

# ForumEducation

#MATLeaders

Policy Roundtable Spring 2018

**The role of Ofsted in the inspection of multi-academy trusts**

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all those MAT leaders, trustees, and others who shared their experiences, reflections and ideas in the development of this paper. We would also like to thank Matthew Purves, Ofsted's Deputy Director for School Inspection, for attending and for listening to the views of attendees. Forum Education takes full responsibility for the content of this paper and any views expressed remain solely those of the company. We have worked hard to bring together a wide range of perspectives and views and hope that this paper helps to encourage further constructive discussion, debate and policy making in relation to the crucial issue of MAT accountability.

## **About Forum Education**

Forum Education is an education consultancy supporting leaders to anticipate and manage change, prepare for the future, and develop their organisations in a way that serves the best interests of all children and young people. Forum Education has established four regional MAT CEO networks in order to help support the sector to develop in an informed, sustainable and successful way. Forum Education also runs an annual national new headteachers' conference and contributes to educational leadership training and conferences and organisational development projects across the country. We also provide training, development and advisory services for academy trust boards and senior leadership teams.

[www.forumeducation.org](http://www.forumeducation.org)

## Executive summary

1. Forum Education currently runs four regional networks for Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of multi-academy trusts (MATs); in the East Midlands, the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the West Midlands; involving approximately 60 MATs across the country.
2. Forum's second policy roundtable event took place on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2018. This event was held in response to recent public statements by Ofsted regarding its keenness to have an enhanced role in the inspection of multi-academy trusts. In order to gain the views and perspectives of MAT leaders in this important area, Forum Education posed the following key questions to those MAT CEOs, trustees and others attending the roundtable event:
  - a. **What should any new MAT inspection framework seek to cover?**
  - b. **What should the inspection of MATs look like in practice and who is best placed to inspect and pass judgement on MATs?**
  - c. **How can we ensure that MAT inspection is informed by best practice – from within and beyond the sector – in what is a new and rapidly evolving system?**

The discussion at the roundtable event has informed the following key points which it was felt should be considered by Ofsted to inform their thinking around and planning for any MAT inspection framework:

- a. *MAT inspection framework:*
  - i. Under any MAT inspection framework and process, the MAT's own account of how it is organised, including its vision and strategy documents, should be the very first thing that the inspectors see. A good 'test' for inspectors might be to see how clear the 'line of sight' was from the MAT's board and CEO to practice on the frontline. One could ask, for example: *How effectively does the vision for education and children and young people's lives and futures translate into classroom practice and the educational experiences of pupils?*
  - ii. Good governance is fundamental to the success and compliance of all academy trusts. It is essential that any inspection framework makes this a central pillar, considering the skills, knowledge and understanding of the trust board as a whole; the clarity around and impact of the work of its committees; and how well the executive team are supported

and held to account. Ofsted should also look at the board's commitment to its own self-improvement and learning.

- iii. The impact of financial management and decision making should be considered as part of any MAT inspection framework. This would 'go beyond' the Education and Skills Funding Agency's role in seeking compliance. *Scrutiny by Ofsted of the financial effectiveness and efficiency of a MAT would enable it to test the impact of financial management and spending on pupils' and students' educational experiences and outcomes, as well as the value for money being achieved.*
- iv. The sustainability of a MAT should be considered as part of any inspection framework and process. This would not just be about improved pupil outcomes but also about how MATs are embedding sustainable leadership (including succession planning and impactful, scalable models of improvement), ensuring recruitment and retention as an 'employer of choice', developing evidence-based and transferrable practices and resources across schools, and securing collective buy-in from all their schools and local communities.
- v. The group were largely of the view that MAT inspection should look at the central MAT's relationship with its individual schools - including parents, staff, local communities and pupils' perceptions of the trust and its impact on the educational experiences, learning, and outcomes of pupils. Individual schools should continue to be at the heart of their local communities, and MATs must ensure that this connection isn't lost, particularly as they grow.
- vi. The group strongly suggested that any new framework should avoid 'labelling' MATs – in order to discourage a 'box-ticking' culture.
- vii. It was felt that in designing any inspection framework, Ofsted should consider how to assess and recognise effective collaborative activity, both within the MAT's own schools and between itself and other MATs, and the impact this activity was having in terms of strengthening practice and improving pupil outcomes.

b. *MAT inspection in practice:*

- i. Ofsted should ensure that smaller MATs are not excluded from the process, simply because they do not have the 'minimum' number of schools usually involved in the current batched

inspections. Smaller MATs may fear ‘missing out’ as medium- and larger-sized MATs received the ‘benefits’ of inspection, including the feedback, challenge and recognition that good inspection can bring.

- ii. Ofsted should undertake further consultation on whether the MAT inspection process will lead to a judgment, or be more of a developmental and supportive process, akin to the new short inspections of schools.
- iii. In developing any new framework, Ofsted must recognise that the expertise resides within the MAT system itself, so that any inspection process needs to involve serving practitioners in various roles, according to what is being inspected (e.g. CEOs, COOs, FDs, trustees).
- iv. MAT inspection reports should be published by Ofsted and be public documents, with careful thought about how they are framed for different audiences. This will serve to enhance accountability and transparency at a number of levels, including with parents and carers.
- v. The MAT inspection process should be about enabling a dialogue over time with Ofsted – with trusts required to prove how they are taking areas for improvement forward – rather than being a snapshot view of the MAT at a particular moment in time.

c. *Learning from ‘best’ practice:*

- i. In developing its research and evidence base around success within the MAT system (which remains relatively immature), it was strongly suggested that Ofsted resists trying to define ‘best practice’, instead focusing on principles that underpin ‘effective practice’.
- ii. By focusing on principles that underpin ‘effective practice’ the inspectorate could look to avoid the unintended consequence of constraining the MAT system and curtailing innovation.
- iii. Whilst accepting that Ofsted will want to (and should) set some basic parameters around what effective practice of MATs looks like, any inspection process should be open to reviewing and reporting on the many different ways that MATs achieve the best outcomes for their pupils. Colleagues referred to the way in which classroom assessment is now judged in terms of how they reflect principles that are known to lead to outcomes rather than against specific and defined practices. The same should be true of MAT development, whether it be the

principles behind school improvement models that work at scale, how financial management leads to better use of resources, or becoming an 'employer of choice' in response to local context, or otherwise.

- iv. The inspection process needs to recognise MATs that are contributing to wider system improvement. Many inspection reports of individual schools involved in school to school support still fail to do justice to the work many of these schools do in improving practice and outcomes elsewhere.
- v. The MAT system should be more proactive in generating knowledge and case studies about effective practice; which Ofsted should take into consideration as it develops a MAT inspection framework and process, and review this over time.

## Background

3. Forum Education currently runs four regional networks for the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and executive principles of multi-academy trusts (MATs); in the East Midlands, the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the West Midlands; representing over 60 MATs across the country.
4. One of the core aims of the MAT leaders networks is to provide opportunities, not only for the members to learn from each other and other sectors, but also to provide a forum for them to use their expertise to inform policy development and change within the wider MAT system.
5. Forum Education ran its first roundtable event in July 2017, with a focus on the challenges around the recruitment, training and retention of MAT trustees. That roundtable culminated in a policy paper with recommendations, which were sent to the then Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, and the National Schools Commissioner (NSC), Sir David Carter (See the full report here: <http://www.forumeducation.org/policy-roundtable-paper-recruiting-retaining-september-2017/> ) We chose to run this first event on the basis that many of the major examples of failures of MATs fundamentally relate to issues of poor governance. The report made a number of specific recommendations, including: establishing a national Members database; setting out a Members' charter; mandatory training for trustees (in particular regarding certain key issues such as executive pay); and the suggestion that MATs hold regular reviews of governance, at least every two years.

6. The issue of MAT inspection has been growing over recent years, with Ofsted using their current inspection powers to undertake ‘batched inspections’ or ‘focused reviews’ of a minimum number of academies within a multi-academy trust, culminating in a detailed letter to the MAT about their findings and making recommendations about potential areas for improvement. However, we know from ongoing discussions, and in particular from the appearance before the House of Commons Education Committee in November (2017) of HMCI, Amanda Spielman, that Ofsted are keen to expand their role to undertake whole MAT inspections. Ms Spielman feels very strongly that Ofsted should have a stronger role in ensuring the accountability of MATs, in particular as they now account for such a significant number of schools across the country.
7. However, we also know, from the appearance of the former Education Secretary, Justine Greening, before the same committee, as well as the evidence given by Sir David Carter and Lord Agnew in December (2017), that the Department for Education (DfE) has concerns over the capacity of Ofsted to be able to undertake whole MAT inspections, as well as the introduction of such a process for a system which is considered to still be relatively immature.
8. It has also become clear, from our conversations with MAT leaders over the past few months, that this is an area of policy development in which they are keen to get involved.
9. We know that Ofsted has been discussing the potential for developing a framework for MAT inspection, which it had previously been suggested could be rolled out as early as September this year (2018). Given that this is such an important and timely topic, and of great interest to the MAT leaders within our networks, Forum decided to hold our spring 2018 roundtable event on the subject of Ofsted’s potential future role in MAT inspection. The event was deliberately held early in the year with the aim of providing some input and steer to Ofsted’s thinking about the possible development of such a framework. As well as inviting colleagues from across our MAT leaders’ networks, we were also pleased to be joined by Matthew Purves – Ofsted’s lead on developing a MAT inspection framework – who attended the event to hear directly from MAT leaders.
10. This report of the discussions which took place aims to provoke further thinking and debate within the MAT sector, as well as informing the thinking of Ofsted as they continue to develop their plans. As such, we will share this report with HMCI, Amanda Spielman; and will also send it for information and consideration to the new Secretary of State, Damian Hinds, and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System, Lord Agnew.

## Ofsted's role in MAT inspection

11. In order to fully address this important area, Forum Education posed the following key questions to colleagues attending the roundtable event:

- a) **What should any new MAT inspection framework seek to cover?**
- b) **What should the inspection of MATs look like in practice and who is best placed to inspect and pass judgement on MATs?**
- c) **How can we ensure that MAT inspection is informed by best practice – from within and beyond the sector – in what is a new and rapidly evolving system?**

12. The remainder of this paper draws out the key points made by MAT leaders in response to the above questions.

### *MAT inspection framework*

13. Colleagues generally felt that Ofsted's current approach to batched inspections was having a positive impact on the sector and on its transparency. This should be read with reference to a general sense in the media and amongst politicians that more transparency is needed across the MAT sector. Indeed, in January 2018 the House of Commons Education Committee described the sector as having *"a lack of transparency and accountability"* and that *"parents, staff and students are in the dark over who is running their schools and that decisions are being taken behind closed doors"*.

14. There was a sense that the reports written as a result of these batched inspections rarely mention the vision and strategy of the MAT, which is fundamental to setting the direction of all the schools. Colleagues suggested that, under any MAT inspection process, the MAT's vision and strategy documents should be the very first thing that the inspectors see. There was a suggestion that a good test for inspectors would be to see how clear the "line of sight" was from the MAT CEO's work and priorities to the day to day work and priorities of teachers and the educational experience of pupils. Taking a leaf out of the NHS approach to improvement, it was suggested that, as the 'end user' within MATs, there should be an opportunity for MAT inspectors to hear from parents and pupils about their

experiences of being part of the MAT, and that these findings should be included in the overall evaluation.

15. MAT governance is much more complex than it is for a standalone school, and is very different again from corporate governance, which is usually about ensuring commercial advantage. Whilst the DfE (Department for Education) has tended to focus on strengthening MAT governance through recruiting trustees with corporate experience, the evidence suggests that this approach has not always been successful. It is important therefore that any framework should consider whether a MAT is governed by a board with the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding required for the effective governance of what are both public service and charitable organisations. It was felt that governing boards should also be required to demonstrate clarity around and impact of the work of their committees; and how well the executive team are supported and held to account. Ofsted should also look at the board's commitment to its own self-improvement and learning – not least as so many failures of governance have been as a result of a fundamental lack of understanding in terms of compliance and duties/responsibilities.
16. There should also be a strong focus, within the inspection framework and throughout the inspection process, on the impact of the MAT around supporting and enabling school improvement for all of its schools. Colleagues felt that MATs should be able to demonstrate evidence of 'causal effect' between the MAT's school improvement functions and processes and the improvement taking place in schools.
17. Some colleagues expressed concern that moving to the academy sector has led to reduced scrutiny around finance, with most of the guidance coming from the ESFA (Education and Skills Funding Agency) being related to submitting documents in time for deadlines and ensuring compliance, but without much proactive guidance or challenge around ensuring financial efficiency and sustainability.
18. It was felt that a review of a trust's financial management and spending should form part of the MAT inspection framework (but with recognition that this is not Ofsted's area of expertise) to demonstrate sustainability. This is strongly driven by the fact that a key role of a MAT is to use income carefully and sustainably in order to improve the outcomes and life chances of children and young people. There was a suggestion that a good inspection question might be '*What is the MAT's dividend to schools?*' as a way of gauging the value for money and benefit schools were achieving from being part of their MAT. There was agreement that whilst the ESFA is looking for probity, Ofsted's scrutiny of the financial health of a MAT should

be about the impact of this spending on pupils and students, and value for money.

19. Colleagues discussed whether the sustainability of a MAT should be considered as part of any inspection framework and process, and that this would not just be about pupil outcomes but also about how MATs are embedding sustainable leadership (including succession planning), what they are doing about recruitment and retention, developing strong and transferrable resources, and securing collective buy-in from all their schools and local communities.
20. Many of the MAT leaders present at this event felt that it would also be important for any MAT inspection to look at the central MAT's relationship with its individual schools, including how parents, staff, local communities and pupils feel about this. There is some concern (borne out by the comments above from the House of Commons Education Committee) that parents feel that, particularly in respect of larger MATs, they do not have a voice. It remains even more vital that individual schools remain at the heart of their local communities and are listening to their parents and pupils, and that all MATs must ensure that this connection isn't lost.
21. However, colleagues were also universally agreed on one core element of MAT inspection – namely that any process that is introduced should not result in MATs being assigned a 'category', in the way that this is currently done for individual school inspections. Colleagues felt that doing so could drive unintended consequences.
22. Some colleagues expressed concern around whether Ofsted is in a position to be able to say what 'excellence' looks like (given the MAT model is still very young) – although this would be less of an issue if categories weren't used as 'judgments' following the inspection process.
23. In summary, the key points from this discussion on what a MAT inspection framework should seek to cover were:

- a. *MAT inspection framework:*

- i. Under any MAT inspection framework and process, the MAT's own account of how it is organised, including its vision and strategy documents, should be the very first thing that the inspectors see. A good 'test' for inspectors might be to see how clear the 'line of sight' was from the MAT's board and CEO to practice on the frontline. One could ask, for example: *How effectively does the vision for education and children and young people's lives and futures translate into classroom practice and the educational experiences of pupils?*

- ii. Good governance is fundamental to the success and compliance of all academy trusts. It is essential that any inspection framework makes this a central pillar, considering the skills, knowledge and understanding of the trust board as a whole; the clarity around and impact of the work of its committees; and how well the executive team are supported and held to account. Ofsted should also look at the board's commitment to its own self-improvement and learning.
- iii. The impact of financial management and decision making should be considered as part of any MAT inspection framework. This would 'go beyond' the Education and Skills Funding Agency's role in seeking compliance. *Scrutiny by Ofsted of the financial effectiveness and efficiency of a MAT would enable it to test the impact of financial management and spending on pupils and students' educational experiences and outcomes, as well as the value for money being achieved.*
- iv. The sustainability of a MAT should be considered as part of any inspection framework and process. This would not just be about pupil outcomes but also about how MATs are embedding sustainable leadership (including succession planning and impactful, scalable models of improvement), ensuring recruitment and retention as an 'employer of choice', developing evidence-based and transferrable practices and resources across schools, and securing collective buy-in from all their schools and local communities.
- v. The group were largely of the view that MAT inspection should look at the central MAT's relationship with its individual schools - including parents, staff, local communities and pupils' perceptions of the trust and its impact on the educational experiences, learning, and outcomes of pupils. Individual schools should continue to be at the heart of their local communities, and MATs must ensure that this connection isn't lost, particularly as they grow.
- vi. The group strongly suggested that any new framework should avoid 'labelling' MATs – in order to discourage a 'box-ticking' culture.
- vii. It was felt that in designing any inspection framework, Ofsted should consider how to assess and recognise effective collaborative activity, both within the MAT's own schools and between itself and other MATs, and the impact this activity

was having in terms of strengthening practice and improving pupil outcomes.

24. In response to this discussion, Matthew Purves (Ofsted's deputy director for school inspection) made a number of key points with regard to Ofsted's current thinking in this area:

- a. Ofsted is keen to have a transparent, well-understood process for scrutinising MATs that has widespread agreement and support.
- b. Ofsted is independent of DfE and reports directly to Parliament.
- c. Ofsted is clear about the purpose of all of its education inspections, and these (four) dimensions would have to be followed for any MAT inspection framework:
  - i. evaluating the quality of education – for MATs this would mean thinking about what things at individual school level and what things at MAT level are having an impact on the quality of education experienced by pupils
  - ii. safeguarding/safety
  - iii. other elements beyond the curriculum – such as how pupils are being supported in their personal development, development of their values, cultural and spiritual development
  - iv. promoting effective administration of education and effective use of resources
- d. Ofsted is still legally required to inspect individual schools.
- e. Any inspection framework for MATs needs to be designed to be flexible to reflect the way the individual MAT is organised and the vision and strategy that underpin decisions around its organisation, so as to avoid attempting to prescribe that MATs should be organised in a certain way.
- f. Ofsted is keen to consider what value undertaking MAT inspections at scale would be to pupils and parents, and to MATs themselves – in particular whether MAT inspection might be constructed in a way to reduce the inspection burden on individual schools.

### *MAT inspection in practice*

25. Colleagues expressed concern that small MATs (which make up the vast majority of the MAT system) tend to get overlooked by the wider system, so that the work they are doing is not necessarily recognised or promoted. Some smaller trusts felt that they too needed the external review and judgment in order to demonstrate their impact and capacity to grow (as

well as to learn from any areas identified as weaknesses); and therefore any MAT inspection process needs to look the same for all MATs, regardless of size.

26. The inspection process is also a developmental and useful tool, which means that colleagues would be reluctant for the MAT inspection process to result in a grading or judgment that could see them 'left alone' for long periods of time, as is happening with some individual ('outstanding') schools within MATs.
27. Colleagues suggested that the MAT inspection process should result in a judgment by Ofsted on whether the MAT is doing everything that is included in the framework to a good standard, or not; and were clear again that this should not result in a 'grade'.
28. Colleagues were also clear that MAT inspection documents should be published and made public, but that there needed to be clarity about which sections of the report would be aimed at different audiences and that these should be written accordingly. The group felt that this would serve to enhance accountability by ensuring that different audiences, including parents and pupils, could engage with the outcomes.
29. Ofsted needs to consider how it will develop the expertise to undertake MAT inspections, including looking at whether all inspectors and HMIs will get involved, or whether there will be a focused team undertaking this role, who receive bespoke training.
30. Colleagues suggested that experience doesn't necessarily equate to expertise, and that Ofsted should consider engaging serving MAT CEOs or chief operating officers (COOs) or finance directors (FDs) in the inspection process, in recognition that the expertise for undertaking MAT inspection resides very much within the system itself. Equally, whilst not all national leaders of governance (NLGs) have experience and expertise with regard to MAT governance structures and functions, there will likely be some MAT trustees and trustees from other sectors who could bring appropriate expertise to the MAT inspection process – in particular as governance remains a crucial area of weakness for some MATs.
31. There was support for the suggestion that any MAT inspection process should start by looking at central functions of the MAT and then follow through by looking at how the work and practices of the central MAT then translates into the day to day life of its individual schools. This was seen as preferable to the current approach of the 'batched inspections', which sees inspectors undertaking Section 5 inspections in each school that is chosen to participate before then entering into dialogue with the MAT itself.
32. It will be vital, when considering how to structure MAT inspection, for Ofsted to think carefully about the logistics of the inspection process, in

particular for the smaller trusts, so that any approach takes account of the capacity of the central MAT team and trustees to properly engage with the process.

33. For school inspections, there is a sense that the process should be undertaken at a single point in time; however, for MATs there was a suggestion that perhaps whole-MAT inspection should be about looking at a series of themes over a longer period of time (e.g. 6 months or a year), so that it becomes less of a 'threat' and more of a developmental approach, with more support. Colleagues felt that this might have a more positive longer-term impact on the wider system. Colleagues mentioned that they liked the idea of the new short inspection process for schools, where schools receive a letter that highlights areas for improvement and are then re-inspected within a maximum of two years, giving them time to address any issues.
34. Colleagues felt that the most important consideration regarding the MAT system as a whole is its sustainability and capacity for school improvement at scale; and this is best tested over a longer period of time.
35. There are a range of inspection frameworks that could be drawn on to inform the development of an Ofsted MAT inspection framework, such as Ofsted's own SEND reviews, NHS Improvement, Challenge Partners, and inspections within other sectors.
36. There was a suggestion that it might make sense for each MAT to have a named HMI, so that a relationship can be established over time – in particular given the above suggestion that the inspection process happens over a longer period of time.
37. In summary, the key points from this discussion on what MAT inspection should look like in practice were:
  - i. Ofsted should ensure that smaller MATs are not excluded from the process, simply because they do not have the 'minimum' number of schools usually involved in the current batched inspections. Smaller MATs may fear 'missing out' as medium- and larger-sized MATs received the 'benefits' of inspection, including the feedback, challenge and recognition that good inspection can bring.
  - ii. Ofsted should do further consultation on whether the MAT inspection process will lead to a judgment, or be more of a developmental and supportive process, akin to the new short inspections of schools.
  - iii. In developing any new framework, Ofsted must recognise that the expertise resides within the MAT system itself, so that any inspection process needs to involve serving practitioners in

various roles, according to what is being inspected (e.g. CEOs, COOs, FDs, trustees).

- iv. MAT inspection reports should be published by Ofsted and be public documents, with careful thought about how they are framed for different audiences. This will serve to enhance accountability and transparency at a number of levels, including with parents and carers.
- v. The MAT inspection process should be about enabling a dialogue over time with Ofsted – with trusts required to prove how they are taking areas for improvement forward – rather than being a snapshot view of the MAT at a particular moment in time.

38. In response to this discussion, Matthew Purves made a number of key points:

- a. Agreed that the best knowledge and expertise regarding the way that MATs operate lies within the system, and not yet within government. Ofsted needs to draw on this expertise and ensure it uses the right inspectors who have received appropriate training.
- b. Agreed to consider the point about ensuring that smaller MATs can be involved in the inspection process. Ofsted needs to consider whether and how the process could be adapted to account for trusts of different sizes, and the implications of this for the scale of the work required to undertake the inspection and the potential burden on smaller MATs and their schools.
- c. Listened to the point about frequency of inspection and whether the process should occur over a longer period of time, rather than a 'snapshot' view. Ofsted will think about this.
- d. Strongly agreed with the need for the inspection reports to be transparent and publicly available, as they are for individual schools, in order for Ofsted to fulfil its public accountability role – further thought is needed about the value of MAT inspections and how they might benefit parents and pupils as well as MATs themselves.

### *Learning from 'best' practice*

39. The MAT system is still relatively immature, and as such the evidence base about what makes an 'effective' MAT is not very well developed. Therefore, it is difficult to define 'best' practice within the system. Ultimately, everything that the MAT does should be about improving the quality of

education it delivers to its pupils, so that they can secure the best possible outcomes.

40. MAT leaders are recognising that they often need to look beyond the education and MAT sector in order to bring in expertise in core areas such as HR and finance, so that they are appointing leaders into these roles who are experts in their field. MATs are often able to do this because they benefit from economies of scale not available to individual schools. It is therefore important that the MAT sector looks to other sectors to determine what effective practice may look like, not least for common principles around achieving financial sustainability, effective recruitment and retention, and good governance. Ofsted's work in determining what effective practice may be must not be limited to the education or MAT sector.
41. Therefore concerns were expressed that, whilst it might be helpful to have some exemplars of what 'success' looks like for MATs, trying to define 'best practice' might constrain the system and reduce innovation. Colleagues from smaller, more geographically focused MATs felt that such MATs are able to have a very close relationship with their local communities and to understand what is best for those communities and the schools that serve them. Trying to define 'best practice' or suggest that 'success' looks a particular way for a MAT is unlikely to serve these smaller trusts well.
42. However, there was some suggestion that it might be possible to set out some 'best practice' for larger MATs, which are more established, as exemplars for other MATs that are wishing to grow.
43. There was some discussion about MATs that have been established to include mostly 'outstanding' schools, and how the inspection framework and process could ensure that the value added for these MATs was properly assessed, as it is likely to look very different from the value added by a MAT with a lot of struggling schools.
44. Colleagues were clear about their concerns around MATs that are 'gaming' the system, including through 'off-rolling' their lower performing pupils – an issue which has made news headlines recently and been discussed by the House of Commons Education Committee through their current inquiry on MATs. Ofsted's new IDSR (inspection data summary report) was welcomed by colleagues as a helpful tool to identifying which schools are taking this approach; with a question around whether there might be any value in developing an IDSR for MATs.
45. Colleagues suggested that the leadership and management section of the current Ofsted Section 5 reports to individual schools might be a helpful model to begin the MAT inspection process. This would need to reflect the fact that a MAT's impact on school improvement, and the sustainability of

its school improvement approach, rely on having a team of people engaged in the process – school improvement can't just sit with one person. Colleagues agreed that for a sustainable trust, school improvement needs to look beyond the NLE (National Leader of Education) model of school improvement and take account of scale and capacity. This is reflected in Forum's '*7 pillars of improvement at scale*', which considers how MATs ensure they have the principles in place that underpin scalable improvement.

46. Colleagues also suggested that the leadership and management section of a MAT inspection report must take account of the MAT's commitment to enabling and driving a self-improving system, which should be part of the MAT's vision and moral purpose. It was felt that a culture whereby MATs are contributing to the learning and development of other MATs, and helping to shape and develop the system, is crucial for a system that is still maturing.
47. Colleagues agreed that, whatever the MAT inspection framework and process becomes, it must be adaptable for the future, for what remains a relatively new and rapidly evolving system.
48. In summary, the key points from this discussion on ensuring that MAT inspection is informed by best practice were:
  - i. In developing its research and evidence base around success within the MAT system (which remains relatively immature), it was strongly suggested that Ofsted resists trying to define 'best practice', instead focusing on principles that underpin 'effective practice'.
  - ii. By focusing on principles that underpin 'effective practice' the inspectorate could look to avoid the unintended consequence of constraining the MAT system and curtailing innovation.
  - iii. Whilst accepting that Ofsted will want to (and should) set some basic parameters around what effective practice of MATs looks like, any inspection process should be open to reviewing and reporting on the many different ways that MATs achieve the best outcomes for their pupils. Colleagues referred to the way in which classroom assessment is now judged in terms of how they reflect principles that are known to lead to outcomes rather than against specific and defined practices. The same should be true of MAT development, whether it be the principles behind school improvement models that work at scale, how financial management leads to better use of resources, or becoming an 'employer of choice' in response to local context, or otherwise.

- iv. The inspection process needs to recognise MATs that are contributing to wider system improvement. Many inspection reports of individual schools involved in school to school support still fail to do justice to the work many of these schools do in improving practice and outcomes elsewhere.
- v. The MAT system should be more proactive in generating knowledge and case studies about effective practice; which Ofsted should take into consideration as it develops a MAT inspection framework and process, and review this over time.

49. In response to this discussion, Matthew Purves made a number of key points:

- a. The effectiveness of a MAT has to ultimately be about its contribution to educational quality within all of its schools – this is one of Ofsted’s core principles of inspection.
- b. Whilst the nature of things that MATs have to do is similar to what has to be done in individual schools, the scale makes things more complex, and the nature of this complexity must be understood and reflected through the MAT inspection process.
- c. It is important for inspectors to understand the nature of the schools which the trust has taken on and the specific mission of the trust around supporting them.
- d. Ofsted believes that MATs have a moral obligation to their pupils – Ofsted is concerned about the issue of ‘off-rolling’ of particular pupils, and will be undertaking work to look at this in the coming months.
- e. Listened to the point about including the MAT’s contribution to the wider system within the inspection process and report – Ofsted would need to think about the practicalities of how best to assess how MATs are supporting the wider system in order to fulfil this element (it is complex to assess accurately).

## Considerations

The discussion at the roundtable event has informed the following key points which it was felt should be considered by Ofsted to inform their development of any MAT inspection framework:

- a. *MAT inspection framework:*

- i. Under any MAT inspection framework and process, the MAT's own account of how it is organised, including its vision and strategy documents, should be the very first thing that the inspectors see. A good 'test' for inspectors might be to see how clear the 'line of sight' was from the MAT CEO to practice on the frontline. One could ask, for example: *How effectively does the vision for education and children and young people's lives and futures translate into classroom practice and the educational experiences of pupils?*
- ii. Good governance is fundamental to the success and compliance of all academy trusts. It is essential that any inspection framework makes this a central pillar, considering the skills, knowledge and understanding of the trust board as a whole; the clarity around and impact of the work of its committees; and how well the executive team are supported and held to account. Ofsted should also look at the board's commitment to its own self-improvement and learning.
- iii. Inspection of the impact of financial management and decision making should be part of the MAT inspection framework. This would 'go beyond' the Education and Skills Funding Agency's role in seeking compliance. *Scrutiny by Ofsted of the financial effectiveness and efficiency of a MAT would enable it to test the impact of financial management and spending on pupils' and students' educational experiences and outcomes, as well as the value for money being achieved.*
- iv. The sustainability of a MAT should be considered as part of any inspection framework and process. This would not just be about pupil outcomes but also about how MATs are embedding sustainable leadership (including succession planning and impactful, scalable models of improvement), ensuring recruitment and retention as an 'employer of choice', developing evidence-based and transferrable practices and resources across schools, and securing collective buy-in from all their schools and local communities.
- v. The group were largely of the view that MAT inspection should look at the central MAT's relationship with its individual schools - including parents, staff, local communities and pupils' perceptions of the trust and its impact on the educational experiences, learning, and outcomes of pupils. Individual schools should continue to be at the heart of their local

communities, and MATs must ensure that this connection isn't lost, particularly as they grow.

- vi. The group strongly suggested that any new framework should avoid labelling MATs as a result of any inspection framework or process – in order to discourage a 'box-ticking' culture.
  - vii. It was felt that in designing any inspection framework, Ofsted should consider how to assess and recognise effective collaborative activity, both within the MAT's own schools and between itself and other MATs, and the impact this activity was having in terms of strengthening practice and improving pupil outcomes.
- b. *MAT inspection in practice:*
- i. Ofsted should ensure that smaller MATs are not excluded from the process, simply because they do not have the 'minimum' number of schools usually involved in the current batched inspections. Smaller MATs may fear 'missing out' as medium- and larger-sized MATs received the 'benefits' of inspection, including the feedback, challenge and recognition that good inspection can bring.
  - ii. Ofsted should do further consultation on whether the MAT inspection process will lead to a judgment, or be more of a developmental and supportive process, akin to the new short inspections of schools.
  - iii. In developing any new framework, Ofsted must recognise that the expertise resides within the MAT system itself, so that any inspection process needs to involve serving practitioners in various roles, according to what is being inspected (e.g. CEOs, COOs, FDs, trustees).
  - iv. MAT inspection reports should be published by Ofsted and be public documents, with careful thought about how they are framed for different audiences. This will serve to enhance accountability and transparency at a number of levels, including with parents and carers.
  - v. The MAT inspection process should be about enabling a dialogue over time with Ofsted – with trusts required to prove how they are taking areas for improvement forward – rather than being a snapshot view of the MAT at a particular moment in time.
- c. *Learning from 'best' practice:*
- i. In developing its research and evidence base around success within the MAT system (which remains relatively immature), it

was strongly suggested that Ofsted resists trying to define 'best practice', instead focusing on principles that underpin 'effective practice'.

- ii. By focusing on principles that underpin 'effective practice' the inspectorate could look to avoid the unintended consequence of constraining the MAT system and curtailing innovation.
- iii. Whilst accepting that Ofsted will want to (and should) set some basic parameters around what effective practice of MATs looks like, any inspection process should be open to reviewing and reporting on the many different ways that MATs achieve the best outcomes for their pupils. Colleagues referred to the way in which classroom assessment is now judged in terms of how they reflect principles that are known to lead to outcomes rather than against specific and defined practices. The same should be true of MAT development, whether it be the principles behind school improvement models that work at scale, how financial management leads to better use of resources, or becoming an 'employer of choice' in response to local context, or otherwise.
- iv. The inspection process needs to recognise MATs that are contributing to wider system improvement. Many inspection reports of individual schools involved in school to school support still fail to do justice to the work many of these schools do in improving practice and outcomes elsewhere.
- v. The MAT system should be more proactive in generating knowledge and case studies about effective practice; which Ofsted should take into consideration as it develops a MAT inspection framework and process, and review this over time.