Sustainable improvement in multi-school groups

Research report

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About the author

Until September 2018 Toby Greany was Professor of Leadership and Innovation at the UCL Institute of Education. He is now Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. He is a trustee of Transform Trust, a primary Multi-Academy Trust based in Nottingham, and from 2016-18 he led the Trust-ED MAT Team Leadership Development Programme at UCL IOE. He has worked for the National College for School Leadership, the Design Council, the Campaign for Learning, the Cabinet Office and as Special Adviser to the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee. He has taught in Brazil, China and the UK.

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Introduction

The research included Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), Teaching School Alliances (TSAs), Federations and Local Authorities (LAs) and aimed to identify what these providers do to facilitate continuous, sustainable school improvement across the schools they work with. The research focussed on three questions:

- How do these school improvement providers identify the improvement needs of schools and the appropriate solutions to those needs?

- How do they implement necessary changes in schools in order to achieve sustainable improvement?

- How do they measure and monitor improvement?

Overall the research comprised five strands:

- An initial review of relevant literature and the development of a research design and data collection and analysis tools.

- 31 detailed case studies of MATs (n = 23), TSAs (n = 4), federations (n = 2) and LAs (n = 2). The MATs were selected on the basis of performance and size, as well as a range of other characteristics.

- A national online survey of over 500 core team members and headteachers in MATs and TSAs.

- A focus group attended by representatives from the case study groups.

- Secondary analysis of existing MAT CEO interviews and MAT school improvement models.

We found strong similarities between how MATs and federations structure and approach school improvement at scale, so we address both models together in the following sections. TSAs and LAs are then addressed separately below and in Chapter 9.

Findings

Overview: sustainable school improvement in MATs and federations

Our research identified a series of **contextual factors** which influence how MATs[1] structure and undertake their work on school improvement. These factors include:

- **age** – in particular, whether the MAT was initiated before or after 2010 (i.e. the year the Academies Act was passed)
- **size and growth model** – in particular, geographical footprint
- **context and composition** – for example, whether the MAT is made up of primarily sponsored or converter academies
- the **phase** of the MAT's schools: while most of our case study MATs included a mix of primary and secondary schools, some were focussed on a single phase
- the **beliefs and values of the MAT's founding leader(s)**.

We identified a series of high-level practices across our sample of MATs and federations which we see as necessary for sustainable improvement at scale. These practices are not consistently associated with MATs in particular performance bands, so we are not arguing that above or below average performers all operate in a distinct set of ways which explain their performance. However, we do identify differences in the quality and rigour of different approaches across our sample, which we illustrate throughout the report.

We describe two sets of high-level practices: the **five school improvement 'fundamentals'**, and the **five strategic areas for sustainability**. The five fundamentals sit within the five strategic areas as shown in Figure 1.1 below.

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[1] A number of the findings in this section relate to MATs only, reflecting the small number of federation case studies (n = 2) and the fact that we did not include federations in the survey.

How do MATs and federations sustainably improve schools?
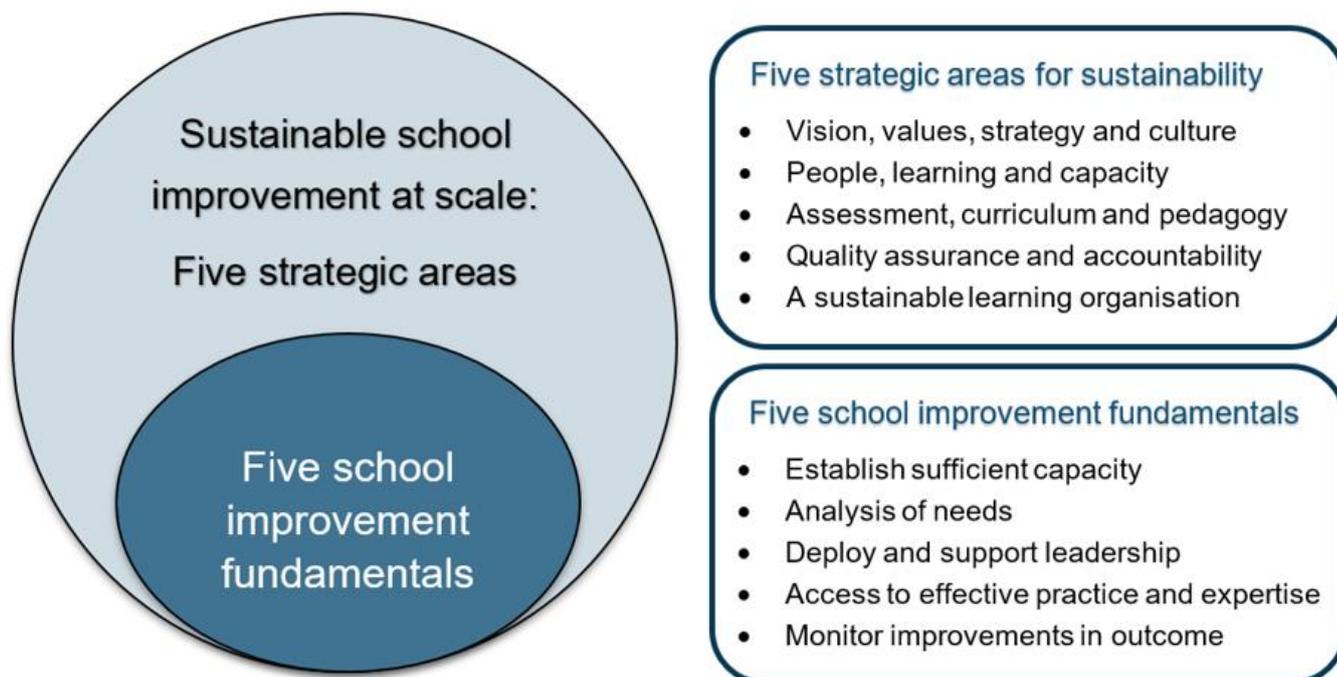
Figure 1.1: The five 'fundamentals' and five strategic areas in MATs and federations

The **five school improvement 'fundamentals'** are interlinked and operate in tandem, but we describe them sequentially as follows:

i. **Establish school improvement capacity:** MATs and federations emphasised the need to have sufficient internal capacity to support underperforming schools. This capacity might be based in the central team or in schools, but always included credible, experienced leaders who could diagnose a school's needs and co-ordinate the improvement efforts of the team. Several MATs had applied a rule-of-thumb ratio (such as 3:1 or 4:1) between the schools in their group that were able to offer school improvement capacity and the schools that needed support.

ii. **Forensic analysis of school improvement needs:** MATs and federations emphasised the need for thorough and precise due diligence of new schools that joined the group, which focussed as much on school improvement as other aspects. This forensic diagnosis provided an initial map for the school improvement support that then needed to be put in place.

iii. **Supporting and deploying leadership:** MATs and federations recognised the need for continuity of leadership at school level in order to lead the process of change, secure baseline expectations, co-ordinate the integration of additional sources of support, and build relationships with staff, parents and pupils in the school. Some used heads of school with executive leadership support, while others appointed experienced leaders to substantive roles.

iv.   **Access to effective practice and expertise at classroom and department level:** The starting point was to focus on pupil progress and raising expectations, particularly in key year groups (i.e. Years 6 and 11). MATs and federations would monitor pupil progress for these groups regularly to determine whether additional targeted interventions were required for particular pupils. Experienced middle leaders would often be deployed to support staff in the new school, providing a range of support, such as teaching, modelling practice and coaching.

v.   **Monitoring improvements in outcomes and reviewing changes in the quality of provision:** MATs and federations undertook regular reviews of progress in the schools they were supporting. These included reviews of pupil assessment data; informal visits and periodic formal reviews. These mechanisms informed the allocation of central resources to schools that required additional support.

We observed the five 'fundamentals' being applied to a greater or lesser extent in all our MAT and federation case studies, but **it was the groups focussed on working to stabilise and repair[2] underperforming schools that applied them most clearly**.

We argue that **the five 'fundamentals' are necessary but not sufficient for sustainable improvement at scale**. In order to achieve sustainable improvement, MATs and federations must also focus on the **five strategic areas** and fifteen sub-areas shown in Figure 1.2 below. The following sections address each of the five areas in turn.

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[2] The terms 'stabilise' and 'repair' are taken from the DfE's MAT good practice guidance (2016). See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576240/Multi-academy_trusts_good_practice_guidance_and_expectations_for_growth.pdf accessed 6.9.18.

Figure 1.2: Five strategic areas for sustainable improvement in MATs and federations

Vision, values, strategy and culture

An ambitious vision underpinned by shared values and a high-trust culture

MAT and federation vision statements are invariably aspirational, but tend to be grounded in quite specific missions aimed at **enhancing outcomes for children and schools** and at **making a reality of social mobility**.

We identify two broad approaches to defining the mission and values. One group were more clearly performance driven, for example using Ofsted language to reflect their core mission (e.g. 'Good or better every day'). The second group retained a strong focus on performance but also reflected a wider purpose and ethos which distinguished their approach. These wider purposes took different forms, but examples included commitment to a faith-based ethos; to a comprehensive intake and not excluding any pupils; to a particular pedagogical or curriculum-related philosophy; and to a particular set of organisational routines, such as restorative practice.

Central and school-based staff in the majority of MATs and federations could articulate the group's vision and values. In a small minority of cases (including two above average performing MATs) it was less clear that a shared vision and set of values had been established. In several below average performing trusts, senior leaders were consciously working to shift the existing vision, values and culture of the organisation.

MATs and federations used different **approaches to ensure that the vision, mission and values were embedded within their schools**, including simple communication devices (such as diagrams and mnemonics) and, in some cases, requiring schools to adopt the values within their curriculum.

Where the vision and values were understood and subscribed to by staff, there was a sense that this helped to support the development of a shared and high-trust culture. This was most evident in MATs and federations where the mission included but went beyond a focus on improving exam scores and Ofsted grades and where the values translated in meaningful ways into informing improvement practices and cultures in schools. In these groups we interviewed school-based leaders who explained that the vision and values informed their work and were meaningful and motivational to them personally.

Senior leaders were key to ensuring that the vision and values were communicated and modelled in the daily life of the MAT or federation. However, some senior leaders acknowledged that it was not always easy to sustain a clear link between the group's espoused vision and values and the day-to-day realities of school improvement.

We show how **different leadership styles and approaches could influence the ethos and culture of the MAT or federation.** For example, we contrast three approaches to decision-making and the allocation of resources between schools – directive, paternalistic and transparent. The extent to which schools across the MAT or federation participate in shared decision-making, through dialogue and co-design processes, appears to influence the strength and collective ownership of the vision.

A coherent but responsive strategy, with clarity on core and school-based roles

All our MAT and federation leaders grappled with **how to balance growth and capacity**. Partly as a result of growth, MATs and federations were **continually reflecting on and developing their approach to school improvement**. A minority could articulate clearly how their approach had become more systematic and strategic over time.

The contextual differences between MATs highlighted above had often led to very different school improvement approaches being adopted in the past, but **we observed a level of convergence in approaches over time**.

Most MATs and federations have an explicit school improvement strategy. In the survey, MAT leaders said they focussed most on identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools; improving the quality of leadership in all schools; meeting the needs of disadvantaged children; and fostering collaboration between schools.

A small minority of MATs do not have an explicit school improvement strategy.
Furthermore, we found that it is rare for MATs and federations to have a comprehensive
strategy for wider aspects of sustainable improvement, for example addressing how to
move schools from 'good to great.'

Most MATs and federations are attempting to adopt a partnership approach to
implementing their strategy, with high levels of trust and alignment between the central
team and school-based leaders. Within this, **there are three common models for
structuring school improvement – school-to-school support, centralised and
earned autonomy**[3] – with most MATs and federations adopting hybrid models. The
direction of travel over time and as trusts grow is towards larger central teams that
combine monitoring, support and challenge functions, usually drawing on some school-
to-school support to augment this central capacity and giving higher performing schools
some level of earned autonomy (but still expecting them to participate in the group).

Securing alignment on shared practices which support improvement at scale

The question of **where and how to standardise or align practice** across a MAT or
federation and where to give schools and teachers the autonomy to make their own
decisions is significant but often contentious. Most leaders were concerned that if they
imposed standardisation it would reduce professional ownership and limit the scope for
adaptation to the needs of different schools and contexts. However, at the same time,
they saw benefits in aligning or even standardising practices where possible, since this
could help ensure that effective practices were shared and applied consistently.

We adopted three core definitions in the research:

- **standardised practice** – 'a single required approach that all schools must adopt'

- **aligned practice** – 'an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis'

- **autonomous practice** – 'each individual school being able to decide its own approach.'

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[3] In the survey we defined 'earned autonomy' as follows: 'Individual schools are largely autonomous and
can decide on their own approach to school improvement, except in cases where performance is poor.' In
our case study visits we found that this definition was accurate, but that this was not interpreted to mean
that higher performing schools were left to their own devices. Rather, such schools would still be monitored
and would usually be expected to be active contributors to the overall success of the MAT. As per the
definition, they would also have greater discretion to decide on their preferred approach to school
improvement, for example in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy.

We identified important **differences in how different MATs and federations work to develop shared practices**, with three approaches apparent:

- **Roll-out** – an approach is developed (usually in the lead school) and then codified and packaged into policies, handbooks, resources and training, through which it is implemented in other schools
- **Co-design** – an approach is agreed by all schools as part of a facilitated process, for example through focussed enquiry projects, subject networks and/or development work by lead practitioners/SLEs. The agreed approach is formalised through the development of agreed policies, resources and training programmes.
- **Organic** – common approaches emerge through a process of discussion, joint working and 'behaviour mimicking' between colleagues from different schools, but these approaches are not necessarily formalised.

Once developed and formalised, an approach might then be agreed as standardised (i.e. prescribed) or aligned (i.e. voluntary). **This often depended on the performance of the school, with underperforming schools given less choice** (i.e. earned autonomy).

We found that **the majority of MATs and federations standardise or align practices in relation to pupil assessment and data reporting**.

The majority of MATs and federations are not adopting a standardised approach to curriculum and pedagogy between schools in the group, although many are working to align or standardise practice in some areas. A small minority of our sample (n = 3) were highly standardised in most areas and around five were moving to become more standardised or aligned. Several of the above average performers were consciously resisting standardisation in these areas, arguing that higher performing schools needed a good level of autonomy in order to meet contextual needs and drive continuing improvement and innovation.

The process of aligning or standardising practices can be challenging for leaders, particularly in MATs and federations where the existing culture is predicated on high levels of school autonomy. While a minority of leaders had adopted a 'bullish' approach and were driving through changes, the majority appeared to be working more gradually to achieve consensus.

People, learning and capacity

How do school groups work to recruit, develop and retain high quality staff?

Most MATs **employ staff on central contracts** and many have developed a **group-wide approach to performance management**, which some had used to embed their specific values and priorities.

Very few of our case study MATs or federations had an explicit strategy for **monitoring or reducing staff workloads**, although several argued that the use of common systems and approaches could help save time and reduce workload.

Most MATs and federations have developed a strategic approach to the **recruitment and development of new teachers**. Recruitment was usually co-ordinated centrally, although individual schools usually selected the candidate. Most MATs and federations offered significant Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and continuous professional development and learning (CPDL) for staff, often operating through an in-house Teaching School and/or SCITT. Programmes tended to be highly practical and were often combined with wider networks and on-the-job learning, for example through secondments.

School-based leaders reported that **professional learning and development was a significant strength in most MATs and federations**, but we do highlight a minority of examples where practice in this area is much less developed.

How do school groups identify, develop and deploy leadership expertise across schools?

Approaches to identifying and developing leadership potential are broadly similar between different MATs and federations, although we observed differences in the rigour and focus of how these approaches were applied.

While many MATs and federations ran their own **leadership development programmes**, these were always augmented by more personalised approaches that included mentoring, coaching and secondments.

Several of the CEOs we interviewed were clear that they continued to see themselves as **leaders of school improvement**, although many found this difficult due to the need to focus on back office, efficiency and growth issues.

We found differences in how MATs and federations **conceptualised the role and nature of the most senior leadership role at school level**. Two approaches were apparent: i) a Head of School model overseen by an executive head, and ii) a substantive headteacher model (usually overseen by the CEO or regional director, but sometimes by an executive head). Several MATs adopted both models depending on circumstances.

There is wide variation in how Executive Head roles operate, but they generally provide a mixture of monitoring, challenge, support and, where needed, direct capacity for the schools that they are responsible for. In some cases, Executive Heads act more like regional directors: co-ordinating cluster-wide meetings and activity, line managing headteachers and evaluating school performance.

How do school groups move knowledge around, within and between schools?

Moving knowledge and expertise around was a priority for our MATs and federations and most saw this as a strength. However, knowledge sharing was sometimes difficult to sustain and some acknowledged that schools are not good at evaluating practice and drawing out what has made something successful.

The approaches adopted broadly map on to the three approaches for developing consistent practice identified above: **roll-out, co-design** and **organic**. For MATs that adopted a roll-out approach, there was an emphasis on codifying knowledge into manuals and procedures that could be consistently applied through defined training packages or by approved personnel. More common was a focus on co-design and organic knowledge mobilisation through networks. In these MATs and federations, **expert staff, usually based in the core team but sometimes working as SLEs in schools, were key to leading the networks and co-design processes**.

Some MATs and federations used 'enabling routines' as a way to support knowledge sharing and build consistency. These routines were tightly defined processes which allowed for significant adaptation in how they were applied across different contexts: examples included lesson study, peer review and incremental coaching. Where such routines were applied consistently, they appeared important in creating a consistent language and approach whilst retaining flexibility and ownership.

Assessment, curriculum and pedagogy

How do MATs and federations develop shared age related expectations and a consistent approach to assessment across schools?

Assessment practices were mostly standardised or aligned in MATs and federations, with curriculum and pedagogy more likely to be autonomous.

One reason MATs and federations had become more consistent in their approach to assessment was that the **predicted grades supplied by schools during an academic year had not been accurate.**

Developing a common approach to assessment was somewhat different between phases. In primary schools, the starting point was to develop common Age-Related Expectations (ARE), in particular for English and Maths. These were then used to inform moderation activities across schools. Some trusts also used common assessment packages. In Key Stage 4, the focus was more firmly on assessment, in particular the choice of a single exam board for all schools to follow. This brought a number of benefits, including a shared timetable and set of expectations for all teachers and the ability to undertake a single 'MAT mock' to track progress mid-year. A small minority of MATs had not been able to agree on a shared approach to assessment.

The benefits of aligning assessment practices appear to relate most closely to their use for quality assurance and accountability purposes, but there are also perceived **benefits for teachers** where such practices support shared expectations for learning and a shared language.

How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision?

We heard from several MATs and federations that were committed to a broad and balanced curriculum. In practice, **we saw relatively few examples of MATs and federations using their scale to offer curriculum enrichment opportunities or to develop all-through approaches to the curriculum**. The MATs that did do so tended to be the larger ones, in particular those working in deprived contexts.

Curriculum standardisation or alignment was more common in secondary than primary. In some cases it followed from the adoption of a single exam board, with shared planning documents and schemes of work developed to support this. In other cases it involved a shared commitment to a particular approach to the curriculum, such as the importance of 'education with character'. In the small number of MATs that were adopting a highly standardised approach overall, the curriculum was also standardised.

How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for teaching, learning and student success?

We set out examples which illustrate a **spectrum of practice in relation to pedagogy, from tightly prescribed at one end to school and teacher autonomy at the other**. At the standardised end, leaders used detailed descriptors to train teachers and evaluate lessons. At the other end of the spectrum were MATs and federations that had abolished lesson observations and where practices ranged from 'honouring didactic and subject based, through to creative and student centred approaches'. The focus in these latter groups was on sharing research and evidence of effective practices.

Whether or not a MAT or federation chooses to align or standardise its approach to pedagogy broadly correlates with performance: below average performing MATs and those working to stabilise underperforming schools tended to be more prescriptive, while above average performing MATs and those working with higher performing schools tended to allow more autonomy to schools and teachers.

MATs that had adopted aligned or standardised approaches to pedagogy had often **encountered difficulties in shifting practices across their schools.**

It was rare, but not unknown, to see MATs and federations using innovative staffing models in support of pupil learning.

Quality Assurance and Accountability

How do MATs and federations develop fit for purpose collection, analysis and reporting of school- and group-wide performance data?

MAT survey respondents were extremely positive about their use of data, seeing this as an **area of strength**.

In most MATs and federations, it was common for data to be used on a routine basis by central teams and schools to **inform their improvement work**. This was supported by a **culture of transparency**, with school performance on different metrics openly compared as a spur to conversations around how to improve.

Most of our case study MATs and federations were looking for **ways to streamline data collection and reporting processes where appropriate**. Nevertheless, we heard from some school leaders that **data collection processes were sometimes time consuming and not always productive**. Several of the larger MATs had established dedicated **data teams and management information systems** to support the collection and analysis of data.

Several MATs and federations were seeking to **strengthen school self-evaluation**, as opposed to reporting for accountability purposes.

Most of our case study MATs and federations produced 'school on a page'-style reports that combined pupil assessment and other data to **track performance, monitor risks and hold schools accountable in comparable ways**.

How do MATs and federations use quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate school performance and to inform next steps?

Assessing school performance and capacity was a continual process of triangulating data from multiple sources. This process was usually driven by the timetable for collecting and analysing pupil assessment data – that is, half-termly or termly.

Pupil assessment data was combined with more **formal school reviews** undertaken by members of the core team or an external reviewer. These reviews provided a **rounded assessment of the school's performance**, often as a way of preparing for an Ofsted inspection. Where staff from other schools were involved, this provided a developmental process for them and helped build a sense of collective endeavour.

MAT and federation leaders gathered **soft intelligence** on their schools, for example through regular visits, which they used to triangulate with other sources of data.

MATs and federations undertook periodic reviews of this evidence to make **decisions about levels of risk** and where and how to allocate central team resources in order to address any issues identified.

How do MATs and federations provide appropriate challenge and support for all member schools?

Schools in MATs and federations are overseen and held accountable in different ways; for example by the CEO, by the School Improvement Director or Hub/Regional Director, by an externally commissioned SIP or by an executive head.

MAT core team members and headteachers who responded to the survey were **strongly positive about the challenge and support they receive from their trust**.

MATs and federations start by agreeing **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and targets** with schools each year, which are then used in headteacher performance management reviews and to monitor school performance.

The CEO or leader responsible for overseeing the school then engages in **regular review meetings** and conversations with headteachers/heads of school and, sometimes, members of the Local Governing Body (LGB). There is a balance to be struck in these conversations between **accountability, challenge** and **support**. Effective models relied on 'self-confident, high quality leadership in schools' but in some cases there was evidence of a **dependency culture**, with headteachers relying too heavily on the central team for advice and support.

MATs and federations as Sustainable Learning Organisations

Our evidence indicates that MATs and federations must operate as **Learning Organisations** as they seek to grow and respond to a rapidly changing external environment. This involves three aspects – governance and the back-office, disciplined innovation and double loop learning.

On **governance**, we found that several MATs had created a 'standards committee' below the main board in order to scrutinise school improvement activity, but this picture was not consistent and several CEOs acknowledged challenges in working to develop a robust and strategic governance model.

Related to this was **how to get the roles and relationships right between the main board, the executive and Local Governing Bodies**. We found that most MATs and one of the two federations had kept their LGBs and had retained their role in scrutinising school-level performance data.

Back-office services were described by many school-based interviewees as consistently high quality and effective: this could free up money (which could then be spent on school improvement) and save time and effort for school-based leaders. However, developing high quality back-office services was not always easy for CEOs, particularly those in smaller groups that lacked scale.

Disciplined innovation:[4] we did encounter examples of MATs and federations using **research and evidence** to inform improvement work, but such practices were far from common or consistent. Disciplined innovation also requires MATs and federations to **learn from and with the wider system:** however, this was another area where there were relatively few concrete examples in our case study visits.

Double loop learning:[5] We identified numerous examples of MATs and federations that were reflecting on their approach to school improvement and working to develop and adapt it over time, often as a result of reflection on their underlying values and beliefs. A small minority of MATs and federations are drawing on pupil and staff views in a systematic way, but this is an area that could be strengthened in most cases.

Teaching School Alliances

TSAs adopt broadly the same five school improvement 'fundamentals' in their school-to-school support work as MATs, but they apply them in different ways. All four case study alliances relied on school-to-school support, rather than a centrally employed team or externally commissioned experts, as their main approach for supporting specific schools. All four alliances had focussed attention on building the skills and capacity of their designated NLEs, LLEs and SLEs. Much of the school-to-school support provided by TSAs comes from schools requesting support based on their own internal evaluations and reviews. The ability to draw on different areas of expertise and to connect schools into different projects and networks was a feature of the TSA model that often differed from the MAT approach. There were some clear examples of how TSAs were monitoring the impact of their work, although these practices were not consistent across our sample.

The most immediate way in which TSAs support school improvement is through their school-to-school support work and their work to designate and deploy SLEs. However, **the wider TSA remit for capacity building, for example in relation to ITT, can also be seen to contribute to sustainable improvement**.

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[4] Disciplined innovation (Greany and Maxwell, 2017) is defined here as 'doing things differently in order to do them better', with an emphasis on using enquiry, research and evaluation to inform and assess improvements.
[5] Double loop learning (Agyris and Schon, 1978) entails the modification of goals or decision-making rules in the light of experience.

The case studies reflected **significant differences in how TSAs interpret and enact their remit**, partly as a result of contextual differences in each area but also as a result of the particular strengths and interests of each Teaching School. There was also **wide variation in how the four TSAs were working with their local LAs and with other TSAs and providers in their area**.

In all four case studies, we found that **most interviewees were committed to the partnership and valued the work of the TSA**.

In the survey, TSA core team members and headteachers rated the following areas highest in terms of **focus**: Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practice; Improving the quality of leadership in all schools; Professional development and feedback/coaching for staff; and Fostering collaboration between schools.

Several TSA interviewees described intensive school-to-school support that involved multiple staff and lasted over at least one academic year. This model is invariably focussed on **'working with, not doing to' autonomous schools**. Many of our TSA interviewees, in particular leaders in schools that had received support, argued that this was a strength of the model.

In one case it was clear that the TSA model could be effective in preventing problems from occurring in schools, by **providing 'upstream' advice, networks and support which helped to avoid schools becoming isolated**. This 'upstream' role was less fully developed in the other three TSAs.

Local Authorities

The two case study LAs are in very different contexts and are working to fulfil their school improvement remits in quite different ways. One is a shire county with above average performance historically that some years ago entered into a joint venture with a private sector provider for all its school improvement provision. This was seen as broadly successful by interviewees, not least because services had been sustained at a time when many other authorities had either cut provision or moved to a fully traded offer. The unitary authority took the decision to disband its in-house school improvement team some years ago and has outsourced the delivery of school improvement services to the local TSA. It has been encouraging its remaining maintained schools to join a MAT.

Despite these differences, both LAs are focussed on **building local strategic partnerships** that involve TSAs and other stakeholders in monitoring standards and in brokering and providing school-to-school support. In this respect they can be seen to be broadly in line with the findings from the previous LGA research (Isos Partnership, 2018).

Conclusion

Addressing the research questions: how do school groups identify and address school needs and how do they measure and monitor change?

The study reveals important differences in how MATs and federations operate to secure school improvement. Some of these differences relate to the context and scale of the MAT or federation, while others appear to reflect the values, beliefs and experiences of key founding leaders. We do not identify specific practices that can be consistently associated with MATs in particular performance bands, so we do not make claims as to the effectiveness of the different approaches that we describe, but we do highlight examples that appear both more and less rigorous and persuasive.

We identify five 'fundamentals' and five strategic areas which all our MAT and federation case studies were working to address, to a greater or lesser extent, and which we see as necessary for sustainable improvement at scale. We also indicate areas where there is a level of convergence in how these areas are being addressed.

We set out areas where there is arguably scope for the sector as a whole to improve. Examples include the extent to which MATs and federations are operating as learning organisations and the dearth of strategies for moving schools from 'good to great' across a group.

The research on TSAs and LAs is less comprehensive but important nonetheless, not least because it allowed us to compare these models with practice in MATs and federations. Two findings from this strand of the research are worth highlighting. Firstly, the way in which TSAs in particular can operate 'upstream', providing support and capacity building for schools to help them avoid dropping in performance; and secondly, the role of local strategic partnerships in helping to bring together key stakeholders across an area to work in concert towards sustainable improvement for all schools.

A typology of MATs and federations

We set out a typology of MATs and federations based on four dimensions. These dimensions reflect extensive research into organisational and institutional development and performance across different sectors[6] as well as our own assessment of the key factors that differentiated the approaches we observed in this study.

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[6] Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organisation* (1986) provides a good synthesis of work on organisational theory. For work on institutional theory and institutional logics see Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012). For an example of how these have been applied to current school structures in England see Ron Glatter's chapter 'Schools as organisations or institutions: defining core purposes' in Earley and Greany (2017).

Detailed definitions for each dimension are provided in the Conclusion, but at headline level they address the following questions:

- **Purpose** – are the vision and values distinctive, meaningful and embedded?

- **Process** – is the operating model clear, flexible and effective in securing continuous improvement at all levels?

- **Participation** – are key stakeholders engaged and included in decision-making?

- **Performance** – is there a clear and sustainable focus on enabling staff and pupils to learn and improve?

We provide illustrative examples of MATs and federations that are particularly strong in each of the four areas and assess the strengths and risks associated with each approach. We suggest that MAT and federation leaders might want to evaluate the strength of their current approach in each area and to consider areas for development.

Significance and implications of the research

This research is arguably significant for several reasons, and a number of key implications emerge from it.

Firstly, it sets out original empirical findings based on a large-scale study in an area that has not been extensively researched until now. In this the research complements but goes beyond existing research. It highlights the continuing importance of stable and effective leadership at school level, but also captures the ways in which school-to-school collaboration and support can generate enhanced capacity for school improvement at scale. It focusses in detail on issues of standardisation, alignment and autonomy and relates these to findings on knowledge mobilisation across a group. It sets out a framework based on four dimensions (purpose, performance, participation and process) which we see as key differentiators between the different MATs and federations we observed. Ultimately, **we argue that MATs and federations must learn to operate as both hierarchies and networks,[7] drawing on a mix of central and school-based capacity and with aligned practices in appropriate areas, in order to effect change.**

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[7] 'Hierarchy' in this context refers to the formal authority structures of the MAT or federation (such as the Board, the CEO and the senior leadership team) and the ways in which they exercise control (for example through targets, policies, rules and standard operating procedures, monitoring and performance management). 'Network' in this context refers to the formal and informal mechanisms within a MAT or federation which support the development of lateral and vertical relationships, partnerships and knowledge sharing based on reciprocity and trust. See Greany and Higham, 2018, for a fuller discussion of these issues in the context of wider system governance.

Secondly, the research provides a system-wide perspective, by including TSAs and LAs alongside MATs and federations. This highlights **the importance of 'upstream' support for all schools**, to help them avoid poor performance; and also the potential of **local strategic partnerships** for bringing all providers together across an area to work in partnership towards the success of all schools.

1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned University College London Institute for Education (UCL IOE), in partnership with Isos Partnership, to undertake this research project into the question: 'How do high-performing school improvement providers sustainably improve schools?' The research was undertaken in the spring and summer of 2018.

1.1 Research focus and approach

The research focussed on providers with strategic responsibility for whole-school improvement, operating at scale. The research included MATs, Teaching School Alliances (TSAs), Federations and Local Authorities (LAs). It aimed to identify what these providers do to facilitate continuous, sustainable school improvement across the schools they work with. It focussed on three questions which the DfE set out in its original specification for the project:

- *How do these school improvement providers identify the improvement needs of schools and the appropriate solutions to those needs?*

- *How do they implement necessary changes in schools in order to achieve sustainable improvement?*

- *How do they measure and monitor improvement?*

In assessing 'sustainable school improvement', as a broad indicator we have adapted a definition from Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink's work on sustainable leadership:

> Sustainable improvement is improvement which goes beyond temporary gains in achievement scores to create lasting, meaningful improvements in learning and school performance across an entire school. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004).

Hargreaves and Fink highlight the need for improvement that has length, depth and breadth, avoiding quick turnarounds that are not subsequently sustained. Clearly, our study was not designed as a longitudinal evaluation and we were not able to fully assess the length, depth and breadth of the improvement work underway. However, for the MAT group we were able to sample based on how these groups had performed over the three years prior to our visit and to compare the approaches used by MATs in different performance bands (above average, average and below average). Furthermore, by interviewing leaders at different levels of seniority in central teams and schools, we were also able to assess the depth and breadth of changes that had been introduced.

1.2 Research design, sampling and analysis

Overall the research involved four strands:[8]

- case study visits to MATs, TSAs, federations and LAs

- a national survey of core team members and headteachers in MATs and TSAs

- a focus group attended by representatives from the case study groups

- secondary analysis of existing CEO interviews and MAT school improvement models.

The research received **ethical approval** through the UCL IOE ethics committee. Case study sites and interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and so are not named in this report.

In designing the research approach, we drew on an **initial literature review of school improvement at scale** as well as a set of frameworks that had been designed by members of the research team in partnership with a range of MAT leaders. In particular, we drew on a framework that had been developed by members of the research team, initially as part of the UCL IOE Trust-ED MAT Team Development Programme and subsequently as part of a DfE project in consultation with MAT leaders in the South West. We also drew on a framework developed by the DfE for use in its MAT Development Programme (DfE, 2018b). We used these frameworks to structure our data collection tools and analysis (see Annex A for details). In Chapter 3 we set out a structure for sustainable improvement in MATs and federations which shows how we have developed these earlier conceptual frameworks in the light of our research findings.

The **sample for the case studies** was mainly focussed on MATs (n = 23, several of which included one or more TSAs). It also included a smaller number of TSAs (n = 4), federations (n = 2) and Local Authorities (n = 2).[9] The larger proportion of MATs in the sample reflects the fact that there are many more MATs in the English school system than any of the other three models. Furthermore, school improvement in MATs has not been extensively studied until now, whereas TSAs (Gu et al., 2015), federations

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[8] Further details of the research methodology, including the case study and survey samples, are included in Annex A.

[9] A recent study by members of the research team has explored the ways in which different Local Authorities are working to address school improvement – the final report can be found here: https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/LGA SI report FINAL Jan 2018.pdf.

(Chapman et al., 2012) and LAs (Isos Partnership, 2018) have all been the subject of publicly funded research and evaluations.

To select the MAT sample, we used the DfE's published MAT performance tables for 2016–17 (DfE, 2018a), which compare the performance of all MATs in the country that have contained three or more schools for at least three years.[10] The DfE tables compare MATs on a range of measures but prioritise progress and attainment measures at KS2 and KS4, showing whether they are significantly above, below or about average performers. **We selected MATs from each of these three performance bands, but with a focus on above average performers** (13 above average, 5 average and 5 below average). Within this sample **we selected MATs in three size bands**, as follows: 6 small trusts (3–6 schools), 9 medium-sized trusts (7–14 schools) and 8 large trusts (15+ schools). Finally, **we sought to achieve a balance in terms of trusts with different characteristics and working with schools in different phases, circumstances and geographical areas**. For example, we included three diocesan-linked trusts; trusts that are primary, secondary and mixed phase in their focus; trusts with higher and lower proportions of sponsored academies; and trusts based across urban and rural areas in the North, Midlands and South. The main characteristics of each of the case study trusts are given in Table A.1 in Annex A.

Given the limited availability of national comparative performance data, it was not possible to identify TSAs, federations and Local Authorities by performance level. Therefore, we selected our sample in agreement with the DfE in order to reflect a range of different contexts and approaches. Further details are given in Annex A.

Each case study visit lasted between one and two days and involved interviews with a range of central and school-based leaders. This included the MAT CEOs in all cases and also members of the central school improvement team, executive heads, heads/principals, deputy heads/principals, and middle leaders, with visits to two or three schools in most cases. Similarly, in TSAs and federations we interviewed a mix of central and school-based leaders, including schools that had been recipients of school-to-school support. In the two LAs we interviewed senior staff within the LA and also MAT CEOs, TSA headteachers and other school-based leaders. In several cases the interviews with

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[10] The DfE tables draw on results from the academic year 2016–17, providing a picture of performance for all MATs that have contained at least three schools for at least three years, so were the most up-to-date data at the time when the sampling was undertaken. As the DfE notes, 'explanations for MAT performance can be complex' (p1), for example as a result of the differing profiles of schools on entry to a MAT. Therefore, we recognise that the classification of our sample MATs as above- or below-average performers can be seen as problematic. In presenting our findings we seek to recognise these issues and do not draw simple comparisons between different performance bands. See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/multi-academy-trust-performance-measures-2016-to-2017.

middle leaders in schools were undertaken in small groups. In total we interviewed 231 leaders in MATs, 32 leaders in TSAs, 18 leaders in federations and 29 leaders in LAs.

The interviews were semi-structured and included use of a set of standard templates that had been developed based on the initial literature review and the existing frameworks referenced above (see Figures A.1-A.4 in Annex A). Each case study was written up using a standard template and was then coded using a combination of existing themes derived from the project conceptual framework and themes that emerged from the data. A detailed cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify common themes and findings using a set of analytical frameworks. In order to ensure a consistent interpretation of the findings, each case study was analysed by at least two members of the research team using a set of common analysis grids. Three members of the team undertook the cross-case analysis separately and agreed the emerging codes and themes through an iterative process. These emerging findings were tested and refined through a workshop involving the wider research team and through the **focus group** with case study leaders.

The **online survey** was completed by 505 respondents from MATs and TSAs in April and May 2018. Overall there were:

- 209 responses from members of MAT core teams, of which the majority (159) were Chief Executives (CEOs)

- 150 responses from headteachers in MATs

- 87 responses from members of TSA core teams, largely split between TSA Directors/Leads (49), CEO or Executive Heads (17) and headteachers (14)

- 58 responses from headteachers in TSAs.

The survey findings were analysed in a number of ways. School-level responses were linked to national data from Edubase/Get Information About Schools, allowing for more detailed analysis based on the background characteristics of schools. Responses were analysed by size and composition of MAT, including factors such as the proportion of sponsored and converter academies and the Ofsted grades of schools.

We also undertook **secondary analysis** of 35 interviews with MAT CEOs undertaken as part of an existing UCL IOE research project, as well as 31 school improvement models developed by MAT leadership teams as part of the Trust-ED leadership programme.

A report or output was produced for each strand of the project, synthesising the key findings. These separate outputs were then brought together into an overarching set of findings which were discussed with members of the DfE Steering Group at two workshops. This report synthesises the findings from across the different strands,

drawing primarily on the cross-case analysis of the case studies and the survey data but also signalling where we draw on data from the other strands where appropriate.

1.3 About the report structure

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of existing evidence relating to sustainable improvement in school groups, based on the initial literature review. It focusses on MATs, TSAs, federations and LAs as well as wider evidence on improvement approaches in England, including system leadership and school-to-school support. It also looks briefly at collaborative group structures in other countries that have similar features to MATs and federations.

The remainder of the report sets out the findings from this study.

Chapters 3–8 focus on the findings relating to MATs and federations, since we found strong overlaps between the improvement approaches adopted by these two hard governance structures. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the findings on MATs and federations. It describes a set of contextual factors which influenced the school improvement models adopted by our case study MATs and federations. It then describes five interlinked practices – the school improvement 'fundamentals' – that we observed in all our case study MATs and federations, in particular where they were working to support vulnerable and underperforming schools. It also sets out five strategic areas that our case study MATs and federations focussed on as they sought to develop sustainable models for improvement at scale. These five strategic areas are addressed in turn in Chapters 4–8.

Chapter 9 focuses on the findings relating to TSAs and LAs. These two groups have different remits and scope to support schools, but we found synergies between their approaches in several areas and so report the findings in a single chapter.

The Conclusion draws together and discusses the findings and their implications. It also sets out a typology of MATs and federations, based on four dimensions – purpose, performance, participation and process. These dimensions are derived from existing research into organisational development and performance as well as our assessment of the key factors that differentiated the approaches we observed. The Conclusion sets out four typical approaches that MATs and federations adopt as they undertake school improvement at scale and assesses the strengths and risks associated with each one.

2. What do we know from existing research on sustainable improvement in school groups?

2.1 Introduction

This section briefly summarises existing national and international evidence on school improvement across multi-school groups. In summarising this evidence it is important to note that the rapid pace of change in school structures and oversight in England over the past 10 years has made research challenging and the evidence base is far from comprehensive (Armstrong, 2015; Courtney, 2015). Notwithstanding these limitations, we start by reviewing evidence on federations, TSAs, MATs and LAs in England, with a focus on studies that have sought to evaluate the impact of these structures. We then draw on a wider set of studies, including evaluations of the London and City Challenges and other models of system leadership and school-to-school support, in order to provide an overview of what is currently known about how leaders and their teams work to secure improvement in vulnerable and underperforming schools. Finally, we review evidence from international studies of organisational models that can be seen as similar to MATs and federations in England, because they operate multiple schools within a single governance structure.

2.2 Current evidence on federations, MATs, TSAs and LAs

Federations here refers to groups of two or more maintained schools that operate under a single governing body. Federations have developed in England since the Education Act 2002, often in the primary sector as a means of sustaining small schools or as a way to facilitate cross-phase (e.g. primary-secondary) or cross-sector (e.g. mainstream-special) working, but also as a mechanism for providing school-to-school support between higher and lower performing schools.

In their first study, Chapman et al. (2009) identified 122 federations encompassing 264 schools across the 50 Local Authorities they surveyed.[11] The majority of these federations were small (i.e. two schools) and most had been formed in the years immediately before the study (2006–2008). Chapman et al. repeated and updated the

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[11] In both the 2009 and 2011 studies, Chapman et al. included a category that they called 'Academy federations'; this would not fit the definition above, which relates only to maintained schools. The proportions of these 'Academy federations' were small in both studies, although they increased over the period (2% in 2009 and 8.6% in 2011). In the 2011 study, Chapman et al. report evidence of impact from these 'Academy federations' in the final year of their analysis (2010). We assume that these 'Academy federations' now operate as MATs, reflecting both changes in terminology and the development of legislation and guidance in this area since 2010.

analysis two years later (Chapman et al., 2011), using Propensity Score Matching to compare schools in different categories of federation with non-federated schools that had similar characteristics and performance profiles. Both studies indicated that there is an overall positive 'federation effect' (i.e. impact), but that this is mainly evident in 'performance federations' (where a strong school has paired with one or more weaker schools) and that this impact takes two to four years to emerge. In the 2011 study, Chapman et al. included a qualitative evaluation of a sample of federations, which identified the importance of strong leadership and the use of school-to-school professional development and support as a means of challenging orthodoxies and changing practice in the supported schools involved in performance federations.

A **Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)** is a company and charity that oversees a group of academies, with a single board responsible for all aspects of operation and performance (West and Wolfe, 2018). MATs can include both converter and sponsored academies and are often formed by a successful school that sponsors one or more underperforming school in a similar model to the 'performance federations' identified by Chapman et al. (2009). The number of MATs has increased rapidly since the passage of the Academies Act in 2010. By July 2018 there were 1082 MATs overseeing 5850 academies in England.[12]

Recent years have seen a number of statistical analyses which compare the performance of academies in MATs, in terms of pupil outcomes, with the performance of all schools and, in some cases, the performance of LAs (Andrews, 2016, 2017, 2018; Andrews and Perera, 2017; DfE, 2015, 2016a, 2018a; Hutchings and Francis, 2017; Hutchings, Francis and Kirby, 2015, 2016; Hutchings, Francis and De Vries, 2014; Worth, 2015, 2016; Eyles and Machin, 2015; Machin and Silva, 2013). The earlier reports generally focus on performance in sponsored secondary academies, reflecting the fact that the MAT sector was initially focussed on addressing underperformance in the most challenging schools. Overall these studies highlight the range of methodological challenges involved in classifying MATs and assessing their performance, given the pace of change in both policy and practice in this area over the past decade.

The longest-running analysis of academy chains[13] is by Hutchings et al. (2014–17), who have a particular focus on the impact of these groups for disadvantaged students.

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[12] Source: 'Open academies and academy projects awaiting approval', Department for Education, July 2018: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development accessed 6.8.18. This figure includes a small number of Umbrella trusts and MATs that include multiple trusts.

[13] Hutchings et al. refer to 'academy chains' (rather than MATs specifically) and include a small number of umbrella trusts and MATs with multiple trusts in their analysis. Given their focus on disadvantage, the early reports focus on sponsored secondary academies, but the 2017 report includes both converter and primary academies.

Hutchings and Francis (2017: 5) conclude that there is significant variability within and between academy chains: while 'a small number of chains continue to achieve impressive outcomes for their disadvantaged students against a range of measures … a larger group of low-performing chains are achieving results that are not improving'. The 2017 report by Hutchings and Francis also identified a number of academy chains that had improved their performance between 2016 and 2017.

The Department for Education (2015a) initially published comparisons between academy chains and local authorities (LAs), while Andrews (2016, 2018) adopted a similar methodology. The results showed few differences between local authorities and MATs on aggregate and wide variation between different MATs and different LAs. The DfE's 2017 and 2018 analyses focus on established MATs, comparing them to all other state-funded mainstream schools using the newly introduced pupil progress measures at KS2 and KS4. The 2018 report (which was used as the basis for identifying the sample in this study) analysed pupil progress measures using 2017 data for schools that had been in a MAT for at least three years, with 155 MATs included at KS2 and 62 at KS4. The broad picture that emerges is that primary MATs are performing more closely in line with the national average, while secondary MATs continue to perform below the national average overall.

Relatively few studies have focussed on analysing the performance of MATs based on their specific characteristics. The DfE (2016a) analysed MATs, comparing them against national benchmarks for different pupil characteristics (prior attainment, disadvantage, SEN and EAL) and by number and composition (converter/sponsored) of member schools. The Education Policy Institute and Ambition School Leadership (Andrews, 2017) explored impact by the geographic spread and, separately, the phase mix (primary and secondary) of member schools within a trust, but found few clear associations between either.

Bernardinelli et al. (2018) used Propensity Score Matching to create two comparison groups for schools in MATs: a group of standalone academies and a group of standalone maintained schools, all with similar characteristics (for example, in terms of pupil intake) and with similar performance trajectories in the years prior to being matched. The analysis assessed the impacts of schools in MATs over a three-year period. It found that, overall, there was no significant impact from MAT status for pupils in either primary or secondary academies when compared to pupils in similar standalone academies. Compared to pupils in maintained schools, pupils in primary academies in MATs tended to perform better but the difference for pupils in secondary academies was not statistically significant. Within these overall findings, the report identified important differences between MATs of different sizes and across different phases: pupils in small and mid-sized MATs tended to perform better, on average, than their peers in

comparable standalone academies and maintained schools. Conversely, pupils in larger MATs (16+ schools) tended to do worse, on average.

Only a few empirical studies have included mixed-methods or qualitative strands aimed at understanding how MATs operate and work to secure school improvement at scale (Greany and Higham, 2018; Cirin, 2017; Chapman and Salokangas, 2012; Hill et al., 2012; Hill, 2009), although these are complemented by a number of reports and speeches based on inspection evidence (Wilshaw/Ofsted, 2016) and other data (Education Select Committee, 2017; DfE, 2016b; 2015b). The findings from these studies are reviewed in the following section alongside wider research into system leadership and school-to-school support in England.

One study that focussed more broadly on organisational development in MATs was by a team at Ambition School Leadership and LKMco (Menzies et al., 2018). The report was based on a mix of survey and case study research in 22 MATs together with interviews with a wider group of MAT CEOs. The study assessed the ways in which MAT leaders develop their organisations as they grow. It 'explored possible relationships between MATs' strategies and performance, [but] did not find any clear links' (p4). The authors argue that MAT leaders should choose between preserving the autonomy of individual schools or achieving consistent teaching and pedagogy across schools and they explore different approaches to how this can be achieved, either through central direction or collaborative convergence, arguing that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. The team also identify a series of 'break points' where they argue that MATs must reshape their approach as the organisation develops, for example around the scope and focus of the CEO role, the model of governance and the structure of the core team and approach to school improvement.

Teaching School Alliances have developed since 2011 and are led by between one and three higher performing schools. These lead schools are designated and funded by the government. By 2017 there were more than 800 Teaching Schools designated nationally. Gu et al's evaluation (2015) highlights the range of organisational forms apparent across different TSAs, partly reflecting their broad policy remit and the voluntary nature of alliance membership. Gu et al. also note considerable regional variation in TSA reach, with rural areas less well served, and an over-representation of secondary schools and schools with less deprived intakes in the Teaching School cohort as a whole. They conclude (Gu et al., 2015: 180) that TSAs can be conceived as 'loose partnerships' which rely on 'like-minded people' working together through a process of 'give and take' to develop collective and collaborative intellectual and social capital for improvement.

Greany and Higham (2018) studied a range of Teaching Schools and TSAs across four localities as part of their wider study of the 'self-improving school-led system'. They found variable levels of engagement among alliance member schools. They also highlighted the pressures on the school 'system leaders' charged with leading the development of

alliances as they juggle the need to demonstrate short-term improvement in other schools, the need to achieve financial sustainability and the fear that their own school might drop in performance as a result of their external work. Partly as a result of these pressures, Greany and Higham reported that several of the Teaching Schools in their study were forming or joining MATs, since this structure was seen to offer greater clarity in terms of lines of accountability and also greater long-term financial and organisational sustainability.

Local Authority approaches to monitoring and supporting school improvement in maintained schools have changed significantly in recent years due to budget pressures and changes to funding allocations, the increase in the number of academies since 2010, and the associated need to develop local strategic partnerships with schools and other stakeholders. LA responses to these changes have differed widely, reflecting differences in LA status (unitary, shire, Metropolitan Borough Council), size, local council funding decisions, historic relationships between LA and schools, school performance, and the rate of academisation in each area (Greany and Higham, 2018; Isos Partnership, 2018; Greany, 2015; Ainscow, 2015; Simkins, 2015; Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Smith and Abbott, 2014; Aston et al., 2013).

LAs continue to hold a range of statutory functions in relation to their remaining maintained schools. While many LAs have retained some internal capacity to both monitor and address school improvement issues across schools, these teams have been significantly reduced in most areas. In their place, there has been an increased emphasis on local and regional school-to-school support and an increase in maintained schools seeking school improvement support from traded services within or outside of their local area.

Isos Partnership (2018) and Gilbert (2018) highlight the approaches in a number of areas to develop local strategic partnerships to bring together LAs, schools, academies, teaching school alliances and other key stakeholders (such as dioceses). Such strategic partnerships often help to co-ordinate the local identification of needs and the brokering or commissioning of support, for example from TSAs. These findings are echoed in the case study visits for this research project, which we outline in more detail in Chapter 9.

2.3 How do leaders lead improvement across more than one school?

This section sets out a summary of evidence on school improvement approaches and models across groups of schools in England. It draws on evidence from the studies referenced in the previous section as well as wider research into partnerships, school and system leadership and school-to-school support, including studies with a focus on addressing the needs of disadvantaged children.

Importantly, research on improvement in school groups largely builds on what is known from existing research about leadership and improvement within single schools. This research highlights the importance of vision, values and effective leadership that is focussed on building capacity and improving the quality of teaching and learning (Day et al., 2009; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009; Southworth, 2009; Spillane et al., 2004). This leadership is always adapted to context. So, for example, while a 'turnaround' school might require an intensive and relatively directive leadership approach in order to establish common systems and a baseline set of expectations around learning, a school where performance and professionalism are already high might require a quite different approach, with greater emphasis on distributing leadership and supporting staff to achieve sustained improvement.

There is extensive research into the leadership of partnerships and networks from beyond the education sector which has resonance for those leading school groups (Popp et al., 2014; Kamp, 2013; Provan and Kenis, 2007; Vangen and Huxham, 2013). This research indicates the importance of building shared attributes, such as reciprocity and trust. It also highlights that while networks tend to develop more formalised governance structures over time and as they grow, such structures can sometimes reduce ownership for some members.

2.3.1 School improvement in federations and MATs in England

Empirical research on how federations and MATs secure improvement is limited. What research there is largely focusses on sponsored secondary academies, since these have been in existence for longer and are more in need of urgent improvement than converter academies, which are, by definition, generally higher performing.

Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister (2011) find that 'strong leadership is a key feature of successful federations' and that 'secondary federations with executive leadership outperform federations with traditional leadership structures (one headteacher leading one school).' Furthermore, they highlight that 'federating provides more opportunities for CPD, often at reduced cost, across the federation' and that 'performance federations in particular use CPD to challenge orthodoxies of practice in schools and to question the accepted norms and expectations of behaviour in staff and pupils'. Finally, they conclude that 'executive leadership combined with effective coordination and movement of resources and practice are key levers for change' (p4).

Hill et al. (2012) make the point that while the school improvement strategies adopted by an academy chain will be important, it is also critical to consider these approaches within the context of the MAT's wider vision, values and culture. Salokangas and Chapman (2014) draw on case studies of two academy chains to illustrate the very different ways in which governance and leadership models can evolve, with differing balances in terms of

central and local school-level control and resulting differences in culture and approaches to school improvement.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, former Chief Inspector of Schools (2016), drew on Ofsted inspector visits to seven high-performing MATs made up of at least nine schools to identify the following features that he saw as contributing to their success:

- An ability to recruit and retain powerful and authoritative executive leaders, with a clear vision for bringing about higher standards.

- A well-planned, broad and balanced curriculum that equips pupils with a strong command of the basics of English and mathematics, as well as the confidence, ambition and team-work skills to succeed in later life.

- A commitment to provide a high-quality education for all pupils, in a calm and scholarly atmosphere.

- Investment in the professional development of teachers and the sharing of knowledge and expertise across a strong network of constituent schools.

- A high priority given to initial teacher training and leadership development to secure a pipeline of future talent.

- Clear frameworks of governance, accountability and delegation.

- Effective use of assessment information to identify, escalate and tackle problems quickly.

- A cautious and considered approach to expansion.

Hill et al. (2012) found a not dissimilar set of levers for improvement in academy chains, but also highlighted a focus on intensive support for students in exam years, such as Year 11; practising action research among staff from different schools in the chain; and working with and securing the support of parents.

Several observers and researchers focus on the question of how far leaders should aim to develop consistency in terms of teaching, the curriculum and assessment approaches across a MAT, although with no real clarity emerging so far on how different MATs approach this and with what effect (Menzies et al., 2018). The importance of shared systems across a MAT was identified by the former National Schools Commissioner, Sir David Carter (DfE, 2015b: 5), who argued for the importance of 'clear quality assurance systems … to improve consistency and performance' (for example through shared CPD and use of pupil achievement data) and 'a Trust-wide school improvement strategy that recognises the different interventions needed at different stages of the improvement journey that a school undertakes' (DfE, 2015b: 7).

These points are reflected in the House of Commons Education Select Committee report (2017: 8–9), which highlights aspects of school improvement models such as:

- recognition of the crucial role played by teaching staff

- regional structures which allow schools to share expertise and resources

- mechanisms for tangible accountability at all levels

- a shared vision for school improvement across all schools within the trust

- a commitment to improving performance and attainment.

The importance of school-to-school collaboration within MATs is highlighted by a number of observers, since this can allow the MAT to share and co-develop effective practice and use intervention to support member schools' needs (HoC Education Committee, 2017). Deployment of existing staff across the MAT to help establish the principles and practices expected is also seen as important (Hill, 2010).

Although curriculum freedoms and length of school day/term changes are open to all academies, Mansell (2016) states that they are rarely exploited due to the nature of national assessments based on the National Curriculum, and the need to reflect parental expectations in relation to start and finish times for schools.

2.3.2 Wider evidence on school-to-school support and executive and system leadership in England

This section looks more broadly at aspects of executive and system leadership and school-to-school support in England, including through the London and City Challenges.

An important study here is Muijs' (2015) mixed-methods analysis of the impact of school-to-school support partnerships brokered between high- and low-performing primary schools in one Local Authority. This identified positive impacts in terms of pupil outcomes as well as some of the very 'hands on' work required from the system leaders involved in order to secure change. Muijs (2015: 582) categorises this activity in three areas: leadership development, development of teaching and learning approaches, and generating quick wins. In a similar vein, Robinson (2012) highlights the need for system leaders to deal with immediate crises in failing schools and to find ways to apply learning on school improvement from one context to another.

In their study of executive headship, Lord et al. (2016) categorise the work of these leaders in four areas: developing school-to-school consistency and collaboration; coaching and developing staff; strategic thinking and organisational development; and focussing outward to position the organisation and to draw in external evidence, expertise and resources.

Rea et al. (2013) looked at how National Leaders of Education (NLEs) work to raise the attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds when providing support to other schools. They identified that NLEs tended to work at three levels: developing whole-

school strategies that supported all pupils; strategies to support all underperforming pupils; and strategies which might be targeted specifically at the school's FSM-eligible pupils in order to provide more focussed support.

2.4 International evidence on improvement across groups of schools

This final section draws on evidence of improvement approaches in two international examples of 'multi-school groups': Charter Management Organisations (CMOs) in the US, and Boards of Multiple Schools (federations) in the Netherlands. These models have broad similarities to MATs, in that they have responsibility for the operation and performance of multiple publicly funded schools, although there are important contextual differences between them which challenge simplistic comparisons.

Starting with CMOs, there have been a number of evaluations of these school groups, some using rigorous designs. Studies of CMOs that have taken on existing, vulnerable schools (i.e. in situations largely comparable to sponsored academies) highlight the challenges they have faced and the need for them to adapt their approach to meet the expectations of deprived urban communities (Massell et al., 2016; Glazer et al., 2014).

Gleason (2016) draws on a range of studies (not all of which focussed exclusively on CMOs) to distil features of charter school practices that have high, moderate and low impacts on success. Practices that are consistently associated with high positive impacts include adopting comprehensive behaviour policies; offering longer school days, school years, or both; and prioritising the objective of boosting students' academic achievement above other possible educational objectives.

Turning to evidence on Dutch school federations, one recent study compared three factors that might impact on primary pupils' achievement: teacher/classroom effectiveness, school effectiveness and school governance (Hofman et al., 2015). The study found that 23% of between-school variation in attainment was due to school-level factors. The influence of stakeholders on school board decision-making had the highest impact, although the level of emphasis on monitoring and evaluating pupil performance was also important. The authors conclude:

> Our study shows a positive impact of school governance on math achievement … This finding indicates that the responsiveness of governance to the educational knowledge of staff and other parties involved in the school life, such as parents, is crucial. (Hofman et al., 2015: 11)

Conclusion

The literature review revealed that while there is a reasonably strong body of knowledge around the leadership of school improvement within single schools, far less is known about how school groups operate to secure sustainable school improvement at scale. The rapid pace of change in school structures and oversight in England over the past 10 years has made research challenging and the evidence base is far from comprehensive. Therefore it is helpful to include evidence from international models that are similar to MATs and federations, whilst recognising the important differences between different systems and contexts.

The evidence from research in single schools highlights the importance of effective leadership which is focussed on establishing a shared vision and professional culture and on improving the quality of teaching and learning so that all children make progress. Such leadership is adapted to the context of the school and works productively with parents and wider stakeholders.

This evidence overlaps with the evidence on improvement across school groups and on the provision of school-to-school support. The latter evidence focusses on how school groups and designated system leaders work to stabilise and repair underperforming schools. This work is focussed on securing effective leadership within the school and building the capacity of in-school staff to secure consistent improvement. This intensive 'turnaround' work is enabled by a number of factors, including a positive, aspirational culture and a set of robust organisational systems, processes and resources. A number of studies and commentators also highlight the importance of managed growth, in particular for MATs.

As yet, very few studies have focussed on how school groups secure sustainable improvement at scale, but the ones that did have raised questions around:

- Where and how to standardise or align practices across member schools and where schools should be left autonomous?
- How school groups can continually build the capacity of staff in schools at all stages of improvement?
- How best to identify expertise, evaluate effective practices and move knowledge around to support continuous improvement?
- How to monitor school performance and hold leaders to account without limiting the scope for school-level agency and ownership?
- How to design organisational and governance structures in order to ensure that all schools receive appropriate and timely support and challenge?

3. Overview: sustainable school improvement in MATs and federations

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the context for the research findings relating to MATs and federations, which we then explore in more detail in Chapters 4–8.[14] We begin this chapter by identifying a set of contextual factors which commonly influence the way in which different MATs and federations develop their approach to school improvement. We then set out what we call the five school improvement 'fundamentals': a set of processes that all our case study MATs and federations were applying to a greater or lesser extent, in particular where they were working to stabilise and repair underperforming and challenging schools.[15] Finally, we identify five strategic areas that our case study MATs and federations were working on, in different ways and to differing degrees, as they sought to develop sustainable models for school improvement at scale. We focus on each of these five strategic areas in Chapters 4–8.

As outlined in Chapter 1, we selected our MAT sample to include a mix of above average, average and below average performers (using the DfE Performance Tables) and also a mix of sizes (small, medium and large). One focus for our analysis of the MAT case studies was to identify whether there are commonalities in how above average performing trusts operate which differentiate them from the average and below average performers. Similarly, we were interested in whether MAT size or any other factors consistently influence how MATs approach school improvement. Our analysis identified a number of consistent school improvement practices across our sample. **In most cases these consistent practices are not distinguishable by MAT performance band, so**

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[14] As explained in the Introduction, we found strong overlaps between our MAT and federation case studies in terms of how they approach school improvement at scale. We include federations alongside MATs throughout Chapters 3–8, but indicate a focus on one or other model in certain places. Our federation sample was not selected based on performance criteria and the small number of federation case studies (n = 2), together with the fact that we did not include them in the survey, means that our findings in this area are less secure.

[15] These terms are taken from the DfE's MAT good practice guidance (2016). The guidance sets out a possible way to categorise schools into one of four improvement stages: i) 'stabilise' – requires significant improvement; ii) 'repair' – establishing more control, but still has reactive decision-making; iii) 'improve' – more proactive leadership, embedding strategies and improving outcomes; iv) 'sustain' – confidence in performance, increased innovation in delivery. A number of our case study groups had adopted these terms in their approach. For details see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576240/Multi-academy_trusts_good_practice_guidance_and_expectations_for_growth.pdf accessed 6.9.18.

we do not argue that 'above average performers' all operate in a distinct set of ways which explains their performance.

We reflect the areas that MATs and federations consistently address in order to secure sustainable school improvement in two ways:

- First, we describe a set of five processes and capabilities that all MATs and federations draw on, to differing degrees, in order to identify school needs, implement changes and measure and monitor progress. These processes and capabilities – which we call the **school improvement 'fundamentals'** – are most apparent where MATs and federations are working to stabilise and repair schools in challenging circumstances, but they also apply in other contexts. There are differences in how systematically and effectively the different school groups we visited apply these 'fundamentals', but these differences are not always related to performance levels. Our evidence indicates that **the five 'fundamentals' are necessary but not sufficient for sustainable school improvement at scale**: they are effective for finding and fixing problems, but do not build sustainable capacity or a culture of continuous improvement for all schools.

- In order to achieve sustainable improvement, **MATs and federations must go beyond the five fundamentals to focus on developing a culture of continuous improvement backed by a wider set of systems, processes and capabilities**. Below, we set out the **five strategic areas** that MATs and federations address; we then use this structure as the basis for our detailed findings in Chapters 4–8.[16]

3.2 What factors influence the improvement approach adopted by different MATs?

The following **contextual factors influence the approach to school improvement** adopted by MATs. These factors indicate that MAT leaders must differentiate their approach to school improvement based on their context.

- **Age**: Established MATs (i.e. those that grew before or during 2010) are different to MATs that have developed more recently (i.e. from 2011 onwards) in several

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[16] As described in Chapter 1, these areas were initially identified based on a review of literature and on development work undertaken by members of the research team with MAT leaders. This prior work was used as an initial conceptual framework for the research and analysis. Most areas of the existing frameworks were supported by our empirical analysis, but we have removed or added sections to reflect the evidence collected.

respects. In our case study sample, these 'established' MATs spanned all three performance and size bands, although they were most likely to be large – with significant numbers of sponsored secondary academies – and to have a wide geographic distribution (see Annex A for details). Clearly, these 'established' MATs have had longer than their younger peers to develop their systems, processes and cultures, although several of the below average performers in this group are now working to change these as they seek to address performance concerns. Some of the lower performing 'established' MATs have also had academies re-brokered out of the group – either voluntarily or as a result of performance concerns – and so have rationalised their footprints and operating models over time. All of the 'established' MATs have had to adapt their operating models over time to respond to changes in policy and the wider landscape of schools (Greany and Higham, 2018). By contrast, the newer MATs (i.e. those established from 2011 onwards) have been able to learn lessons from the 'established' group and have developed within a more controlled policy environment. As a result they tend to be smaller and leaner, with a more local geographic footprint, and with greater attention paid from the outset to capacity issues and clarity on their school improvement offer and model.

- **Size and growth model**: We observed several differences by size of MAT. Small (and to some extent medium-sized) MATs tend to be more focussed on a tight geographical area and this, coupled with their smaller size, means that they can rely on relationships between key staff, with less need for formalised operating systems and processes. By contrast, the larger MATs tend to have more established and defined systems and processes, but must work hard to sustain and develop relationships, in particular where they cover a wider geographic area.

- **Context and composition**: Two of the MATs in our sample comprise primarily converter academies (i.e. 85%+) and have notably lower than average levels of children in receipt of free school meals (FSM) (i.e. less than 10%). These MATs have been able to work in different ways to the other MATs in our sample, with far less need to focus on the school improvement 'fundamentals', given that their schools are largely higher performing and require less in terms of challenge and support. Other case study MATs comprise a mix of converter and sponsored academies. While this can be helpful in providing capacity for school-to-school support, several also reported cultural challenges, for example where a higher performing converter academy within the group expected a much higher level of autonomy and did not want to participate fully in the work of the trust. By contrast, the MATs in our sample that were predominantly focussed on sponsoring underperforming schools (i.e. 33% converter or less) in deprived contexts (i.e. >25% FSM) saw benefits in the clarity that this gave them in terms of their mission, values and skillsets, but had often faced other challenges, for example in

terms of capacity. Several of our below average performing MATs argued that their performance to date reflected the profile of their member schools rather than the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their school improvement approach. These lower performing MATs had also made more or less significant changes to their school improvement approach within the past year, as they sought to address previous performance issues, so it was too early for us to say whether their new approach was effective or not.

- **Phase**: There are differences between the MATs in our sample that work mostly or solely in one phase, and the MATs that straddle both phases, having to work flexibly across the two approaches. These differences relate partly to resources: secondary schools have larger budgets, but are larger institutions and so turning them round can take longer and be more complex. Equally, while primary schools might require less intensive support to turn them round initially, it can be challenging to monitor and maintain performance across multiple small sites where performance can drop quickly if one or two key staff leave. As one primary MAT CEO observed: 'We have 21 boilers to maintain!' Beyond these resource differences, our interviewees also reported cultural differences between the two phases that are not specific to MATs and federations, but which nevertheless influence their approach to school improvement. For example, we heard that primaries tend to have a stronger focus on parental engagement and child centred approaches compared with secondaries. These differences impact on the school improvement model and culture. Primary headteachers must be all-rounders, juggling multiple operational demands with limited capacity for strategic development. In contrast, secondary leaders have larger teams and therefore more capacity but this brings its own challenges in terms of scale and complexity (Southworth, 2003). As a result, primaries tend to welcome the support and collaborative environment that a trust can offer, but some MAT CEOs explained that this can sometimes develop into a dependency culture. Several of the CEOs described situations where they had had to push for more strategic approaches in member primaries, for example in relation to teacher and leadership recruitment and development. By the same token, the stronger intra-institutional culture of secondaries can mean that they have their own momentum and it can be hard to generate meaningful cross-school collaboration.

- **Beliefs and values:** The school improvement models of the MATs we visited were often shaped by the beliefs and values of the founding school/s and its/their leader/s, especially where one of those leaders had become the MAT CEO. One of the key ways in which the beliefs and values of the founding leader/s tended to influence a MAT's approach was in its approach to standardisation, alignment and autonomy, which we address in Chapter 4. This is not to say that the beliefs and values of individual leaders or the school groups they lead remain fixed: indeed,

we show that the vast majority of our sample had adapted their approach over time and in response to feedback (see Chapter 8). Our 35 interviews with MAT CEOs for the parallel UCL IOE research, which we reanalysed for this project, reveal the changes that most CEOs go through as they move from operating as the head of a single school to leading a much larger and more complex organisation. This process appears to require a change in identity which can be difficult for some to make, as they move from a role of positional leadership with hands-on responsibility and accountability for pupil learning in a single school, to a more strategic role in developing an organisation, with far less day-to-day involvement in classroom-related issues.

3.3 Five school improvement 'fundamentals' for MATs and federations

As outlined above, the research was focussed on three core questions, relating to how school groups identify the improvement needs of their schools, how they implement strategies for addressing these needs, and how they measure and monitor progress. We describe below a set of five processes we call the **school improvement 'fundamentals'**. All our case study MATs and federations were adopting the 'fundamentals', but particularly those that were working to stabilise and repair vulnerable schools. Although we describe these 'fundamentals' in sequence, in practice they were interlinked and operated in tandem.

Fundamental i: Establish school improvement capacity

The federations and trusts in our sample emphasised the need to have sufficient internal capacity to support other schools in the ways that they needed. Some trusts specified a rule-of-thumb ratio (such as 3:1 or 4:1) between the schools in their group that were able to offer school improvement capacity and the schools that needed support.

This core capacity (whether based in schools or located centrally) included individuals with the credibility and skills necessary to steer the other school improvement fundamentals. Most had personal experience of leading one or more school from Special Measures to Good or Outstanding in Ofsted terms. This expertise was important in the diagnosis of school improvement needs, the accurate understanding of appropriate support and interventions and, often, the provision of leadership support in the supported schools. One of the skillsets displayed by these experienced leaders was knowing when and how to support schools at different stages of their improvement journey, as one Executive Head explained:

Always looking at that McKinsey journey[17] of you do the right things at the right stage of the schools' journey – you don't engage in peer review in a school in special measures, that's a silly thing to do.
Executive Head

These core leaders were also important in communicating and modelling the vision and values of the MAT or federation. In most cases these leaders focussed on developing others through coaching, mentoring and succession planning and also worked to foster a wider culture that included a focus on collaboration, consultation and professional growth. As a result, these key leaders were generally known to, and trusted by, their school-based colleagues, which meant that they could draw on the expertise and goodwill of a wider group of colleagues in their work to support schools.

We explore these areas in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Fundamental ii: Forensic analysis of school improvement needs

The leadership expertise identified above was central to analysing the school improvement needs of new schools joining the MAT or federation, usually structured through a formal due diligence process. Our case study MATs and federations emphasised the thoroughness and precision with which they needed to undertake learning walks, lesson observations, book scrutinies, or other reviews of teaching and learning to develop an accurate understanding of the improvement needs of the school, the needs of different groups of pupils, and where the school was on its improvement journey. A number of trusts and federations had recognised over time that their due diligence processes needed to focus as much on school improvement as other aspects, such as finances and staffing.

One head of school improvement described a process to understand:

What are their [joiners'] needs and have we got capacity to make rapid improvements, what are the strengths they can bring, what are their leadership values and ethos, and what would it be like working in partnership?
Head of School Improvement

Another trust described how it was crucial that they understood the willingness of staff to embrace change and improvement. This forensic diagnosis, when it was working effectively, provided an initial map for the school improvement support that was needed.

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[17] See Mourshed, M. Chijioke, C. and Barber, M. (2010), *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better,* London: McKinsey&Co.

Where trusts and federations were taking on schools in Special Measures or judged Inadequate by Ofsted, there were often numerous compliance issues to address in terms of staffing, safeguarding, finance or the school infrastructure. A number of interviewees explained that they usually began by addressing behaviour and inclusion issues, in order to secure a better climate for learning. For example, one Director of Education described working with a Head of School to implement a restorative justice behaviour strategy in a newly joined school, while at the same time 'going to the wall with [behaviour] standards'.

Once schools had joined the group, the process of diagnosing school improvement needs continued. Structures for ongoing monitoring and gathering soft intelligence all worked to inform a regular and systematic assessment of risks and needs across all schools so that there were 'no surprises'. As schools made progress on their improvement journeys, the ongoing and repeated diagnoses of their needs enabled the MAT or federation to respond and put in place different support, provide access to new learning or identify further areas for improvement.

We explore these issues and approaches further in Chapters 4 and 7.

Fundamental iii: Supporting and deploying leadership

Almost all the trusts and federations we visited recognised the need for continuity of leadership at school level if sustainable school improvement was to be ensured. One trust consciously deployed leadership that was able to be there for the long haul to ensure improvement did not stall, rather than deploying an interim solution that would be withdrawn. Doing so made it more possible to then work on developing a sustainable culture and staffing model.

Many of the trusts and federations filled leadership vacancies at a new school by deploying one or more leaders from another school in the group, or used them as additional capacity to support existing leadership. One MAT CEO likened their approach to a military campaign: 'very much boots on the ground'. Some groups used head of school roles with executive leadership support, which might reduce over time. These heads of schools were often able emerging leaders from other trust or federation schools, who had not yet necessarily been headteachers. Other MATs sought to appoint more experienced leaders into substantive roles.

Whichever model was adopted, the need was to provide stable leadership on site which could then lead the process of change; secure baseline expectations; co-ordinate the integration of additional sources of support; and build relationships with staff, parents and pupils in the school.

The leaders involved in providing support to underperforming schools explained that the process was often messy, with a vast number of issues to address before they could get

to the real work of building capacity for improvement. However, it was important to manage the pace of change, as one federation Executive Principal explained:

> *There's nothing worse than schools in Special Measures having so much support they don't know what to do with it. It's got be targeted, planned and have impact.*
> Executive Principal

The starting point in turning a school round was generally to focus on pupil progress in lessons and raising expectations in relation to standards. As one Head of School put it:

> *The most important things are the children and standards. You can be child centred if you also have strong standards; you have to get that right.*
> Executive Principal

Several trusts operated their own leadership programmes for middle or aspirant leaders, while two of the larger trusts had their own headship preparation programmes. The CEO of one described this as addressing 'the stuff that heads find difficult'.

We explore these approaches in more depth in Chapters 4 and 5.

Fundamental iv: access to effective practice and expertise at classroom and department level

Trusts and federations that took on underperforming schools generally focussed intensively on improving pupil outcomes in key year groups (i.e. Years 6 and 11) in the first year or two. As one CEO explained: 'If it doesn't impact on attainment, it's not a priority for us this year.' These trusts and federations monitored pupil progress in these key year groups on a regular basis and used these reviews to determine whether additional targeted interventions were required for particular pupils.

The trusts and federations in our sample with strong track records in school turnaround were thoughtful and systematic about how they used middle leaders (often working as Specialist Leaders of Education – SLEs) and expert practitioners to support staff in vulnerable schools. A Head of School in one federation explained that the emphasis in this work was on 'ensuring it's a done with rather than a done to model.' This support ranged from taking on teaching for a time-limited period, to modelling practice or coaching colleagues.

Well facilitated and focussed subject networks and hubs also provided opportunities for subject/phase leaders and teachers to meet, moderate and review practice, and to co-design shared schemes of work.

We explore these approaches in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Fundamental v: Monitoring improvements in outcomes and reviewing changes in the quality of provision

With school improvement needs identified and a plan and capacity to address these needs in place, MATs and federations explained the importance of regular reviews of progress.

There were several aspects to this. Almost all undertook regular reviews of pupil assessment data, usually on a half-termly or termly basis, and met with headteachers to review progress and to agree any actions required. Most also visited schools on a regular basis and undertook more formal reviews at least annually, with a focus on learning walks, lesson observations and book scrutinies. These mechanisms helped identify whether interventions were working effectively or not, and informed the allocation of central resources to schools that required additional support.

The role of 'head of school improvement' or 'head of standards' for those trusts that had such positions provided the capacity required to undertake data analysis and reviews of performance, often using a risk-based approach to identify the schools that needed to be prioritised for support.

We explore these areas in depth in Chapters 4 and 7.

As noted above, we observed the five 'fundamentals' being applied to a greater or lesser extent in all our MAT and federation case studies, but it was the groups that were focussed on stabilising and beginning to repair vulnerable and underperforming schools that applied them most clearly. These MATs and federations had usually taken on sponsored academies. MATs with mostly converter academies had less immediate need to focus on the 'fundamentals' and could rely on individual schools to drive their own improvement, or could apply a differentiated ('earned autonomy') approach depending on each individual school's performance level. For this reason, **the level of focus on the fundamentals did not necessarily align with the performance level of the MAT**: we visited below average performers that were rigorous in applying them and we saw above average performers that did not focus on them to the same extent.

Our analysis indicates that **the five school improvement 'fundamentals' are necessary but not sufficient to secure sustainable school improvement**. The data indicate a number of ways in which MATs and federations are working to achieve sustainable change and improvement that goes beyond stabilising and repairing individual schools. This wider work is focussed on building capacity and developing an organisational model and culture that supports continuous improvement. We describe the elements of this wider work in the sections that follow. We conclude that **for school groups to deliver sustainable school improvement, they must pursue the school**

improvement fundamentals and the wider approach to sustainable improvement in tandem. Most of the groups we visited were working towards a sustainable approach, but a substantial minority were focussed on working tactically to stabilise their most vulnerable schools by applying the five 'fundamentals', with little focus on building a more sustainable model.

3.4: Five strategic areas that MATs and federations address for sustainable improvement at scale

The five school improvement 'fundamentals' were important for all our case study MATs and federations, especially those that were working to support schools that had been underperforming. Our interviews highlighted that these activities did not stop once a school had been stabilised: there was still a need to monitor performance and to challenge and support schools to improve, particularly in schools facing challenging circumstances. As one CEO explained:

> *They are not schools that you can say they are sorted and you can walk away. We are dealing with stuff all the time.*
> CEO, large, above average performing trust

However, it was clear that **the more strategic MATs and federations were focussed more widely on building capacity, establishing shared systems and processes and embedding a positive culture that would enable them to meet the Hargreaves and Fink (2004) definition of sustainable improvement**.

We set out the **five strategic areas that MATs and federations focus on as they work to secure sustainable school improvement** graphically in Figure 3.1 on page 54. We use this as the structure for Chapters 4–8. Each strategic area includes three sub-areas as follows:

i. **Vision, Values, Strategy and Culture**:

- an ambitious vision underpinned by shared values and enacted through a high-trust culture
- a coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team and school-based roles[18]

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[18] All of our case study MATs and federations had a core school improvement team, although in the smallest examples this might be little more than the CEO. Most MATs and federations also drew on some school-based staff who worked part-time or on temporary assignments to provide support to other schools or across the group. Section 4.3 explores the different models for these core and school-based roles.

- alignment around shared practices which support improvement.

ii. **People, Learning and Capacity**

- an effective approach to recruiting, developing and retaining high quality staff
- systems to identify, develop and deploy leadership and staff expertise across schools
- systematic ways of moving knowledge and evidence around, within and between schools.

iii. **Assessment, Curriculum and Pedagogy**

- shared age-related expectations and a consistent approach to assessment across schools
- shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision
- shared principles for quality teaching, learning and student success.

iv. **Quality Assurance and Accountability**

- fit for purpose data collection, analysis and reporting
- use of quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate school performance and inform next steps
- appropriate challenge and support for all schools.

v. **Developing as a Learning Organisation**

- effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement
- disciplined innovation – research, evaluation and learning from/with the wider system
- double loop learning – adapting your approach over time and in response to feedback.

Figure 3.1 diagram

Vision, values, strategy & culture
- An ambitious vision underpinned by shared values & a high-trust culture
- A coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team & school-based roles
- Alignment around shared practices which support improvement

People, learning & capacity
- An effective approach to recruiting, developing & retaining high quality staff
- Systems to identify, develop & deploy leadership expertise across schools
- Systematic ways of moving knowledge & evidence around within & between schools

Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy
- Shared age related expectations & a consistent approach to assessment across schools
- Shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision
- Shared principles for quality teaching, learning and student success

QA & accountability
- Fit for purpose data collection, analysis & reporting
- Use of quantitative & qualitative data to evaluate school performance & inform next steps
- Appropriate challenge & support for all schools

A sustainable learning organisation
- Effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement
- Disciplined innovation - research, evaluation and learning from/with the wider system
- Double loop learning - adapting your approach over time and in response to feedback

Figure 3.1: Five strategic areas for sustainable improvement in MATs and federations

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that **the context of a MAT or federation – for example in terms of its age, size and growth model, composition, phase and the beliefs and values of its founding leaders – is important in shaping its approach to school improvement**. These contextual differences can influence both what is done and how it is done; much of Chapters 4–8 is devoted to exploring the nature of these differences.

Whilst recognising these important contextual differences, we identify a number of consistent practices across our sample of MATs and federations.

Firstly, we argue that all our case study MATs and federations were applying **five school improvement 'fundamentals'**, although the focus on these areas was most apparent in groups that were working to stabilise and repair schools that had been underperforming. We argue that these five fundamentals are necessary but not sufficient for sustainable improvement at scale: they are necessary to address underperformance and they remain important even when schools are improving, but they do not ensure sustainable performance in and of themselves.

Secondly, we set out a set of **five strategic areas** that all our case study MATs and federations were focussed on to greater or lesser degrees as they worked to build capacity and to ensure an effective organisational structure and culture that would support their school improvement work. These five strategic areas form the focus of the following five chapters.

4. Sustainable improvement in MATs and federations i: vision, values, strategy and culture

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter we focus on the first strategic area for sustainable improvement in MATs and federations – vision, values, strategy and culture. Within this we focus on the three sub-areas as follows:

- an ambitious vision underpinned by shared values and enacted through a high-trust culture

- a coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team and school-based roles

- alignment around shared practices which support improvement.

Figure 4.1, below, highlights these areas in relation to the wider structure described in Chapter 3.
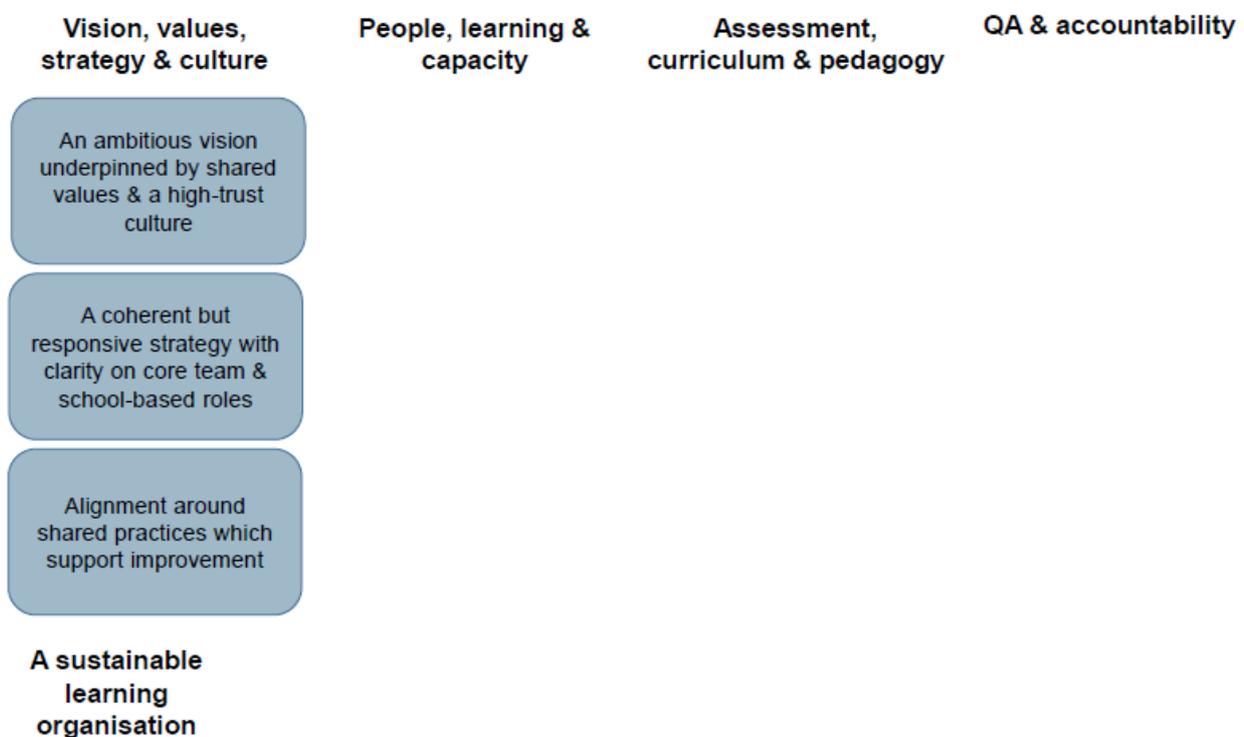
Figure 4.1: Vision, values, strategy and culture in MATs and federations

4.2 How do MATs and federations work to develop an ambitious vision underpinned by shared values and a high-trust culture?

This section focusses on the first area under vision, values, strategy and culture; namely, how MATs and federations work to develop an ambitious vision underpinned by shared values and a high-trust culture. This is shown in Figure 4.2 below.
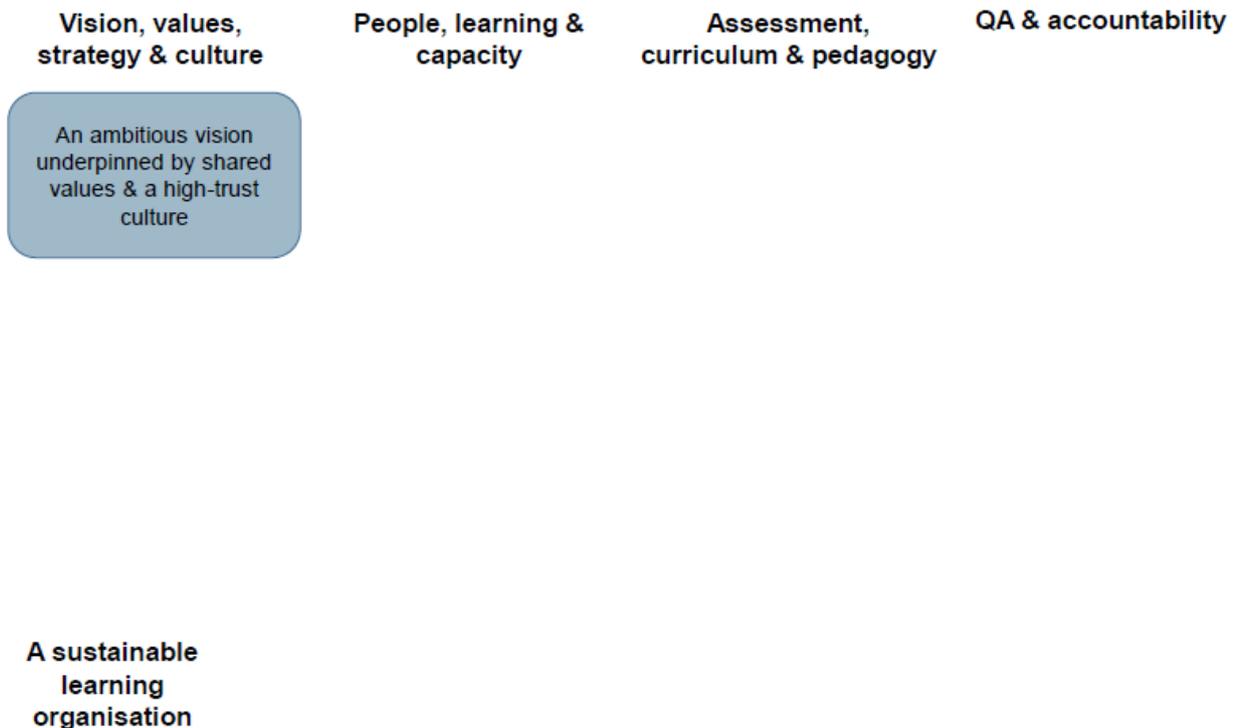
Figure 4.2: An ambitious vision, shared values and a high-trust culture in MATs and federations

This section is divided into four sub-sections which address the following questions:

- To what extent did our case study MATs and federations have a clearly defined vision and set of values?

- How do MATs and federations develop their vision and values?

- How do MATs and federations develop a shared culture?

- How do MATs and federations ensure that decision-making reflects their vision and values?

4.2.1 To what extent did our case study MATs and federations have a clearly defined vision and set of values?

Nearly all of the trusts and federations we visited had articulated their vision and values, and in the majority of cases the headteachers and other school-based staff we

interviewed were aware of these and could describe their essence (even if not using the precise words). In most cases our interviewees could also explain how the vision and values translated into the day-to-day work and culture of the organisation, although the clarity and consistency of this translation into practice varied quite widely, as we explore below. Alignment around a core vision and values was also apparent in the survey, where 89% of MAT core team members and 86% of headteachers in MATs either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement: 'All staff across our school group share its vision and values and can describe what they mean in practice'.

In a small minority of our case study MATs and federations, it was less clear that a shared vision had been established. For example, in one small, above average performing trust there was limited evidence of a formalised vision and no explicit school improvement plan for the MAT. In another, large, above average performing trust made up primarily of converter academies, the school-based staff we interviewed had limited awareness of the MAT's vision and values. Also, the senior and middle leaders in schools (i.e. below headteacher level) had little awareness that they were part of the trust and had never seen the CEO, indicating a very limited trust-wide culture.

In several of the below average performing trusts we visited, the CEO and **senior leadership were consciously working to shift the existing culture of the organisation**, which sometimes involved a reassessment of the vision and values. For example, in one medium-sized, below average performing trust, there had been a culture of competition between schools in the past – partly as a result of the way in which the trust was established – which the CEO had been working to shift towards one of greater collaboration. Another, large, below average performing trust was consciously working to shift its culture from one that was largely based on trust and collective responsibility to a much harder-edged accountability model, in particular for lower performing schools in the group, backed by a stronger and more focussed core team. The CEO argued that this had enabled the trust to 'drive school improvement at a different pace as a result.'

In summary, central and school-based staff in the majority of MATs and federations we visited could articulate the group's vision and values. In a small minority of cases (including two above average performing MATs), it was less clear that a shared vision and set of values had been established. In several below average performing trusts, senior leaders were consciously working to shift the existing vision, values and culture of the organisation.

4.2.2 How do MATs and federations develop their vision and values?

The vision statements of the MATs and federations we visited were always aspirational, but tended to be **grounded in quite specific missions aimed at enhancing outcomes for children and schools.** This was reflected in statements such as 'every child, every day' and 'whatever it takes'. In the trusts and federations that focussed on supporting

schools in challenging circumstances, with high proportions of disadvantaged students, these statements reflected a belief in social mobility and the potential for education to overcome barriers to achievement. This generally meant being explicit that 'poverty is no excuse' for underachievement, linked to a commitment to 'high aspirations' and 'high expectations' for all children.

Our evidence indicated **two broad approaches to defining the mission and values**. One group were more clearly performance driven, for example using Ofsted language to reflect their core mission (e.g. 'Good or better every day'). The second group invariably retained a strong focus on performance, but also reflected a wider purpose and ethos which distinguished their approach. This wider purpose was reflected in a range of different ways: in some cases it involved a commitment to a comprehensive intake and not excluding any pupils, in others it came through a focus on a particular pedagogical or curriculum-related philosophy (such as 'education with character'), while in others it was embodied in a particular set of organisational disciplines, such as restorative practice. The diocesan-linked MATs in our sample had a distinctively faith-based ethos. For example, one had four key tenets underpinning its decision-making: Catholicity, solidarity, subsidiarity and accountability.

In addition to setting out their vision, **most trusts and federations had also defined a set of core values which captured their beliefs about education and how they wanted to work**. These values had often been developed through a process of co-design or consultation involving the headteachers and Local Governing Bodies of the founding group of schools. As a result they often referred to how the schools in the trust wanted to work together (for example, 'collaboration', 'trust' and 'transparency') as well as wider commitments to 'putting the child at the centre', 'moral purpose', 'equity' and 'excellence'. Some of the MATs we visited had consciously worked to revisit and refresh the values as they grew, so that new schools felt a sense of ownership and they remained relevant across a larger group.

Several of our case study trusts required their member schools to adopt their core values, although in at least one case each member school could also adopt one unique value in order to reflect its own unique context and culture. In one large, above average performing MAT, the values had been translated into a set of behaviours that were then embedded into the trust's professional development programmes and into its performance management process, meaning that staff were expected to be able to demonstrate how they reflected the behaviours. In a small number of MATs, the schools were working to develop the trust's values through the curriculum. For example, one primary academy that we visited within a large, above average performing MAT operates a repeating cycle focussing on one value each week. The school presents certificates to those children who have best demonstrated behaviour or work that illustrates and shows understanding of the value.

One medium-sized, above average performing MAT provides **a good example of how the values can be translated into day-to-day school improvement practices**. The trust had identified five core values, which originated in the founding school but had subsequently been adopted and adapted as the trust grew. These values provided a framework for how the trust operated and how it developed new policies and practices. There is a trust-wide strategy group for each value and each school's Development Plan is structured around the values, although schools can set their own local priorities as well. One example of how the values are translated into consistent practices is the 'Valuing People' area, which is reflected in the house system and vertical tutoring models that have been adopted and adapted by all the trust's schools.

A minority of medium-sized and large trusts in our case study sample had developed acronyms or simple diagrams in order to capture the essence of their vision, values and approach to working together, which they used in induction sessions and training days with staff as a way to communicate their approach. Even in trusts where such communication tools had not been developed, senior staff could usually articulate the vision and values in no more than a few words or short phrases, and it was these core phrases (or at least their essential meaning) that tended to be repeated by the other staff that we interviewed across the trust.

In summary, MAT and federation vision statements are invariably aspirational, but tend to be grounded in quite specific missions aimed at enhancing outcomes for children and schools and at making a reality of social mobility. Our evidence indicates two broad approaches to defining the mission and values. One group were more clearly performance driven, while the latter group retained a strong focus on performance but also reflected a wider purpose and ethos which distinguished their approach. MATs and federations used different approaches to ensure that the vision, mission and values were embedded within their schools, including simple communication devices (such as diagrams and mnemonics) and, in some cases, requiring schools to adopt the values within their curriculum. As we explained in Chapter 3, senior leaders were also key to ensuring that the vision and values were communicated and modelled in the daily life of the MAT or federation.

4.2.3 How do MATs and federations develop a shared culture?

In the trusts and federations that we visited in which the vision and values were understood and subscribed to by both core team and school-based staff, there was a sense that this helped to support the development of a shared culture. This shared culture appeared strongest in MATs and federations where there was a clear, shared purpose which included but went beyond a focus on improving exam results and Ofsted grades. In these MATs and federations, we interviewed middle and senior leaders in schools who argued that the vision and values directly informed their daily work and

that they were meaningful to them personally, providing a motivational focus for their work. In these MATs and federations, levels of commitment, trust and collaboration appeared to be high. For example, in one medium-sized, above average performing MAT that had a core focus on restorative practice across all its work, the staff and children celebrated the trust's birthday each year: one year each school designed its own jigsaw piece that then fitted together to develop a picture of belonging, another year they planted fruit trees at each school and decorated them. 92% of MAT core team members and 86% of MAT headteachers that responded to the national survey either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Levels of trust and respect between central office staff and schools within the MAT are high'.

Senior leaders, in particular the CEO, of the trust or federation were critical in communicating the vision and modelling the espoused values. This modelling was important externally as well as internally, since the external perception of the trust could influence whether or not a converter academy might choose to join that particular trust. We interviewed a small number of headteachers in converter academies and schools within trusts and federations who had been in post prior to the school joining and who could therefore articulate their reasons for joining. These leaders were generally looking to join a trust or federation that they saw as having similar values to their own, that would offer significant improvement support and challenge to the school and its staff, and that had an open and consultative culture which was not overly prescriptive. For example, one primary head whose school had joined a large, above average performing trust explained that

> *It was really important for me was that it was child centred and it really is child focussed … The fact that it was about developing staff, and getting them to be the best that they can be … Also it was very clear that the trust wasn't just a board of people above us, we are the trust, we shape those decisions and work out how we move forwards … I didn't want to work where someone said you have to use these books, and this scheme.*
> Primary headteacher, medium-sized, above average performing MAT

Senior leadership was also important for modelling the values and establishing the culture of the trust internally. To a large extent this was about visibility and credibility: where senior leaders were well known to staff and were seen as experienced and effective leaders of school improvement who actively championed the vision and modelled the desired values, this played a significant role in shaping a shared culture. In many of the trusts and federations we visited, but particularly in the above average performing ones, we heard about the significance of such leadership from our school-based interviewees, as the following quotes indicate:

> *The leaders of the trust are really inspiring as their hearts in the right place, and they're a very visible presence.*

School leader, medium-sized, above average performing MAT

At my last school, senior leadership sat behind a door. Here, you email, they email back … they know you as a person. That's not just within our schools, it's the central team, it's the other schools … it's much more of a community feel, so you don't feel so on your own.
Middle leader, large, above average performing MAT

However, such views were not universal, as we indicated above in the example of the MAT where the school-based middle leaders had never met the CEO.

In summary, where the vision and values were understood and subscribed to by staff there was a sense that this helped to support the development of a shared and high-trust culture. This was most evident in MATs and federations where the mission included but went beyond a focus on improving exam scores and Ofsted grades. Senior leaders, in particular the CEO, were critical in communicating the vision and modelling the espoused values, thereby helping to shape a shared culture.

4.2.3. How do MATs and federations ensure that decision-making reflects their vision and values?

The approach to decision-making differed among our case study MATs and federations. Some senior leaders emphasised the need for inclusive decision-making, arguing that might take longer but it helped build trust and ownership. Others were more directive; for example, an executive head in one small, above average performing MAT described a 'non-negotiable culture, and a non-excuse culture.' These **different leadership styles and approaches influenced the ethos and culture of our case study MATs and federations**. The extent to which schools across the MAT or federation participated in shared decision-making, through dialogue and co-design processes, appeared to be correlated with the strength and collective ownership of the vision.

Some of our interviewees acknowledged that **it was not always easy to sustain a clear link between the group's espoused vision and values and the day-to-day realities of school improvement**. For example, one regional director explained:

I'm not sure that's something we are clear enough about … I don't think we are explicit, that we say, when we are collecting your data dashboard, we don't make it clear that this fits with our 'strive for excellence', for example.
Regional Director, large, above average performing MAT

This challenge of translating a high-level vision and set of values into day-to-day decision-making and practice played out differently in different trusts and federations. For example, the following two examples both involved addressing the issue of **how to allocate resources differentially to meet the needs of different schools**.

The senior leader in the first trust, a medium-sized, above average performing MAT, characterised their schools as a family, in which they were the parent who must meet the differing needs of their children:

> *I'm trying to treat it like a family: I love them all [i.e. schools in the trust], but at the moment I need to give this one lots of attention because we have this issue; so we don't treat them all equally; treat everyone differently and that makes them equal.*
> NLE, medium-sized, above average performing MAT

In contrast to this more paternalistic approach, leaders in the second MAT were more transparent and inclusive, involving senior leaders from across the trust in co-designing an approach based on a shared set of values. The Deputy CEO of this large above average performing trust described how they had agreed the allocation of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs):

> *NQT is a really good example: we recruit all our NQTs collectively, and we've co-constructed a prioritisation of how we deploy NQTs into the schools, so the schools that are the most vulnerable recruit the strongest NQTs … and that's been a heck of a journey and I think it's a real testament to the partnership.*
> Deputy CEO, large, above average performing MAT

In summary, senior leaders, in particular the CEO, were key to ensuring that the vision and values were communicated and modelled in the daily life of the MAT or federation. However, some senior leaders acknowledged that it was not always easy to sustain a clear link between the group's espoused vision and values and the day-to-day realities of school improvement. We have shown how different leadership styles and approaches could influence the ethos and culture of the MAT or federation. For example, we contrast three approaches to decision-making and the allocation of resources between schools – directive, paternalistic and transparent.

4.3 How do MATs and federations ensure a coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team and school-based roles?

This section focusses on the second sub-area under vision, values, strategy and culture. It sets out the ways in which the MATs and federations we studied were working to ensure a coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team and school-based roles, as shown in Figure 4.3 below.

Vision, values, strategy & culture   People, learning & capacity   Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy   QA & accountability

A coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team & school-based roles

A sustainable learning organisation

Figure 4.3: a coherent but responsive strategy with clarity on core team and school-based roles in MATs and federations

This section is divided into three sub-sections, which address the following questions:

- To what extent do school groups have explicit strategies for school improvement and what do these strategies focus on?

- How have our case study groups grown and developed their approach to school improvement to reflect their context and over time?

- How do different school groups structure their school improvement teams?

A key issue that all MAT and federation leaders grappled with as they developed their school improvement strategy was how to balance growth and capacity. For many of our case study MATs and federations, supporting underperforming schools and helping them to improve was part of the lifeblood of the organisation and was seen as part of the moral purpose of education. Providing such support opened up new opportunities for existing staff to apply their skills in new contexts and to develop and grow in their careers. Growth also brought additional income and scale, allowing MATs and federations to invest in staff and other systems that could support their existing member schools.

However, as we identified in the five 'fundamentals', our case study MATs and federations had all become more disciplined in their due diligence processes; spending significant time in any potential new school to assess its current capacity and culture and to clarify where and how any support would need to be allocated in order to secure improvement. Several of our interviewees explained that they had had to turn down potential new schools if they felt that they did not have sufficient capacity to make a difference. As one Executive Head in a federation explained:

Our main question is, 'Do we have capacity to meet the needs of the school?' We do due diligence. We only ever grow the federation when we have secured the practice in our existing schools. I've seen poor models of this where they don't have the capacity or skills to sort out the schools they've taken on. We never wanted to have a negative impact on the education of the existing children. Executive Head, primary federation

Assessing the right balance between capacity and growth was never simple for our case study MATs and federations, although we highlight the use of rubrics such as 3:1 or 4:1 for 'capacity giver' versus 'capacity taker' schools that some used to balance their existing capacity against new demands. As we have indicated, these decisions on growth and capacity frequently influenced decision-making in the areas that we explore below.

4.3.1 To what extent do school groups have explicit school improvement strategies and what do these focus on?

In the survey we asked members of MAT core teams and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement, 'We have a clearly defined model for school improvement across our school group which underpins the way we work'. As Table 4.1 shows, 90% of MAT core team members and 88% of MAT headteachers either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. **This indicates a high level of confidence in this area, although the fact that 7% of headteachers in MATs actively disagreed with the statement appears problematic.**

Percentage	We have a clearly defined model for school improvement across our school group which underpins the way we work	
	MAT Core Team	**Headteachers in MATs**
Strongly agree	58%	50%
Tend to agree	32%	37%
Neither disagree nor agree	7%	6%
Tend to disagree	3%	4%
Strongly disagree	0%	3%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 4.1. Proportion of core team members and headteachers in MATs who say they have a clearly defined model for school improvement

Many of the case study MATs and federations had published a school improvement strategy on their website or shared this with us as part of our visit.[19] These strategies usually included an outline of how the group would monitor school quality and when and how it would intervene if a school was causing concern. This provided clarity for Local Governing Bodies and headteachers on how they would be held accountable and on the level of support they could expect from the MAT or federation, for example in preparing for an Ofsted inspection. Even where such written strategies were not shared with the research team as part of case study visits, it was usually evident that the MAT or federation had a model for such monitoring, support and intervention; although the clarity, consistency and comprehensiveness of these systems and processes were sometimes less strong, as we explore below.

In some of our case study sites, it appeared that the immediate need to focus on turning round underperforming schools had prevented leaders from focussing on the development of more strategic and sustainable models. In other cases, the history, composition and culture of the trust had made it hard for leaders to develop a strategic approach. Some of the challenges we observed in a minority of our case study sample, including in MATs in all three performance bands, were as follows:

- In several MATs, individual academies had resisted moves by the central team to develop shared processes or capacity which could enable more systematic sharing of expertise or support if a particular school were to struggle.

- In a small number of MATs, the trust did conduct review visits to each school, but these relationships did not appear to significantly challenge the schools or hold them accountable for improvement.

- In one large MAT, the central team did not have a credible set of school improvement priorities or approaches, with regional teams left to develop different approaches and limited consistency across the group.

- School-based interviewees in one MAT reported a proliferation of leadership roles and a lack of clarity around lines of reporting, responsibility and decision-making.

Even in MATs and federations with more developed approaches, it was rare for them to have a comprehensive strategy for wider aspects of sustainable improvement, such as how to move schools from Good to Outstanding in Ofsted terms. As one Regional Director acknowledged, there was a risk that the MAT was

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[19] We also analysed the high-level strategies produced by 35 MATs as part of the Trust-ED MAT Team Development programme (See Chapter 1 and Annex A for details).

overly focussed on addressing underperformance and that higher performing schools would not stay engaged:

> *We are so focussed on fixing what's not quite right; how much are we focussed on developing what's already right to be even better? … In our trust where we've got schools that range from Special Measures to Outstanding, getting that balance is crucial, because that's how the highest performing schools will stay engaged … It's the 'What's in it for me?' If they don't see that it's not just about fixing what's broken, it's about moving from good to great, then they won't stay engaged.*
> Regional Director, large, above average performing MAT

In addition to reviewing the formal, written school improvement strategies in our case study sites, we also asked our respondents in both the survey and case study visits to rate the level of focus or priority that they felt their school group placed on each of 12 common school improvement areas on a scale of 1–10.[20] Having rated the level of focus or priority for each area, we then asked our respondents to score the impact that they felt their MAT was having in these areas. These ratings were inevitably subjective, but by using the same template with all our case study interviewees (from CEOs to middle leaders) we were able to assess the consistency of opinion within and between our case study groups, which we draw on in our analysis throughout this report.

The responses from the MAT survey respondents are shown in Table 4.2 below. These responses were broadly consistent with the responses in our case study visits. Some of the key points that emerge are as follows:

- MAT headteachers and core team members broadly agree about the level of focus and impact in each area, although headteachers tend to rate the level of focus and impact for each area slightly lower than core team members.

- Core teams and headteachers in MATs rate all 12 areas as having a high focus (the lowest rating is 6.7). The three highest average ratings for focus by MAT core teams are 'Identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools', 'Improving the quality of leadership in all schools', and 'Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children'. The highest three average ratings for focus by headteachers in MATs are 'Identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools', 'Fostering collaboration between schools', and 'Improving the quality of leadership in all schools'.

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[20] The survey asked MAT and TSA respondents to rate the level of 'focus' in each area. In the case study visits we used a template which interviewees either completed in advance or in the interview. This asked them to rate the level of 'priority' for each area. Therefore we use both terms here.

- MAT core teams and headteachers agree on the three areas of lowest focus: 'Engaging parents and community', 'Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues', and 'Developing a shared approach to pedagogy'. In the survey these areas were still scored highly, despite being lower than other areas, but in the case study interviews there was a much wider range of responses. Most case study interviewees acknowledged that they do not focus on 'Engaging parents and communities' in their core school improvement work to any significant extent, although most did see it as an important area for individual schools to focus on. On 'behaviour and inclusion', as we note in setting out the five 'fundamentals' in Chapter 3, most MATs and federations prioritised establishing good pupil behaviour where necessary when they were taking on underperforming schools. However, once behaviour standards and systems had been established in a school, it was generally seen as the responsibility of school-level leaders to maintain them, sometimes with the support of an executive head. The central MAT team did sometimes monitor attendance and exclusion data and did sometimes include one or more attendance officers – as well as, in some larger trusts, wider roles such as Educational Psychologists – but we did not encounter core team roles dedicated to developing trust-wide behaviour policies or approaches. We address developing shared approaches to pedagogy in Chapter 6.

- In most areas, the level of impact is judged to be slightly lower than the level of focus (i.e. by less than one mean point). The areas where impact is seen as notably lower (i.e. one mean point or more difference) by one or both groups are 'Identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools' (heads only), 'Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children' (core teams and heads), and 'Increasing financial efficiency' (heads only).

To what extent does your group's school improvement strategy focus on the following areas? For each area, indicate how important it is where 1 = Low priority and 10 = High priority. (Mean ratings)			To what extent do you think that your school group's work in these areas is having an impact? For each area, 1 = No impact and 10 = High positive impact.		
Focus	**MAT Core Team**	**Head in MAT**	**Impact**	**MAT Core Team**	**Head in MAT**
Identifying and addressing under performance in specific schools	9.4	8.9	Identifying and addressing under performance in specific schools	8.7	7.7
Improving the quality of leadership in all schools	9.2	8.5	Improving the quality of leadership in all schools	8.7	8.1
Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children	9.0	8.4	Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children	7.8	7.4
Fostering collaboration between schools	8.9	8.7	Fostering collaboration between schools	8.6	8.2
Increasing financial efficiency	8.7	8.4	Increasing financial efficiency	7.9	7.4
Securing robust QA and accountability for schools including peer or external reviews	8.7	8.4	Securing robust QA and accountability for schools including peer or external reviews	8.3	8.1
Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practice	8.7	8.3	Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practice	8.1	7.9
Recruiting, developing and retaining talent	8.7	7.9	Recruiting, developing and retaining talent	7.9	7.2

Developing shared approaches to curriculum and assessment	8.2	8.1	Developing shared approaches to curriculum and assessment	7.9	7.6
Professional development and feedback/coaching for staff	8.1	7.7	Professional development and feedback/coaching for staff	8.6	7.9
Developing a shared approach to pedagogy	7.9	7.7	Developing a shared approach to pedagogy	7.5	7.3
Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues	7.6	7.1	Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues	7.5	6.7
Engaging parents and community	7.0	6.7	Engaging parents and community	6.5	6.1

Table 4.2: Areas of school improvement – mean ratings for focus/priority and impact responses from MAT core teams and headteachers

In the survey we also asked members of core teams and headteachers in MATs whether they agreed or disagreed with two statements relating to the sustainability of their group's approach to school improvement: 'Our school group's approach to school improvement is financially sustainable' and 'Our school group's approach to school improvement is sustainable in terms of staff workloads'. The responses are shown in Tables 4.3 and 4.4.

Table 4.3 shows that 84% of MAT core team respondents and 80% of MAT headteacher respondents agreed that their approach to school improvement was financially sustainable.

Our school group's approach to school improvement is financially sustainable.		
Percentage %	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	40%	39%
Tend to agree	44%	41%
Neither disagree nor agree	7%	13%
Tend to disagree	8%	6%
Strongly disagree	1%	1%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 4.3: MAT core team and headteacher views on the financial sustainability of their approach

Table 4.4 shows that 84% of respondents from MAT Core Teams and 81% of MAT headteachers agreed that their approach was sustainable in terms of staff workload, although a significant minority in each case did not agree. In our case study visits we explored the ways in which school groups are working to address staff workload issues; we share these findings in Chapter 5.

Our school group's approach to school improvement is sustainable in terms of staff workloads		
Percentage	MAT Core Team	Headteacher in MAT
Strongly agree	31%	34%
Tend to agree	53%	47%
Neither disagree nor agree	7%	12%
Tend to disagree	8%	8%
Strongly disagree	0%	1%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 4.4: MAT core team and headteacher views on the sustainability of their approach in terms of staff workloads

In summary, most MATs and federations do have an explicit school improvement strategy. These strategies focus most closely on four areas: identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools, improving the quality of leadership in all schools; meeting the needs of disadvantaged children, and fostering collaboration between schools. Out of the 12 areas asked about, the 3 that scored lowest in terms of focus and impact were engaging parents and community, addressing behaviour and inclusion issues, and developing a shared approach to pedagogy. Most MAT leaders are confident that their school improvement approach is sustainable, both financially and in terms of staff workloads. However, a small minority of MATs do not appear to have an explicit school improvement strategy. Our analysis also identified that it is rare for MATs and federations to have a comprehensive strategy for wider aspects of sustainable improvement, such as how to move schools from 'Good' to 'Outstanding' in Ofsted terms.

4.3.2 How have groups developed their approach to school improvement to reflect their context and over time?

In Chapter 3 we outlined some of the ways in which contextual differences such as age, size, phase focus and composition (for example in terms of sponsored or converter academies) influenced the school improvement approach in different MATs. In this section we explore these differences in greater detail and also outline the ways in which different MATs have developed their approach to school improvement as they have evolved.

Six of the MATs in our sample developed either before or during 2010: the year that the Academies Act was passed and that large-scale academisation began under the Coalition government. Of the remaining MATs, four were initiated in each of the years 2011 and 2012, six were initiated in 2013 and three in 2014.

As we noted in Chapter 3, there were several differences between the MATs in our sample that were created before and after 2010. Firstly, the MATs created before or during 2010 tended to include higher proportions of secondary schools and sponsored academies than most of the MATs created later. Secondly, there were differences in how the trusts were initiated and sponsored. The majority of the MATs in our sample were initially centred on a single high-performing school or group of schools. By contrast, half (n = 3) of the MATs created in or before 2010 did not have a high-performing school at their centre as they were sponsored by individuals or trusts from outside education. These three MATs all had wide geographic distributions (a characteristic shared by just two in the rest of the sample); this has presented them with particular school improvement challenges as they have worked to support schools in different parts of the country, often with little locally based capacity to draw on.

These **historic and contextual differences influenced the school improvement models** and approaches adopted by our case study MATs. For example, we found that trusts with a wide geographic distribution and with limited school-based capacity had had to work quite differently to trusts that had grown more slowly and more locally. As we explore in the next section, these differences often related to the role, size and structure of the central team: the more established trusts tended to rely on larger core teams compared with many of the more local trusts that had consciously tried to keep their core teams small, drawing on school-to-school support capacity instead. However, **we did also see some convergence in the approaches adopted by different trusts over time**. For example, the trusts that had developed with a wide geographic distribution were mostly working to develop local clusters or regional groupings in order to foster school-to-school collaboration in ways which were somewhat similar to the more localised trusts.

Meanwhile, the lower performing trusts created before or during 2010 were also working to address parallel challenges. For example, the CEO of one had had to work hard to rationalise its geographic footprint by re-brokering some schools out of the trust. Another CEO wanted to expand, but argued that the first priority was to ensure that the trust's existing schools were full, so was focussed on marketing to prospective parents.

The trusts that developed later had also learned lessons from the established trusts, in particular around **the need for managed growth and a geographic footprint that allowed for good levels of collaboration and support between schools**. As we set out in the first of the school improvement 'fundamentals', many of the trusts that had developed from 2011 onwards had adopted a model of three or four higher performing

schools (usually converter academies) for each sponsored academy. However, the medium- and larger-sized trusts that had adopted these ratios were usually evolving their approach over time and as they grew, establishing larger central teams to monitor school performance and manage back-office systems. Several of these trusts felt that they needed to grow in order to achieve a level of scale, but were finding this difficult due to the limited opportunities available for sponsoring new schools and as a result of the slowdown in rates of academisation since 2016.

Whatever their starting point, **most of our case study MATs and federations were continually reflecting on and developing their approach to school improvement.** The focus of their efforts continued to be on the five school improvement 'fundamentals', but they were also focussed on how to make this work consistent and sustainable. One medium-sized primary-focussed average performing MAT provided a good example of how it had iteratively developed its school improvement model over time, in order to address this question. According to the CEO, in phase one, when the MAT was first established, it sponsored two local underperforming schools with support 'from the mothership' (i.e. the founding National Support School). In phase two, as the trust grew to nine schools, it relied on what its CEO called a 'leadership-plus model'. In this phase, the approach was to deploy excellent leadership into new schools that joined the trust, with additional support provided by the Deputy CEO, with the aim of 'getting the schools to Good' (CEO). Over time, the 'plus' aspect of the model (i.e. the support that came from the Deputy CEO), was gradually withdrawn as the schools became stabilised. However, relying too heavily on individual leaders in each school proved problematic, for example when a headteacher left post. Therefore, in phase three, as the trust has grown to 14 schools across two separate clusters, its school improvement model has evolved further. It has appointed two executive leaders, one in charge of teaching and learning and the other in charge of leadership. Each of these executive leaders provides support to a number of academies, but there is a parallel focus on developing core curriculum-related materials and approaches which help to ensure a level of consistency in practice, especially for new schools that join.

The three phases described by the MAT CEO above were inevitably not as neat and tidy in practice as they appear on paper. Other trusts have adopted quite different models, as we explore throughout this section, so we are not suggesting that this is a universal or inevitably developmental journey. What this example does illustrate is the way in which **some of the MATs and federations we studied could describe their approach to school improvement and could explain how they had adapted it over time, becoming more systematic as they moved to operate at scale**. The spur for shifting from one model to another was often a serious issue or even a crisis; for example, several of our case study trusts had strengthened their approach to due diligence of new schools and quality assurance of existing schools after realising too late that they had missed significant issues.

Some of our MAT interviewees recognised that **becoming more systematic could entail risks**, for example if it created additional bureaucracy and so reduced levels of trust and co-operation. In response, several were seeking to **retain flexibility even as they became more systematic**. As one Regional Director put it:

> *I think there's a real danger in saying, 'this is a model that fits.' We might have one school that has intensive support, but other schools get much lighter touch.* Regional Director, large, above average performing MAT

Other MATs and federations had adopted more standardised approaches, arguing that any loss of flexibility was balanced by increased consistency and quality. For example, the Deputy CEO in one small, above average performing MAT emphasised the importance of everyone 'singing from the same page', which was achieved through 'standardised mechanisms for school improvement.' We explore these responses in more detail in section 4.4 below, where we focus on standardisation, alignment and autonomy; and in Chapter 8, where we focus on the ways in which MATs and federations operate as learning organisations.

In summary, the contextual differences between MATs highlighted in Chapter 3 had often led to very different school improvement approaches being adopted. However, we also observed some convergence in the approaches adopted; for example, where national MATs were moving to develop local or regional cluster models that allowed for higher levels of collaboration and school-to-school support between schools, mirroring the approach adopted by many smaller MATs. Most of our case study MATs and federations were continually reflecting on and developing their approach to school improvement and some could articulate clearly how it had become more systematic and strategic over time.

4.3.3 How do different school groups structure their school improvement teams?

As we highlighted in the previous section, mapping the ways in which contextual differences influence the approach to school improvement across our case study MATs is not straightforward. Historical and compositional differences overlap with differences in size and performance level as well as the beliefs and values of the founding sponsor or CEO in each case. Nevertheless, the broad picture that emerges is that the **trusts that were created earlier and trusts that are larger tend to rely more on central and regional teams and capacity, whereas trusts that were created later and those that are smaller tend to have leaner central teams and to rely more on school-to-school support as their main school improvement capacity**. Over time and as trusts grew there appeared to be some convergence in these models, with larger trusts developing clusters as a way to encourage school-to-school collaboration, and with smaller and medium-sized trusts growing their central teams. Each of the models can be seen to

have strengths and weaknesses. A larger central team and set of processes can help to ensure consistency but can also reduce school-level ownership of change and create a dependency culture. Equally, a school-to-school-based model can ensure that expertise and decision-making remain centred in schools, but can be difficult to co-ordinate and quality assure at scale.

MATs were mostly reducing their use of externally commissioned improvement support over time. Several of the larger, established trusts we visited had drawn extensively on such external support in the past, but had reduced this in the face of tighter budgets and concerns around quality. Instead they had generally increased the capacity of their central teams, seeing benefits in this in terms of long-term commitment and enhanced capacity for networking and knowledge sharing. The exception to this tended to be the use of ex-HMI and other Ofsted-trained reviewers who could provide an independent perspective on school performance, although in some cases this came from external organisations such as Challenge Partners. Three-fifths (59%) of all MAT core team respondents to the survey said that they drew on 'Commercial consultants and companies' at least once a term. The next-most-common forms of support came from 'Teaching School Alliances' (53%) and 'Regional Schools Commissioners' (50%).

In the survey, we asked MAT core teams and headteachers to describe their trust's approach to school improvement by selecting one of five options, as shown in Table 4.5. This shows that, overall, both **core team leaders and headteachers in MATs are most likely to describe their approach as a partnership**, in which 'most decisions and actions involve both schools and the centre'. However, there were differences between the two groups: while three-fifths (60%) of core team members selected this option, less than half (46%) of headteachers did. The second-most-common approach, according to core team members (16%) was **school-to-school support**, in which 'the central team is small and plays a facilitating role'; a fifth (19%) of MAT headteachers selected this option. The second-most-common approach for MAT headteachers (28%, compared to 11% of core team members) was one in which 'individual schools are largely autonomous and can decide on their own approach to school improvement, except in cases where performance is poor (i.e. **earned autonomy**)'. Just over 1 in 10 core team members (11%), compared to 7% of headteachers, described their approach as one in which '**the central team is the driving force for school improvement** … and is where most of the capacity sits'. Finally, the least common response, selected by just 2% of core team members and no headteachers, was a model in which 'responsibility and capacity for school improvement … is largely devolved to local or regional clusters/hubs'.

Which of the following statements best describes your MAT's approach to school improvement?	Central MAT		HT MAT	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Individual schools are largely autonomous and can decide on their own approach to school improvement, except in cases where performance is poor (i.e. earned autonomy).	20	11%	37	28%
Most of the school improvement activity in our MAT draws on school-to-school support – the central team is small and plays a facilitating role.	28	16%	25	19%
The central team is the driving force for school improvement in our MAT and is where most of the capacity sits.	20	11%	9	7%
Responsibility and capacity for school improvement in our MAT is largely devolved to local or regional clusters/hubs.	3	2%	0	0%
School improvement in our MAT is a partnership between the central team and school-based leaders – most decisions and actions involve both schools and the centre.	106	60%	60	46%
Total	**165**	**100%**	**132**	**100%**

Table 4.5: MAT core team and headteacher views on the overall approach to school improvement

The fact that 'partnership' is the most common response for both groups appears to reflect a preference for **operating as a network rather than a hierarchy** in many MATs, with high levels of trust and decisions made consensually as far as possible. However, the differences between core team and headteacher responses in this area are interesting, with some headteachers seeing themselves as having 'earned autonomy' despite their core team peers seeing it as a partnership. This highlights a difficult balance that CEOs were seeking to strike in several of the MATs we visited and in our secondary analysis of the MAT CEO interviews: **on the one hand they wanted to operate as a collaborative partnership, with all schools having an equal voice and with headteachers feeling a sense of ownership, but on the other hand they felt that they needed a level of central control and oversight in order to ensure quality and accountability**. Such 'partnership'-based decision-making also became more challenging as MATs grew, with an inevitable risk that they became less flexible and

more bureaucratic. One Deputy CEO in a large, above average performing MAT implicitly acknowledged this when they argued that 'there's nothing about our school improvement model that is transactional … if a school needs more, it will get more', but also highlighted that such flexibility was 'a challenge, in terms of our business model.' In practice, therefore, these 'partnership' MATs tended to adopt aspects of the other models we identified in the survey, with a growing reliance on 'centrally driven' functions offered in combination with aspects of 'earned autonomy' and 'school-to-school support'.

In our case study visits, it appeared that **most MATs and federations were seeking to work in partnership with schools, but in doing so were adopting combinations of three core models:**

- **earned autonomy** (equivalent to option one in Table 4.5)

- **school-to-school support** (equivalent to option two in Table 4.5)

- **centrally driven** (equivalent to option three in Table 4.5).

Several of the larger MATs were moving to regional or local hubs and cluster models, but these structures generally operated in tandem with one of the other three models rather than as a distinct approach. The exception to this was one large, below average performing MAT, where the regional directors worked largely independently of each other, with minimal central oversight (i.e. the fourth option in Table 4.5).

The majority of MATs and federations adopted hybrid combinations of these models, as we outline below, but a minority were consciously committed to a single approach. For example, one medium-sized, above average performing trust described their ethos as 'very much for schools by schools' and 'for staff by staff', and so had deliberately kept the central team lean. Similarly, one of the two federations we visited had operated for more than 10 years and had a mature school-to-school support model, with clear processes for brokering SLEs and other designated lead practitioners between schools across the group, facilitated by a small executive team and a Teaching School. Another medium-sized, above average performing trust had initially adopted a more centralised model, but had then reverted to a school-to-school support one. It had appointed a central team comprising an ex-HMI and a seconded headteacher when it first started to grow, but this had led to dissatisfaction among school leaders: 'we realised we had unintentionally created an office-based, LA model with a central team to scrutinise performance' (Head of School Improvement). 'This went away from the vision that we had created around using the best in all our schools. The model set up [the two central staff] as experts and the headteachers didn't like it … So we stepped back and revisited the vision and values.' This led to a restructure, with the core team reduced and capacity for school improvement now firmly located in schools. The trusts that adopted this school-to-school support model were mostly small or medium-sized and tended to be

the ones that kept a balance between higher performing and challenging academies as they grew.

A small minority of trusts adopted an explicitly centralised model, often in tandem with a more directive leadership style and a focus on standardisation as we explore in section 4.4. One example of a centralised model was where a new CEO had taken over a below average performing large trust and was seeking to effect rapid improvement. In the CEO's view, the biggest and most important change they had made immediately after taking up post was to adopt a new trust-wide Scheme of Delegation, which clarified that the CEO (rather than individual Academy Councils) had overall accountability and responsibility for improvement. This change had allowed the new CEO to make a series of key decisions, such when and where to redeploy Executive Principals, without having to ask the individual Academy Councils to agree to this. Other changes had included creating new central leadership posts (such as Senior Directors for English and Maths) and moving to a common curriculum and timetable in all the trust's secondary schools and a common assessment and reporting system in all its primary and secondary schools.

A very different example of a 'centralised' model combined with 'earned autonomy' came from one of the large, above average performing trusts we visited. This MAT supports more than 40 challenging schools across a relatively tight geographic area. It employs a large central team but also encourages its schools to operate independently; for example, the CEO invests time into recruiting high quality governors for each Local Governing Body. The CEO described the approach as follows:

> *The autonomy for the heads is really important and as long as it's successful, then we're happy with that … But we're really good at watching carefully, intervening fast if it's not working, challenging the bits that are not working, and coming up with better ways of working. So it's less about a [MAT] machine and more, 'you're going to be successful, no matter how you do it, let's explore the different ways it might work.'*
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

The trust's primary and secondary directors work with a team of executive heads to challenge and support schools. In primary, every school is allocated an executive head, but in secondary they are only deployed to schools where there is a concern about capacity or performance. In secondary in particular the trust generally appoints experienced substantive headteachers for each school. The trust has a SCITT providing large-scale Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and runs a suite of leadership development programmes. It also has a significant back-office team which includes functions that directly support school improvement, such as data analysis. Critically, the trust employs a central team of 50 subject and phase consultants who provide support to schools and also help to move knowledge and expertise around the group, as we explore in Chapter

5. The CEO estimates that around 95% of the support for schools comes from this central team, although the trust does also include two Teaching Schools that provide their own CPD and there is some school-to-school support facilitated by the executive heads.

Several of our case study trusts had adopted a much more devolved model of 'earned autonomy' than this, with a small central team focussed on monitoring performance and commissioning support for schools where required, but with higher performing schools largely left to drive their own improvement. These trusts usually allocated each school a set number of days each year from a SIP (School Improvement Partner); who might be an employee, such as the School Improvement Director, or externally commissioned. The SIP would visit the school on a regular, usually half-termly, basis, in order to review performance, to provide challenge and to agree any support required. The support itself might come from the SIP, but was more likely to be brokered in from another school or an external source, such as a Teaching School. The level of SIP scrutiny usually depended on the performance level of the school, with lower performing schools receiving more intensive support. In one medium-sized, below average performing trust, each school had two SIPs: one to provide challenge and the other to provide support. The SIPs in this trust were all rotated every 18 months so that they could provide a fresh perspective on each school. We explore how these SIP roles supported QA and accountability in Chapter 7.

The majority of the above average performing trusts we visited, as well as several average and below average performers, had adopted hybrid approaches that combined all three models (centralised, school-to-school support and earned autonomy) and, sometimes, some externally commissioned support. The core team in these trusts always led on the monitoring of school performance, whether from a SIP-type function or an executive head, but usually provided some additional capacity as well. This central capacity enabled the core team to facilitate subject networks, to develop shared resources and to provide some support for schools that required it. But these MATs and federations would also augment this core capacity by brokering school-to-school support where needed, for example from headteachers and SLEs that might be located internally or externally to the MAT.

One large, above average performing trust provides an example of how this hybrid model could evolve. The MAT started in 2012 and now supports 20 primary schools across a reasonably focussed geographic area. Its approach was initially based on a school-to-school support model, with a Teaching School based at the lead school helping to build sustainable capacity through its ITT, CPD and leadership development provision as well as its designation of SLEs from across the alliance. The trust applied a capacity model from the outset, with three schools able to provide capacity for each 'capacity taker' that joined. Today the headteachers and staff of the 'capacity giver' schools do continue to

provide support to other schools where required and are paid for this. However, the model has evolved over time and the CEO estimates that only around 40% of support now comes from other schools, with the majority (around 60%) coming from the trust's core team. In addition to the back-office team, this comprises the CEO, Deputy CEO (who is also director of the TSA), three Hub Directors and three part-time Lead Practitioners (for English, Maths and EYFS).

The Hub Directors are key to the model, combining a mixture of monitoring, challenge and support for schools within their hub. Each Director is responsible for around eight schools, which are allocated to reflect personalities and needs rather than on a strictly geographic basis. These eight schools operate to some extent as a cluster, for example with the eight headteachers meeting on a regular cycle. All schools receive a minimum of six days per year of 'challenge and support' from their allocated Hub Director along with Performance Management for the headteacher and an annual partnership review. Any additional support is allocated by the central team based on a cycle of 6-weekly risk meetings in which performance across every school is reviewed. If a school is identified as needing significant support, then it is common for the Hub Director to step in and effectively become a part-time executive head, working with the substantive head in the school, for a time-limited period. Less intensive support might come from one of the trust's three Lead Practitioners or from an SLE. The Hub Director role is carefully woven together with the trust's other accountability and support structures. For example, the MAT has retained Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) for each school but has also developed a cluster-level governance model through which the eight LGB Chairs meet to focus on the performance of the schools in the hub. Similarly, the work of the TSA and the three Lead Practitioners is focussed on developing and sharing trust-wide practices in relation to assessment, curriculum and pedagogy so that schools across the trust feel connected into a wider approach.

In summary, the evidence shows that while many MATs and federations are attempting to adopt a partnership approach, in practice they draw on one or more of three distinct models – school-to-school support, centralised and earned autonomy. While some larger MATs have adopted regional and cluster-based models, it is rare for these devolved structures to operate independently with lead responsibility for school improvement; more commonly, these regional and cluster models serve to complement one of the other three approaches. Most MATs and federations have adopted hybrid models which combine aspects of the three models. As they develop these hybrid models, most MATs and federations are seeking to maintain a partnership approach, characterised by high levels of trust between central office staff and schools. The direction of travel over time and as trusts grow is towards larger central teams that combine a monitoring and challenge function with providing some or all of the support required for schools that are struggling, though often drawing on some school-to-school support to augment this central capacity.

4.4 How do MATs and federations work to secure alignment on shared practices which support improvement at scale?

We turn now to the final sub-section of this chapter on vision, values, strategy and culture. In this section we focus on how MATs and federations work to secure alignment on shared practices which support improvement, as shown in Figure 4.4 below.

Vision, values,   People, learning &   Assessment,   QA & accountability
strategy & culture   capacity   curriculum & pedagogy

Alignment around shared practices which support improvement

A sustainable learning organisation
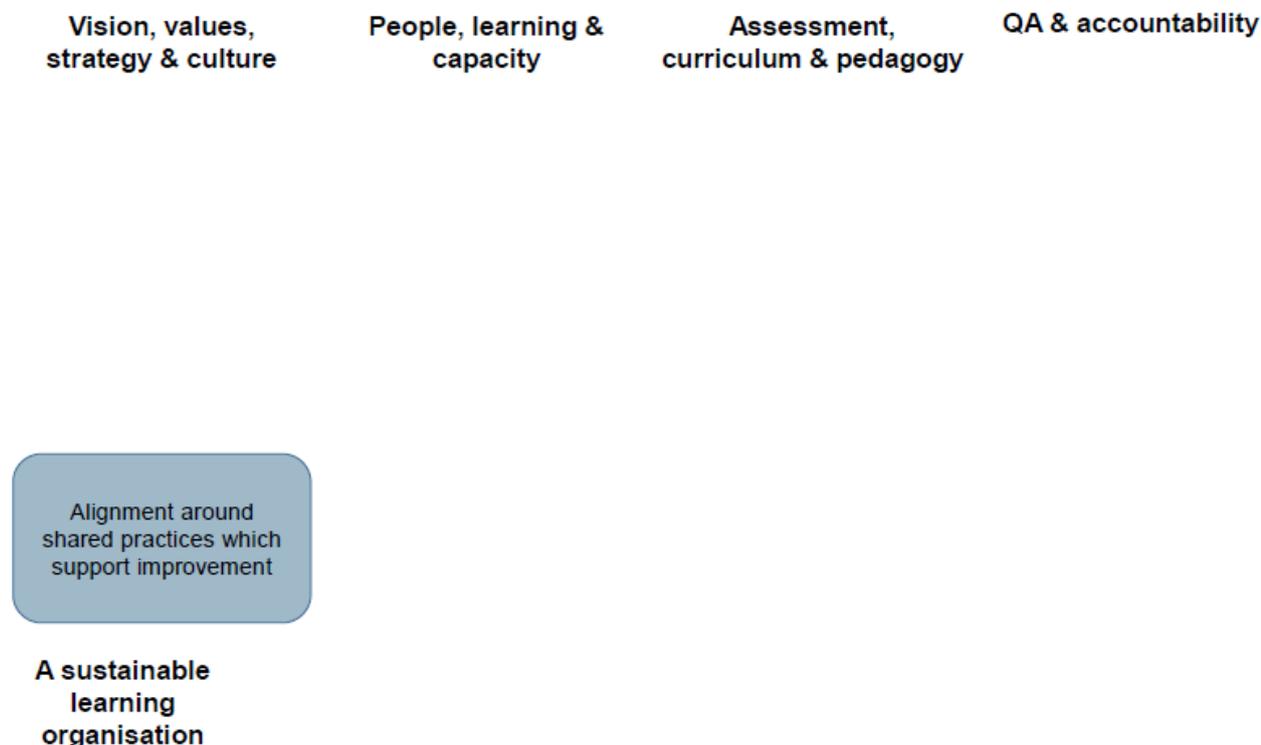
Figure 4.4: Alignment on shared practices which support improvement in MATs and federations

In Section 4.3 we outlined three models for structuring the approach to school improvement (centralised, school-to-school support and earned autonomy) and explained that the centralised approach was often aligned with high levels of standardisation. In this section we develop this analysis further, by exploring the question: Where and how do MATs standardise, align and give schools autonomy over practice?

We address this question in three sections, starting with an overview of key definitions and the main findings and then focussing in more detail on the findings from the survey and the case studies. We then return to these issues in more depth in Chapter 6, where we discuss assessment, curriculum and pedagogy.

4.4.1 Where and how do MATs standardise, align and give schools autonomy over practice? Key definitions and an overview of findings

The question of where and how to standardise or align practice across a MAT or federation and where to give schools and teachers the autonomy to make their own decisions is significant but often contentious. **Debates in this area can become polarised**: proponents of standardisation argue that it allows for consistency and the application of proven approaches, while critics argue that it de-professionalises teachers and leaders and risks making all schools the same, with little scope for adaptation to context. These arguments partly echo wider debates relating to 'what works/evidence-based practice' (Greany and Maxwell, 2017; Coldwell et al., 2016) and scale-up (Peurach and Glazer, 2012), but until now there has not been any large-scale research into practices in MATs and federations in England.

In both the survey and case study research we adopted three core definitions:

- **'Standardised'** - 'a single required approach that all schools must adopt'.

- **'Aligned'** - 'an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis'.

- **'Autonomous'** - 'each individual school being able to decide its own approach'.

In our cross-case analysis of the case studies, we categorised each MAT and federation to identify its dominant approach in three broad areas of practice: assessment, curriculum and pedagogy, using a standard set of grids that were completed and cross-moderated by both the individual case study researcher and one of the lead authors. In the case of pedagogy, we also distinguished between approaches that were aligned around a defined set of principles and models and those that were developing alignment more incrementally, for example through subject and teaching networks.[21]

Practice in most MATs and federations was adapted to different issues and school contexts, so although **we focus on dominant approaches here, we recognise that these risk masking these important nuances**. We also found subtle differences in terminology and interpretation between our interviewees; for example, some resisted the use of the word 'standardised' even though they had some practices that were mandatory.

We also identified important differences in *how* different MATs and federations worked to achieve standardisation or alignment of practice. Most often, our case study MATs and federations had developed and defined an agreed approach through a

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[21] We discuss the specifics of the different approaches to assessment, curriculum and pedagogy in Chapter 6, so the focus here is on the overall approach to standardisation, alignment and autonomy.

process of co-design or consultation that involved their member schools. In some cases, shared practices had **emerged organically** over time as teachers and leaders worked together and observed each other, through a process that one Vice Principal described as 'behaviour mimicking'. Once developed, these approaches might then be defined as standardised (i.e. prescribed) or aligned (i.e. voluntary), often depending on the performance of the school (i.e. earned autonomy). In a minority of MATs, the approach had been defined at the outset, usually based on practices developed in the founding lead school, which they then **rolled out** to other schools through the use of training programmes, prescribed procedures and toolkits. We explore these different approaches in more detail in Chapter 5, where we ask how MATs and federations move knowledge around, within and between schools.

It might seem that the differences between these development approaches (co-designed, organic, rolled out) would be academic for any new school joining the MAT or federation: either way, the practice had now become standardised or aligned. However, in practice this did not seem to be the case. **In the roll-out model the standardised practices tended to be tightly codified and fixed, whereas in the co-designed and organically evolved models the practices were less tightly specified and so remained malleable, changing and evolving as they were debated and applied across different contexts.**

Furthermore, the process of co-designing an approach appeared more likely to ensure ownership and buy-in from staff, even where the approach had subsequently been agreed as a standardised (i.e. prescribed) model. For example, one federation had developed its own maths programme, which had been written by staff representatives from across its schools. Interviewees from across the federation argued that the co-design approach meant that it was 'our programme'.

The findings reported in this section indicate that **the majority of MATs and federations, including a majority of above average performing MATs, standardise or align practices in relation to pupil assessment and data reporting**. Other areas of practice, particularly in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy, are less clear-cut: two of our above average performing MATs did standardise practices in these areas, but the majority did not, although many were more prescriptive when they took over a failing school. However, **most of the above average performing MATs we visited were working to align some aspects of practice in these areas**. As we saw in the last section, they were seeking to do this through a partnership approach which protected a level of school autonomy and decision-making on the basis that this was essential for ownership, innovation and adaptation to context. As we saw, school-level leaders often believe that they have more 'earned autonomy' than members of core teams, perhaps subtly suggesting the success of this approach. The process of aligning or standardising

practices can be challenging and so we outline some of the ways in which leaders are working to overcome these challenges in the section below.

The findings reported here relate to the analysis in section 4.3, above, where we compared centralised, earned autonomy and school-to-school support models. As might be assumed, MATs and federations that adopt highly standardised approaches tend to have stronger central teams and are less likely to support earned autonomy. However, the different models do not consistently align; for example, we visited trusts with strong central teams that were also committed to earned autonomy and that had very few areas of standardised practice.

4.4.2 Where and how do MATs standardise, align and give schools autonomy over practice? Findings from the survey

In the survey we asked MAT core teams and headteachers to state whether policies and practices in a number of specified areas in their MAT were 'mostly standardised', 'mostly aligned' or 'mostly autonomous' (using the definitions above). We also gave a fourth option in each case – 'mixed approach/depends on context'. The results can be seen in Table 4.6, with the percentage of core team members stating that an area of practice is 'mostly standardised' shown in ascending order.

The responses indicate that some areas of practice are more likely to be standardised or aligned across a MAT than others. **'Data capture and reporting' is by far the most likely area to be standardised or aligned**, with 56% of core team members describing it as standardised and 25% describing it as aligned. This is followed by two related areas: 'Assessment, e.g. exam boards' (36% standardised, 26% aligned – core team) and 'Moderating standards of pupil work' (39% standardised, 32% aligned – core team). The three areas that were most likely to be described as autonomous by core team members were 'Format/process for lesson planning' (68%), 'Behaviour management' (58%) and 'Reporting to parents' (58%).

Headteachers in MATs broadly agree with core team members on the areas that are most and least standardised, aligned or autonomous. However, **headteachers are noticeably more likely than their core team colleagues to see some areas as autonomous and less likely to describe them as standardised or aligned**. For example, 50% of Headteachers describe 'Approaches to teaching/pedagogy' as autonomous, compared to 35% of core team members; 69% see 'Curriculum design/timetabling' as autonomous compared to 53% of core team members; and 58% see 'Curriculum content' as autonomous compared to 49% of core team members.

We also broke responses to this question down by size of MAT, combining the responses for core team members and headteachers in each case. The MAT sizes we used (1–3 schools, 4–6 schools, 7 or more schools) are not the same as the ones we adopted for

identifying our case study sample, so cannot be compared to our wider findings in this section. The results are included in Annex B and indicate that smaller MATs are more likely to be standardised or aligned in most areas of practice, while the larger MATs (7+ schools) are least likely to be standardised or aligned.

For each of the following areas, please indicate whether policies and practices across your MAT are: i) mostly standardised, that is with a single required approach that all schools must adopt; ii) mostly aligned, that is with an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis; iii) mostly autonomous (i.e. each individual school decides on its own approach)?	MAT Core Team					Headteacher in MAT				
	Mostly standardise	Mostly aligned	Mostly autonomous	Mixed approach/depends	Total	Mostly standardise	Mostly aligned	Mostly autonomous	Mixed approach/depends	Total
Format/process for lesson planning	6%	14%	68%	12%	**100%**	7%	8%	72%	13%	**100%**
Curriculum design/timetabling (e.g. curriculum-based budgeting)	8%	24%	53%	15%	**100%**	9%	11%	69%	11%	**100%**
Targeted interventions for pupils with common challenges	9%	27%	48%	16%	**100%**	7%	20%	66%	7%	**100%**
Curriculum content	9%	24%	49%	18%	**100%**	13%	14%	58%	14%	**100%**
Approaches to teaching/pedagogy	11%	36%	35%	19%	**100%**	8%	26%	50%	15%	**100%**
Behaviour management	14%	16%	58%	11%	**100%**	13%	20%	62%	5%	**100%**
Marking and feedback to pupils	15%	25%	49%	11%	**100%**	7%	24%	59%	10%	**100%**
Reporting to parents	15%	21%	58%	7%	**100%**	14%	25%	56%	6%	**100%**
Managing teacher workloads	16%	30%	43%	11%	**100%**	10%	19%	63%	7%	**100%**
Format/process for pupil progress reviews	22%	27%	41%	10%	**100%**	16%	28%	53%	3%	**100%**
Monitoring the quality of day-to-day teaching (e.g. lesson observations)	26%	31%	28%	15%	**100%**	11%	31%	47%	11%	**100%**
Moderating standards of pupil work	39%	32%	14%	14%	**100%**	23%	40%	23%	13%	**100%**
Assessment e.g. exam boards	39%	26%	24%	12%	**100%**	46%	25%	22%	6%	**100%**
Data capture and reporting	56%	25%	11%	7%	**100%**	57%	30%	7%	6%	**100%**

Table 4.6: MAT core team and headteacher responses on standardisation, alignment and autonomy

4.4.3 Where and how do MATs standardise, align and give schools autonomy over practice? Findings from the case studies

The findings from the survey align with our case study visits to MATs and federations, where we asked our interviewees to describe examples of practices that are either standardised, aligned or autonomous (using the same definitions as the survey) and to give an estimate for what proportion of overall practice in their MAT or federation fell into each category.

As in the survey, we found that MATs and federations are most likely to focus on standardising or aligning practice across their member schools in the areas of age related expectations, assessment, moderation and data capture and reporting. The trusts and federations that had adopted a standardised or aligned approach in these areas argued that this allowed the core team and trust board to monitor school performance and to hold schools accountable through a consistent and comparable approach. The use of a single exam board for assessment (including interim/mock assessments) and the use of cross-school moderation of pupil work in primary schools was an important aspect of this, since it gave MATs and federations confidence that their data was reliable and comparable. Several interviewees explained that before they adopted a single approach, they had relied on school-reported data for interim assessments of pupil progress, but this had sometimes been problematic, for example where a school was over-optimistic about standards in relation to the new national assessments.

Standardising or aligning practices in these areas was usually seen as helpful for schools and teachers. Several of our school-based interviewees argued that developing a single set of Age Related Expectations (ARE) for pupil learning, as well as a single approach and timetable for assessing and moderating pupil work, supported richer and deeper collaboration between staff, because they had a shared language and set of expectations. Several also argued that a single approach to data collection and reporting was helpful because it saved time, reducing the need for multiple data collections. As we explore in Chapter 7, many trusts and federations also had sophisticated systems for collecting and analysing data to inform the improvement process.

Some of our case study trusts had not standardised or aligned practice in relation to assessment and data reporting, while others were still in the process of developing an agreed approach. This included three above average, two average and one below average performing MATs. Several of these had relatively small central teams which lacked the capacity and/or authority to push through a common approach. In several cases the core team had been preoccupied with addressing underperformance in particular schools and so had not had time to focus on agreeing trust-wide approaches.

Beyond the core areas of assessment, moderation and data reporting, there was far more variability in practice across our case study sample. Indeed, many of our case study MATs and federations were engaged in active debates around the pros and cons of standardisation, alignment and autonomy, in particular in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. These discussions were often interwoven with debates relating to the issues we explored in the previous sections, for example around the role and size of the central team. On the one hand, we heard quotes such as: 'We don't want to be faceless, like an Ikea flat-pack organisation, and lose that element of being a family' (CEO, medium-sized, above average performing MAT). On the other side, we heard that 'if you want to be in our trust, we're the design authority' (CEO, small, above average performing MAT). As will be clear, these perspectives relate to the different approaches to decision-making that we described in section 4.2.3 and the three models for moving knowledge around that we outline in the following chapter.

Three of the MATs in our sample (two above average and one below average) were committed to standardisation across most areas of curriculum and pedagogy. The CEOs of these trusts had generally not engaged in a process of co-design involving their member schools: rather, they had rolled out approaches that had been developed either in the lead school or, in one case, another MAT. They argued that it made sense to apply these proven approaches in a consistent way across every school. For example, one CEO argued:

> *We have proven that if you apply our teaching, learning and pedagogy, our reading and writing and maths strategies … our kids will make really good progress.*
> CEO, small, above average performing MAT

These three trusts had developed tightly prescribed ways of ensuring that these proven approaches were applied across the MAT. For example, one small MAT had codified its approach into a manual, which was then implemented through defined professional development courses, through the performance management system and through the trust's approach to lesson observations and feedback. An executive head in this MAT described a 'non-negotiable culture, and a non-excuse culture.'

The large, below average performing MAT had adopted a slightly less prescriptive, but still highly codified model as a way of trying to address the MAT's historic poor performance. The CEO described it as 80:20 (i.e. 80% standardised, 20% flexible), with a standard approach to the following areas in all the trust's secondary schools: curriculum size and structure, marking and assessment, lesson structures, the timing of the school day and behaviour. This meant, for example, that every lesson was delivered consistently across each subject at the same time in every school, using a standard six-part lesson structure and plan. Leaders gave an example of how the standard lesson starter approach had been developed in one subject area in one school and this had then been

adopted by schools across the trust in order to illustrate how the 20% flexibility could be applied to support innovation and continuous improvement.

In addition to the three MATs that had adopted standardised approaches, another five (two above average, one average and two below average) were in the process of becoming more standardised in their approach to curriculum and/or pedagogy, having been less so in the past. For the lower performers, this shift reflected a concern that their existing model was not delivering sufficiently good results, so they felt they needed to develop greater consistency across the trust. For the average and above average performers, the shift reflected a desire for a more systematic approach, with less reliance on individual leaders or schools. Some of these MATs had imposed an approach developed by the core team or lead school, while others were focussed on co-designing an approach with input from other member schools.

The majority of our case study MATs and federations were not adopting a single standardised approach to curriculum and pedagogy, although many were working to align practices in some areas or to agree a mix of standardisation, alignment and autonomy in different areas. Leaders in these MATs and federations were concerned that if they imposed standardisation, in particular if they prescribed specific approaches, this would reduce professional ownership and limit the scope for adaptation to the needs of different schools and contexts. However, at the same time, they saw benefits in aligning or even standardising practices where possible, since this could help ensure that effective practices were shared and applied consistently. One Hub Director described their approach as follows:

> *We celebrate the uniqueness of the schools, it isn't a blanket 'we'll all do this' … In order for each school to thrive, it has to be owned by their own staff. If they feel that we are doing to and putting blanket rules over it … they'll do what needs to be done, but it will be a surface level, it will never be owned … We hold on to that, where is the balance between standardisation and autonomy? How much of this do we need to be adopted, how much can be adapted and how much are we going to allow the schools to fly in their own right?*
> Hub Director, large, above average performing MAT

Strong leadership at school level was important for these MATs and federations, because this could ensure that schools continued to feel ownership and to drive their own improvement. For example, one CEO argued:

> *We don't want school leaders to be just implementing a centrally prescribed curriculum as this leads to atrophication of ideas … headteachers are the engine room of school improvement*.
> CEO, medium-sized, average performing MAT

However, **there was generally a recognition that such local agency and leadership was contingent on performance and context, with lower performing schools often required to adopt more standardised approaches**. These considerations sometimes related to whether the school had joined the trust voluntarily (i.e. as a converter) or had been brokered in as a sponsored academy. Converter academies had often joined the trust on the basis of an agreement that they would retain some autonomy, whereas sponsored academies generally had less ability to demand this. One CEO put it this way:

> *It probably comes down to ownership … In a sponsored academy position, the trust has ownership of the direction that school's going to take, and it will go on that journey. If it's a converter, ownership is with the headteacher, working within our framework and they'll deliver it in their way*.
> CEO, medium-sized, above average performing MAT

CEOs and core teams in these MATs and federations had to navigate these historic and performance-based differences carefully, working to facilitate shared decision-making and local ownership wherever possible, but sometimes having to adopt a more 'bullish' approach in order to overcome resistance to change. In the words of one Executive Head:

> *That spectrum from autonomy, through to alignment, through to standardisation, at times it can be a rocky path. And the discussions that we've had in terms of developing standardised schemes of work and standardized assessments through Key Stage 4 … we get there in the end but people don't just sort of quietly acquiesce and say, 'yes, give me your scheme of work.' It's 'Train me, talk to me, let's look at it like this.' Good professional debate … We've become more bullish as time has progressed because we're committed to getting this right obviously.*
> Executive Head, medium-sized, average performing MAT

Clearly, there were risks involved in becoming too 'bullish' if this meant that school-level leaders felt overruled. We heard from many school-based interviewees that they did not want to work in a trust or federation that dictated to them; or, as one primary head put it: 'I don't want to be in a school where I'm told: "You must do it this way or that way."'

Therefore, these later case study **MATs and federations were working hard to maintain a balance between consistency on the one hand and ownership on the other**. In these trusts, the consistent practices had often been developed organically, through a process of 'behaviour mimicking', as teachers and leaders from different schools collaborated with each other, for example to design and facilitate professional development programmes for their colleagues. Senior leaders in these MATs and federations actively encouraged these processes; as we explore in Chapter 5, where we focus on approaches to moving knowledge around. In other cases the consistent practices might be agreed more formally, through meetings and other forums. These

approaches might then become standardised (i.e. prescribed) for all new underperforming schools that joined the group, but usually remained aligned (i.e. voluntary) for schools that were higher performing. Critically, even where practices were more standardised, there was a recognition that they should remain flexible and would require adaptation in different contexts.

The CEO in one of the MATs that reflected this balance between consistency and ownership explained what it was about:

> *Same philosophy, different context … Alignment comes as people talk; it is not a diminution of autonomy but a consequence of professional dialogue.*
> CEO, medium-sized, above average performing trust

In this CEO's view, the trust had become more convergent as it had grown, with the majority of policies and practices now established at MAT level, but with an explicit commitment to school-level adaptation. According to one interviewee in the same trust, it now operated like a Russian doll: 'expectations are standardised, standards are aligned, delivery is local and autonomous'. A head of department in the same trust was clear that the trust 'doesn't feel like a corporate business.'

Finally, while many of the above average performing trusts were working towards greater alignment or consistency in different areas of practice, they were generally committed to balancing this with a level of school autonomy. For example, one CEO explained:

> *We've got some schools where it's all about the hero head, but it works, so that's fine. And we've got other schools where the head is quite low-key, and it's all about systems, and it works and that's fine.*
> CEO, large, above average performing trust

In this MAT, a school Vice Principal argued that, if anything, the trust had become less prescriptive over time:

> *I think that's one of the things that surprised me when I joined [the MAT], the lack of rigidity … the mission statement is to improve social mobility, and that's it … so you understand very quickly that your role is to help disadvantaged students, but beyond that I don't think there's that much specification of method. It is up to the schools to be fairly autonomous in their operations … they don't really specify how you should do it; I think probably less as the years have gone on … It felt slightly harder when I arrived. But as you are getting more schools that are Outstanding and figuring out what the next step is, I think they are allowing more autonomy within that.*
> Vice Principal, large, above average performing MAT

In summary, this section has explored the question of where and how MATs and federations are working to standardise or align practice and where they give schools and teachers autonomy to make their own decisions. We identified three broad approaches to how MATs and federations were working to develop shared practices: roll-out, co-design and organic. Once developed and formalised, an approach might then be agreed as standardised (i.e. prescribed), aligned (i.e. voluntary), or autonomous, with the choice often based on the performance profile of the school. We found that the majority of MATs and federations standardise or align practices in relation to pupil assessment and data reporting. The majority were not adopting a standardised approach to curriculum and pedagogy, although many were working to align or standardise practices in some areas. The process of aligning or standardising practices could be challenging for leaders, in particular in MATs and federations where the existing culture was predicated on high levels of school autonomy.

Conclusion

Two points are worth highlighting in relation to the focus of this chapter, which has explored the processes involved in establishing a shared vision, values and culture and in operationalising a school improvement strategy across MATs and federations.

While the majority of MATs and federations do have a clear vision and strategy for school improvement and many are working increasingly strategically, a minority remain tactical and focus on school turnarounds without significant evidence of a sustainable approach.

Our case study MATs and federations were at different stages of developing an organisational model that would enable them to deliver the five school improvement 'fundamentals' more effectively and sustainably.

We identified differences between MATs and federations that focus predominantly on performance in terms of exam scores and Ofsted grades and those that have defined a wider purpose or set of values and have translated these into tangible school improvement approaches. School-based leaders in the latter group explained that they found these approaches meaningful and motivational, arguably indicating a more sustainable approach, but there is clearly an important balance to be struck between achieving focussed improvement priorities and generating a wider sense of purpose.

Most MATs and federations are seeking to operate as both hierarchies and networks simultaneously.

All of our case study MATs and federations were wrestling with the question of how to grow sustainably. The most astute recognised that the development of stronger systems and processes risked a loss of flexibility and collegial effort if those systems became too

fixed and bureaucratic. Meanwhile, some trusts and federations also recognised that as they became more systematic in spotting risks and turning round underperformance, they risked losing sight of how to challenge higher performing schools to improve further.

We outlined three distinct school improvement models – centralised, school-to-school support and earned autonomy. We showed that while a minority of MATs and federations consciously adopt one model, the majority adopt a hybrid approach that mixes aspects of the three models whilst retaining a partnership approach between the centre and schools. We also set out our findings on how MATs and federations work to secure more or less consistency in practice through approaches to standardisation, alignment and autonomy and we distinguished between three approaches to developing consistency of practice: roll-out, co-design and organic.

On the basis of our analysis, we argue that most MATs and federations are seeking to operate as both networks and hierarchies simultaneously. Each model arguably has potential benefits and risks. While hierarchies can provide clarity on decision-making and lines of accountability, they can also become bureaucratic and limit agency; and while networks can increase ownership and support effective knowledge transfer, they can also become self-referential and can struggle to achieve consensus (Greany and Higham, 2018). Retaining a balance between hierarchical and network properties is not simple, particularly as MATs grow and work to develop greater alignment and standardisation in practice. It is too early to say conclusively whether MATs and federations are proving successful in this endeavour.

To some extent the trusts that were working to achieve alignment in their practices can be seen to reflect what Mourshed et al. (2010: 87) describe as 'non-mandated uniformity', in their study of the Aspire chain of schools in the US. Mourshed et al. explain that teachers in Aspire schools adopted aligned practices as a result of collaborative development: 'instructional materials and methods are co-developed by teachers, tested in classes, and the results studied'. However, Mourshed et al. also explain that, at Aspire, 'what works well is shared widely and adopted by peers. What does not work is discarded.' We did not observe MATs or federations in England where this level of rigorous evaluation and prioritisation was happening systematically, but in Chapter 8 we do outline some examples of disciplined innovation from our data.

5. Sustainable improvement in MATs and federations ii: people, learning and capacity

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 set out the five school improvement 'fundamentals' and the five strategic areas that MATs and federations address as they work to develop sustainable models. Chapter 4 set out how MATs and federations establish a shared vision and set of values and how they structure and operationalise their school improvement approach.

This chapter addresses the second strategic area that MATs and federations are working to address as they develop a sustainable approach – people, learning and capacity. It focuses in particular on the three sub-areas shown in Figure 5.1, which address how MATs and federations work to:

- recruit, develop and retain high quality staff

- identify, develop and deploy leadership and staff expertise to address school needs

- establish mechanisms to move knowledge and effective practices around the group, so that they support improvement.
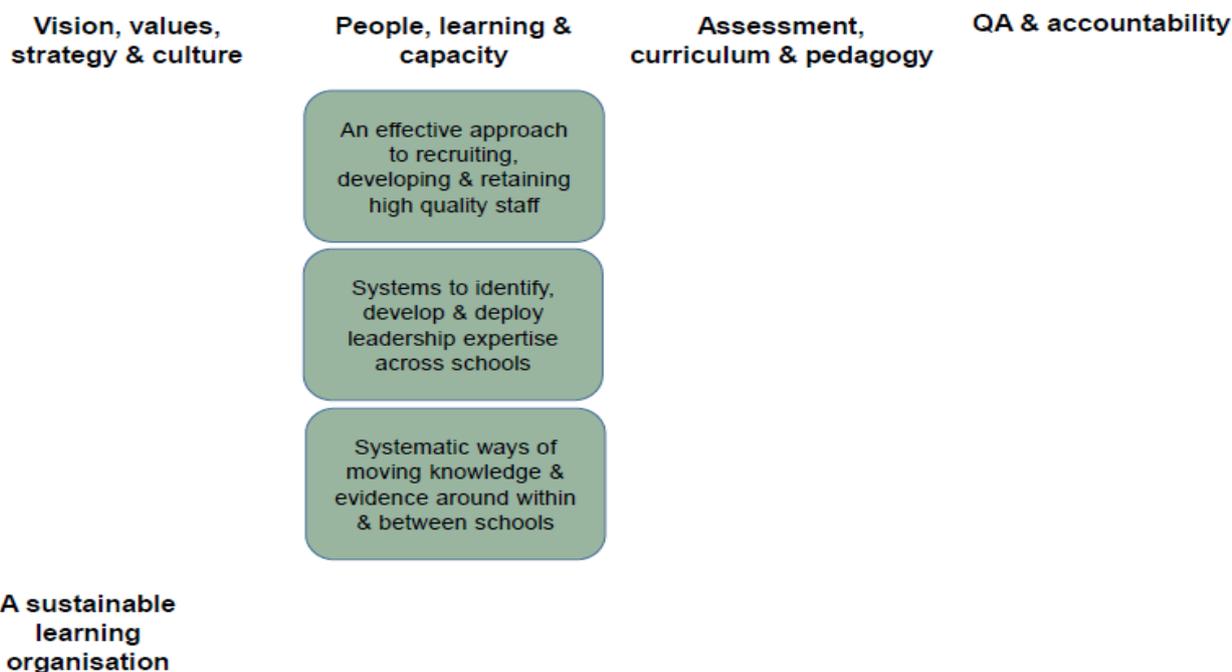
Figure 5.1: Developing people, learning and capacity through three areas of focus

5.2 How do school groups work to recruit, develop and retain high quality staff?

In this section we focus on the first sub-area under People, Learning and Capacity, as shown in Figure 5.2 below: How do school groups work to recruit, develop and retain high quality staff?

Vision, values, strategy & culture

People, learning & capacity

An effective approach to recruiting, developing & retaining high quality staff

Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy

QA & accountability

A sustainable learning organisation
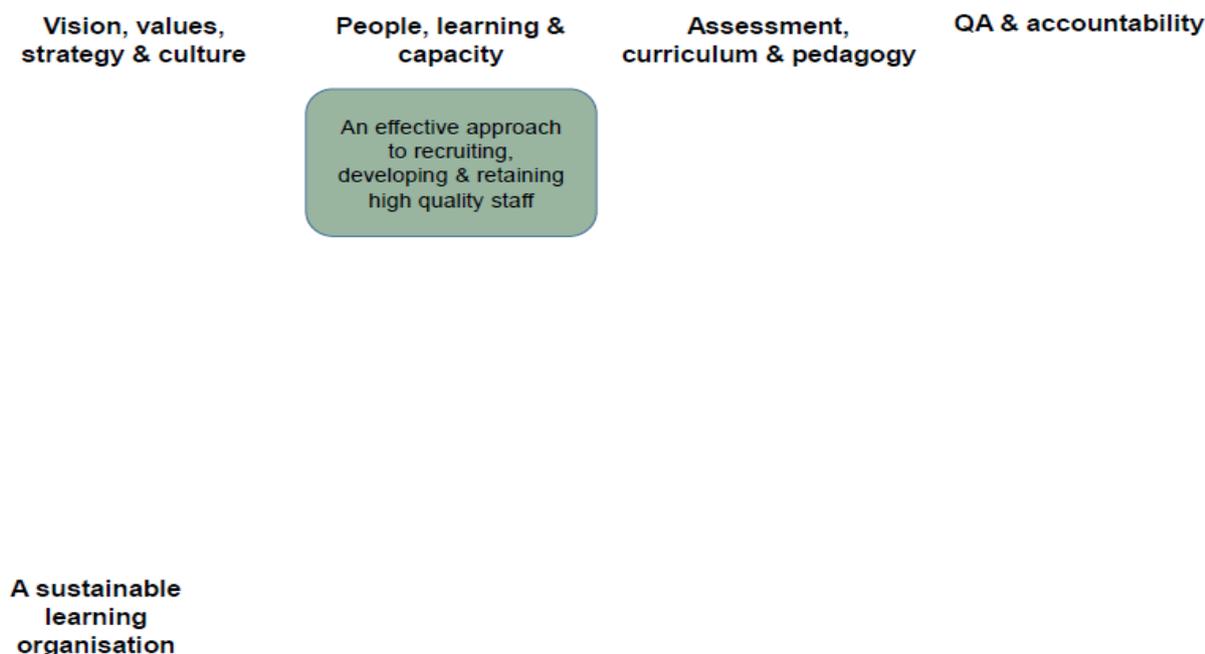
Figure 5.2: How school groups work to recruit, develop and retain high quality staff

This section is structured in two parts. The first focusses on how MATs and federations work to create a positive employment offer and working environment for staff, including by addressing issues such as workload for teachers. The second focusses on how MATs and federations approach the recruitment and professional development of staff.

5.2.1 How do MATs and federations work to create a positive employment offer and working environment for staff?

The recruitment and development of high quality teachers and staff was recognised by all our MATs and federations as an essential priority for building capacity and securing sustainable school improvement at scale, although at least one of the below average performing group acknowledged that they did not have a strategy for this. In this section we focus on the overall employment picture, including issues of workload.

In the survey we asked MAT core team members and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'Teachers and other school-based staff regard this MAT as a good place to work'. The findings indicate a very positive picture, with 95% of core staff

and 85% of headteachers agreeing. We did not include teachers themselves in the survey so cannot assess how accurate these responses are. Given widespread concerns nationally relating to teacher workloads and retention rates, this finding merits further investigation in order to assess whether and how MATs and federations are proving successful in overcoming these challenges.[22]

None of our case study MATs and federations referenced having holistic 'people' strategies covering all aspects of staff employment and development. However, most had developed aspects of their HR approach to support their focus on recruiting, developing and deploying high quality staff. For example, **almost all the MATs employed staff on a central contract with standard employment terms and conditions, which was seen as helpful because it supported the use of secondments and deployments of staff between schools**. Although most MAT terms and conditions were aligned with national and Local Authority models, some had used their autonomy to make their employment terms more attractive; for example, one large trust offered higher salaries than other local schools and a minority also offered other employment benefits, such as health care or gym membership.

Many MATs had redesigned their Performance Management (PM) framework in order to clarify expectations and ensure that the approach aligned with the group's values and desired behaviours. In one medium-sized, below average performing trust, the fact that the PM framework was not consistent across different schools was seen as unfair and problematic by one of the middle leaders we interviewed. One medium-sized, above average performing MAT had also adjusted its pay and reward policies to support its approach: staff progressed up a 1–10 scale based on their performance, with a bonus for exceptional performance (3% of salary as a one-off payment). This was seen as motivational by the middle leaders we interviewed, and as a means of preventing career stagnation.

We asked our case study interviewees whether and how they worked at MAT or federation level to address issues of staff workload. As we noted above (see Table 4.6), in the survey 43% of MAT core team members saw this as an area in which schools are autonomous to decide on their own approach, but a combined 46% indicated it as an area where practice is standardised or aligned across the MAT. Given this, **it was surprising that very few of our case study MATs or federations appeared to have a defined strategy for monitoring or reducing staff workloads**. That said, most could point to how they were working to streamline systems and processes in ways that they argued would support more efficient working and so reduce workloads. This included

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[22] See for example the House of Commons 2018 briefing paper on teacher recruitment and retention in England: http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7222/CBP-7222.pdf accessed 3.9.18

efforts to reduce data collection burdens for schools, for example by moving to a single template and timescale for reporting to the central team. Trusts that were working to standardise their curriculum and to provide shared schemes of work argued that this would save time for teachers in planning and preparation. Some had also adapted marking approaches and policies in order to reduce the frequency and amount of teacher marking. One large, above average performing trust had appointed a well-being co-ordinator in each of its schools, with a remit to develop small-scale initiatives, such as raffles and half-termly free breakfasts for staff. None of the MATs or federations appeared to have evaluated the effectiveness of these approaches to reducing workload.

5.2.2 How do MATs and federations develop a strategic approach to the recruitment and development of staff?

While a positive employment offer was seen as important by our interviewees, it was clear that **the majority of their attention and effort in this area was focussed on recruitment and professional and career development and learning**. This was the case for MATs in all three performance bands, and there were no consistent approaches that differentiated above average performers from their peers. That said, we do highlight below the minority of MATs in our sample (including above and below average performers) where practice in this area was less developed. We also indicate some of the other differences in approach among different MATs and federations in our sample; for example, between those that operated a highly centralised model and those that gave more autonomy to schools to determine their preferred approach.

Most of the MATs and federations that we visited, including most of the above average performers, had developed a strategic approach to the recruitment and development of new teachers. Many of the MATs undertook this work themselves, through their Teaching School or SCITT, while the remainder worked in close partnership with an external Teaching School, SCITT and/or HEI. Retaining this strategic focus was a priority for MAT CEOs, even in the face of tight budgets and other priorities. For example, one CEO of a large, above average performing trust explained that 'the primaries recently said they weren't going to take any salaried ones (for School Direct), and I just said you have to, it's short-sighted.' The scale and scope of the training activity were largely related to the size and maturity of the trust, rather than performance level. Trainee cohorts ranged from half a dozen in small trusts up to 150 or more in the largest ones.

Where the MAT or federation had lead responsibility for the training of new teachers, it offered a dedicated development programme, sometimes explicitly aligned to a set of standards that incorporated the MAT or federation's own expected values and behaviours. Trainee teachers were placed in MAT and federation schools, with an emphasis on high quality in-school mentoring and support. Following their training year, most Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) would be employed by the MAT or federation with

a specific development programme in place to support them. The NQT programmes offered by MATs combined further formal training with in-school observations and coaching. In one small, above average performing trust, these observations were undertaken jointly by two members of staff, in order to ensure transparency and objectivity of judgements and also to develop the skills of school-based observers. The Deputy CEO of one large, above average performing trust explained that all but four of the teachers in a two-form-entry primary school had been trained by the trust. One benefit of this approach was that the new teachers were seen to be better able to 'hit the ground running' compared to NQTs that had been trained externally.

MATs and federations also focussed time and resources on wider staff recruitment at a time of considerable challenges in this area. Recruitment was usually co-ordinated on a trust- or federation-wide basis, for example through co-ordinated campaigns and recruitment fairs, although it was common for individual schools to interview and make actual appointments since this allowed them to ensure that any new teacher would fit the school's culture. However, in one small, above average performing MAT, recruits were appointed centrally and allocated to schools, since this maximised flexibility and allowed for late resignations. Some trusts were also engaged in overseas recruitment campaigns. Some MATs deliberately over-recruited: taking a risk by offering more posts than they had vacant at the time to ensure schools were fully staffed for the autumn term. One large trust had appointed a dedicated expert to run online campaigns using social media. According to the CEO, this had proved successful and had cut the average cost per hire from about £15,000 to £6,000.

The vast majority of MATs and federations that we visited invested heavily in continuous professional development and learning (CPDL) for staff. Individual development needs were usually identified through the Performance Management framework, but were often also driven by trust and school-wide priorities. In the survey, we asked MAT and TSA respondents whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'Training and development for staff across our school group is well aligned with both organisational and individual needs'. The results are shown in Table 5.1. As can be seen, 85% of core team members and 76% of headteachers in MATs agreed with the statement.

Training and development for staff across our school group is well aligned with both organisational and individual needs		
Percentage	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	38%	33%
Tend to agree	47%	43%
Neither disagree nor agree	11%	18%
Tend to disagree	4%	5%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 5.1: MAT respondent views on how far training and development for staff meets needs

The extent to which individual schools drove their own approach to CPDL depended on the level of centralisation and standardisation in the MAT or federation. In some trusts, each individual school retained responsibility for the design and delivery of its CPDL approach, usually drawing on some programmes run by the MAT or federation as well as, less commonly, externally run programmes. In other trusts, the Teaching School or core team played a stronger role in co-ordinating development programmes for staff drawn from schools across the MAT. Which of these two approaches was adopted tended to depend on whether the MAT was more or less centralised or more or less committed to school-level autonomy in its wider improvement approach. For example, in one large, below average performing MAT, all staff in every school attended two hours of training each week, the content of which was tightly focussed on embedding the MAT's standardised approaches to teaching, learning and the curriculum. By contrast, a primary headteacher in a large, above average performing MAT who had moved the school from Special Measures to Outstanding in three years explained that this process had largely relied on an investment in CPDL and leadership in the school: she estimated that about half of the CPDL provision had been developed internally, while the other half had drawn on the MAT's provision.

Most of the CPDL programmes offered by MATs and federations tend to focus on aspects of pedagogy, but some also addressed curriculum-related developments and subject knowledge. This finding is in line with a recent review of CPDL in England, which found that few MATs and schools offer significant subject-specific CPDL for staff (Cordingley et al., 2018). Larger trusts had the capacity to address more specific needs, such as for SENCOs, and many offered leadership development programmes as we

outline in the next section. These programmes were often combined with more bespoke coaching models.

Most MAT and federation-run programmes were facilitated by core team members or classroom practitioners/SLEs, with a strongly practical and applied focus. In one small, above average performing trust, research articles would be sent to participants in advance of professional development sessions and most sessions concluded with a task that participants would complete back in school. However, **some of our case study MATs and federations did draw on external providers as well as internal experts**. For example, one medium-sized, average performing trust funded Masters' qualifications as a key part of its development approach and as a way to retain staff. It had an expectation that all newly appointed staff would be studying on a Master's within three years and had around 30–40 staff studying for one at any one time.

In addition to CPD and leadership programmes, most trusts and federations also ran staff conferences/INSET days, Teach Meets and subject networks, while some also facilitated other forms of peer-to-peer learning as a means of sharing practice and moving knowledge around (which we focus on in the third part of this chapter). In the following section, we also outline the use of secondments as a way to retain staff and develop leadership capacity. These wider activities were seen as highly developmental for staff and were often positioned as an integral part of the professional learning continuum in most trusts and federations.

The blending of formal programmes with more bespoke support through coaching/ mentoring and network-based forms of development was also apparent from the survey. We asked MAT core team members and headteachers to select, from a list of professional development approaches, which ones were offered in their trust. They were then asked to rate these approaches according to their perceived impact. The top 12 interventions for each group are shown in Table 5.2. As can be seen, the two lists are slightly different, but 'Subject/middle leader networks', 'Structured visits to other schools', 'Peer reviews', 'NQT/post-NQT development programmes' and 'Mentoring/support from an expert peer (e.g. SLE)' come out high on both lists.

MAT Core Team		Headteacher in MAT	
Professional development approach (selected from list)	Likelihood of being offered and seen as high impact	Professional development approach (selected from list)	Likelihood of being offered and seen as high impact
Peer reviews	46%	Subject leader and/or middle leader networks	50%
Subject leader and/or middle leader networks	43%	Coaching	45%
Trust-wide INSET days/conferences	35%	Peer reviews	41%
Structured visits to other schools	34%	Structured visits to other schools	38%
Mentoring/support from an expert peer (e.g. an SLE)	34%	NQT and post-NQT development programmes	34%
NQT and post-NQT development programmes	34%	Use of IRIS/video feedback	30%
Subject expert networks	33%	Mentoring/support from an expert peer (e.g. an SLE)	29%
Coaching	31%	Subject expert networks	28%
Structured process for classroom observations	25%	Structured process for classroom observations	28%
Joint Practice Development/ peer learning groups	22%	Joint Practice Development/ peer learning groups	28%

Action research/enquiry projects	16%	Trust-wide INSET days/conferences	27%
Use of IRIS/video feedback	15%	Access to research/evidence reviews	24%

Table 5.2: MAT core team and headteacher views on approaches to professional development in their trust

Many of the school-based leaders that we interviewed recognised and valued the quality and range of CPDL that they had received in their MAT or federation. The following two quotes are illustrative of the views expressed:

> *I think the time that I've spent here is the best CPD I've ever had, in terms of me being coached and mentored … and finding solutions and so on.*
> Primary Headteacher, large, above average performing MAT

> *Here, I feel you are much more nurtured as a person … whatever stage of your journey you are on, there is CPD that is designed around you and your needs … I don't think if I'd stayed at my old school I would have had the opportunity to be the subject lead.*
> Primary middle leader, large, above average performing MAT

While CPDL was seen as a strength in the vast majority of our case study MATs and federations, this was not the case in a small minority. For example, in one medium-sized, below average performing trust, one Head of Faculty stated that he saw CPD as a relative weakness in the trust because too much was in-house, with insufficient external training. Equally, in the trusts we have described in previous chapters that had minimal core teams and in which schools had resisted the development of group-wide approaches, there was very little evidence of a coherent approach to CPDL.

In summary, the recruitment and development of high quality teachers and staff was recognised by all our MATs and federations as an essential priority for building capacity and securing sustainable school improvement at scale. Most MATs and federations employ staff on central contracts and many have developed a group-wide approach to performance management, which some had used to embed their specific values and priorities. Very few of our case study MATs or federations appeared to have a clear strategic focus on monitoring or reducing staff workloads, although several claimed that the use of common systems and approaches could help save time and reduce workload. Most MATs and federations have developed a strategic approach to the recruitment and development of new teachers. Recruitment was usually co-ordinated centrally, although individual schools usually selected the candidate. Most MATs and federations focussed significant resources into Initial Teacher Training and continuous professional

development and learning for staff, often operating through an in-house Teaching School and/or SCITT. Most programmes offered by MATs and federations tended to be highly practical and were often combined with wider networks and on-the-job-learning, for example through secondments. Formal programmes tended to focus on aspects of pedagogy, with less focus on curriculum- and subject-related programmes. The extent to which the design and delivery of CPDL programmes were driven by individual schools or by the central MAT or federation team depended on the wider culture and structure of the group. The school-based leaders that we interviewed in most MATs and federations reported that professional learning and development was a significant strength, but we have highlighted a minority of examples where practice in this area is much less developed.

5.3 How do school groups identify, develop and deploy leadership expertise to address school improvement needs?

This section focusses on the second part of the People, Learning and Capacity strategic area, as shown in Figure 5.3 below: How do MATs and federations develop and deploy leadership expertise to address school improvement needs? It is structured in three sections. The first sets out how MATs and federations spot and develop talented leaders, the second focusses on how they secure strong and stable leadership at school level, and the third focusses on the roles of CEOs and Executive Heads.

Vision, values, strategy & culture

People, learning & capacity

Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy

QA & accountability

Systems to identify, develop & deploy leadership expertise across schools

A sustainable learning organisation

Figure 5.3: How MATs and federations develop and deploy leadership expertise across schools

5.3.1 How do MATs and federations spot and develop talented leaders?

In the survey, we asked MAT core teams and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'Our school group has a strong and effective focus on developing the next generation of senior leaders, including headteachers.' The results can be seen in Table 5.3: they show that 92% of core team members and 86% of headteachers agree with the statement. More than half of the respondents in both groups strongly agree.

Our school group has a strong and effective focus on developing the next generation of senior leaders, including headteachers		
Percentage	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	61%	52%
Tend to agree	31%	34%
Neither disagree nor agree	7%	12%
Tend to disagree	1%	2%
Strongly disagree	0%	1%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 5.3: MAT core team and headteacher views on leadership development in their trust

Many of the above average performing MATs and federations we visited **devoted significant time and space for senior leaders to discuss staff, spot talent, and consider those that might benefit from additional temporary roles or secondments, sometimes reporting to the board on capacity for succession planning**. These 'incessant conversations', in the words of one trust CEO, provided the basis for more-or-less-formal career planning for the group's future leaders, ensuring that anyone with 'itchy feet' could be given a new challenge before they applied for jobs elsewhere. Responsibility for spotting and developing talent was often a key responsibility allocated to regional or phase directors, where these roles existed. As a result, they were able to take a keen interest in each of the senior school-based leaders across the group; they knew the work and interests of these leaders and often provided more or less formal mentoring and coaching to support their career development.

Building on these approaches to talent spotting and development, **most of the trusts and federations that we visited ran or accessed leadership development programmes** that they had either developed themselves or that were licensed versions of the National Professional Qualifications. These programmes usually included a strong focus on developing middle leadership within schools, since this created capacity and

helped to secure consistency. Some programmes also focussed on more senior roles; for example, one large, above average performing trust had established its own two-year 'fast track to principal' course that included experiences such as designing a curriculum or working through a mock staff restructure. Another medium-sized, below average performing trust runs its own middle leadership programme: a one-year course that involves a mix of formal sessions, school-based projects and action research. The programme combines generic aspects of middle leadership, such as holding difficult conversations, with specific aspects that focus on the MAT's pedagogic model and approach. Participants also complete an in-school development project.

Several of the MATs and federations we visited took **a proactive approach to secondments for high-potential middle and senior leaders**. These secondments provided good professional development for the individuals involved but were also seen as good for the MAT or federation, because they developed leaders with a wider perspective who could help to build consistent processes and a shared culture. In trusts that used school-to-school support as their main model for school improvement, the secondments formed an integral part of this, although secondments were common even in trusts that relied more on central teams. One medium-sized, above average performing trust had developed a formal Managing Secondments policy: this allowed for secondments of up to two years, with the post holder's original position held open for them. Staff in the trust were not obliged to participate in secondments, but progression through the Upper Pay Spine incentivised engagement. To be on the UPS2 scale, staff had to be willing to lead across schools, and to progress to UPS3 staff needed to have had experience of being seconded (or being prepared to be seconded). The trust had supported 22 secondments over the previous two years through this strategy.

MATs and federations often faced logistical as well as cultural challenges in brokering and seconding leaders between schools. On the one hand they wanted strong and stable leadership in each school; on the other, they needed to be able to deploy capacity to schools that were struggling. Not surprisingly, individual schools wanted to hold on to their high-potential leaders, but we heard of several examples where the trust's collaborative culture meant that schools would be willing to give up a leader to support another school at short notice when required. Nevertheless, the survey responses indicate that this remains a challenging area for many MATs. In the survey we asked MAT core teams and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'The trust is able to deploy staff to work in different schools when needed'. The responses can be seen in Table 5.4, which shows that both core team members and headteachers were less confident about this area than most others. While 71% of core team members and 67% of headteachers agreed, they were less likely to strongly agree than in most other areas, and nearly one in five of the headteachers disagreed.

The trust is able to deploy staff to work in different schools when needed		
Percentage	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	35%	32%
Tend to agree	36%	35%
Neither disagree nor agree	17%	14%
Tend to disagree	10%	17%
Strongly disagree	2%	2%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 5.4: MAT core team and headteacher views on deploying staff to work in different schools

5.3.2 How do MATs and federations ensure strong leadership at school level?

Our case study MATs and federations were all focussed on ensuring that every school across their group, but particularly any challenging underperforming schools, had high quality leadership in place. For example, one Regional Director explained:

> *We focus on improving quality of leadership, because that makes it a sustainable approach. They are the core of their school. Of all our schools, the top 7 in terms of risk have weak leadership. As a trust, our top priority is how we manage that senior leadership.*
> Regional Director, large, above average performing trust

Reviewing the quality and depth of leadership in a school was always an important part of the due diligence process for MATs and federations considering taking on a new school. In cases where the existing leadership was considered to be incapable of leading rapid improvement then it was not uncommon for them to be removed or to choose to leave and for the trust or federation to bring in a new principal or head of school. However, it appeared more common for the existing principal to remain in post, but with additional support, for example from an executive principal.

The vast majority of our case study MATs and federations were working to build stability in the leadership of each school, although this was not always easy given the challenges involved. Executive leaders were generally expected to be ready to shift their focus between different schools on a regular basis, but the aim was usually for

headteachers and heads of school to focus on a single school over an extended period so that they could build capacity and embed a positive culture. The exception to this model was one of the large, below average performing MATs in our sample: this trust deliberately reallocated many of its principals and executive principals to different schools on a regular basis (i.e. more than once a year). In the CEO's view, this helped to ensure that these senior leaders were prepared to look beyond their own school and see that they had a wider responsibility for outcomes across the trust.

Where new principals were appointed, it was common for them to be appointed from within the trust or federation, especially in above average performing trusts. This was seen as a way to recognise and retain existing talent while also ensuring that the school would adopt the group's existing culture and ways of working.

One of the key differences between the MATs and federations we visited was around how they conceptualised the role and nature of the most senior leadership role at school level. **Two broad approaches were apparent – a Head of School model and a Substantive Headteacher model.** The first was more common in the primary sector, including in the two federations, but was also seen in MATs that were more centralised and standardised. The second was more common in secondary schools and in MATs that were more committed to school-level autonomy.

The Heads of School that we met did not usually have substantive responsibility for the school's performance, which would sit with an executive head who oversaw their work. These heads of school often had relatively little experience of senior school leadership and might have been appointed from a middle leadership position. Their role was usually deliberately focussed on leading teaching and learning across the school, with limited responsibility for other aspects such as finance. In larger MATs, these heads of school formed the third or even fourth tier down in the organisation and did not necessarily attend regular strategic meetings or contribute to group-wide decision-making.

By contrast, in MATs that had a stronger commitment to school-level autonomy, the headteachers we met generally had substantive responsibility for their school, with executive heads only deployed to support them in specific cases. In these MATs and federations, the headteachers usually sat on a strategic group with the CEO and other key leaders, contributing to group-wide decision-making. In line with their responsibilities, these headteachers tended to be considerably more experienced than in the Head of School model. However, it was nevertheless seen as important that these substantive headteachers worked productively and collaboratively with other heads and with the central team, whilst not becoming dependent on this support. As one School Improvement Director in a large, above average performing MAT put it:

> *Lots of my heads are mavericks, though there's a compliance line, and so there are things that you haven't got a choice about … [But] people [i.e. heads] think*

that because we have strong central service, that they can fall back on that, but that can't be allowed to happen.
School Improvement Director, large, above average performing MAT

5.3.3 How do CEOs and Executive Heads lead across MATs and federations?

As we highlighted in the five school improvement 'fundamentals' in Chapter 3, most of our above average performing MATs included a strong core of highly credible school leaders in their team. These leaders generally had significant experience of turning round failing schools and providing successful school-to-school support. In the vast majority of cases this included the CEO, although a small minority of CEOs in all three performance bands had wider educational backgrounds. **Several of the CEOs we interviewed were clear that they continued to see themselves as leaders of school improvement, although our analysis of the 35 CEO interviews revealed that many found this difficult due to the need to focus on back-office, efficiency and growth issues.** In larger MATs it was less critical for the CEO to focus on school improvement where they had appointed other experienced leaders into senior school improvement roles. Nevertheless, as the CEO of one large, below average performing trust, who had recently taken on the role, explained:

> *MATs get into trouble when the CEO stops thinking like they are the Head of more than one school – it's that mindset which keeps me focussed on school improvement day to day. I can't afford to spend my time focussed on HR and Finance – that won't turn our schools round.*
> CEO, large, below average performing trust

As noted above, **many MATs and federations also utilise executive head models, but there is quite wide variation in how these roles are conceived and structured.** In some MATs and federations every school has an executive head, usually with a Head of School model. These executive heads provide a mixture of monitoring, challenge, support and, where needed, direct capacity for the schools that they are responsible for. In these models, the schools sometimes operate in clusters, with the executive heads co-ordinating cluster-wide meetings and activity. In other cases, the executive head model is not applied across every school and is less all-encompassing, usually focussing on providing direct support and capacity where necessary. Headteachers in these latter trusts are usually the substantive head, with higher levels of operational autonomy than in the Head of School model.

MATs and federations invariably required their executive heads to have significant experience and credibility. For example, in one above average performing trust, executive heads had to have led a school to Outstanding in Ofsted terms. However, we also heard about more subtle criteria for deciding who would make a good executive

head; largely related to whether or not they could adopt a coaching and mentoring style that built the skills and capacity of their team, as opposed to a more directive approach to leadership. For example, as one experienced Secondary Director explained:

> *Some of our leaders are good at developing capacity, especially where they have brought through a head of school who understands their approach … [but] we've had execs who haven't worked out as execs, I think it's a different role … rather than being principal in both schools … it's learning how much they have to be hands on, almost like the head, and how much they exec … and seeing the benefits of being more strategic and working at the next level is not in everyone's skillset.*
> Secondary Director, large, above average performing trust

In summary, we found that approaches to identifying and developing leadership potential were broadly similar between different MATs and federations, although there were differences in the rigour and focus with which these approaches were applied. Several of the CEOs we interviewed were clear that they continued to see themselves as leaders of school improvement, although many found this difficult due to the need to focus on back-office, efficiency and growth issues. Reviewing the quality and depth of leadership in a school was an important part of the due diligence process for MATs and federations considering taking on a new school: while it was not uncommon for the existing leadership in a sponsored school to be removed or to choose to leave, it appeared more common for the existing principal to remain in post, but with additional support, for example from an executive principal. While many MATs and federations ran their own leadership development programmes, these were always augmented by more personalised approaches that included mentoring, coaching and secondments. One of the key differences in approach was around how MATs and federations conceptualised the role and nature of the most senior leadership role at school level. Two broad approaches were apparent: i) a Head of School model overseen by an executive head, and ii) a Substantive Headteacher model. There is wide variation in how executive head roles operate, but they generally provide a mixture of monitoring, challenge, support and, where needed, direct capacity for the schools that they are responsible for. In some cases executive heads act more like regional directors, co-ordinating cluster-wide meetings and activity, line managing headteachers and evaluating school performance.

5.4 How do school groups work to move knowledge and evidence around, within and between schools?

This section focusses on the third part of the People, Learning and Capacity strategic area, asking: How do school groups work to move knowledge and evidence around, within and between schools? This focus is shown in Figure 5.4 below.

This section returns to the themes explored in Chapter 4 around standardisation, alignment and autonomy, in particular the three approaches for developing consistent practices outlined there: roll-out, co-design and organic. We address the issues here in three sections. The first provides a brief overview of the issues for moving knowledge around within MATs and federations. The second asks how MATs and federations move knowledge around through prescribed approaches. The third asks how MATs and federations move knowledge around through networks and enabling routines.

Vision, values, strategy & culture   **People, learning & capacity**   **Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy**   **QA & accountability**

Systematic ways of moving knowledge & evidence around within & between schools

A sustainable learning organisation
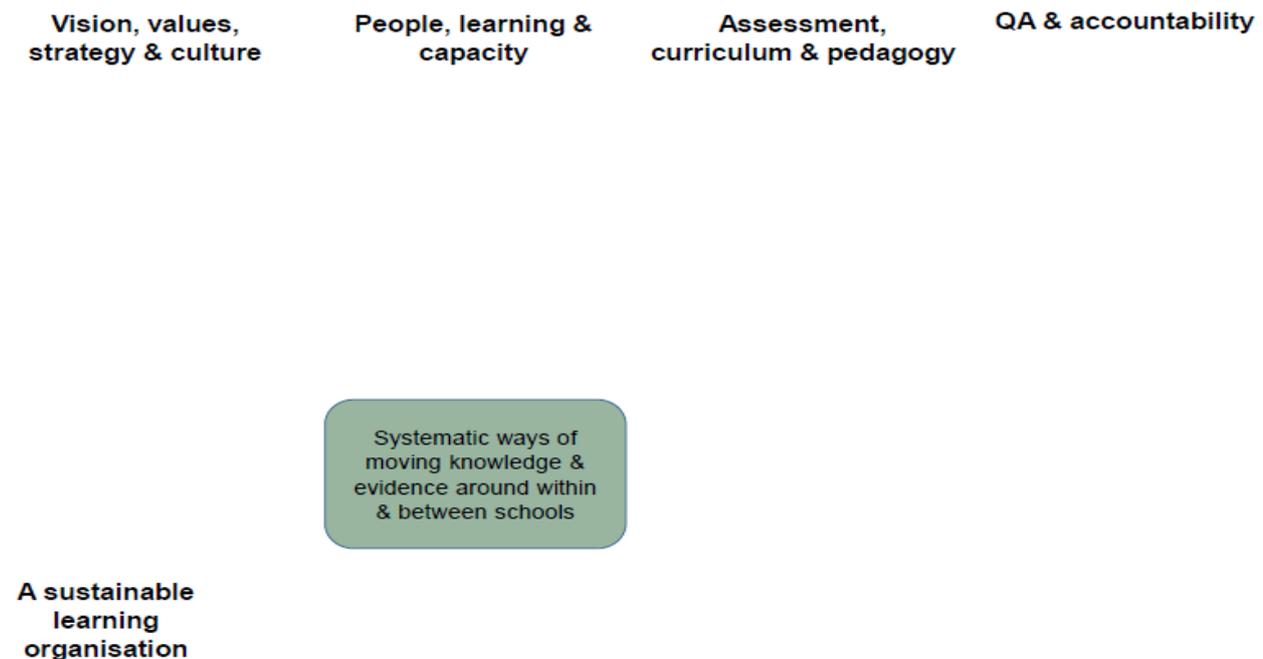
Figure 5.4: How MATs and federations move knowledge and evidence around, within and between schools

5.4.1 What are the issues for moving knowledge around in MATs and federations?

Moving knowledge and expertise around was a priority for our MATs and federations and most saw this as an area of strength. In the survey, 85% of MAT core team members and 83% of MAT headteachers agreed with the statement: 'Phase and subject expertise is identified and shared strategically across our school group – we are good at moving knowledge around'.

In practice, **our case study visits indicated that such knowledge sharing was difficult to sustain**, particularly in cases where the attention of senior leaders was largely focussed on addressing underperformance in specific schools. For example, the CEO of one large, above average performing MAT admitted: 'If I am honest, I don't think we share the strengths as well as we could … I think we do it with leadership, but I don't think we do it on the ground.' According to this CEO, **one of the issues was that**

schools were not as good at evaluating practice and drawing out what had made something successful as they needed to be.

> *Headteachers generally are not very good at doing that. We've had two of our schools that have won Pupil Premium awards, but didn't know why … so we've said, 'Tell us what you're doing really well' – 'Don't know.' They almost wait for Ofsted to evaluate it.*
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

5.4.2 How do MATs and federations move knowledge around through standardised approaches?

In Chapter 4 we identified three broad approaches to developing consistent practices across school groups – roll-out, co-design and organic. These three approaches were also key for moving knowledge and expertise around, within and between schools.

In the minority of MATs that adopted a **roll-out approach**, there was an emphasis on codifying knowledge into manuals and procedures that could be consistently applied through defined training packages or by approved personnel. For example, one small, above average performing trust had developed a toolkit that set out its prescribed approaches. These MATs and federations generally relied on executive leaders, SLEs and other lead practitioners who had worked in the lead school, or who had proven that they understood and could apply the tried and tested models in a new context, to drive change and the adoption of new practices in new schools that joined the group. The fact that timetables and procedures were generally standardised across these school groups meant that it was easier for these leaders to be deployed between different schools, because the systems and processes were the same in each case.

The CEO of a MAT that had adopted the roll-out approach explained that the aim was to develop 'Trust Teachers', emphasising that,

> *There is no grey in what we do. It's very prescriptive and it's very precise, but it's precise for the reason of if you follow the prescription, you get the outcomes, and that's essentially how we kind of pride ourselves really.*
> CEO, small, above average performing MAT

In order to achieve this when taking on a new school, the Deputy CEO explained:

> *We front-load a lot of training and support for all teachers. Everyone gets a fresh start. There are expectations on how people get there, but there is a time limit on helping you to get there.*
> Deputy CEO, small, above average performing MAT

The content of this training is tightly defined and consistent:

All of our training materials are against our core pedagogy. So, when we on-board a school, we are really focussed on, 'This is how we'd like you to teach.' And all of our training and our INSETs are all pre-done, so you are not getting different messages.
Deputy CEO, small, above average performing MAT

Planning and Preparation time for teachers across the MAT is aligned and there is a requirement that they work together using resources from the trust's central online repository.

As we outlined in Chapter 4, this roll-out approach was adopted by a small minority of our case study sample (three MATs). In addition, some other MATs were adopting this approach in specific areas; for example because of a lack of appropriately qualified teachers in a particular subject area, meaning that they needed to develop lesson plans and resources that other, non-expert staff could use.

5.4.3 How do MATs and federations move knowledge around through networks and enabling routines?

As we showed in Chapter 4, co-design and organic approaches to developing consistency were far more common than roll-out. In MATs and federations that adopted these approaches, the focus was on developing alignment and on building shared knowledge and expertise through well-facilitated networks and co-design processes. In these cases, the development and sharing of knowledge and expertise was more fluid, based on a set of more or less formalised processes for networking, sharing and professional learning. These usually included some formal activities, such as annual staff conferences, as well as the kinds of professional development programmes we have outlined in the previous two sections. However, in the words of one CEO, the core of the approach in these MATs and federations was to build networks: 'it's real people in classrooms talking to others, that seems to be the most effective way'.

In one large, above average performing MAT, the networks were facilitated by a team of 50 subject consultants who were employed centrally and deployed to schools across the trust. The CEO described these experts as the 'honey bees', working in and with schools to share knowledge and drive improvement. These consultants were all expert teachers and most had experience as a senior leader in school. Their role was not only to share knowledge and expertise: they also played roles in monitoring and reporting on performance, in designing and administering MAT-wide assessments, and in providing additional capacity for schools or departments that were struggling. As they undertook these wider activities, they were also continuously identifying effective practices and helping to share these as they moved around between different schools. The consultants also helped to facilitate the MAT's subject networks, run subject-specific CPD and

research projects and connect with external bodies, such as subject associations and the DfE, so that they could feed this knowledge into thinking across the trust.

Over the last few years, the consultants in this trust had also worked with school-based staff to develop a suite of curriculum materials and teaching resources which could be used by schools across the group. This work reflects the ways in which practices become more aligned over time through a process of dialogue and co-design and can then move to become standardised. However, in this particular MAT there was an agreement that the use of these resources remained voluntary, and an expectation that they would be adapted for use in different contexts and developed iteratively over time.

Most of our case study MATs and federations did not have the ability to appoint such a large team of experts, although many had appointed much smaller teams or had freed up two or three lead teachers from school-based roles to undertake similar roles part-time. These experts would usually work in a similar way to the consultants described above: modelling effective practices, facilitating subject networks, leading development projects and working with school-based colleagues to develop shared resources.

In addition, most of these trusts and federations drew on Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) or other lead practitioners as a key way of both providing capacity for school improvement and also moving knowledge and expertise around the group. In one medium-sized trust there were around 40 SLEs designated, while in cases where the trust had a Teaching School or was in partnership with one, the SLEs might be brokered from across the wider alliance. These SLEs were brokered to support other schools on a temporary and usually part-time basis, with their home school often receiving payment for their time. Some SLEs had reduced teaching commitments in their home school, so that they had time and capacity to support other schools.

In addition to using expert practitioners and consultants, several of these MATs and federations also used 'enabling routines' as a way to support knowledge sharing and build consistency. The concept of 'enabling routines' is adapted here from the business literature on scale up across large organisations and franchises (Winter and Szulanski, 2001). Enabling routines are processes which are themselves tightly defined, but which require adaptation in how they are then applied across different contexts.

Examples of enabling routines that we observed in our case study visits included lesson study; clustering schools, often in triads or hubs, and using peer view visits and learning walks as a way to foster shared learning; using Research and Development projects focussed on a common enquiry question or issue across the group; holding formal 'sharing excellence weeks' in which schools could visit each other to share practice; and using consistent models for peer coaching and mentoring between staff.

For example, one small, above average performing trust expected all its teachers to work in triads and to use classroom cameras to undertake peer observations and peer coaching. A middle leader in the trust stated that

> *Staff seem to like and value this way of working … at first it was difficult because we are not steering the improvement, but they are far more specific now about their own practice and the impact.*
> Middle leader, small, above average performing MAT

Another large, above average performing trust required all its staff to video themselves teaching once per term and then play it back to themselves, using self-reflection grids. Staff were given time to enable this and no one else had to see the video: 'You pick up all sorts of things,' according to one middle leader.

In MATs and federations that had adopted **a small number of such enabling routines across all their schools, this appeared particularly powerful as a way of creating a consistent language and approach whilst retaining flexibility and adaptation** for different contexts. Sustained commitment from senior leaders was important for establishing and embedding these routines, so that they became a deliberate part of the strategy for building a shared culture across the trust. Where such senior commitment was not present, a routine would not become embedded; for example, in one above average performing MAT an approach to learning walks (structured visits to other schools) had been adopted but had 'fizzled out'. Similarly, a subject leader in another large, above average performing MAT made up of mainly converter academies explained that they had been asked to co-ordinate a subject hub across three secondary schools, but they had encountered indifference and had had to work with other schools instead.

In summary, moving knowledge and expertise around was a priority for our MATs and federations and most saw this as an area of strength. However, knowledge sharing was often difficult to sustain. The approaches adopted broadly map onto the three approaches for developing consistent practice identified in Chapter 4: roll-out, co-design and organic. For the minority of MATs that adopted a roll-out approach, there was an emphasis on codifying knowledge into manuals and procedures that could be consistently applied through defined training packages or by approved personnel. Much more common was a focus on co-design and organic knowledge mobilisation through networks. In these MATs and federations, expert staff, usually based in the core team but sometimes working as SLEs in schools, were key to leading the networks and co-design processes. Some MATs and federations used 'enabling routines' as a way to support knowledge sharing and build consistency. These routines were tightly defined processes which allowed for significant adaptation in how they were applied across different contexts. Where such routines were applied consistently across a MAT or federation, they appeared important in creating a consistent language and approach whilst retaining flexibility and ownership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that MATs and federations rarely have comprehensive people strategies in place, but they are nonetheless focussed on key areas such as recruitment and professional development for staff. Only a minority of MATs use their academy freedoms to offer employment benefits, although a slightly larger group have adapted their Performance Management and reward frameworks. Most MATs place a strong focus on recruitment, but schools usually decide which staff to select. Surprisingly few MATs and federations have a strategic focus on reducing staff workloads.

Most MATs and federations see their work relating to Initial Teacher Education, CPDL and leadership development as a strength. The extent to which schools or the centre drive these approaches largely depends on whether the wider structure and improvement model is centralised or school-driven. Most CPDL and leadership development is organised and facilitated by in-house teams, with a strong focus on applied learning; but some MATs and federations do draw on external partnerships, for example with HEIs. There is a relatively limited focus on developing subject-specific knowledge and skills.

MATs and federations have a strong and consistent focus on succession planning and talent management for leaders. These efforts often combine formal programmes with secondments and coaching and mentoring for high-potential leaders, who are regularly appointed to internal positions. Most MATs and federations seek to secure stable leadership in every school through one of two models: i) an executive head overseeing a less experienced head of school, or ii) experienced substantive heads in each school, sometimes with additional support from an executive head.

An ability to move knowledge and expertise around a MAT or federation is important. It can ensure that staff are continually reflecting on effective practices and can help to develop alignment and consistency. We identified two approaches to this: the first involves codifying practices and packaging them up so that they can be implemented consistently through training, while the second involves facilitating networks and embedding enabling routines which provide opportunities for staff to collaborate and share practices. We have shown how some MATs and federations are focussed on embedding a small number of 'enabling routines' as a way of creating a shared but flexible approach to developing and sharing practice and building the capacity of staff.

6. Sustainable improvement in MATs and federations iii: assessment, curriculum and pedagogy

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focusses on the third strategic area that MATs and federations are working to address as they develop a sustainable approach to improvement at scale: assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. This analysis builds on and deepens the findings we reported in Chapter 3, where we explained that MATs and federations are most likely to standardise or align practice in relation to assessment, with a much more mixed picture in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. This explains why, in this chapter, we focus first on assessment.

This chapter is structured in three sub-areas, as indicated by Figure 6.1. These sub-areas address the following questions:

- How do MATs and federations develop shared age related expectations and a consistent approach to assessment across schools?

- How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision?

- How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for teaching, learning and student success?
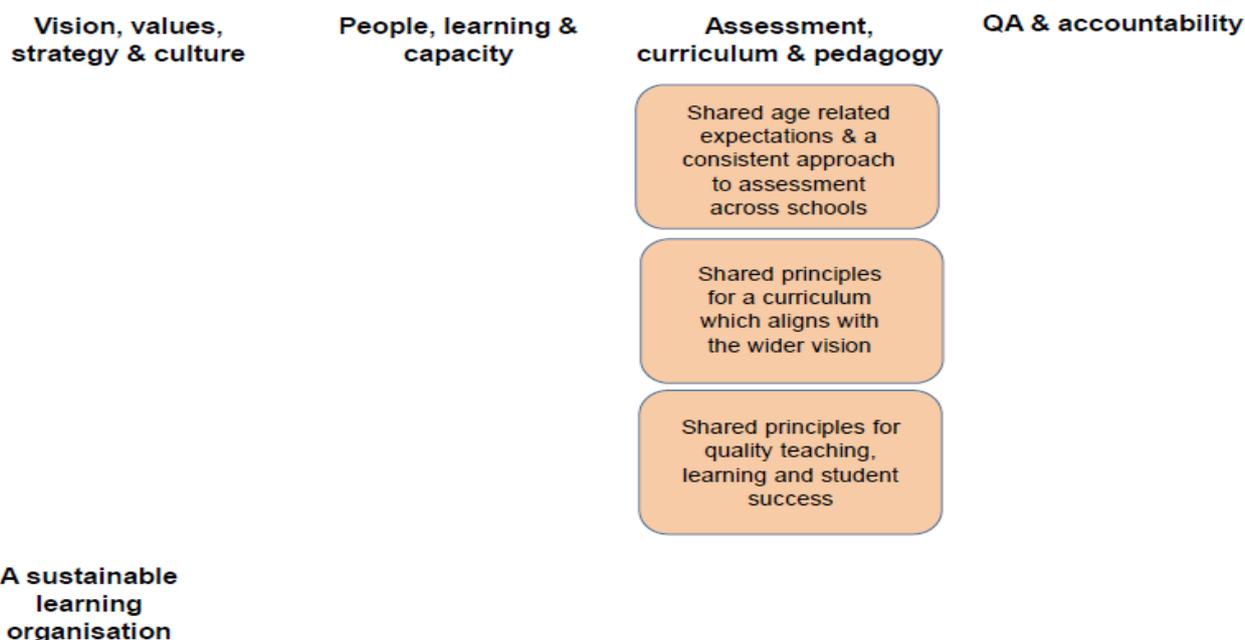
Figure 6.1: Assessment, curriculum and pedagogy in MATs and federations

6.2 How do MATs and federations develop shared age related expectations and a consistent approach to assessment?

This section focusses on the first sub-area, as shown in Figure 6.2: How do MATs and federations develop shared age related expectations and a consistent approach to assessment across schools?

Vision, values, strategy & culture   People, learning & capacity   Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy   QA & accountability

Shared age related expectations & a consistent approach to assessment across schools

A sustainable learning organisation
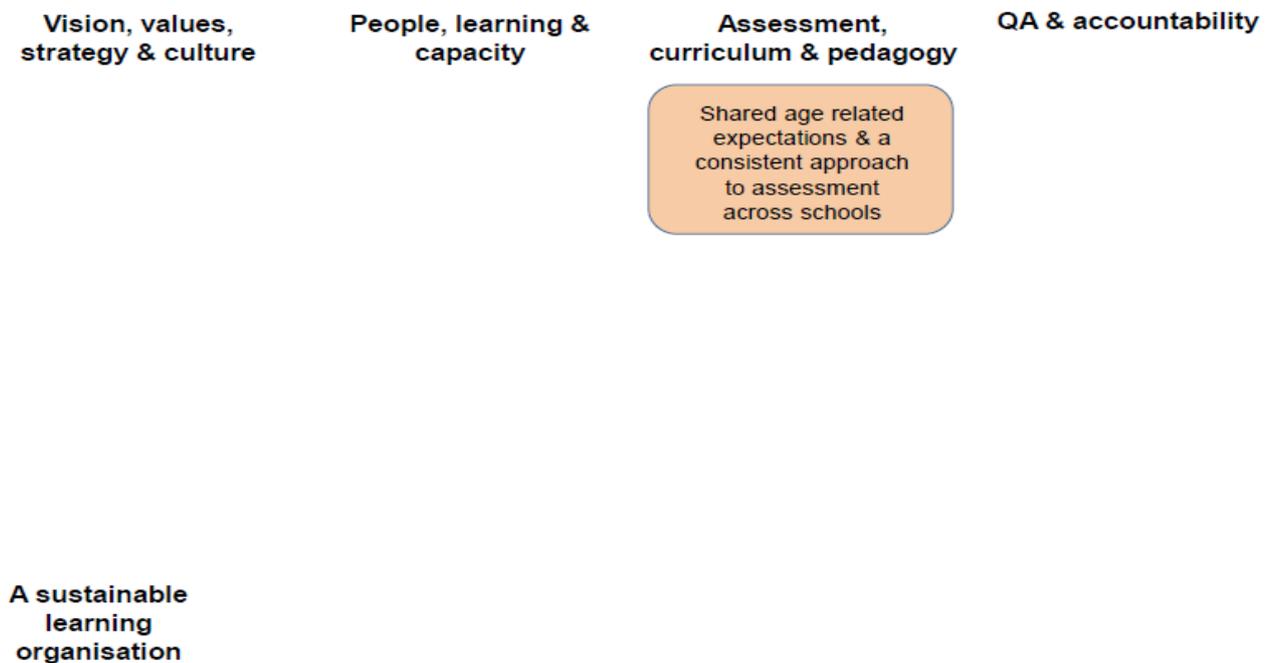
Figure 6.2: Shared age related expectations and a consistent approach to assessment in MATs and federations

As we outlined in Chapter 4, **most of the MATs and federations we visited had standardised or aligned their approach to Age Related Expectations (ARE) and the assessment and moderation of pupil learning**. We saw in the survey, shown in Table 4.6, that 71% of MAT core teams described their approach to moderation and 65% described their approach to assessment as either mostly standardised or mostly aligned.

Several of the MAT and federation leaders we interviewed argued that alignment or standardisation in these areas brought **benefits for teachers**, for example because they could compare pupil work against a commonly understood standard and could discuss and reflect on which pedagogic practices had been most effective in enabling pupil progress. Many of the case study MATs and federations also used this assessment data to identify pupils who required additional intervention and support in order to make progress. However, it was notable that **none of our interviewees emphasised the use of formative assessment practices by teachers**: using data and other evidence to diagnose and address pupil learning needs and to help children identify the next steps they need to take to make progress. Finally, as we explore in the next chapter,

standardised assessment data was also used by MAT and federation leaders to monitor school performance and to hold schools accountable.

In most MATs and federations, the approach to developing shared models for assessment had usually involved a consultative process of discussion and development between member schools, although in some cases the decision was driven by the lead school or senior team. Following on from these discussions and agreement, the approach was usually standardised (i.e. prescribed) for all schools, although in some cases it remained optional so long as a school could demonstrate high standards. Several MATs had not yet aligned their approach to assessment but were working to do so.

A number of MATs explained that assessment was an area that they had standardised or aligned over time as their trust had grown, as stated by the CEO of one medium-sized MAT:

> *Our assessment approach is standardised across all primary schools so as to provide meaningful comparisons. Assessments are done and entered on a specified timetable that allows performance and prediction data to be reported at board meetings. Assessment is one of the few areas that has become more prescriptive as the trust has grown.*
> CEO, medium-sized, above average performing MAT

In the minority of MATs that had adopted a highly standardised approach to school improvement in all areas, assessment was tightly prescribed for all schools, as this CEO explained:

> *We have a very tight assessment framework … So, all schools adhere to and follow, so set dates, set times, for assessment at all schools, even down to what paper we use. It's all very tight and rigidly set … we have half-termly assessments, and we have end-of-term assessments. What that allows us to do is to make sure that we're picking up, every six weeks, where the children are. So that we're not leaving things twelve weeks, eighteen weeks, before we identify a problem in progress or attainment. And then, what we have is a process of every six weeks when we have the assessment data, we do very thorough pupil progress meetings.*
> CEO, small, above average performing MAT

One of the reasons that many MATs and federations had become more consistent in their approach to assessment and moderation was that the **predicted grades supplied by schools during an academic year had not been accurate**. For example, the Director of Primary in one small, below average performing trust explained that the group's Key Stage 2 performance had been worse than expected the previous year. The

issue was seen to be the accuracy of teacher judgements in the context of the new National Curriculum, so the trust had commissioned a review by an external expert and had redesigned its approach to monitoring standards.

Developing a common approach to assessment was somewhat different between phases, although MATs that included primary and secondary schools were often developing similar approaches for Key Stages 1–3. In primary schools, the starting point was generally to develop common ARE and expectations for pupil progress in the core subjects of English and Maths. Assessment of progress against these expectations could then be aligned across the group, with teachers from different schools (but particularly phase and subject leaders responsible for Years 2 and 6) meeting on a regular basis to moderate samples of pupil work. Several trusts used the same assessment packages across all their academies, such as PIRA (reading) and PUMA (maths).

In one small, above average performing faith-based MAT, most of the pupils went on to the same secondary school (which was also part of the trust), so this approach to progress had been extended into Years 7 and 8 for English, Maths and RE. According to the CEO, the benefits of this approach included more seamless transition and that 'parents will know when they see a score of 100 how that shows progress from the score they were getting in primary.'

In Key Stage 4, the focus was more firmly on assessment, in particular the choice of a single exam board for all schools to follow. As we outlined in Chapter 4, the use of a single exam board by several of our case study MATs, especially in the core subjects, brought a number of benefits; including a shared timetable and set of expectations for all teachers, for example in relation to specifications and grade boundaries, and the ability to undertake a single 'MAT mock' to track progress mid-year.

Moving towards a shared approach to assessment had been problematic for some MATs. For example, one medium-sized, above average performing MAT had not yet aligned its approach to exam boards. The CEO described the lack of a common model as a 'massive barrier' to school improvement, but was adopting an incremental approach to change which relied on changing the exam board when a head of department or subject left, although lower performing sponsored academies were being required to adopt a common approach more quickly. By contrast, in one large, average performing trust, the leaders that we interviewed in schools expressed frustration that the debate over whether or not to adopt a single exam board had dragged on for a prolonged period without any resolution.

6.3 How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision?

This section focusses on the second sub-area, as shown in Figure 6.3: How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision?

Vision, values, strategy & culture

People, learning & capacity

Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy

QA & accountability

Shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision

A sustainable learning organisation
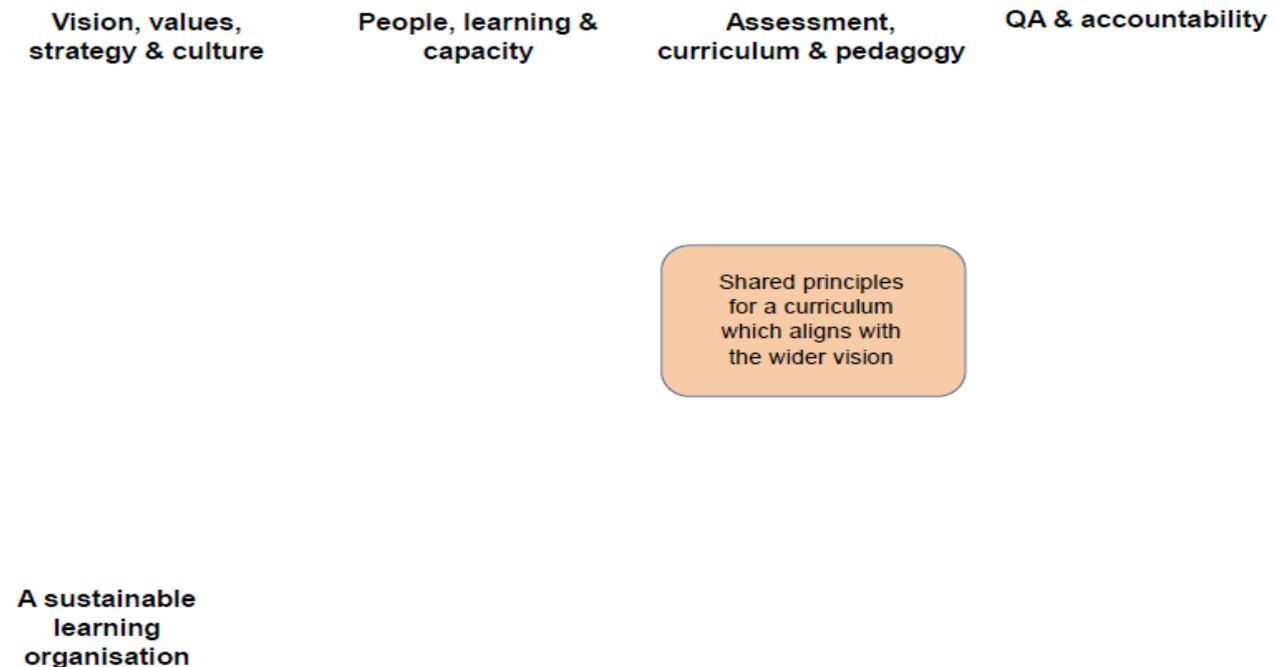
Figure 6.3: Developing shared principles for a curriculum which aligns with the wider vision

In the survey, we asked MAT core teams and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'Our MAT provides a wider range of learning opportunities and a broader curriculum for pupils than would be possible in a standalone school'. 83% of MAT core team members and 71% of headteacher respondents agreed.

In our case study visits we heard from several MATs and federations that were committed to a broad and balanced curriculum. A few monitored this closely; for example, one large MAT audited the curriculum in its primary schools in order to assess the amount of time spent on each subject and to ensure breadth and balance. Several others encouraged participation in enrichment initiatives, such as Forest Schools, but **we saw relatively few examples of MATs and federations using their scale to actively secure curriculum breadth and enrichment**. The MATs that did do so tended to be the larger ones, in particular those working in deprived contexts where there was a clear need to develop social and cultural capital for young people. For example, one large, above average performing MAT sponsored a range of enrichment programmes for its schools aimed at developing 'education with character'. These opportunities included participation in external sports, music and drama events, and encouraging students to

take on leadership roles and to develop social awareness. More commonly, in larger MATs that were located in a reasonably tight geographic area we saw examples of collegiate provision at sixth form, and, less commonly, examples of using UTC and Studio School provision as ways to offer a broader set of pathways from KS4 onwards.

Similarly, **it was relatively unusual to see examples of MATs that included primary and secondary schools working on a single 3–19 curriculum**. One large, below average performing MAT reported that it was working to build its curriculum 'from the bottom up and create a 3–19 curriculum with links between each of the key stages'. According to its Director of School Improvement, the trust was 'really looking at personal growth and meaning within the curriculum, not just knowledge and skills.'

As we outlined in Chapter 4, **a minority of our case study MATs and federations were working to align or standardise aspects of their curriculum, although this was considerably less common than for assessment**. In the survey, about a third of MAT core teams said that their curriculum and timetabling were either standardised or aligned, although only around a quarter to a fifth of headteachers agreed with this. Practices differed between different areas of the curriculum. For example, it was quite common for all primary schools across a MAT to be required to adopt phonics and Maths Mastery approaches, but each individual school could then usually select the particular scheme that it wanted to use. Relatively few of our case study MATs and federations had standardised or aligned other areas of the curriculum in primary, beyond an expectation that schools would comply with the National Curriculum and address any specific knowledge areas included in the ARE.

Curriculum standardisation or alignment was slightly more common in the secondary phase, partly as a result of the decision to adopt a common exam board. In some cases this alignment involved a shared commitment to a particular philosophy or set of beliefs in relation to the curriculum. For example, one large, above average performing MAT had adopted a commitment to what it called 'powerful knowledge'. The trust had developed key performance indicators (KPIs) for each year group and most subjects against which progress was measured, using a common approach to assessment. These KPIs were based on analysis and reflection about what children should know and be able to do through primary and secondary to Key Stage 3, but schools were largely free to determine how they would work to develop this. Several other trusts had developed common schemes of work which were adopted in lower performing schools, while higher performing schools were left free to decide on their preferred approach. As one interviewee put it:

> *When schools are broken, we need to put a basic standard in, but actually, if we want the schools to reach their full potential we have to give them some control over their curriculum to make sure it represents their context and needs. It's the old adage, 'tighten up to good; loosen up to outstanding.'*

The exceptions to this approach were the small number of MATs that were adopting a highly standardised approach overall, including in the curriculum. One of these MATs, a large, below average performing trust, was in the process of adopting a curriculum-led financial planning model for all its secondary schools; this largely determined staffing levels and the breadth of the curriculum offer. Another small, below average performing trust was in the process of developing curriculum standardisation, initially in its secondary schools. Each school had appointed a Curriculum Director for Maths, English and Science, and they were working with the central team to ensure that subject time allocations, exam boards, schemes of work, resources and assessments were all standardised in these subjects.

6.4 How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for teaching, learning and student success?

This section focusses on the third sub-area, as shown in Figure 6.4: How do MATs and federations develop shared principles for teaching, learning and student success?

Vision, values, strategy & culture   People, learning & capacity   Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy   QA & accountability

Shared principles for quality teaching, learning and student success

A sustainable learning organisation
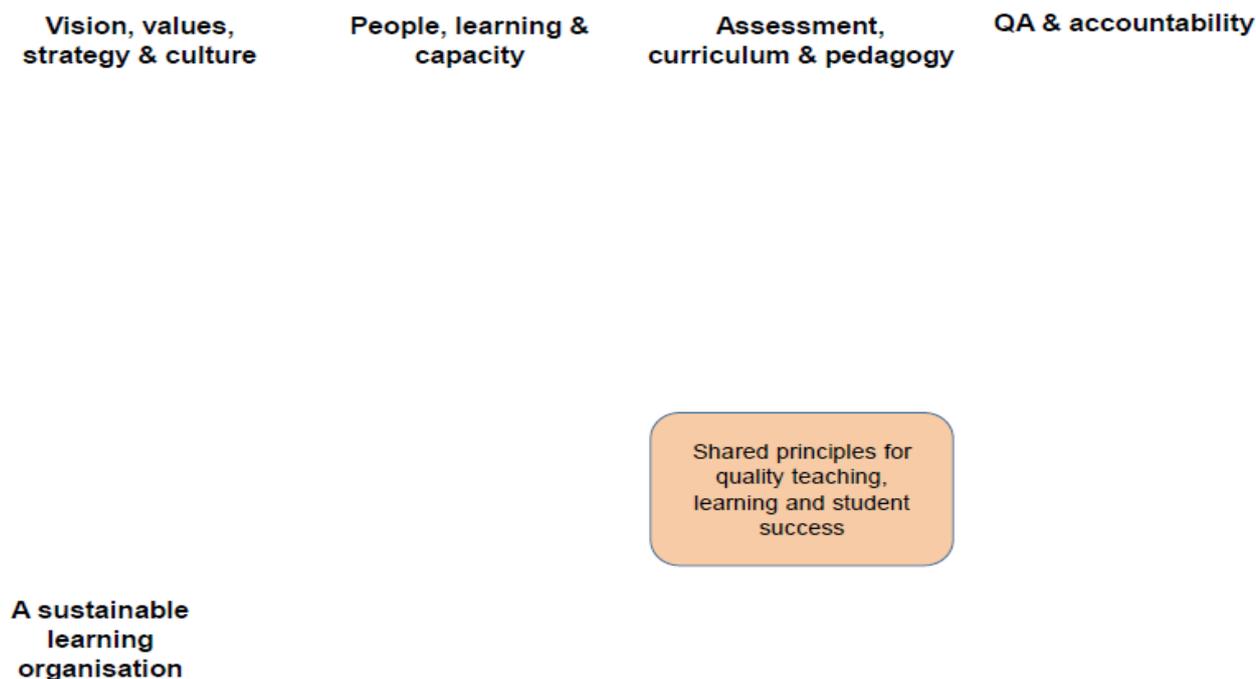
Figure 6.4: Developing shared principles for teaching, learning and student success

To some extent, **the approach adopted for pedagogy in a MAT or federation mirrored the approach to curriculum**. Thus, the trusts that took a highly standardised approach to their curriculum tended to have a highly standardised model for pedagogy as well. For example, the large, below average performing trust referenced above required that lesson plans were consistent across every subject and every school, using the same

six-part lesson structure. The trust also had a standard timetable, meaning that every lesson was taught in the same way at the same time in every school.

Overall, **the approach taken towards pedagogy correlated with performance**: below average performing groups and some of the groups that were working to turn round very challenging schools were more likely to adopt a highly prescriptive approach, while above average performing groups were more likely to allow more autonomy to schools to choose an approach that would suit their context. There were exceptions to this, however, with some above average trusts taking a highly standardised approach and some average and below average performers continuing to allow schools a high degree of autonomy over teaching and learning. A small number of the MATs and federations that had not adopted a prescribed curriculum had nevertheless adopted a standardised or aligned approach to pedagogy. In the survey, 47% of core team members and 34% of headteachers stated that their MAT's approach to teaching/pedagogy was either standardised or aligned.

The approach to pedagogy in MATs and federations often reflected the values and beliefs of the key leaders who had implemented it. So, for example, in one small, above average performing MAT, the CEO explained that all staff were trained to apply the trust's prescribed pedagogical model, which had been designed to make teaching as easy and routine as possible:

> *It's easy to be successful in our trust … it's really simple: do the basics, very well, every day. And that's all we're asking. It's not some complex rocket science. It's really simple – understand what the children don't know, and then teach them what they don't know, and help them understand what they don't know and how to get better.*
> CEO, small, above average performing MAT

By contrast, the Executive Principal of a large, challenging school that formed part of a large, above average performing trust described an almost diametrically opposite philosophy, reflecting their view that teaching is a complex professional endeavour that requires highly intelligent staff who are likely to be put off by a mechanistic approach:

> *If you want to recruit outstanding teachers … they'll only join you if you are seen to be quite liberal and progressive and intelligent … because if you're not, then they'll look at you and think, 'I don't want to work in that kind of school.' Intelligent staff will coalesce around other intelligent talented staff.*
> Executive Principal, large, above average performing MAT

In between these two perspectives we observed a range of approaches that provided more or less structure and guidance in relation to pedagogy. The following examples

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illustrate four points on a **spectrum of practice that we observed, from tightly prescribed at one end to full school autonomy at the other**:

i. At the standardised end, the approach adopted by one average performing, medium-sized trust was illustrative of a minority of the MATs and federations we visited. The trust had adopted a teaching and learning policy which all schools were expected to adhere to, including through their lesson observations and monitoring. The policy included a model for teaching and learning that had three main elements: clarity of expectations, technical ability in structuring a lesson, and exposition and explanation. Each of these was divided into a number of aspects and supported by detailed questions that could be used to evaluate practice. The trust's leaders were confident that teaching and learning could be judged as at least 'good' if this model was consistently applied.

ii. A less prescriptive, but still quite standardised approach had been adopted by one medium-sized, above average performing trust. This trust had adopted a signature pedagogy, based on developing metacognitive skills, across all its schools. The CEO saw this as helpful in developing a consistent language and approach and in equipping students with the skills and behaviours they needed to become successful learners: 'It's my number one agenda. I don't force it on staff but I imagine I set a culture where most schools adopt it.' Each school had a small team of teachers who were trained and charged with embedding the approach across their school. Interviewees across the trust were all aware of the approach and some saw it as helpful, although others felt that it did not translate well from the founding school to other schools with more challenging intakes or with different age groups.

iii. Towards the looser end of the spectrum were the minority of MATs and federations that had a broad preference for a particular pedagogic style, but which did not prescribe how this was developed. For example, the CEO in one medium-sized, above average performing MAT explained that they emphasised teaching that had rigour, pace, engagement, energy and a relentless focus on progress – 'I don't expect to see teachers sitting down but to be up and involved in the learning zone.' In a similar vein, a Head of School in one federation explained:

> *When working with staff, you're not telling them how to do it, but how to develop the story of the lesson, what is the starting point, get the flow working, how will you know what the children have done, where will it end.* Head of School, medium-sized, above average performing MAT

iv. Finally, several groups, including a majority of the above average performing MATs, left most decisions relating to pedagogy to individual schools to determine. For example, a Deputy Head in one large, above average performing MAT

explained that approaches to pedagogy across the trust ranged from 'honouring didactic and subject based, through to creative and student centred approaches'. The trust had removed its requirement that schools undertake lesson observations and give gradings before Ofsted did, and this was seen to have helped create a less prescriptive environment. The CEO explained:

> *We make sure they all know about what other schools are doing, but we let them make their own decisions, otherwise we're getting into that compliance thing, which is not healthy.*
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

Two final points are worth highlighting in this area.

The first is that **it was rare, but not unknown, to see MATs and federations use innovative staffing models in support of pupil learning**. For example, one medium-sized, average performing trust had adopted a model of having three teachers for every two classes, funded through a reduction in the number of TAs. This had enabled the trust to have smaller class sizes (around 20) in the morning for English and Maths and to use the third teacher for targeted intervention work with individual pupils in the afternoon.

Secondly, **the trusts that had adopted more aligned or standardised approaches to pedagogy had often encountered difficulties in shifting practices across their schools**. For example, a senior leader in one trust acknowledged that

> *There was resistance in the early stages to the pedagogical approach. We realised that it took longer when you're not implementing at your own school where the model has developed. We couldn't just take it and implement it.*
> School Improvement Director, medium-sized, average performing MAT

In response, the trust ran lots of staff training sessions, but still found the approaches were not always being implemented. According to the senior leader: 'On reflection we tried to implement it too quickly as we thought Ofsted were coming back.' However, the process had helped the staff in the lead schools to clarify their own pedagogy and therefore explain it to others in a different context.

Conclusion

In this chapter we saw that assessment practices were most likely to be standardised or aligned in MATs and federations, with curriculum and pedagogy more likely to be autonomous. For example, around two-thirds of MAT core team members (65%) described their approach to assessment as either mostly standardised or mostly aligned, compared to one-third (33%) in relation to the curriculum and just under a half (47%) for

pedagogy. Headteachers in MATs were notably less likely than core team members to agree that curriculum and pedagogy were standardised or aligned.

The benefits of aligning assessment practices appear to relate most closely to their use for quality assurance and accountability purposes, which we explore in Chapter 8; but there are also perceived benefits for teachers where they have shared expectations for learning and a shared language.

We observed relatively few examples of MATs and federations using their scale to offer curriculum enrichment opportunities or to develop all-through approaches to the curriculum.

Whether or not a MAT or federation chooses to align or standardise its approach to pedagogy broadly correlates with performance: below average performing MATs and those working to stabilise failing schools tended to be more prescriptive, while above average performing MATs and those working with higher performing schools tended to allow more autonomy to schools. We identify that the approach adopted partly reflects the views and preferences of the key leaders involved, for example reflecting whether they see teaching as a set of routines or as a more complex professional endeavour. Proponents of standardisation tend to argue that it ensures consistency in the application of 'proven' approaches, saves time for teachers and makes it 'easy [for them] to be successful'. By contrast, proponents of autonomy argue that schools and teachers should have access to ideas and evidence from elsewhere, but that they will be put off by a 'compliance' culture and will not be able to adapt their practice for different contexts.

7. Sustainable improvement in MATs and federations iv: quality assurance and accountability

7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the fourth strategic area for sustainable improvement in MATs and federations, asking how MATs and federations work to quality assure schools and to secure accountability. It builds on the analysis in the previous chapters, including the five school improvement fundamentals (Chapter 3) and the discussion of structures and school improvement models in Chapter 4. As we show, Quality Assurance processes also rely heavily on the processes for producing standardised pupil assessment data outlined in the previous chapter.

This chapter focusses in particular on the three sub-areas shown in Figure 7.1, which address how MATs and federations work to:

- develop fit for purpose collection, analysis and reporting of school and group-wide performance data

- use quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate school performance and inform next steps

- provide appropriate challenge and support for schools, at all stages of their improvement journey.
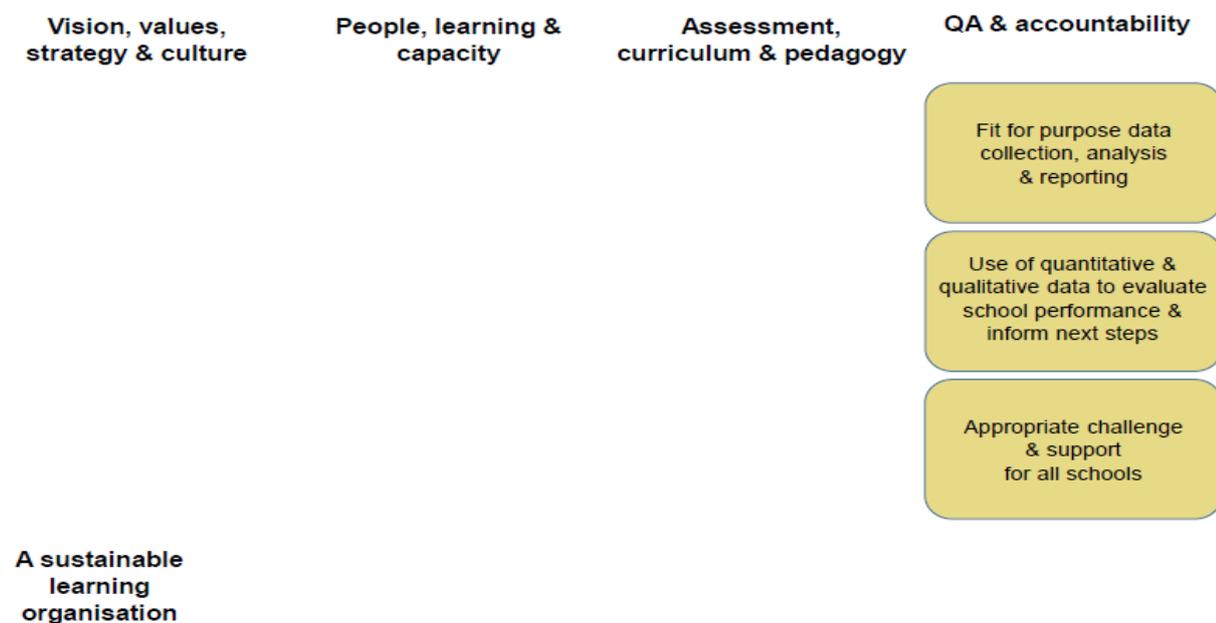
Figure 7.1: Quality assurance and accountability in MATs and federations

7.2 How do MATs and federations develop fit for purpose collection, analysis and reporting of school and group-wide performance data?

This section focusses on the first sub-area, as shown in Figure 7.2: How do MATs and federations develop fit for purpose collection, analysis and reporting of school and group-wide performance data?

Figure 7.2: Fit for purpose collection, analysis and reporting of performance data

Table 4.6 in Chapter 4 showed that 81% of MAT core team members and 87% of MAT headteachers in the survey identified that 'Data capture and reporting' was either standardised or aligned across their trust (usually standardised). In the last chapter we outlined the ways in which MATs and federations were adopting standardised or aligned approaches to assessing pupil progress and attainment. These assessment data formed the core of MAT and federation-wide approaches to collecting, analysing and reporting data, although most also included other school performance data, for example on attendance and exclusions. As we explore in the following section, these data were used alongside qualitative data to quality assure and hold schools accountable.

MAT respondents to the survey were extremely positive about their trust's use of data: 96% of core team members and 94% of headteachers agreed with the statement 'Data on school performance is collected, analysed and shared in systematic ways across our school group', with 71% of core team members and 70% of headteachers strongly agreeing.

In most of our case study MATs and federations it was common for data to be used on a routine basis by central teams and schools to inform their improvement work.

In the majority of MATs and federations there appeared to be a **culture of transparency around data**. For example, in one trust, every school's attendance data was ranked and circulated to the principals each week, while in another every school's performance in national assessments was presented to all staff in an INSET session at the start of the autumn term each year.

Most of our case study MATs and federations were looking for ways to **streamline data collection and reporting processes where appropriate**. For example, an NLE in one medium-sized, above average performing MAT explained: 'In fact we don't collect in as much data now as we did; we collect less, and are now more focussed on what's the purpose and how does it drive school improvement.' Some MATs were using automated systems, such as Classroom Monitor, to collect pupil assessment data, as a way to reduce the burden on schools.

Linked to efforts to streamline data gathering and reporting was a view that MATs and federations needed to **balance the ways in which data were used for accountability purposes and for school self-evaluation**, as one Hub Director explained:

> *We've had to get smarter about what data we collect and why from all the schools … we are trying to use something that will give us lots of information from one capture … we don't want to be pestering our schools, so while it is quite meaty to complete … what I've been trying this year is encouraging schools to complete the information in advance, so then we can use the time to spend on the questioning, rather than the gathering.*
> Hub Director, large, above average performing MAT

Despite these efforts, **we heard from some school leaders that data collection processes were time consuming and not always productive**. For example, a school leader in one medium-sized, average performing MAT argued that the trust was 'data obsessed.' We also heard about practices in some trusts that placed a heavy reporting burden on teachers and leaders. For example, in one large, below average performing MAT, every teacher was required to RAG rate every pupil on a weekly basis based on their view of whether the student was on track to achieve the minimum standard in national assessments (KS2 or GCSE). This data was then reviewed each week by a panel chaired by the school principal and involving the school's executive principal and other senior leaders, in order to identify pupils requiring additional support or intervention.

Several of the larger MATs had established dedicated data teams, while some had also developed **bespoke management information systems to enable the collection and analysis of data**. This dedicated capacity allowed these trusts to analyse internal 'MAT-mock' assessments and also to undertake sophisticated analyses of pupil attainment data, sometimes combined with data from other sources, which could then inform reflection and action by schools. For example, one large, above average performing MAT

analysed pupil assessment and demographic data linked to responses from its annual staff and pupil surveys. This allowed the trust to undertake a range of analyses, such as linking pupils' views of their experiences of school with data on their progress; providing indications of the quality of teaching; verifying how well techniques such as providing helpful feedback were being used and to what effect; and finding associations, for example, between a general work ethic and attainment in reading. These analyses had identified, for example, that children in receipt of the Pupil Premium were less likely to know what to do to improve their work.

Finally, most MATs and federations produced reports that combined pupil assessment data with background data on pupil characteristics (for example, gender and FSM) **in order to analyse school and trust-level performance and hold leaders to account**. These reports would be updated on a regular basis throughout the school year, sometimes linked to a half-termly or termly assessment cycle. In most cases these data were combined with wider data to produce a short **'school on a page' report**. These reports generally included data such as the proportion of lessons or teachers categorised in each of the Ofsted inspection grades (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement or Inadequate); pupil attendance and absence data; headline results from the staff survey; an assessment of leadership and Local Governing Body capacity; the school's most recent Ofsted grade; and the headlines from the most recent monitoring visit or review undertaken by the MAT or federation. These reports often used RAG (Red, Amber, Green) ratings that categorised the school's performance across these areas in order to help compare performance across different schools.

These reports were usually discussed and agreed with headteachers and LGBs before being shared with the MAT standards committee and/or board. As we outline in the following section, the reports were used to inform regular discussions with headteachers, Local Governing Bodies and the board around school progress and performance.

In summary, MAT survey respondents were positive about their use of data, seeing this as an area of strength. In most MATs and federations it was common for data to be used on a routine basis by central teams and schools to inform their improvement work. This was supported by a culture of transparency, with school performance on different metrics openly compared as a spur to conversations around how to improve. Most of our case study MATs and federations were looking for ways to streamline data collection and reporting processes where appropriate and several were seeking to strengthen school self-evaluation, as opposed to reporting for accountability purposes. Nevertheless, we heard from some school leaders that data collection processes were time consuming and not always productive. Several of the larger MATs had established dedicated data teams and management information systems to support the collection and analysis of data. Finally, most of our case study MATs and federations produced 'school on a page'-style reports that combined pupil assessment and other data to track performance, monitor risks and hold schools accountable in comparable ways.

7.3 How do MATs and federations use quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate school performance and to inform next steps?

This section focusses on the second sub-area, as shown in Figure 7.3: How do MATs and federations use quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate school performance and to inform next steps?

Vision, values, strategy & culture

People, learning & capacity

Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy

QA & accountability

Use of quantitative & qualitative data to evaluate school performance & inform next steps

A sustainable learning organisation
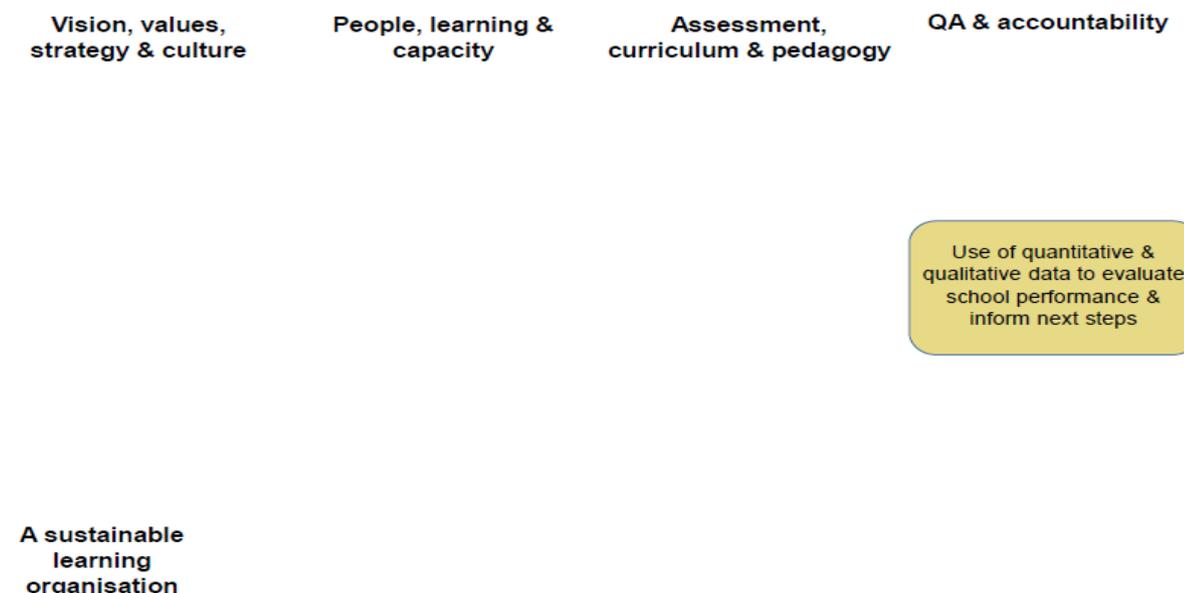
Figure 7.3: Using quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate school performance and inform next steps

In the last section we described the 'school on a page' templates that most of the case study MATs and federations we visited were using to capture and report on school performance. This section explores in greater depth how these **data reporting templates were combined with formal quality assurance reviews and other forms of soft intelligence to evaluate school performance.** These evaluations were then used by MATs and federations to assess risk, in terms of schools that required additional intervention or support. This section outlines the ways in which MATs and federations used these evaluations as a basis for holding schools accountable and for identifying improvement priorities and actions.

Most of the MATs and federations that we visited were involved in **a continual process of triangulating data from multiple sources to inform judgements around school capacity and performance and any actions required to secure improvement**. These processes generally had a rhythm that was underpinned by the timetable for collecting and analysing pupil assessment data that we outlined in the previous chapter – usually half-termly or termly.

The majority of trusts and federations combined these ongoing processes for collecting, analysing and reporting data with **formal school reviews that provided a more rounded assessment of the school's performance**, often as a way of preparing for an Ofsted inspection. One federation Executive Principal described these reviews as 'peer reviews with extra rigour as sometimes peer reviews tend to be a bit woolly or a love-in.'

The format for these reviews differed, but a common approach was for the trust School Improvement Director (or, sometimes, an externally commissioned HMI or consultant) to undertake a one-day visit. The focus for the visit would be based on an initial analysis of the school's data and self-evaluation and would focus on particular lines of enquiry, such as areas where results were poor or where practice was seen to be weaker (or, in a small minority of cases, where strong practice had been identified). The visit itself would generally include a combination of learning walks and lesson observations (usually alongside and in dialogue with the school's leaders), book scrutinies, pupil discussions and reviews of relevant data. For example, in one medium-sized, above average performing trust, 90% of the staff in the school were observed teaching in each visit. These observations were not graded, but each member of staff received feedback and the results were used to inform staff training and development.

These **reviews generally took place termly or annually, although in several cases the frequency was determined by an assessment of risk, with lower performing schools visited more often**. One medium-sized, above average performing MAT undertook three visits to each school annually. The first focussed on safeguarding and compliance issues relating to buildings, the website, and the single central record; the second focussed on teaching, learning and pupil progress; and the third focussed on personal development, behaviour and attendance, and the student experience. The trust was considering adding a fourth visit focussed on disadvantaged pupils.

Whatever the review approach adopted, it was always **integrated with the MAT or federation's wider structures for monitoring and supporting schools**, as outlined in Chapter 3. So, for example, in MATs that used a SIP model, the review might be undertaken by the SIP. Some trusts combined internally organised reviews with peer reviews between schools, in some cases undertaken by external organisations such as Challenge Partners.

In several of the trusts we visited, senior leaders from schools across the group were involved in reviews alongside core staff. This provided a **formative and developmental process for staff and also allowed for developmental work and conversations**. As one Director of Education put it, 'Right, these are things we're finding, let's roll our sleeves up because we're all part of this, what are the actions and what are we going to do next?' This willingness to get involved in helping address the issues identified was important for one senior federation leader, who compared it with their previous experience of advisors who offered 'advice but no accountability'.

One medium-sized, above average performing trust had gone further, introducing a three-hour planning meeting at the end of each review, where the focus was on developing an action plan for the school based on the review feedback. These meetings included two or three headteachers from other schools in the MAT, all of whom had been on the review team. This was seen to increase the sense of collective responsibility and commitment to improvement across the MAT and often led to practical school-to-school activity. A few weeks after each review, the trust's Head of School Improvement would visit the school to evaluate progress against the issues identified.

In addition to these formal processes for analysing data and undertaking reviews, **it was common for central MAT and federation leaders to gather soft intelligence on their schools, which they used to triangulate their judgements about school capacity and effectiveness**. Some of this soft intelligence came from visits undertaken by trustees, CEOs, school improvement directors, executive heads, SIPs and other core team members. In the survey, 98% of core team members and 92% of headteachers agreed with the statement: 'Our school group's Core Team visit schools regularly and have a sophisticated understanding of the strengths and development needs of each school'.

The combination of formal data and reviews with soft intelligence was important for ensuring that any performance issues in a school were identified. This combination of formal and informal processes was critical, even in larger MATs that appeared on the surface to be quite systematised. As one Teaching School Director put it:

> *There's a fine-grained understanding of departments and people and how they are doing, even in high-performing schools there might be a dip. You might think that in a big organisation it would all become systematised, but it's just experience I suppose.*
> Teaching School Director, large, above average performing MAT

Building on these systems for evaluating schools, most of the MATs and federations we visited had a **process in place to review this evidence and to make informed decisions about levels of risk and where and how to allocate central team resources in order to address any issues**. The CEO of one large, below average performing MAT explained that they had strengthened the rigour of this risk assessment process because, in the past, 'we missed signs that some of our schools were declining or not improving fast enough.' The trust's central team now meets regularly to review performance, with each school judged on a 1–5 scale against seven areas: outcomes, culture, strength of principal, strength of wider SLT, quality of teaching potential, strength of the Academy Council, and strength of the Chair of the Academy Council. Based on this, each school is given a risk rating which determines the level and type of support that it is offered by the trust and also the level of autonomy that it is given.

Another large, above average performing trust had adopted a similar model for evaluating risk, with the central team meeting every six weeks to do this. The Deputy CEO of this trust explained that this was necessary because of how quickly school performance could change, with schools that might have a lower Ofsted grade actually in a position to provide support, and schools that were ostensibly higher performing actually requiring additional support.

In summary, most MATs and federations combined standard 'school on a page' reporting templates with formal quality assurance reviews and other forms of soft intelligence to evaluate school performance. These evaluations were used by MATs and federations to hold schools accountable; to identify improvement priorities and actions; and to assess risk, in terms of schools that required additional intervention or support. Assessing school performance and capacity was a continual process of triangulating data from multiple sources, but this process was usually driven by the timetable for collecting and analysing pupil assessment data – that is, half-termly or termly. This pupil assessment data was combined with more formal school reviews undertaken by members of the core team (or sometimes an external reviewer), in some cases accompanied by senior leaders from other schools. These reviews provided a more rounded assessment of the school's performance, often as a way of preparing for an Ofsted inspection. Where staff from other schools were involved, this provided a formative and developmental process for them and also helped build a sense of collective endeavour. It was also common for central MAT and federation leaders to gather soft intelligence on their schools, for example through regular visits, which they used to triangulate with other sources of data. MATs and federations undertook periodic reviews of this evidence to make decisions about levels of risk and where and how to allocate central team resources in order to address any issues identified.

7.4 How do MATs and federations provide appropriate challenge and support for their member schools?

This section focusses on the third sub-area, as shown in Figure 7.4 below: How do MATs and federations provide appropriate challenge and support for their member schools?

Chapter 4 set out the ways in which MATs and federations structure their school improvement teams and approach to improvement, while Chapter 5 explored different leadership models for schools. As we have shown, schools are overseen and held accountable in different ways, depending on the model adopted. Common models include oversight from the CEO, School Improvement Director or Hub/Regional Director, oversight by an external SIP or by an executive head. This section does not revisit those findings, but builds on them and on the findings outlined in the previous sections of this chapter on the ways in which schools are evaluated. This section focusses on how MATs

and federations set and monitor targets for schools and how they then provide challenge and support to schools to help them achieve those targets.

Vision, values, strategy & culture   **People, learning & capacity**   **Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy**   **QA & accountability**

Appropriate challenge & support for all schools

A sustainable learning organisation
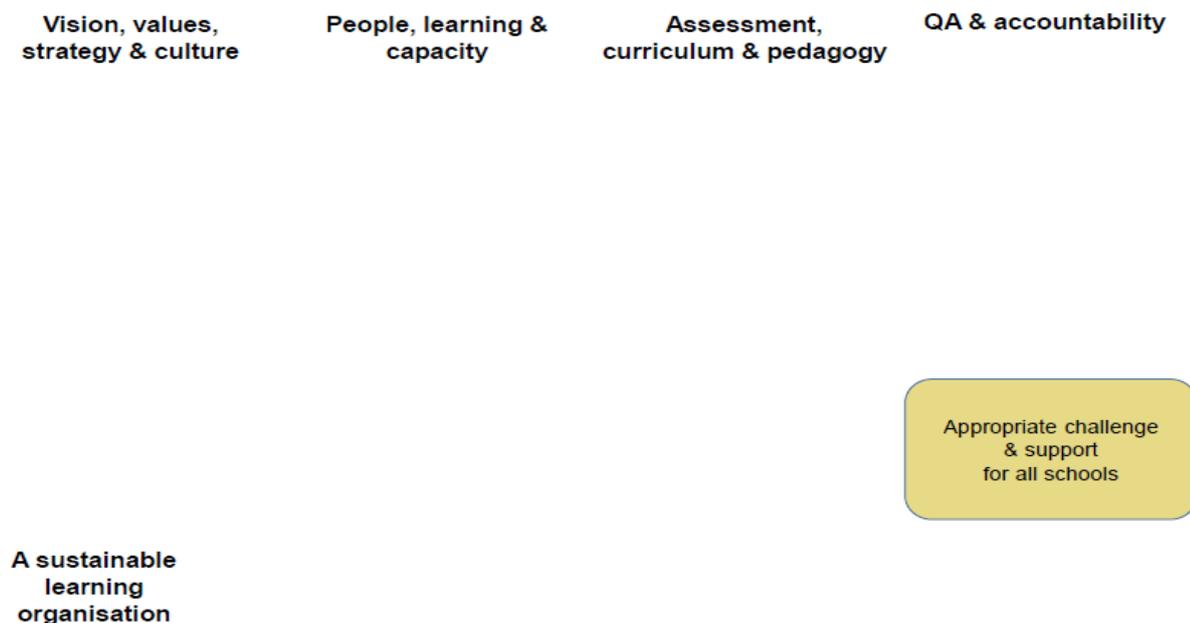
Figure 7.4: Providing appropriate challenge and support for all member schools

In the survey we asked MAT core team members and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the following two statements: 'Our school group's Core Team provides effective challenge to Headteachers/Heads of School across the group' and 'Our school group's Core Team provides effective support to Headteachers/Heads of School across the group'. In both cases, between 94% and 98% of core team and headteacher respondents agreed with the statement, indicating a high level of confidence in this area.

The starting point was to agree Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and targets for each school. It was common for these to be set by the CEO in dialogue with individual headteachers. These KPIs were then used in headteacher performance management reviews and also to monitor wider school performance over the course of a year.

In most of the above average performing trusts that encouraged a level of school autonomy, these **KPIs were generally designed to be flexible and to give schools scope to determine their own approach**. In a minority of cases, the trust actively encouraged schools to plan and report their work in relation to the MAT's core values as well as the more typical aspects of performance and accountability. For example, one medium-sized, above average performing MAT had established Executive Committees linked to each of the MAT's five values. These committees were charged with establishing core principles and policies. Each school then developed its own standards framework within this framework, and was monitored against its plans through review visits.

Even in MATs that adopted a more instrumental approach to setting targets, it was often clear how these were used to drive the MAT's vision and values. For example, an Executive Head in one large, above average performing MAT explained:

> *It starts at the top, with the CEO's performance management target and you pass that down to the executive head … All principals have a target of at least +0.5 or above (for Progress 8) and then you have micro targets within that for what you have done less well or what the trust is focussed on. So the trust has a massive vision for improving the lives of young people, social mobility … the talk in every target setting meeting is about that, about what's happening to your FSM children, or your FSM children who are high ability … so the targets are very very high, but we're moving away from that 'hire them fire them' thing: if you don't get that +0.5, the school will still get a financial reward for reaching your target, you might not get +0.5, but you might get half of your bonus if you get +0.3.*
> Executive Head, large, above average performing MAT

In addition to formal targets and KPIs, MAT and federation leaders explained that they used **informal pressure and challenge to achieve desired changes in the behaviours of their member schools**. For example, the CEO of one large, below average performing MAT explained that they had raised the issue of pupil exclusions with heads across the trust as they felt that schools were applying different standards. Having made it an issue in this way, exclusion rates had gone down, 'without us really doing anything or putting anything in place' (CEO).

Having established a framework for school performance and monitoring, CEOs, school improvement directors – or, where they existed, hub directors, SIPs or executive heads – engaged in regular review meetings and conversations with headteachers, heads of school and, sometimes, members of the LGB. These review meetings were usually scheduled at least half-termly and were informed by both school self-evaluations and trust collated data on the school's performance. These meetings provided **a key mechanism for ongoing accountability conversations**; for example, a headteacher might be asked to explain how they were addressing any weaknesses or issues identified from their data or from other review evidence. But the meetings were also **a chance to engage in collective planning**, with the trust core team committing additional support or resources to enhance the school's efforts where needed.

It was common for the headteacher interviewees in the above average performing MATs to describe the culture of accountability as 'challenging but not punitive, the conversation will always be about how to move things forwards' (Headteacher). However, it was also clear that there was **a balance to be struck between accountability, challenge and support by the core team leaders engaged in these conversations**. On the one hand, there was a need to retain a level of challenge in these conversations, so that headteachers felt accountable for their own performance. Equally, as this Regional

Director argued, there was also a need to retain high levels of trust so that school leaders would give an honest assessment of their school's strengths and weaknesses:

> *There is a bit of a tension for me in terms of what relationship do we want with our heads and how that will shape where we go with things like Performance Management … it is that openness, we can dig and dig, but actually, they will only show us what they want to show us… When you're only there for a short amount of time, you need to see it warts and all … That process is very relational, we know our schools very well, not just the outside bits of data, how it functions, what the personalities are, where our HTs are in their personal lives … it's the balance between all of that.*
> Regional Director, large, above average performing MAT

Getting these issues and relationships right was a constant balancing act. On the one hand it required 'self-confident, high quality leadership in schools, rather than leadership that is told what to do,' as one Executive Head in an average performing MAT put it. Without self-confident leadership in schools there was **a risk of a dependency culture**, or 'learned helplessness', which could be a drain on the resources and time of the core team. One CEO put it as follows:

> *We are finding more and more, that we've got a bunch of heads that are expecting us to take a lot off them and devolving responsibility back to us … I want them to take risks, but that's what we're not seeing, the trust almost accentuates that, heads aren't willing to really go out and try stuff.*
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

The Director of Schools in another large, average performing trust described their approach to avoiding dependency as follows:

> *There cannot always be a dependency on me. Empowering means supporting the heads to lead, to understand the principles behind school improvement and bend them into their own thinking processes. For example, the connection between doing something and considering its impact is not always there. Actions are not an end in themselves. So … 'What did you expect it to look like?' 'Have you measured this?' 'How has it been of benefit to pupils?' are at the heart of reflective, empowered leadership. I see my role as getting people to understand how to do that; how to judge what assessment information is telling them about particular groups of children; asking the right questions and habitually doing that when I am not there.*
> Director of Schools, large, average performing trust

In summary, schools in MATs and federations are overseen and held accountable in different ways; for example by the CEO (in smaller groups), by the School Improvement

Director or Hub/Regional Director (in larger groups), by an externally commissioned SIP or by an executive head. The starting point was to agree Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and targets, which were then used in headteacher performance management reviews and to monitor wider school performance over the course of a year. These KPIs were generally designed to be flexible and to give schools scope to determine their own approach. The CEO or other leader responsible for overseeing the school would then engage in regular review meetings and conversations with headteachers/heads of school and, sometimes, members of the LGB. There was a balance to be struck in these conversations between accountability, challenge and support, with a need for high levels of trust so that school leaders would give an honest assessment of their school's strengths and weaknesses. This required 'self-confident, high quality leadership in schools', but in some cases there was evidence of a dependency culture, with headteachers relying too heavily on central advice and support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, providing appropriate monitoring, challenge and support to schools within a MAT or federation requires a combination of clear success measures which align with the group's vision and values, backed by robust systems and processes for gathering data and analysing performance, together with a challenging but supportive culture which allows for a collective focus on addressing issues.

In most MATs and federations, the focus is on school-level ownership and action to drive improvement, with the central team ensuring this through sophisticated data systems and analysis backed by the triangulation of evidence from multiple sources so that performance is accurately evaluated. This allows the trust or federation to provide accurate challenge to heads and also to identify issues and intervene where necessary.

Key to the success of these models is that they are based on an open and respectful culture which ensures that there are 'no surprises' and 'no blame'. MATs and federations must consider carefully how the core team roles, responsibilities and relationships with school-level leaders work to ensure this.

8. Sustainable improvement in MATs and federations v: a sustainable learning organisation

8.1 Introduction

In this final chapter specifically focussed on MATs and federations, we address the fifth strategic area required for sustainable improvement at scale: operating as a sustainable learning organisation. The three sub-areas addressed in this chapter are shown in Figure 8.1 below.

These sub-areas address the following questions:

- How do MATs and federations secure effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement?

- To what extent do MATs and federations support disciplined innovation[23] – drawing on research and learning from and with the wider system?

- To what extent do MATs and federations engage in 'double loop learning'[24] – systematically adapting their improvement approach over time and in response to feedback?

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[23] Disciplined innovation (Greany, 2018) is defined here as 'doing things differently in order to do them better', with an emphasis on using enquiry, research and evaluation to inform and assess improvements.

[24] Double loop learning (Agyris and Schon, 1978) entails the modification of goals or decision-making rules in the light of experience.

| Vision, values, strategy & culture | People, learning & capacity | Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy | QA & accountability |

| A sustainable learning organisation | Effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement
Disciplined innovation - research, evaluation and learning from/with the wider system
Double loop learning - adapting your approach over time and in response to feedback |

Figure 8.1: Areas of focus for a sustainable learning organisation

The initial conceptual framework for the research did not include these areas, so we did not focus on them explicitly in our data collection and visits. As a result the evidence base in these areas is often not as consistent as in other areas of the report. Nevertheless, these aspects emerged as important in many of our case study visits so we report the findings here. In doing so we draw on concepts from existing research and theory on 'learning organisations', which has been ongoing across different sectors over several decades. This work generally draws on one or more of three fields: organisational learning (e.g. Agyris and Schon, 1978), learning organisations (e.g. Senge et al., 1990) and knowledge management (e.g. Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Most recently, the OECD has investigated the idea of schools as learning organisations, with Kools and Stoll (2016: 5) defining this in the following terms:

> A school as a learning organisation has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision.

8.2 How do MATs and federations secure effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement?

This section focusses on the first sub-area, as shown in Figure 8.2 below: How do MATs and federations secure effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement? It is structured in two parts, the first focussed on governance and the second on back-office support.

| Vision, values, strategy & culture | People, learning & capacity | Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy | QA & accountability |

| A sustainable learning organisation | Effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement |

Figure 8.2: Securing effective governance and back-office systems to support school improvement

8.2.1 How do MATs and federations secure effective governance of school improvement?

Our case study visits did not include interviews with trustees or members of LGBs, but we did ask our interviewees about their approach in this area. In addition, our secondary analysis of interviews with 35 MAT CEOs highlighted their perspectives on governance and leadership. These sources indicated some of the challenges facing MAT leaders and the ways in which they were having to engage in a process of continual reflection and learning about how to develop their new organisations.

Several MATs had created a 'standards committee' or other such subcommittee of the main board in order to scrutinise school improvement activity. These committees usually included some expert educationalists, whether from the board or externally, who had the knowledge and skills required to scrutinise performance data and who could then report to the main board. Whether through such committees or by the main board, the use of 'school on a page' reports (as outlined in Chapter 7) and assessment of progress and risks against a previously agreed set of KPIs was common. One CEO explained the role of their School Improvement Committee in monitoring performance as follows:

> *The board has signed off a monitoring framework. And that monitoring framework is against our own internal trust, pedagogy, systems and processes. That is reported back to the board and the School Improvement Committee every term, based on our external reviews. So, they have a clear line of sight about the incremental improvements against the already-defined arrangements.*
> CEO, small, above average performing MAT

While the above example indicates the way in which governance was being strengthened in some of the MATs we visited, this picture was not consistent and **several CEO interviewees acknowledged challenges in working to develop a robust and strategic governance model**. One CEO acknowledged that both she and her trust board lacked appropriate knowledge and skills, while others argued that board meetings were insufficiently strategic, focussing on detailed issues such as risk registers and finance software, rather than on establishing a clear and consistent vision or an appropriate model for school improvement.

One of the issues identified by CEO interviewees was **how to get the roles and relationships right between the main board, the executive and Local Governing Bodies**. This was partly about the formal scheme of delegation but also about how to make the arrangements work in practice, in particular with appropriate and complementary oversight of school improvement at board and LGB level.

In our case study visits we observed a range of practice in this area. **Most MATs and one of the two federations had kept their LGBs and had retained their role in scrutinising school-level performance data.** In one large, above average performing MAT, the CEO explained that the trust prioritises the need for effective LGBs, which are responsible for everything that a maintained governing body would do except setting the budget and appointing the head. The CEO interviews every applicant for every LGB personally, prioritising governors with a professional background who have a strong commitment to the school:

> *I want people who are able to challenge. We provide loads of training. We want them to be clued in, we want them to challenge. We've got GBs who stretch our heads, it's not aggressive, but it's not comfortable either … they add value because of that*.
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

A primary executive head working in this same trust explained that the two governing bodies she worked with were made up of highly skilled and committed people, although she had had to educate them about educational issues. These LGBs met once a term, but she also expected them to come to the school for key events, such as Christmas plays, and to spend time meeting the school council and on playground duty. She felt that this was important for the governors to really understand the school, rather than relying on her reports. The result of this investment of time and effort was that she found the LGBs to be helpful in challenging and supporting her in her role.

By contrast, in Chapter 4 we described how one CEO of a large, below average performing MAT had rewritten the trust's scheme of delegation soon after they arrived in order to clarify that they, rather than the LGBs, had responsibility for appointing

headteachers and accountability for school improvement. This had enabled the CEO to make key decisions and move more rapidly, for example around the allocation of headteachers to different schools.

One of the challenges faced by our case study trusts was **finding enough governors for LGBs who had both the knowledge and expertise required to oversee school improvement in a single school and also an ability to focus on the needs of the wider trust**. In order to address this issue, one large, above average performing MAT had retained LGBs in each school with responsibility for key areas, such as the attainment and progress of pupils, the quality of teaching and learning and the range and quality of the curriculum. In order to strengthen the scrutiny of these areas and to develop a trust-wide focus, the trust had created additional cluster-level governance groups. The CEO described these groups as

> *almost a middle tier on governance, rather than just leaving the chairs to do it on their own. Challenging the chairs to do their accountability stuff effectively – it's holding them to account.*
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

Each cluster-level group was responsible for eight schools and was supported by its respective Cluster Director and a finance officer. The cluster-level groups were chaired by a board trustee and were attended by the chair or vice-chair of the eight LGBs with a remit to 'focus on school improvement and the performance of the schools in the hub' (CEO). Partly as a result of these developments, the CEO reported that **some governors had started to question the role and added value of LGBs**, so the trust had set up a governors' working group to explore

> *what the future model looks like. What it's looking like is that we are duplicating – so every six weeks we [i.e. the executive] go in and are measuring, and the Governing Bodies do that through the headteacher reports, and the Governing Bodies are saying, 'you are more qualified to do it than we are.'*
> CEO, large, above average performing MAT

These examples highlight the ways in which **MATs are evolving their approach to the governance of school improvement across their schools**. Getting the balance right between executive and non-executive oversight and between challenge and oversight at trust and school levels is not simple. This is one of the reasons why we argue that MATs and federations must operate as learning organisations, since it is unlikely that they will achieve the perfect balance between these different elements from the outset, or that the approach will not need some adaptation and development as the organisation develops.

8.2.2 How do MATs and federations secure effective back-office services to support school improvement?

Turning to back-office services, in our case study visits it was clear that many of the MATs had developed sophisticated back-office teams and functions. Levels of top-slice reported to fund the central team and services varied widely but tended to average at around 4–6%.

In most of the above average performing MATs we visited, back-office services were described by school-based interviewees as consistently high quality and effective. This was important for school improvement for two reasons. Firstly, efficiency in areas such as procurement **could free up money that could then be spent on school improvement**. For example, one large, above average performing MAT used procurement savings to appoint three Year 6 teachers in its two-form-entry primary schools. Secondly, high quality and responsive back-office services, in particular in the areas of HR and finance, **saved time and effort for school-based leaders so they could focus on school improvement**. As one Executive Headteacher explained:

> *That frees us up to do the important bit which is the teaching and learning. When I was in an LA school, the headteacher spent hours and hours making sure that the budget balanced. I don't; an accountant brings me a budget and I tell him what I want … but each school isn't an identikit … the 6-year-olds here don't feel like they're in a corporate environment, they feel like they are in a nurturing, engaging primary school, which is what you want.*
> Executive Headteacher, large, above average performing MAT

Developing these sophisticated back-office services was not always easy for our case study MATs and CEOs, particularly for those working in smaller MATs and federations that did not have the scale and resources to appoint dedicated teams.

In the CEO interviews, several acknowledged that they themselves sometimes lacked skills or needed to develop new ways of thinking about their leadership in order to operate effectively. At one level this was about learning new skills, such as how to manage a much larger back-office team or how to work with a more complex set of external stakeholders. At another level this was about a more fundamental shift in leadership style or identity, for example to be more strategic in how they worked to develop a larger and more complex organisation.

8.3 Disciplined innovation – how do MATs and federations use research and evaluation evidence and engage in learning from and with the wider system?

This section focusses on the second area, as shown in Figure 8.3 below.

Vision, values,
strategy & culture
People, learning &
capacity
Assessment,
curriculum & pedagogy
QA & accountability

A sustainable
learning
organisation

Disciplined innovation - research, evaluation and learning from/with the wider system

Figure 8.3: Disciplined innovation in MATs and federations

In the survey we asked MAT leaders whether or not they agreed with two statements: 'Research and evaluation evidence are drawn on regularly to inform decision-making about priorities and approaches to improvement in our school group', and 'Our school group supports teachers and schools to innovate and has good systems for evaluating the impact of new approaches'. The results are shown in Tables 8.1 and 8.2. As can be seen, as in all areas of the survey, respondents are largely positive about the focus on these areas, but it is notable that they are considerably more positive about the use of research and evaluation evidence (44% of core team members and 46% of headteachers strongly agree) compared to the extent to which schools are encouraged to innovate and evaluate new approaches (29% of core team members and 32% of headteachers strongly agree).

Research and evaluation evidence are drawn on regularly to inform decision-making about priorities and approaches to improvement in our school group		
Percentage	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	44%	46%
Tend to agree	45%	41%
Neither disagree nor agree	9%	10%
Tend to disagree	2%	3%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 8.1: MAT core team and headteacher views on how research and evaluation evidence are used to inform improvement

Our school group supports teachers and schools to innovate and has good systems for evaluating the impact of new approaches		
Percentage	MAT Core Team	Headteacher in MAT
Strongly agree	29%	32%
Tend to agree	54%	47%
Neither disagree nor agree	14%	15%
Tend to disagree	3%	5%
Strongly disagree	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%

Table 8.2: MAT core team and headteacher views on the evaluation of innovative practices

Our case study visits indicated that **these were areas in which MATs and federations were less consistently strong in their practice**. While there were examples of using research and evidence to inform improvement work, as we outline here, such practices were far from common or consistent.

A minority of MATs and federations were **working to embed research into teachers' practice**. For example, in one small, above average performing trust, the leader of the Curriculum and Assessment Group had responsibility for keeping up-to-date with research. This leader reviews Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) reports and asks, 'What would this look like in our schools and what might it help us to achieve?' She also leads a cross-MAT professional development network and works with this group to pilot and evaluate new approaches in one or two schools before roll-out.

In one small, above average MAT, teachers on Band 3 (equivalent to Upper Pay Scale) have the option of choosing an action research project as part of their professional development. This option is offered every other year and is supported by the local HEI, which provides training and support for the research process and accredits the programme with 15 MA credits. Teachers work in groups on a topic related to a trust-wide priority. Findings from each group are presented to staff across the trust at a trust-wide professional development event and feed into trust and school improvement plans. For example, one group has been working over the last two years on a project aimed at improving further the progress of pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium. The collaborative nature of these projects is seen to help deepen working relationships between the trust's most highly skilled teachers.

One federation had commissioned two of its middle leaders to undertake a review of pupils' peer- and self-assessment across all its schools as this was a federation-wide priority. The middle leaders adopted an appreciative inquiry approach which involved talking to headteachers, assistant heads, teachers and pupils, and also carrying out observations and looking at books. This gave them an overall perspective on the approaches taken in each school and a federation-wide view of what was working well in

terms of impact. Their findings were sent to all headteachers and federation governing bodies to inform decision-making on next steps.

Another, large, above average performing MAT uses data to identify and address common challenges across schools. Each year they focus on specific groups across the MAT, asking why they are not achieving and what might be done. Some issues, such as poor attendance by white British boys, are recognised as complex, taking two or three years to address. If a group of schools all have the same issue then they are expected to focus on this together, although they will not assume that there is a single answer. Addressing an issue might require a mix of approaches from the central team and from schools; for example, raising awareness among headteachers, reviewing the curriculum and so on. Where the central team sees something working they will try to pick out what is making a difference and share it across the other schools. The next challenge will be literacy, where the trust has identified that Pupil Premium children are underperforming in subjects where the literacy demands are high.

Learning from and with the wider system was another area where there were relatively few concrete examples in our case study visits, although our interviews did not focus on this in depth. Some of the MATs and federations we visited were participating in local and regional networks, for example as part of RSC co-ordinated initiatives or as a result of regional projects funded through the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF). MATs that included Teaching Schools were also working as part of the Teaching School Council's national and regional networks. In addition, MATs that were engaged in Initial Teacher Training were sometimes working with local HEIs, while some CEOs and their teams had engaged in executive and strategic leadership development programmes. Where MATs and federations engaged in these networks, it was clear that they garnered useful ideas and in some cases developed strategic partnerships which supported their development.

8.4 Double loop learning – how do MATs and federations adapt their approach over time and in response to feedback?

This final section focusses on the third area under the Sustainable Learning Organisation heading, as indicated in Figure 8.4 below.

Vision, values, strategy & culture	People, learning & capacity	Assessment, curriculum & pedagogy	QA & accountability

A sustainable learning organisation	Double loop learning - adapting your approach over time and in response to feedback
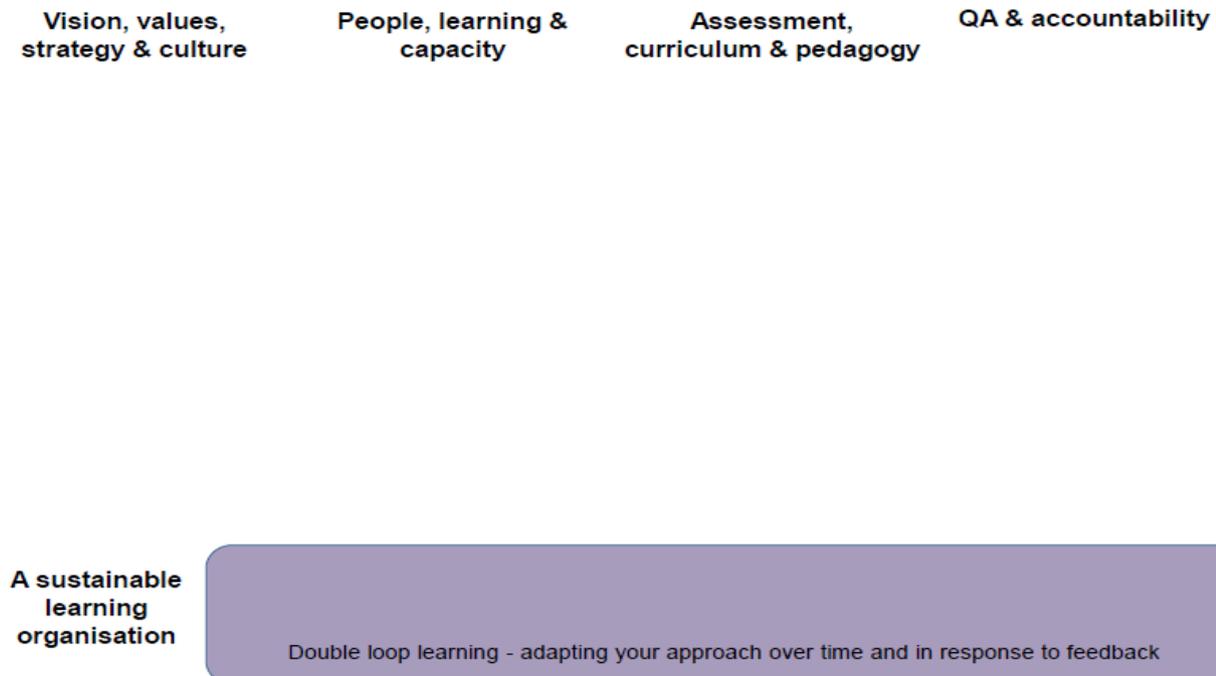
Figure 8.4: Double loop learning in MATs and federations

A key concept in the literature on learning organisations is the idea of double loop learning (Agyris and Schon, 1978). This recognises that if something is not working in a given area, a common response is to simply repeat the same approach (single loop learning) in the hope that by working harder or faster successful change can be achieved. Another common response is to engage in defensive routines, for example by denying responsibility, blaming others or becoming cynical about the process. By contrast, double loop learning requires an organisation or individual to reflect on and be prepared to redefine their underlying values and beliefs in order to assess why they have

adopted a particular approach and what they might need to change in order to achieve a more successful outcome (see Figure 8.5 below).
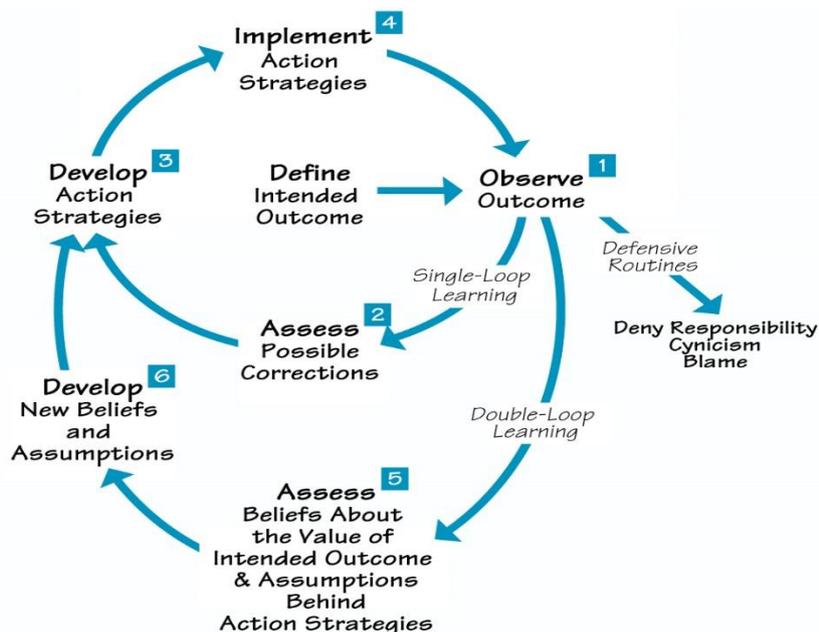
Figure 8.5: The difference between single loop and double loop learning

Double loop learning tends to be most likely in organisations that have **systematic approaches for collecting feedback on what is working and what is not**, for example by seeking out perspectives from staff, pupils or parents. In the survey we asked MAT core team members and headteachers whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'Parent feedback and pupil voice/perspectives are collected systematically and are used to inform decision-making around school improvement priorities and approaches.' The results are shown in Table 8.3 and show that while core team members and headteachers are broadly positive, they are notably less confident than in most other areas of the survey, with only 23% of core team members and 22% of headteachers strongly agreeing that this is the case.

Parent feedback and pupil voice/perspectives are collected systematically and are used to inform decision-making around school improvement priorities and approaches		
Percentage	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	23%	22%
Tend to agree	43%	41%
Neither disagree nor agree	16%	21%
Tend to disagree	14%	13%
Strongly disagree	3%	4%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 8.3: MAT responses on the use of parent feedback and pupil voice to inform decision-making

In our case study visits we did identify a small minority of MATs that were drawing on pupil and staff views and perspectives in a systematic way. For example, in Chapter 7 we described the established MAT that conducted regular pupil and staff surveys and used these to analyse ways in which teaching and learning could be enhanced for different groups. Other case study MATs and federations conducted annual staff surveys which they used to identify areas for improvement. However, such examples were relatively rare. Furthermore, in Chapter 4, we reported that MATs and federations rated 'parental and community engagement' lower than other areas in their school improvement strategies and work. This suggests that **MATs and federations could do more to strengthen their use of feedback loops by capturing and reflecting on pupil, staff and parental perspectives more systematically.**

Despite this finding, **we did identify numerous examples of MATs and federations that were reflecting on their approach to school improvement and working to develop and adapt this over time, often as a result of reflection on their underlying values and beliefs**. We have referenced many of these examples throughout the report. For example, in Chapter 4 we described the MAT that had appointed a central team but had then realised that 'we had unintentionally created an office-based, LA model with a central team to scrutinise performance', and so had reverted to a more school-to-school-focussed approach. Also in Chapter 4 we outlined the way in which one medium-sized, above average performing MAT was working to embed its values through five strategic groups, each one focussed on a particular value, with a set of evolving practices, such as vertical tutoring, that were being iteratively applied and adapted across different schools as part of a collective learning process.

In the survey, we asked MAT core team members and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'Leaders across the MAT, both executive and school-based, have a shared understanding of where and how the MAT as a whole needs to improve'. The results are shown in Table 8.4 and show a strong level of agreement. Our research suggests that MATs and federations are adapting their approach, but this development will need to continue as they seek to secure sustained improvement over time.

Leaders across the MAT, both executive and school-based, have a shared understanding of where and how the MAT as a whole needs to improve		
Percentage	**MAT Core Team**	**Headteacher in MAT**
Strongly agree	65%	61%
Tend to agree	32%	36%
Neither disagree nor agree	2%	2%
Tend to disagree	1%	1%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 8.4: Core team and headteacher responses on alignment around MAT-wide priorities

In summary, we argue that MATs must also operate as Learning Organisations as they seek to grow and respond to a rapidly changing external environment. As set out in Chapter 3, this involves three aspects – governance and the back-office, disciplined innovation and double loop learning. On **governance**, we found that several MATs had created a 'standards committee' below the main board in order to scrutinise school improvement activity, but this picture was not consistent and several CEOs acknowledged challenges in working to develop a robust and strategic governance model. Related to this was how to get the roles and relationships right between the main board, the executive and Local Governing Bodies, since most MATs and one of the two federations had kept their LGBs and had retained their role in scrutinising school-level performance data. **Back-office services** were described by many school-based interviewees as consistently high quality and effective; where this was so, it could free up money (which could then be spent on school improvement) and save time and effort for school-based leaders. However, developing high quality back-office services was not always easy for our case study MATs and federations, particularly smaller ones that lacked scale. On **disciplined innovation**, we did encounter examples of MATs and federations using research and evidence to inform improvement work, but such practices were far from common or consistent. **Learning from and with the wider system** was another area where there were relatively few concrete examples in our case study visits. On **double loop learning**, we did identify a small minority of MATs and federations that were drawing on pupil and staff views and perspectives in a systematic way, but this was an area that could be strengthened in most cases. We identified numerous examples of MATs and federations that were reflecting on their approach to school improvement and working to develop and adapt this over time, often as a result of reflection on their underlying values and beliefs, but it will be important for this process to continue as MATs and federations become more established.

Conclusion

In Chapter 3 we highlighted the contextual factors that influence how MATs and federations approach school improvement at scale, which partly reflect the rapid pace of change that has occurred in the sector over the past 10 years. We also indicated the ongoing challenges that MATs face in the context of a need for growth, a rapidly changing external environment and an ongoing need to secure school improvement at scale. We argue that these challenges require MATs to operate as learning organisations; meaning that they are clear about their underpinning values, that they listen carefully to their stakeholders through a process of sound governance, and that they continuously change and adapt over time based on systematic feedback loops.

Many of the MATs and federations we visited had features of a learning organisation, particularly in the ways that they were adapting their approach to school improvement over time and based on their core values and beliefs.

However, we also argue that practice in this area was often not as strong as it needed to be, with sometimes problematic governance relationships and relatively few examples of disciplined, evidence-informed innovation. A minority of the MATs and federations in our sample did have strong systems for capturing feedback from staff and pupils, but this practice was far from universal and there was generally a lack of focus on the voices of parents.

Looking ahead, MATs and federations will continue to need to focus on these areas in order to secure evidence-informed practice and improvement approaches that are able to adapt to new challenges and opportunities, such as the potential for enhanced use of technology for learning or the need to address rising concerns around student well-being and mental health. As the sector continues to mature and develop, there are increasing opportunities and resources available for MATs and federations to learn from evidence-informed practice and from each other. It will be important for all of them to engage with these opportunities productively over time.

9. TSAs and LAs supporting sustainable school improvement

9.1 Introduction

This chapter focusses on the ways in which TSAs and LAs support school improvement across groups of schools. As outlined in Chapter 1, we conducted two case studies of LAs and four discrete case studies of TSAs. In addition, a number of our MAT case studies also included Teaching Schools and we draw on the evidence from this wider group in this chapter where appropriate. Teaching School core teams and headteachers also participated in the survey, although response rates from both groups were quite low (n = 87 for TSA core teams and n = 58 for TSA headteachers), so these results should be seen as indicative. Overall, it is important to recognise that the evidence base in this chapter is based on a much smaller sample than for MATs.

Teaching Schools and LAs have different remits and operate at different scales, but we focus on them together in this chapter because there were often significant overlaps in how they worked across their different localities. Several of our case study examples included local strategic partnerships through which LAs and TSAs worked together (often involving locally based MATs as well) to identify and address the improvement needs of schools across a locality, so we explore the nature of these partnerships here.

Teaching Schools and LAs are also different to MATs and federations in several important respects. MATs are single organisations that have direct responsibility and accountability for the operation and quality of their member schools. Most of the MATs in our sample were sponsoring schools that had been identified as seriously underperforming, which they needed to stabilise and repair. By contrast, LAs are accountable for the quality of all maintained schools in their area, but those schools operate with greater independence and LAs do not generally have the capacity or ability to influence practice in the way that MATs and federations do. For example, the Governing Body of a maintained school has responsibility for appointing the headteacher and is accountable for overseeing the budget, which is not usually the case for a Local Governing Body in a MAT. Similarly, Teaching Schools generally work with a range of schools, but do not have formal responsibility or accountability for their performance in the way that MATs and federations do. Furthermore, the TSA designation and remit can be removed, whereas MATs and federations operate as independent legal entities. Finally, where Teaching Schools do provide school-to-school support, it is usually to schools that are not underperforming to the extent that they require MAT sponsorship.

We start this chapter by outlining key findings on how TSAs are structured and operate to undertake school improvement, acknowledging that our four case studies are diverse and are adapted to their different contexts. Despite these differences, we show that the TSAs all broadly adhere to the five school improvement fundamentals set out in Chapter 3, but

also highlight differences in how they apply these compared with MATs and federations. We then describe the key features of the two LA case studies, relating them to the LGA research. In the Conclusion section we reflect on the role of local strategic partnerships, which bring LAs, TSAs and MATs together in some areas.

9.2 Teaching School Alliances

The most immediate way in which TSAs support school improvement is through their school-to-school support work and their work to designate and deploy SLEs. This is the part of their remit that most clearly relates to identifying and addressing improvement issues in schools and we focus on that in some detail here. But the wider TSA remit for capacity building can also be seen to contribute to sustainable improvement across a locality. The most significant example of this capacity building is the work of TSAs on School Direct and other school-based ITT routes, which helps to ensure a supply of high quality teachers. We also highlight the role of TSAs in supporting other aspects of school improvement, for example by working to develop common approaches to assessment and moderation, by facilitating subject networks, and through other projects aimed at enhancing the curriculum or the quality of teaching and learning in specific areas.

We structure this section in two parts. The first sets out the findings from the case studies and the survey in relation to vision, values, strategy and culture of TSAs, while the second focusses in more specifically on school improvement in TSAs.

9.2.1 Vision, values, strategy and culture in TSAs

In the survey we asked TSA core team members and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'Our TSA has a clear vision and set of values which all member schools subscribe to'. The responses were strongly positive: 95% of core team members and 91% of headteachers agreed (with well over half of each group strongly agreeing).

The case studies reflected significant differences in how TSAs interpret and enact their vision and values. These differences were **partly a result of contextual differences in each of the four areas** that the TSAs were located. So, for example, one case study TSA had chosen not to offer a substantial programme of professional and leadership development because they argued that there was an over-supply of such provision in its local area. These differences also **related to how each particular Teaching School had chosen to interpret its remit**, which was partly influenced by their context but also a reflection of the particular strengths, values and interests of the lead school.

These differences were reflected in how the four case study TSAs developed their alliances and worked with partners. Two of our case study Teaching Schools had

developed formal alliances: one involved around 60 primary schools across a large rural area, while the other involved around 30 primary and secondary schools across both urban and rural parts of a large county. A third case study Teaching School was a job-share involving two primary schools, although it was working hard to engage secondary schools as well: this alliance was open to all schools in the unitary authority where it was based, with no membership fee. The fourth case study did not have an alliance but was working intensively with a small number of underperforming schools to implement its unique curriculum model.

There was also wide variation in how the four case study TSAs were working with their local LAs and with other TSAs and providers in their areas. This engagement can be seen on a spectrum. At one end, one case study TSA was deeply embedded within a local strategic partnership; one had begun to engage with its LA on school-to-school-related activity more recently as part a bid to the DfE's Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF); one saw itself as a competitor to the LA in providing improvement services; while one was working across four LA areas, but with very little engagement with the LAs themselves.

In all four case studies we found that most interviewees were committed to the partnership and valued the work of the TSA, including those from schools that had been recipients of school-to-school support. The fact that membership of the alliances was voluntary and mostly stable over time, despite the fact that schools paid a subscription fee in two cases, supported this sense of commitment. In the TSAs that operated alliances there was a common view among the member headteachers we interviewed that 'You get out what you put in,' or, 'The alliance is not "them", it's "us."' This sense of shared commitment was fostered through mechanisms such as joint conferences and planning sessions that involved all member schools, annual audits of needs and priorities, termly headteacher meetings and clear governance arrangements. However, we did also interview some school-based leaders who were unsure whether they would renew their alliance membership in the year ahead, suggesting a less firm commitment, and several who explained that they drew on multiple networks, not only the TSA.

In the survey, we asked TSA core team members and headteachers whether or not they agreed with the statement: 'We have a clearly defined model for school improvement across our school group which underpins the way we work'. Overall levels of agreement were high – 82% of core team members and 73% of headteachers agreed – but it was noticeable that the strength of this agreement was less strong than for MATs. For example, whereas 58% of MAT core team members strongly agreed with this statement, only 36% of TSA core team members did.

We also asked TSA core team members and headteachers about the areas of focus and perceived impact in their school improvement work, using the same set of headings as

we used for MATs (See Table 4.2). The TSA responses are shown in Table 9.1 below. They show that, as in MATs, core team members and headteachers in TSAs largely agree on the levels of focus and impact in each area. **The TSA ratings are lower than for MATs overall and show greater differentiation between the different areas.** For TSA core teams, the three highest average ratings for focus are 'Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practice', 'Improving the quality of leadership in all schools', and 'Professional development and feedback/coaching for staff', while TSA headteachers include 'Fostering collaboration between schools' in their top three. The lowest three average ratings for TSA core teams and headteachers are 'Engaging parents and community', 'Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues', and 'Increasing financial efficiency'.

These areas of focus were also reflected in the case studies. **Whereas MAT leaders were sharply focussed on 'identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools' as their top priority, most TSA leaders were focussed on developing a broader network for sharing practice, building capacity and supporting all schools to improve.** The TSAs could most readily show impact on specific schools where they had undertaken focussed school-to-school support work aimed at addressing underperformance, but they could also describe the ways in which the breadth of their remit and activity was adding value; for example, where they combined support for specific, struggling schools with their broader CPD offer and networks of expertise, allowing them to develop an integrated package of support that drew on expertise from multiple different areas.

Several of the TSAs were also involved in networking across the wider system, helping to bring together different partnerships and join up disparate strands of activity in a way that was rare for MATs. This networking was a result of TSAs' wider remit, for example connecting with universities on ITT, with LAs on many aspects of CPD and school improvement, and with other TSAs at regional and national level through the Teaching Schools Council. Our interviewees also **argued that their focus on building an alliance of schools, rather than only focussing on underperformance, allowed them to prevent as well as fix school improvement issues**.

To what extent does your group's school improvement strategy focus on the following areas? For each area, indicate how important it is where 1 = Low priority and 10 = High priority.			To what extent do you think that your school group's work in these areas is having an impact? For each area, 1 = No impact and 10 = High positive impact.		
Focus	Mean level, TSA Core Team	Mean level, Heads in TSA	Impact	Mean level, TSA Core Team	Mean level, Heads in TSA

Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practice	8.8	8.5	Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practice	8.4	7.9
Improving the quality of leadership in all schools	8.6	8.1	Improving the quality of leadership in all schools	8.2	7.4
Professional development and feedback/coaching for staff	8.5	8.0	Professional development and feedback/coaching for staff	8.6	8.3
Fostering collaboration between schools	8.3	8.2	Fostering collaboration between schools	8.3	7.7
Recruiting, developing and retaining talent	8.3	7.8	Recruiting, developing and retaining talent	7.6	7.8
Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children	8.1	7.2	Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children	7.0	6.5
Developing shared approaches to curriculum and assessment	7.3	7.0	Developing shared approaches to curriculum and assessment	6.8	6.7
Identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools	7.2	6.9	Identifying and addressing underperformance in specific schools	7.6	6.6
Securing robust QA and accountability for schools including peer or external reviews	6.9	7.0	Securing robust QA and accountability for schools including peer or external reviews	6.8	6.9
Developing a shared approach to pedagogy	6.9	6.8	Developing a shared approach to pedagogy	6.5	6.8
Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues	6.1	5.8	Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues	6.0	6.0
Increasing financial efficiency	5.6	5.7	Increasing financial efficiency	5.1	5.3
Engaging parents and community	4.3	5.0	Engaging parents and community	4.5	5.0

Table 9.1: TSA core team and headteacher views on areas of focus and impact in relation to school improvement

Finally, as with MATs, we asked TSA core teams and headteachers in the survey about their views on the sustainability of their approach to school improvement in terms of both finances and workloads (see Tables 9.2 and 9.3 below). **TSA leaders were notably less confident than their MAT peers in this area.** Although more than half (52%) of TSA core team respondents (and 49% of TSA headteacher respondents) agreed that their

approach was financially sustainable, only 6% of TSA core team respondents strongly agreed with the statement, compared to 40% of MAT core team members (see Table 4.3). A similar picture was apparent in terms of staff workloads.

These findings were reinforced by our case study visits, where we found that **TSA core teams tended to be smaller than MATs**. All four had a dedicated TSA director or manager working full- or part-time, sometimes with an additional manager and one or two administrators largely focussed on ITT-related work. However, it was common for interviewees to express concerns about funding and the sustainability of the model. Two had had funding from their LA in addition to the core grant from the DfE, but this was coming to an end in both cases. One executive principal we interviewed was blunt in arguing that the funding model was insufficient.

Our school group's approach to school improvement is financially sustainable		
Percentage	**TSA Core Team**	**Headteacher in TSA**
Strongly agree	6%	25%
Tend to agree	46%	24%
Neither disagree nor agree	25%	40%
Tend to disagree	17%	7%
Strongly disagree	6%	4%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 9.2: TSA leaders' views on the financial sustainability of their school group

Our school group's approach to school improvement is sustainable in terms of staff workloads		
Percentage	**TSA Core Team**	**Headteacher in TSA**
Strongly agree	6%	22%
Tend to agree	50%	40%
Neither disagree nor agree	23%	27%
Tend to disagree	20%	9%
Strongly disagree	1%	2%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Table 9.3: TSA leaders' views on the sustainability of their school group in terms of staff workloads

9.2.2 School improvement in TSAs

As we indicated above, Teaching Schools operate in different ways to MATs and federations in many respects. Where Teaching Schools do provide school-to-school support it is usually less intensive than where MATs and federations are working to stabilise and repair underperforming schools. But this is not to suggest that the school-to-school support work of TSAs is always light touch: **many of our interviewees described intensive support that had involved multiple staff and that had lasted over at least one academic year**, while in the survey 64% of TSA core team members agreed with the statement, 'On a regular basis (i.e. at least once a term) the TSA provides intensive support to schools that are really struggling'. We also asked TSA core team members in the survey whether they agreed with the statement: 'The Teaching School model is not effective in supporting schools that are seriously underperforming – we don't have the remit or capacity to intervene'. Over three-fifths (62%) actively disagreed, although 21% agreed.

Nevertheless, as we have explained, TSAs do not have direct accountability for the performance of the schools they are working with, so **the model is invariably focussed on 'working with, not doing to' autonomous schools**. One NLE that we interviewed described her school's approach as 'mooring alongside' the supported school, allowing them to disengage once the work was complete. **Many of our TSA interviewees, in particular leaders in schools that had received support, argued that this was a strength of the model**, as the following quotes indicate:

- The alliance 'brings a tight network of support around you but as Headteacher you are always in control.' (Headteacher)
- 'The support has given us a different way to think about our practice but is still led by me and my senior team.' (Headteacher)
- 'It starts with listening to my values and ethos, showing me different ways of thinking.' (Headteacher)
- 'It acknowledges that the learning happens in both directions. It's not a model in which the Teaching School has all the answers.' (Headteacher)

In some cases **it was clear that the TSA model could also be effective in preventing problems from occurring in schools, by providing 'upstream' advice, networks and support which helped to avoid schools becoming isolated**. For example, in one alliance we visited, a newly appointed headteacher explained that they had had immediate contact from their local Teaching School after taking up post. From this initial contact a package of support was agreed, comprising:
   a. Coaching for the headteacher, focussed on understanding the school's context and post-Ofsted planning.
   b. Developing a plan of support, with a focus on teaching and learning. This plan was then delivered by SLEs using a three-stage model:

i) Observe – the school's staff visited the Teaching School to meet teachers and observe practice.

ii) Joint Planning – SLEs from the Teaching School supported the school's teachers in planning and preparing lessons.

iii) Team teaching – SLEs visited the school to team teach with staff from the school.

The alliance that had supported this new headteacher was in the process of developing a more comprehensive programme of support for new heads. This was focussed on addressing issues that they would not typically have experienced as a deputy head, such as dealing with staff capability issues, finance, governance and data. The programme includes a two-day residential with visits to outstanding schools. For heads who had been in post for a year or two, there was a programme of coaching and there was also a network for aspirant deputy heads.

This 'upstream' role was less fully developed in the other three TSAs. One in particular had chosen not to develop an alliance and was focussed on providing intensive support to a small number of challenging schools. But **the Executive Principal in this TSA was frustrated by the model, arguing that it is harder to make a difference because 'you are not in control.'** They argued that a year was often not long enough to make a significant impact in supported schools, creating pressure to focus on quick fixes, and that any changes made might not be sustained. This TSA was now developing a MAT and the Executive Principal explained that this work was now their priority over the Teaching School work.

While acknowledging these important differences from MATs and federations, **we also found that TSAs adopt broadly the same five school improvement 'fundamentals' in their school-to-school support work as MATs (see Chapter 3), although they apply them in different ways**.

1. **Establish school improvement capacity**

As was the case in MATs and federations, **the alliances were all led by experienced and credible leaders**. A key feature of the Teaching School designation is that the lead school must be high performing and most of the leaders involved had operated as NLEs over a number of years. These leaders played important roles in building and leading an alliance of partner schools, diagnosing school improvement needs and, in some cases, directly undertaking school-to-school support.

All four case study alliances relied on school-to-school support, rather than a centrally employed team or externally commissioned experts, as their main approach for supporting specific schools. For example, 75% of TSA core team members agreed with the statement in the survey: 'School improvement across our

alliance is mainly achieved through school-to-school support (e.g. drawing on National, Local and Specialist Leaders of Education) – the central team's role is to facilitate that'. In two of our case studies, where the alliance was strong, it was common for these roles to be based across multiple schools, with schools willing to deploy their staff in return for a standard fee. In the other two cases, SLEs and other expert roles were based in the lead school – in one case due to difficulties in brokering capacity from other schools across the alliance and in one case because the Teaching School did not operate an alliance.

All four alliances had focussed attention on building the skills and capacity of their designated NLEs, LLEs and SLEs. It was common for these key practitioners and leaders to receive training, particularly SLEs who had less leadership experience. This training was generally focussed on helping them to engage successfully with colleagues in the supported school, to identify and address needs and to adopt a coaching, capacity-building approach. One TSA had also developed clear protocols and handbooks in order to define expectations for both sides. In one TSA, the five SLEs based in the lead school were each allocated 0.2 FTE to enable them to undertake school-to-school support. Two of the Teaching Schools had also created their own 'lead practitioner' designations as a way to recognise classroom-based practitioners who undertook school-to-school support. In one TSA these 'lead practitioners' were expert teachers who could then be visited to observe their teaching practice in their own classroom, avoiding the need for them to be out of class. Each observation was then followed by a debrief discussion. One TSA had also identified Lead Peer Reviewers and Pupil Premium Reviewers and some also deployed National Leaders of Governance (NLGs).

2. **Forensic analysis of school improvement needs**

The case study TSAs were clear that **provision of school-to-school support needed to be bespoke, based on an assessment of the needs of the supported school**. One TSA Director explained that 'we put something on the website in the beginning, but we took it off again as it didn't fit what we do.'

Beyond this, **the process for identifying and assessing needs differed widely depending on the context**.

Much of the school-to-school support provided by TSAs comes from schools requesting support based on their own internal evaluations and reviews. In the survey, 76% of TSA core team members agreed (and only 5% disagreed) with the statement: 'Individual schools in the alliance identify their own needs, but then usually approach the TSA first for any support required'. One secondary TSA Director explained that this kind of support was usually required at department level and was increasingly focussed on English, Maths and Science, with support then provided by the alliance's five key SLEs.

It was less common for alliances to review data and undertake a systematic assessment of needs and risks in the ways that we identified in MATs. For example, in the survey, only 35% of TSA core team members agreed (and only 7% strongly agreed) with the statement: 'Data on school performance is collected, analysed and shared in systematic ways across our school group'. However, **two of our case study alliances did have a formal process for identifying needs**, as follows:

- One alliance undertook an annual audit of needs across its 60 member schools to inform its overall offer for the year ahead. It had also introduced a formal peer review model, with all schools committing to participate on a two-yearly cycle. This peer review model had replaced an earlier triad model of peer support in the hope of increasing the level of challenge, with Lead Peer Reviewers trained from across schools to help ensure consistency. Alliance leaders explained that the aim of the peer review model was to act as an 'early warning' system to flag schools in need of support and to grow the confidence of heads to acknowledge such needs.
- The second alliance was part of a local strategic partnership established with the LA and other partners. The board is supplied with data by the LA and RSC, from which schools are identified as causing concern and are allocated an NLE, LLE or an LA Officer whose role is then to work with the school to develop a costed school-to-school support action plan. These plans are reviewed by another NLE or LLE before being implemented.

We discuss the role of local strategic partnerships in more depth below, but it is important to note that even in alliances that are not part of such local arrangements, it appears quite common that they will sometimes be referred schools to support. For example, in the survey, 69% of TSA core team members agreed with the statement: 'Where the TSA provides intensive support to schools that are struggling, it is usually as a result of a referral from the Local Authority, Regional Schools Commissioner or other local strategic partnership'.

In a third case study TSA, the Director explained that they reviewed published school performance data each year in order to identify any schools in the alliance or beyond that might require support. In the past year or so, the TSA had also worked more actively with the LA to identify a group of schools requiring support in another town, with the work now funded through SSIF.

In the fourth case study – the Teaching School that works with a much smaller group of schools and that has now developed a MAT – the approach to identifying needs is essentially the same as for the other MATs described in Chapter 3. Schools have either approached the Teaching School directly for support or have been referred by the RSC or Teaching School Council. The first step is to undertake a detailed audit, which usually takes two days and involves lesson observations; discussions with teachers, leaders and students; scrutiny of key policies and an analysis of performance data. The size of the

team responsible for the audit depends on what is requested: in some cases a school might request relatively small-scale support, for example on safeguarding or the use of Pupil Premium, while in other cases the school is referred because it is in Special Measures.

3. **Supporting and deploying leadership and providing access to effective practice and expertise at classroom and department level**

We combine these two aspects of the five 'fundamentals' because **it was common for TSAs to broker packages of support that brought the two strands together**. This ability to draw on different areas of expertise and to connect schools into different projects and networks was a feature of the TSA model that often differed from the MAT approach.

The core of the school-to-school support arrangement was usually an NLE, LLE or SLE as we have described above. These designated leaders would usually work with the supported schools to agree the support required as well as the measures of success.

One Teaching School Headteacher set out the following characteristics of successful school-to-school support as follows:
1. Early due diligence conversations which aim to understand the needs of the school holistically and recognise 'the talent in every school.' This is about understanding the issues that are affecting performance; for example, it may not be about boys' achievement but about resilience.
2. Packages of support that generally include:
   o coaching for the headteacher
   o training and support for leaders across the school
   o providing access to existing subject hubs for middle leaders as a way to build expertise and enable access to existing models for moderation
   o exposing teachers to effective practice through structured visits
   o signposting relevant research and helping the head to see how to move their team forward
   o showing staff at all levels that there are different ways to work and that it is all right to be vulnerable and acknowledge difficulties.

The ability to bring together these opportunities was reliant on Teaching Schools having a strong alliance, characterised by a culture of openness and a range of other CPD and development projects that they could connect with. As we have indicated, this picture differed quite widely across our four case study examples. However, in the stronger examples it was clear that these wider mechanisms could complement the provision of school-to-school support; for example, where there were existing subject networks facilitated by SLEs that a new school could readily tap into. One alliance was working on three SSIF-funded projects (oracy, maths and phonics) with well over 50 schools

involved, so schools that were receiving support could be included in these projects where appropriate.

A different example of school-to-school support came from one of the secondary TSAs. Through its successful SSIF bid, it was working with a group of schools (all in a single town) that had recently been graded Requires Improvement by Ofsted. Most of the schools had surplus places and so were competing for pupils. The TSA identified that the issues were not so much about the quality of senior leaders, but the lack of 'traction' within their schools. A multi-pronged approach has been developed and agreed with the schools, which will involve:

- Student conferences to boost Y11 performance, focussing on 20 students from each school for 4 days over the course of a year, with masterclasses, sessions to promote motivation and engagement, and team building.
- Governor support to build capacity for accountability and challenge. A National Leader of Governance was leading on this work.
- Use of the Improving Teacher Programme for identified staff.
- A bespoke cohort of the NPQSL programme that brings together leaders from all of the participating schools.

The strands are linked in that, for the NPQSL programme, each participant is asked to identify actions after each session with their expected impact. They are then asked to submit an impact report to their headteacher and a governor and these are then used in the governor training strand.

4. **Monitoring improvements in outcomes and reviewing changes in the quality of provision**

Finally, on the last of the school improvement fundamentals, **there were some clear examples of how TSAs were monitoring the impact of their work, although these practices were not consistent across our sample**. It appeared that the focus on research and evaluation in SSIF had raised the level of practice in this area for TSAs that had received funding. For instance, in the example above of student conferences, the progress of these students was being compared with a matched control group in each school, to provide indicators of impact.

The **smaller scale school-to-school support activity**, for example where an SLE worked with a department over the course of a few days, **could be difficult to evaluate in a formal sense**. In these cases the key success criterion could be as simple as whether or not the school asked for further support from that individual. In one of the schools we visited that had received support, the headteacher was clear that they did not want an 'off the shelf' package – 'it's not about what you *should* do, it's about what you *could* do'. For this head, the approach had been successful because it had focussed on impact from the beginning, teasing out from leaders the changes that they were aiming

for and how these would be measured to provide evidence of progress. Other leaders across the school were adamant that genuine improvement could not be measured simply in terms of pupil attainment data, but only through deep professional learning and empowering practitioners. They had sought out the TSA because of their non-hierarchical and collaborative way of working.

Where TSAs were providing more formal school-to-school support, in particular where this was in response to a referral from the LA or an RSC, **the approach to monitoring had more similarities with the MAT model** described in Chapters 3 and 8. For example, in the TSA that worked as part of a local strategic partnership, the progress of all school-to-school support projects was RAG-rated on a fortnightly basis by a team comprising the Local Authority and system leader representatives who sat on the Primary Improvement Board. Any concerns that were raised were then taken to the monthly Improvement Board meetings. Interviewees explained that the focus of these reviews was to hold the NLE or LLE providing the support to account for the quality and impact of their work, rather than to add a further layer of accountability to the headteacher of the supported school.

Finally, one TSA had recently introduced research study groups as a new professional development approach. These groups are organised across subject areas six times a year and are led by staff who have been trained for their role. Focus areas are publicised and teachers choose which to attend. The groups study and discuss recent pedagogical research but there is no formal expectation that they will apply this to their own teaching; though they can choose to do so and give feedback on its impact.

In summary, the most immediate way in which TSAs support school improvement is through their school-to-school support work and their work to designate and deploy SLEs; but the wider TSA remit for capacity building, for example in relation to ITT, can also be seen to contribute to sustainable improvement. The case studies reflected significant differences in how TSAs interpret and enact their remit, partly as a result of contextual differences in each area but also as a result of the particular strengths and interests of each Teaching School. The TSAs could most readily show impact on specific schools where they had undertaken focussed school-to-school support work aimed at addressing underperformance. In one example it was clear that the TSA model could be effective in preventing problems from occurring in schools, by providing 'upstream' advice, networks and support which helped to avoid schools becoming isolated, but this 'upstream' role was less fully developed in the other three TSAs. We found that TSAs adopt broadly the same five school improvement 'fundamentals' in their school-to-school support work as MATs (see Chapter 3), although they apply them in different ways.

9.3 Local Authorities

As noted above, we included two LA case studies in our sample, primarily because members of the research team had recently completed a wide-ranging study of LA approaches to school improvement for the LGA (Isos Partnership, 2018) and so the purpose of this research was to test these findings in two additional locations.[25] We draw out the key features of these case studies here and show how they complement the existing LGA research.

The LGA research identified nine key conditions for LAs to focus on in developing their approach to school improvement, as follows:

1. A clear and compelling vision for the local school improvement system.
2. Trust and high social capital between schools, the local authority and partners.
3. Strong engagement from the majority of schools and academies.
4. Leadership from key system leaders.
5. A crucial empowering and facilitative role for the local authority.
6. Sufficient capacity for school-to-school support.
7. Effective links with regional partners.
8. Sufficient financial contributions (from schools and the local authority).
9. Structures to enable partnership activity.

The two case studies that we undertook for this project provide further evidence to support these nine conditions, as we illustrate below.

The two cases were in very different contexts. One was a shire county that has historically achieved above national averages in terms of school and pupil performance. The council has taken an 'even-handed' approach to academies and around 40% of all schools in the county have academised, leaving large numbers of schools – mostly primaries – to be maintained. The second case study was a small unitary authority in a deprived context. Some years ago school standards in this LA were below average and the Authority received a critical inspection report from Ofsted.

Both LAs have made significant changes to their school improvement services in recent years. The shire county entered into a joint venture with a private sector provider for all its school improvement provision some years ago, which has proved largely successful. One benefit of this contract as seen by our interviewees was that services in the county had been sustained at a time when many other authorities had either cut provision or moved to a fully traded offer. The balance between funded and paid-for services to

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[25] The Isos Partnership research for the LGA is available at https://www.local.gov.uk/enabling-school-improvement accessed 14.9.18

schools is now around 50/50, reflecting an ongoing (but reducing) level of investment by the county council. The unitary authority took the decision to disband its in-house school improvement team some years ago and has outsourced the delivery of school improvement services to the local TSA. It has been encouraging its remaining maintained schools to join a MAT. Around 60% of all schools in the LA are currently within one of 12 MATs that operate in the city: some are local while others have a wider footprint. The LA has redefined its own role in school improvement to be a champion of the interests of children and young people.

Both LAs have developed strategic partnerships which bring together key stakeholders from across the locality in order to co-ordinate action and ensure that no schools are left unsupported. In the shire county, the Director of Education chairs this partnership board, while in the unitary LA it has an independent chair. The DCS in the unitary LA described the board as a coalition founded on shared principles, beliefs and ambition for the town, with no requirement that schools have to commit – 'It is not a gym membership, it's a congregation.'

In the shire county, the commissioned private provider has a team of advisors and curriculum experts, including literacy, maths and early years, as well as a wider team that includes governor support and data and assessment capacity. The focus of this team's work is mainly on maintained primary schools, although there is a small secondary strand. The curriculum experts play an important role in working with schools, for example co-ordinating subject networks and moderation across schools, which helps to ensure that pupil progress predictions by schools are accurate and that research and policy-related evidence are shared across the system.

The advisers work closely with TSAs and other system leaders across four area teams. A formal group meets in each of the four areas twice a term in order to review school performance data, identify any schools that require support, broker support, and monitor the impact of interventions. Schools are categorised by the LA into one of five performance bands: great, good, light touch, focus, or keys to success. An LA-wide Management Board is attended by the Director of Education and the four area team leads and will discuss any schools causing concern, making decisions on whether to issue a 'formal letter of concern' or impose an Interim Executive Board (IEB). The LA can also broker a 'management partnership' (described as similar to a soft federation) with an existing federation or MAT in cases where it has concerns about a school. Schools that are categorised in the last two bands (focus or keys to success) receive more intensive offers of support, including school-to-school support, support from an adviser, and a joint evaluation visit from an adviser and an NLE. The NLE may then go on to provide any school-to-school support that is required under the aegis of one of the county TSAs.

The development of this model has been 'not without teething problems' according to the LA, but it is now seen to be working well, particularly in the primary phase.

In the early days there was some suspicion about working closely with the private provider, but the LA is seen to have played a role as an honest broker and to have listened well to schools.

The unitary LA is much smaller than the county; this has helped to enable key stakeholders to come round the table through the strategic partnership, including several of the MATs and the city's only TSA. **The fact that the LA has stopped providing improvement support has arguably enabled it to play a more independent, brokerage role.** Several of the MAT CEOs and headteachers that we interviewed that were engaged with the partnership welcomed the transparency with which it had been developed – 'Not done to, done with.' There is scope for even stronger engagement: currently around 50% of the schools in the city are said to be actively engaged in supporting and benefitting from the partnership.

The development of the school improvement model started with a focussed analysis of data, which identified which schools were high priority and how resources for improvement would be deployed. The data analysis also identified a series of cross-cutting areas for improvement. These have become the focus for the partnership and have helped focus the TSA's work: closing the gap, SEN support in mainstream, developing subject specialisms, leadership, attendance, and supporting the more able. Clarity on these priorities has also helped with several successful SSIF bids which have further helped to accelerate the work.

A school improvement board acts as a subgroup of the wider partnership. It is chaired by a secondary school headteacher and includes 10 other heads as well as the TSA. The board categorises schools on a three-point scale, based on published data, which determines their level of prioritisation. Maintained schools and academies are included in this categorisation. For maintained schools that are struggling, the support and challenge is not optional and is provided for free. For schools in MATs, the support is voluntary and will usually be funded by the MAT. All other maintained schools receive at least one visit per term from the TSA. The partnership also encourages all schools to have an external review once a year, for example through Challenge Partners.

Any school-to-school support that is required is co-ordinated through the TSA. Some is delivered directly by the Director of the TSA, but 75% of the NLEs, LLEs and SLEs in the city are based in different MATs and the TSA plays a key strategic role in deploying this resource across the city. In the last academic year there were 89 SLE and NLE deployments, typically of around 5 days each, but negotiated between the individual and the receiving school. Results across the city are improving and the percentage of schools judged by Ofsted to be Good or Outstanding has increased considerably.

Alongside this process for monitoring and supporting schools, the partnership has also supported some capacity-building work. For example, working with a local Maths Hub, a

group of strong teachers have been training and providing moderation and also teaching and learning support to their colleagues across the city.

In summary, the two LAs studied are in very different contexts and are working to fulfil their school improvement remits in quite different ways. Nevertheless, their focus on building local strategic partnerships that involve TSAs and other designated system leaders to monitor standards and broker and provide school-to-school support can be seen to be broadly in line with the findings from the previous LGA research.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the roles that TSAs and LAs play in supporting school improvement. As we have shown, this work has parallels with the work of MATs and federations in many respects, but is also distinct, in particular where it focusses on the needs of schools more widely and on building system-level capacity to meet the needs of all schools.

This chapter has highlighted in particular the role that **local strategic partnerships** can play in bringing together different partners and helping to create a sense of co-ordinated ambition across a locality. This was true in the two LA case studies but also in one of the TSA examples outlined in the first half of this chapter. These local strategic partnerships serve partly to increase dialogue and trust between different providers, in particular where TSAs see themselves as in competition with the LA for 'a slice of the cake'. But the strategic partnerships we visited also go further, enabling a data-informed analysis of needs and priorities which allows for a co-ordinated approach to supporting schools. This support can then be commissioned in transparent ways from whichever provider is best placed, but in all three cases this is usually schools rather than LA staff. Furthermore, the partnerships allow for regular monitoring of progress and impact over time. In the following concluding chapter, we argue that there is scope to consider how such local strategic partnerships could play a more significant role in ensuring that the needs of all schools are addressed and that local providers are collaborating and playing to their strengths at a time of tightening budgets.

10.   Conclusion and implications

This research has focussed on how school groups in England achieve sustainable school improvement at scale. It was based on three core research questions, as follows:

- *How do MATs, federations, TSAs and LAs identify the improvement needs of schools and the appropriate solutions to those needs?*

- *How do they implement necessary changes in schools in order to achieve sustainable improvement?*

- *How do they measure and monitor improvement?*

In this conclusion we start by reviewing the extent to which these questions have been addressed. In order to bring together the findings and to reflect the different ways in which MATs and federations in particular are approaching sustainable school improvement at scale we set out a typology, with four illustrative examples of different approaches as well as the advantages and risks associated with each example. We then reflect on the significance of findings and their key implications, asking where and how they build on previous research in this area.

10.1 Addressing the research questions

Our research identified a series of important contextual factors which influence how MATs in particular structure and undertake their work on school improvement. We also identified a set of high-level practices across our sample of MATs and federations which we argue are necessary for sustainable improvement at scale. These high-level practices operate at two levels:

- The five school improvement 'fundamentals' are necessary but not sufficient for school improvement at scale. They describe the broad interlinked processes and capabilities that school groups draw on when they are working to identify and address school improvement needs, most obviously when they are working to stabilise or repair underperforming schools.

- The five strategic areas describe the wider areas that MATs and federations address in order to build organisational capacity and a culture of continuous improvement which enables them to achieve sustainable improvement at scale.

The five fundamentals sit within the five strategic areas, as shown in Figure C.1 below.
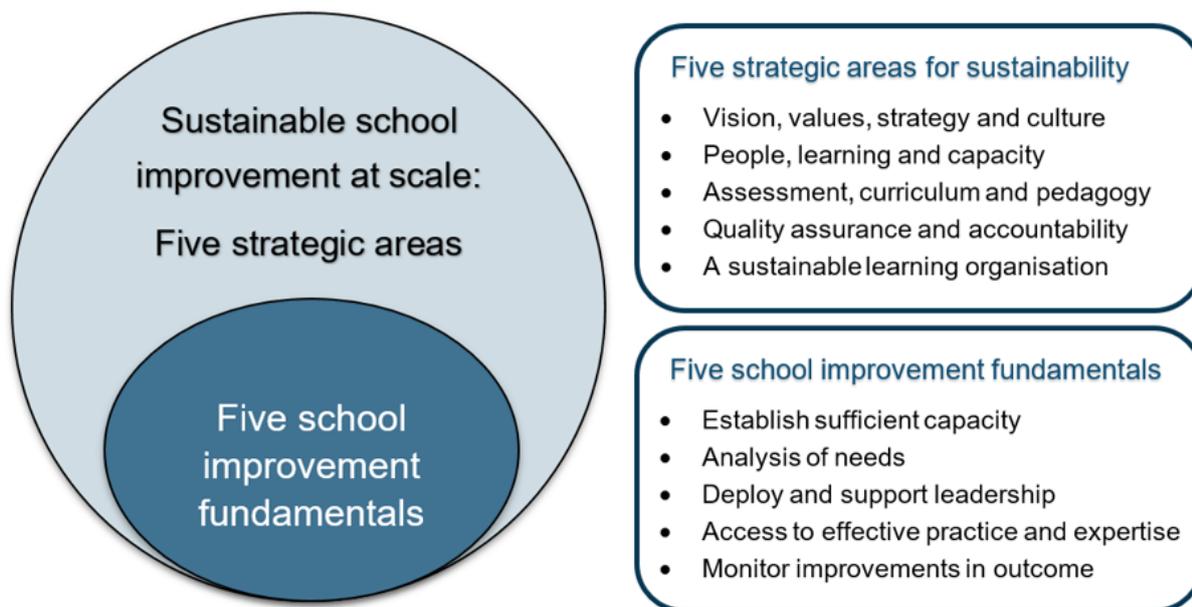
Figure C.1: The five school improvement fundamentals sit within the five strategic areas

Our research revealed important differences in how MATs and federations are addressing the five 'fundamentals' and the five strategic areas, but also a level of convergence in many areas. We described these areas of convergence and the range of practice in each area, illustrating the different ways in which MATs and federations are approaching the challenge of sustainability. Many of these differences in practice reflected the contextual factors that we outlined in Chapter 3, such as the age, size and composition of the MAT. Importantly, the practices we observed were not consistently associated with MATs in particular performance bands, so we are not arguing that above or below average performers all operate in a distinct set of ways which explains their performance.

Overall, the findings from the survey and case studies indicate that the great majority of middle and senior leaders within schools that are in MATs and federations are positive about the benefits that these structures bring, although we have highlighted examples where this is not the case. We also revealed areas where very few MATs and federations currently demonstrate exemplary practice and where there is arguably scope for the sector as a whole to improve. This was most evident in the section on operating as a Learning Organisation, but we also highlighted examples in other sections of the report; for example, where we argued that very few MATs and federations appear to have a comprehensive strategy for moving all schools from 'good to great'.

Our research on TSAs and LAs was less comprehensive but is important nonetheless, not least because it allowed us to compare these models with practice in MATs and federations. We did identify some commonalities between the different models and used

the five 'fundamentals' as a structure for describing how TSAs approach school improvement. But we also recognise that TSAs and LAs have different remits and operate differently, both from MATs and federations and from each other. Two findings from this strand of the research are worth highlighting:

- The way in which TSAs in particular can operate 'upstream', providing support and capacity building for schools that are not in MATs or federations, which can help them to avoid dropping in performance and requiring more focussed improvement support. Of course, this 'upstream' support was also offered by MATs and federations in our sample, but only to the schools that were within these structures.
- The role of local strategic partnerships, which were being convened by both our case study LAs and which were also an important aspect of the TSA that was most effective in providing 'upstream' support for all schools. We discuss these local strategic partnerships below in considering the implications of this research.

10.2 A typology of MATs and federations

The five 'fundamentals' and five strategic areas bring together the high-level areas that all MATs and federations were working to address as they sought to secure sustainable improvement at scale. But throughout the report we have also highlighted important differences in *how* MATs and federations were working to address these areas. Some of these differences reflected objective contextual factors, such as the size and composition of the MAT. In other cases the differences reflected less tangible contextual features, such as the beliefs and values of the founding leaders or simply the skills and capabilities of those leaders. We did not identify clear, consistent differences in approach between MATs in different performance bands, so at this stage we do not think it is possible to argue that the different approaches we observed can be described as more or less 'effective'. Nevertheless, we do think it is valuable to draw out these differences in ways which can inform decision-making by MAT and federation leaders and also, potentially, future research.

We do this by setting out a typology of MATs and federations, which reflects what we see as the key dimensions that differentiated the approaches we observed. In developing the typology we have been informed by extensive research and theoretical work on organisational and institutional development, which has been ongoing across a range of sectors over several decades.[26]

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[26] Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organisation* (1986) provides a good synthesis of work on organisational theory. For work on institutional theory and institutional logics see Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012). For an example of how both organisational and institutional theories have been applied to current school structures in England see Ron Glatter's chapter 'Schools as organisations or institutions: defining core purposes' in Earley and Greany (2017)

The typology is based on four core dimensions, which we define as follows:

- **'Purpose'** reflects the extent to which the school group is clear about its vision and values and how they inform day-to-day practices and behaviours. In the report we describe two broad approaches to defining the mission and values. The first is more instrumental, for example with a narrow focus on improving the Ofsted grades of schools, while the second reflects a wider purpose and ethos (for example in terms of faith, inclusiveness, the approach to the curriculum or pedagogy, or particular organisational disciplines) which distinguishes the approach. We highlight ways in which a subset of MATs and federations are working to embed their values into the day-to-day practices of their group, for example by convening a strategic committee to focus on the development of each trust value and by requiring schools to use the values in their development plans. We show that in MATs and federations that have embedded a distinctive vision and set of values, school-based leaders can explain how they inform their daily work. These leaders argued that the values were meaningful to them personally, providing a motivational focus for their work.

- **'Performance'** refers to the level of focus and impact of the MAT or federation in improving academic and wider outcomes for all children and in creating a high-performance working environment for staff. The vast majority of the MATs and federations we visited were clear about how they were working to secure impact in the first of these areas, although we highlight differences in the quality and rigour of this work. We also indicate areas where practice across the sample is arguably weaker overall; for example, there were relatively few examples of MATs and federations using their scale to offer a wider curriculum experience, and limited evidence of how they were moving schools from 'good to great'. In the latter area (creating a high-performance working environment for staff), most MATs and federations were strong on how they were working to build staff capacity and create professional learning cultures, but there was less evidence of strategic approaches to issues such as workload.

- **'Participation'** refers to the culture of decision-making in the group, in particular whether key stakeholders, such as staff, students, parents, employers and wider communities, feel that their perspectives are sought and listened to. This is partly an issue of governance, about which we did not collect significant data and so make only limited observations in the chapter on operating as a learning organisation. In that chapter we highlight some of the challenges that MAT CEOs in particular mentioned around the design and operation of governance groups across their trust. But 'participation' is also about the decision-making style of executive leaders, where we report significant differences between MATs and

federations that are more directive and others that are more consultative and deliberative in their approach. Our interviews with school-based leaders revealed the challenge of striking the right balance between these two approaches, but also the importance of staff and leaders feeling that they have a voice and a level of control over their work.

- **'Process'** refers to the extent to which the organisation has clarified its operating model and approach, with a clear theory of action for how its structures, systems and processes will secure continuous improvement. The balance to be struck here is between consistency and flexibility. We describe the different options for the design of central and school-based functions and roles in some detail and show that each model can have strengths and weaknesses. We argue that there is a level of convergence in approaches over time and as MATs grow, with most MATs and federations seeking to operate as a hierarchy and network simultaneously. We argue that the growth of central teams and more formalised processes could mean that MATs and federations become overly bureaucratic over time if they do not sustain a focus on operating as a learning organisation; for example by engaging in disciplined innovation, drawing on feedback loops and engaging in double loop learning. At present, practice in these areas appears less consistently strong.

In Figure C.2, we show the four dimensions in a grid, suggesting that MATs and federations could use this to evaluate their current and desired practices on a scale from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong).

Figure C.2: A framework for analysing MATs and federations
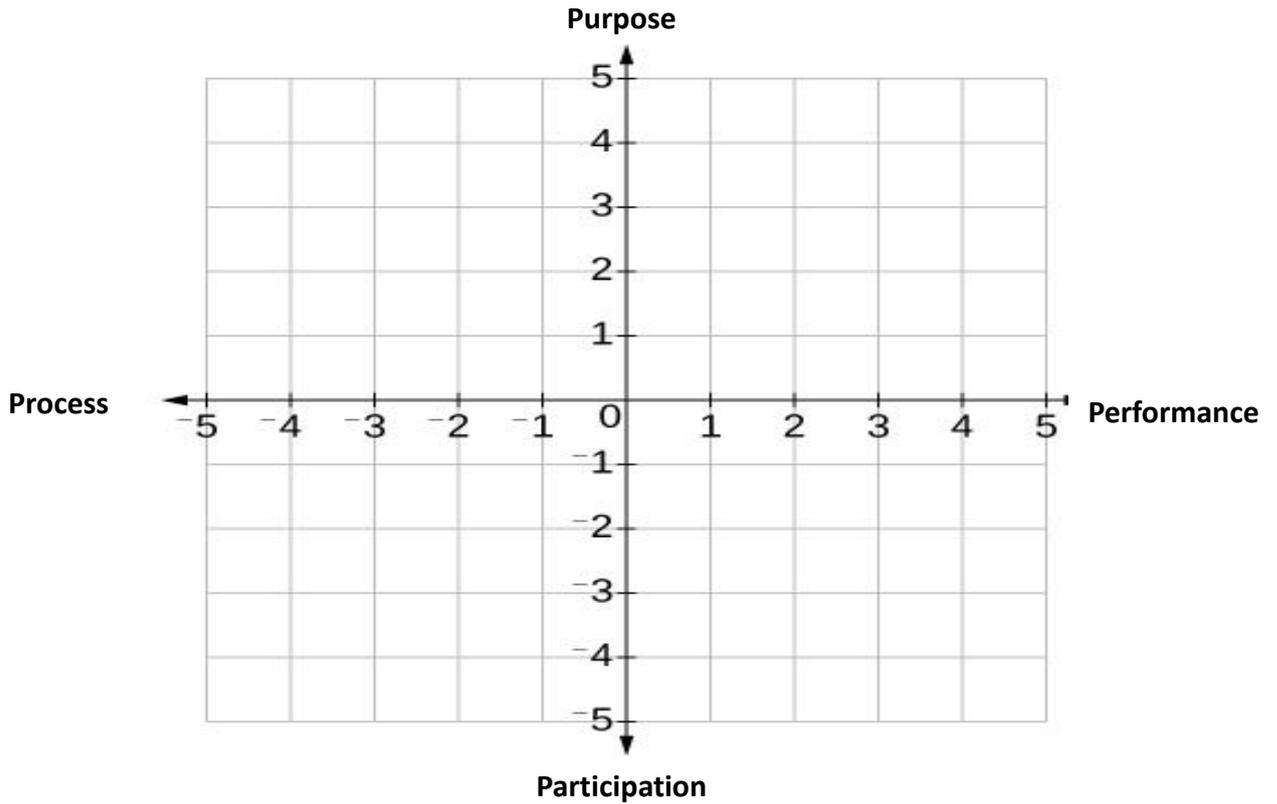
In order to illustrate the dimensions we provide four examples below (Figure C.3), each of which describes a MAT or federation that is strong in one area but less developed in the other three. Clearly, these are presented as ideal types rather than specific examples, but we do this to illustrate the potential advantages and risks of each approach.

Figure C.3: A typology – four examples of MATs and federations using the Four Ps framework
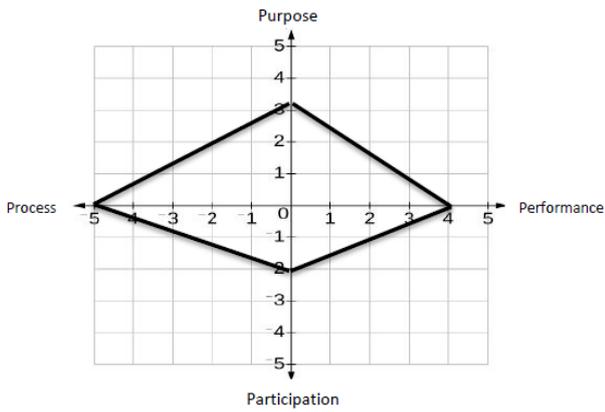
Process

- Tried and tested systems/processes codified and prescribed for all schools
- Strong central team and limited school-level autonomy – focus on outcomes
- Advantages: efficient, replicable
- Risks: can disempower staff and may not enable move from 'good to great'
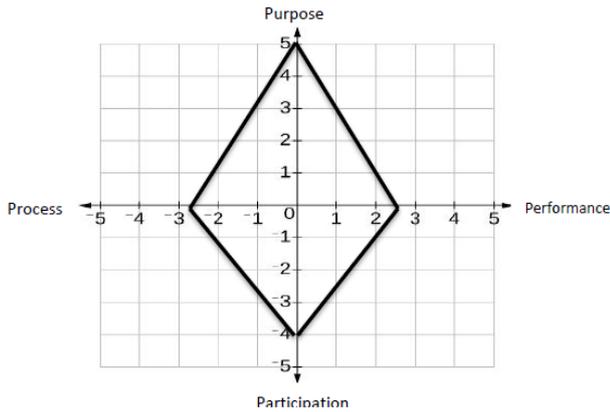
Purpose

- Shared vision and ethos unites staff and distinguishes group
- Shared values embedded into ways of working and practices
- Advantages: Commitment, coherence
- Risks: Lack of clarity/focus on outcomes, difficult to replicate
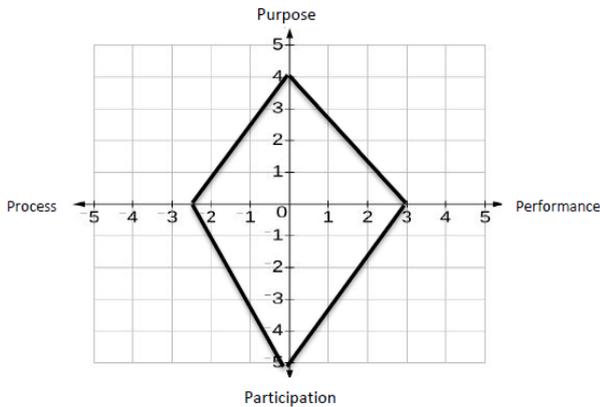
Participation

- Inclusive approach to decision-making
- Commitment to developing shared practices through dialogue/co-design
- Advantages: ownership, trust
- Risks: slow moving, difficult for new entrants to understand/adopt tacit approaches
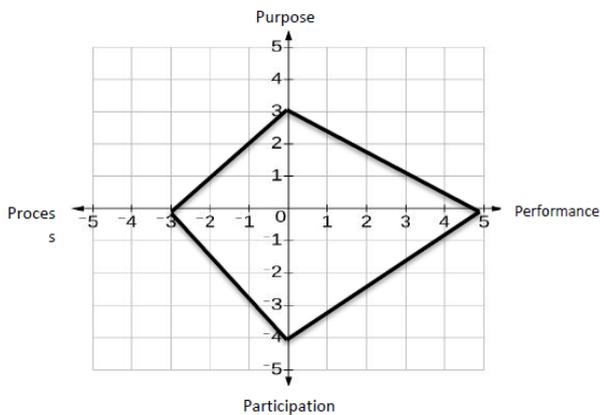
Performance

- Strong focus on clear performance criteria
- Relentless drive on improvement
- Advantages: Rapid and decisive action
- Risks: Improvement is narrow and/or not sustainable, lack of buy-in

10.3 Significance and implications of the research

This research is arguably significant for several reasons and a number of key implications emerge from it.

Firstly, it sets out original empirical findings based on a large-scale study in an area that has not been extensively researched until now. It also sets out a model – i.e. the five 'fundamentals and the five strategic areas – for how MATs and federations develop sustainable school improvement at scale. This model is by no means one size fits all, and we highlight the importance of contextual factors in shaping how it is applied. Nevertheless, it does describe the high-level areas that leaders in MATs and federations address, based on empirical data, and also highlights areas where there is a convergence in practices over time.

This research arguably complements but goes beyond the existing research that we reviewed in Chapter 2. It supports and confirms those previous findings in many respects, for example by highlighting the importance of stable and effective leadership at school level and by capturing the ways in which school-to-school collaboration and support can generate enhanced capacity for school improvement at scale. We focus on the issue of where and how MATs and federations standardise or align practice and where they seek to retain school-level autonomy, and relate this to our findings on moving knowledge and expertise around and across a group. Our findings indicate that standardisation or alignment in relation to assessment and data reporting is important, but that approaches to curriculum and pedagogy are more diverse and that MATs and federations must focus above all on ensuring that knowledge and expertise on effective practices can and do move around to become established across the group. We show how enabling routines are used by some MATs and federations to develop consistent but flexible ways of working and a shared language and culture. We set out four dimensions (purpose, performance, participation and process) which are informed by existing research and which are key differentiators between the MATs and federations we observed. Ultimately, we argue that **MATs and federations must learn to operate as both hierarchies and networks**, drawing on a mix of central and school-based capacity and with aligned practices in appropriate areas, in order to effect change.[27]

Finally, the research provides a system-wide perspective by including TSAs and LAs alongside MATs and federations. Although less comprehensive, the findings on TSAs

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[27] 'Hierarchy' in this context refers to the formal authority structures of the MAT or federation (such as the Board, the CEO and the senior leadership team) and the ways in which they exercise control (for example through targets, policies, rules and standard operating procedures, monitoring and performance management). 'Network' in this context refers to the formal and informal mechanisms within a MAT or federation which support the development of lateral and vertical relationships, partnerships and knowledge sharing based on reciprocity and trust. See Greany and Higham, 2018, for a fuller discussion of these issues in the context of wider system governance.

and LAs are significant in showing similarities and differences in the approaches they adopt. Where TSAs and LAs appear to add particular value is when they work in concert with each other and with MATs, federations and schools to create **a coherent, strategic, partnership-based approach to improvement which meets the needs of all schools across a locality**. While such models certainly need to focus on identifying and addressing underperformance, they also engage schools more widely and focus on building skills and capacity through networks that bring together different partners to address shared priorities. Forming and leading these strategic partnerships is not simple and we suggest that more could be done at national level to help key system leaders to learn from the evidence we have collected here.

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Annex A: Research methodology

Research design

As outlined in the Introduction, the research involved four strands:
- case study visits to MATs, TSAs, federations and LAs
- a national survey of core team members and headteachers in MATs and TSAs
- a focus group attended by representatives from the case study groups
- secondary analysis of existing CEO interviews and MAT school improvement models.

The research received ethical approval through the UCL IOE ethics committee. Case study sites and interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and so are not named in this report.

Case study sample and approach

The sample for each of the four groups was selected on the following basis:

MATs: We used the DfE's published MAT performance tables for 2016-17,[28] which compare the performance of all MATs in the country that have had three or more schools for at least three years. The DfE tables compare MATs on a range of measures but prioritise progress and attainment measures at KS2 and KS4, showing whether they are significantly above, below or about average performers. We selected MATs from each of these three performance bands, but with a focus on above average performers (13 above average, 5 average and 5 below average). Within this sample we selected MATs in three size bands, as follows: 6 small trusts (3–6 schools), 9 medium-sized trusts (7–14 schools) and 8 large trusts (15+ schools). Finally, we sought to achieve a balance in terms of trusts with different characteristics and working with schools in different phases, circumstances and geographical areas. For example, we included three diocesan-linked trusts; trusts that are primary, secondary and mixed phase in their focus; trusts that have higher and lower proportions of sponsored academies; and trusts based across urban and rural areas in the North, Midlands and South. The main characteristics of each of the case study trusts are given in Table A.1 below.

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[28] See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/multi-academy-trust-performance-measures-2016-to-2017

Table A.1: Key characteristics of MAT case studies

	Year started	Phase	Number of schools (DfE table – based on 2017 data)	Number of schools – at time of visit	Balance of sponsored/ converter	Religious affiliation	% schools Ofsted Good or Outstanding	% FSM	Geographic distribution	KS2 performance	KS4 performance
1	2014	Primary	3	3	67% converter	None	67%	31.8%	Low	Positive	N/a
2	2012	Primary	3	9	33% converter	None	100%	13.4%	Low	Positive	n/a
3	2014	Primary and secondary	4	4	100% converter	Yes	100%	3.6%	Low	Positive	n/a
4	2011	Primary	5	5	80% converter	None	80%	19.6%	Low	Positive	n/a
5	2011	Primary	3	5	33% converter	None	100%	34.1%	Low	Mixed	n/a
6	2011	Secondary and primary	9	11	56% converter	None	56%	13.7%	Mid	N/a	Positive
7	2013	Mainly primary	14	14	64% converter	None	79%	25.6%	Low	Positive	n/a
8	2013	Primary and secondary	10	11	40% converter	None	60%	14.6%	Low	Positive	Mixed

	Year started	Phase	Number of schools (DfE table – based on 2017 data)	Number of schools – at time of visit	Balance of sponsored/ converter	Religious affiliation	% schools Ofsted Good or Outstanding	% FSM	Geographic distribution	KS2 performance	KS4 performance
9	2013	Primary and secondary	9	9	11% converter	None	56%	25.5%	Low	Positive	n/a
10	2013	Primary and secondary	13	13	54% converter	None	77%	16.3%	High	Positive	n/a
11	Pre-2010	Primary and Secondary	More than 40	More than 40	16% converter	Yes	72%	22.8%	High	Negative	Positive
12	2014	Primary and secondary	24	24	88% converter	Yes	83%	9.9%	Mid	Mixed	Positive
13	2013	Mainly primary	25	25	64% converter	No	64%	24.2%	Mid	Mixed	n/a
14	2010	Mainly secondary	32	36	13% converter	No	69%	21.5%	High	Positive	Mixed
15	2009	Secondary and primary	15	15	13% converter	No	60%	20.9%	Low	Negative	Negative

	Year started	Phase	Number of schools (DfE table – based on 2017 data)	Number of schools – at time of visit	Balance of sponsored/ converter	Religious affiliation	% schools Ofsted Good or Outstanding	% FSM	Geographic distribution	KS2 performance	KS4 performance
16	2012	Primary and secondary	20	20	10% converter	No	35%	33.8%	High	Mixed	Negative
17	2011	Primary	14	14	21% converter	No	36%	24.0%	Mid	Mixed	n/a
18	2013	Mostly primary	12	12	67% converter	No	83%	13.5%	Low	Mixed	n/a
19	2012	Primary	7	8	14% converter	Yes	71%	30.3%	Low	Negative	n/a
20	Pre-2010	Mainly secondary	7	7	29% converter	No	71%	23.7%	High	n/a	Negative
21	Pre-2010	Secondary and primary	4	4	50% converter	No	100%	11.3%	Low	Negative	Negative
22	Pre-2010	Secondary and primary	43	44	12% converter	No	79%	21.4%	Low	Positive	Positive
23	2012	Primary	19	20	79% converter	No	74%	14.9%	Low	Positive	n/a

Given the limited availability of national data it was not possible to identify TSAs, Federations and Local Authorities by performance level. Therefore we selected our sample as follows:

Teaching Schools:

Members of the national Teaching Schools Council[29] were asked to recommend Teaching Schools in each region that met the following criteria:

- strong performers in terms of impact and outcomes over time, in particular around school-to-school support/school improvement
- reflect a diverse mix of contexts – rural/urban/geography/phase, etc.
- reflect a diverse mix of approaches/models for how they approach school improvement – for example, in terms of how the alliance is structured, how the core team is structured/skillsets, how they facilitate school-to-school support/SLEs, having a distinctive pedagogical focus or approach (e.g. combined with a Maths Hub).

From the list of recommended TSAs, four were then selected, in agreement with the DfE project Advisory Group, which were deemed to meet these criteria and reflect a good geographic spread.

Federations:

A list of all federations in England was downloaded from Get Information About Schools/Edubase. This list was analysed in order to identify larger federations that had operated since at least 2012, on the basis that these would have an established school improvement approach. Two primary-focussed federations were selected (one rural, one urban, both with Good/strong performance in terms of school Ofsted ratings) in agreement with the DfE project Advisory Group.

Local Authorities:

Data on school structures and performance from all LAs in England were analysed. LAs involved in the recent research by Isos Partnership into LA approaches to school improvement were excluded from the sample. Part of the aim of the selection for this project was to identify practice that would augment our existing understanding in this area. The research team recommended two LAs for study based on an analysis of this national data and also their knowledge of current developments in a large number of LAs. The final selection was agreed with the DfE project Advisory Group.

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[29] For details see https://www.tscouncil.org.uk/

Case study data collection:

In designing the research approach and data collection tools we drew on an initial literature review of school improvement at scale as well as a set of frameworks that had been designed by members of the research team in partnership with a range of MAT leaders. We used these frameworks to structure our research tools and approach, for example to guide the areas that we focussed on in the interviews and to inform our analysis of the case studies.

Each case study visit lasted between one and two days and involved interviews with a range of central and school-based leaders; either individually or, for middle leaders in schools, in small groups. In total we interviewed 231 leaders in MATs, 32 leaders in TSAs, 18 leaders in federations and 29 leaders in LAs. The interviews were semi-structured but included use of a set of standard templates that interviewees were asked to complete either in advance or during the interview (see A1-A4 below – A.1 and A.2 were used with all interviewees. A.3 and A.4 were used with CEOs and principals only). The tools were developed based on the initial literature review and the existing frameworks referenced above. The research team that undertook the case studies were involved in developing the tools and were trained in their use. Some of the tools and the definitions that they used were mirrored in the survey, which enabled comparisons between case study and wider findings.

To what extent does your group's school improvement strategy focus on the following areas (1 = low priority, 10 = high priority)

Identifying and addressing under-performance in specific schools

Developing shared approaches to pedagogy

Fostering collaboration between schools

Developing shared approaches to curriculum and assessment

Improving the quality of leadership in all schools

Recruiting, developing and retaining talent

Analysing data to identify and target interventions for specific groups of children

Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practices

Engaging parents and community

Professional development and feedback/coaching for teachers

Robust QA & accountability for schools – including (peer) reviews

Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues

Figure A.1: First spidergram tool used in case study interviews

To what extent is your group's work in these areas having an impact? (1 = no impact, 10 = high positive impact)

Identifying and addressing under-performance in specific schools

Developing shared approaches to pedagogy

Fostering collaboration between schools

Developing shared approaches to curriculum and assessment

Improving the quality of leadership in all schools

Recruiting, developing and retaining talent

Analysing data to identify and target interventions for specific groups of children

Identifying, evaluating and spreading effective practices

Engaging parents and community

Professional development and feedback/coaching for teachers

Robust QA & accountability for schools – including (peer) reviews

Addressing behaviour and inclusion issues

Figure A.2: Second spidergram tool used in case study interviews

| Please give examples of where support comes from for schools in your group. Overall, approximately what proportion/% of activity falls in each box? Which forms of support have the greatest impact in your view?		
School to school support from within the group	Central office team (including regional directors and exec heads)	Bought in or provided by an external partner (including other schools)
e.g. SLEs (or other school-based expert practitioners) facilitate subject networks Peer reviews undertaken by leadership teams from different schools in the group	e.g. Associate heads and subject experts employed by central office are deployed to schools for time limited periods. TSA staff run middle leadership programmes across group.	e.g. Pay for membership of PiXL and The Key Buy in ex HMI as consultant to undertake school reviews.

Figure A.3: Grid completed by case study interviewees on where support comes from

Please give examples of areas where your group standardises, aligns or allows school-level autonomy in improvement practices? Approximately what proportion/% of your practice falls in each box?		
STANDARDISED (i.e. a single required approach that all schools must adopt)	ALIGNED (i.e. an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis)	AUTONOMY for some/all schools (i.e each individual school decides on its own approach)
e.g. We insist on single exam board and approach to collecting/presenting assessment data	e.g. We have co-designed our model for lesson planning and a set of protocols for how we observe and feed back on lessons	e.g. Each school decides its own curriculum and timetable as well as when/how to provide interventions for particular groups of children

Figure A.4: Grid completed by case study interviewees on practices that are standardised, aligned or autonomous

Each case study was written up using a standard template and was then coded using a combination of existing themes derived from the project conceptual framework and themes that emerged from the data. A detailed cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify common themes and findings. In order to ensure a consistent interpretation of the findings, each case study was analysed separately by at least two members of the research team using a common set of analysis grids. The cross-case analysis was undertaken separately by three members of the team (Greany, Rea and Day), with emergent codes and themes agreed through an iterative process. The emerging findings were also sense-checked with case study participants through the focus group. Two matrices were used to analyse the level of standardisation and alignment in MATs and federations in relation to assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. These are shown in Figures A.5 and A.6 respectively.

		Curriculum - Decisions about what is taught		
		Schools are autonomous (and largely distinct)	Aligned across group (most/all schools work within an agreed framework)	Standardised (prescribed) across group
Assessment and ARE – Decisions about how student learning is defined and assessed	Schools are autonomous (and largely distinct)			
	Aligned across group (most/all schools work within agreed an framework)			
	Standardised (prescribed) across group			

Figure A.5: Analysis grid for assessing the relationship between assessment and curriculum practices in MATs and federations

		Curriculum - Decisions about what is taught		
		Schools are autonomous (and largely distinct)	Aligned across group (most/all schools work within an agreed framework)	Standardised (prescribed) across group
Pedagogy – Decisions about how students are taught	Schools are autonomous (and largely distinct)			
	Aligned across group (most/all schools work within agreed an framework)			
	Standardised (prescribed) across group			

Figure A.2: Analysis grid for assessing the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy practices in MATs and federations

In addition to the case study visits we held a focus group with 20 of the case study providers to test and validate the emerging findings.

We also undertook secondary analysis of 35 interviews with MAT CEOs undertaken as part of an existing UCL IOE research project, as well as 31 school improvement models developed by MAT leadership teams as part of the IOE's Trust-ED leadership programme.

Survey sample and approach

The online survey was completed by 505 respondents from MATs and TSAs in April and May 2018. Lead contacts in 880 MATs were emailed directly by the Department for Education. This included all MATs in England with at least two schools and that had been in existence since before April 2016, but with the list of actual/proposed case study MATs removed. A link to the survey and a request to complete it was included in a scheduled DfE newsletter sent to all TSA lead contacts in England. One or more reminder was sent to both these groups before the survey closed at the end of May.

The lead contacts were asked to complete the survey themselves and also to forward the survey link on to senior members of their core team with responsibility for school improvement, as well as to all the headteachers in their MAT or TSA. Slightly different versions of the survey had been developed for the four groups of respondents (i.e. MAT core team, MAT headteacher, TSA core team and TSA headteacher).

The details of the respondents are set out in Tables A.2–A.5 below. Overall they show that there were:

- 209 responses from members of MAT core teams, of whom the majority (159) were Chief Executives (CEOs)
- 150 responses from headteachers in MATs, of whom 142 were single-school headteachers
- 88 responses from members of TSA core teams, largely split between TSA Directors/Leads (49), CEOs or Executive Heads (17) and headteachers (14)
- 58 responses from headteachers in TSAs.

As indicated above, it was possible for more than one member of a MAT or TSA core team to complete the survey and for multiple headteachers within a single MAT or TSA to do so. Respondents were given the option of providing the name of their MAT or TSA, but not all did so, so it is not possible to clarify exactly how many individual MATs and TSAs completed the survey. However, the fact that 159 (out of a possible 880) MAT CEOs completed the survey indicates a response rate of at least 18% for this group.

The survey findings were analysed in a number of ways. School-level responses were linked to national data from Edubase/Get Information About Schools, allowing for more detailed analysis based on the background characteristics of schools. Responses were analysed by size and composition of MAT, including factors such as the proportion of sponsored and converter academies and the Ofsted grades of schools.

Where respondents included the name of their MAT or TSA we were able to link their responses to nationally available data, such as the proportion of children in their group in receipt of free school meals. We also asked all respondents about the characteristics and make-up of their school or group, for example its most recent Ofsted grade, which allowed for further analysis by different characteristics. We use percentages throughout in order to aid comparison between MAT and TSA responses.

Table A.2: Number of responses by school group and role

Role	Number of responses by school group
MAT Core Team	209
Headteacher in MAT	150
TSA Core Team	88
Headteacher in TSA	58
Total	**505**

Table A.3: Job title of respondents from MATs

Job Title	MAT Core Team	Headteacher in MAT
CEO or Executive Head	159	1
Headteacher	0	142
Other MAT role (e.g. phase or T&L lead)	27	0
TSA Director/lead	1	0
Other	22	7
Total	**209**	**150**

Table A.4: Job title of respondents from TSAs

Job Title	TSA Core Team	Headteacher in TSA
CEO or Executive Head	17	0
Headteacher	14	54
TSA Director/lead	50	0
Other	7	4
Total	**88**	**58**

Table A.5: Phase of schools in the school group

Phase of schools in the school group	MAT Core Team	Headteacher in MAT	TSA Core Team	Headteacher in TSA
Mostly primary schools	62	49	29	23
Mixed primary, secondary, other	88	70	47	21
Mostly secondary schools	21	6	8	14
Other	38	25	4	0
Total	**209**	**150**	**88**	**58**

Respondents mostly came from school groups comprised mostly of primary schools, or of a mixture of primary, secondary and 'other' schools. These other schools were, for example, special, nursery or all-through schools.

Table A.6 Ofsted grade of schools (applicable to HT respondents only)

What grade did your school receive in its last Ofsted inspection?	Headteacher in MAT	Headteacher in TSA
Outstanding (1)	27	34
Good (2)	94	22
Requires Improvement/Satisfactory (3)	22	1
Inadequate (4)	2	0
Not yet inspected	4	1
Total	**149**	**58**

Most of the respondent headteachers were from schools that were either good or outstanding. Nearly all of the schools with lower Ofsted grades at their last inspection were in MATs.

In the reporting stage, an output was produced for each strand of the project, synthesising the key findings. These separate outputs were then brought together into an overarching set of findings which were discussed with members of the DfE Steering Group at two workshops.

Annex B: Standardisation, alignment and autonomy by MAT size

MAT Core team and headteacher combined views on how far policies and practices in their trust are mostly standardised, mostly aligned, mostly autonomous or adopt a mixed approach, split by size of MAT.

Table B.1 MAT Core team and headteacher combined views on standardisation, alignment and autonomy by size of MAT

For each of the following areas, please indicate whether policies and practices across your MAT are: i) mostly standardised, that is with a single required approach that all schools must adopt; ii) mostly aligned, that is with an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis; iii) mostly autonomous (i.e. each individual school decides on its own approach?	MAT 1–3 schools					MAT 4–6 schools					MAT 7 or more schools				
	Mostly standardise	Mostly aligned	Mostly autonomous	Mixed approach/depends on context	Total	Mostly standardise	Mostly aligned	Mostly autonomous	Mixed approach/depends on context	Total	Mostly standardise	Mostly aligned	Mostly autonomous	Mixed approach/depends on context	Total
Targeted interventions for pupils with common challenges	17%	30%	39%	15%	**100%**	4%	26%	59%	11%	**100%**	6%	20%	61%	13%	100%
Format/process for lesson planning	17%	17%	44%	22%	**100%**	5%	18%	68%	8%	**100%**	3%	5%	83%	9%	100%
Approaches to teaching/pedagogy	17%	39%	24%	20%	**100%**	12%	36%	8%	45%	**100%**	2%	28%	51%	19%	100%
Curriculum design/timetabling (e.g. curriculum-based budgeting)	19%	26%	41%	15%	**100%**	7%	21%	63%	9%	**100%**	6%	10%	70%	14%	100%
Curriculum content	20%	28%	37%	15%	**100%**	13%	18%	58%	12%	**101%**	7%	13%	63%	17%	100%
Behaviour management	22%	26%	41%	11%	**100%**	11%	16%	66%	8%	**100%**	9%	16%	67%	7%	100%
Reporting to parents	28%	28%	33%	11%	**100%**	13%	20%	63%	4%	**100%**	5%	20%	67%	8%	100%
Marking and feedback to pupils	28%	28%	30%	15%	**100%**	39%	34%	20%	7%	**100%**	19%	43%	19%	19%	100%
Format/process for pupil progress reviews	31%	24%	11%	33%	**100%**	16%	25%	53%	7%	**100%**	13%	29%	52%	6%	100%
Managing teacher workloads	32%	28%	28%	11%	**100%**	13%	28%	49%	11%	**100%**	6%	23%	65%	5%	100%
Monitoring the quality of day-to-day teaching (e.g. lesson observations)	43%	22%	24%	11%	**100%**	18%	38%	36%	8%	**100%**	8%	27%	48%	17%	100%
Moderating standards of pupil work	46%	22%	15%	17%	**100%**	39%	34%	20%	7%	**100%**	19%	43%	19%	19%	100%
Assessment e.g. exam boards	48%	20%	19%	13%	**100%**	47%	25%	17%	11%	**100%**	39%	30%	23%	7%	100%
Data capture and reporting	67%	15%	13%	6%	**100%**	53%	25%	12%	11%	**100%**	55%	33%	5%	7%	100%

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