

# The MATs research project

Emergent findings

Sue Lewis Senior Research Lead



# We will cover

- An introduction to research and evaluation at Ofsted, including our current and future activities
- The MAT research project itself including
  - key questions
  - the methodology and sample
  - emergent findings
  - next steps

# Introduction to Research and Evaluation at Ofsted



# Fundamental to our strategy

## Intelligent

- **Valid measures**
- **A skilled workforce**
- Informative grading
- **Aggregation of insight**

## Responsible

- **Responsive and engaged**
- **Understanding the consequences**
- Responsible intervention
- Addressing our audience

## Focused

- Prioritising inspection
- Keeping children safe
- Keeping pace
- Groups
- Right framework

# The research programme

- 2-year programme (18-19) agreed with EB
- Around 20 research and evaluation projects
- Cross-remit
- Linked to strategic priorities, e.g. curriculum, EIF
- Led by the Research and Evaluation team in Corporate Strategy

# Research practice

- HMCI expects us to conduct research that is comparable to the best educational research organisations in the country if not the world
- This means adhering to the professional standards within the discipline. Including:
  - Projects are underpinned by literature reviews and data analysis, and informed by expert advisory groups
  - Scoping is detailed and fully documented
  - Coding practice is transparent, scrutinised by managers and uses professional software
  - Ethical, safeguarding, legal and equalities considerations are considered fully and policies strictly upheld

# Our approach to research

- No one method – mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches depending on project needs
- Our research is co-produced between researchers and inspectors
  - Each project co-lead by a research lead and an Inspector lead
  - Inspectors collaborate on instrument development, lead on visits, and provide key insight and work collaboratively with the research team
  - R&E is expected to drive projects forward and make sure the programme meets the expectations set by the Board

# Multi Academy Trust (MAT) Research Project:





# Introduction

- MATs have become a very central part of the education system
- Ofsted does not inspect MATs. However, by definition we inspect a lot of schools that are part of a MAT. We also do summary evaluations of MATs
- Individual regions hold regular discussions with MAT leaders
- Some criticisms of our expertise in this area (e.g. Hill, 2017; David Carter, often)
- As an organisation, we need to ensure we fully understand MAT contexts
- Many MATs do not have more than one or two academies within them; our interest lay in exploring those which have

# Research questions

- What are the main functions of a MAT?
- What does it mean for a school to be part of a MAT?
- What are the implications for inspector training and inspection practice and guidance

# Methodology

- A qualitative study – interviewing key personnel within MAT organisation and schools
- Who we talked with, what we talked with them about, our key questions and our approach to analysis directed by:
  - A literature review
  - Discussions with an expert panel
  - Discussions with HMI and other colleagues
  - Our current knowledge of the MAT system – what we did know and what we had little information about.

# Identifying the sample of MATs and schools

- We wanted to find out
  - whether MAT size and/or type was a critical determinant in the functions they carried out
  - whether schools' view of the MAT was influenced by factors such as whether they were sponsored academies or convertor academies, previously in difficulties or a good or better school, the length of time they had been in the MAT and so on
  - whether any common challenges or benefits were identified regardless of size, demographics, pre conversion status etc
  - how MAT leaders made decisions about the level of support offered or the amount of central control

The sample of MATs and schools visited reflected the diversity of MATs and their schools but

- Did not include MATs with less than five schools
- Excluded MATs and schools that regions requested should not be visited
- Excluded schools due an inspection that term or had just been inspected
- This meant that the sample could only be considered to be representative of larger MATs

# The sample

- We visited
  - 41 MATS representative of the diversity of MATs with more than 5 schools
  - 121 schools within these MATs
  
- We talked with
  - MAT CEOs and Board representatives
  - Headteacher of each school, middle leaders and representatives of any local governing body

# What we asked about included

- MAT vision and values
- The benefits and challenges/ drawbacks of being in a MAT
- The MAT's role in determining the curriculum, the approach to teaching and learning, behaviour and exclusions
- MAT role in teacher recruitment and continuing professional development, succession planning
- What each group considered to be the key functions of a MAT

# Findings





# Types of MATs

- In our sample it was also possible to identify different 'types' of MATs, differentiated by the services, support or interventions they offer or impose
- These were often underpinned by their vision and values and the contextual and historical features such as how the MAT had evolved

# Types of MATs

- At one extreme are MATs that have little role in the curriculum or quality assurance, but appear to 'broker' certain services
- In contrast there are MATs who play a central role in directing almost all aspects of school life
- In between there are MATs who take varying leads in back office and more academic interventions and provide a range of central services
- However, there are some 'core functions which almost all MATs appear to carry out – back office support (finance, some premise/ buildings support, training for safeguarding/ health and safety and an annual health check.
- MAT trusts recognised their accountability for the governance of the schools within the MAT, but how they interpreted this varied considerably particularly in terms of local governance and strategic planning

# MAT functions: performance and accountability

- While many MATs evaluate their schools, and conclude from this the performance of the trust, not many evaluate their own performance
- Very few had ways of self-assessing whether their working practices were the most effective ones to meet the Trust's aims
- Only a few mentioned the Regional Schools Commissioners and the Department for Education and how they were held to account by these. In these instances, the RSC were seen as offering useful challenge and access to additional funds

# MAT growth

- MAT growth was clearly seen as important as offering potential for both further resource and influence, but comes with downsides.
- School staff worry about the impact of geographical spread and the impact of new systems that come with growth
- They talked about losing their distinctiveness, and asked: what size is the right size for **this MAT?**
- Individual schools feel the loss of local governance whilst understanding the trade off between that and the benefits of being part of the MAT.
- Local governors appear to play very different roles in MAT schools to those in single schools; some felt that there was a danger of the MAT not being as much in touch with the local community and its needs as a result.

# Functions: Self review and strategic planning for both the MAT and schools

- Mechanisms for schools and other stakeholders to influence Trust priorities or judgements, or strategy were at 'an early stage of development' in many Trusts.
- Some HTs and local governors who previously had a strategic role reported that as the Trust grew, their role diminished and their skills not fully used.
- School self- and-peer review was an almost universally valued part of the package for schools and an important way for the MAT to keep sight of schools' strengths and needs.

# Functions: direct or indirect role in the curriculum

- Almost all CEOs said that the schools were responsible for the curriculum, but that guidance was given about balance and self review or school 'health checks' inevitably involved looking at all or parts of the curriculum
- Schools were given curriculum responsibility 'so that they could adapt to the needs of their pupils and communities', but the MAT checked on breadth and balance
- However common approaches to assessment were seen as facilitating MAT-wide review and comparisons. This meant that similar examination boards were used; staff from different schools shared practice as they moderated work or followed the same syllabi
- A small number of MATs and their schools indicated they were moving towards a more common curriculum, indicating they were drawing on each others' strengths in different subjects, particularly in non core subjects to do so.

# Curriculum

- Even where MATs were not directly determining or influencing the curriculum, the sharing of training, teacher resources and staff expertise, including peer support and joint planning, meant that schools were often in practice drawing closer together in terms of curriculum approach and indeed content
- MAT leaders indicated they were prepared to set up a particular model of curriculum in schools which were perceived as weaker: *'we gave them 'Cornerstones' to give them confidence until they can move to more creative curriculum.'*

# Functions: direct or indirect role in behaviour and exclusions

- MATs indicated either
  - there was a MATs behaviour policy and HTs were responsible for its implementation, reporting to trust on this; or
  - individual school's behaviour policy and its implementation were expected to be in line with the MAT's aims and values
  - MAT leaders and school leaders often saw the aims and values as pivotal to the ethos and climate for learning they wanted to promote within the school and pupils' behaviour being an important part of that

All MATs indicated that exclusions were the responsibility of the HT and the local governing body but brought to the attention of the CEO prior to exclusion



However, in the case of a sponsored academy, previously in difficulties MAT leaders indicated that



- The first task was often to 'sort out the behaviour'
- The MAT and school would draw on the expertise of its central team (where there was one) or other schools in the group to support staff.
- Individual MATs had lead behaviour specialists or drew on the expertise of a special school within their MAT to support
- School leaders including middle leaders spoke highly of any external support they could access to enable staff to create more bespoke responses to the needs of individual pupils; some lamented the loss of access to such specialists from the local authority.

# What does it mean for a school to be part of a MAT?



## School leaders, including middle leaders and governors

- Were very positive about the benefits of belonging to a MAT, often indicating that this was not how they had felt prior to MAT entry
- Most struggled to articulate any drawbacks but when they did put this within the context of needing to balance drawbacks against the many benefits

# Benefits of being in a MAT

- School staff and governors value the support gained from MATs for back room services and school assessment
- Often head teachers indicated they spent more time themselves in classrooms and supporting their staff as they were no longer having to do the 'back room stuff'.
- Challenging reviews are strongly supported by school leaders and local governors. Leaders almost all praise the rigour of the accountability systems, identifying it as thorough, challenging and relevant to their school. Many say this is more rigorous than any holding to account previously.
- Middle leaders valued a range of opportunities around curriculum, teaching and learning, CPD and leadership development they say they would not have had previously.

# Benefits of being in a MAT

- The power of collaboration: visits, joint CPD, sharing of subject expertise re. curriculum and assessment; middle/ subject leaders may have a lead roles across schools; opportunities to develop as leaders within MAT
- General sense of mutual support and growth, but also support for working with groups of pupils e.g. SEND
- Support for recruitment and retention including shared appointments, ability to gain promotion within the Trust, work across different schools seen as providing real career development for staff

# Drawbacks of being in a MAT

- Some clearly feared the loss of autonomy – but only a very few schools felt it constrained their work to any significant level; most saw it as a necessary trade off with what they gained from the MAT.
- Finance was the most commonly mentioned drawback, alongside logistics linked to MAT growth and geographical spread
- SEND also mentioned by a few as a drawback – limited access to LA services
- In a few MATs and schools individual leaders mentioned the challenge of turbulence and uncertainty, particularly for sponsored academies
- Sometimes common systems were seen as too time consuming e.g. on recruitment

## Next steps

- Finalising the report
- Continuing to disseminate findings
- Full report published in April

Any comments and reflections to

- [Donna.Neill@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:Donna.Neill@ofsted.gov.uk)
- [Naseef. Huda@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:Naseef.Huda@ofsted.gov.uk)



# Thank you



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