in terms of pupil outcomes, progress and leadership. But as a consequence of appointing these personnel, MAT representatives perceived that they had also increased their capacity for growth, because the necessary structures and expertise would be in place to offer adequate support to schools joining.

'The trust aims to get in place robust school improvement mechanisms to secure better outcomes, provide support in finance and HR to support rapid growth. We need capacity first to get the growth to be successful'. (CEO, COO, Regional and Teaching and Learning Directors, South West)

Smaller numbers of interviewees felt that there was a skew towards one function or the other in what they were specifically aiming to achieve with RAGF. This tended to be in favour of building capacity across leadership and systems, thus supporting MAT growth. For example, where 'back office' functions were being developed so that a single academy could become a MAT, it was perceived by the participant that this was not related to school improvement in the short-term, which remained a longer-term ambition beyond RAGF.

'What had happened was that the number of schools increased beyond what the previous team...could cope with - when you have a system like that things fall through the gaps so I have had to make sure that we now know where we are going. Some schools are really struggling with the financial growth and we are having to look at good practice in other schools to support them... Once that is all in place we can [move on to making] sure school provision is first class – we are still in the position where we want to increase the [capacity] of our schools by training the staff, which will then [later] impact on school improvement'. (CEO, COO and Academy Support Officer, West Midlands)

A few participants noted that it was important that any growth did not adversely impact on existing schools. One MAT reported that they had directly communicated to leaders across the trust that *'we are not going to allow growth to interfere with school improvement'*. This was to help ensure that changes were sustainable and that school improvement continued as the MAT grew. Therefore, it was important for the trust to ensure that where funding was distributed to schools, the leaders of those schools could then *'show how they can use [the funding] wisely'* and consequently indicate at trust level

that there was a positive impact from bidding for the funds. (CEO and Business Director, North West London & South Central)

Ensuring capacity for growth was felt to be important by regional DfE teams, with time needed for MATs to consolidate improvement work before taking on any further schools. It was also hoped that this would help to improve long-term sustainability. This was particularly noted to be the case for small (single/two school) trusts or new MATs.

'It is not all about growth [but] about what can do to support development and embedding of better capacity and practice in fledgling MATs, so that when we need them to grow they have the right infrastructure in place'.
(Regional DfE team)

Regional DfE teams reported that building trust capacity and growth was a priority in their regions, but there were also other challenges including performance, and managing risk so that trusts can be sustainable. They highlighted a shift in objectives between RAGF and MDIF, with the latter focusing on encouraging school improvement in these areas.

'The MDIF is focussed more on this area whereas the RAGF was for growth and improvement outcomes for all children. We are now focussing more on disadvantaged children with the MDIF'. (CEO and Head of Operations Finance, North West London and South Central)

Similarly, representatives from several MATs reported that they had focused on broad growth and improvement measures through RAGF (see section 5) and were using MDIF funding to move on from this and work specifically on improvements for disadvantaged pupils. Overall, priorities were shifting from growth to school improvement, particularly around supporting disadvantaged pupils. They felt that RAGF had enabled them to create a foundation upon which to base future work more focused on specific cohorts, which would be realised through the transition from RAGF to MDIF.

'I would say that [RAGF has had an impact on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils], but to a certain extent it is as a...by-product...A real focus on school improvement meant that we have as a result had a real focus on the attainment of disadvantaged children...[Consequently], our provision is improving and the attainment of disadvantaged children. So it's a by-product of great school improvement strategy, as a result of RAGF Funding allowing us to employ the right people. It wasn't a direct target at [the time of the RAGF bid]. It's part of our MDIF focus'. (CEO and COO, North West London and South Central)

'Receiving the RAGF meant that the MAT gained confidence and strength and that meant that we felt able to go ahead and submit an MDIF bid. This was challenging but the support of the Development Officer was invaluable.'

We are introducing [specialist software] through the MDIF to help to target learners from these cohorts and help make a specific difference in those outcomes'. (Executive Director, North West London and South Central)

4.2 Activities not in scope

In terms of activities not funded through RAGF as they were not in scope of the fund, there were only a few participants that provided feedback. They felt that the following could be considered as part of future criteria:

- Sustainability when allocating funds to reflect the needs of MATs for longer-term improvement/growth, rather than offering a single 12-month award (this variation in funding model is discussed further in section 6.3).
- Recruiting expertise or having the resource to free up personnel internally to conduct detailed research and development work that informs strategic change.
- Conversion processes where they become more expensive than the £25,000 academy conversion support grant²⁰, particularly in cases where due diligence is very complex or where higher charges were being incurred for legal and re-brokerage services.
- Professional fees, such as risk management and consultancy fees for the interim support required during the period before recruitment takes place (e.g. finance consultancy support).
- Funding to develop office accommodation so that core business personnel could work together, particularly in MATs where these teams were growing much larger as a result of expansion.

Two regional DfE teams noted that the smaller MATs were excluded from the MAT growth strand due to limitations on the number of schools/pupils required for eligibility. However, this had changed with the introduction of MDIF. Two also felt that capital funding could have been included within RAGF criteria, reflecting increased need for office space and equipment to support the development of central core teams across MATs to carry out business functions.

4.3 Changing plans

Where trusts were awarded less than they applied for, they were asked how their delivery of activities had changed. A small number of examples were given. These were:

²⁰ 'Schools get a start-up grant of £25,000 to help with the costs of converting, such as legal fees, stationery and signage'. DfE, *Academies: information for new openers*: [Guidance: Academies - information for new academies](#)

- Recruitment of part-time rather than full-time staff, or specialist help recruited on a consultancy basis rather than through fixed term contracts.
- Not installing new ICT infrastructure, e.g. software for central systems such as HR.
- Delivering CPD in-house rather than commissioning external provision, or modifying training programmes to meet priority needs.

It was felt by participants that where they had received less funding, MATs still had the same ambitions but progress was slower than originally anticipated.

'[Receiving less funding] made it hard although we achieved [our aims] – we could have gone quicker if we got the full amount we bid for. We would have liked to do more governor development work and improve the MAT's performance outcomes for KS4'. (CEO, North)

Some MATs had not grown as much as anticipated, although this was for a range of reasons and not just isolated to receiving a lower level of funding than anticipated (see section 6). Unsuccessful RAGF applicants reported that they were either taking on schools that had existing financial resources (rather than schools in financial difficulty) that could contribute towards trust growth, or postponing plans to grow the trust or not taking on new schools at all. One trust was closing, and this was attributed, in part, to their lack of success in obtaining RAGF funding.

'Because I didn't get the RAGF the capacity...[the ability] to support other schools has been limited, we just didn't have the money for it'. (Headteacher, Unsuccessful applicant)

Several others noted that being unsuccessful with RAGF had limited their progression, although this came with an awareness that *'it's all conjecture really isn't it...we don't really know what would have happened otherwise'* (CEO, Unsuccessful applicant).

4.4 Timescales

There were varying responses as to whether 12 months was a sufficient amount of time to carry out the activity expected of the award, depending on the type of activity being delivered.

'It depends what the project is - setting up a hub needs a two-to-three-year time frame. For school improvement interventions then 18 months is appropriate'. (CEO and CFO, West Midlands)

Many participants felt that 12 months had been adequate in order to implement activities such as recruitment and installing infrastructure, however they commonly stated that this

did not provide any time to demonstrate evidence of impact. It was felt that in order to be able to provide this evidence a longer period of 18 months to two years would be preferable (to allow for the production and comparison of outcomes data over time). As per the MAT representatives, regional DfE teams also reported that 12 months was not long enough to measure some areas of impact, particularly in terms of MAT growth.

'We knew it was 12 months, but the key is to make it sustainable. We need to strategically plan. RAGF is over a financial year not an academic year so 18 months would be better'. (CEO, COO, Regional and Teaching and Learning Directors, South West)

A small number suggested that 12 months was only adequate if there were no risks to the activity in terms of identifying and working effectively with suppliers, or conversion processes becoming more complex than anticipated within MAT growth plans. As a result, some trusts did not grow as quickly, or by as many schools, as initially anticipated. This is discussed in section 5.

The level of support received from regional DfE teams was felt to be a factor in working successfully to the timescales. This included continual dialogue with regional DfE team staff regarding the schools that are joining a MAT to ensure that there is clear communication about the issues that need to be addressed. Without this dialogue and support, one RAGF recipient felt that delivering the activities within 12 months would be an *'impossible task'*. (CEO and CFO, East Midlands and Humber)

5. Perceived impact of RAGF

This section explores the ways in which MATs measured the impact of RAGF and whether the key performance indicators (KPIs) set were appropriate for measuring their progress against objectives. Participants were also asked to identify the individual activities undertaken through RAGF that they felt had been most effective in helping trusts achieve RAGF aims.

5.1 Effectiveness of KPIs in measuring progress

When participants were asked what their KPIs had been to measure progress against RAGF activities, they commonly stated that these aligned with the school improvement targets and priorities set out in their school development plan or as defined within a MAT's overall strategic plans. Where they provided specific examples of KPIs, these were:

- Number of schools in the trust (or number of schools to expand by).
- Comparison of outcomes data year-on-year (e.g. attainment and progress for key stages), and/or improvement of outcomes, for example to meet/exceed national averages.
- Levels of staff turnover.
- Behavioural targets such as levels of disruption, exclusions data, attendance rates.
- Financial performance such as remaining within budget, monitoring the proportion of budget allocated to and/or spent on staffing to ensure sustainability.

Participants generally tended to perceive that although these KPIs were effective, they were in place anyway, and progress against them would be monitored regardless of RAGF or other funding allocations. One suggested that in hindsight, they would have conducted a governance audit prior to the implementation of RAGF and then repeated the exercise following RAGF activities to track impact in this area.

5.1.1 Growth as a KPI

Regional DfE teams felt that where some trusts had anticipated taking on three or more schools in twelve months, this had been a considerable challenge. They perceived that growth plans had been overly ambitious in some cases and did not always take into account the potential for complex issues to come to light during due diligence/conversion processes. A small number of participating MATs felt that they had not made as much progress as they would have wished. This related to unforeseen challenges that had

occurred during conversion processes, legal processes that had been more protracted than initially anticipated, and uncovering additional financial shortfalls or issues in converting schools that had not been clear from the outset. It was subsequently challenging for them to evidence impact of RAGF if the KPIs for the funding had focused narrowly on growth plans. Consequently, regional DfE teams suggested that ‘number of schools’ as a KPI for growth could be a blunt instrument that did not appropriately take into account the range of activities related to supporting growth and building capacity for growth (e.g. recruitment and staffing changes, installing infrastructure and core business personnel, CPD for leadership).

This had led some regional DfE team representatives to identify the potential for more tailored KPIs that would help ‘to show MATs maturing in more professionalised ways’. This was work that was ongoing, but they felt that for future funding streams they would be likely to focus on tailoring KPIs to a region’s need and include financial viability, specific school improvement measures (particularly for MATs with a challenging portfolio) and conducting more regional-level data analyses. One regional DfE team flagged that it wanted to carry out additional analysis on RAGF impact to identify whether improvements, for example across sponsored academies, could be attributed directly to RAGF. This detailed evaluative work was ongoing.

‘Last year, out of all the different types of schools that we have [in the region], sponsored academies have improved by the greatest margins – including mainstream schools and converters. If you back-track those figures to trusts which had RAGF funding – you may see a relationship. We have not done that work yet to see the detail’. (Regional DfE team)

5.2 Evidence of progress

Participants were asked if they had been able to make sufficient progress against school improvement KPIs and to what extent the RAGF award contributed to this. Generally, they reported that they had made good progress.

‘With the additional RAGF and the school improvement resources it has helped us maintain our KPIs; without this funding we would have been stretched’. (CFO, North West London and South Central)

Although most participants felt that this progress would have been made anyway, RAGF had made the rate of progress quicker.

‘We have made good progress – I would say with the RAGF it made it just a bit easier than it would have been’. (CEO, North West London and South Central)

Overall it was felt to be too early to provide definitive evidence of impact against KPIs relating to outcomes data, attainment and progress. However, a range of examples were provided.

For those that had shown progress against **growth plans**, RAGF was perceived to have enabled many MATs to take on new schools (one MAT reported that they had expanded by 10 schools in one year although rates of growth were more commonly by between one and three schools). Rates of growth were noted by MAT representatives and regional DfE teams to ultimately have been ambitious in the timescale allowed by RAGF, as discussed above.

Other evidence of where RAGF had supported MATs to grow and drive improvement included Ofsted ratings improving for underperforming schools that were sponsored (one reported a school moving from inadequate to outstanding), improved attendance rates among pupils due to more focused leadership, and balancing school budgets where they had not done so in the past (for example where RAGF activities had streamlined back office functions by removing duplication in individual schools and co-ordinating activities across a central MAT team, or making them more cost-effective by developing internal expertise through training, thereby reducing the need for buying-in external suppliers).

In terms of **school improvement targets**, MATs suggested a range of ways that they thought RAGF had contributed to school improvement. Activities were perceived to have enabled progress towards improvement, with evidence provided by participants including:

- Outcomes, attendance and exclusion rates improving in schools as a result of strategies brought in by new personnel and training (based on observations, year-on-year data and outcomes against expected progress); MAT representatives also noted that they were able to confirm this progress through the use of new data tracking software installed as part of RAGF implementation.
- Where underperforming schools were taken on and improvement activities implemented via RAGF, subsequent Ofsted reports had improved (e.g. inadequate to good/outstanding).
- Successful transition to becoming a sponsor academy and new schools being sponsored.
- Development of new staff networks and staff expertise/capacity as a result of targeted CPD and leadership development work, and building expertise and capacity for sustainable growth and improvement going forward.
- The quality of teaching, learning and safeguarding improving (noted during peer observations).

- Increased collaboration between schools in the MAT and other schools outside of the MAT or in other networks.

Commonly, the specific evidence provided to show this impact tended to relate to MATs recruiting additional staff which had increased expertise and capacity for improvement, and being able to monitor data more closely so that areas for targeted intervention could be better identified.

Several participants felt that RAGF had enabled senior leaders to focus on teaching and learning, or for CEOs to have more capacity to provide strategic leadership and oversight, because a core team of personnel had been put in place via RAGF to support more business-focused functions.

'We have made significant improvements and yes, RAGF has helped by freeing up school-based senior teams to concentrate on improvement of teaching and learning'. (COO, CEO and Finance Lead, West Midlands)

'There has also been a lot of developing networks at all levels across the schools. We monitor carefully the progress and attainment across the schools and we review that regularly at every director meeting. RAGF has enabled us to do that – and then the data allows us to identify gaps and put in training to close those gaps'. (CEO, North East London and East)

5.2.1 Accountability

Each MAT representative and regional DfE team mentioned the quarterly progress reports that trusts were expected to submit as part of RAGF monitoring. These were said to report against key performance indicators (KPIs) that were attached to the awards. However, a small number of MATs and regional DfE teams queried whether accountability processes were rigorous enough in terms of providing evidence of activities against KPIs, and where these were not being met (particularly around growth) the need for more checks by regional DfE teams was highlighted. It was thought that this would help ensure that funding allocations were being used effectively by MATs to build capacity for future growth or develop sustainable school improvement programmes.

5.2.2 Success stories

Regional DfE teams were asked about success stories as a result of RAGF and could identify a range of examples that often reflected those provided by MAT representatives. Examples they provided were:

- Schools taken on by MATs as part of RAGF showing the greatest level of improvement across a region during 2017-2018.

- Trusts reporting that they were in a more positive financial position than previously. For example, the integration of core business teams had removed duplication of effort within individual schools and streamlined systems across a MAT to make them more cost-effective.
- School Ofsted ratings improving (e.g. 'requires improvement' to 'good').
- Improvement in key stage outcomes data following staff CPD.
- Unlocking of complex re-brokerage processes.

'One [trust] has grown in a challenging area in the region – it...had [a] positive monitoring report from Ofsted, they are about to take on another school. [RAGF] enabled the CEO to invest in infrastructure to consolidate their role...rather than wearing multiple hats'. (Regional DfE team)

Where they felt able to note impact (due to the short timescale between RAGF delivery and this evaluation), regional DfE teams reported that early outcomes of RAGF projects were:

- Professionalisation of discrete roles, such as taking on specialists across a range of areas including finance, which should lead to improvements. This also included the CEO being freed up from other roles (such as headteacher of a school within the MAT) so that they could focus on strategic leadership across the MAT more broadly.

'[The regional DfE team has] spent a lot of time in the last couple of years talking about specialist skillsets and the knowledge needed by trust directors – it is also about central operating team that sits in the trust'. (Regional DfE team)

- Increased levels of formal training and CPD, particularly around leadership development (the CEO role was seen as significantly different to the headteacher role by both regional DfE teams and MATs).

Case Study: Developing internal structures and governance

A small MAT received funding via the MAT Growth stream as it felt that it needed to implement a 'more structured approach' to a range of operational areas if more schools were to be taken on. This included governance and central team functions such as HR and estates management.

'The main aims of the application were governance and building back office to allow us to have the systems, processes and structures in place to allow us to grow'. (Interview with MAT senior leaders)

To achieve this and support effective growth, it was felt that structures around governance and personnel needed to be *'more response-led and bespoke'* to the MAT. However, there was also an awareness that the MAT needed to be sustainable and that there were not adequate resources to recruit a large number of specialist personnel via RAGF and then maintain those roles going forward.

'We can't have specialists like [an HR Director] now, so [the MAT is] building strength internally slowly' by sharing and co-ordinating responsibilities across the MAT rather than duplicating effort within each individual school. Specialist provision is then bought in where required for complex issues relating to HR or estates management. This has consequently freed up the time of the CFO to *'focus on strategic [planning] and finance'*.

Governance was regarded as a key element of sustaining the MAT, with an aim for local governing bodies developing strong connections to the school community. To achieve this, training and support was delivered to trustees and governors. As each local governing body was dispersed across a rural area, an online suite of training programmes bespoke to the MAT was developed for individuals to access remotely.

'Local governing body has accountability, what they need is materials... [For example] finance and risk management [training documents] are written so governors can [view their] own school documents, such as accessing examples of a specific school monitoring report [to review against the training guidance]. There are videos and audios for clarifications. It is very bespoke and has been well received'.

The MAT representatives taking part in the interview felt that some of these activities would have been implemented without RAGF, but would not have been delivered to the same depth and resources would have been stretched. Consequently, it was also felt that the MAT would not have grown and it would have been challenging to take on more schools. *'There were two areas of risk – governance and premises... [Activities implemented through] RAGF has mitigated those key risks... [The MAT] structure looks stronger. We are in a position... to sponsor another school'.*

5.3 Perceived impact on disadvantaged learner outcomes

Although encouraging a focus on areas of high deprivation/disadvantage was not a stated aim of RAGF, participants were asked in the interviews if the availability of RAGF had encouraged them to work in these areas. The large majority said that RAGF supported work that was already underway. This reflects that many trusts take on underperforming schools as part of their remit. Several mentioned that they had applied to RAGF following discussion with a regional DfE team and agreeing beforehand to take on schools in the area that required improvement.

A small number of participants felt that the funding did encourage them, or it helped them to make progress against existing plans.

'It helps in those areas, and if you took the funding away we couldn't get things in place as quickly'. (CEO and CFO, Lancashire and West Yorkshire)

Small numbers of interview participants reported a positive impact of RAGF activities specifically for these cohorts. These tended to be where new schools had joined the MAT whilst facing challenges specific to disadvantaged pupils, or where schools joining the MAT had a history of poor data monitoring in relation to disadvantaged pupils.

Where participants identified an impact on disadvantaged pupils, this was commonly in relation to new data tracking and progress monitoring/planning (and this was the same across recipients from each RAGF funding stream). They reported that the implementation of data management/tracking software, or the appointment of lead practitioners to oversee assessment and feedback processes, had enabled schools to have a clearer and more informed view of student development and progress. Examples included schools starting to regularly and consistently review pupil attendance, exclusions data, and outcomes data for different cohorts such as Pupil Premium, genders, forces families and children looked after. This activity meant for example that schools were isolating data for disadvantaged and other cohorts so that interventions could be better targeted and applied more effectively according to specific need. A small number of MATs reported that installing these systems was particularly effective in small single schools that had not had the resource to oversee centralised systems previously.

5.4 Sustainability

All participants said that activities implemented through RAGF were continuing following the end of the funding period. There were common reports that RAGF had 'kick-started' pre-existing plans and had 'got the ball rolling' in terms of enabling staffing appointments or the installation of new software.

'We had to hit the ground running and set up from nothing with no capacity; we had to get things in place quite quickly. This funding has enabled us to do this'. (CEO and Head of Operations Finance, North West London and South Central)

Due to many of the activities delivered through RAGF being related to core processes and systems, participants agreed that much of the activity would remain in place going forward.

'These structures are now in place, so we will continue – we are still growing and we can push forward'. (CEO and CFO, Lancashire and West Yorkshire)

As reported in the case study in section 4.1, the majority of MATs had made key personnel appointments as a result of RAGF and they reported that these personnel were still in post at the time of the interviews (spring term 2018). No participants indicated that personnel recruited through RAGF were no longer in post, although some had taken on part-time or consultancy staff rather than full-time permanent roles.

A small number of MATs were concerned about financial viability in the longer-term. This was reported, for example, in cases where MATs had taken on schools that had large deficits or where they had not grown as much as anticipated, thereby not generating as much income as initially anticipated.

In terms of sustainability, a few participants noted that new posts were being budgeted for in the long-term via the income raised by taking on more new schools.

'All of the positions that were appointed are continuing [to be funded] from the top slice from the other schools as we grow'. (CEO and Finance Director, East Midlands and Humber)

MAT representatives tended to note that implementing initial growth and then achieving sustainability through additional growth was a cyclical process. In other words, increasing MAT capacity via RAGF to support growth (e.g. by recruiting core personnel and streamlining central business functions) had helped secure future sustainability for MATs because the improvements made them more appealing as a trust: *'you get more schools, then there are more funds for management, so [then we] can sustain the activity'* (CEO and CFO, West Midlands). Conversely, where growth had not occurred as much as planned - or in one example where they had not top-sliced funds from schools - this created greater concerns among a small number of MAT representatives relating to long-term sustainability, suggesting that budgeting and financial strategies would need reviewing in cases where growth had not occurred at the anticipated rate.

Delivering activities through RAGF was reported by some to have increased their overall confidence as a trust in the growth strategies that they had in place.

'I think the RAGF is very helpful...As we are going through a period of growth, from a confidence point of view it helps and encourages us. [Receiving the funding] is an affirmation of what we are doing and the standard we are achieving'. (CFO, North West London & South Central)

Smaller numbers of participants reported that activities funded via RAGF would continue as the new processes or the introduction of centralised systems had created more effective practice.

'We have [a governance expert] which has established accountably across the trust; we [now] have effective practice in place and have good monitoring outcomes for children and all the legal statutory requirements'. (CEO and CFO, North West London and South Central)

There was however a general sense among participants that school improvement takes time and for many MATs this meant between two and four years. As a result, it was felt that sustainability needed to be considered more strategically during both funding applications and the implementation of activities.

'When you take on these schools the grants are only for a short term, and the staff you take on to support and improve these schools are long-term, so there is risk attached to that'. (Director of Finance and Operations, North West London and South Central)

5.5 Most effective activities

Participants were asked, of the individual spending activities that were funded, which were most effective for helping trusts achieve their RAGF aims. Across all three funding streams, by far the most common response was the appointment of new personnel in key roles. Participants were able to provide a range of specific examples as to why this had been the most effective activity. The following are examples provided by individual MATs:

- Recruiting a facilities management and health and safety officer had enabled expert advice to be given on structures and facilities, and ensured appropriate repairs and maintenance took place across the MAT.
- Implementing additional HR support had helped to manage the natural increase in case workload due to the expansion of the MAT and associated increase in staffing levels.

- Creating a central team for business functions such as finance and HR had streamlined systems across schools so that they were more efficient.
- Having the capacity to release personnel for CPD and mentoring, meaning that staff across the MAT were meeting and learning from one another on a more regular basis.
- Recruiting a data manager had enabled a MAT to create baseline data for assessment purposes, thereby increasing rigour in internal monitoring systems.
- Strengthening governance structures through activities such as performing trust-wide governance reviews, appointing governance officers/leads to ensure consistent compliance across a trust, training governors, and appointing a clerk to governors to ensure expert governance support across the MAT.
- Creating the role of school improvement lead had helped the MAT to review provision strategically and prepare for Ofsted, identifying training and support needs for staff and governors in key areas.
- Appointing new leadership, including SLEs, to build capacity and drive improvement and core subject development across schools in the MAT.

Smaller numbers provided other examples of what activities had been the most effective. These included reviewing governance structures, installing new software packages that allowed staff to focus on teaching and learning instead of administration, delivery of CPD across a range of areas to support staff development (especially at leadership level), supporting the development and delivery of a catering service for all schools in the MAT, and being able to set up specialist provision for specific needs such as mental health support.

6. Lessons learned

This section explores the key learning points that participants had identified during their experiences of applying for and implementing RAGF awards. This includes their perceptions on the most appropriate funding models and the support they felt that MATs required to take on and improve underperforming schools.

6.1 Key learning points

Overall, participants reported that they would not have approached RAGF differently. There were several comments from recipients of funding as to how positive the experience of RAGF had been, from the application through to implementing the funding, and participants noted their general appreciation of RAGF in terms of the simplicity of the application, its flexibility in terms of eligibility criteria and the range of activities that could be delivered as a result

'We need to celebrate [RAGF], it's well targeted, really helpful and it's the most effective funding stream, keep it going. It makes a difference to children'. (CEO, COO, Regional and Teaching and Learning Directors, South West)

The learning points varied by funding stream. Those delivering activities through MAT Growth focused on strategic planning and due diligence processes. Those responding in relation to the Sponsor Capacity stream suggested that collaborative working, sustainability and recruitment were key areas to get right, and those delivering activities via the new hub/cluster stream gave feedback in relation to tracking growth and monitoring progress carefully.

The examples given for each stream are summarised in the boxes below, although they are also relevant across all streams.

Key learning points: MAT Growth

Several MATs receiving funding through this stream highlighted that it was important to have a clear plan from the start of funded activity, in terms of matching up funding received with the trust's overall strategic plan. When writing bids, they had learned that it was important to ensure that specific examples of the impact the funding was anticipated to have were clearly outlined.

A couple of participants noted a need to share ideas with other MATs when developing funding applications, e.g. ideas on the types of activities that could be delivered within the scope of funding criteria.

MAT Growth recipients emphasised the need to conduct thorough due diligence so that conversions were as smooth as possible, but maintaining an understanding that each school was different and approaches to transition needed to remain flexible as well as financially viable.

Key learning points: Sponsor Capacity

Sustainability was a key point for those receiving funds through the Sponsor Capacity stream, for example budgeting three years ahead to ensure that activities that are delivered through a one-off grant could be continued beyond the funding period. This would then instil confidence in trust members as to when expansion was viable.

Integral to this was the need for collaborative working, and where this was becoming more common across MATs, the benefits were highlighted. 'We have become a sharing culture', noted one (CEO and CFO, Lancashire and West Yorkshire). Collaboration was felt to be important not only in teaching and learning, but also through sharing central business functions (finance, payroll, HR). A streamlined centralised approach across a MAT was felt to reduce pressures on existing staff working in these areas, particularly through periods of MAT growth. It would also ensure that expertise was shared, thereby mitigating the risk of key personnel dependency by building resilience across a core team.

Key learning points: New hub/cluster

The few participants funded through this stream and offering learning points suggested that it was important to ensure that some funds were allocated to marketing the MAT to other schools, and the time and staff capacity required to visit and work with schools prior to conversion.

Others felt that strategic planning could be improved, in terms of:

- Reflecting internally on the impact and rigour of due diligence procedures after each conversion, to review and identify any areas that could be improved.
- Keeping closer track of activities against KPIs to review how funding has been spent, identifying specific impacts and learning where effective practice has been best implemented.
- Conducting a central benchmarking exercise (e.g. collecting evidence over three or four years) to determine the actual costs of setting up a new cluster.

Regional DfE teams emphasised the need to be cautious regarding the level of detailed information available to MATs prior to taking on new schools and highlighted the need for thorough due diligence processes. There was also an awareness that conversion timelines can be disrupted due to unforeseen issues emerging in this process.

One regional DfE team representative felt that quarterly reporting rounds should be changed to termly as this would fit better with school timetables and business processes (e.g. one quarterly report deadline falls in the middle of the summer break). Another underlined, as many MAT representatives did too, the need for effective core business processes to be in place to monitor, provide accountability and ensure progress and improvement.

One regional DfE team reported that they had not been able to find a way to enable MATs to submit a joint bid, for example to fund the recruitment of a COO that could operate across more than one trust (where the individual trusts did not have the capacity to recruit this role on their own). It was felt that this was a missed opportunity and greater collaborative working of this kind between MATs would be worth considering for the future.

6.2 Models of funding delivery

Interviewees were asked what kind of model of funding delivery was most useful (i.e. a discrete annual fund or one delivered on a rolling basis). Responses were mixed, although a preference towards an annual fund was slightly more common.

'We can identify what we need to do with growth in advance. We can be certain about what is applied for and what is needed. So we can get appointed. We know what we need to achieve going forward and we know what capacity we need in advance, and it's great that it is there to cover those costs in the early days until the position becomes sustainable through growth of the trust'. (CEO and COO, North West London and South Central)

Several interviewees (from across the three funding streams) reported that the most appropriate funding model depended on the context and setting that the funding was to support. For example, one-off funding was perceived to be useful in circumstances where specific investments for improvement were identified (e.g. for training or development in discrete areas); however, they felt that if a MAT was taking on an underperforming school or creating a new hub/cluster, funding on a rolling basis would help the MAT to improve and support schools or establish sustainability of a hub over a period of time. In these circumstances, funding over a rolling period over three to five years was perceived to be beneficial for strategic development of a project.

'In Opportunity Areas, if you are having trouble recruiting teachers to increase capacity, a one-off grant can do that. For a longer-term project, you do need a rolling grant to help sustain impact'. (CEO and Finance Director, East Midlands and Humber)

'It is mainly people costs and they are there for longer than [the] one year the grant is for; you can't invest in people for a year then let them go. With a rolling model with a 3-year minimum you know you have something coming in to match your costs'. (CFO, East Midlands and Humber)

Generally, the concept of a discrete annual sum was felt to be preferable for planning purposes. It was felt that this meant the MAT could be clear upfront about the level of funding received, and when funding would be in place to enable activities to start.

'It would be handy knowing how much money you are going to get – applying is time-consuming and it takes a long time to find out if you are successful and then for the money to come through. [Therefore] many decisions are deferred; if there was an annual amount of money to fund MATs you could be a bit more innovative in how you are supporting the schools'. (CEO, COO and Academy Support Officer, West Midlands)

Some were concerned that funds delivered on a rolling basis could be at risk of becoming 'lost' among normal activities, thus making it preferable to have an annual fund that was ring-fenced for specifically designed activities.

Representatives from one MAT suggested that rolling funds could risk losing the innovation that occurs as a result of having to create bids for discrete funding streams. Some also noted that rolling funds risked MATs becoming dependent on funding applications for sustainability.

Regional DfE teams were interested in a potential model of funds on a rolling basis, however they had similar reservations to MAT participants that although a rolling system could be 'attractive' it would be necessary to ensure that MATs did not plan-in funding as part of their budgeting as a result.

'[A rolling system] could have implications [with MATs] building in the finance money to their planning, and if they didn't get it then that would have a big impact. The spending would need to be a bonus – otherwise there would be an impact of pulling it - this [impact] could be greater if [the funding was] not limited to one year'. (Regional DfE team)

It was also noted that this rolling basis for funding was perceived to be only appropriate for 'larger' awards such as SSIF. It was felt that the volume of work - in terms of engagement with regional DfE team officials and monitoring - needed to be commensurate to the level of work, and this level of demand was unlikely to be appropriate for time-bound or smaller awards such as MDIF or RAGF.

6.3 Support requirements

All fieldwork participants (both those successful and unsuccessful in their RAGF applications) were asked to list the top three things they felt a MAT required in order to take on and improve underperforming schools. In order of frequency of response, participants suggested the following:

- **Capacity and expertise to focus on school improvement.** This was mentioned by more than half of participants and particularly referenced the need to appoint and develop outstanding leadership, school improvement leads, core subject experts and individuals who understood the time and resources required to bring a school from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding'. It was felt to be important that an effective leader responsible for driving school improvement could communicate needs through effective strategic planning, implement a clear improvement process and understand what this needed to look like to reflect the needs of an individual school. Some noted that it was important to create capacity so that the CEO of a MAT was not also a headteacher of one of the schools within the MAT, as there was a need to focus on each role individually in order to drive school improvement and oversee the quality of the trust. *'Staffing is most important - school*

funding is [constrained]... We don't want pupils to be affected, this is a challenge – we need to make sure the right people are doing the right jobs'. (CEO and CFO, West Midlands).

- **Funding to assist with improving facilities, conversion costs, implementing infrastructure and curriculum resources.** In order to deliver high quality provision across a MAT, participants highlighted the resources required for buildings and facilities repairs and maintenance, capital funding, legal fees and conversion costs and the installation of IT hardware and software.
- **Tight due diligence and effective brokerage processes.** This was noted by participants not just in terms of finance and site surveys to understand the condition of buildings, but also teaching and learning practices - ensuring that the vision of senior leaders and governors of a school looking to join a MAT fit the ethos of the trust. Due diligence processes were felt to require openness on both sides in terms of the improvements that were required, and all partners being open to change.
- **Recruitment and staffing.** This feedback related to the need to find ways to support the recruitment of high quality and experienced teaching staff such as incentives to make the role attractive (e.g. relocation allowances, offering secondments). It also included the need for effective systems to manage underperforming staff and for succession planning.
- **Operational support.** Several participants emphasised the importance of having a centralised core business team in place to ensure that services fundamental to driving improvement were streamlined and that they had oversight of the whole MAT as well as individual schools (e.g. finances, health and safety, safeguarding). It was noted that these teams were likely to be the personnel who unearthed different issues in schools taken on by a MAT and therefore needed to have the capacity to be able to deal with those issues as they arose whilst keeping improvement and development on track across the trust. It was said to be important to offer a remuneration package that was commensurate with the skills of a very capable business manager, as finding individuals with the right skills in these areas for a MAT was perceived to be a big challenge.
- **CPD.** Training and development across all levels of staff was felt to be important to ensure that institutions kept up with current thinking and evidence-based practice. Some reported that it would be beneficial to have the capacity to deliver quality training internally/locally to MAT schools rather than commissioning external training provision that was perceived to be costly.

- **Collaboration and consistency.** This included the provision of business support across a MAT, school-to-school sharing of expertise across a trust and encouraging consistency and commonality in practice across a trust (e.g. in terminology and processes used). One area of collaboration felt to be particularly effective was having an element of flexibility in staffing so as to allow, for example, maths and English experts within the trust to work across different schools through networking and acting as coaches rather than being based entirely in one school.
- **Understanding of data.** This related to the need to have full-time specialist personnel working at both trust level and in individual schools, to ensure that progress was being monitored, interpreted and understood in the same way and that targets agreed for schools reflected a trust's strategic aims and vision. Data managers and analysts were perceived to be crucial to the success of this function.
- **Quality assurance.** A few participants felt that reviews of governance in underperforming schools were critical, stepping in to improve governance (e.g. removal of a local governing body and the appointment of an interim academy board to oversee improvement), or appointing an external peer review partner to provide an impartial perspective on school improvement processes.
- **Access to specialists in SEN.** Either internally or through collaborative arrangements with external agencies, including Educational Psychologists. Small numbers suggested that additional funding streams were required that focused on improving and developing capacity within specialist and alternative provision.
- **Balance between growth, improving schools and maintaining standards in existing provision.** Representatives from one MAT highlighted that it was important to invest in, or develop, essential resources that were required to help support underperforming schools *prior* to taking on those schools. Another noted that it was important to ensure that any trust services '*can grow sufficiently to support [new] schools without adversely effecting your existing schools*'. (CEO, South West)

7. Conclusions

Overall, perceptions and experiences of RAGF among successful applicants were very positive. They appreciated the flexibility of RAGF and the range of activities that could be included against the funding criteria. The application process had been felt to be straightforward when compared to other funding routes (MDIF in particular), although requests for more feedback on both successful and unsuccessful bids were common. This included more detail on funding criteria and how funding decisions were made.

For the majority, the most effective individual activity implemented via RAGF had been the recruitment of key personnel. They also noted the significance of implementing trust-wide business functions, policies and processes. This was often related to the need to either strengthen capacity of leadership or develop central systems to support operational functions. Several participants mentioned the creation of a central team so that approaches and processes across a MAT were consistent and compliant. This commonly included the recruitment of senior personnel to oversee leadership at trust and school level, CPD/staff development, finance and HR processes, governance arrangements (including strengthening governance), and systems such as safeguarding and data management. It was felt that the formation of such a team also freed up senior leaders to focus on strategic improvement and teaching and learning in their respective schools, rather than on business functions. The appointment of personnel who could work in several schools across a MAT was perceived to improve capacity for future expansion, as the expertise required for growth would already be in place.

Early evidence indicates that RAGF awards supported a range of activities that enabled progress against school improvement targets. However, growth plans were a considerable challenge for some. RAGF activities showed participants that MATs need to put secure foundations in place to enable sustainable growth to take place. Regional DfE teams felt that where some trusts had anticipated taking on three or more schools in twelve months, this had been overly ambitious and did not always take into account the potential for complex due diligence and conversion processes. This made it challenging for some to evidence impact of RAGF if the KPIs had focused on growth plans in terms of number of schools taken on. Consequently, regional DfE teams suggested that 'number of schools' as a KPI for growth could be better tailored to take into account the range of activities focused on supporting and building capacity for growth.

The role of the regional DfE teams was highlighted to be a key element for some MATs in developing successful bids. Some requested more regular communications with regional DfE teams, for example through a termly meeting or telephone call.

The majority of participants who had received funding had achieved their initial aims during the delivery of RAGF activities, however accountability for funding needs to be ensured. These tended to relate to recruitment and staffing, training/CPD, implementation of ICT infrastructure (hardware and software) and strengthening governance. Research participants felt that although school improvement KPIs were already being worked towards across MATs, activities undertaken via RAGF had increased their rate of progress against these. A small number of MATs and regional DfE teams queried whether accountability processes were rigorous enough in terms of providing evidence of activities against KPIs, and where these were not being met (particularly around growth) the need for more checks by regional DfE teams.

Collaborative working and developing networks was a common topic during interview feedback. This included the importance of encouraging collaborative working between staff members in schools and across MATs to ensure that expertise is shared. This included staff meeting for MAT-led CPD sessions, and key personnel splitting their time between different sites in order to oversee core subject development or improvement in specific areas such as leadership or governance. However, there were also common requests for increased collaboration between trusts, particularly in terms of sharing practice relating to bid development and also in implementing activities.

The need to ensure sustainability and balance was clear throughout discussions. For example, between growth and improvement, ensuring that taking on new schools does not risk the progress of existing ones in a MAT. Sustainability needs to be considered by MATs during initial planning for funding applications, as well as during the delivery of activities so that activities can be budgeted for and remain financially viable beyond the funding period. This should include incorporating financial performance as a KPI to be monitored during the funded activity. To encourage planning for sustainability, it may be beneficial to ensure there is clarity regarding the intention of seed funding within guidance materials for future streams (and a requirement for applicants to show this has been understood within the assessment criteria).

Several participants felt that the appropriate model for funding delivery was dependent on context and setting. The availability of discrete annual funds was felt to be more appropriate for clearly defined individual activities, with set points for awards to aid planning and bid development. Funding offered on a rolling basis (over three to five years) was reported as being preferable for longer-term projects such as the development of a hub/cluster.

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Department
for Education

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Reference: DFE-RR840

ISBN: 978-1-78105-965-4

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