

Schools are facing unprecedented challenges as a result of COVID-19. Is this really the right time to press ahead with such a significant decision?

Whilst COVID-19 has caused unprecedented disruption to the smooth running of schools and has significantly increased responsibilities and workload for headteachers and governors, establishing MATs is a strategic objective which will benefit pupils and staff for generations to come.

COVID-19 has highlighted the strength and resilience of MATs in response to a crisis. Schools are stronger when they collaborate. During the pandemic MATs have been able to reduce the workload for individual headteachers, teachers and support staff by allowing for a common approach to undertaking risk assessments for schools, joint procurement of PPE and signage, implementing schemes to provide free school meals vouchers to vulnerable families and providing appropriate learning materials for pupils during lockdown. It is easier for larger organisations to allocate resources to these activities than it is for individual schools.

Why are schools being allocated to a single MAT in a predefined geographical area rather than being allowed to form smaller groupings themselves?

The need for planned geography lies at the heart of the Diocesan academisation programme for four main reasons:

1. Growth cannot be sporadic or dictated solely by local or generational circumstance. Any MAT being created can accommodate local relationships via the hub model, but it cannot be allowed to degenerate into haphazardness, because in those circumstances, it will lose its underpinning coherence and so be much less likely to last.
2. A MAT has to be scalable. It must be able to grow to the right size without being allowed to grow too big. Any MAT that is too small will not get sufficient economies of scale and the benefits of enhanced collaboration and sharing of expertise. Any MAT that is too big will get diseconomies of scale and lose tightness of collaboration and sharing of expertise. Key milestones are hitting 3,000 pupils and not going much beyond 10,000. Family groups have to be planned to accommodate the right level of scalability.
3. Closely related to this, it has to be sustainable. Any MAT has to have the capacity to hit critical mass and survive and thrive on its own internal resources. MATs that are too small, or in any other sense limited, will stand less chance of surviving and thriving.
4. Finally, the Trustees are advocating this academisation plan as their strategy for the future. For that reason, it has to be generationally coherent. We need to leave something behind that can be peopled and understood by those who follow in, let us say, forty years' time. MATs are therefore designed along deanery and local authority lines, so that they have an immediately recognisable and intelligible ecclesial and local structure.

What is a hub?

A **hub** is a group of schools, which have converted to become academies, working together within a MAT. The arrangement will be based on deaneries. Any hub is part of the same legal entity as the MAT, under the Trust Board of Directors and reports to the MAT's CEO. It can have an Executive Leader with delegated powers under a scheme of delegation. Central office functions can be shared among schools in the hub.

What are the benefits of academies?

- MATs provide a formal framework for collaboration, shared curriculum expertise across schools and enhanced opportunities for sharing good practice in a variety of settings and phases.
- Curriculum support for secondary schools by primaries and for primaries by secondaries in targeted areas – with possible cross-phase teaching – will enhance pupils' learning and enrich professional practice.
- Formal collaboration frameworks allow for more shared planning, more shared examples of good practice, more shared resources and more shared assessment and moderation.
- Inbuilt collaboration facilitates buddying/mentoring systems to enhance teaching and learning and enriches school-to-school support.
- Shared curriculum events such as Science Days, Languages Days and shared concerts become much more practicable.
- Greater opportunities for career progression enable schools to grow their own leaders. The Ambition Institute research shows that MATs have much higher rates of promotion from classroom teacher to middle leadership, particularly at primary school, than non-MAT schools.
- Improved recruitment and retention. The evidence is that MATs, with the flexibility and career progression opportunities they allow, attract more applications.
- **In short, MATs systemically enrich professional dialogue and practice, thereby improving pupils' learning experience.**

What about federations? They can deliver the same benefits.

Federations can deliver the same benefits and have previously been used to support collaboration between small clusters of schools, but the lack of a hard legal structure means that they tend to be as good as the people working within them; this is no bad thing in itself, but they do not often survive generational shifts in personnel. They are therefore less attractive as a long-term sustainable solution desired by the Trustees to the pressures our sector is facing.

How will academies make a difference to the challenges we face? How would MATs help with falling pupil roll or lack of finance or deficits in schools? Will there be more money for schools?

The principle of a problem shared being a problem halved will apply: in MATs, headteachers by definition no longer struggle alone; they are key members of a larger network with a CEO having overall responsibility. The very existence of a CEO with oversight of a group of schools allows for a more coordinated approach in mitigating risks to that group, and to the sector as a whole.

With government borrowing at record levels and a contracting economy, there is very little chance that more money will be put into schools. We therefore have to make economies where we can and MATs will help to alleviate the stress schools are under. They will not remove that stress, but they will help; in fact, they are the best mechanism available to us to create that help.

As far as falling rolls are concerned, the more money that can be directed back into front-line education through economies of scale, and the better the educational provision that MAT structure will provide, the more popular it will prove with parents. The hard fact is that the only way in our power to increase numbers is to render ourselves more attractive to parents who are applying elsewhere.

Furthermore, academies are able to share staff across schools and deploy them flexibly to respond to cost pressures from falling roll.

How can Catholic Academy Trusts better respond to falling rolls than VA Schools?

When schools come together in MATs they become part of the same legal organisation. The MAT can drive down costs for schools through a more flexible approach to sharing staff, resources and even classes and pupils to meet the challenges of balancing budgets against a declining roll. A MAT is the vehicle for enhanced collaboration and innovative solutions. The determination, resilience, creativity and ingenuity of MAT leaders will be key to finding sustainable solutions to continue to provide a rich Catholic education in these challenging times. The CEO's oversight of a group of schools will allow for a more co-ordinated approach in mitigating risks.

MATs will not ultimately save a school from closure. A MAT cannot resist the inevitable tide of pupil numbers declining to unviable numbers. What a MAT can do, however, is buy us time until pupil numbers increase.

Will schools lose their individuality when they become part of a MAT?

No. MATs enshrine the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity which underpin Catholic Social Teaching. Subsidiarity – decisions are best made by those who are closest to their effects – is key: its express purpose is to avoid excessive centralisation. This can find expression in the MAT's delegation matrix. Our pupils are best served if schools keep their individual charism.

How do MATs promote career progression?

MATs can provide a coherent plan for 'talent management' and as a consequence are better placed to keep their expertise within the Trust rather than losing high quality staff elsewhere. MATs give staff the opportunity to move from school to school, without changing employer, and experience new challenges in different contexts. This enables them to gain experience in a larger organisation, take on promotions and additional responsibility and so be less likely to leave.

Evidence can be found by clicking here: <https://www.ambition.org.uk/research-and-insight/people-power/>.

What is the cost of academisation for the school and how will this be funded? If the cost of academisation is higher than the grant of £25,000 given to schools converting to become an academy, how will the school be able to cover the extra amount? If the school spends less than the £25,000 grant given, will the school keep the remainder?

The £25,000 grant is a contribution to each school's conversion costs. The conversion costs approximate to £25,000. If the costs can be contained within the grant, the school keeps any surplus. If costs exceed the grant the school will need to fund this. It is possible to make some small efficiency savings by pooling the conversion grant across a number of schools converting at the same time.