

DRIVING SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS

Centralisation: what, how and why?

Centralising services in multi-academy trusts is carried out to bring efficiencies. But what can be centralised, how can it work and what are the benefits?

What do we mean by centralisation? For MATs, the goal is to achieve consistent standards across its schools and, unsurprisingly, this doesn't happen overnight. When done well, centralisation enables you to:

- share best practice
- support each other and encourage collaboration
- streamline standard documents and processes to reduce workload
- save time and money
- improve pupil outcomes
- drive consistency and efficiency.

If you're thinking about centralising services in your MAT, read on to find out what is commonly done.

Centralisation or collaboration?

The fear for schools when centralisation is discussed is the loss of autonomy and local knowledge and experience that exists within them. Joining a MAT can feel like a takeover so explaining the intended benefits of the partnership can help alleviate concerns.

If centralisation of some key tasks saves time and money, that time and money can be reinvested into teaching pupils and improving outcomes. Focusing on collaboration with other schools and the time saved for school leaders to spend on improving pupil outcomes and wellbeing can be appealing.



Pros and cons

Centralisation is all about weighing up the pros and cons of different functions.

- Will centralising save money?
- Will the quality of the service be better?
- Will any knowledge, skills or expertise be lost?
- Will pupils and staff benefit?

Before centralising, consult with the individual academies as there may be different areas of expertise (e.g. one may have a particularly strong IT team). By involving the individual academies, the MAT is more likely to ensure that appropriate services are provided at the right level, and that schools are on board. Everyone needs to believe in the vision and culture of the MAT for collaboration to be successful.

What can be centralised?

‘Back office’ functions, such as HR, finance, IT and data management, are commonly centralised with the aim of giving school leaders more time to focus on teaching and learning, the curriculum and pastoral care. These are some things to consider for each of these aspects.

HR

Standardising HR across a MAT saves the time and workload of HR teams in individual schools on administration tasks. Where schools from different local authorities join a MAT, the MAT becomes the new employer. Schools bring different contracts and ways of working with them and centralising HR removes these inconsistencies.

Payroll can be centralised too, along with policies such as those on recruitment, discipline, absence and pay. This ensures a single message on practice and procedure exists on each site.



The biggest change is likely to be that of culture. Schools are used to getting HR and other support from their LA and it can be scary for it to be bought in-house. There may be an attitude of 'that's the way we've always done things' and a fear of change. The culture needs to move to one where HR and the central team are trusted allies, there to support and advise.

Finance

A MAT will need to easily be able to review the financial information of each academy on a timely basis. Centralising finance systems has several benefits.

1. Standalone finance systems in individual schools are likely to only be accessible in each school which isn't helpful when needing to review budgets across the MAT. It's simpler to review, compare and manage spending if all the schools in the MAT are using the same systems and processes.
2. Reporting is also made easier by using the same format. Reports can be produced at any time, at any level, whether by individual academy or for the MAT.
3. Individual schools remain responsible for choosing how to allocate their budgets, and the time saved can free up finance staff to focus on maximising school resources.
4. Collective procurement power increases for high value purchases. Quotes for legal support, for example, will be cheaper when done collectively.

Some things may still be better to procure at a local level which is a great way to build links with businesses in the local community.

Data management

If different schools have different pupil tracking systems, it would be difficult to understand what was going on across the MAT at any one time. [DfE guidance](#) recommends standardising data collection and quality assurance processes across a MAT. This means that consistent information is collected and reported to the board so they can easily digest findings and make performance comparisons between schools.



Standardised data management, progress tracking and QA systems also make it easier to identify strengths and weaknesses in the same subject areas across individual schools and where they can collaborate more closely to support each other.

Reducing workload

An intranet or shared area for teaching resources makes it easier for leadership teams across schools to monitor planning, assess the quality of what is being delivered and compare across departments. Centralising lesson plans and resources eliminates the need for each department in the MAT to create separate plans, helping to save time and reduce teacher workload.

Collaboration between schools in a MAT allows good practice to be identified more easily, which can be shared through coaching and delivering CPD in-house. This can mean savings on consultants or course fees, as well as travel if the schools are geographically close.

Communication

If you're going to centralise HR procedures and policies and encourage staff to collaborate across schools, it makes sense to have a secure centralised communications system or shared intranet. Think of it as a company who has multiple teams (marketing, finance, IT, sales etc.) but needs access to the same resources such as HR forms, a central calendar or annual leave booking.

To keep all schools up to date and involved, and governors and trustees too, communicate regularly using a variety of platforms, such as:

- regular bulletins from the central team
- a CEO newsletter
- regular headteacher meetings
- a central calendar
- trust-wide update meetings.



Central team

Where services are centralised, someone must be responsible for overseeing the effectiveness of the services provided (e.g. a chief operating officer or finance director). The right people with the right skills should be in these roles as early as possible to look at efficiencies across the MAT.

Individual schools are likely to still have business managers and HR leads in them and the central team can provide expertise where specialist advice is needed, for example accountancy support. Having a central team also offers a route to progression for staff in individual schools who may want to further their career.

Why centralise?

Should it be a question of autonomy vs standardisation or autonomy vs *efficiency*? Despite the need to accommodate individual academies and be flexible, it is likely that the benefits from centralising some functions will mean that a MAT will need to insist it happens.

MATs are likely to have a balance of centralisation and autonomy which needs to be flexible as it grows. There's no one size fits all and it isn't a straightforward choice between the two. Systems need to be reviewed regularly as a MAT grows so that they're still applicable for all schools.

Changing systems may mean you spend more money initially to save money in the longer term. These shared systems of managing finances, for example, don't bring larger amounts of money into the trust but they bring in efficiencies.

Centralisation is a marathon: you can't do everything at once. Planning and regular communication is key, along with getting the right culture in place to embrace change and collaborate.