

# ForumEducation

#MATLeaders

Policy Roundtable Summer 2017

**Recruiting, training and retaining MAT trustees**

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all those MAT leaders, trustees, and others who shared their experiences, reflections and ideas in the development of this paper.

Forum Education takes full responsibility for the content of this paper and any views expressed remain solely those of the company. We have worked hard to bring together a wide range of perspectives and views and hope that this paper helps to encourage further constructive discussion, debate and policy making in relation to the crucial issue of MAT governance.

## **About Forum Education**

Forum Education is an education consultancy supporting leaders to anticipate and manage change, prepare for the future, and develop their organisations in a way that serves the best interests of all children and young people. Forum Education has established four regional MAT CEO networks in order to help support the sector to develop in an informed, sustainable and successful way. Forum Education also runs an annual national new headteachers' conference and contributes to educational leadership training and conferences and organisational development projects across the country. We also provide training, development and advisory services for academy trust boards.

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## 1. Executive summary

### *Background*

1. Forum Education currently runs four regional networks for Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of multi-academy trusts (MATs); in the East Midlands, the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the West Midlands; involving over 40 MATs across the country.
2. Our work with these MAT networks and with other MATs in all regions has consistently highlighted the challenges faced by many MATs in recruiting and retaining high calibre individuals (people with the necessary skills, experience, and competencies) to their Boards of Trustees.
3. This led Forum Education to hold a roundtable discussion during early July 2017 with representatives from across our MAT CEO networks and beyond, including a number of trustees, in order to discuss some of the issues and to propose a number of recommendations for the system. These will also be shared with the Secretary of State, Justine Greening, and the National Schools Commissioner, Sir David Carter.

### *Key conclusions*

4. MATs and national stakeholders must do far more to raise awareness of the role of trustees and the difference they can make to children and young people's education and to society generally. However, MATs and national stakeholders must also be very clear and upfront in their communications and advertising about what it means to become a trustee in terms of responsibility, accountability, skills and time commitment involved. It is important that prospective and serving trustees appreciate this and can make an informed decision about whether they are 'right for' the role.
5. In recruiting trustees, there must be appropriate balance given to assessing their awareness and understanding of the education and academy context, and the specific skills and experience they bring to the trust board. Colleagues generally felt that whilst the necessary level of educational knowledge could be acquired fairly swiftly through high quality induction and training, it is crucial that a prospective trustee has the required skills, ethics and sense of moral purpose to do their best for the trust and therefore for the children and young people in its care.
6. Attracting and recruiting new trustees should be a core part of the role of existing trustees and the Chair, who should foster and draw upon their local connections, including with national and local businesses, the third and public sector, community leaders and other local groups and organisations, in order to do this.

7. There was wide ranging recognition of the level of responsibility and expectations placed upon Chairs. Colleagues had mixed feelings regarding whether Chairs of trustees and/or trustees generally should be remunerated for their roles. Some expressed concern that this may have the potential to distort the 'market' of individuals interested in joining trust boards, whilst others questioned if it was reasonable to expect individuals to undertake such responsible, time consuming and accountable roles without any offer of remuneration. Overall, participants felt that the remuneration of trustees was an area that could be explored and debated further by the sector, with reference to how this issue is managed in other sectors (such as the NHS).
8. There needs to be more clarity at a national level regarding the role of trust Members and more openness about who these individuals are, their motivations, and the experience that they bring to this, ultimately, rather powerful position. Colleagues suggested the DfE should undertake a national audit of trust Members and publish key and appropriate information on these individuals on an online database.
9. Colleagues feel that further work should be undertaken to look at the position of members within the academy trust system and to establish a charter setting out the duty they have for ensuring the overall success of academy trusts and the children they serve and to avoid conflicts of interest.
10. Colleagues welcomed the support made available for MAT trustees by Academy Ambassadors, although some raised concerns about accessibility of support in some areas.
11. What is clear is the value and importance of the learning that comes from engaging directly with other MATs. Colleagues felt there was great potential for local MATs to collectively commission or develop joint training for their trustees, in order to achieve economies of scale and share learning.
12. The Chair of trustees has a vital role in identifying the training and development needs of trustees. This needs to be made even more explicit as trustees' access to CPD is vital if MATs are to retain the best individuals on their trust boards.
13. The provision of training opportunities for trustees should include key areas such as an overview of procurement law, reducing and addressing/managing conflicts of interest, and also executive pay (with associated guidance provided by government on benchmarking). This would help to develop better understanding in the system in relation to those areas where trust governance has failed on a number of occasions. We would suggest that attending such training would be strongly recommended (and possibly be made mandatory) by the DfE and should be accessed by trustees every two years, to ensure they keep up to date with the latest guidance and legislative requirements. It might also be that

Ofsted review in their co-ordinated inspections of MATs (or MAT inspections, if a framework is developed at some point) whether trustees have attended such training and evidence of how it is supporting best practice across the trust.

14. There needs to be a shift in language and tone in respect of MATs, at a national level, to counter the negative and all too often sensationalist press that inevitably follows high profile failures of leadership and governance. This shift in language needs to include more upfront and constructive discussion around these failings, together with more open discussions around how governance could be further improved – drawing on evidence and examples of best practice. The system also needs to develop greater understanding (through independent research) about how high performing trusts go about achieving both better outcomes for children and young people and strong corporate leadership.
15. At a national and regional level, it was felt that some regional schools commissioners (RSCs) must do more to promote the value and best practice examples of MATs of all sizes, rather than too often giving the impression that it is the largest MATs that have all the answers (bigger is not always better).
16. At a local level, it is the responsibility of MATs to promote their vision, the many benefits of becoming a trustee, and the roles they have available on their trust boards. It should be a core responsibility of trustees to promote their trusts and to encourage other skilled and committed individuals to apply to join their boards.
17. MAT trustees have a key role in developing the narrative and vision for children and young people in their areas and in their schools, and it is important that trustees are able and confident to work with their MAT's communities (including other local schools) to develop visions and success criteria that go above and beyond narrow government targets. MAT boards should make the most of their freedoms to develop visions based on a range of factors including children's health, wellbeing, literacy and preparedness for their lives ahead.
18. These discussions with MAT CEOs and trustees attending Forum's roundtable event, and subsequent input from a further number of MATs, have informed the following core recommendations:

#### *DfE/NSC/RSCs*

- a. The DfE (and MATs themselves) should do much more to promote the role of trustee and the positive difference trustees can make to children and young people and to society generally. There is little general understanding in society of what MATs are, how they

- operate, and the role that trustees can play in making a positive difference to children and young people's lives.
- b. The DfE must clarify and clearly communicate the responsibilities of the role of Chair of trustees for MATs, so that MATs themselves can make this clear when recruiting to the role and when succession planning. The DfE should emphasise the important role that Chairs should play in recruiting and retaining high calibre trustees to the board and in ensuring trustees have access to high quality training and development.
  - c. The DfE should consider undertaking a national audit of trust Members to determine who they are, what they do, what their expertise is - and ensure this is made publicly available. The DfE should look to create a charter for Members of academy trusts (which all Members must sign) and all Members should publish a personal statement outlining their motivations for being a member on their trust's website. A pro-forma questionnaire could be developed by the DfE for these purposes, so that this information is presented consistently and to a sufficient level of detail across all MATs' websites.
  - d. In light of the need to encourage employers to promote the role of trustee among their staff, the DfE should consider introducing an incentive scheme that requires organisations of an appropriately large size to demonstrate that they have supported a proportion of staff (as far as possible) to become MAT trustees. This could also help in terms of widening participation and improving the diversity of MAT trust boards
  - e. The DfE must ensure that training for MAT trustees is accessible for MATs in all regions.
  - f. The DfE should strongly recommend (and potentially make mandatory) the provision of training opportunities for trustees on key areas such as procurement law, reducing and addressing conflicts of interest, and also executive pay (with some associated guidance on benchmarking). Our view is that this training should be accessed by trustees every two years, to ensure they keep up to date with the latest guidance and legislative requirements. It might also be that Ofsted review in their batched inspections (or MAT inspections, if a framework is developed at some point) whether trustees have attended such training and evidence of how it is supporting best practice across the trust.
  - g. The DfE and NSC should consider whether evidence of appropriate and impactful collaborative activity with other MATs should be a prerequisite for MAT growth; and Ofsted should look at collaboration

as part of their focused reviews of MAT schools. Whilst there is great value in engaging directly with other MATs at a local and regional level (including through joint commissioning of some services or engaging in peer review, for example), attitudes to collaboration and willingness to share identified strengths and weaknesses between MATs remains mixed.

- h. At a national and regional level, the regional schools commissioners (RSCs) must promote the value and best practice examples of MATs of all sizes, rather than giving the (current) impression that it is the largest MATs that have all the answers. This will help to promote and raise awareness of the work of a wide range and diversity of MATs.
- i. The DfE should make it clear that it is a core responsibility of MAT trustees and Chairs of trust boards to promote the vision and work of their MATs and the benefits of joining a trust board in order to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- j. Further work should be undertaken to seek views of a wide range of stakeholders on whether Chairs of trustees/trustees should be remunerated, with reference to how this is managed in other sectors and the impact it may or may not have had in those sectors.

#### *MATs/Chairs/trustees*

- k. MATs and other national stakeholders should actively engage in raising awareness of what it means to become a trustee – not least in terms of responsibility, accountability, skills and time commitment. However, these conversations and communications must also speak to the sense of purpose and chance to ‘make a difference’ inherent with serving as a trustee.
- l. Attracting, recruiting and developing trustees should be a core part of the role of the Chair, and this should be made more clear at central government and regional level (by the DfE and RSCs) and at a local level by MATs themselves through the Chair’s job description and as part of that recruitment process. Providing training for Chairs on recruitment and retention is essential. Likewise, Chairs must ensure that trustees receive appropriate training and development, including high quality induction.
- m. Serving trustees can play an important role in working with other local MATs and their trustees to develop a strong and engaging vision for educational improvement and children and young people’s success in their local areas – going above and beyond government targets and performance measures. In doing so, they can engage

- people of all backgrounds in the work of their trusts and in the opportunities that governance provides to make a difference.
- n. Indeed, MATs should play a much more active role in promoting themselves and the difference they make, and the Chair of trustee's role should have responsibility for driving this activity as a core element of their role. At a local level, MATs should do much more to promote and market themselves as organisations and groups of organisations, including the roles they have available on their trust boards and the many benefits of becoming a trustee. Developing strong and ongoing relationships with local businesses, third and public sector organisations, community groups and charities is key.
  - o. MATs must be prepared to spend appropriate resources (time, funding, etc.) on the recruitment of trustees given that it is such a crucial role. This must include a well-crafted information pack (which clearly sets out the expectations of the trust board); a robust application, shortlisting and interviewing process; a high-quality and engaging induction package; and ongoing investment in training and professional development (which is equally as important as the commitment to CPD for teachers and leaders).
  - p. Groups of local MATs should consider collectively commissioning or jointly developing training for their trustees, in order to achieve economies of scale and share learning. This was particularly important for the smaller MATs (which remain the vast majority in the system).
  - q. MAT boards should regularly engage in both external review and 'skills audits' of their existing trust board membership, in order to determine where there are gaps in the skills and expertise of their trust boards and also to support succession planning so that there are no gaps in skills sets when trustees leave the board following cessation of their tenure.



## 2. Background

19. Forum Education currently runs four regional networks for the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of multi-academy trusts (MATs); in the East Midlands, the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the West Midlands; involving over 40 MATs across the country.
20. Our work with these MAT networks and with other MATs in most other regions has consistently highlighted the challenges faced by MATs in recruiting and retaining the most appropriate individuals to their Boards of Trustees. We believe that attracting and retaining high calibre trustees with strong moral purpose is essential if a more autonomous, profession-led education system is to succeed in the long term.
21. We know that there are huge risks associated with poor or sub-standard governance in any school, but for academy trusts it is such a fundamental concern as so much of the accountability and oversight lies with trust boards themselves due to the greater freedom and autonomy that academy schools benefit from. This is a key reason why failures of governance in MATs is so serious and therefore high profile.
22. Indeed, trustees are responsible for multi-million pound budgets, a range of statutory obligations, and the performance of schools which are often diverse and geographically dispersed, making accountability even more challenging and demanding. Becoming a MAT trustee requires a significant time commitment and even greater responsibilities than the governance of a local authority school (although these are still great, bearing in mind oversight of public funds).
23. MAT trust boards also have a major role to play in setting the vision for children and young people's success, both in terms of their lives and education today and in preparing them for the future. The most confident and visionary boards will go beyond government's narrow performance measures and develop a vision for success that takes into account a wide range of factors, including pupils' health, happiness, wellbeing, character development, literacy, and preparedness for their future lives.
24. The difficulties faced by so many MATs in recruiting and retaining high calibre individuals to their trust boards led Forum Education to hold a roundtable discussion during early July 2017 with representatives from across our MAT CEO networks, in order to discuss some of the issues and to propose some possible solutions for the system. These will also be shared with the Secretary of State, Justine Greening, and the National Schools Commissioner, Sir David Carter.
25. Following this roundtable event, we sought the input of a number of MAT CEO network members, so that this paper draws on the experience of multi-academy trusts across the regions represented by Forum's MAT CEO networks.

### 3. Recruiting and retaining MAT trustees

26. In order to fully address the issues, Forum Education posed the following key questions to colleagues attending the roundtable event and to all members of Forum's MAT CEO networks:

- a. What more can be done to attract and incentivise people from a wide range of backgrounds – including those with significant professional experience – to become trustees? What more can MATs do and what can government do to help?
- b. What would high quality training and development for MAT trustees look like? How should it be delivered to meet the emerging and evolving needs of trust boards?
- c. How can and should the system and government promote the role of multi-academy trusts and the difference that being a MAT trustee can make?

27. The remainder of this paper draws upon the views, experiences, reflections and ideas contributed by a wide range of colleagues in response to the above questions.

#### i. Attracting and incentivising people to become trustees

##### *Promoting and clarifying the role*

28. The Government and multi-academy trusts need to be open and honest about the time commitment and level of responsibility associated with becoming a MAT trustee. In the same way that MAT CEO colleagues have found that there is a big difference between being a headteacher and becoming the CEO of (even a relatively small) multi-academy trust; so too is there a big difference in role between being a member of a school governing body and being a trustee of a multi-academy trust. This must be made clear when advertising for trustees, in order to avoid appointing high calibre colleagues who then find that they just do not have the time to commit to the trustee role. However, this needs to be balanced with promoting the opportunity to make a difference and sense of purpose associated with the role, so as not to deter the best candidates from joining trust boards.

29. The DfE must do more to raise the profile of the work of trustees and the positive difference the role can make to children and young people's lives and society generally. The National Schools Commissioner (NSC) Sir David Carter, and the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), clearly have a crucial role in supporting MATs across the system to communicate the

benefits and expectations of the trustee role to a wider audience. Ensuring a vision for children and young people's healthy development and success (across a wide range of outcomes) is seen as vital if MATs are to attract individuals who will be passionately committed to giving their time and expertise. There is currently little general awareness or understanding within our society about the role of MATs, the work that trustees do and the impact that they have on children and young people's lives.

30. The publication (January 2017) by the DfE of the '*Competency framework for governance*' provided welcome (non-statutory) guidance on the competencies needed for effective governance, including of multi-academy trusts. This guidance, along with the recently updated '*Academies Financial Handbook*' is crucial for potential and newly recruited trustees to be aware of and for MATs to use as ongoing tools to help them evaluate whether they have the right people on their trust boards as they plan for growth. The DfE, NSC, RSCs and the ESFA should consistently be highlighting and promoting the importance of these sources of guidance in their communications with MATs.

### *Being clear on the skills and experience required*

31. In order to underpin the appointment of appropriate individuals as trustees, many established MATs are increasingly undertaking 'skills audits' of their existing trust membership. These are undertaken in order to determine where there are gaps in the skills and expertise of their trust boards and also to support succession planning so that there are no gaps in skills sets when trustees leave the board following cessation of their tenure.

32. However, the way in which the multi-academy trust system has evolved (and continues to evolve) so rapidly since the introduction of the Academies Act in 2010 has seen many members and Chairs of local school governing bodies being automatically appointed as trustees and Chairs of trustees upon conversion to academy status. Whilst this has helped to maintain ongoing connections between the central MAT and its member schools and their local communities, Forum network colleagues expressed concern that the trustee role is very different. This has inevitably been a significant degree of mismatch in some MATs between the requirements of the trustee role and the expectations of colleagues who have transferred from being local school governing body members.

33. There has been a strong steer from Government in recent years around 'professionalising' school and academy governance, including a drive to engage more local and national businesses. Whilst the expertise of such individuals has been largely welcomed by MATs, a number of colleagues expressed a note of caution around the assumption that just because someone is professionally skilled, they will automatically make a good MAT

trustee. Colleagues from the private sector in particular need to be properly informed and trained on entry to the sector, not least on the legislative and regulatory requirements of public sector budgets and spending, so as to avoid potentially inheriting some of the poorer practices from the private sector.

### *Taking ownership of and responsibility for the recruitment process*

34. Attracting and recruiting new trustees should be a core part of the role of existing trustees and the Chair, who should foster and draw upon their local connections, including with local businesses and other organisations, in order to do so. Local business forums can provide excellent opportunities for MATs to champion the trustee role and attract interest from the local community. MATs should also make use of their other networks and connections to directly approach particular individuals if they feel they may have the skills, moral purpose and commitment to bring to the role. For example, one colleague described how she approached a high profile network of local businesses and secured a short presentation slot at their monthly meeting, from which she secured 20 expressions of interest in the MAT trustee roles she wished to secure and resulted in 10 interviews and a number of suitable appointments.
35. Indeed, MAT network colleagues feel very strongly that you get out what you put in, and therefore if MATs are genuinely committed to recruiting and retaining the best trustees to serve their academies and pupils, they must be prepared to spend appropriate resources (time, funding, etc.) on the whole process. This must include a well-crafted information pack (which clearly sets out the expectations of the trust board); a robust application, shortlisting and interviewing process; a high-quality and engaging induction package; and ongoing investment in training and professional development (which is equally as important as the commitment to CPD for teachers and leaders).
36. Careful consideration needs to be given to the content of the information packs provided to potential trustees, which should be given at least the same status as the information provided to potential teachers and leaders. These information packs should be clear about the requirements of the role but also the ethos and vision of the MAT and the wide-range of successful outcomes (not simply exam results) it intends to achieve for children and young people.
37. The vagaries of the education system can feel quite overwhelming to colleagues with no previous professional experience of the system, so there is a sense that in order to avoid losing talented and skilled colleagues from trust boards, MATs must ensure they have high quality induction processes

and training in place to bring new trustees up to speed with their educational knowledge and the workings of the academy trust system.

### *Help and incentivise more people to become trustees*

38. Whilst many larger, national companies are now doing much more to encourage staff to undertake voluntary work in their local communities, including school and academy governance roles, the Government could do more, perhaps through links between the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), to send a stronger message to all employers about the benefits of allowing staff time to undertake this sort of role.
39. Given that only 10 per cent of school governors are aged under 40, there is a strong focus, including among MATs, on trying to engage with and recruit a new and potentially younger cohort of school and academy governors and trustees. Whilst the generally more mature age profile of academy trustees continues to reflect school governance of all kinds as the province of individuals with more free time, MAT CEO colleagues are keen to ensure that their trust boards are properly representative of the communities they serve. This is therefore not simply about the age profile of trustees, but is also about ensuring that there is an appropriate balance in terms of gender and ethnicity so that MATs retain their community links. This is something that charities are particularly good at, and since MATs also have charitable status, this could be another source of good practice for MATs. We suggest that widening participation and improving the diversity of MAT trust boards could be encouraged through the introduction of an incentive scheme (as suggested in paragraph 16c above), which would require organisations of an appropriately large size to support a certain proportion of staff to become MAT trustees, and which could potentially include targets in relation to ethnicity and age profile.

### *Understanding the motivations of people wishing to serve*

40. The messages received from the National Schools Commissioner's office within the Department for Education suggest a 'tipping point' in efficiencies achieved by MATs once they grow beyond around 8 schools (dependent on the size of the schools and therefore the number of pupils). However, there is a sense that when applying for a trustee role, it is the idea of serving the local community that often attracts candidates, and that smaller, local MATs can therefore be more attractive.
41. Colleagues are clear that it is as important for potential trustees to have the right attitude to the role as it is to have the right skills. Candidates must be passionate about education and their role in ensuring the best outcomes

for pupils, and must therefore be prepared to read all information and meeting papers, and to ask challenging questions of the MAT's leadership. The role of MAT trustee is challenging, but also very interesting and rewarding, so the more engaged trustees become, the more they are likely to want to stay in the role. This also supports the point made earlier regarding engaging new trustees quickly so that they feel supported but not overwhelmed.

42. MAT network colleagues were clear that they did not want to attract people onto their trust boards who were simply looking to collect yet another non-executive directorship to add kudos to their professional CVs.
43. Of course, joining a trust board is a two-way process, and providing high quality, appropriate information at the outset will help ensure that potential trustees are able to make a decision regarding whether they feel the MAT board is right for them, as well as whether they are the right person to sit on that MAT board.

#### *The role of Chair (and Members)*

44. The role of the Chair of trustees is vital to ensuring the recruitment and retention of other trustees, so it is essential that the Chair embodies the moral purpose, commitment and behaviours that are expected of all members of the trust board. The National Governance Association (NGA) has developed a 'Future Chairs' project, which is a small pilot project that seeks to recruit individuals who have the right skills and moral purpose to become a trustee (or school governing body member), with a view to them becoming a Chair at some point in the future. As part of the pilot project, individuals receive training and development and support from a mentor. The NGA is hopeful that the learning from this pilot will help to inform better recruitment of Chairs of trustees and better succession planning for these roles.
45. Colleagues were clear that there is a big difference between professionalisation and pay, and that whilst professionalising school and academy governance is to be welcomed in support of a more robust and accountable school system, they had mixed feelings regarding whether trustees and Chairs of trustees should be remunerated for their roles, with some expressing concern that this may have the potential to distort the 'market' of individuals interested in joining trust boards, and that the finite (and diminishing) resources in schools should be spent for the betterment of children's education at the front line. However, some colleagues made the point that there is a big jump between being Chair of trustees, for example, and Chair of a local school governing body, in terms of the scope of the role and level of accountability, and wondered if it was reasonable to expect trustees and Chairs in particular to undertake this without any offer

of remuneration. Overall, participants felt that the remuneration of trustees could be explored and debated further, with reference to how this is managed in other sectors.

46. There needs to be more clarity at a national level regarding the role of trust Members and more openness on who these individuals are, their motivations, and the skills that they bring. Members have a key 'hands off', 'eyes on' role in relation to the trust board, and, as such, play a role in ensuring that the board is functioning appropriately (including through overseeing the successful recruitment and appointment of trustees) and in acting as a safeguard to board failure.
47. Colleagues suggested that the DfE should undertake a national audit of trust Members and publish appropriate information about them on an online database. Many also felt that further work should be undertaken to look at the position of Members within the academy trust system and to set out a charter setting out the duty they have for ensuring the overall success of academy trusts and the children they serve and to avoid conflicts of interest. There is currently some ambiguity about the motivations and responsibilities of members. This is partly driven by a lack of visibility of members and a general lack of understanding about what their role entails. It is also possibly driven by the fact that members are analogous to shareholders in private and public companies, who – in those other contexts - are largely driven by the need to maximise organisational profit within the framework of company law. That is not and should not be the case in providing state education (members unlike company shareholders cannot receive any profit), so therefore the use of the company model within the public sector means that the motivations and roles of members should be set out very clearly and unambiguously through a charter for academy trust members. This should underpin members' work in making any appointments to and in their interactions with the board and its Chair.
48. Colleagues felt that the MAT system as a whole would welcome clarification from the DfE about what is now the most appropriate practice for MATs in terms of trust board membership. Whilst trust articles allow MAT CEOs to also be trustees, there is a lack of consistency across the system, and some concerns as to whether having this arrangement presents a potential conflict of interest. In addition, where any concerns regarding the configuration of trust boards are concerned, there is generally little steer from the DfE regarding deadlines for when any changes should be in place. Again, colleagues would welcome greater clarity if and when such issues arise.

### *The importance of HR skills in ensuring effective recruitment*

49. The move towards professionalising trust boards and the focus on financial propriety (particularly in light of a number of high profile cases in the media of financial mismanagement within MATs), has had the benefit of rapidly increasing the financial and business acumen of many trust boards, with 85% now including a financial professional. However, only 45% of trust boards include an HR professional<sup>1</sup>, which is one of the key areas where local authorities would have historically provided support before academy conversion. MATs should be placing equal weight on securing an appropriate HR professional to their trust board as they do to securing a finance professional. As discussed above, the school-based aspects of HR can be quickly learned by the right individual, the key is to secure someone who is prepared to commit to the role, has a sound knowledge of employment law (which is consistent to all sectors) and who has the moral purpose to want to serve the MAT and the local community through their role.

50. In summary, the key points arising from this question were:

- a. MATs (and other, national, stakeholders) must have open and honest conversations about the trustee role. The DfE must do more to raise awareness of what MATs are and the role of trustees in making a difference to schools and children and young people.
- b. These conversations must speak to the moral purpose (and other important drivers such as serving the local area and its children) of individuals who may be interested in such a role.
- c. In recruiting trustees, there must be appropriate balance given to their awareness and understanding of the education and academy context, and the skills and experience they bring to the trust board (which should have been identified as a need by the MAT's board).
- d. Existing trustees, including the Chair, should have a role in attracting and recruiting new trustees, including through building and fostering their links with local businesses, community groups, and other organisations.
- e. MATs should use their local business forums to champion the trustee role and attract interest from the local community.
- f. MATs should also make use of their other many and varied networks and connections to directly approach particular individuals if they feel they may have the skills, moral purpose and commitment to bring to the role. This approach may be particularly useful when seeking a new Chair of trustees.

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- g. The potential for remuneration of Chairs of trustees and trustees should be further explored, with reference to how this is managed in other sectors.
- h. There needs to be more clarity at a national level regarding the role of trust Members and who they should be in order to ensure appropriate accountability. The DfE should consider undertaking a national audit of trust Members to determine who they are, what they do, what their expertise is, etc, and ensure this is made publicly available where appropriate. The DfE should look to create a charter for members of academy trusts (which all members of academy trusts should sign) and all members should publish a statement on their motivations for being a member on their trust's website.
- i. Ensuring greater clarity around what is expected in terms of the motivations and responsibilities of members can only serve to strengthen the leadership of trust boards, as it is the members who appoint trustees.

## ii. Training and development

51. MAT network colleagues welcomed the support provided for trustees by Academy Ambassadors; although noted that the accessibility of support was not always accessible to MATs across all regions. Whilst there is also some regional training provided by the organisation for new trustees, again this tends to be short in nature and only provided in particular areas.
52. As with so much professional development, some of the best opportunities seem to be provided by visits between individual MATs, especially where MATs are willing to share the challenges and pitfalls and where things have gone wrong, so that lessons can be learned by others across the system.
53. Colleagues felt that in smaller MATs that are in a challenging position and need to rapidly improve, it is often the CEO who finds themselves driving the development of trustees, because they have the strategic oversight to determine what skills are required. This is particularly the case where trust boards are not as strong as they need to be and where there has been a considerable amount of reconfiguration. In these MATs recruiting a strong and effective Chair as soon as possible is paramount. This also makes provision of and access to high quality training and development for MAT trustees even more vital, delivered in the most appropriate way for increasingly time-limited individuals.
54. Colleagues praised the NGA's publication '*Welcome to a multi-academy trust*', which they felt was an excellent 'back to basics' introduction to the trustee role, not only for those new to the role but also as an aide memoire to serving trustees.

55. The large number of small MATs (91% have less than five schools), and their limited capacity and resources to deliver training and development for trustees suggests the need to establish local MAT networks which could pool resources in order to provide development opportunities at an appropriate scale. This could also provide an opportunity for groups of MATs to develop their own bespoke training for trustees and Chairs of trustees and to be able to deliver this on a trust-to-trust basis. However, this approach relies very much on MATs being willing to share openly with others across the system, and whilst some MAT leaders are very happy to do this, others remain reluctant in what has again become a highly competitive education system.
56. MATs are also able to draw on the cadre of National Leaders of Governance (NLGs), who are experienced Chairs of governors, and could potentially provide additional leadership capacity to the trust board. However, colleagues expressed some concern over quality variations within the NLG group.
57. Whilst the MAT sector is still in its infancy, there is an increasing amount of knowledge amassing that ought to be communicated and disseminated more efficiently for the benefit of the whole education system, as well as to promote effective and efficient MAT growth and development. As such, the Government must ensure that the knowledge and understanding it already has about good governance in MATs is shared openly with the sector and informs training. It should also look to commission independent research into the work of high performing academy trusts.
58. In the same vein, there is a strong sense that bad governance practice in MATs needs to be more effectively and rapidly dealt with by the Government. Whilst bad practice can exist in any type of school, it is usually MATs which receive the most negative media attention when things go wrong. However, these high profile cases could be avoided if poor practice (often financial and therefore an outcome of poor governance) was identified and addressed more rapidly by regional schools commissioners and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). In addition, the provision of training opportunities for trustees on key areas such as procurement law, reducing and addressing conflicts of interest, and also executive pay (with associated guidance on benchmarking) would address these concerns at the outset of their tenure on the trust board and hopefully reduce the need for intervention at a later stage. We would suggest that attending such training would be strongly recommended by the DfE and should be accessed by trustees every two years, to ensure they keep up to date with the latest guidance and legislative requirements. It might also be that Ofsted review in their batched inspections (or MAT inspections, if a framework is developed at some point) whether trustees

have attended such training and evidence of how it is supporting best practice across the trust.

59. If we wish to professionalise trust boards, we must accept that the colleagues we are hoping to attract into trustee roles will have limited time available for training and development opportunities, so the system as a whole needs to be smarter about how such opportunities are delivered, and to recognise the value of learning through shorter, focused and more flexible sessions. Some MATs have responded to this need in a relatively simple way, by adding 30 minutes to an hour on to the end of each trust board meeting, in order to deliver training on a particular issue. It is vital that training and development opportunities are engaging, time-bound, specific and of course of the highest quality, and these attributes must apply whether the training is delivered at national scale or by groups of local MATs.
60. The Chair of trustees has a vital role, not only in the recruitment of trustees but also in identifying their training and development needs through self- and external-audit of trust boards strengths and weaknesses and supporting subsequent opportunities. This is vital if MATs are to retain the best individuals on their trust boards.
61. The significant time commitment and the level of responsibility and accountability expected of MAT trustees is likely to mean that their tenure will be shorter than that traditionally associated with school governorship. This must be a consideration when determining how the system can deliver the most effective and efficient development opportunities for trustees, which is likely to be needed at more frequent intervals. Again, this could be where groups of local MATs could pool resources (funding and people) to deliver more regular and bespoke MAT-to-MAT training.
62. In summary, the key points arising from this question were:
  - a. The importance of learning from other MATs, and therefore for MATs to be willing to share openly with others across the system.
  - b. The potential to commission, or develop, joint training with other, local MATs.
  - c. DfE should strongly recommend that trustees attend training on procurement law, managing conflicts of interest and best practice around determining executive pay every two years, to ensure they keep up to date with the latest guidance and legislative requirements
  - d. The value of social media in supporting the professional development of MAT trustees.
  - e. Acknowledging the limited time available to trustees to engage with training and development and to provide flexible opportunities.
  - f. The value of the NGA's guide to joining a MAT trust board.

- g. The importance of the Chair of trustees' role, not only in the recruitment of trustees but also in identifying their training and development needs and supporting subsequent opportunities.

### iii. Promoting MATs and role of trusteeship

63. Whilst there are more similarities than differences between academies and local authority maintained schools, there seems to be an emerging dichotomy in the system, with very strong feelings on both sides. The continuing negative press associated with multi-academy trusts only serves to fuel this discord, at a time when the school system as a whole should be pulling together with the collective aim of improving a wide range of outcomes for all children and young people.
64. It is unfortunate that there have been a number of high-profile examples recently of where MATs have failed in their leadership and governance, leading to financial impropriety and often also poor outcomes for pupils. There needs to be a shift in language and tone in respect of MATs, at a national level, to counter the negative press that inevitably follows such failures and to encourage a more constructive approach to addressing poor practice and ensuring all MATs are developing based on best practice. Not to do so risks increasing the rift in an increasingly dichotomous system, and distracting from the core moral purpose of education, which is to ensure the very best outcomes for all children and young people. This shift in language needs to include more constructive discussion on how poor practice can be overcome, the sharing of best practice, and how MATs and others can work together to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in a wide range of areas.
65. Colleagues are concerned that the drive for a self-improving school system has resulted in a lack of a central vision for the system as a whole, and a consequent lack of vision for school governance, whether that is in LA maintained schools or stand-alone academies, or MATs.
66. This also means that there is no national message about the great benefits of getting involved in school and MAT governance and the difference that getting the best individuals into these roles makes to pupil outcomes.
67. However, MAT network colleagues acknowledged that this does provide an opportunity for MATs to tell the story of what they stand for, their vision and moral purpose, in order to attract the best individuals to become trustees. MATs themselves have the opportunity to create a vision that rises above the narrow performance measures within the system and to set out a broader, more relevant, and more inspiring vision for success.
68. Indeed, at a local level, it is the responsibility of MATs to promote themselves as organisations and the roles they have available on their trust

boards and to communicate the many benefits of becoming a trustee. Likewise, it should be a core responsibility of trustees to promote their trusts and to encourage applications from other skilled individuals. Groups of trustees from different but local MATs may wish to work together on providing a whole-community vision for their work to improve outcomes for children and young people in their care, which would help to attract interest in serving local children through trusteeship.

69. Colleagues expressed their concern that not only is there a dichotomy in the school system between LA maintained schools and academies, there is also increasing fragmentation in the MAT sector. The DfE's drive to grow the number and size of MATs has led to a view that bigger is always better and this has led to inconsistency around the measured growth of some MATs, that perhaps should have been supported to consolidate their work rather than expanding further. There is also a reluctance amongst some MATs to collaborate and engage in local MAT networks.
70. Whilst Forum's MAT CEO networks include representation from many different sizes of MATs, there is an overwhelming sense that good practice can come from any size of MAT and that the RSCs have a crucial role to play in shifting the culture away from 'bigger is better' to one that encourages all MATs to showcase their best practice.
71. There needs to be a much more open culture on the part of MATs and greater collaboration if the system and Government are to be able to promote the positive role of MATs in improving outcomes for children and young people, and consequently to attract the best individuals into MAT trustee roles. The NSC and RSCs could support this by giving a consistently strong message around genuine collaboration.
72. There remains much confusion in the school system as a whole regarding whether the DfE still aims to have every school becoming an academy (and preferably joining a MAT) at some point in the future. Whilst the majority of secondary schools have already converted to academy status, this uncertainty is having an impact on primary schools, many of whom are beginning to discuss federation as a preferred option for formal partnership, rather than to convert and form a MAT. Again, the DfE needs to be clear on its vision for the education system and the direction and pace of travel it is seeking.
73. There remains a huge tension in the system between the DfE and NSC/RSCs, and Ofsted and of course local authorities, in particular regarding their different monitoring and accountability roles with respect to MATs, which must be clarified so that potential trustees can be clear about who and what they are accountable to and responsible for.

74. In summary, the key points arising from this question were:

- a. RSCs must promote the value and best practice examples of MATs of all sizes.
- b. There needs to be a shift in language and tone in respect of MATs, at a national level, to counter the negative press and encourage greater engagement in discussions around how best practice can be understood and shared across the wider system.
- c. This shift in language needs to include more positive discussion on the role and impact of collaboration in achieving better outcomes for children and young people, and less discussion about structures, which are only one element of the school improvement process.
- d. It is the responsibility of MATs to promote themselves as organisations – including through broader and more ambitious visions for children and young people’s success - and to promote the roles they have available on their trust boards and the benefits of becoming a trustee.
- e. It is also a core responsibility of trustees to promote their trusts and to encourage applications from other skilled individuals. Groups of trustees from different but local MATs may wish to work together on providing a whole-community vision for their work to improve outcomes for children and young people in their care.

#### **4. Recommendations**

75. These discussions with MAT CEOs and trustees attending Forum’s roundtable event, and subsequent input from members of all our MAT CEO networks, have informed the following core recommendations:

##### *DfE/NSC/RSCs*

- a. The DfE (and MATs themselves) should do much more to promote the role of trustee and the positive difference trustees can make to children and young people and to society generally. There is little general understanding in society of what MATs are, how they operate, and the role that trustees can play in ensuring children and young people’s success.
- b. The DfE must clarify and clearly communicate the responsibilities of the role of Chair of trustees for MATs, so that MATs themselves can make this clear when recruiting to the role and when succession planning. The DfE should emphasise the important role that Chairs should play in recruiting and retaining high calibre trustees to the board and in ensuring trustees have access to high quality training and development.

- c. The DfE should consider undertaking a national audit of trust Members to determine who they are, what they do, what their expertise is - and ensure this is made publicly available. The DfE should look to create a charter for Members of academy trusts (which all Members must sign) and all Members should publish a personal statement outlining their motivations for being a member on their trust's website. A pro-forma questionnaire could be developed by the DfE for these purposes, so that this information is presented consistently and to a sufficient level of detail across all MATs' websites.
- d. In light of the need to encourage businesses to promote the role of trustee among their staff, the DfE should consider introducing an incentive scheme that requires organisations of an appropriately large size to demonstrate that they have supported a proportion of staff (as far as possible) to become MAT trustees. This could also help in terms of widening participation and improving the diversity of MAT trust boards
- e. The DfE must ensure that training for MAT trustees is accessible for MATs in all regions.
- f. The DfE should strongly recommend (and potentially make mandatory) the provision of training opportunities for trustees on key areas such as procurement law, reducing and addressing conflicts of interest, and also executive pay (with some associated guidance on benchmarking). Our view is that this training should be accessed by trustees every two years, to ensure they keep up to date with the latest guidance and legislative requirements. It might also be that Ofsted review in their batched inspections (or MAT inspections, if a framework is developed at some point) whether trustees have attended such training and evidence of how it is supporting best practice across the trust.
- g. The DfE and NSC should consider whether evidence of appropriate and impactful collaborative activity with other MATs should be a prerequisite for MAT growth; and Ofsted should look at collaboration as part of their focused reviews of MAT schools. Whilst there is great value in engaging directly with other MATs at a local and regional level (including through joint commissioning of some services or engaging in peer review, for example), attitudes to collaboration and willingness to share identified strengths and weaknesses between MATs remains mixed.
- h. At a national and regional level, the regional schools commissioners (RSCs) must promote the value and best practice examples of MATs of all sizes, rather than giving the (current) impression that it is the

- largest MATs that have all the answers. This will help to promote and raise awareness of the work of a wide range and diversity of MATs.
- i. The DfE should make it clear that it is a core responsibility of MAT trustees and Chairs of trust boards to promote the vision and work of their MATs and the benefits of joining a trust board in order to improve outcomes for children and young people.
  - j. Further work should be undertaken to seek views of a wide range of stakeholders on whether Chairs of trustees/trustees should be remunerated, with reference to how this is managed in other sectors and the impact it may or may not have had in those sectors.

#### *MATs/Chairs/trustees*

- k. MATs and other national stakeholders should actively engage in raising awareness of what it means to become a trustee – not least in terms of responsibility, accountability, skills and time commitment. However, these conversations and communications must also speak to the sense of purpose and chance to ‘make a difference’ inherent with serving as a trustee.
- l. Attracting, recruiting and developing trustees should be a core part of the role of the Chair, and this should be made more clear at central government and regional level (by the DfE and RSCs) and at a local level by MATs themselves through the Chair’s job description and as part of that recruitment process. Providing training for Chairs on recruitment and retention is essential. Likewise, Chairs must ensure that trustees receive appropriate training and development, including high quality induction.
- m. Serving trustees can play an important role in working with other local MATs and their trustees to develop a strong and engaging vision for educational improvement and children and young people’s success in their local areas – going above and beyond government targets and performance measures. In doing so, they can engage people of all backgrounds in the work of their trusts and in the opportunities that governance provides to make a difference.
- n. Indeed, MATs should play a much more active role in promoting themselves and the difference they make, and the Chair of trustee’s role should have responsibility for driving this activity as a core element of their role. At a local level, MATs should do much more to promote and market themselves as organisations and groups of organisations, including the roles they have available on their trust boards and the many benefits of becoming a trustee. Developing



- strong and ongoing relationships with local businesses, third and public sector organisations, community groups and charities is key.
- o. MATs must be prepared to spend appropriate resources (time, funding, etc.) on the recruitment of trustees given that it is such a crucial role. This must include a well-crafted information pack (which clearly sets out the expectations of the trust board); a robust application, shortlisting and interviewing process; a high-quality and engaging induction package; and ongoing investment in training and professional development (which is equally as important as the commitment to CPD for teachers and leaders).
  - p. Groups of local MATs should consider collectively commissioning or jointly developing training for their trustees, in order to achieve economies of scale and share learning. This was particularly important for the smaller MATs (which remain the vast majority in the system).
  - q. MAT boards should regularly engage in both external review and 'skills audits' of their existing trust board membership, in order to determine where there are gaps in the skills and expertise of their trust boards and also to support succession planning so that there are no gaps in skills sets when trustees leave the board following cessation of their tenure.