

Education Select Committee Multi-Academy Trusts Inquiry: NFER Response

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Introduction to NFER

1. NFER is a charity and the leading independent provider of education research and assessments in the UK. We provide evidence that improves education, learning and the lives of learners in the form of insights that are relevant and accessible and inform policy and practice. Successive UK governments have used our evidence to inform policy thinking.
2. Through expert research and extensive knowledge of education and assessment, we offer a unique perspective on today's and tomorrow's educational challenges. We draw on trusted relationships, working with a range of influential organisations from government departments to employers; from school leaders and teachers to parents. The breadth of our work enables us to have a systemic view of the education system, linking together evidence from different areas to give a wide perspective.

Overview of our response

3. **We welcome the Select Committee's decision to hold an inquiry into the performance, accountability and governance of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs).** Since the introduction of academies, NFER has endeavoured to provide research evidence – for policy makers and practitioners – on what is known about this approach to school improvement.
4. **This submission is built on the NFER evidence base**, primarily drawing upon the following sources:
 - *A Guide to Regional Schools Commissioners* (Durbin *et al.*, 2015)
 - *Academies: It's Time to Learn the Lessons* (Worth, 2015)
 - *Academies and Maintained Schools: What Do We Know?* (Election Factsheet) (Gee *et al.*, 2015)
 - *A Guide to the Evidence on Academies* (Sims *et al.*, 2015)
 - *School Choice: the Parent View* (Wespieser *et al.*, 2015)
 - *What Works in Enabling School Improvement? The Role of the Middle Tier* (Aston *et al.*, 2013).

Where these key sources provide evidence applicable to the six points set out in the call for submissions, they have been summarised as appropriate.

5. **Our key recommendations are:**
 - a. More evidence needs to be collected about the role of MATs within the context of other structures in the education system, and further research needs to be conducted in order to understand the characteristics, structures and behaviours of high performing MATs.
 - b. Collaboration and school-to-school support play an important part in the role of MATs, but it needs to be remembered that these actions are not confined to, or limited within, MATs.
 - c. The role of MATs and their place in the accountability process need to be clear to all stakeholders, especially parents.

- d. Track record in turning around underperforming schools – as well as current performance – should be considered when assessing MATs, but new sponsors may require a different metric.

The current MATs landscape, including in terms of the number, size, and geographical coverage of MATs

- 6. **As of March 2016, 13 per cent of primary schools and 30 per cent of secondary schools were in a MAT (Gee *et al.*, 2016)**

Type of school	Percentage of primary schools	Percentage of secondary schools ¹
Local authority school	82%	35%
Academy in a MAT	13%	30%
Academy not in a MAT	4%	29%
Free schools, UTCs, studio schools	<1%	5%

The role of MATs in the context of other intermediate structures operating between Whitehall and individual schools, including Regional Schools Commissioners

- 7. **In an area renowned for a lack of evidence (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2015), very little is known about the effectiveness of this approach.** In 2015, NFER reviewed 13 key studies in order to contribute to the evidence on the performance of academy schools (Sims *et al.*, 2015). Of these important studies, only two contained evidence on the role of MATs. These studies asserted that:
 - a. All local authorities were likely to intervene in schools that Ofsted rated ‘inadequate’, or where results were below the floor standard. In contrast, intervention was likely in 95 per cent of MATs (National Audit Office, 2014).
 - b. MATs are not working in isolation from the rest of the local school system, and are actively working together to lead school improvement (Cirin, 2014).
- 8. **In particular, there is a lack of research that compares the role of MATs in different phases of education.** Primary schools are much smaller organisations and likely to need a different level of support. A reliance on existing local authority support structures may be one of the reasons fewer primary schools have chosen to convert to academy status than secondaries. It may also explain why the proportion of primary academies that are not part of a MAT is smaller than the proportion of secondary academies that are not part of a MAT. Understanding the role and support that different types of schools will be looking for from their ‘middle tier’ in future will be important, both to help RSCs establish the most effective arrangements, and to monitor their performance.
- 9. **International evidence shows that, in high-performing countries, the middle tier nurtures and facilitates school-to-school support.** As middle tier structures such as MATs and Regional Schools Commissioners are a relatively new addition to the English school landscape (they didn’t exist at the time of the 2010 White Paper for example), there has been little time to truly understand their impact. It was with this in mind that NFER funded a rapid review of the evidence on how high-performing

¹ Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100.

countries enable school-driven systems leadership. The review found that each of the successful systems had some form of middle tier that was distinct from national government and that local strategic partnerships, which embody a sense of place, were important to schools. Schools also looked to national middle tier bodies for inspiration and support. Models of successful school-led school-to-school support were characterised by a number of key features, in particular:

- a clear and shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities confronting schools, based on thorough monitoring and a rich evidence base
- strong leadership that respects practitioners' professionalism and motivates their enthusiasm, that is provided by school leaders and the middle tier
- schools take responsibility for the education system as a whole and do not confine their attention to their own specific institution
- all staff contribute to the process of school improvement through distributed leadership (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

The balance of decision-making at the individual school level and at the chain level, and the appropriateness of formal governance structures employed

10. **To ensure trusts are able to effectively govern the schools for which they are responsible, growth in MATs will require more capacity** – existing chains growing and new chains developing (Worth, 2015).
11. **Collaboration is not necessarily confined to formal governance structures.** Schools accountable to the same MAT have the opportunity to build on existing partnerships, work collaboratively and support schools to improve attainment (NCTL, 2014). Our research from a nationally representative sample of teachers shows that 57 per cent of academy teachers believe that working with other schools and organisations is the most innovative approach that academy autonomy has led to (Worth, 2015). However, DfE research has also found that many academy schools support other schools and that academies often receive support from academies within a trust of which they are not a member (Cirin, 2014).
12. **Parents want schools to be locally accountable.** With a plethora of intermediate structures operating between Whitehall and individual schools, it is difficult for parents to understand the role of MATs. At a school level, our research shows that parents don't understand what an academy is and what differentiates it from a local authority-maintained school (Wespieser *et al.*, 2015). Parents are even less likely to know about MATs (although the research did not explicitly ask about MATs). Despite being confused by current structures, parents are clear that they want schools to be locally accountable – 79 per cent of parents in our sample agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that schools should be locally accountable.² Our survey also found that only around a third of parents feel that they have a say in how their child's school is run. Arguably, in many of the current MAT structures – and with the removal of the requirement for the role of parent governor as proposed in the recent White Paper – this proportion is unlikely to increase.

² It should be noted that the survey did not provide any further definition of local accountability and this could have been interpreted by respondents in a number of ways.

How the performance of MATs should be assessed

13. **More research is needed to understand the characteristics, structures and behaviours of high performing MATs** in order to accurately identify the appropriate metrics to assess MAT performance.
14. **NFER has previously argued that there needs to be an aggregate measure of the performance of all the schools in each MAT** (Durbin, 2015). We have suggested that this take into account the length of time each school has been part of the grouping. For example, it would be unfair to penalise a MAT for the poor performance of a school that it has only taken on that year, especially where the very purpose of this move could be for a successful MAT to turn the school around. There are already a few examples of exactly where this has been done, such as by the Sutton Trust (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015) and in a statistical working paper released by the Department for Education (DfE, 2015).
15. **We suggest that, as well as its current performance, the MAT's track record in turning around underperforming schools should also be considered**, i.e. do they have any experience in taking on struggling schools, and if so what happened to those schools in the years that followed? This is important to include as it is possible that all schools in a MAT are outstanding simply because they were already outstanding when they joined. It is particularly relevant where the current performance of a MAT is used to inform its suitability to taking on new, underperforming schools.

How the expansion of MATs should be monitored and managed

16. **Performance indicators should contribute to the monitoring and management of expansion and contraction of MATs.** NFER estimates that there are typically around seven schools requiring attention for every existing sponsor with the potential to respond (Durbin, 2015). Assessing organisational capacity will rightly draw heavily on the Regional Schools Commissioners' expert judgment. However, this should be supported by some consistently applied 'health metrics', such as the proportion of the schools currently in a chain with performance below key thresholds, or the typical length of time schools in the MAT below these thresholds remain so. A sponsor's capacity may also depend on the nature of the school requiring intervention – for example, different skills may be required for primary versus secondary schools – and on its geographic location.
17. **In our report, *A Guide to Regional Schools Commissioners*, we created a formula to measure potential for further expansion.**³ Based on DfE guidance on the most successful sponsors, we scored existing sponsors of two or more schools as follows:
 - Performance: percentage of existing academies below floor or coasting (<10% +2pts; 10-34% 0pts; 34%+ -2pts)
 - Size: total number of academies across all regions (2-4 1pt; 5-10 0pts; 11-30 1pt; 31+ 0pts)
 - Geography: where are sponsors' academies located (within a single LA 1pt; within a single region or nearby LAs 1pt; nationally 0pts).

We added the scores for each sponsor and classified them as:

4pts - High potential for taking on new academies

³ This cannot provide a measure of potential new sponsors.

3pts - Good candidates, but may require some support
1-2pts - Could take on new academies, but with concerns
0 or less - Not ready.

18. **New sponsors should be especially closely monitored but this may need to utilise a different metric.** In order to incentivise the new sponsors required to deliver full academisation, whilst at the same time managing the risk that a new sponsor potentially does not have a track record in the English system, it may be more appropriate to assess their performance in a different way. An interesting parallel to explore could be the 'improvement period' proposed in the White Paper during which schools won't be inspected by Ofsted in order to allow the time and stability to put in train sustainable improvement. This is designed to re-balance the incentives faced by successful leaders considering taking on underperforming schools by limiting the short-term risk to their career and reputation.
19. **A mechanism will be needed to enable academies to move between MATs when performance isn't acceptable. This will need to minimise the impact on the academy, its staff and students.** It is currently difficult for an academy to change which MAT it is part of (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Committee, 2014). In order for a monitoring and assessment system to have leverage and impact, ultimately a smoothly managed transition to a different MAT must be an available option.

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