

How Multi-Academy Trusts are Involved in School Inspections

Introduction and background

The 2010 Academies Act led to a rapid expansion in the proportion of academy schools and multi-academy trusts. As of January 2023, there are 1,346 multi-academy trusts in England. In 2022, trusts were educating about half of all pupils in England. Ofsted carries out a small number (12 per year) of voluntary summary evaluations of education and leadership in a trust, and a member of the trust leadership team is always involved in the discussion that contributes to the evaluation of a school's inspection judgements.

However, inspections are carried out at school level - Ofsted does not have legal powers to inspect the effectiveness of the trust itself. Against this somewhat ambivalent background, this research from Ofsted explores multi-academy trusts' responsibilities and how their work is currently evaluated in inspections of their schools.

In order to gather data, 172 inspectors who led inspections of trust schools between September 2021 and April 2022 were surveyed. Ofsted received 105 responses to the survey. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a sample of 11 trust leaders, most of whom were trust CEOs. Although the research sample covered a wide range of trusts with different characteristics, Ofsted acknowledges that the sample of trust leaders is small and therefore its findings cannot represent the views of trusts as a whole.

Key findings

The role of the MAT in school inspections

- As outlined above, every inspection of a school which is part of a trust includes discussions with the trust CEO or their delegate. All trust leaders saw their role as supporting the headteacher and senior leaders during an inspection. This ranged from taking an active role in discussions during feedback meetings to providing a background presence to support the inspection, such as covering classes to free up time for school staff to speak to inspectors.
- Where trust leaders were more closely involved in school inspections, it was generally because the school was previously graded inadequate or requires improvement. Conversely, trust leaders were less likely to be involved in inspections when the headteachers were more experienced or schools had previously been judged good or outstanding.
- Trust leaders were more involved in cases where there were safeguarding concerns, where a school had recently joined the trust, or where there was a diverse range of schools in the trust.
- The trusts and inspectors surveyed acknowledged the trusts' central role in monitoring attendance and exclusions. All trust leaders who were interviewed took an active role in monitoring attendance in their schools, often via a central database.
- Inspectors recognised the role of many trusts in setting expectations for teaching, and in reinforcing and managing behaviour. Trust leaders emphasised the benefits of being able to use experts employed by the trust to manage behaviour across trust schools. Trust-level behaviour policies were the most common centralised practices seen by inspectors.
- Although trust leaders are asked to share a high-level overview of how their trust works, some trusts wanted inspectors to have a better understanding of their scheme of delegation. This included responsibilities for governance within their trust.
- None of the trust leaders interviewed expected to be involved in all inspection activities at school level. Discussions between inspectors and subject leaders and teachers were seen by trust leaders as the responsibility of the individual school. However, inspection evidence highlights that occasionally employees of the trust asked to sit in on all meetings and inspection activities.
- Most inspectors and trust leaders had positive interactions during school inspections. Trust leaders valued being involved in the feedback and daily inspection team meetings. Trusts saw the detailed verbal feedback from the inspection team as helpful as it helped to celebrate the successes and to improve the school.
- The fact that inspection is designed at school level leaves the role of the trust in inspection unclear. For example, a few trust leaders reported that the level of their involvement in inspection activities depended on the individual inspector. Some trust leaders wanted to be more involved in meetings and have greater opportunity to discuss their role and views from a trust perspective as well as from a school leadership perspective.

Acknowledgement of trust impact

- Ofsted is required by law to inspect the school and not the trust. However, inspection aims to acknowledge that 'leaders and managers of the MAT are responsible for the quality of education provided in all the schools that make up the MAT'. Therefore, some trust leaders were frustrated that school inspections separate the leadership and management of the school from the



trust. They considered this problematic, since many trust leaders work closely with school leaders. One of the trust leaders interviewed pointed out how leadership and management of the school is a result of the school, but also a direct result of the trust which has managed and supported them.

- Inspectors could identify at least some of the wider impact of the trust on school improvement. For example, some trust leaders described how they set the culture and ethos of the trust, such as outlining trust-wide principles that they expected to see in their schools. However, this was not routinely discussed as part of the school inspection process.
- Inspectors explained that they can identify where strengths or weaknesses are attributable to the trust, but the need to focus the report on the individual school can make it difficult for inspectors to include comments about this.
- Trust leaders wanted clearer recognition of the impact that trusts have on the 'journey of school improvement' of their schools. Some schools join trusts and then quickly benefit from the trust's expertise and improve. Trust leaders wanted inspection reports to better reflect this. Similarly, trust leaders said that they wanted trusts to be held accountable when schools are not doing so well.
- A lack of time on a school inspection was the greatest barrier to fully exploring how a trust's involvement in their schools was relevant to school inspection judgements. Typical discussions with trust leaders in the school lasted for a maximum of 30 minutes.
- Because inspection is focused on school level and constrained by resources, it is not always possible to involve the trust to the extent that trust leaders would like. A common view from trusts and inspectors was that, although school inspections cover a lot in the allocated 2 days, this is not enough time to explore the work, influence, and impact of the trust in detail.
- Curriculum design was the area in which inspectors could most easily see the influence of the trust on the school. Trust leaders reported that they were always involved in curriculum design to an extent, regardless of their operating model.
- Trust leaders explained that they often worked with school leaders to develop a curriculum that works for the specific school and that this collaboration differed between each school. Struggling schools were often provided with more structured support to build a curriculum. Some trust leaders chose to implement a common curriculum, to ensure that there was a high-quality curriculum in all the trust's schools and to help with monitoring outcomes.
- Inspectors identified that aims and ambitions for the personal development of pupils are often set by the trust.
- Inspectors explored how trusts promote diversity and expand pupils' horizons. The trust leaders interviewed highlighted a strong culture of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Trust leaders were committed to inclusion in every sense, from representation in the curriculum to ensuring that all children are given the support they need to achieve. They also spoke about using the trust's connections to provide wider development programmes for all pupils. One trust ran careers days for all pupils in Years 10 and 11, sourced by one school, using a link to a local university.
- Trust leaders believe that trusts have a central role as community hubs. They described charity work with which schools have been involved, as well as central

trust roles such as family liaison officers. However, at present this cannot be recognised publicly through school level inspection.

- In 2019, research by Ofsted in 41 trusts found that some had very little involvement in overseeing the quality of education in their schools. Four years on, Ofsted's analysis of inspection activity shows that trust leaders now have a more influential role in this area. This includes increased involvement in curriculum development, either as a whole-trust approach, or with individual schools.

The full documents can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-multi-academy-trusts-are-involved-in-school-inspections>