

A group of diverse students in a classroom setting, looking at laptops and discussing content. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.

# Academies: Where are we at and what comes next?

A briefing from PLMR

## In this briefing:

- What does the current school system look like?
- Where will it go next?
- What should schools and trusts be considering now, given the opportunities and risks the projected landscape presents?
- What should schools and trusts be considering when thinking about how best to develop and collaborate, both internally and externally, to ensure the best possible outcomes for each pupil and the best career development and pathways for staff?

## Summary:

This briefing offers an overview of what the school system currently looks like, the direction it is headed in and helps to frame strategic thinking either for schools which are considering becoming an academy or for trusts which are considering growth.

It also sheds light on the current and future education landscape for those who are interested in how it is shaping.

As the data in this report will evidence, academies are not just a subcategory within the school system, increasingly they are the school system. As we are approaching the 10,000th academy opening, rather than continued fragmentation with the school system split between academy and local authority maintained schools, in addition to a desire for collaborative structures for school improvement, the likelihood of all schools being part of a trust may now be down to the statistics and logistics as opposed to politics or ideology. Given this landscape, schools and trusts should carefully consider how to best support their pupils and staff moving forward.

- The 2021/22 academic year is likely to see the landmark 10,000th academy opened (out of 22,000 state-funded schools).
- Academies are state schools funded directly by the Government, are free to attend and they are inspected in the same way as other state schools. Academy trusts are education charities that are set up purely for the purpose of running and improving schools, overseen by a Board of Trustees. Trustees have strict duties under charity law and company law.
- Because academies are schools, rather than 'academy trust' this briefing henceforth adopts the term 'school trust' used by the sector body Confederation of School Trusts when referring to trusts.
- As of the Department for Education's most recent data published 29th September 2021<sup>1</sup>, there were 9,752 open academies across 2,564 school trusts - with 274 converters (choosing to become an academy), 63 sponsored (joining a trust through intervention, for example after being judged Inadequate by Ofsted) and 206 free schools<sup>2</sup> (new schools, which are all academies) in the pipeline for the coming months. England is now on the cusp of 10,000 academies.
- Even without any additional nudges from the Government, a growing number of local authority areas will soon reach the point in which the number of remaining maintained schools will be too low for a local authority to effectively support them.
- To ensure all schools have the support they need, the Government and local authorities will need to call upon school trust partners to support in these areas and elsewhere.
- This brings significant opportunities, as well as risks, for both existing and new trusts.

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development>

2 Published 14th October 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-schools-successful-applications>

## Introduction

There were only 203 academies, all of them secondary schools, prior to the 2010 General Election, the subsequent invitation from then Education Secretary Michael Gove for all publicly funded schools to apply for academy status and the passing of the Academies Act<sup>3</sup> in 2010. The education landscape has since transformed dramatically.

The evolution of academies has continued since the Government's Educational Excellence Everywhere White Paper in 2016. Though its stated aim of ensuring all schools joined a school trust failed<sup>4</sup>, the White Paper did succeed in shifting the thinking of school and trust leaders across England to think differently about how schools could benefit from being part of a school trust, for example:

- What could more highly impactful school improvement support look like?
- How could more personalised and familiar HR services impact on staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing?
- How could greater financial efficiencies be made in order to maximise the return on investment of public money?

As more leaders, both executive and non-executive, considered these ideas, the academy sector continued to expand.

The sector itself has also rapidly matured over the last decade. There is significantly less emphasis on the concept of 'autonomy' and instead a greater understanding of school trusts as charitable organisational structures purpose-designed to advance education for public benefit, an understanding well-encapsulated and facilitated by the sector body the Confederation of School Trusts<sup>5</sup>. Discussion among trust leaders focuses on what meaningful collaboration entails, what good support looks like, what has or has not worked in various contexts, and areas in which they have seen organic alignment.

Rather than waiting for Government policy to force structures, frameworks or methodologies, the sector is getting better at leading the design of its own system, both in terms of shaping a narrative, but also re-thinking what is possible at school, trust and system levels.

Now, five years on from the White Paper's drive for more academies, the signs coming out of the Department for Education, coupled with the solid statistics evidencing the continuing momentum of the academy sector itself, are indicating that, one way or another, whether through carrots, sticks or levers, we are moving ever closer to a school system completely composed of academies which are part of school trusts.

The over-riding question, then, for school and trust leaders thinking forward is: how do they make it work for them, in order to make it work for the children and young people in their school or schools?

Here, we examine the current situation in the academy sector, where it is heading and what opportunities are currently available for schools and trusts that choose to pursue them.

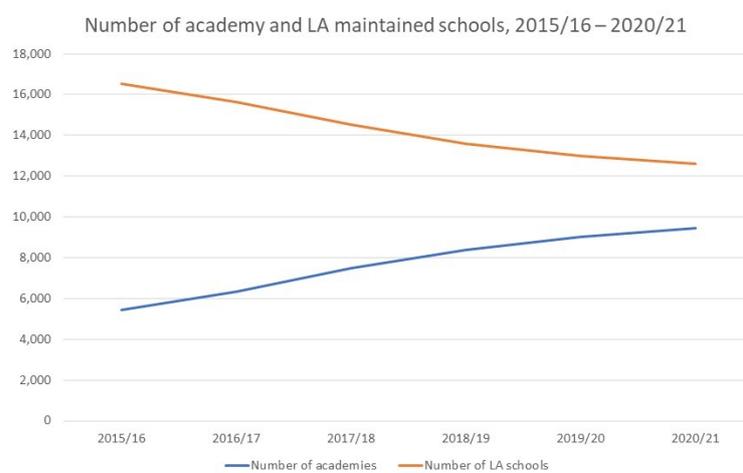
3 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/32/contents>

4 <https://www.tes.com/news/government-scrap-education-all-bill>

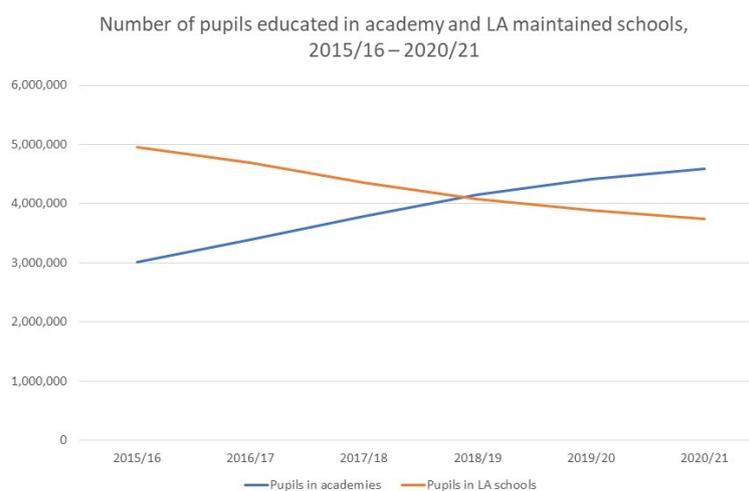
5 <https://cstuk.org.uk/guidance-improvement-hub/what-are-school-trusts>

## What is the current situation?

The latest 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' data<sup>6</sup>, available from the 2015/16 through the 2020/21 academic years, shows that the number of pupils attending academies continues to grow, along with the number of academies, while the local authority (LA) maintained sector continues to shrink.



		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number of schools	Academy	5,425	6,345	7,469	8,398	9,041	9,444
	LA Maintained	16,552	15,639	14,527	13,606	12,988	12,603



		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Headcount - Total	Academy	3,017,849	3,386,775	3,794,964	4,157,953	4,421,118	4,591,865
	LA Maintained	4,958,662	4,699,037	4,358,261	4,080,856	3,892,370	3,750,656

<sup>6</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

As of the latest annual 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' data, published 27th July 2021:

- 37% of state-funded primary schools were academies; this has more than doubled from 18% since July 2016 (the end of the same academic year in which the Government's White Paper aimed to make all schools an academy). They accounted for 39% of pupils in primary schools.
- 78% of state-funded secondary schools were academies (up from 64% in July 2016). They accounted for 78% of the secondary school population.
- Overall, 39% of all schools were academies; these educated 52% of pupils.
- Of state schools, 43% were academies. These educated around 55% of state school pupils (up from 38% in July 2016).
- Due to the higher proportion of secondary schools that are academies, and the higher per pupil funding that secondary schools receive<sup>7</sup>, around 55% of school funding goes to academies.

## Where next?

There were 337 schools in the process of converting either voluntarily or through sponsorship as of the Department for Education's data published 29th September 2021<sup>8</sup>. These will take the total number of open academies from 9,752 to more than 10,000, or about 45% of all state schools, and they will be educating around 57% of pupils. Plus, there are just over 200 free schools in the pre-opening phase<sup>9</sup>.

On top of this, even without any further nudges by the Government, the number of academies and pupils taught in academies is going to continue to increase significantly over the next few years:

- As the bulge in primary pupil numbers moves through to the secondary sector, where nearly 80% of schools are already academies;
- If the Catholic Church brings the remainder of its 2,000 state-funded schools into school trusts, which will add around 1,400 schools and just under half a million pupils to the totals<sup>10</sup>. These will increase the proportion of academies by around 6%, and the proportion of pupils taught in academies by the same or more; and
- If the Church of England – which has more than 4,000 primary schools and 200 secondaries - sets up more Church-led school trusts, boosting its numbers from the relatively low 900 academies so far<sup>11 12</sup>.

These shifts alone mean that by the next General Election in 2024 it is highly likely that:

- More than half of schools will be academies;
- Around two-thirds of pupils will be educated in academies; and
- Nearly 70% of school funding will sit within the academy sector.

7 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/2020--annual-report-on-education-spending-in-england-schools.pdf>

8 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development>

9 Published 14th October 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-schools-successful-applications>

10 <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/images/CensusDigestEngland2020.pdf>

11 <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-academies>

12 <https://schoolsworld.co.uk/berridge-happy-for-en-masse-conversions-in-faith-schools-academies-plan/>

Whilst there is no formal target or deadline, the Government has been clear that it wants to see all schools join a school trust. As the then Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, said in April 2021<sup>13</sup>:

"Today over 50 per cent of pupils in state-funded education study in academies. But we want to go further because strong multi-academy trusts are the best structure to enable schools and teachers to deliver consistently good outcomes for all their pupils.

The Government's vision is for every school to be part of a family of schools in a strong multi-academy trust... we have published guidance for trusts and prospective converters, outlining how even more schools can join a strong family to turn that 50 per cent of pupils studying in academies into 100 per cent."

The Secretary of State for Education is now Nadhim Zahawi. While it is still very early days in his tenure, which only began on 15th September 2021, his Parliamentary voting record<sup>14</sup> indicates he will continue to promote the success and growth of the academy sector. He consistently voted in favour of academies and free schools, including for turning all schools in England into academies in 2016.

In 2019, Zahawi argued that "the reforms of the last eight years show that autonomy and freedom have allowed the best leaders and teachers to make the right decisions for their pupils to reach full potential."<sup>15</sup> Also in 2019, Zahawi pointed to the ability of free schools to plug gaps in SEND provision<sup>16</sup>.

At the NAHT school leaders' union's annual conference in London on 9th October 2021, though saying the Government is "not going to set an arbitrary deadline to achieve a wholesale structural change", Zahawi also said<sup>17</sup>:

"[Schools] do benefit from being part of a multi-academy trust... There is evidence that that makes a huge benefit and trusts of course help underperforming schools to improve and provide the opportunities for teachers and leaders to enable them to focus on what I think matters most, which we all agree on, which is high-quality teaching and support for pupils outcomes effectively.

"I do want us to look at the journey that we've been on and how we're going to move forward together. And I will always look at the evidence, and I will come here and I will share it with you, and we will move forward together... I will bring you the evidence and work with you to make sure that whatever we do, we'll do it together, and we will produce, I hope, an ecosystem that will build on all the good things that the evidence demonstrates can happen and then we will be able to have that discussion and see how we move forward."

Indeed, looking back on the journey we have been on already, as the data shows, the shift towards more academies is more pragmatic as opposed to ideological now. With the SEND and children's social care systems currently under review, it may be that once the role of local authorities is clearly identified, there will also logically be a natural role for school trusts within those systems. This could further encourage the Department for Education to ensure consistency by moving away from a mixed-economy school system.

Shortly after Zahawi spoke at the NAHT conference, the Swindon local authority backtracked on their plan to vote on proposals to 'support' maintained schools and standalone academies into joining school trusts<sup>18</sup>. While the council said this was done to thinking Zahawi appeared "to have taken a different line from his predecessor" in his NAHT appearance, the bigger picture, and indeed the journey Zahawi referenced, signal that the academy trajectory is still the same.

13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-speech-to-the-confederation-of-school-trusts>

14 <https://members.parliament.uk/member/4113/voting>

15 <https://www.zahawi.com/parliament/nadhim-zahawi-responds-debate-inequality-and-social-mobility>

16 <https://www.zahawi.com/parliament/education-questions-7>

17 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/zahawi-wont-set-arbitrary-deadline-for-academy-ambition/>

18 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/swindon-council-forced-academies-conversion-fears-policy/>

If there is unlikely to be a dramatic shift in the approach to academies from the Department for Education under Zahawi, then based on indicators from the Williamson-era, there are likely to be a number of policy developments to help this along, including<sup>19</sup>:

- Additional funding for turnaround-specific school trusts;
- To create more turnaround-specific school trusts like Falcon Education Trust, as well as faith-specific ones to support those sectors;
- Support for the expansion of existing strong school trusts;
- Support for existing strong school trusts to expand into regions where they do not currently have a presence;
- Funding and greater support for trust partnerships (what Williamson described as "try before you buy") service level agreements<sup>20</sup>;
- Compulsory move to a school trust for local authority maintained schools which have received three consecutive Requires Improvement (RI) or worse judgments from Ofsted; the Government may consider extending that for double RI schools;
- Asking Ofsted to inspect more schools over the course of the next few years, with the prospect that – following the impact of COVID-19 – more local authority maintained schools may go into a category and therefore become academies; and
- Area-specific compulsory move to school trusts e.g. where a local authority falls into difficulty or results are stubbornly low, all schools could be asked or ordered to convert, either with a school trust of their choice or one chosen for them.

In summary then:

- A shift to all schools being part of a school trust is likely to press ahead in the coming years;
- Overwhelmingly, this will mean schools joining existing school trusts, rather than becoming standalone trusts, or indeed rather than starting new trusts, in the interests of consolidation and cementing and building on the existing strengths within the system;
- A successful transition will require the input and expertise of existing school trusts;
- There will be significant opportunities for strong school trusts which wish to make a difference; and
- The school trusts proposing and leading the change will be in a better position to shape things than those waiting and reacting to developments.

## Things to consider

There is a significant story to be told by the data: academies form a large and growing proportion of the school system, with more than half of children and young people already attending one, and for various reasons, those numbers are continuing to grow.

As the system continues to edge towards all schools fully sitting within school trusts, and more trust mergers are either encouraged or required, schools and trusts alike should consider how they can ensure they are ahead of the game by understanding the landscape around them, in order to best serve their current and future pupils and staff.

Here, we suggest a number of questions and factors for schools and trusts to consider in order to strategically shape their future. This is by no means an exhaustive due diligence list, but rather a starting point for thinking about the best options for your school or trust, given the current landscape, in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for all of your people, both pupils and staff.

<sup>19</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/speed-read-williamsons-7-policies-to-revive-the-academies-drive/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/987339/Trust\\_Partnerships\\_guidance\\_for\\_academy\\_trusts\\_and\\_prospective\\_joiners\\_v4.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/987339/Trust_Partnerships_guidance_for_academy_trusts_and_prospective_joiners_v4.pdf)

We have separated these into three sections:

- The first for local authority maintained schools;
- The second for standalone academies; and
- The third for existing school trusts.

Within each section, we have divided questions into:

- The first set for schools and trusts to use to consider the practical implications of the increasing number of academies; and
- The second set for schools and trusts to use to consider the benefits of either joining or growing a school trust, given the projected landscape.

## Current local authority maintained schools:

### Considerations for local authority maintained schools regarding the projected landscape

#### Key Questions

- What is the proportion of academy and maintained schools within your local authority, and those local authorities around you? Does this already affect the level of support from the local authority for maintained schools?
- What is a likely percentage of academies, and percentage of pupils in academies, in your area by 2024? What will this mean for the maintained schools in your area?
- Which school trusts are in your area at the moment? Which schools do they already run / have relationships with?

#### Factors to consider

- Primary / secondary / special / AP sectors
- Faith schools – these are under-academised currently, and this will change rapidly as both the Catholic Church and the Church of England form and grow more trusts
- Maintained schools that are currently in a category or have received consecutive Requires Improvement judgements
- Any new schools due to open e.g. mainstream or special free schools
- Any local authority schools that have already considered joining a trust at one point or another
- Any local authority school with falling pupil numbers
- Local authority schools with financial viability issues, particularly one-form entry schools
- Existing school trusts in your local authority, and those in surrounding local authorities – in terms of those with formal funding agreements in place, but also in terms of those who work in some sort of informal or formal partnership or support arrangement with other schools
- School trusts not currently in your area but which might be interested in setting up a hub given the opportunity

## Considerations for local authority maintained schools regarding either joining or starting a school trust

### Key Questions

- How can your school best collaborate with others in a strong and resilient structure to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?<sup>21</sup>
- What are the benefits to your pupils and staff in remaining with the local authority? Are these still the same if most local schools join school trusts? What risks are there in remaining with the local authority?
- Which existing nearby school trusts would you be happy joining? Why?
- Which existing school trusts would you be reluctant to join? Why?
- If your current Ofsted judgement is Good or Outstanding, would you have the capacity and expertise to form a new school trust? If so, which local schools would make good partners? If forming a new school trust, as opposed to joining an existing trust, how long would you estimate it would take for you to have the structures and services in place in order for your pupils and staff to obtain the benefits of being part of a trust?
- If your current Ofsted judgement is Requires Improvement, have you considered any support from a local school trust? Why or why not?
- What strengths would you bring to a school trust, and what areas would you most want support in?

### Factors to consider

- The vision and values other schools/trusts have
- Their approach to culture and curriculum
- What is the quality of education in your school currently? What capacity do you have for ongoing improvement?
- What is the quality of education like within a trust you would consider joining? What is their school improvement model like and how do they collaborate effectively as a trust to improve every school, regardless of current Ofsted rating?
- Which aspects of school life you are comfortable with the school trust determining centrally, and which do you wish to retain decision-making over? In other words, what areas are you most happy for the trust to manage centrally, in order for you to focus on teaching and learning?
- What are the genuine strengths of your school?
- What are the genuine areas for improvement?
- How can you best help every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in what they teach (curriculum) and how they teach it (pedagogy); ensure every teacher has access to the best evidence from research; and provide teachers the best professional development opportunities so they can continue to improve their teaching, thereby ensuring continued improvement for pupils?<sup>22</sup>

21 [https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/link\\_boxes/Improvement-Frameworks/CST-narrative-what-are-school-trusts.pdf](https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/link_boxes/Improvement-Frameworks/CST-narrative-what-are-school-trusts.pdf)

22 [https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/pdfs/CST\\_Knowledge\\_Building\\_Whitepaper.pdf](https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/pdfs/CST_Knowledge_Building_Whitepaper.pdf)

- What would the professional development programme of a particular school trust offer to your staff (in terms of opportunities, boosting retention and recruitment and, of course, the ultimate impact on pupils)?
- What would the career pathways within a particular school trust offer to your staff (in terms of opportunities and boosting retention and recruitment) and to your pupils (in terms of access to expertise and support from within the trust)?
- Would the support from a particular school trust enable you to focus on core teaching and learning within your school? (e.g. if the trust is able to offer support in areas such as facilities, HR, finance, IT, etc.)
- What impact and value for money do you currently receive for any external support (e.g. from your local authority or elsewhere) that you would be getting instead from a particular school trust? What impact would that trust's support provide?
- The mix of primary / secondary / special / AP of any trust you would join / could create and how that mix of expertise could improve teaching and learning in your school
- Would the support from a particular school trust, coupled with that trust's scheme of delegation, enable your school to focus on improving the education and experience of the children and young people in your school?
- Are any concerns about joining a school trust to do with school or governance leaders holding a different level of control, perceived or otherwise, within a school? Is that a pupil-driven concern or an adult-led concern?

## Current standalone academies:

### Considerations for standalone academies regarding the projected landscape

#### Key Questions

- What is the proportion of academy and maintained schools within your local authority, and those local authorities around you? Does this already affect the level of support from the local authority for maintained schools?
- What is a likely percentage of academies, and percentage of pupils in academies, in your area by 2024? What will this mean for the maintained schools in your area?
- Which school trusts are in your area at the moment? Which schools do they already run / have relationships with?

#### Factors to consider

- Primary / secondary / special / AP sectors
- Faith schools – these are under-academised currently, and this will change rapidly as both the Catholic Church and the Church of England form and grow more trusts
- Maintained schools that are currently in a category or have received consecutive Requires Improvement judgements

- Any new schools due to open e.g. mainstream or special free schools
- Any local authority schools that have already considered joining a trust at one point or another
- Any local authority school with falling pupil numbers
- Local authority schools with financial viability issues, particularly one-form entry schools
- Existing school trusts in your local authority, and those in surrounding local authorities – in terms of those with formal funding agreements in place, but also in terms of those who work in some sort of informal or formal partnership or support arrangement with other schools
- School trusts not currently in your area but which might be interested in setting up a hub given the opportunity

## Considerations for standalone academies regarding either growing or merging with a school trust

### Key Questions

- How can your school best collaborate with others in a strong and resilient structure to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?
- What are the benefits to your pupils and staff in remaining standalone? Are these still the same if most local schools join school trusts? What risks are there in remaining standalone?
- Which existing school trusts would you consider joining? Why?
- Which existing school trusts would you be reluctant to join? Why?
- If your current Ofsted judgement is Good or Outstanding, would you have the capacity and expertise to grow your school trust? If so, which local schools would make good partners? If growing your school trust, as opposed to joining an existing trust, how long would you estimate it would take for you to have the structures and services in place in order for your pupils and staff to obtain the benefits of being part of a larger trust?
- If your current Ofsted judgement is Requires Improvement, have you considered any support from another local school trust? Why or why not?
- What strengths would you bring to another school trust, and what things would you most want support in?

### Factors to consider

- The vision and values other schools / trusts have
- Their approach to culture and curriculum
- What is the quality of education in your school currently? What capacity do you have for ongoing improvement?

- How can you best help every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in what they teach (curriculum) and how they teach it (pedagogy); ensure every teacher has access to the best evidence from research; and provide teachers the best professional development opportunities so they can continue to improve their teaching, thereby ensuring continued improvement for pupils?
- What is the quality of education like within a trust you would consider joining? What is their school improvement model like and how do they collaborate effectively as a trust to improve every school, regardless of current Ofsted rating?
- If you wish to grow your trust, how would your school improvement model adapt as you grow and how would you drive collaboration to improve every school?
- Which aspects of school life you are comfortable with a trust you join / grow determining centrally, and which do you wish to retain decision-making over at school level? In other words, what areas are you most happy for the trust to manage centrally, in order for schools to focus on teaching and learning?
- What are the genuine strengths of your standalone school?
- What are the genuine areas for improvement?
- The mix of primary / secondary / special / AP of any trust you would join / could create and how that mix of expertise could improve teaching and learning in your school
- What would the professional development programme of a school trust you join / grow offer to your staff (in terms of opportunities, boosting retention and recruitment and, of course, the ultimate impact on pupils)?
- What would the career pathways within a school trust you join / grow offer to your staff (in terms of opportunities and boosting retention and recruitment) and to your pupils (in terms of access to expertise and support from within the trust)?
- Would the support from a school trust you join / grow enable your school leaders to focus on core teaching and learning within your school? (e.g. if the trust is able to offer support in areas such as facilities, HR, finance, IT, etc.)
- What impact and value for money do you currently receive for any external support (e.g. from your local authority or elsewhere) that you would be getting instead from a trust you join / grow? And what impact would that trust-wide support provide?
- Would the support from a trust you join / grow, coupled with the trust's scheme of delegation, enable your school to focus on improving the education and experience of the children and young people in your school?
- Are any concerns about joining / growing a trust to do with school or governance leaders holding a different level of control, perceived or otherwise, within a school? Is that a pupil-driven concern or an adult-led concern?
- What governance and operational changes would you need to make joining / growing a trust, and what possible financial savings and operational synergies could you generate from these?

## Current school trusts:

### Considerations for school trusts regarding the projected landscape

Key Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the proportion of academy and maintained schools within your local authority, and those local authorities around you? Does this already affect the level of support from the local authority for maintained schools?</li> <li>• What is a likely percentage of academies, and percentage of pupils in academies, in your area by 2024? What will this mean for the maintained schools in your area?</li> <li>• Which school trusts are in your area at the moment? Which schools do they already run / have relationships with?</li> </ul>
Factors to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary / secondary / special / AP sectors</li> <li>• Faith schools – these are under-academised currently, and this will change rapidly as both the Catholic Church and the Church of England form and grow more trusts</li> <li>• Maintained schools that are currently in a category or have received consecutive Requires Improvement judgements</li> <li>• Any new schools due to open e.g. mainstream or special free schools</li> <li>• Any local authority schools that have already considered joining a trust at one point or another</li> <li>• Any local authority school with falling pupil numbers</li> <li>• Local authority schools with financial viability issues, particularly one-form entry schools</li> <li>• Existing school trusts in your local authority, and those in surrounding local authorities – in terms of those with formal funding agreements in place, but also in terms of those who work in some sort of informal or formal partnership or support arrangement with other schools</li> <li>• School trusts not currently in your area but which might be interested in setting up a hub given the opportunity</li> </ul>

### Considerations for school trusts regarding either growing or merging with a school trust

Key Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can your trust best develop and collaborate, both internally and externally, to best leverage the structure of a school trust to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?</li> <li>• What are the benefits to your pupils and staff in remaining at your current size? What risks are there in remaining at your current size?</li> <li>• What is your strategy for growth and development – mergers with existing trusts? Individual schools joining? A mix?</li> <li>• Which existing national or local trusts would you consider joining together with? Why?</li> <li>• Which existing national or local trusts would you be reluctant to join with? Why?</li> </ul>
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- Which existing schools or trusts would you consider bringing into your trust? Why?
- How many schools / pupils / staff could your current structure and systems successfully support?

## Factors to consider

- The appetite to be the 'lead' in a trust, as opposed to 'merging' with the roles, capacity and expertise coming in from a joining trust or school.
- The vision and values other trusts and schools have, including their approach to culture and curriculum.
- How would you define your trust culture (either in practice or what you aim for it to be), and what challenges might arise in merging the culture of your trust with the school or trust that would be joining with you?
- What is the genuine quality of education within your trust? What capacity do you have for ongoing improvement? How effective is your school improvement model at leveraging your scale to drive meaningful collaboration?
- What is the quality of education like within a trust you would consider joining together with? How would joining together build capacity for ongoing improvement for all pupils? How would your school improvement models come together and how would you collaborate effectively as one trust to improve every school, regardless of current Ofsted rating?
- If you wish to grow your trust, how would your school improvement model adapt as you grow and how would you drive collaboration to improve every school?
- How can you best help every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in what they teach (curriculum) and how they teach it (pedagogy); ensure every teacher has access to the best evidence from research; and provide teachers the best professional development opportunities so they can continue to improve their teaching, thereby ensuring continued improvement for pupils?
- Which aspects would you want your trust determining centrally, and which would you wish schools to retain decision-making over?
- What are the genuine strengths of your trust?
- What are the genuine areas for improvement?
- The mix of primary / secondary / special / AP of any school or trust which would join you and how that mix of expertise could improve teaching and learning in all of your schools
- What governance and operational changes would be needed to grow your trust's capacity? And what possible financial savings and operational synergies could you generate from these at scale? Are your existing governance and operational structures still fit for purpose at each iteration of growth?
- What funding from the Department for Education would you require to grow your trust?
- Are any concerns about merging with another trust to do with executive or governance leaders holding a different level of control, perceived or otherwise, within a trust? Is that a pupil-driven concern or an adult-led concern?

## Conclusion

The educational landscape looks likely to continue to shift towards a system in which all schools are part of a school trust.

There are many things to consider as this journey continues, both as a sector (from what impactful governance actually means in a trust, to facilitating game-changing school improvement and beyond) and as an individual school or trust (what are the best options in our context for our pupils, staff and communities?).

But the key thing may be about thinking beyond one school gate, or one trust office – the rationale for every step on this path should be about creating better schools, by creating better trusts by creating a better system. Rather than to do the same old things better, the education system must be designed to do better things.

The academy sector is still young enough both to be moulded and to mould the wider school system. The strength of the leaders within it now can help to shape what it looks like for generations to come. Those schools and trusts which carefully consider the questions and factors outlined above now, will be well-prepared for a future that is system-designed and led, as opposed to government policy-designed and led.

**Questions or comments? Please get in touch:**

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