



The role of MATs in localities

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Summary

A key finding of research which I undertook with Dr. Susan Cousin (2021), which explored four leading international systems, was that – to borrow a phrase from educational researcher Michael Fullan – **‘Leadership from the Middle’ through locality-based governance and partnership working is key to building school systems that can deliver excellence and equity**. These findings have been confirmed by an updated [Literature Review](#) by Cousin and Greany (2022).

This paper focuses on the role of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) in localities. It argues that it is important that that role is developed in the interests of their staff, parents, and pupils and because of the enormous contribution they should make to their localities.

The paper draws on new research based on 10% of Local Authorities (LAs) which demonstrates, for these 16 Local Authorities, most MATs in June 2022 operate within one LA. Moreover, if Diocesan MATs are included, because of their overwhelmingly local focus, the proportion is even higher. It was also striking that converter academies mostly chose local MATs.

Most MATs are rooted in the local ecosystem as, of course, are SATs, and the still large number of maintained schools, but they have no formal standing in a number of key areas unless the LAs have taken steps to provide them or they are in Opportunity Areas.

There is a debate currently underway about what constitutes a strong MAT. Their role in the locality needs to be a key part of that assessment. The paper explores why MATs are largely locality based, what the MATs local agenda might be, looking beyond the support for vulnerable pupils. Drawing on the research it outlines what kinds of collaborative models might support that engagement.

Introduction

One of the many gaps in the 2022 Education White Paper ‘Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child’ is an examination of the role of MATs in localities. Ministers rejected an amendment in the House of Lords, proposed by Estelle Morris, Baroness Morris of Yardley, calling for support for local networks which would indicate their current thinking, that both in the transition to a fully MAT system and in the future, autonomous MATs will meet system needs.

The March 2022 Green Paper ‘Right Support, right place, right time’, outlined the government’s vision for a single, national SEND and alternative provision system that will introduce new standards in the quality of support given to children across education, health and care points. It points to close working of MATs with LAs and other agencies, on support for vulnerable pupils whose needs stretch ‘beyond the (school) gate’; on pupil admissions; the supply of school places and the 12 Opportunity Areas.

The DfE also promised, at one stage, a review of MAT accountability. There are 34 LAs with school-led partnerships of various kinds, involving MATs, SATs and maintained schools, which are also wrestling with what their future role should be as LAs lose their school improvement grants and MATs may look increasingly to their own support teams.

This short paper argues that MATs need, in their pupils’ interests, to position themselves as a key part of the local system not just in the areas for collaboration that the DfE identified in the White Paper but working on a broader agenda. Many MATs along with the SEND Green Paper recognise that the fragmentation of the system has disadvantaged vulnerable pupils and families the most. This is not what they wanted. They are wrestling with what their role is, how it can be managed effectively alongside the strong centralising and competitive pressures of the current system and how it should be taken forward.

The paper starts by looking at how far, 20 years on, the current system of MAT development is organised around LA boundaries. The development of MATs has been driven by the three forces of: DfE policy backed up by generous funding (in the early days), relationships between schools and their LA, and decisions of individual schools. The Paper then looks at why the locality agenda is important to MATs for school improvement as well as other areas and what the latest research can tell us about the kind of structures and networks that are likely to best enable MATs to play a full role in their locality.

The current MAT landscape

This analysis draws on a sample of 16 LAs, five counties, 6 cities, two London Boroughs, and three towns, a sample of 10% of all LAs.

Table 1 presents a picture of the academy landscape in the 16 LAs. It shows the percentage of academies in the LA that have formed or joined ‘local’ MATs, defined as a MAT which operates only in the single LA. It also gives the number of MATs which operates across more than one LA but has only one school in that LA. These are predominantly MATs that operate in bordering LAs. The final four columns give the overall number of maintained schools,

academies, SATs and free schools in the LA. Diocesan MATs play a very important and distinct role in this landscape so have been treated separately in this paper.

The data indicates that the landscape is predominantly one of local clusters of schools, either within a single LA or a single geographical area across LA borders.

Table 1: The MAT Landscape

LA	% Of academies in MATs which only operate in the LA	No of cross-LA MATs with only one school in the LA	No of LA maintained schools ¹	No of Academies ²	No of SATs	Academies inc free schools
Bristol	39	1	62	84	0	91
Coventry	73	3	61	52	1	57
Devon	55	3	164	193	2	208
Doncaster	85	3	34	88	3	94
Durham	95	3	164	98	3	100
Ealing	75	0	77	12	5	18
Essex	67	7	235	307	38	321
Milton Keynes	33	5	69	40	4	45
Portsmouth	11	2	18	42	1	43
Rochdale	58	4	71	18	0	19
Sheffield	62	3	74	99	4	105
Surrey	77	8	195	194	4	203
Tower Hamlets	72	0	75	12	1	22
Wakefield	72	5	56	86	0	87
Wigan	33	4	97	31	0	32
Wiltshire	58	2	121	110	0	114

Table 1: sources: DfE <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development> and <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk>

Notes: All academies are categorised as either SATs or MATs (type of Trust). The ‘type of establishment’ can be Converter, Free School, Sponsored, Studio or UTC. These establishment types can be either SAT or MAT. A Free School can be set up as a single entity (SAT) or can be part of a MAT. For example, of the 5 free schools in Coventry, 4 are MATs and one is a UTC; the only SAT is a Converter academy. In Devon, both SATs are free schools. UTCs can be listed by Trust type or by

¹ includes Church schools but excludes Special schools

² excludes Free schools

establishment type: e.g., in Portsmouth on the DfE spreadsheet the UTC is a SAT, on the website it is a free school.

Diocesan MATs

Dioceses are geographically organised, mainly corresponding to counties, as they existed before the Local Government Act 1972. There are 42 Church of England dioceses. 26% of primary schools and 6% of secondary schools are designated 'Church of England', a total of 4632 schools, of which 1535 are academies. The Church of England claims to be the "biggest provider of academies in England"; it operates 254 MATs (www.churchofengland.org).

There are more than 2122 catholic schools and colleges in England and Wales (10% of national state funded schools) (www.catholiceducation.org.uk). Before 2010, most were voluntary aided; since 2010 many have converted to academy status, organised within 22 dioceses each with an education board or service.

Dioceses have an important role in locality working. While many cover several local authority areas, their websites stress their commitment to local communities: e.g., "*churches and schools exist to serve their local communities*" (Durham and Newcastle.org – 107 schools in 10 LA areas).

Baroness Warsi, on 6 April 2011, described the role of the catholic church in building social engagement and civic responsibility:

"It has been communities, often led by the Church which has been at the cutting edge of tackling drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime, broken families, poor standards in health and education.... it would be impossible to discuss the Catholic contribution to social action without acknowledging the Church's work on education. In this country, schools are your single largest civic contribution."

(www.gov.uk/government/speeches/building-a-new-culture-of-social-responsibility)

There is a strong argument, therefore, that Diocesan schools also operate on a locality basis, as their governance is via their local diocesan board of education, and they are closely linked into local parishes.

Discussion of the data

1. There are currently 1,460 MATs in England that manage at least two schools. 29 have 26 schools or more; 85 have 12 – 25 schools and 259 have 6-11 schools. 6/10 MATs have five schools or fewer. 55% of state-funded pupils are in an academy. 86% of academies are in a MAT of at least two schools. (NGA, 2021: 1)
2. Schools in MATs appear to be organised largely in local MATs. If Diocesan schools were to be included in the percentage in column 1 of Table 1 (as also 'local' by virtue of association with local parishes), the percentage of 'local' MATs would be even higher. For example, the % of 'local' schools in Wigan would double from 33% to 66% because 10 of the 30 schools are in a Diocesan MAT. The data indicates that the majority of converter schools, which had a free choice, chose to form a SAT, are in a single school MAT or joined or formed a local MAT. In Essex, for example, 68% of Trusts operate only in Essex and 5 MATs are formed of single schools. Of the cross-LA

MATs which have only 1 school in Essex, 1 is in a Diocesan MAT which has 4 schools in neighbouring Thurrock; 1, located on the Cambridge/Essex border, is in a MAT which has 8 schools geographically close, in southern Cambridge. Only 2 are in large MATs (of 20 or more schools).

3. There are many maintained schools which have chosen not to become academies but to remain as LA-maintained. Nationally that is currently 66% of primary schools and 21% of secondaries. The 2021 annual school governance survey (NGA, 2021, p.10) found that 63% of maintained schools were not considering joining a MAT and a further 12% had considered it but decided against.
4. The number of schools choosing to join the large MATs (defined as over 20 schools) is small; where this occurs, it appears to be where the MAT originated in the locality and/or has a large presence in that LA. Outward Grange MAT with 10 schools in Wakefield out of a total of 38 in the MAT, is one example; GLF MAT with 23 schools out of 41 in Surrey is another example. Otherwise, there are practically no cases of converter schools choosing large MATs.
5. Although this is only a 10% sample, the mixture of counties, cities and boroughs in the sample indicates that this could be a guide to the national pattern. However, there are Northern LAs with larger numbers of previously voluntary aided schools and some LAs with very few academies, such as Hampshire (with only 13% of its schools being academies but half of its secondaries). This could present a different picture and of course the pattern could change if the DfE's MAT drive accelerates.
6. The high percentage of schools in these 16 LAs which are single schools in a MAT is an anomaly in the system. This is still the case some years after Lord Nash argued for clusters as being the most efficient model. Together with the number of SATs, this presents a large number of schools outside of LA support and it is unclear how far they gain the support they need from networks or partnerships of varying degrees of formality. A headteacher interviewee in a recent study (Cousin and Crossley-Holland, 2021) described the deregulated market for school improvement as 'bewildering' with too many providers not accountable for the impact of their support and a lack of quality assurance.
7. There are many examples of school-led partnerships working across LAs which are bordering. These draw on the strength of local networks. The DfE (2022) summary of learning from the Opportunity Areas programme points out that "Delivery partners cover an area wider than the designated area, for example across all districts within a shire county. Good practice does not observe lines on a map or organisational boundaries."

Factors explaining the predominance of local MATs

The reasons why schools favour staying linked to the locality have been reported by researchers for some time (Greany and Higham, 2018). These include: the importance of relationships and local knowledge, the sharing of experience and recognition of common challenges, the opportunity to share resources to tackle these challenges, the commitment to the place in which they may well live, and the feeling of keeping some measure of control. These are summarised in the infographic (see Appendix A) which has been produced by the [LocalED 2025 Project](#).

Greany and Kamp (2022) in 'Leading Educational Networks-Theory Policy and Practice', which drew on international case studies and current research, noted that all schools are involved in a range of school improvement networks (p71). They call on policy makers *"to focus on how the middle tier can best facilitate networks...this requires clarity on the desired role of the reshaped middle tier together with a continued importance of commitment to place to all schools and therefore all communities... (it) requires the adoption of a local solution mindset and co-design approach across all aspects of policy development and enactment."* (2022 p190).

The book outlines an English case study 'Brampton', an anonymised LA that is in an Opportunity Area. The Strategy Group has been successful in pulling together MATs and maintained schools. One MAT CEO commented *"I think the (Strategy) Group has had a positive role in getting us to where we are now...for example we are having regular 'research breakfasts' looking at evidence. We are talking about this as a group as the best thing that we have ever done. We have a framework for CPD available across Brampton and we are optimistic about developing a strategic approach to school improvement across Brampton"* (p70).

Greany and Kamp (2022) argue that networks are not a panacea and require a different facilitative leadership, both tough and enabling, of the kind Singapore has developed through their Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), and structures with a Foundation Board and an independent chair. Their focus was on school improvement. They make the telling argument that effective school improvement, if it is to be embedded, needs a long-term approach, which the best schools and MATs have developed, and which can pay attention to the 'adaptive challenges' that follow initial programme implementation. They point out the importance of Opportunity Area Partnerships having the support of both the LA and the DfE and both were providing funding.

The emphasis in this section has been on the continued pull of MATs and academies towards their local areas. Of course, there is no reason why MATs operating across several LAs could not organise themselves to play a full part in the local agenda and a number in their mission statements are committed to doing so. As one MAT CEO of a Trust with 14 schools operating across several LAs commented, after reading a draft of this paper: *"I agree completely with your premise that MATs need to link in and be part of their locality ecosystem"*.

There can be an assumption so far that locality working means within current local authority boundaries. The [LocalED 2025 Project in the North of Tyne](#) which includes three local authorities, is testing out whether there can be advantages to organising some school improvement programmes across a combined authority while still retaining the strengths of locality working. The Combined Authority, working with the three LAs, has identified five programmes to test this out. The Cabinet has voted nearly £1m to support it. One brings together school improvement leads from MATs and LAs and accredits them. Anecdotally, the DfE have acknowledged that this is a gap in the system. They are also coordinating the largest education focussed anti-poverty programme in the country. It is clear there are gains from being able to scan a wider area to identify and share best practice, with local areas

free to adapt the practice to their local circumstances. They all see advantages in linking to the Combined Authority skills and adult education roles and employer links.

The importance of ‘place’

The argument that ‘place’ is a central feature shaping life experiences and the ‘geography of opportunity’ in which schools are situated has been persuasively made (Butler and Sinclair, 2020). Cousin and Crossley-Holland (2021: p38) summarise the benefits of place-based approaches: provision of essential ‘glue’ or coordination across an area and services; mobilisation of a collective sense of responsibility to reduce competition which drives local hierarchies and increases the effects of disadvantage; addressing contextual factors which are barriers to achievement; potential to increase cost-effectiveness and share good practice; engagement of teachers, pupils and communities via identification with; and loyalty to ‘place’.

The DfE award of £108M to the Opportunity Areas programme was in recognition of the importance of ‘place’: Michelle Donelan, the then Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, cited benefits as: supported innovation; sharing learning around the system; improvements in key measures including attendance, progression and pupil outcomes; sustainable culture change and ‘value-for-money’ (cited Cousin and Greany, 2022: p.32).

MATs’ role in the locality agenda

This section considers why the locality agenda is important for MATs and how their role might develop. MAT leaders in the locality, where possible Chairs of MAT Boards and CEOs, need to meet regularly with each other and with maintained schools to establish partnership principles driven by what will best meet the needs of the pupils in the locality and identify the priority areas for collaboration. They could include:

1. Strategic engagements with local agencies, especially to support vulnerable pupils.

MATs will be engaging with local agencies that support vulnerable pupils such as health, the police, the LA and charities at an operational level, as the White Paper puts it, whose needs extend ‘beyond the (school) gate’. They need to help shape policy. The engagement with local bodies strategically needs to extend to skills and careers and relationships with employers and community leaders, especially where there are significant minority communities.

Higher Education are very significant partners in many localities. This will become even more important as the Combined Authorities are given greater responsibilities in some of these areas. It would be very difficult for these bodies to engage with MATs individually. The Government’s new intention to reform the curriculum along the lines advocated by the Times Education Commission and place a much greater emphasis on vocational education will make these strategic relationships with the Combined Authorities, local enterprise partnerships, universities and FE colleges much more important.

2. School Improvement.

As Greany and Kemp’s ‘Brampton’ example has recognised, there is a local school

improvement task. This is very important for the transition to full academization where the DfE seem to be set on removing the LA role in school improvement and not providing an alternative for many schools which are not part of MATs.

If the move to full academicization doesn't happen, as it may well not in several areas, local collaboration will remain even more important. The Brampton discussions have underlined that there will be a continuing need to collaborate beyond that such as on sharing best practice; meeting local challenges; collaborating on delivering CPD and on recruitment and retention. The nirvana of all MATs being strong is not going to be achieved without this sort of approach. MATs will need support as well from time to time. This may be particularly important for one of the 53 academies which were a long way from other schools in that MAT. Local capacity will be critical as will be the need for an effective independent broker to unlock it.

3. Helping shape the local system.

MATs have an interest in the shape of the fully academicized system that emerges, if that is what transpires. There needs to be a local strategy. So far, the DfE have not produced any information about how they intend to approach the move to academicization. As one primary Chair of Governors recently commented to me, it was not sensible to set up a system where children could face an education through the various phases overseen by 5 different trusts.

There also needs to be a strategic view taken of provision such as special schools and alternative provision which serve the whole area and, in some cases, the sub-region.

Nor does it make any sense to have so many MATs with only one school in a locality. There were 53 examples from our 16 LAs sample. In some cases, the distance to another school in that MAT might be easily managed but that would not be the case for many of them. Proactive LAs are pulling together with partners an agreed set of principles to help move to all schools becoming an academy in the interest of what is best for the locality and for parents and children. Parents will have to live with the consequences of the decisions for long afterwards. There is the risk that the decisions that could be embedded for the long term could turn on how well the current school leaders get on with each other. MATs need to be helping shape the pattern.

4. Pupil admissions.

Giving support to the LA and Dioceses in being responsible for setting admissions policies for the locality in the interests of pupils and parents and in administering all pupil admissions, as many have advocated including recently (Sam Freedman, Institute of Government, and Tom Richmond, EDSK). Many LAs, with the agreement of academies, continue to administer pupil admissions at the main transition points and in year.

5. Identification with the locality and its history and institutions.

This will be very important to staff, many of whom will live in the locality and to the

pupils and parents. A survey found that 80% of people felt a strong attachment to their area compared to 75% who identified with national government (Cox and Jeffrey 2014 p1). The further away from London you went, the more people identified with their local area than with London.

Professor Goodhart underlined how much pupils were rooted in the area that their schools were in as 3 in 5 pupils aged 14 went on to live within 20 miles of it ('Road to Somewhere', 2017, p15). This argument would be accepted without question in a discussion about 'Levelling Up' which prioritises the importance of local solutions.

6. Scope for reducing costs.

There is going to be a huge pressure on funding and local collaboration provides one way to share costs. Do all medium sized MATs need their own independent support services functions? Large, competing private sector firms manage to share back-office functions.

7. Accountability and communication with local stakeholders.

There is a need to look again at how MATs, (and schools generally) communicate with their parents and the local community. The current 4-yearly, anodyne Ofsted report may satisfy the DfE and reassure parents that the school is meeting national requirements, but it provides very limited and infrequent quality assured information. [One of our pilots](#) is exploring what improvement could be made to provide much more frequent and useful information for parents, carers and the community. The White Paper proposed a 'Parent Pledge': it will be interesting to see how the DfE envisages schools keeping parents informed of its delivery.

What kind of structure or structures?

These seven areas set a very ambitious agenda and the structures that could enable MAT engagement could take several forms depending on local arrangements. There may well need to be several bodies depending on how the LA wishes to discharge its statutory and community roles.

Greany and Kamp (2022) acknowledge the barriers to working together on school improvement, including the unwillingness to share data and teachers using different terminology. They talk positively about the process which Brampton used, which was to pull together a steering group of leaders which included MAT CEOs, to brainstorm a vision and set of principles which they felt met the locality's needs. The DfE and LA provided support for local solutions and funding. They agreed an independent Chair, a foundation Board and a CEO with the status, recognition and the ability to be able to lead; to be enabling but also tough when needed to resolve tensions. The ability of the body to really analyse problems, to find solutions and see through the behaviour change necessary for effective implementation was key. The Brampton focus was school improvement, but the model could support a broader agenda including some of the items mentioned above.

The process evaluations from the Opportunity Areas programme (2017 – 2022), available on the DfE website, note the importance of a strong local leadership Board to broker relationships and steer action. The implementation process review (Easton et al., 2018)

cites the importance of brokering partnerships between LAs, early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, health professionals and voluntary and community organisations. They suggest a strength of the programme was the use of an 'honest broker', a dedicated LA link officer whose local knowledge ensured the alignment of activity and resources with other programmes.

Cousin and Greany (2022: pp.25-26) cite several studies which emphasise the importance of 'transitional' structures to give a strategic overview of services 'around the school'. These structures gain legitimacy through having representatives of all local stakeholders and are important mechanisms in attempts to 'relandscape' the local system.

Such structures go beyond the benefits of 'networks' or 'partnerships', which can be more or less formal. Greany and Higham (2018) found that all schools collaborated to some extent in a range of networks.

Cousin and Gu (2022) describe the 'constantly evolving structural complexity of inter-school partnership'. They pull together a wealth of evaluation literature of different types of partnership, emphasising that partnership working needs a concerted effort and incurs 'transaction costs' such as time, energy and funding. Their 4-stage process involves: sharing aims so that each member has something to gain; establishing protocols to reinforce an ethos of equity and trust; having an evidence-based rationale for actions; and planning, monitoring and quality assurance.

Cousin and Greany (2022, p.27) summarise a range of literature (Gilbert, 2017, Hadfield and Ainscow, 2018, Cousin and Gu, 2021, Greany and Kamp, 2022) to suggest a list of conditions for transitional structures, or any formal partnership working, to be effective:

1. Partners who see clear and tangible benefits from collaboration.
2. Trust between partners, established through the careful development of relationships amongst key actors.
3. Clear goals and agreements between partners.
4. Forms of leadership that are skilful in managing tensions.

They reinforce the value of an intermediary organisation in its ability to:

- Carry out contextual analysis of a local system's capacity for collaborative working.
- Identify areas of outstanding practice and how to apply this to support system level improvement.
- Broker relationships across professional and social boundaries to increase exposure to sources of expertise and innovative practice.
- Enable the 'micro-mobilisation' of successful head teachers to take on system leadership roles, in combination with the macro-mobilisation of sufficient school leaders at all levels to create a professional movement with sufficient momentum to overcome internal and external resistance.
- Create a strong political mandate at national and local levels to create conditions to support collaborative local action. This, they advise, requires "new thinking, attitudes and relationships across education systems" ... and that inequalities of power are addressed.

Cousin and Greany (2022, p.27)

Conclusions

There is a strong argument for strengthening locality working and bringing greater cohesion across a local area. Schools wish to retain strong links to their localities in some form, as both maintained, and converter schools have demonstrated by their actions. Discussion about what constitutes a strong MAT needs to include their role in localities.

The Opportunity Areas provide examples of how a place-based approach can contribute to the levelling up agenda by addressing long-standing issues with collaborative innovations.

The work in North of Tyne is beginning to demonstrate that there is an argument for the locality for some programmes operating across a medium sized Combined Authority.

MATs in their own interest and in that of their pupils and staff need to be leading advocates for locality working whether they operate in one LA or many. They could play an important role in advocating with the DfE nationally, and with the Regional Development Directors locally, for the need for such local partnerships and support them with their subscriptions. They would provide a positive platform to tackle the outstanding issues that confront the system together and to demonstrate their commitment and accountability to the local stakeholders.

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WHY LOCALITY-BASED APPROACHES BUILD STRONG SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE PUPILS

Local solutions are therefore often more cost effective

Each locality's challenges and opportunities are different

Localities-based approaches can generate sustainable local capacity

Collaboration at local level provides the glue and can bring different agencies together

Identity and place matter

Relationships and collaboration are as important as data

Although national oversight is important...

localled2025.org.uk (2022) - Developing new locality models for English schools