

LOCALITY MATTERS: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE OF HOW TO SUPPORT EDUCATIONALLY ISOLATED SCHOOLS.

A Case Study of a Multi-Academy Trust's Schools' 'Hub Model'.
(2019 – 2022)

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Final Report 2023

Foreword

The long standing challenges of England's rural and coastal communities are now getting some attention. As the human impact of entrenched deprivation is magnified by isolation it is timely to examine how school groups should respond.

If every school is now to be in a Multi-Academy Trust, how should they respond to counter that isolation and nurture a mindset of high aspiration? Recruiting teachers in these areas is hard, how can we create strong professional networks to drive improvement in the quality of teaching? These communities are normally in poorly funded local authority areas, how should schools best collaborate to ensure every child's needs are addressed?

This study looks at how one MAT in the South West has responded by using a local hub model. This worked well with the London Challenge in the first years of the century, could it work in a more rural context?

The results are fascinating and enlightening. More needs to be done but this study deserves attention in signposting ways forward.

Jim Knight

Rt Hon Lord Knight of Weymouth

Executive Summary

The concept of Educational Isolation refers to a situation in which a school has limited access to resources because of the challenges related to its location. The combined elements of geographical remoteness, socioeconomic deprivation and cultural isolation in the school's area have a direct effect on teacher recruitment, retention, staff development, school to school support and external opportunities for additional funding.

Educational Isolation affects pupil outcomes

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In England, Educational Isolation is common in rural and coastal areas, where poverty and social exclusion are significant concerns. Location matters. Rural and coastal areas in England face infrastructural challenges, socioeconomic issues, and limited employment opportunities, negatively affecting housing, transport, technology, and leisure.

In 2020, 19% of all primary and 16% of secondary schools in England were in a rural-coastal location. Pupils from persistently disadvantaged backgrounds in rural-coastal school have lower attainment at the end of secondary schooling than pupils from similar backgrounds in urban schools.

This report shares findings from a three-year research project (2019 – 2022) focused on a 'hub model' for schools implemented in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT, also referred to as Trust) consisting of 20 primary schools in the South West of England. The Hub model was used to geographically group schools into smaller units for school-to-school support with the aim of reducing the negative effects of Educational Isolation experienced by many of the schools.

The research team interviewed senior leaders within the MAT, including headteachers, Hub Leads, the outgoing and incoming CEOs, and the COO, each year for three years. The MAT's vision was to give a better education to children through the sharing of resources, expertise, and knowledge at a local level. The CEO believed that smaller groups of schools – hubs of schools - could achieve this vision.

The key successes of the Hub model for the MAT were:

- The development of trusted, supportive local relationships.
- Collaboration within the Hubs to the benefit of the whole MAT.
- Quality of communication.

Developing supportive, trusted relationships was considered the most significant success of the Hub model.



School leaders appreciated the non-judgmental, local support that helped reduce feelings of isolation inherent in a school leader role (feelings exacerbated by geographical remoteness from other schools).

Collaboration was also considered a great achievement of the Hub model for sharing knowledge, expertise, and resources, particularly during the pandemic and with schools in close geographical proximity that understood the context of the community. The ethos of sharing and supporting matured and flourished during the three years of the Hub model.

School leaders were pleased with the quality of communication throughout the MAT, which facilitated better coordination and alignment of policy and practice across schools. Ofsted visits were a key area where communication, collaboration and resource-sharing occurred.

Overall, school leaders in the MAT expressed support for the Hub model and a desire to make it work. However, challenges of the Hub model were identified and related to three broad themes:

- Context
- Clarity
- Capacity

The context of each Hub of schools was different, with some hubs having more geographical distance between schools, some having schools with differing contexts e.g. size and faith, and other having differential experience of headteachers; which resulted in some cases in a lack of sharing of expertise within Hubs, uneven opportunities for CPD, and a need for more rigour in school improvement processes at MAT level.

The Hub Lead role was seen to lack clarity, with Hub Leads required to undertake multiple roles e.g., as headteacher as well as Hub Lead, and the conflicting priorities that can arise from this. Line management was also raised as a concern by school leaders, who were unsure of the Hub Lead role in the appraisal process.

Capacity was another issue raised, with school leaders expressing concerns over Hub Leads' workload, and headteachers being pulled away from their responsibilities for Hub meetings or visits.

Most school leaders interviewed agreed that the Hub model would benefit from review, particularly with the increase in the number of schools joining the MAT in the next academic year.

Identifying best practices within Hubs and sharing that information across the MAT was seen as a way to bring more rigour to the school improvement processes.

The appointment of a new CEO and COO during the last year of this research project, and the announcement of a new White Paper by the Department for Education, brought changes to the MAT. The White Paper requires MATs to meet certain criteria to be considered a 'strong Trust',



including providing robust CPD routes, high standards of curriculum, attendance, and behaviour, targeted catch-up support. The Hub model was seen to contribute to this in part.

The new CEO and COO had an embryonic vision to address policy direction, which included introducing a fifth Hub, creating networks for small and church schools, separating the school improvement model from the Hub model, and possibly bringing in subject networks for school improvement.

The findings suggest that the Hub model is able to mitigate the effects of Educational Isolation in different ways.

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Putting the schools into small, geographically focused hubs of school supported the MAT in reducing the effects of geographical remoteness, creating formal connections for staff development, sharing of resources (including teachers) and opportunities to work together to submit applications for innovative external funding.

The sharing of ideas for more effective school improvement helped to mitigate elements of socioeconomic deprivation in school communities, such as lower attainment. This included schools working together in their Hub to provide new opportunities for children that widened their experiences to raise aspirations. It also reduced cultural isolation, an issue that was particularly difficult to address during the pandemic years because of the restrictions on movement.

Headteachers, Hub Leads, and executive leaders in the MAT agreed on the successes and challenges of the Hub model for supporting Educationally Isolated schools.

The key message is that small groups of schools working together in commutable geographic proximity supports school improvement.

Our recommendation is that large MATs with Educationally Isolated schools consider a hub model as it supports school leaders accessing the resources needed for school improvement at a local level. We also recommend that policy leaders recognise and respond to needs of Educationally Isolated schools. Locality matters.



Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) that welcomed, and positively engaged with, our investigations for three years. The research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and we are grateful that the MAT and its school leaders wanted to continue to explore the effect of the hub model on its educationally isolated schools. We recognise that the three years of the research covered a very challenging period for the MAT, like all other schools across the globe, and were glad to be able to report that the hub model appeared to support headteachers as they responded to the needs of pupils and staff during the pandemic.

Our thanks also to our Universities, Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth, for supporting this research.



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1. Introduction

Educational isolation is complex, grounded in location, situated in access to resources and results in reduced agency for schools. Educational isolation is defined as

A school experiencing limited access to resources for school improvement, resulting from challenges of school location (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019¹).

The challenge of location is particularly hard for schools in rural and coastal areas of England (and the UK). The image of an idyllic country or seaside life, with strong community support for the local schools², continues but is not necessarily the whole picture; many coastal and rural areas have high levels of deprivation, their schools can be isolated from different kinds of support for teaching and learning, and community members do not always support their local school.

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1.1 The rural and coastal context in England

In England the Rural-Urban Classification based on Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs³) is used to distinguish rural and urban areas. The Classification defines areas as rural if they fall outside of settlements with more than 10,000 resident population. There is no distinguishing data for coastal settlements in this classification, and coastal areas are included in the Rural-Urban classification by number of resident population. Approximately 17% of the population live in rural areas in England, with residents predominately white (97.6 per cent) with school aged children (5 – 18 years of age) estimated at 16 per cent of the rural population in 2019⁴.

There are significant concerns about poverty and social exclusion in rural areas, made worse by their relative invisibility. This invisibility is caused in part by below average productivity, but above average income found 'mostly in rural areas within commuting distance of large cities'⁵ skewing impressions of rural poverty. DEFRA's (2018) Rural Poverty Statistics report demonstrates that in rural areas poverty has been on the increase for some years:

...the percentage of children in relative low income, before or after housing costs, has seen a strong increase. (4)⁶

¹ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2019) *Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England*, Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth. <https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/>

² Cloke, P. J. (2003) *Country Visions*. Harlow, UK: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

³ Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) are a geographic hierarchy designed to improve the reporting of small area statistics in England and Wales.

⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (2020) Statistical Digest of Rural England, December 2020. London, DEFRA. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rural-poverty>

⁵ ONS (2021) What are the regional differences in income and productivity? London: Office for National Statistics. www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1370/

⁶ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (2018) Rural Poverty, London, DEFRA. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rural-poverty>



Coastal areas are a significant part of England, making up over a fifth of local authority (administration) areas⁷. The Office for National Statistics produced a report on coastal towns in England and Wales in 2020 that highlighted the specific socioeconomic place-based context of coastal towns⁸. 146 towns in England were identified as coastal by the ONS using the definition as those with a tourist beach, or with an industrial heritage or port. Coastal villages with populations less than 5,000 were not included in the ONS report.

A comparison on local authority areas by the Social Market Foundation (SMF) in 2017 identified a widening economic gap between coastal and non-coastal communities, with lower economic output, employee pay and number of degree level qualified residents⁹. In 2019 the House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities reported in 'The Future of Seaside Towns' that there are some specific challenges that characterise coastal communities in England, which impact on young people:

*Young people in seaside towns are being let down and left behind by poor standards in existing provision, limited access to educational institutions and a lack of employment opportunities, resulting in low levels of aspiration. (5)*¹⁰

In 2018 seaside towns had higher shares of self-employment, part-time and seasonal employment than non-coastal towns; two thirds had higher levels of deprivation compared to one third of non-coastal towns; had slower population and employment growth than non-coastal towns and had higher shares of residents over 65 years of age and lower shares of residents aged 0 to 15 compared to non-coastal towns¹¹.

The socioeconomic context of rural and coastal areas in England is challenging; limited and declining employment opportunities and ageing populations have impacted on the infrastructures of these communities, negatively affecting housing, transport, technology and leisure¹². These infrastructural challenges, as well as socioeconomic issues, affect schools in coastal and rural communities and result in more limited access to resources than schools in urban areas, they are Educationally Isolated¹³.

⁷ Social Mobility Commission. (2017). *State of the Nation 2017: Social mobility in Great Britain*. London: Social Mobility Commission. Retrieved from gov.uk website: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf

⁸ ONS (2020) Coastal Towns in England and Wales: October 2020. London: Office for National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/tourismindustry/articles/coastaltownsinenglandandwales/2020-10-06>

⁹ Social Market Foundation (SMF) (2017) Living on the Edge: Britain's coastal communities. London, SMF. <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Living-on-the-edge.pdf>

¹⁰ House of Lords (HoL) (2019) The Future of Seaside Towns. Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities, HL Paper 320, Report of Session 2017–19. London, HoL. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldseaside/320/320.pdf>

¹¹ ONS (2020) Ibid

¹² House of Lords (HoL) (2019) Ibid

¹³ Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2015 and 2019 Ibid



1.2 The educational context for rural and coastal localities

In 2020, there were 3268 state maintained rural primary schools in England¹⁴ (DfE, 2020) compared to 5210 in 2008¹⁵. These rural primary schools are 19 per cent of all primary schools in England and confirmed as rural under the Designation of Rural Primary Schools Order 2020. The data demonstrates a massive decline in the number of rural primary schools in last 12 years. This decline warrants further discussion, but in essence is linked to education policy and funding in England, which tends to benefit larger schools and Multi Academy Trusts¹⁶ (MATs). 551 secondary schools (ages 11–16) were in rural areas in 2020, forming 16 per cent of the total 3448 secondary schools in England in 2020¹⁷.

There are 84 local authority areas in England defined by the government as ‘countryside living’; of these 34 are coastal and the remaining coastal-countryside areas are ‘heritage’ or ‘industrial legacy’ (see Figure 1). In 2018 the number of pupils attending schools in rural areas who left school with English and Maths GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent was higher than in urban areas (69.5 per cent compared to urban areas 63.5 per cent and England overall 64.5 per cent) in 2018¹⁸. However, The Centre for Education and Youth revealed that pupils in rural schools (including coastal schools) from persistently disadvantaged backgrounds have lower attainment at the end of secondary schooling than pupils from similar backgrounds in non-rural schools:

*Notably, in rural areas the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes is particularly strong. So although pupils in rural schools with low deprivation attain highly, schools in deprived areas are really struggling... Geography, demographics and community/economic context play a critical role in moderating the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes. (Para 10 - 15)*¹⁹

¹⁴ Department for Education (DfE) (2020) Rural primary schools’ designation. London, DfE.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-primary-schools-designation>

¹⁵ Countryside Agency (2008) State of the countryside 2008. London: Countryside Agency.

¹⁶ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Luke, I. (2020) Sense-making of educational policy and workforce supply for small schools in England in Tanya Ovenden-Hope and Rowena Passy (Eds) Exploring Teacher Recruitment and Retention: contextual challenges from international perspectives. Oxford, Routledge.

¹⁷ Department for Education (DfE) (2020) Ibid

¹⁸ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (2019) Rural Education and Childcare, London, DEFRA. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rural-education>

¹⁹ Centre for Education and Youth (CFEY) (2019) Breaking the Link? Attainment, poverty and rural schools <https://cfey.org/2019/04/breaking-the-link-attainment-poverty-and-rural-schools/>



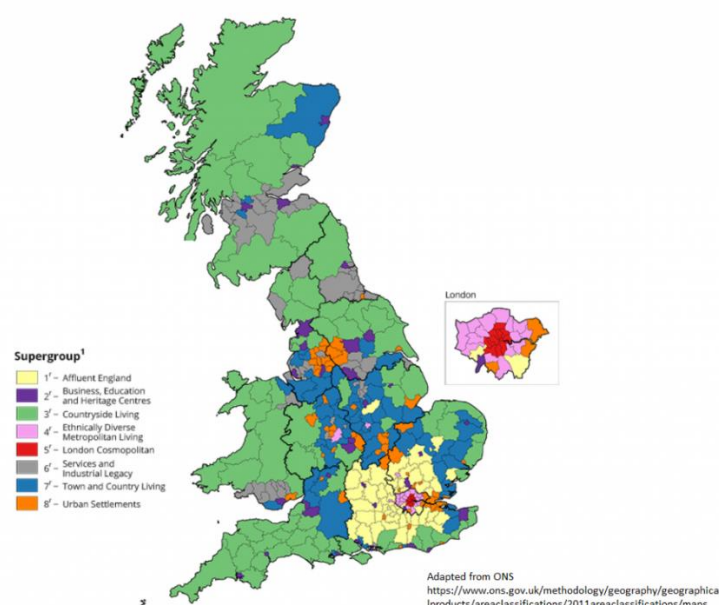


Figure 1: Countryside living local authorities. NB: Countryside living local authorities shown in green.²⁰

The geographic, socioeconomic and cultural challenges of place for rural-coastal England are similar and these have played out in education as lower pupil attainment. Pupils in schools in countryside living areas were found to have a 0.58 correlation between disadvantage and attainment in the end of secondary school General Certificate of Secondary Examinations (GCSEs), the highest of all areas in England²¹. DEFRA, using the Rural-Urban classification mentioned previously, support the link between deprivation and rural school pupil attainment:

The proportion of pupils achieving English and Maths A to C grades or equivalent in their GCSEs at the end of Key Stage 4 (end of secondary-level education), based on residency of pupil...was lower for all rural areas for each level of deprivation (IDACI decile group) compared with urban areas. (7)²²*

The relationship between geographical isolation and socioeconomic deprivation is also realised in Ofsted judgements of school performance, particularly in secondary schools in England, where 'poverty and isolation seem to act in concert. Among the relatively small number of secondary schools with high levels of both, two-thirds are rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate'²³. This finding demonstrates the importance of poverty when considering place and education.

For coastal school pupils' attainment is lower than in non-coastal schools. SchoolDASH (2015)²⁴ identified that pupils were on average achieving 3 per cent lower results than pupils in urban schools, based on the benchmark five A*-C GCSEs including English and maths. Thomson (2015)²⁵

²⁰ CFEY (2019) Ibid: para 1

²¹ CFEY (2019) Ibid

²² CFEY (2019) Ibid: 7

²³ Hannay, T. (2020, March 3). Outliers: On geographically isolated schools [blog]. SchoolDASH.

<https://www.schooldash.com/blog.html>

²⁴ SchoolDASH (2015) Beside the seaside. Online.: <https://www.schooldash.com/blog-1511.html#20151106>

²⁵ Thomson, D (2015) The pupil premium group in coastal schools is their rate of progress really any different to schools with similar intakes. Education DataLab. <http://educationdatalab.org.uk/2015/04/the-pupil-premium-group-in-coastal-schools-is-their-rate-of-progress-really-any-different-to-schools-with-similar-intakes/>



reported that there was a lower rate of relative progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 among Pupil Premium²⁶ (a proxy measure of deprivation) pupils attending coastal schools, predominantly white British pupils in disadvantaged areas. The DfE reported on this sustained inequity in outcomes for coastal school pupils in both the progress and attainment 8 scores (end of secondary school measures of performance) in 2018, regardless of levels of disadvantage:

Overall, attainment and progress for all pupils was higher for pupils attending schools located in non-coastal areas compared to pupils in coastal areas.(17)²⁷

The disparity in rural and coastal school pupil attainment is sustained and pernicious in England. To add to this, the greatest resource for pupil attainment, high-quality teaching has been shown to be affected by place. While there is a paucity of research in this area, the DfE reported in 2016 that '[schools] that were in coastal rural areas had the highest rate of teachers leaving the sector. Urban schools in general recruited a higher number of newly qualified teachers (NQTs)' (DfE, 2016:3²⁸). This acknowledgement of poorer teacher retention and greater challenges with teacher recruitment for coastal and rural schools in England is significant. The DfE continued that 'Further research is needed to understand the underlying reasons for these differences' (2016:3²⁹). The concept of Educational Isolation provides a lens for understanding how place or locality can limit a rural or coastal school's access to resources to explain the lower attainment of persistently disadvantaged pupils in these schools.

Overall, we would argue that English schools in deprived coastal and rural areas have been relatively neglected by policy and research until very recently. This neglect is in part because research has been steered by the English government's focus on schools in densely populated/urban areas, where funded interventions, such as The London Challenge³⁰, were considered to have a greater reach in their impact. This is changing, as the government's 'Levelling Up'³¹ agenda identifies place as impacting on educational outcomes, and more specifically as work in this area (such as Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2015, Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019³², Odell, 2017³³) has begun to show how persistently disadvantaged students from schools in coastal and rural areas have performed less well in examinations than those in more populated areas. As a

²⁶ Pupil Premium was introduced in England in 2011 and is a sum of money given to schools each year by the Government to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children.

²⁷ Department for Education (DfE) (2019) Outcomes for pupils at the end of KS4 by geography. London, DfE. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908315/Outcomes_for_pupils_at_the_end_of_KS4_by_geography_-_ad_hoc_statistics.pdf

²⁸ Department for Education (2016) Schools workforce in England 2010 to 2015: trends and geographical comparisons. September 2016. London, Department for Education. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/550970/SFR44_2016_text.pdf

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ The London Challenge was a secondary school improvement programme run and funded by the government that was implemented in the capital of England between 2003 and 2011. It was subsequently extended to other cities around the UK in 2008, having already been deemed to have made a positive impact on London's schools.

³¹ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

³² Ibid

³³ Odell, E. (2017). Lonely schools: the relationship between geographic isolation and academic attainment. Educational Research, 59(3), 257-72.



schools' relative geographical isolation increases, so the average attainment of disadvantaged pupils decreases³⁴.

This project is a direct response to the issue of under-researching Educational Isolation. Researchers from Plymouth Marjon University and the University of Plymouth are grateful for the opportunity to research in collaboration with a large primary multi-academy trust (MAT) in rural and coastal South-West of England. The majority of the schools of the MAT are Educationally Isolated, and the few that are not are in areas of socioeconomic deprivation and cultural isolation. All schools in the MAT are coastal or rural schools.

1.3 The complexity of Educational Isolation

Part of the complexity in conceptualising Educational Isolation is articulating the way it is experienced differently by schools in relation to their place. We have therefore defined Educational Isolation in a broad and encompassing way. In our report from the Educational Isolation research project, undertaken between 2017 – 2019³⁵, we cite the main challenges of a school's place as:

- **Geographic remoteness** – leaders from rural and coastal schools reported limited access to public transport; the high cost of travel, together with long journeys, were seen to have a negative effect on parental/community engagement with the school and teacher recruitment and retention. Distance from high quality professional development opportunities was also identified as an issue, as was being located away from other schools and universities, reducing expectations for both teachers and pupils.
- **Socioeconomic disadvantage** – the same school leaders reported that few large-scale, innovative, local employers in the area resulted in an impoverished type of careers advice; that high levels of seasonal and poorly-paid employment limited young people's expectations; that the absence of sound employment prospects reduced student motivation at school. Intergenerational low, seasonal and unemployment was also seen to impact on parental engagement at school.
- **Cultural isolation** – rural and coastal leaders told us of their cultural isolation, which they believed led to a less rich educational experience for their students than for those attending multicultural schools in cities that have readily-accessible museums, galleries and theatres. Leaders argued that rural and coastal schools needed to invest considerable time, money and effort into introducing children to different ethnicities, cultures and lifestyles, drawing a comparison with more populated areas that have a diverse population and in which there are a range of readily available cultural opportunities. The disparity in school funding between London and more remote areas was seen as an important barrier to offering children these experiences.

Nonetheless, these challenges individually may not result in Educational Isolation. Urban inner-city schools, for instance, may have high levels of disadvantage but still have access to the different

³⁴ Future Leaders Trust (2015) [Isolated schools Out on a limb.pdf](#)

³⁵ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2019) *Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England*, Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth.



resources needed to support school improvement. For example, cultural diversity in cities can widen students' experiences as part of everyday life; there is a larger pool of teachers to draw on for school recruitment; and relatively short distances within cities can facilitate teacher continuing professional development (CPD).

When the three challenges are experienced together by a school, we have identified this as Educational Isolation (see Figure 1) and seen that it limits access of these schools, predominantly but not exclusively in coastal and rural areas, to:

- **A high-quality workforce** – staff recruitment and retention can be more difficult in coastal and rural areas, partly because of the high cost of housing in desirable areas that attract second homeowners and partly because teaching at these schools can be challenging. The resulting high levels of churn can lead to ongoing staff development issues; experienced but possibly underperforming teachers can move around local schools, resulting in 'coastal churn'; or at the other end of the retention spectrum, a static staff can lead to inward-looking school improvement through 'lack of churn'.
- **School support** – rural and coastal leaders reported high levels of isolation in terms of teacher CPD and/or leadership development because of the long distances between schools, which inhibit opportunities for shared school improvement and networking. They also reported that the cost of sending staff to conferences in major urban areas could be prohibitive.
- **Externally-funded interventions** – rural and coastal leaders told us that they were disconnected from national funding streams, and that this exacerbated disparities in school funding. They argued that deprived areas in cities or towns received '*far more funding*', a reflection of government policy oriented towards large urban areas with high population density.

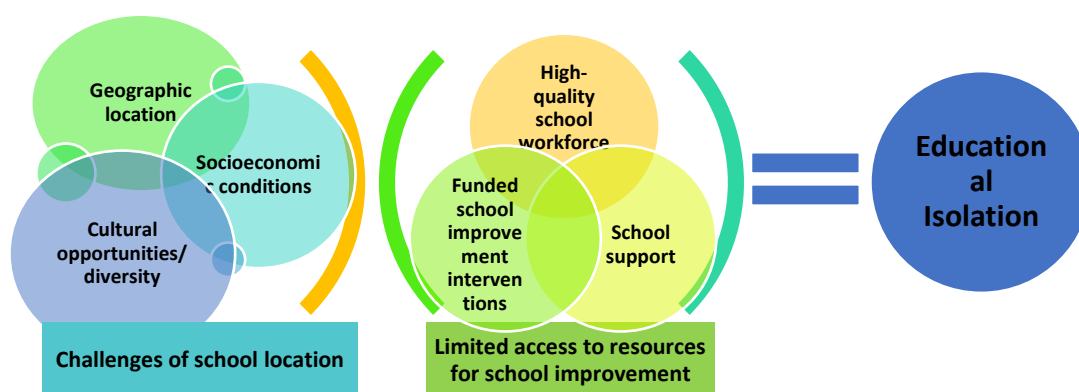


Figure 1: Conceptualising Educational Isolation³⁶

³⁶ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2019) Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England, Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth, pp.4-5.



2. The Case Study Multi-Academy Trust

The MAT was established in academic year 2019/2020 from two successful but smaller primary school only MATs based in the South West of England and with schools covering very similar coastal and rural geographical areas. The predecessor MAT had a proven track record of working closely together through an umbrella Trust and a Teaching School Alliance for school improvement and Initial Teacher Education. The merging of the predecessor MATs was considered to be opportune and would provide financial, operational and strategic benefits in an education policy arena pushing for larger, more economically sustainable MATs.

The strong partnerships already in place between the two MATs, e.g., the sharing of strategic providers, shared visions and values, and aligned services, were noted as being able to facilitate harmonisation of systems and standardisation of policies across the new MAT. As a much larger trust, there was recognition of the need to work differently to affect school improvement.

The new Board of Trustees and Executive Leadership Team (ELT) (Chief Executive Officer (CEO), one Deputy CEO, one Chief Operating Officer (COO)) decided on a structural model of support for schools that they believed would impact positively on school improvement through enhanced staff development and ways to mitigate teacher recruitment challenges, and promote a range of opportunities for pupils. The Trustees and ELT recognised that the schools in their Trust had additional location challenges of being in areas that were geographically remote, and/or socioeconomically deprived and culturally isolated, and that these affected school improvement opportunities by limiting access to specific resources.

In September 2019 the new MAT was led by a CEO, one Deputy CEO, one COO, who were held to account by a Trustee Board with several sub-committees. The Hub Leads joined the CEO, Deputy CEO and COO as part of the Senior Leadership Team. The Hub Leads combined this role with that of Executive Headteacher or Headteacher of one or more schools in their hub. Headteachers were responsible for the day-to-day management of their schools and were part of the Senior Leadership Team. This leadership structure remained relatively static over the three years of the project, but did see the CEO retire and a new CEO, DCEO and COO appointed. There was also a restructure of the central office team.

2.1 The hub model

The new MAT embedded four clusters, or hubs of schools, into its structure. These clusters (later named hubs) would work collaboratively, each with a Hub Lead and about 1000 pupils in total. Initially there would be a fifth 'hub' of one school which was also a Designated Teaching School and English Hub lead in the area. The criteria to create the hubs were: geographical location, existing cross-school relationships, size of school, and level of school improvement needs. The hubs would be fairly autonomous with a large amount of responsibility delegated to them while 'subscribing' to central principles, vision, processes and strategies. The hubs were established in the summer term 2019, before the new MAT officially launched in Autumn term 2019, so that school leaders across the two trusts could start to co-design their own hub ideas.



The inception of the hub model was considered much more than just a school improvement strategy by the Trustees and Executive Leadership Team of the new MAT. The hub model was embedded to ensure a mechanism for strategic and operational planning to support outcome/impact ambition e.g., developing shared school-based functional specialists and subject leads who could support high-level delivery and impact on outcome for pupils across hub. Within the hubs, more effective use of school-based practitioners would support school improvement. Further, specialist expertise across staff within the Trust, including Local Leaders of Education, Specialist Leaders of Education and Post Threshold Specialists, would be accessed both within hubs and trust-wide to benefit more pupils and meet the high priority needs of individual schools.

The hub model proposed a more distributed leadership approach while achieving good value for money, as well as enabling more local involvement in smaller groups to allow school leaders to have a bigger voice. The belief was that the hub model would help schools feel well-supported and possibly better equipped with the sharing of resources across the hub. The hubs were also intended to promote opportunities for individuals to develop specialisms and responsibilities and then, as the hubs became established over time, specialists to meet with staff of similar roles in other hubs to share expertise and develop best practice, e.g., SEN leads, Sports Premium leads, PP leads, Maths leads, etc.

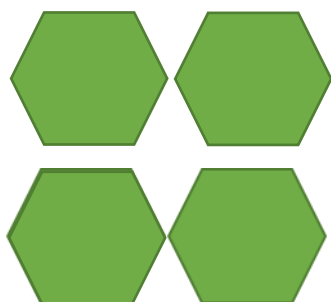
The hub model was implemented in the MAT's schools from September 2019. The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) took responsibility for the evolution of the hub model within the Trust, using interim reports from this research to inform decision making on the effectiveness of the hubs for achieving its initial aims outlined above and as a means for mitigating the effects of Educational Isolation in its rural/coastal area schools by combining the advantages of:

1. economies of scale
2. devolved leadership and management processes
3. clear succession planning for school leadership creation
4. smaller supportive, localised school improvement communities.

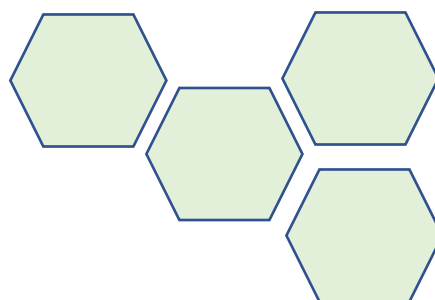
Diagrams of the evolving hub models from 2019/20 to 2021/22 can be seen below in Figures 2, 3 and 4:



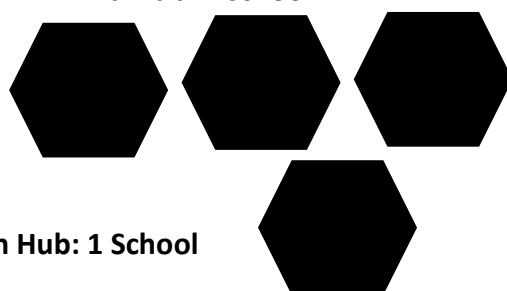
West Hub: 4 schools



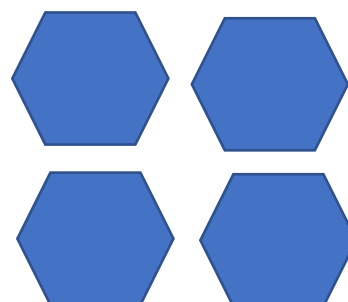
North Hub: 4 schools



Mid Hub: 4 school



East Hub: 4 Schools

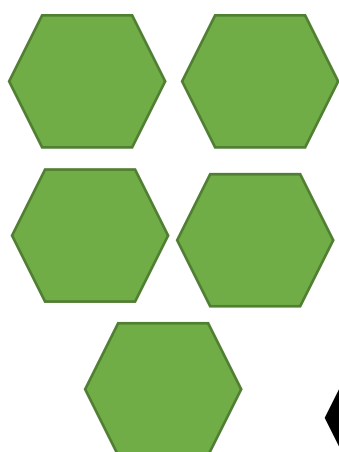


Teaching School/English Hub: 1 School

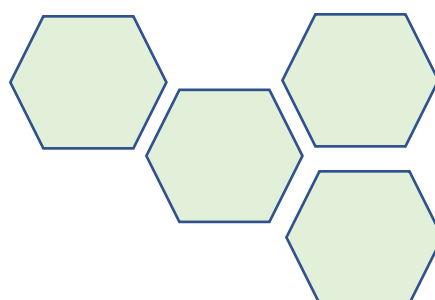


Figure 2: The hub school model in 2020/21

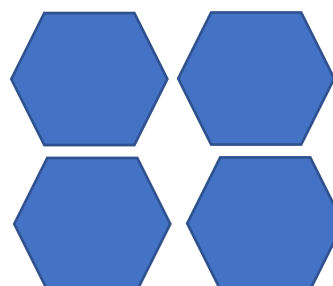
West Hub: 5 schools



North Hub: 4 schools



East Hub: 4 Schools



Mid Hub (includes Teaching School and English Hub)

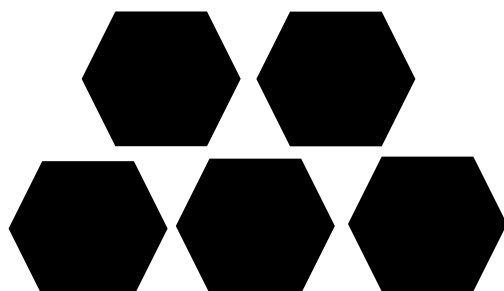
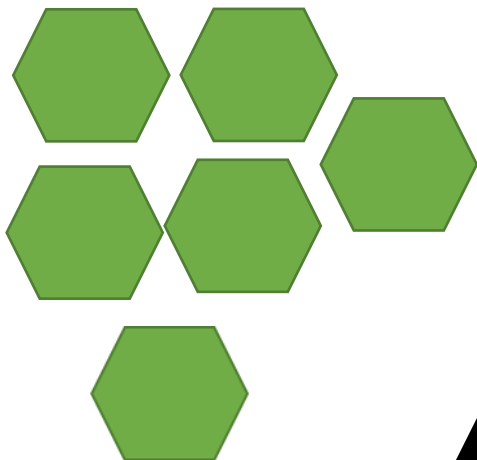


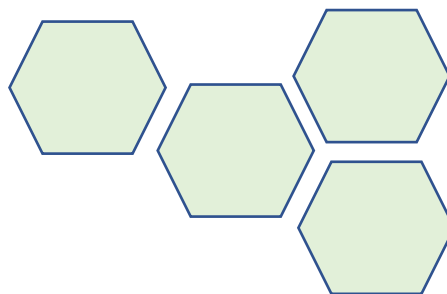
Figure 3: The hub model in 2021/22



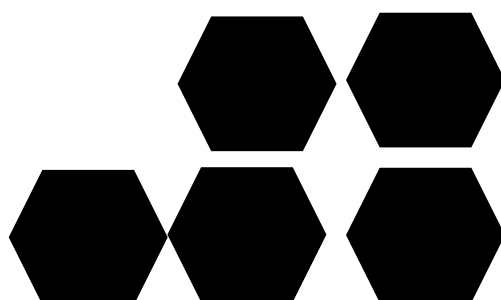
West Hub: six schools



North Hub: four schools



Mid Hub: five schools



East Hub: five schools

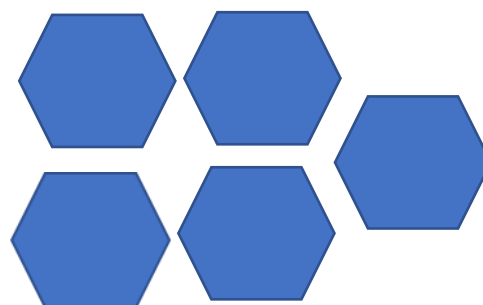


Figure 4: The hub model in 2022/23

2.2 Hub Leads

Hub Leads (originally to be called Cluster Principals) were identified as successful headteachers with a track record of school-to-school support. They would have 3 days per week in their school within their hub and 2 days per week focused on hub work to coordinate and oversee the working of the hub. Hub Leads were intended to have a clearly defined role, carry accountability for the hub and, as part of the Executive Leadership Team, be line managed by the CEO. The principle was they would support communication between the MAT and the locality of hubs by sharing central messages, strategies and policies within their hub and monitor their implementation. This structure was also considered to provide a succession planning opportunity for aspiring headteachers in the hub to share the role with the Hub Lead, in turn creating a part-time Assistant Headteacher opportunity for another aspiring senior leader and ensuring a pipeline of future senior leaders for the MAT (in area where leadership recruitment could be more challenging than the national picture).

Over the three years of the research project, the ELT meeting minutes reflected the challenges with clarifying the Hub Lead role, and the workload for Hub Leads, due to the dual responsibility held by



its incumbents. The ELT minutes from 2020 to 2022 indicate much discussion around the Hub Lead role, with suggestions coming from headteachers on 'what they would like from their Hub leads'. Time was spent in many ELT meetings discussing Hub Lead roles and responsibilities. For example, it was acknowledged that executive Head and Hub lead were very different roles. Heads should not be overburdened but feel supported and be signposted to relevant people and places. Hub Leads should support each other, as well as the schools in their hub and equal access to all schools in hub must be given.

The Hub Lead role was 'complicated' through the decision for RAG (red amber green) rated hub schools at red to be supported by the DCEO as lead, but with the Hub Lead to visit weekly and support. In amber schools, the Hub lead would play the major role. Visits to red/amber schools would be once per month by its respective lead, apart from when it was weekly while an interim Head was in place or where new Co-head was being supported and preparation was in place for an Ofsted visit. Hub Leads would visit green schools at least once a half-term. Hub leads were also expected to attend local advisory board meetings for all hub schools. It is therefore not surprising that the Hub Lead role emerged as recurring theme in this research.

Hub Lead Job Descriptions from 2019/20 and 2020/21 are shared in Appendix II to illustrate the consideration given by the ELT to creating a clear and purposeful role within the hub model.



3. The Hub Model research

The research project was qualitative and longitudinal, taking place over the three academic years 2019 – 2022. The aims were to:

- draw on the MAT's experiences to explore the concept of Educational Isolation in depth
- examine how the effects of Educational Isolation might be mitigated by the hub model adopted by this MAT.

We used the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which is a strengths-based, positive approach to leadership development and organisational change³⁷. It generally involves four phases of Discovering (how the organisation works), Dreaming (envisioning what might be), Designing (determining what will be) and Delivering (realising the propositions)³⁸. It has similarities to the action research model of 'plan, do, review', which fitted well with the Executive Leadership Team's approach of flexibility in response to developments within the MAT. AI's positive approach also matches the MAT ethos of supportive professional development.

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3.1 Research methods

Our research used a case study approach, focusing on a structural model for supporting schools in a newly formed MAT. The case study was informed by a scrutiny of publicly available data to understand the MAT, its constituent schools, and policies and practices relating to establishing and developing the hub model. These documents were available from the MAT website and from the MAT. Unfortunately in all three years of the research, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the education system, including the cancellation of external exams in 2020 and 2021; while primary-aged children were examined in 2022, no individual school data will be published until the end of the 2022/23 academic year. The second source of data was a focus group with the ELT and Hub Leads in Year 1, to explore the school leader's knowledge of the hub model and their understanding of Educational Isolation in relation to their own experiences of their school. The third source of data was interviews with school leaders from all hubs in all three years of the research to illustrate understanding of the hub model and how it was working in practice.

The project was granted ethical approval by Plymouth Marjon University, with particular focus on voluntary participation, confidentiality, and secure data management and protection. In each year of the research, data were analysed thematically, following the principles of Braun and Clarke³⁹ that involve familiarisation, coding, theme generation and writing up.

In the next sub-sections we summarise the findings from the previous two years of research to provide context for the three years' findings in section 4. All quotations are '*in italics*' and unattributed to maintain participants' anonymity although, where helpful, the interviewee's role is made known. Quotations were selected as an illustration of points made by interviewees.

³⁷ Cooperrider, D. & Srivastva, S. (1989) Appreciative inquiry in organizational life, *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1, pp.129-169.

³⁸ Reed, J. (2007) *Appreciative Inquiry: Research for Change*, London: Sage, pp.22-3.

³⁹ Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (n/d) *Thematic Analysis*, <https://www.thematicanalysis.net/>



3.2 Year 1

In Year 1 of the project our primary data were collected first from a baseline focus group at the start of the academic year with senior and executive leaders of the MAT, asking about their understanding of Educational Isolation and the hub model. At the end of the year we interviewed the seven senior leaders, asking for their views on the hub model, its challenges and successes and plans for the next year.

Leaders in the MAT all aligned their experiences of school leadership with Educational Isolation. They identified clear place-based challenges from the three elements of Educational Isolation in their schools:

- **Differential school funding** (less funding in rural areas, and in small schools) and the **associated challenges to support access to resources, such as high quality CPD from external sources.**

'Is there a correlation between distance from Westminster and reduction in resource is?...poor access to addition funding, for example the London Challenge.' (East Hub)

'Rurality can mean small numbers on roll, which has financial impact.' (Mid Hub)

'There are funding differences by region.' (North Hub)

- **Infrastructural inequity**, such as poor access to public transport, sports facilities or broadband, resulting in social isolation as well as geographical isolation and associated issues with attracting teachers, supporting pupil development and staff CPD.

'Technological challenges...poor access to facilities, for example broadband utilities.' (East Hub).

- **Cultural isolation** creating a feeling of insularity (North Hub) and not a reflection of multicultural Britain 'creating a lack of access to languages and culture...Children are isolated not only to limited cultural experiences, but access to a diversity at all levels.' (ELT)
- **Community deprivation** was seen to limit opportunities and aspiration, for example 'Sporting aspiration impacted by lack of local facilities, missed talent' (North Hub)

Data from these two methods showed that, despite the challenges brought by the Covid pandemic, the benefits of the hub model were:

1. Opportunities for relationship development, with a *'personal'* feel to each hub.
2. Staff confidence-building through MAT-wide and localised CPD. There was also increased confidence in the model to deliver its aims of centralised leadership with localised autonomy.
3. Opportunities for local collaboration.
4. Ease of communication through the meeting systems set up at MAT and local level.
5. School improvement, through a greater understanding of each school's strengths and needs.



6. Sharing of resources, seen to reduce workload and open staff to new ideas.
7. Financial efficiency, through sharing of staff such as SENCOs and subject leaders.
8. New technology. The technology infrastructure set up enabled staff to keep in touch with families during the lockdowns and subsequently, which was particularly helpful for the families of children with learning difficulties.

The challenges of the hub model were reported as:

1. **Allocating schools to hubs.** Balancing existing relationships with geographical location, pupil numbers and differential school improvement needs proved to be difficult. In response to these challenges, the Executive Leadership Team decided that flexibility was key, and to enable headteachers to choose the '*best fit*' for their hub. Schools can change hub if circumstances require.
2. **Support and control.** All hub leaders commented on the challenge of finding the right balance between tight oversight of the model and autonomy of delivery.
3. **The Hub Lead role.** All Hub Leads identified the need to separate the multiple roles as Hub Lead/Headteacher and find the right balance between them.
4. **School resources.** School leaders reported that a balance had to be found here too, this time between generally sharing expertise and prioritising the most important MAT-wide school improvement issues.

3.3 Year 2

In Year 2 of the project we conducted the interviews towards the end of the summer term in 2021. We first interviewed the MAT CEO to gain an overview of developments in the academic year 2020/21, followed by interviews with all of the Senior Leadership Team who were leading a school; 22 staff members in total. These school leaders had roles that included executive headteacher, headteacher and the four Hub Leads. The aim of the interviews was to explore ways in which the hub model was functioning for all concerned, the successes and challenges, if the model was mitigating the effects of Educational Isolation and ideas for next steps. The interview schedule can be seen in Appendix 1.

At the end of a '*turbulent*' year in which the schools experienced high levels of disruption from the ongoing Covid pandemic, school leaders reported that the three main benefits of the hub model were:

1. **Trusted, supportive relationships:** School leaders continuing to develop trusted, supportive relationships within the hubs. Most felt that they contributed to and received non-judgemental support in a safe environment in which leaders could be 'critical friends' to each other.
2. **Collaboration:** School leaders reported high levels of collaboration in terms of sharing, whether this was in the form of decision-making, knowledge, expertise, CPD, staff or material resources.



3. **An effective model of communication:** School leaders reported clear MAT level communication, with opportunities to contextualise messages at a local level through the hubs to support school level and local needs.

Once again school leaders cited a lack of clarity over the Hub Lead role as a challenge, pointing to the unpredictability of the workload and Hub Leads' multiple roles as factors that could limit engagement with the schools they were supporting. Questions were raised over the optimum size of a hub, and leaders of small schools argued that their particular challenges were unrecognised by leaders of the larger schools. A minority of school leaders argued that the financial cost of the hub model would be better spent focusing on their own school improvement.

Year 2 of the hub model gave some insight into the potential of this MAT structuring of school support in mitigating against Educational Isolation. Findings suggested the following elements of Educational Isolation had already been affected by the hub model:

- **Socioeconomic disadvantage:** Communication within the Trust was helping to raise awareness of, and to, support schools with high levels of disadvantaged pupils: *'[hub lead] has been really helpful with supporting me with ensuring that the provision for PP pupils is as it should be because I think, if I'm honest, as a school ... we don't really know what deprivation might really look like and what it might mean to be disadvantaged'*.
- **Professional isolation:** The Trust was developing localised working relationships, set in the context of the needs of the local community. This was reducing some headteachers' feelings of isolation: *'the reliance on Teams recently and communication has been high amongst all schools really, not just within the hub ... If it wasn't for being in the MAT, and especially within the hub model, I would feel personally extremely isolated'*.
- **Accessible resources for school improvement:** Collaboration on CPD within and across the hubs was beginning to open up opportunities for pupils in all schools: *'We're now part of something very big and we are able to do lots of exciting and innovative and engaging activities. And then we make sure that all of our smaller village schools have equal and full access to them ... I think it [the hub model] has up-levelled the opportunities that are there for our small village schools and I can see that those things are starting now'*.
- **Cultural isolation:** the Trust was setting up cultural events for pupils, such as the G19 summit. There was belief that the hub model would provide more support with cultural opportunities as budgets tighten: *'I think as budgets grow tighter and tighter, and it becomes much harder for us to be able to give additional opportunities, or buy in to additional opportunities, or access some of those, doing it together and sharing, again, that expertise, because there may be people who can provide that within our hub, will definitely help that. So I think that the impact will be more greatly felt in the coming years, rather than this year'*.
- **High quality workforce:** The focus on school improvement and CPD is leading to high expectations: *'I think it's good in that it's a Trust that doesn't stand still and nobody can be expected to just sit in their classroom and carry on. They've all, all, got to just keep learning'*



and be innovative basically. And actually, that is almost an expectation ... I think it's welcome because actually we all learn from each other'.

- **Externally funded interventions:** One externally funded science project was mentioned: *'That has been a joy to see, and to bring that fun engagement back into science, that children do actually really love science here'.*



4. Year 3

In Year 3, the final year of the research in 2021/22, we interviewed all 29 senior leaders within the MAT. These included 22 headteachers or co-headteachers; four Hub Leads; the outgoing CEO; the incoming CEO; and the Chief Operating Officer (COO). This time we focused on three main questions for interviewees:

1. What is your view of the hub model? How is it working out? Please explain your answer.
2. What do you think are the three best things about the Hub model?
3. What are three things that need improvement?

In addition, and in line with second phase of AI (Dreaming), we asked the outgoing CEO to reflect on her vision of the hub model; we also asked the newly appointed CEO and the COO about how they envisioned the model's development. As was the case in previous years, the data were analysed thematically, drawing on the interview schedule for the coding framework.

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4.1 The hub model vision: sharing and supporting

The outgoing CEO's vision for hubs had focused on them being a structure for sharing and supporting of staff and resources:

... the idea as we moved on, and it is now beginning to happen, was that there would be sharing of staff, sharing of resources, sharing of expertise, shared staff meetings etc, across the Hubs. So, the hubs would be self-sustaining and supporting but not their own little Trust within a big Trust. They still have to be within the vision of the big Trust.

The MAT vision was that

... we're here for the children and we're here to make the best of the resources we've got. And the reason we came together was to share those resources, whether that's people or expertise or knowledge or actual resources ... This was about coming together and being able to give a better education to the children in our Trust because we were working together'.

The CEO believed that it was difficult for any person in a position of leadership to manage more than five or six schools at any time. This was because of the impossibility of absorbing the necessary detailed knowledge of staffing structure, finances and types of support needed to ensure that schools could offer children the best education possible. *'Self-sustaining Hubs ... within the vision of the big Trust'* would enable smaller groups of schools to support one another in the realisation of the vision, thereby mitigating both the feeling (through local relationships) and the practical reality (through geographically close schools that shared expertise, resources, meetings) of Educational Isolation.

The CEO reported that she was retiring and leaving the MAT



... really proud of what we've done. It didn't quite happen in the way that I thought it was going to happen [because of the Covid pandemic]. But I'm pleased that ... I'm leaving it in a really strong position, really strong school improvement-wise. You know, we had successful Ofsted in all of the schools during the period that I was CEO. The finances are very, very strong. The governance is very strong, and trustees are very strong, and they've appointed a good CEO. So, you know, I'm really, really proud of all of that.

She believed that there were two main areas that needed addressing; the role of the Hub Lead, something discussed by most school leaders over the three years of the research, and the hub structure. This was partly because there were new schools waiting to join the MAT and partly because of changes within some schools within Hubs:

... there are several schools waiting on the wings to come in [so making sure] that the hub structure is looked at as a whole to decide whether it would be better to do a little bit of a move around of schools. Because in the beginning, in the very, very beginning, although geography was part of it, we did have some people that were head over two schools that weren't in the same area. So, some of that has now changed.

The CEO cited the importance of maintaining the trusted relationships that had developed between school leaders, a great success of the hub model, and that were central to her vision of sharing and supporting:

We always said that we would never put a head in a Hub that they weren't happy with because relationships are so important. If you don't get on with the Hub Lead, it's not going to work, is it? So, heads have very much got to be part of that discussion.

Future model development was left to the incoming CEO and COO:

[The incoming CEO] is a very different person from me. She is very visionary. She's very creative ... And, you know, are we okay with our vision or, you know, do we need to make changes to it? Where are we going for the next five years?

The outgoing CEO provided a picture of an established hub model that had an embedded ethos of sharing and supporting, and that was moving into a new phase prompted by changes to leadership, staffing and the new environment of a larger MAT. She was aware of the areas of the hub model that needed addressing. Her understanding of the hub model aligned very clearly with school leaders' experiences of the hubs.

4.2 Embedding and developing the hub model

There were no structural changes to the hub model in the academic year 2021/22, and staff reflected on how, as one school leader put it, they were returning to a 'pre-post-pandemic' world in which schools were opening up to activities that had ceased during the pandemic. As was the case in the previous years' research, all school leaders were supportive of the hub model, although to



varying degrees according to how they believed the model worked for them and their school. All believed that the model was now embedded in the MAT and several commented on its 'sharing culture':

It feels like we're at a point now where ... the hub model is actually embedding and it is embedded actually in many, many ways.

... that's a really good hub model where you can go to your colleagues and really learn about their experiences, and what's worked well, what's not going so well, and gather ideas and knowledge of different things ... the expectation is that it's a sharing culture.

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Several observed how well the model had worked during the two years when the pandemic was at its most intense:

I really do think that within [the Trust], and again, this is just my experience, over the last two years, over the pandemic, we smashed it out of the park as a Trust.

... we had six months really when we were setting up the Hubs and then ... Covid happened, and everything sort of changed. I think over these past two years, the hub model's proved really successful in helping those headteachers manage the Covid journey ... I think those first two years it was a really good model for helping us navigate those really new experiences, that no-one had ever had to encounter before.

Some spoke of how the alignment of values within the MAT was central to developing the MAT's sharing and supportive ethos:

Knowing that the MAT have got, you know, there's a vision and we're all kind of moving towards that and our values are all aligned I think, are absolutely key.

A few school leaders reflected on changes within the wider educational landscape that were placing schools and their staff under increasing pressure:

1. **Capacity issues** because of staff short- and long-term illness and teacher attrition: *Staffing wise, I had no issues during Covid at all, it's been after Covid ... You take one person out of a small team when there's only like nine of you in the building at any one time anyway, and ... you're not going to have the capacity to be able to cover that absence.*
2. **Changed contracts** through heightened awareness of safeguarding: *... the Keeping Children Safe in Education document⁴⁰ says the designated safeguarding lead will be contactable during the school holidays ... the government put that in without saying, 'Oh, we need to re-negotiate your contracts'. Without any discussion whatsoever, it's now there.*

⁴⁰ Department for Education (2022) *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2>



3. **An increasing number of complaints:** *... because I think the community, and society really, has got fractured, and we are the front people, so we get it in the neck quite a lot for things that are beyond our control ... like an acrimonious relationship, or all sorts of life events. And we become the focus of that, although it's nothing to do with what we are dealing with day to day, but people outpour their own frustrations on us.*
4. **Concern over future Ofsted visits:** *And what I really worry about now is that external regulators, such as Ofsted, have forgotten that the pandemic happened. And schools are very much still recovering from that. I mean, I've got two staff that have got long Covid; they're in, but they're struggling.*
5. **The sense of firefighting:** *[I would like] the time to deliver on the job rather than [be] firefighting all the time ... I'll be honest with you ... I am a really positive person and, and this has been the toughest two years of my career.*

Nonetheless, school leaders were upbeat about the way the MAT supported them in navigating these pressures, with one referencing the 'top cover' that enables headteachers to focus as far as possible on leading their schools:

Because I speak to teachers ... who are maybe still with county or they're in their own multi-academy trust, who I really don't understand why they're not all nervous wrecks. Because all you hear about is headteachers in horrible situations, that are being put through the wringer, often with things that were completely out of their control. And if you've got top cover, like we have in our Trust, that can be a nice comfort blanket to enable you to lead your school properly.

Picking up on the outgoing CEO's point that resource-sharing was 'now beginning to happen', school leaders recounted recent examples of sharing training, staff, expertise and information that built on previous years' experiences. While much of the collaboration cited in the previous years' research had been virtual because of pandemic-related restrictions, in-person collaboration over a wider range of activities had been (re-)started:

[During the pandemic] we'd liked to have been able to get into each other schools much more and share practice and share teaching staff. And, but I think that's, that, is kind of coming into its own a bit more now with more flexibility around moving people around.

The return to face-to-face meeting was seen as joyful by one interviewee:

It brought tears to my eyes because I was like Oh, this is so nice, to see people for real ... It was just lovely and it just felt like you know, we can all get really, properly get to know each other in the same room.

Another explained how some relatively new headteachers had only met their Hub counterparts on the virtual platform Teams until this academic year, and how important these in-person meetings were:



They [new headteachers] know who they [longer serving headteachers] are. But they'd never met them in person, and they said the difference in the conversation was phenomenal and they really value that face-to-face ... because you tend to turn take much more purposefully. You're picking up on lots of things and also, it's those incidental things where you're catching somebody's eye and giving them a smile or you're saying, 'Ooh, can I catch you after for five minutes?' ... It just facilitates more networking.

Within this supportive structure, school leaders appreciated that they could retain their autonomy as headteachers:

You still have your autonomy in your school as a head ... You know, I know in some MATs it's like, 'We're all going to do this for English' or, 'We're all going to do this for Maths' or whatever. We don't have that, which is good, I think, because not all schools are the same ... it depends on the geographical location; it depends on the social and emotional mental health of the children ... There are so many different factors. So, I like that element of being in our MAT.

This section has provided context for the next sections, which focus on the successes and challenges of the hub model in the academic year 2021/22, and on the new CEO and COO's (re-visited) vision for the MAT.



5. Hub model successes

Each school leader interviewed was asked to identify and elaborate on what they believed were the three main successes and challenges of the hub model in each year of the research. Table 1 below shows the three main successes cited by school leaders in 2021/22 (with 2020/21 in brackets for comparison), plus the number of times each was mentioned. It is notable that school leaders identified the same ‘top’ three successes in both Year 2 and Year Three of the hub model but in greater numbers for ‘development of trusted relationships’ and ‘collaboration’, which suggests that the ‘sharing and supporting’ ethos had matured during the third year of the model. This is an interesting insight into the hub model in relation to Educationally Isolated schools in that it suggests co-locating schools geographically to support school leaders working together can reap positive outcomes.

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Success	Number of mentions 2021/22
Development of trusted, supportive relationships	29 (16)
Collaboration; sharing knowledge, expertise, resources; CPD	23 (14)
Quality of communication throughout the MAT	13 (12)

Table 1: Most frequent school leader responses to the question ‘What are the three best things about the Hub model this year?’

5.1 Trusted, supportive relationships

Developing trusted relationships was identified by all school leaders as a success of the hub model, and the increase in the number of citations from 16 in 2020/21 to 29 in 2021/22 demonstrates the centrality of these relationships to school leaders’ working lives. The school leaders repeated comments similar to the previous year’s, citing non-judgemental, local support as a key factor in reducing their feelings of professional isolation. Headship can be a lonely place, and even more so when leading an Educationally Isolated school that, without a hub model, is typically limited in the way it can access support from other school leaders due to both physical distance and issues of need.

Without the hub, I’d feel so isolated to be honest.

You’d give it a good go, but I couldn’t do this job without that trust and support and to know I’ve got five people [other headteachers in the hub] I could phone just to ask a question.

[I look] really favourably [on the hub model] ... Just that support, that local support mechanism. Having that group of schools that you can build that relationship with, that close relationship.

Other notable comments on the theme of relationships included the respect between headteachers as colleagues:



I greatly respect everyone I work with ... [they have] knowledge, understanding and expertise that, you know, is in my mind outstanding, actually exceptional. So it's great to have that connection across the hub, but also further into the Trust.

Value was placed by all school leaders on having a small group of other headteachers in the hub to contact for support in the midst of a shared experience:

Sometimes it's just about being able to listen to each other as well. I think we do lots of that.

The hub meetings are very important, if possible, in person as well and that works brilliantly. Because you've got those relationships and you can have that, you know. As a head it's very lonely, you can't talk about the challenges that you're having [with your staff] and having an opportunity to do that[talk to other hub headteachers] is so, it's so valuable.

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One headteacher articulated clearly why the hub model worked for establishing trusted relationships between a small, local group of headteachers:

We benefit from each other within that hub model by openly sharing our thoughts, feelings, worries, concerns, best practice ... It can be the smallest of things but, 'When was the date for that head teacher report?' You know, sometimes you miss things, don't you? And to have that trusted friend who will sort of say, 'I've forgotten it too, I'll find it out, find out and I'll get back to you'. You need that trust. Otherwise, it just doesn't work, and I think the joy of the Hub is that trusting atmosphere we've got, I would say.

It is important to note how school leaders reiterated the importance of their relationships with the other headteachers in their hub, including the one acting as hub lead, as schools began to recover from the pandemic. Some argued that picking up the threads of assessment and other customary activities that were halted during Covid has been challenging, and that the hub offered space for 'safe and friendly' reflection that was facilitated by the Hub Lead:

Massively, on a personal level, it [hub model] supports massively. I think last time I spoke to you, we were just tipping into this, feeling the benefits, I think, of the hub. But now it's huge, especially having been through Covid, getting everything back on track, dusting everything down and really it's been quite a steep learning curve for all schools getting back into the assessment process. And everything that we used to do pre-Covid and dusting it down and getting on top of it. It has been a challenging year, even without Covid, because we've had to just get back to what we do best and keeping teachers buoyant as well. So from a personal level, the hub meeting is a really safe and friendly meeting after the heads' meeting.

5.2 Collaboration

School leaders were keen to share their experiences of collaboration with the hub, and also across the MAT, including with schools similar to their own, for example other small schools. Their comments were similar to Year 2 of the hub model and focused on ways in which they had



collaborated over, or shared, information, ideas, resources, learning and advice. For Educationally Isolated schools, having access to open collaboration for high quality, relevant and timely support and development cannot be underestimated.

One important area that school leaders were information- and resource-sharing on T was the newly restarted (following the pandemic) Ofsted visits. This excellent CPD was valued by all school leaders in the MAT, and the hubs supported the contextualisation of experience by locality:

We've had lots of Ofsted recently ... And so being able to support directly in terms of you know, as that phone call happens and to be able to support with that but also giving that feedback ... to help each other, to be as prepared as you know we can be the next time ... So we recorded the conversations that we had, we made crib notes of the different questions and they were all shared with the leaders, but also with the class teachers in the different schools as well, to help everybody to be as prepared as possible.

Another example of collaborative CPD included visits of teachers to other schools in the hubs to develop best practice:

This week for example, two sets of year group teachers are going across to [another school in the hub] to get some support with Talk for Writing and watch some Talk for Writing lessons and things. That's really good.

Sharing ideas and learning from other schools, as well as contributing to others' professional development, was becoming an increasing part of hub model experience for many school leaders:

... that collaboration with other schools, sharing experience, you know what I've talked about being able to share my experience with other schools. But you pick up things from other schools as well yourself don't you, even if you've been doing something a long time. Someone else will go, 'Oh, have you done this?' You go, 'Oh no, that's great', and I'll steal that idea, I might try that one. So that joint working together, it is great, as well as how I've felt that I've been able to go and support. That's good for me and my CPD as well.

Several school leaders suggested a skills audit should be done with the hubs, so that pockets of expertise and facilities could be accessed by other school leaders across the MAT:

Well, I would also like you know, somebody to not just do a skills audit on staff but to do a resources audit. What have we got in our Trust you know, who's got what? Some of our schools are right by the sea, some of them are in the town, some of them are on the moors and you know, we could really go to town on using each other's facilities.

There were also the economies of scale when purchasing resources:

... within the Hub the purchasing power of the bigger schools can support the smaller schools. And a really good example of that is when we order the test



papers ... Small schools, they might have ... six children in the cohort but the packs come in packs of ten ... So they've got four papers they can't use.

Finally, there was the 'richness of discussion' that came from visiting other schools and sharing different experiences:

Just to visit each other's schools, so we have the leadership meeting and then it's like, 'Let's go for a wander' and we tend to visit each other's schools. It's just a different richness of discussion, the things that you get from it, which has been great. So yes, the sharing of that, the teaching and learning principles and like you say, just people's experiences.

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5.3 Communication

The third most-referenced success of the hub model was communication. Figure 5 below shows that the model of communication adopted by the MAT is hierarchical. The CEO shares information at two MAT levels, Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and Senior Leadership Team (SLT), to ensure clarity and accuracy of message. The information is then discussed in each hub at local level and cascaded at school level by headteachers to teachers and support staff, and teachers to pupils and parents/carers. Clear communication in a large MAT is essential in sharing best practice for school improvement, and in providing access to the resources to underpin that practice. Educationally isolated schools experience greater limitations in accessing the resources, which strong and robust communication can mitigate when that school is located within a MAT structure.

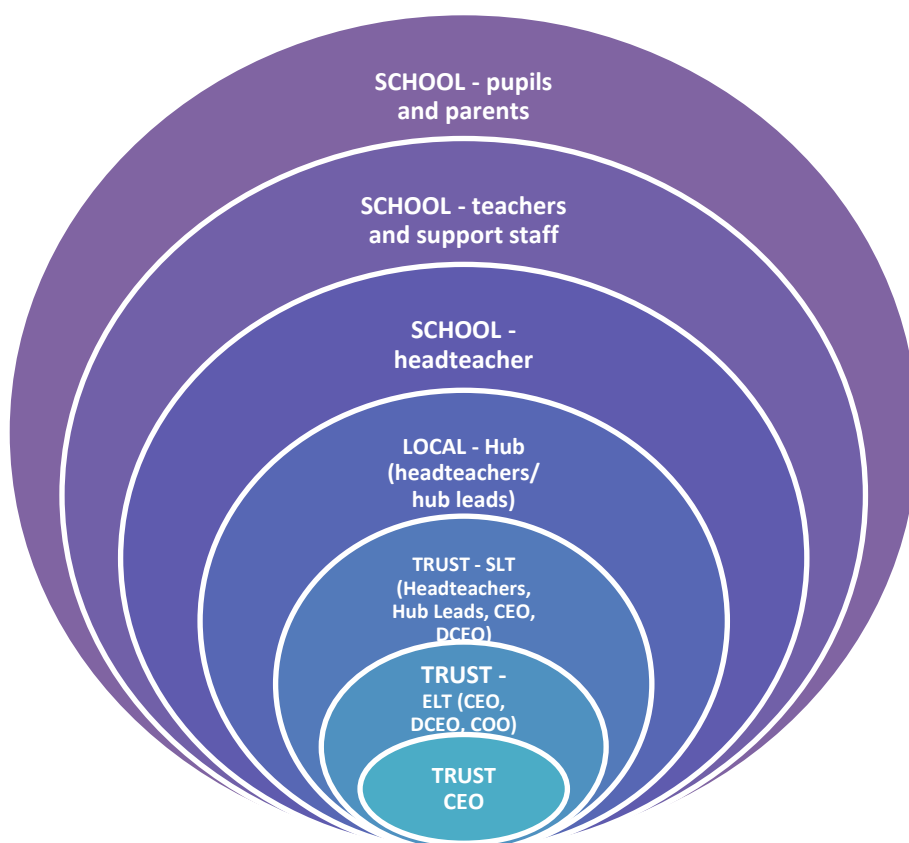


Figure 5: The MAT model of communication



The quality of communication is key to the success of the hub model's collaborative practice in that it supports and enables the trusted relationships between headteachers in a hub to develop:

I think the collaboration is really useful ... in terms of all of those kind of communications, the bits that you just ring for a chat or you're seeking a bit of advice or you need a problem solving and you're looking for different ideas, to that kind of sharing of resources and that working together to be able to achieve different things.

The Hub Lead has emerged as playing an essential role for communication both within the hub and across the MAT:

I think the real strength of it [hub model] is that communication and the Hub Lead getting to know a small number of schools in depth, and I think that's been really successful.

Hub Leads were reported as successful in facilitating discussion on MAT matters that had been raised in the monthly MAT Senior Leadership Team meeting, and also at taking matters discussed at Hub level back up to the central team. This two-way communication was described by one headteacher as:

... when you're working with that number of schools [the MAT], you know you can't go to a leadership meeting and productively discuss any focus with, you know, that number of schools. So the hub model, yes, it's great that we all come together like for the beginning bit of meetings and things. But actually the hub model enables that task time, for want of a better word, and that time to discuss. And to then know, I think, which is important, that that communication discussion is then fed back ... It's not like you have the discussion and then it doesn't count for anything; you know that there is a channel through the Hub Lead that communication is being passed up and down and back and forth along that continuum. So I think that's really, really important and makes things work more effectively.

Another headteacher spoke of how the Hub Lead supported headteachers with implementation of MAT policy following these meetings:

[The Hub Lead has] done like some training with us to make sure that the messages that the Trust are out across all the schools and that we implement them. And any problems we can go to her with that.

A number of school leaders reiterated the view that small, hub group discussions gave headteachers the confidence to participate more fully than in the meeting with all school leaders i.e., in the Senior Leadership Team meeting. The example below from one headteacher reinforces the key role that the hub plays in reducing headteachers' sense of isolation through the ability to communicate with trusted colleagues:

What I really like about it [hub model], is that it's given me the opportunity to build those relationships with a smaller group of heads, so I know them really,



really well now, which is great. I think it creates that kind of open safe space to have those conversations. So you know, when we used to meet face to face as a big heads' group, perhaps it was slightly more tricky or people might not have felt as confident to kind of ask those questions, really get to the bottom of things, whereas actually working within that small group of heads, we're absolutely, 'Oh, what do you think about that', 'Tell me about that', 'Well, that didn't quite work' or, 'Wow, that's really not working for us'. So I think that's been really, really good.

Three years of working with a hub model that geographically group schools to reduce the effects of Educational Isolation has had positive outcomes for the MAT. Headteachers were working well in collaborative, sharing practice, both within their hub and across the MAT. Their confidence to lead their schools and to contribute to school improvement in other schools was seen to grow as a direct consequence of being in the trusted and supportive relationship of other headteachers in their hub. The sharing of resources had been established within the hubs and was cascading into collaborative resourcing across the MAT. The next section reports on those areas within the hub model that interviewees felt could be improved.



6. Hub model challenges

In 2021/22 school leaders believed that the most intense years of the pandemic were receding, which meant that they focused more directly on the day-to-day working of the hub model when discussing the challenges of the academic year. All comments were offered in the context of support for the hub model and were underpinned by the desire to make it work even better. The themes of context, clarity and capacity were identified to group together areas for developing an even more effective hub model in practice.

6.1 Context: hub size, school locations, hub focus

Two issues around hub context that have arisen in each year of the research are hub size and school geographical proximity in a hub. School leaders offered their thoughts on discussed the ideal size of a hub, generally believing (in line with the CEO's vision of the hub model) that four or five schools would be 'a really good number' although 'five might be too much' if several of those schools were in Ofsted categories Requiring Improvement and Inadequate; '[the optimum size of Hub] is on a continuum, isn't it, as to the strength and capacity and capability of each school'.

A minority of headteachers focused on the location of schools and reported across the years that their school was not within easy travelling distance of other hub schools, which they felt was a problem:

We're in geographical groups ... Maybe there's that kind of movement amongst staff and giving people experience and CPD development but actually, it doesn't quite work out like that. I mean, it would take 45 minutes, 50 minutes for me to drive to one of my schools in my hub.

In Year 3, school leaders spoke of the different experiences for headteachers within each hub, suggesting the issues with clearly defining the Hub Leader role was impacting how hub leaders lead and managed the hubs:

I think we've all had different experiences. So some people have not done very much work with the Hub Lead at all and some people have worked really, really closely with the Hub Lead.

I think there's a huge, there's huge differences between each Hub, and there's nobody really going to check on that.

In terms of school improvement the hub model hasn't overly supported me yet ... I think lots of our staff seem to go out and do other things and help in other Hubs or in other schools. It's very rare anyone is coming here to offer the same.

Others argued that the model was working well for headteachers but less so for other staff; in some cases staff had told school leaders that they did not understand why headteachers were pulled away for Hub meetings or what Hub Lead visits were for:

I've noticed on the flipside ... that it [hub model] could work against us for support staff, for example, in that they see how busy we are, and they see us being pulled



away for the Hub meeting. They see heads coming round after we just had challenge partner yesterday, for example. As much as I try and say, 'Oh, these heads are lovely, they're coming to see how wonderful we are and look at our classroom environments' ... there are a couple of staff here, I'm being honest now, who sometimes see it as a negative that I'm pulled away in meetings.

Other comments addressed what was seen as uneven opportunities for CPD:

And one thing I raised [in a meeting] was that we're offering fantastic CPD for our headteachers, we're not offering anything for our teachers.

There was also a sense that, although sharing was happening within hubs, there was little sharing of expertise across the hubs:

Our Trust is as strong as we are because of the collective expertise of our staff, and so we need to, yes, we need to find ways to share that collective expertise and not silo it.

Most school leaders agreed that the hub model needed revisiting as more schools were joining the MAT in the next academic year. In the following quotation, one school leader argued that identifying best practice within hubs and sharing that information would also bring more rigour to the school improvement processes:

*I think it's [Hub model] working in terms of the strength, in terms of communication and a school not feeling isolated and particularly for school leaders. I think with the increase in the number of schools it's got to be looked at ...
... I think we do need to have more of an overview of, more rigour on school improvement and that comes back to sharing what's happening in the Hubs and really identifying that best practice and where that's happening.*

6.2 Clarity: What is the Hub Lead role?

Many school leaders suggested there should be more clarity over the Hub Lead role:

So we're doing the 'do' bit, but within a 'plan, do, review' process ... but some people aren't particularly clear on what the role of the Hub Lead is. If they plan doing and then reviewing their aspect of, for example, safeguarding work of the Trust, or the school improvement work of the Trust, or the strategic work, or the operational work of schools and that support work of the Trust, you don't know when you can get involved to do your review bit.

Other comments related to the multiple roles that Hub Leads are required to undertake, and the conflicting priorities that can arise from these multiple roles; the urgency of a forthcoming Ofsted inspection, for example, could mean that the Hub Lead has less time for other urgent responsibilities. This, in turn, could mean that headteachers were unwilling to ask questions for fear of adding to the Hub Lead's workload. As one interviewee commented:

I really worry about their [Hub Leads'] workload ... I just think that there's a heck of a lot on a Hub Lead job list.



Hub Leads echoed the point:

I don't feel I'm giving my best to any of those roles in particular at the moment, which is frustrating.

The lack of clarity extended to the Hub Lead's role in management, with most headteacher interviewees reporting that they had not seen a job description for the Hub Lead role. Some interviewees reported that Hub Leads were their line managers, but others were not sure, even though Hub Leads could be conducting their performance management review. A few school leaders pointed out that Hub Leads' line management brought an unwanted hierarchical element to their relationship. There was also the question of resolving potential disagreements without clarity of responsibility:

... the Hub Lead is also a headteacher, so there isn't that that clarity I guess around, like she's not my line manager ... We've never had it [the relationship] potentially be tricky ... But had we had a disagreement or we, we you know, she felt that, and I felt this, that would be an interesting dynamic to unpick because, I don't know if she is my line manager technically [although] she does [my performance management].

In addition there was some confusion around specific responsibilities, described by one school leader below:

It's become a bit blurred at times when I'm not sure who to ask, whether that's a Hub thing or not ... the school improvement bit also sits under [name], so do you ask questions or provide ideas etc to that person or is it a Hub role? Or ... if it was around governance, is that a different person? So it's not entirely sure who to go to for what ... And some practices which have always been in place and ... and remain in place, also kind of blur that role of the Hub Lead I think ... As a really silly example, having an expense form signed off by your Hub Lead ... makes it look like that person's in charge of this area, but they're not.

Similarly, school leaders reported that some MAT policies such as admissions were run through the central team rather than by the Hub Lead or at school level, causing confusion:

... when you are a headteacher, say for instance like with admissions, that also goes through [central team] ... and that confuses me because I think, Well, I know what's best for my school. Surely that's my decision as headteacher? ... I think sometimes I don't know why I have to run some decisions through central team.

A few school leaders suggested that Hub Leads' multiple roles also meant that school improvement processes were not clear: 'in terms of school improvement ... I don't feel we're there yet'. Some suggested:

another layer ... [of] School Improvement Leads who ... I guess, [could] add a consistent approach to drive improvement forward ... I think it's about having people in to add that support and that guidance who are senior across all the



schools. I mean, sometimes, when you go with just your experience and you talk to one school it's, there's a limit to the conversation.

For their part, Hub Leads reported that the central team regularly 'go through a list of schools and what's happening' without the Hub Leads in attendance. They suggested that Hub Leads could make a valuable contribution to such a meeting, particularly if decisions were being made about the types of action that should be taken. They also suggested that spending protected time together to discuss Hub practices would be helpful in widening the sharing across Hubs.

Finally, the question of funding the Hub Lead was raised by school leaders in a small minority of interviews:

So, I just think that, you know a conversation with my Hub Lead about what you know, is a conversation, it's a shared dialogue, it's not something to be paying for, I don't think.

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6.3 Capacity: time and workload

The first point that school leaders emphasised in relation to capacity was that the Hub model is timesaving:

... being in our own Hub has saved a lot of time in terms of transportation. I think I told you before, that I had one month where ... I'd driven to [place] and back six times, and it's an hour there, it's an hour back, and I was really envious of other heads who had had those 12 hours in their office, or in their school with their children, and that wasn't good use of time. So, the fact that we're more local is much better ... And there'll be things that I find I'm working on, which are obviously a priority in my head, but another school's working on something else, and I think if you can exchange that information, or share, again, it's time-saving.

Nonetheless, almost all school leaders reported increased pressure on their time:

I'm not sure whether it's just the leftover from ... what we've gone through for the past two years or, or what the situation is, but we're being expected, I feel, and held up to be demanded to do more and more on time and there is only so much capacity within each school.

This was particularly the case in small schools. Headteachers in these schools continued to report that they had very different hub experiences to those in the larger schools, and they argued that opportunities for professional development in small schools were more limited than for staff in larger schools :

... they have the capacity in a larger school which you absolutely don't have in a small school. As a small school head, I don't have an assistant head, so you know it's me, I am the safe guarder ... we didn't have a SENCO for a little while ... it is about capacity I think, and I think that's probably the biggest challenge in a small school.



... if you're wanting to send people to training or training opportunities, we [a small school] just don't have the capacity to do that. And we don't have the budget to pay for it either, so you are definitely a disadvantage there.

... we [a small school] haven't got the capacity to do extra roles. You might like to do, you might have an interest in a particular subject or a particular area, but small school wise, you're juggling so many balls anyway, you almost can't really take an extra one on even if you'd like to.

One small school leader felt that the change in CEO offered an opportunity to review how small schools could be supported:

I don't think there's ever really been an understanding from anybody at the top regarding the difficulties that we have as a small school. There's been talk over the years about people coming out to us and, or getting us together and talking openly about the challenges of a small school but it actually has never happened. And I realise you know, it's time ... I think the CEO definitely needs to have a good understanding of small schools and learn how to distribute the support out effectively.

Another point related to capacity was the question of backfill when headteachers, and particularly Hub Leads, were out of their schools and supporting others:

I feel there needs to be some capacity within the school, you know. [My headteacher] is doing two jobs basically. And then I am backfilling for bits and then I therefore am doing two jobs, and then we need another person to then come and pick up the load of what I would normally be doing. So, I would say that might need to be looked at a little bit.

I'm not sure it's great for staff in a school to be missing their own headteacher a lot because they're off supporting other schools ... I think it's a bit blurry with responsibilities in people's own schools as well. It concerns me because I think there's probably a slightly better way of doing it in terms of getting value for money.

One Hub Lead brought the question of capacity, backfill and school improvement together:

Is it [Hub Lead role] more of a mentoring role and a supportive role and as and when and signposting to where support needs to be? Or is it a school improvement role? School improvement, real true school improvement takes ... time and the ability to really be able to give yourself to wherever's needed without feeling that you are going to create this catastrophe in your own school because you're not there.

Multiple demands on people's time can lead to stress; here a Hub Lead observed that systems to help with stress could be improved:



... this head needs another person here one day a week to really get on top of things and that's not in place. I can feed it up [to the central team], but at the end of the day the buck doesn't stop with me ... So, I think we do need to be better at having systems in place to help with people stress.

Finally, school leaders reported a capacity issue with MAT-side staff such as the education welfare officer (EWO) or speech and language therapist (SLT):

The model that we now have is there's one EWO for all of the schools and she only addresses those complex cases. So those schools that don't have very complex cases have paid into a service that they've not received ... the employers' SLT ... she's not doing the work we want with our families. So, it's not bespoke enough to meet the needs of individual schools. And again, some schools don't get a bite of that because, again, she's trying to support 20 schools and there's one of her ... I appreciate the need to be a consistency of approach, but I think there needs to be more flexibility in the model, so schools have got the freedom to purchase a service ... so we really meet the needs of their community.

6.4 The re-visited hub model vision

When we spoke to the new CEO and the COO, they emphasised that they were thinking carefully about the hub model and that their thinking was ‘*embryonic*’. The immediate context for these interviews was not only the recent appointment of the CEO (April 2022) and the expansion of the MAT, but also the announcement by the Department for Education of a new White Paper that promised (among other things) a ‘fully trust led system with a single regulatory approach’⁴¹. The new regulations were that, in order to be cast as a ‘strong Trust’ that would be allowed to expand, MATs needed to ensure that all teachers had a strong CPD route (Chapter 1); that they were delivering high standards of curriculum, attendance and behaviour (Chapter 2); that they enabled children to access targeted catch-up support where needed (Chapter 3); and that all schools would be in a ‘strong multi academy trust by 2030’ (Chapter 4). At the time of the interview, however, there was no formal definition of a ‘strong Trust’. These significant changes meant that:

... the direction of travel for this Trust needs to be that we're going to have to prove lots of things, and change or work on lots of things, in a different way. Because we are bigger, but because the agenda has changed ... I have to be like the god, the Roman god Janus, in looking back and thinking forward ... Looking back to say, ‘What am I doing for these schools?’ But looking forward to say, ‘What do I need to bring in to make sure we remain sustainable?’ (CEO).

The final change coming over the policy horizon was a new focus for Ofsted towards MAT summary evaluations (MATSEs), a new form of inspection that will take account of disadvantaged pupils’ outcomes. In an historically low-performing area and after two years without external examinations and with multiple disruptions to many children’s lives, the CEO recognised the potential issues:

⁴¹ HM Government (2022) *Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063602/Opportunity_for_all_strong_schools_with_great_teachers_for_your_child_print_version.pdf p.10.



But now that we're emerging out of it [the pandemic], and we're going to have a dataset that's very starkly going to say where schools are okay and where they're not. And that will look different for all twenty schools. We're going to need to work differently for that. And we're having to prove that we've got a school improvement structure that improves schools across the whole of the Trust (CEO).

At the same time, there was recognition both of the work that the Hub Leads were undertaking and of the pressures they were under:

I think Hub Leads are working really hard to support our schools ... I think probably Hub Leads may be feeling quite frazzled by it all ... So I think that's probably where we make sure that we really make the role clear, and we take the pressure off. And we then start to develop this other space that says, 'When a school falls over, or before a school falls over, when we can see that there's a problem, we've got a bigger support network of school improvers that come in and support' (CEO).

The COO had similar ideas, perhaps unsurprisingly, and in the interview addressed more issues raised by headteachers during this year's interviews:


I guess we're in a position where it is hard for some of our headteachers perhaps, to have performance management done by who they might see as their peers, because ultimately, they are another headteacher of another school within their locality ... I don't know whether that model for them, providing line management is right ... I'd much rather see our Hubs become equitable, kind of peer-led, support networks, and then I think we need to develop other networks outside of those Hubs. For example, we've got a number of small schools, we've got a number of church schools, but they don't all sit within the same Hub. They've got very specific needs, where they would benefit from working with each other ... if our Hubs were our kind of horizontal support networks, we then have these vertical networks that go across Hubs so that that support is much more targeted at where it needs to be (COO).

The 'embryonic' vision, then, was to:

- Introduce a fifth Hub to ensure that the number of schools in each Hub was even
- Introduce networks for small and church schools
- Change the school improvement model so that it was separate from the Hub model
- Possibly bring in subject networks as part of school improvement

These (potential) plans demonstrated a new energy and a revitalised vision for the MAT at a propitious time – schools were beginning to recover from the pandemic, had new parameters for their work, and the MAT was entering time of change as more schools were about to join. There was much agreement between headteachers, Hub Leads and ELT about the challenges and solutions to the working of the Hub model, and concrete plans were being made to address the issues most frequently mentioned by the MATs school leaders over the three years of the research:





the size of the Hubs; the location of schools within the Hubs; the role of the Hub Lead; and the need to recognise the specific support needs for some schools e.g., small schools.

All school leaders without exception recognised the strength of personal relationships and support within the hub model, and the first CEO's vision of 'sharing and supporting' was set to be the key consideration in the MATs future plans for the hub model.



7. Mitigating Educational Isolation: a hub model for school-to-school support

School leaders and MAT leaders throughout this report have illustrated how relationships, collaboration and communication are all closely tied together, how the hub model has reduced feelings of isolation among headteachers and the ways in which the hub model structure has supported them through three challenging years.

The hub model has built a strong platform from which it has been able – and can continue – to mitigate the effects of the three challenges of place.

- **Geographic remoteness.** Some argued that geography was no longer a limiting factor, as technology such as Teams enabled quick and easy communication between MAT members:

... we're so good with Teams now aren't we? ... It doesn't feel like, you know, that distance is a barrier anymore somehow. I'd be just as likely to Teams-call [somebody geographically distant as someone close] so, yeah, the geographical thing doesn't really make a difference to me.

Nonetheless school leaders reported that the hub model worked most effectively where schools were located in relatively close proximity:

We meet regularly, to be able to well, give support and help to each other. I think we're probably quite a strong Hub in terms of you know, being able to do that, because you know, for the most part we're quite close geographically as well. Closer than some, which really helps.

One Hub was thought to be working particularly well, and interviewees put this success down to close geographical co-location of its schools, regular meetings, and close long-term staff relationships.

However, there were a few headteachers who commented on the distance they still needed to travel, whether that be for meetings, CPD or activities for children. This suggests that the challenge of geographical location remains for some schools; however plans to introduce a fifth Hub could offer much needed close connections for schools that are located in the more remote areas.

- **Socioeconomic disadvantage.** School leaders reflected on the way that the hub model could help to mitigate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage:

... the sharing of ideas to overcome ... some of those difficulties [related to socioeconomic deprivation] is really, it's been really important. Things like covid catch-up funding and things that being able to make sure that you're getting the best value that you can in terms of how you spend that money. We've been able to buy some resources together so that we get better value for it, but we've also been able to talk to each other about what's worked in different settings for different children. And then we've been able to use that to obviously inform what we do



ourselves and having those kinds of conversations about impact, particularly in [relation to] something that hasn't happened before, like Covid.

In addition, Hub schools have worked together to provide new opportunities for children that widen their experiences and can have the effect of raising aspirations:

... we've got a careers fair coming up, that's being held at a local hotel and that's something that we are all able to access. So all of the Year 6 children from all of the schools in the Hub will be going there, and we'll be able to take part in that.

Poverty and disadvantage are structural issues that require wider attention than schools can give on their own – but school leaders were aware of the issues and, now that activities for pupils were being resumed, were planning to support children in ways that enabled them to look beyond the present and particular through widening their experience in different ways:

[The Hub model] helps the children in terms of building their aspirations, giving them additional opportunities to be able to do things, being able to feed into different people's interests and expertise ... one of the heads within the Hub promotes residential trips for their children ... but does it on a really tight budget and ... has done some work in the project for school on how we could replicate that here, because obviously we operate on a tight budget with such a high number of people premium children. And so there's been lots of overlap and crossover that way, in the feeding of ideas.

- **Cultural isolation.** Mitigating the effects of cultural isolation has been particularly difficult during the pandemic years because of the restrictions on movement and group activities. School leaders spoke about the way that they were firefighting rather than finding the time to plan for extra-curricular activities:

There's never enough time. Time is an issue, isn't it; but that's not a fault of the Hub ... I guess if the pace was less, there'd be more time ... I mean, you look at your diary and you think, 'Oh yes, I've got that, that and that today, then I can go in that classroom then' and actually, when real people walk in the door ... situations arise and you're dealing with everything else, you realise that what you had planned for the day doesn't get looked at till 4 o'clock because you've been dealing with real people and real children, and that's not factored in when you look in your diary.

Others had begun to reflect on how different cultural events may be approached and managed in the future:

[Events] do come with a challenge in terms of logistics don't they, so you know when we did the big G9 summit and things, it was fantastic. But so much work went into that. So, you know, to have different music events, different sporting events and things, it would really need to be carefully managed and very much part of the kind of culture of what everybody's doing, what everybody's working towards.



Once again, however, there was the question of cost:

The Trust do do things like big science days. We've had science weeks at the same time and brought children together. There's been international days for the summit and for school Council brought together, so it is beginning to happen. But when they talk about you know, the potential having sporting events and then they're all the way down to [school], it costs us quite a lot of money to get transport and free children and staff up from a school like ours.

Enriching children's lives through cultural and other activities can help to raise aspirations and be part of a broadly-based, fulfilling time at school. Starting to think about this type of opportunity as the immediate effects of the pandemic recede could be a helpful route for the MAT in the forthcoming year.

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The hub model has, as the founding CEO hoped, helped to mitigate the three effects of Educational Isolation.

- **Limited access to a high-quality workforce.** While there was always an emphasis on CPD and school improvement, the hub model enabled access to locally delivered, well-resourced CPD from experts across the Trust. As the new CEO pointed out in Year 3, the data to be published in the summer of 2023 will demonstrate areas that need rapid improvement for the MAT. Putting the structures in place to achieve this will ensure that the MAT is in the position to achieve the required improvement. Additionally, well support staff, with succession for Hub Leads planned into the hub model to enable career progression for other staff, can improve both teacher recruitment and retention. The hub model has created local career opportunities.
- **Little school to school support.** School leaders have illustrated the extent of the sharing and collaboration across schools within Hubs. School leaders' expertise is easily accessible with the hub, with plans to widen the sharing so that more can benefit from particular areas of expertise. The proposed new hub structure with separate school improvement has the potential of enabling greater sharing and resource-building.
- **No capacity for externally funded interventions.** The new CEO has plans for the MAT to become a 'strong Trust', which is likely to enable to access different funding streams that will benefit staff and pupils in the MAT. The hub model will be fundamental to the strength of the Trust moving forward, having established key foundations through the collaborative, supportive approach to the sharing of resources.

The hub model embedded into the structure of this new MAT in 2019/20 has facilitated the development of enhanced working relationships among its leaders, established a clear framework for collaboration and enabled communications from the MAT to be localised and contextualised to the benefit each school. The appointment of the new CEO offers the opportunity for a renewed vision in which successes can be built upon and new approaches developed. We wish them the very best of luck in the next stage of their journey.



7.1 Recommendations

Educational Isolation is complex, grounded in place and situated in lack of agency for schools. The hub model adopted by the MAT gave agency to headteachers by enabling them to work with a small group of local schools for support and development. The key recommendations are few, but vital to challenge inequity in access to resources for Educationally Isolated schools:

1. Policymakers must understand the importance of place-based targeted resources and support.
2. MAT leaders must consider how school support structures can be re-defined to provide targeted resources and support to school affected by their place. They should consider a hub model if they have Educationally Isolated schools, as it supports school leaders accessing resources needed for school improvement at a local level.

Locality matters.



Appendices

Appendix I: Interview schedule 2021

1. Please can you tell me your role title and explain your responsibilities in the MAT.
2. Can you explain the Hub model structure in the MAT?
3. Why was the hub model introduced to the best of your knowledge? What was it intended to achieve?
4. Have you seen any benefits of the Hub model – pre and during C-19? Can you explain what these were? Prompts:
 - a. Increased opportunities for Staff CPD
 - b. Increased collaboration
 - c. Increased participation in wider interventions e.g. externally funded?
 - d. Increased support in areas on the SIP
5. Why do you think these benefits occurred? Prompts
 - a. Geography
 - b. Socioeconomic
 - c. Cultural
 - d. Pupils
 - e. Parents
 - f. Staff
 - g. Trustees
6. Have you experienced any challenges in the Hub model – pre and during C-19? Can you explain what these were?
7. Why do you think these challenges occurred?
8. Are you going to make any changes to the hub model for next year?
9. Wellbeing of pupils in C-19 in hubs?
10. Wellbeing of teachers in C-19 hubs?
11. Anything else you would like to tell me about the Hub model?



Appendix II: Hub Lead Job Descriptions

2019/20

Works with Executive Team (ET) to determine the aims, ethos and priorities of the Trust and ensures that those of individual schools within their hub are in keeping with the Trust

Acts as critical friend to EH / HT – asking supportive and challenging questions

Works to provide an environment in which hub staff are enabled to achieve their potential

Monitors and supports the work of the EH / HT

Deals with complaints about EH / HT in consultation with CEO and possibly other Hub Leads

Supports and advises hub advisory boards / Chair of Governors

Ensures that the final Improvement Plans in their hub, and allocation of resources are in line with the Trust Improvement plan

Works with school leaders to create intensive action plans and negotiates for additional support / resources with HLs / CEO / COO

Analyses hub HT reports and Challenge Partner reports to identify school / hub strengths and areas of development

Works with ET to create whole-Trust policies

Ensures trust policies are followed at hub level

Supports HT / EH with formulation of curricular policy and statements

Monitors published curriculum statements for hub schools

Reports any disapplications from curriculum / assessments to CEO and advises EH / HT

Supports delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum where required via intensive action plans.

Reports any irregularities in relation to statutory assessments to CEO

Ensures website compliance for hub

Monitors standards across hub schools

Monitors the overall standards of teaching and works to improve teaching and learning across the hub

Constructs training programme to meet hub training needs and / or works with other HLs and 'inset coordinators' to construct trust CPD programme (making the most of Teaching School provision)

Supports HT / EH with staffing issues

Oversees provision for pupil groups across the hub

Ensures compliance in relation to the publishing of SEN information across the hub



Encourages hub schools to forge secure relationships with pre school and secondary school providers and to participate in local networks

Works with HLs / CEO to determine the Trust strategy for behaviour management, including a Trust wide approach to Anti Bullying.

Ensures that the Trust strategy for behaviour management, including the Trust wide approach to Anti Bullying is implemented in the hub schools

Advises HT / EH on exclusions

Monitors overall behaviour, personal development and welfare across the hub

Ensures hub compliance in relation to the written statements of behaviour principles and publication of these.

Supports HT / EH with staffing plans and managing of staffing budget

Supports HT / EH with staffing issues as required

Liaises with HR manager as required

Supports the CEO with HoS / EH / HT appointments in the hub

Leads on teacher recruitment days in the hub

Works alongside KTSA with ITT recruitment and future appointments

Ensures compliance with Safer Recruitment policy and Equality and Diversity Policy across the Trust.

Works with Group accountant on budget building across hub

Advises EH / HT on spending decisions in hub schools

Liaises with school leaders on spending related to specialist funding

Secures additional funding /resources for hub schools as agreed within intensive action plans

Supports EH / HT with PM as required to ensure consistent implementation of policy

Supports EH / HT with determining salary levels as required to ensure consistent implementation of policy set within trust benchmarks

Performance manages EH / HT with CEO

Supports EH / HT with personnel issues taking advice from Personnel manager

Supports EH / HT with H&S issues taking advice from Estates Manager

Complies with Health and Safety law

Holds emergency procedures for all hub schools

Supports HT / EH with closure of schools

Liaises with CEO on school closures



2020/21

Job title:	Hub Leader (Executive Leader)
Department/team:	Executive Leadership Team
Responsible to:	Deputy CEO / CEO
Responsible for:	Head Teachers and Heads of Schools within Hub
Grade/salary:	L20 to L24

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Purpose of role

The Hub Leader has responsibility for the work of Trust in relation to effectively leading, managing and inspiring designated schools within the Trust and mentoring and supporting senior leaders within schools to ensure all children/young people and employees within the schools achieve their potential in an inclusive and safe environment.

The role will include:

- Provision of inspirational, strategic and professional leadership
- Continuous improvement of educational standards and achievement for all
- Effective use of resources across the Trust
- Working with the Deputy CEO (Academic) to achieve the vision of the Trust
- Retaining a statutory headship responsibility in one of the schools

Key accountabilities:

- **Leadership**
 - Take leadership responsibility for the schools within the designated Hub in relation to support and challenge to the school leaders to ensure that Trust vision is delivered
 - Lead the designated Hub to ensure that there is clear communication between Hubs and Executive Leadership team to ensure consistency across the Trust
- **Teaching and Learning**
 - Mentor, coach and support school leaders to improve and innovate curriculum provision so that it inspires and engages all pupils;



- Ensure a consistent and continuous Trust wide focus on pupil assessment and achievement that tracks individual pupil progress using local and national benchmarking in with the Trust's expectations;
- Analyse data and identify any patterns or trends, take action to drive forward improvements in achievement and progress across the schools;
- Consider and use the appropriate evaluation/impact analysis tool when setting high expectations and challenging targets for each school;
- Ensure that designated schools develop, implement and review effective strategies for behaviour and attendance management.

- **Development**

- Identify underperformance at the earliest opportunity and ensure that this is addressed without delay by school leaders, intervening where appropriate if sufficient improvements are not achieved;
- Manage the appraisal process for identified school leaders making sure that targets and objectives are identified and understood not only for the development of the individual but for the improvement of whole school outcomes;
- Manage and take responsibility for own professional development and actively engage with and seek out areas for improvement;
- Develop talented and motivated senior leadership teams within identified schools to drive the schools forward;
- Support the development policies and practices aligned with the Trust values and ethos.

- **Communication and Relationships**

- Work alongside the Deputy CEO (Academic) and other Hub Leaders to deliver objectives of the Trust;
- Develop effective working relationships with internal and external stakeholders reporting to the Deputy CEO (Academic) on all relevant matters;
- Manage and communicate change effectively within the designated Hub.

- **Operational**

- Ensure that all delegated responsibilities are carried out with regard to designated school sites, and that the resources are in place to enable this to take place;
- Alongside the Executive Leadership Team create and review structures across the schools and Trust that reflect the Trust's values and enable management systems, structures and processes to work effectively



- Create an inspiring and professional working environment consistent with the vision and principles of the Trust and the values and aspirations of each school;
- Ensure staff are managed in accordance with their terms and conditions of employment and current employment legislation;
- Be accountable for the management of the school budgets in line with the Financial Procedures manual, ensuring value for money and identifying opportunities across the group for financial gains and sharing of resources;
- Ensure that all resources available are used to provide a stimulating curriculum and environment which will prepare pupils for their futures with confidence and determination.

The principal responsibilities and tasks as set out above are not intended to be exhaustive. The need for flexibility, accountability and team working is required. The post-holder is expected to carry out any other related duties that are within the employee's skills and abilities, commensurate with the post's grade and whenever reasonably instructed.

This job description should be read with regard to the provisions of the School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document and the National Standards of Excellence for Head Teachers.

This document will be reviewed regularly to ensure that it relates to the role being performed and to incorporate reasonable changes that have occurred over time or are being proposed. This review will be carried out in consultation with the post-holder before any changes are implemented.



Cite this report as:

Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2023) Locality matters. Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools: a case study of a multi academy trust 'hub model' for schools (2019 – 2022). Plymouth, Plymouth Marjon University, UK.

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