Multi-Academy Trust School Governance:
A Hub Advisory Board Model

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2025

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NGAs 15 years of research and exploration of Multi Academy Trust Governance has shown us that good governance thrives when it is clearly connected to the people it is delivering for. In MATs, this means governance remaining close to the communities it serves. Local voices—those of parents, carers, staff, community members and local business—bring irreplaceable insights that anchor educational decisions in community context and need. Locally connected governance enables trustees and MAT leaders to hold school leaders to account for the outcomes that matter most in their pupil populations, not just performing against distant, nationally set targets and political ambitions.

At various points during the last decade there have been suggestions that trusts could achieve a more innovative approach, through mechanisms such as clusters or hubs, but this has never materialised at scale. The lack of advancement in this approach has led to us, at NGA , choosing instead to celebrate and focus more on the strengths of an adapted, whilst perhaps not fully realised version of an enduring, tried and tested model based on great knowledge, oversight and family and community engagement at individual school level, whilst capitalising on trust-wide oversight. However, there remains a degree of curiosity around hub governance that we shouldn't ignore.

This important research by Plymouth Marjon University therefore arrives at a critical juncture for multi-academy trust governance. Our research highlights that virtually all MATs operate with some form of school level governance, and that there is a tried and tested model that serves its communities well, when it is meaningful and not tokenistic. Yet some trusts seek alternative solutions that balance school level efficiency, meaningful community engagement and the trust's wider vision and identity. The findings presented here therefore are a welcome part of the wider exploration of MAT governance, bringing an insight into a specific and less explored territory. This study offers both encouragement and caution. On one hand, the research demonstrates that hub models can successfully fit the MAT governance structure and, rather than causing confusion and overlap, which has often been the major criticism, can help reduce administrative burdens and improve communication while crucially, fostering a valuable collaborative culture between schools.

However, the study also reveals a fundamental tension: the risk that efficiency gains may come at the cost of genuine community representation. When 90% of parents cannot identify their hub chair, and when stakeholders report feeling "distanced from the governance of the school," we are confronted

with a governance gap that threatens the very accountability relationships that make education democratically responsive. If a hub model is to become a more recognised part of the trust governance system, it must resolve, rather than add to, these issues.

This is not an argument against innovation, rather, it is a call for governance models that strengthen without question, rather than weaken, the local voice. The most successful governance models—whether traditional local governing bodies or emerging hub structures —share common characteristics: clear communication pathways, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and robust accountability mechanisms that ensure community concerns are heard and acted upon.

The research reveals that where hub models succeed, they do so by preserving what matters most about local governance: deep understanding of school contexts, trusted relationships with communities, and the capacity to challenge and support school leaders effectively. Where they struggle, it is often because these fundamental elements have been compromised in pursuit of structural efficiency.

For MATs considering hub governance, this study provides a helpful benchmark. It demonstrates that successful implementation requires substantial investment in communication strategies, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and ongoing professional development. Most critically, it shows that the question is not whether to maintain local voice, but how to ensure it remains strong.

At NGA, we believe that effective governance is inherently locally rooted, responsive to context, and accountable to those it serves. This research reinforces that conviction while providing practical insights for maintaining these principles within the realities of modern MAT operation and evolution. The future of trust governance lies not in choosing between efficiency and engagement, but in creating structures sophisticated enough to deliver both.

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Executive Summary

Research Overview

This comprehensive 19-month longitudinal study (January 2023 to October 2024) examined the implementation of Hub Advisory Board (HAB) governance within a large Multi-Academy Trust in South West England. The research represents one of the most thorough empirical studies of hub governance models in English education, analysing experiences across executive leadership, trustees, HAB members, school leaders, and parents/carers.

Context and Strategic Rationale

- The study addresses a fundamental challenge facing Multi-Academy Trusts nationwide, the **recruitment and retention of skilled governors** capable of providing effective oversight and support to schools[1].

- 88% of MAT Trustees report having some form of local tier governance, with increasing governor recruitment difficulties creating pressure for innovative governance solutions[2].

- The studied MAT replaced traditional Local Governing Bodies with **five hub-based advisory boards**, each overseeing multiple schools across rural and coastal areas characterised by educational isolation[3].

Key Governance Achievements

- **Operational improvements** include reduced administrative burden on headteachers, enhanced strategic trustee focus through consolidated reporting, and increased cross-school collaboration opportunities.

- Executive and senior leaders consistently reported that the model promotes **standardisation and coherence** across the MAT while maintaining capacity for contextual responsiveness.

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[1] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). Local governance here and now. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

[2] Sam Hensen and Megan Tate (2021) Governing in a multi academy trust. Trust Governance in 2021. National Governance Association. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/y3hak0y5/mat-governance-report-sep-2021-final.pdf

[3] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2019). Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England. Plymouth Marjon University and Plymouth University. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

- The geographical clustering of schools enables **face-to-face collaboration** and addresses place-based challenges particularly relevant to educationally isolated schools[4].

- The approach aligns with National Governance Association principles emphasising "clear delegation" and "separation between layers of governance"[5].

Critical Implementation Challenges

- **Limited stakeholder awareness**: Only 18% of surveyed parents reported full understanding of how their school engages with its HAB, and 90% could not identify their HAB chair.

- **Role uncertainty**: Nearly half of HAB members reported lack of clarity about their role after 19 months of implementation.

- **Confidence recalibration**: HAB members' initial high confidence in technical areas like risk assessment decreased from 80% to 43% over time, suggesting systematic support gaps remained unaddressed.

Accountability and Oversight Concerns

- Senior leaders increasingly reported that **HABs lack sufficient understanding of individual schools** to provide effective challenge and support, with this concern growing rather than diminishing over time.

- The **advisory nature of HAB recommendations**, combined with limited authority to effect change, creates potential governance gaps that may compromise school improvement efforts.

- By July 2024, 57% of senior leaders believed HABs did not effectively engage with stakeholders.

Community Representation Issues

- The most significant challenge relates to **community representation and local voice** within the HAB model.

- The transition from school-specific LGBs to multi-school HABs has created substantial barriers to meaningful parent and community engagement.

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[4] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[5] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now*. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

- Parents reported feeling "distanced from the governance of the school" and experiencing the HAB model as "remote, disconnected and self-serving".

Professional Development Insights

- HAB members demonstrated authentic engagement in self-reflection, with **confidence increasing in accessible domains** like curriculum understanding (from 60% to 86%).
- Confidence appropriately moderated in technically complex areas, such as financial oversight, suggesting governance development programmes should anticipate and support "confidence recalibration" processes.
- Targeted support in technically demanding areas becomes increasingly important as HAB members develop practical experience.

Strategic Implications for MATs

- The research demonstrates that governance innovation must **balance efficiency gains with preservation of local voice** and community connection.
- While hub models can address recruitment challenges and improve operational efficiency, successful implementation requires substantial investment in communication strategies, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and ongoing professional development.
- The future of local governance within MATs depends on the **quality of relationships, clarity of roles, and effectiveness of communication systems** that underpin governance practice.
- The findings contribute to broader understanding of governance effectiveness within the evolving MAT landscape.

Introduction

Governance of schools in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in England appears to be moving towards "hub" models to reconcile centralised strategic oversight with localised school autonomy. This report considers empirical research, sector guidance, and policy analysis to understand the efficacy of a new approach to MAT school governance - a hub advisory board (HAB) model. Hubs are defined as intermediary structures that delegate specific responsibilities to clusters of schools, in the case of the HAB the responsibility is with those governing the cluster of schools. Aligning with the National Governance Association's (NGA) principles for effective governance (National Governance Association [NGA], 2023)[6], the research considers variations in hub design, evidence-based strengths and systemic challenges for the HAB model, and actionable recommendations for MATs considering implementing a HAB governance model.

Multi Academy Trusts and School Governance

Reforms in the education system of England in the last three decades rapidly accelerated and changed course under the Conservative-led Coalition Government elected in 2010 (Ovenden-Hope and Luke, 2021)[7]. Local government control was severely curtailed, and market forces played a role in the delivery of education through increased competition (Simon et al, 2021)[8]. Multi-academy trusts (MATs) developed out of academisation, and the policy shift was to a self-improving school-led system (Gibson and Outhwaite, 2022)[9]. While autonomy for schools and parents was the stated aim of academisation (HM Government, 2010)[10], the development of MATs has in essence removed much of that autonomy from

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[6] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now*. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

[7] Ovenden-Hope, Tanya, and Luke, Ian (2021), 'Sense-making of Educational Policy and Workforce Supple for Small Schools in England', in *Exploring Teacher Recruitment and Retention: Contextual Challenges from International Perspectives*, ed. by Tanya Ovenden-Hope and Rowena Passy, Abingdon: Routledge, 115-127.

[8,] Simon, Catherine A., James, Chris, and Simon, Alan (2021), 'The Growth of Multi-Academy Trusts in England: Emergent Structures and the Sponsorship of Underperforming Schools', *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 49(1): 112-127.

[9] Gibson, Mark T., and Outhwaite, Deborah (2022), 'MATification: Plurality, Turbulence and Effective School Governance in England', *Management in Education*, 36(1): 42-46.

[10] HM Government (2010a), *Academies Act 2010*, 2010 Chapter 32. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/32/contents (Last accessed 27 Sep 2022).

individual schools (Spicksley, 2022)[11]. As the previous Conservative government's preferred mechanism for school improvement (we have yet to see what the current Labour Government's preference will be), MATs have increased in number and grown in size (Simon et al., 2021) [12].

MATs are charitable companies, they are governed by legislation relating to companies in the UK, albeit limited by guarantees instead of shares; therefore, their governing structure has Members (equivalent to shareholders) and Trustees (equivalent to directors) (Male, 2019)[13] . The DfE (2020: 6)[14] provides common governance models or structures for academy trusts, as shown in this figure 1.

While there is flexibility in the exact structure of each trust, the general hierarchical organisation sees Members at the top. Members monitor the activities of the Trust Board (comprised of Trustees), which is the decision-making body and is accountable and responsible for all academies in the MAT. The next level down includes committees and Local Governing Bodies (LGBs, also known as local advisory boards or LABs), the latter of which are advisory only. As only two parents, elected from among all the schools in a MAT, are required to sit on academy trust boards, there is great scope for a disconnect from the local school communities in a MAT (Gibson and Outhwaite, 2022)[15], which makes the LGB that is typically constituted from parents and local community members, all the more important.

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[11] Spicksley, Kathryn (2022), '"A Less Unpalatable Alternative": Executive Leaders Strategically Redefining Their Work in Primary MATs', *Management in Education*, 36(2): 64-71.
[12] Simon, Catherine A., James, Chris, and Simon, Alan (2021), 'The Growth of Multi-Academy Trusts in England: Emergent Structures and the Sponsorship of Underperforming Schools', Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 49(1): 112-127.
[13] Male, Trevor (2019), 'Governance in multi-academy trusts (MATs): Evidence from the Field', Paper presented at European Council for Education Research, Hamburg, September 2019. Available at: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10080922/1/2019%20Governance%20in%20multi-academy%20trusts%20-%20evidence%20from%20the%20field%20-%20Trevor%20Male.pdf
[14] Department for Education [DfE] (2020), Academy Trust Governance-Structures and Role Descriptors, DfE-00167-2020, October 2020. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/924673/Academies_governance_role_descriptors.pdf
[15] Gibson, Mark T., and Outhwaite, Deborah (2022), 'MATification: Plurality, Turbulence and Effective School Governance in England', *Management in Education*, 36(1): 42-46.

Figure 1: Common MAT governance model
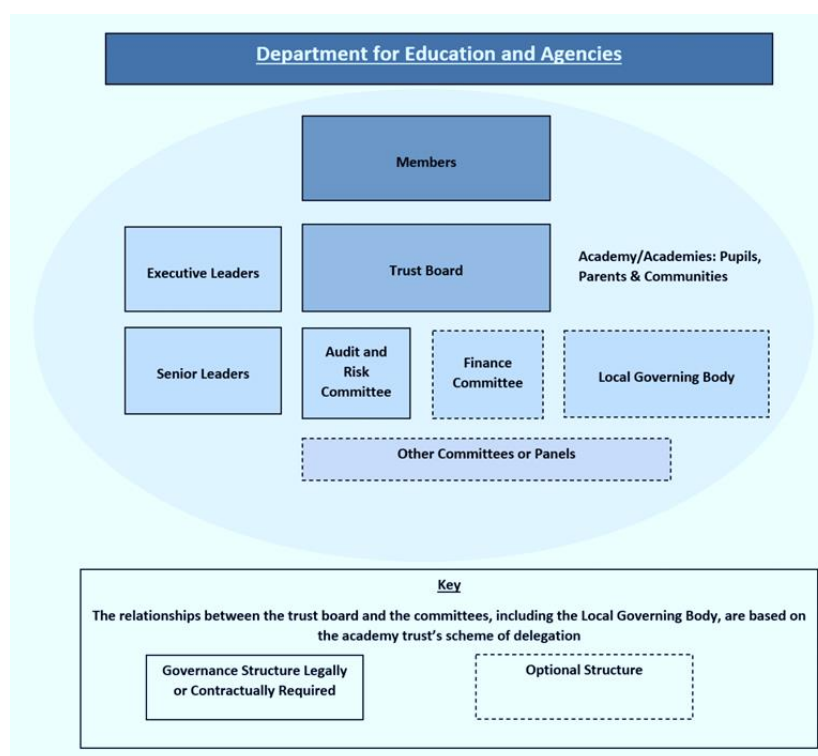
Challenges exist, however, in securing and managing LGB members within MATs. Securing high quality LGB members i.e., they have the skills needed to support effective school governance (see National Governance Association Skills Audit for Governors) is difficult given the volunteer nature of the role and the high responsibility the role carries for ensuring school accountability e.g., Ofsted inspections. It is also more challenging to recruit governors in sparsely populated areas due to fewer potential candidates living locally to be able to fill the role. This is particularly noticeable in educationally isolated areas (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019[16] and 2023[17]). This means that there are also place-based equity issues for securing high-quality school governance, which contributed to the MAT in this report developing a new approach to MAT school governance.

MATs were also moving towards a minimum of ten schools under the previous government, which saw local governing body member numbers increase to over 200 people, which is

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[16] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2019). Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England. Plymouth Marjon University and Plymouth University. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[17] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

time consuming for MATs to manage, as well a being challenging in terms of governor recruitment. Lastly, the LGBs are focused on the school they are advising on, and members typically hold an interest in that school as a parent, or grandparent, and have little understanding of the wider MAT, its aims, or needs from each school as the overarching organising. The focus of LGB members tends to be only on only the one school, above the needs of MAT, which can result in dissonance between school actions and MAT priorities.

Defining Hubs: Structure and Variation

The use of school hubs represent a tiered approach within MATs, situating decision-making authority between the central trust board, executive leadership team and individual school leadership (with or without support from independent advisors). Traditional local governing bodies (LGBs) should not be confused with hubs. Hubs typically oversee 3–8 schools grouped by geography, phase, or functional specialism (NGA, 2023)[18]. For example, the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) has developed location-based hubs to "function as collaborative units which facilitate school-to-school support and form a basis for training and more. Each hub has a link trustee and a delegated budget." (Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust [ODST], 2025)[19]. This locational foundation for establishing hub schools has been shown to be particularly effective when schools are educationally isolated, experiencing place-based challenges of geographical remoteness, cultural isolation, and socioeconomic deprivation, which limits their access to resources (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019[20]; Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023)[21].

Three dominant hub typologies emerge from sector practice:

1. **Geographical or Locational Hubs**: Proximity-driven clusters enabling face-to-face collaboration, which prioritise mobility of staff and shared resources for school improvement, such as the ODST Hub Schools (OSDT, 2025)[22]. A three-year study of coastal and rural MATs found that hubs mitigated educational isolation by fostering

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[18] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023b). *The mature MAT model*.
[19] Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST). (2025). *Hub working*.
https://www.odst.org.uk/page/?title=Hub+working&pid=20
[20] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2019). Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England. Plymouth Marjon University and Plymouth University. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at:
https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/
[21] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at:
https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/
[22] Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST). (2025). Hub working.
https://www.odst.org.uk/page/?title=Hub+working&pid=20

"trusted relationships among school leaders" and enabling resource-sharing (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023: 5)[23].

2. **Phase-Specific Hubs**: Primary or secondary school groupings that align curriculum development and transition strategies. The NGA notes that 6% of MATs adopt this model to address phase-specific challenges like GCSE attainment gaps (NGA, 2023)[24].

3. **Functional Hubs**: Task-focused clusters concentrating on areas such as SEN provision or financial management. Arbor Education's analysis of MAT growth phases identifies functional hubs as critical for decentralising technical expertise while maintaining central oversight (Arbor Education, 2018)[25].

Each of these type of hubs has potential benefits and challenges that must be considered to understand the appropriateness of hubs for MAT development of school improvement and for the focus of this study, governance hubs that replace LGBs.

Strengths and Potential

Enhanced Contextual Responsiveness

School hubs can empower MATs to tailor interventions to local needs. For example, educationally isolated schools within a MAT experienced a reduction in teacher recruitment challenges when they were geographically co-located in hubs to share resources, which included teachers and opportunities for new roles across schools (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2023). The NGA emphasises that such localised decision-making aligns with the local governance principle of "a local tier, made up of local people" (NGA, 2023, p. 3)[26].

Enhanced Opportunities for Compliance

Devolved governance responsibilities can improve regulatory compliance. MATs using geographical hubs report streamlined communication between hub leads and central compliance officers

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[23] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[24] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). The mature MAT model.

[25] Arbor Education. (2020). *6 phases of MAT growth, (and the crises that follow!)* https://arbor-education.com/blog-6-phases-of-mat-growth-and-the-crises-that-follow/

[26] 13 National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now*. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

(Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023)[27], demonstrating improved opportunities for compliance as required by the Department for Education (DfE) in MAT governance for "regulatory, contractual, and statutory requirements." (DfE, 2025, p. 10)[28].

Stakeholder Engagement and Community Trust

Hubs can bridge the gap between MAT boards, schools, and local communities. A 2023 NGA survey found that MATs with hub models exemplified best practice in 'horizontal collaboration', engaging with the full range of the school community, from Trust to parents/carers (NGA, 2023: 23)[29]. The ODST model, which integrates 'link trustees' into school hub operations, exemplifies this strength, ensuring diocesan strategies are contextualised at the hub level (ODST, 2024)[30].

> *"All trusts should have reserved places for parents, carers or other individuals with parental responsibilities in their governance structure" (DfE, 2024: 10)[31]*

Scalability and Sustainable Growth

Arbor Education's growth phase model identified school hubs as critical for MATs expanding beyond seven schools, preventing a 'crises of control' through delegated authority (Arbor Education, 2020)[32]. By decentralising operational decisions, hubs that have strong communication across the trust can reduce executive leadership workload, while also ensuring the Trust vision is one with the schools' vision with a cleared sense of shared priorities (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023)[33].

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[27] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[28] DfE (2024) Academy trust handbook 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a3909aab418ab055592dda/Academy_trust_handbook_2024_FINAL.pdf

[29] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now* [PDF]. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

[30] Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST). (2025). Hub working. https://www.odst.org.uk/page/?title=Hub+working&pid=20

[31] DfE (2024) Academy trust handbook 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a3909aab418ab055592dda/Academy_trust_handbook_2024_FINAL.pdf

[32] Arbor Education. (2020). *6 phases of MAT growth, (and the crises that follow!)* https://arbor-education.com/blog-6-phases-of-mat-growth-and-the-crises-that-follow/

[33] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

Systemic Challenges and Risks

Role Ambiguity and Overlap

The dual accountability of hub leads to executive leaders and to individual schools has the potential to create conflict that can be difficult to resolve (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023)[34]. Any hub delegation, school, or governance requires clearly defined roles to avoid strategic drift (DfE, 2024)[35] and any impact on school improvement opportunities.

Capacity Constraints

Hub leadership roles can increase workload pressures, with some hub leads reporting unsustainable demands from both MAT-wide initiatives and school-level priorities (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023)[36]. The NGA links this to inadequate training, and identifies the need for MATs to provide dedicated leadership development for hub roles (NGA, 2023)[37].

Hub Fragmentation

The variety in hub models that have developed has led to inconsistent practice, and lack of clarity in practice. The NGA reported that hub models were used in 6% of MATs surveyed in 2023 (NGA, 2023)[38], however these were established for different purposes, creating the different types of school hubs identified above. The risk is that this may create confusion about best practices for school improvement. When hubs are extended into school governance, the risk to regulatory compliance becomes a consideration.

School hubs offer the potential to MATs of a structurally sound mechanism to balance scale and specificity, yet their success hinges on deliberate design and resourcing. Evidence from school hubs in practice demonstrates that hubs enhance compliance, community engagement, and contextual

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[35] DfE (2024) Academy trust handbook 2024.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a3909aab418ab055592dda/Academy_trust_handbook_2024_FINAL.pdf
[36] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at:
https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/
[37] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now* [PDF].
https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

[38] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now* [PDF].
https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

responsiveness when aligned with NGA principles (Ovenden-Hope and Passy[39], 2023; ODST, 2024[40]). The potential for a hub advisory board (HAB) model for school governance within the MAT system is clear. However, unresolved challenges around role clarity, workload, and dual affiliations (school and Trust) offer a warning for the importance of professional development in appointed HAB members. There is possibly also a need for systemic reforms, including standardised training, protected time, and innovation-focused funding. For MATs contemplating hub adoption, the imperative lies in viewing hubs not as cost-saving tools, but as investments in sustainable, community-anchored governance. Our study of a new HAB model for school governance considered what has been learned from school hubs, and from the NGAs best practice in governance, to inform our understanding of what those involved with the HABs told us about their effectiveness.

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[39] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[40] Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST). (2025). Hub working. https://www.odst.org.uk/page/?title=Hub+working&pid=20

A Hub Advisory Board Model for School Governance

In academic year 2021/2022 a large MAT consisting of 19 primary schools and 7 secondary schools in the South West of England and serving to County's began a review of its approach to school governance. The MAT had a typical school governance structure of LGBs for each school in the Trust. The MAT was finding the recruitment of school governors increasingly challenging, and recognised that there was a skills deficit for effective governance in many of the LGBs. The MAT was keen to grow in school number (and by the end of this research had 23 primary schools and 8 secondary schools) making the need for a manageable and effective new model of school governance even more important. The MATs school's predominantly serve areas with high levels of socioeconomic deprivation, including rural and coastal locations that are also geographically remote and culturally isolated (educationally isolated), alongside urban areas. The South West of England has been demonstrated to have some of the poorest educational outcomes and social mobility in England (South West Social Mobility Commission, 2022; 2024[41]).

The MAT executive leadership team conducted a consultation with parents in 2022 that proposed a new approach to school governance that would remove the existing LGBs and establish a 'hub advisory board' model. The consultation shared the challenges the MAT was experiencing in recruiting governors to advise for all of its schools in a meaningful way and how the new model of governance would support a smaller, but more skilled group of governors to advise the MAT on school needs. While some parents were concerned that the change in school governance would reduce their school's voice within the MAT, the majority accepted the proposed rationale for change.

In January 2023, the MATs new hub advisory board (HAB) governance model commenced. The premise of the HAB model was to centralise governance in order to support improved strategic governance and quality, streamline processes, improve efficiencies, encourage

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[41] South West Social Mobility Commission (2022) Social Mobility in the South West. Levelling up through education. Access at:
https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/newsarchive/researchgeneral/Social_Mobility_in_the_South_West_Report.pdf and https://southwestsocialmobility.com/

collaboration and intelligence gathering for learning across schools for school improvement, and allow for consistency in governance outcomes across the Trust's schools.

The key structural change of the HAB model was the removal of the LGBs and the creation of governance hub, each hub having a HAB to oversee and advise on a group of schools in the Trust (see Figure 2). The HAB was intended "to provide a connection between the Trustees, schools and their communities" (MAT Website, 2025). HABs govern at least one secondary school and five primary schools. The HABs meet three times a year to consider reports from executive leaders and matters arising from HAB members' visits to school. After each HAB meeting the Chair and Vice-Chair of the HAB meet with CEO and Chair of Trust, to support a flow of local knowledge and oversight from the HAB to the trust board.

Figure 2: Hub Advisory Board Governance Model
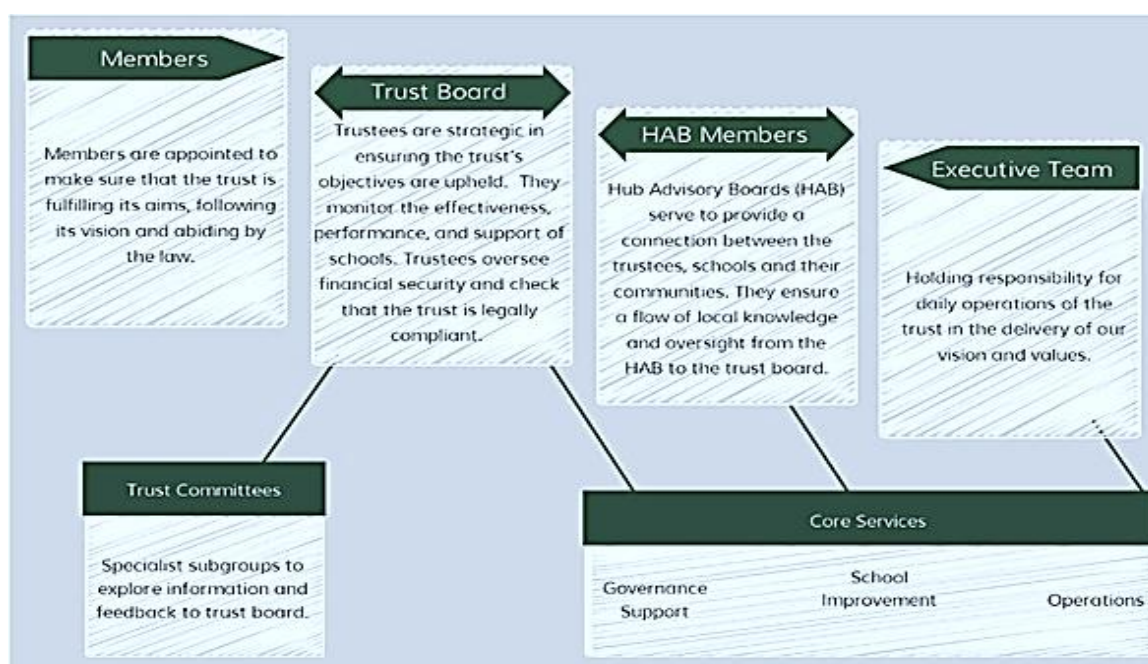
As part of the school governance change, fewer governors serve primary and secondary schools, and the role of primary specific governors was removed. The rationale for fewer advisory board members was that it would:

1. increase the MATs chances of securing higher quality governors, particularly as its schools served many areas with low density populations
2. enable the MAT to provide more effective and efficient training and development opportunities for the HAB members recruited

3. support a more coherent understanding of the MAT's strategic objectives and enable this to be applied consistently and objectively to school contexts

The operational HAB model established 5 HABs for the 26 schools, with a chair and vice-chair for each HAB, and total of 44 HAB members. Each HAB school grouping was considered for overall HAB student number size, the inclusion of at least one secondary school, and geographic proximity of schools to mitigate place-based limitations in accessing resources caused by educational isolation (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2023[42]) and to support understanding of area-based communities. The HAB model attempts to balance regional representation with operational practicality. Schools in urban areas are general closer to their farthest HAB group school, while the rural inland schools have larger distances to travel between their HAB group schools. Figure 3 provides HAB grouping by location in the county the school resides, rural/urban/suburban classification, geodesic distance between farthest schools in the HAB, and the phase of each school for 2023/24.

Figure 3: HABs Operational Structure (2023/24)

HAB 1 South & East Rural & Urban	HAB 2 South & North Rural	HAB 3 South Urban & suburban	HAB 4 North & South Suburban & rural	HAB 5 North & East Rural & suburban
45.5km	60.2 km	32.9km	51km	41km
Secondary 1	Secondary 1	Secondary 1	Secondary 1	Secondary 1
Primary 1	Primary 1	Secondary 2	Primary 1	Secondary 2
Primary 2	Primary 2	Primary 1	Primary 2	Primary 1
Primary 3	Primary 3	Primary 2	Primary 3	Primary 2
Primary 4	Primary 4	Primary 3	Primary 4	Primary 3
Primary 5				

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[42] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

The HAB model is a critically informed approach to governance, responsive to the unique place-based challenges of the South West of England. Accepting the challenges in recruiting skilled governors in rural, sparsely populated areas, the HAB model embraces fewer school advisors to support more targeted recruitment of those with the skills needed. The new model also presented a way for the MAT executive leadership to bridge the gap between strategic oversight and local accountability, ensuring that the Trust's vision and statutory responsibilities could be enacted in ways that reflected the lived realities of each school community. By meeting regularly, scrutinising safeguarding, attendance, and attainment data, and approving local policies, HABs provide the mechanism for nuanced, context-sensitive decision-making that is particularly valuable in a region marked by rurality, social disadvantage, and travel-based complexity.

The HAB structure also presented the opportunity to support a flow of local intelligence to the Trust Board, supporting more agile responses to issues such as persistent absence, staff recruitment, and the attainment gap for disadvantaged and SEND pupils. The HAB model aligns with best practice in MAT governance, as it balances central strategic priorities with the need for local challenge and support, ultimately aiming to drive up standards and improve outcomes for all pupils in a region that has historically lagged behind national averages. The HAB groupings, if empowered and well-supported, offered the potential to act as a critical lever for school improvement and community engagement in the South West (and a model of best practice for other similar areas in England).

Findings on the HAB Governance Model

This report presents for the findings of the research in two sections. Section 1 discusses stakeholder awareness and engagement with the HABs over time, drawing on survey data from the Executive Leadership Team, Trustees, Senior Leaders, HAB members and parents/carers. Section 2 considers the strengths and risks of the HAB model for school governance in the MAT, focus on the governance vision and implementation, issues of accountability and oversight, and the quality of governance. Section 3 discusses stakeholder perceptions of effectiveness of the HAB model for governing schools in a large MAT. Section 4 examines the HAB members perceptions of confidence in their skills to govern the schools in their hub. Section 5 explores the priorities for continued development of the HAB model.

1. Stakeholder Awareness, Understanding and Engagement with the HABs

Awareness and understanding

The majority of the executive leadership team and senior leaders reported a strong understanding of the HAB governance model, its policy framework, and its intended purpose. Across multiple surveys, most report feeling confident in their knowledge of the Trust's strategic priorities, governance structure, and legal and compliance responsibilities. These findings suggest that the HAB model is largely well-communicated at Executive and senior leader levels.

At trustee level, findings from July 2024 indicated that most trustees were aware of the HAB model and its approach, although a small number reported being unfamiliar with its governance structure. This may reflect the natural variation in engagement levels among trustees or that the onboarding process for new trustees requires review to support earlier intervention in trustee understanding of the MATs full governance framework.

HAB member data showed that just under half of those surveyed in July 2024 felt uncertainty about the HAB's core functions, with the majority unclear about its role and related expectations. While this may, in part, reflect new members still adjusting to their responsibilities, it could also indicate a broader need for continued guidance, communication, and role clarity within the HAB governance structure for this group.

Less than a fifth of parents/carers that engaged with the survey reported that they fully understood the HAB structure supporting the MATs governance of their child's school (18%) (see Figure 4). Although this finding is not necessarily representative of the whole parental population, it points to variation in parental awareness levels of the HABs. Most parents appeared to lack an understanding of the Trust's strategic priorities and how these relate to their child's school (72% were not at all familiar and 24% only somewhat familiar). This suggests that parents/carers are more likely to receive information on the actions of their school, rather than how it is governed and the workings of the wider MAT that holds regulatory responsibility and accountability for the school. These findings offers insight into the communication between parents/careers, the school and the MAT that requires consideration if the role of the MAT for schools is to be fully understood by parents/carers.

Figure 4: Parent/carer responses to the questions 'I understand fully how my school is involved with its hub advisory board'.
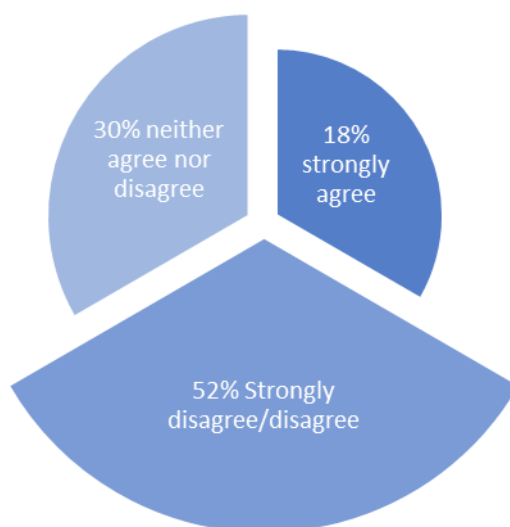
Communication with parents was consistently identified as the most significant barrier to being aware or understanding the HABs' model. While a few parents attributed their lack of knowledge to being new to the school, or acknowledged that they might have missed relevant communications, the majority pointed to limited, or unclear information about the HABs. Even parents reporting to be actively involved in their child's education, or serving as governors in other schools, and who took the initiative to seek additional information reported that the available resources, such as those on Trust and school websites, were generic and insufficient for gaining a clear understanding of the HAB's role and function. Such feedback highlights a potential lack of clear guidance from the Trust on how schools should disseminate information about the HAB and variability in the quantity and approach to such communication at the school level.

Until this survey I was unaware that this model was being used to help govern my son's school (Parent, July 2024).

I am not sure how the school is governed, it has made me reluctant to contact them(Parent, July 2024).

To be honest I don't really know much about the HAB Model of governance. Communication in this area has been fairly quiet since the local school governing body was disbanded (Parent, July 2024).

I am an engaged parent, read all the newsletters, attend events at the school as well as parents' evenings online. However I've seen or heard very little about the HAB. It would be nice to have more information about it (Parent, July 2024).

I recall an email asking for volunteers for the HAB, but do not know anything else about it (Parent, July 2024).

Importantly, findings indicate that executive leaders, senior leaders, and trustees were aware of the lack of parental awareness and understanding of the HAB model. In both the July 2023 and July 2024 surveys, the majority of these leaders and trustees were unable to assess whether parents were familiar with the model, suggesting a disconnect between governance leadership and parental engagement. Where executive leaders and senior leaders that did express a view on parental awareness of the HABs, the dominant perception was that parents are largely unaware of the HAB model. The findings indicate that leaders in the MAT with direct school-level engagement were more likely to be aware of the limited parental familiarity with the model. This offers a way forward for the MAT in improving parental awareness and understanding of the HABs, it shows that senior leaders need to engage more with parents and carers to explain the governance model used for their school, and how this relates to the wider MAT.

The data suggests that not only do parents likely have limited awareness of the HAB model, but that the executive leadership team, school leaders and trustees struggle to assess the extent of parental understanding. This raises concerns about communication and engagement between governance structures and the wider school community. If leaders are uncertain about parental awareness and understanding of the HAB model after 19 months of implementation, it highlights a need for more direct efforts to bridge this gap—whether through clearer communication, structured engagement initiatives, professional development for leaders and trustees, or targeted outreach to ensure parents understand how governance decisions impact them and their children.
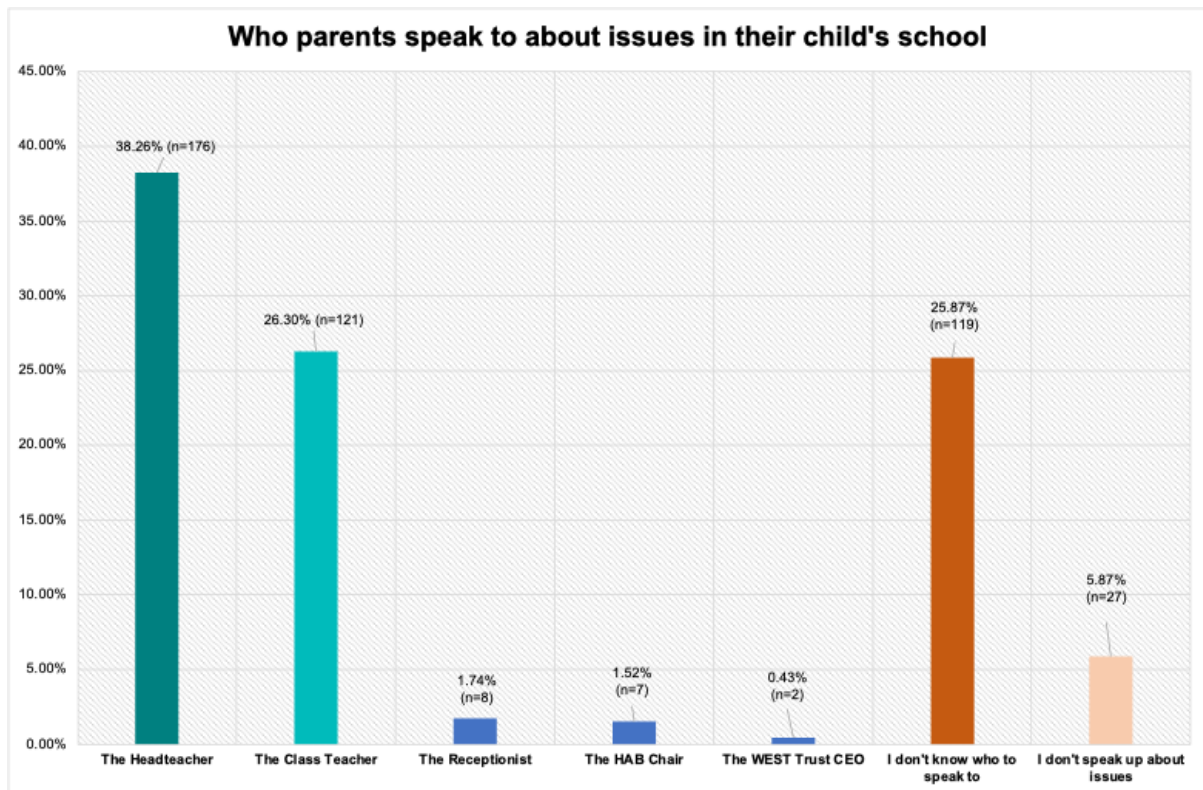
Engagement

There is noticeable variation in the executive leadership team's understanding of how the HAB engages with stakeholders, i.e., school leaders, parents, executive leadership team, school leaders, and trustees, and how stakeholder feedback influences both their perspectives and the MATs decisions. This variation persists from the early stages of the HAB's implementation through the length of the research (19 months), suggesting ongoing challenges in ensuring clarity around how stakeholder input is captured and utilised at the highest levels of governance.

In July 2024 all but two senior leaders reported that they did not believe the HAB model effectively engaged with stakeholders or that this engagement informed decisions at their school. This findings reflects and corroborates the poor understanding of the HABs reported by parents/carers at this time. Barriers to effective stakeholder engagement are identified by parents. They reported that while they feel confident in raising governance concerns to school leaders, in the main they could not engage with the HAB and did not no who **the HAB chair was for their school (90%) and thus being devoid of a** direct route **to contact them**. It appears that parents/carers use the school leader to report concerns as a proxy for the HAB and potentially losing any meaningful direct impact for influencing governance decisions. Individual school leaders and teachers remain the primary point of contact for parental concerns (see Figure 5).

These findings offer simple strategies to improve HAB visibility and accessibility to stakeholders. Parents need to be made aware through direct communications and on the school website who the HAB Chair is for their school, and how to contact them. Having the list of members of each HAB equally visible for parents would also offer more transparency for governance working. Therefore, it is important for the success of the HAB model as a school governance structure to consider the following:

• **Develop clear communication pathways** between parents/carers and the HAB to support two-way engagement for governance discussions.

• **Address the information gap on the HABs and school governance** through the MAT providing structured guidance to parents on where parents educational and school concerns can be directed, to whom and how.

Figure 5 - Parental points of contact for school related concerns

Who parents speak to about issues in their child's school

Category	Percentage
The Headteacher	38.26% (n=176)
The Class Teacher	26.30% (n=121)
The Receptionist	1.74% (n=8)
The HAB Chair	1.52% (n=7)
The WEST Trust CEO	0.43% (n=2)
I don't know who to speak to	25.87% (n=119)
I don't speak up about issues	5.87% (n=27)

Factors influencing engagement

The data suggests a risk is emerging for the MAT through the **inconsistency** in stakeholder engagement across schools. The inconsistency reported could potentially limit meaningful collaboration between the HAB and parents/carers, teaching staff, and the wider community, diminishing the full range of school voices that should be heard for shaping school-level decisions. This inconsistency in engagement with the HAB could be due to a number of, or a combination of different factors, including:

- Variations and limitations to a standardised approach to stakeholder engagement during the implementation of the HAB model.
- A lack of monitoring of HAB stakeholder interaction with schools, and parents/carers.
- Variation in how HABs and/or individual HAB board members communicate their stakeholder engagement activities to School Leaders, with potentially unsystematic or infrequent feedback loops for what schools need.
- Lack of clarity around accountability framework that holds HAB members to account when expectations are not met.

It is worth considering further actors affecting parental engagement and the HABs. The data highlights a disconnect between parental confidence in raising concerns and their ability to engage meaningfully with the HABs. While a majority of parents (73%) expressed confidence in speaking up about issues related to their child's education, many faced barriers that reduce opportunities to voice their perspectives and their participation in relevant school and trust level decision making processes. Nearly half of parents who expressed a view of the HABs impact reported feeling disengaged and possibly in cases excluded from meaningful engagement and decision-making at the school and HAB level. The remaining parents primary lacked awareness of the HABs inhibiting them from offering their perspective. Several factors seem to contribute to parental disengagement in school level governance:

- Limited understanding of the HAB's purpose and model's benefits, especially regarding the inclusion of multiple schools in a HAB.
- Perceptions of the model as prioritising standardisation and centralisation, potentially reducing individual school autonomy and operating in the Trust's interests rather than serving individual school needs.
- Concerns that the HAB operated as an extension of what is perceived to a 'business-oriented' approach encouraged by the MAT, which some parents saw as misaligned with the real purpose of schools.

Since the inception of the HABs I've felt like there is far more distance and far more complex and less engaging communication that relates to our school. I have no idea who the HAB contacts are, although I'm sure the school could tell me. (Parent, July 2024)

I feel very distanced from the governance of the school and feel that parents are not really involved at all. I'm not convinced that the Trust actually cares about informing parents... (Parent, July 2024)

I experience it [HAB model] as remote, disconnected, and self-serving. (Parent, July 2024)

Schools are now run as a business and not as schools should be. (Parent, July 2024)

This model is too far removed from parents. Who do I turn to with questions and concerns?... Speaking up in a Parent Forum (with a tight agenda) is not an easy thing to do. (Parent, July 2024)

I have been a parent within the Trust for 3 years and have worked as a Clerk to Governors elsewhere, so have a keen interest. I have found it very difficult to access information as a parent (meeting minutes etc.) and have no knowledge of the school governance structure, process or people involved. This is very disappointing, and I do not feel that there has been any parent engagement from governors. The individual school website only has very broad and generic information - this is where parents need to be engaged so it feels relevant (not redirection to a MAT website which is also sparse in its information sharing) (Parent, July 2024).

The findings from this research offer a strategy to overcome parental disengagement with school governance for a MAT adopting a HAB model. If parental engagement is hindered by a lack of awareness and limited understanding of the HABs, and unclear channels for communication and participation with the HABs, then the solution is to provide clear and accessibly information and communication. The findings demonstrated that a notable 27% of parents/carers reported feeling confident to raise concerns, and these parents/carers could actively contribute to school and Trust level discussions. This missed opportunity for valuable parental input is not completely unexpected, as any large-scale change in a large organisation takes time to embed. However, the importance of stakeholder engagement, understanding and inclusion should never be underestimated in the success of such a large-scale change. Fundamental to stakeholder engagement is clear, deliberate, consistent, and accessible communication. With this strategy for communication in place, the doors open for meaningful engagement with all stakeholders that should influence school improvement.

SUMMARY

AWARENESS, UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT WITH HABs

While most executive leaders, trustees, and senior leaders understand the purpose and structure of the HAB model, many HAB members remain unclear about their core functions and expectations. A small number of trustees also lack clarity around governance structures, possibly due to onboarding gaps or limited information.

Parental awareness of the HABs seems limited, including their role and function for individual schools and who the HAB chairs are. This limited visibility restricts opportunities for parental access and meaningful engagement in governance.

Lack of clear communication to parents on the HAB model has further limited parental engagement, compounded by feelings that the MAT seeks to overly centralise and standardise its schools, reducing school autonomy and promoting a business-like governance approach that may conflict with the values and culture of individual school communities.

2. The Strengths and Risks of the HAB Model for MAT School Governance

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The HAB model is good, and should make governance more agile and streamlined with improved comms. The practice needs some work! (Trustee, July 2024).

In this section we explore the themes that emerged related to the strengths and risks of the HAB model. These themes were derived from data collected from the executive leadership team, trustees, senior leader, and parents, and focus on the Trust's governance vision and implementation and school accountability and oversight.

Governance vision and implementation

Strengths of the HAB Model

The following aspects were identified as key strengths of the HAB governance model, particularly in relation to the Trust's governance vision, strategic approach, and operational efficiencies.

Governance vision and commitment to school improvement

Senior leaders suggested that the HAB model reflects the commitment of the MAT to school improvement by seeking a new way of bringing together the diverse experiences and skills of HAB members, trustees, and school leaders, fostering shared responsibility. It was reported that within a HAB model of governance schools have the opportunity to share intelligence and practices with other schools within their Hub through the HAB and the relationships that HAB members build with school leaders. The MAT were reported to provide additional resources and guidance to schools in a HAB as needed. Thus, strategic collaboration and practice sharing was identified as being a priority for the schools in a HAB, with centralised governance aiming to foster consistency across schools while also trying to respect their unique needs.

This approach to school governance suggests a vision for school improvement rooted in collaboration, shared governance, and shared resources to support school improvement, with targeted support to meet the diverse needs of all schools. The vision of the HABs is founded on a small number of highly skilled HAB members with full understanding of the schools of their Hub, able to work with the Hub school leaders to directly benefit individual schools and the Trust as a whole.

Schools can see how they compare and fit into the wider trust schools HAB members have a range of skills and experience that enhance the board Primary/secondary models of education are vastly different so reports on performance and education, school improvement are enhanced by the presence of heads from settings and demonstration of models of good practice, heard but also opportunities to observe (Senior leader, July 2024).

Schools can see how they compare and fit into the wider trust schools HAB members have a range of skills and experience that enhance the board Primary/secondary models of education are vastly different so reports on performance and education, school improvement are enhanced by the presence of heads from settings and demonstration of models of good practice, heard but also opportunities to observe. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Collaboration and resource sharing between schools

Executive leaders and senior leaders agreed that the HAB governance model emphasises collaboration and shared expertise. It was reported that the HAB model fosters a more unified approach across the MAT, with HABs providing opportunities for primary and secondary schools to share experiences and learn from each another, and potentially enhancing transitions from Year 6 to Year 7. Senior leaders also reported it to have the potential to support a locality focus, given that the schools in each hub were geographically closely located.

Collaborative thinking, cross-school communication, partnership working, and shared governance responsibility. (Senior leader, July 2023)

Opportunity to operate alongside other schools with similar challenges and to share experience and learning. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Hubs create potential for locality focus. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Standardising governance for greater coherence

The HAB governance model was recognised by executive leaders, trustees and senior leaders as promoting alignment and reducing ambiguity in governance practices across the MAT. Standardising

decision-making processes and communication across schools was reported to support a consistent application of governance practices, addressing variations in individual school governance while maintaining a structured yet adaptable framework for school improvement.

It [HAB model] creates consistency, clarity, and alignment. (Trustee, July 2023)

The centralised governance - consistency of approach both primary and secondary schools in the same HABs. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Reduced workload through streamlined processes

Executive leaders suggested that trustee workload was reduced by the HAB governance model. Reports received by trustees, and engagement with schools, were focused on groups of schools rather than individual schools, which streamlined the engagement and resource expected of trustees. Similarly, senior leaders pointed to reduced workload for headteachers. The new approach of the HAB model, encompassing shared policies, processes, and procedures, seemed to have streamlined governance and reduced significant administrative burden for headteachers, such as committee meeting reports and attendance, allowing them to focus more on school priorities and school improvement.

More efficient use of headteacher time and resources. Opportunity to consider schools with a community context rather than stand-alone entities (Executive leader, July 2023) Workload and Efficiency for Headteachers. (Senior leader, July 2023)

Reducing Headteacher workload through streamlined processes, shorter reports, and fewer committee meetings. (Senior leader, July 2023)

Risks associated with the HAB model

There are, however, risks that could undermine the vision and implementation of the HAB governance model.

HAB members' understanding of the MAT's objectives

While recognising progress had been made with the HAB governance model, senior leaders pointed to the need for deepening HAB members' understanding of their role within the broader Trust context and its strategic objectives to ensure stronger alignment and coherence. HAB members also identified a lack of confidence in their understanding of wider MAT strategic priorities (as did trustees), corroborating the need to mitigate this risk moving forward through more effective onboarding procedures and sustained development while in role.

There is a lack of clarity in purpose and direction [of HAB members]. (Executive Leader, July 2024)

I don't feel that any HAB governors as yet understand individual schools or that, at the two meetings that we have already had, there has been anything of value added to my school. (Senior leader, July 2023)

Clarity of the HAB roles and responsibilities

Both executive leaders and senior leaders agreed that the effectiveness of the HAB governance model is hindered by a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. Ambiguity persists about the remit of HAB members, their interactions with other governance structures, and their specific responsibilities toward individual schools' school improvement, particularly in supporting children form disadvantaged backgrounds, LAC, and those with SEND needs, as well as school improvement across their Hub schools and their accountability within the governance model. Great clarity is required to avoid compromising the operational coherence and meaningful collaboration that has started to be seen in school governance.

Sustaining clarity on remit/responsibilities [HAB Members] and operating model (leading to inconsistency of operations). (Executive Leader, July 2024)

Clarity of the HAB structure and operational model

Senior leaders reported persistent challenges in the coherence of the HAB governance structure and operating model, noting the lack clear policies and procedures as barriers to operational coherence.

These concerns were raised in both the July 2023 and July 2024 surveys, indicating an ongoing issue that may not have been fully addressed by the time of the second survey.

[Challenges with] communication, strategic guidance, purpose [of HABs].
(Trustee, July 2024)

Lack of clarity around its [HAB] model of operation. (Senior leader, July 2024).

Local school autonomy and representation

The shift toward a centralised model of school governance was considered by senior leaders and parents/carers to pose risks to the autonomy and representation of individual schools, but reducing their influence in decision-making through multi-school HABs. It was felt that there had been a loss of local voice in the governance of individual schools, which could potentially impact on community engagement and trust.

Parents/carers reported feeling disconnect from the governance process, with the removal of LGBs and replacement by HABs being perceived as a weakening of the 'critical friend' role and relationship between headteachers, parents/carers, the community and governance. While HAB members brought valuable skills to school governance, senior leaders acknowledged that the direct ties between schools and their communities had become less prominent under the HAB model. This area of risk requires consideration in order to create an inclusive governance culture for all schools in the MAT.

I am concerned about a loss of the traditional links between governance and parents. I believe it encouraged engagement and connectivity between families and school parent (Parent, July 2024).

There was previously a team of well informed, visible, and accountable governors [LGB] in contrast to HAB (Parent, July 2024).

Accountability and Oversight

Strengths of the HAB model

The HAB model governance model not only has strengths in its governance vision, but it also has strengths related to Trust accountability and oversight, and in particular through streamlined accountability processes and improved oversight for decision making.

Streamlined accountability processes

Both executive leaders and senior leaders highlighted the HAB governance model's ability to streamline accountability processes. Executive leaders emphasised the way it had enabled improved reporting mechanisms as a direct result of fewer boards that were able to share information directly with the Trust Board. It was felt that this streamlines accountability process enabled greater clarity and reduced workloads for both the executive leadership team and trustees. Senior leaders added that the role of localised HABs facilitated a shared approach to governance and collective accountability across schools. All leaders of the MAT agreed that the streamlining of school governance into the HAB model should enable trustees to focus on the strategic priorities of the MAT across schools, rather than operational details.

It [HAB model] enables the trust to streamline accountability. (Executive Leaders, March 2023).

The HAB supports improved lines of communication in the channels of governance. Simpler model of accountability. The 'our schools' rather than 'my school' culture. (Trustee, July 2023)

Improved oversight for decision-making

Executive leaders noted that simplified accountability structures enhance oversight by providing clearer, more actionable information, with most helpful aspects noted as: improved communication between governance tiers and the Trust Board, and clearer information flow potentially enhancing decision-making and building trust across the governance structure. Senior leaders pointed to the benefits of localised HABs as the practical implementation of the governance model, allowing schools to compare themselves with other schools in the MAT, as well as work together as a community hub of schools. Together the HAB was seen to support improved oversight of schools

both within hubs and across the MAT. The benefits of this were realised through schools in hubs being able to collectively address challenges, engage in cross-phase education discussions, share governance responsibilities, and drive strategic initiatives through the HABs standardised reporting formats and shared dashboards for individual schools' KPIs, and request Trust-level support as needed.

Opportunity to consider schools with a community context rather than stand-alone entities. We have had multiple successful Ofsted inspections since January 2023 implementation; new governance model has not been criticised. (Executive leader, July 2023)

Schools can see how they compare and fit into the wider trust schools. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Risks associated with the model

As with the HAB governance vision, risks were also identified with the way accountability and oversight were presenting in the model, particularly around the monitoring of school performance and wider aspects of accountability for governance within a MAT.

Monitoring of school performance

Executive leaders identified concerns with the ability of HABs to adequately monitor school performance, particularly to inform Ofsted inspections and other critical metrics. For senior leaders, the risk for school performance from the HABs was seen to be in the HAB members ability to hold individual schools to account, understand the full context of the school for development, and thereby support school improvement. These concerns were articulated in both the July 2023 and July 2024 surveys, but by July 2024 senior leaders raised this concern in greater numbers, reinforcing that accountability remained a critical issue for schools. These findings suggest that the implementation of the centralised HAB school governance model may be struggling to balance MAT level consistency with accountability and individual school improvement.

The lack of understanding of the HAB members in relation to each school. (Senior leader, July 2024).

The HAB member focus is too narrowly directed at accountability and not supporting the development / school improvement function of the trust.
(Executive leader, March 2023)

Issues for accountability

Senior leaders identified improvements in the HAB model's implementation for its system wide approaches and tools for accountability, such as the standardised reporting formats and shared dashboards for individual schools' KPIs mentioned above. While these improvements should have supported HAB member contributions to accountability, senior leaders and HAB members reported over the 19 months of the research a continued lack of clarity for the HAB member governance role, and the operational frameworks needed to support accountability. The key areas of risk were identified as:

- **HAB members accountability -** the HAB member advisory role and lack of authority to enact change were perceived as risk for enabling school improvement.

- **Generic reporting –** HAB reports cover multiple schools, hindering the HAB's ability to hold individual schools accountable. Senior leaders emphasised the need for timely, school-specific reports to enable meaningful scrutiny and constructive oversight.

- **Limited understanding of individual schools beyond the provided documentation –** it was suggested that there was an over-reliance on documentation by HAB members due to fewer school visits than there had been with the previous LGBs, preventing HAB members from gaining a first-hand understanding of the contexts of individual schools. The risk for targeted support on an individual school basis was noted.

- **Ofsted understanding of the HAB model –** there were concerns that the HAB model may not be fully understood and appreciated by Ofsted as a system of school governance that aligns with HGA best practice.

- **Communication and feedback between governance tiers -** despite reported improvements in communications between the HABs and the Trust Board, gaps and bottlenecks were reported in communication that potentially undermine the streamlining and system-wide sharing of priorities being sought by the HAB model.

- **Time constraints among HAB members** – It was noted that many of the appointed HAB members were in full-time employment, which was perceived to restrict their ability to engage deeply with pressing issues and reduce their capacity to provide timely support.

- **Operational inefficiencies,** reported in the July 2024 survey included:

- *Effectiveness of HAB meetings:* HAB meetings were described by some senior leaders as tokenistic, lacking depth, and failing to foster meaningful dialogue or focus on individual schools.

- *Responsiveness in escalating concerns:* challenges for the HAB members in escalating concerns to the Trust Board were highlighted, with reports from HAB members of being ignored or having their concerns inadequately addressed. This highlights a problem in the feedback loop between the HAB members (particularly the Chair) and the Trust Board that puts a risk against the support for accountability.

I feel the HAB model has taken accountability away from the trust. (Parent, July. 2024)

It [HAB model] removed so much involvement of the true school community and only serves to reduce accountability for the trust with less oversight. (Parent, July 2024)

[HAB] Meetings appear tokenistic and a tick box exercise where brief reports are considered. (senior leader, July 2023)

[HAB] Actions for escalation to Trust board are rarely acted upon or responded to so the same issues re-arise at each meeting. (Senior leader, July 2024)

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS AND RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE HAB MODEL

Governance vision and implementation

The HAB model presents:

- **a vision for school improvement rooted in strategic collaboration, shared governance and diverse stakeholder knowledge and experiences, fostering**

shared responsibility and learning. It has the potential to balance MAT centralisation with local autonomy to achieve consistency across schools;

- opportunities for schools to learn from each other and operate more as a 'community of schools' through shared forums that the model supports;

- a standardised model for schools governance of alignment that has the potential to reduce ambiguity in decision-making;

- a way to reduce trustee and headteacher workload, allowing more time to focus on school priorities rather than administrative demands;

- efficiencies of resource through streamlined operations – fewer governors, fewer meetings, fewer reports;

- a need for further strategic alignment with the MATs objectives by strengthening HAB members' understanding of their role within the broader Trust context, including their interactions with other governance structures and their responsibilities for school improvement and accountability;

- a need for improved clarity of its governance structures and greater coherence in its operations through more detailed policies and procedures;

- a need to consider how individual schools and their communities are represented effectively, with clear considerations of local autonomy, engagement, and ability to influence decision-making.

Accountability and Oversight

The HAB model offers:

- the potential for improved oversight and decision-making through simplified accountability structures and processes, enhancing easier communications, information-sharing and reporting between governance tiers and the Trust Board;

- the structures to enhance accountability at a HAB level, with the potential to improve decision-making and build trust across the governance structure for the MAT;

- localised HABs with the potential to enable more effective sharing of actionable information across schools, using standardised practices, such as dashboards;

- limited authority to HAB members to effect change at school or Trust level due to their advisory role;
- little to support HAB members understanding of individual schools which may hinder deeper engagement;
- communication gaps, especially in the feedback loop between HABs and the Trust Board;
- a need for timelier, school-specific reporting in place of generic reports.

3. Stakeholder Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the HAB Governance Model

Perceptions of the HAB model's effectiveness within the MAT, and factors influencing such perceptions, are explored in this section from the perspective of the stakeholders engaged with, or affected by, the approach to governance - the executive leadership team, trustees, senior leaders, and parents/carers.

Pragmatism for an evolving model

Executive leaders, trustees, and senior leaders expressed mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of the HAB governance model, with more positive responses observed during its early implementation in February 2023. By July 2024, views on the HAB model's effectiveness were split among those leading the MAT. Those who viewed the model as effective offered a pragmatic perspective, acknowledging that challenges are an inherent part of new initiatives and that continual improvement is essential to achieving long-term success and expressed optimism.

The model is working fine; HAB members have taken the time to familiarise themselves with my school. Next steps will be a more nuanced approached to key topics in order to provide challenge and support, e.g. Pupil Premium. (Senior leader, July 2023)

I feel more time is needed before a comment can be passed [on the HAB model] - it still feels like the model is in development. (Senior leader, July 2024)

There was acknowledgement that the HAB was an evolving model that was being adapted by the executive leadership team in response to feedback in real time. For example, when surveyed in June 2023, senior leaders reflected on the varying stages of maturity in the implementation of the HAB's procedures and processes. This said, half of the MATs leaders provided positive feedback about the HAB's effectiveness, indicating that some of the HABs were beginning to take shape and were viewed favourably.

Areas that were identified by senior leaders as being particularly effective through the supported received from HABs were:

- Ofsted inspections
- Less frequent, but more focused school visits by a HAB member

Very supportive - particularly prior to Ofsted visit. (Senior leader, July 2024)

The HUB model has allowed for more focused visits by members, even though they are less, but with a clear knowledge of trust priorities. This has freed up time for Heads, in writing reports, as we all contribute a shorter report to a compiled, primary report. (Senior leader, July 2024)

It is interesting to note that continuity in leadership of a HAB was raised a key area of effectiveness in the working of the model. Where the previous LGB chair had transitioned into the HAB chair **it** allowed for an already established relationship with the headteacher to be maintained**.** Such feedback signifies the importance of relationships between HAB members and school leaders for developing trusted working relationships. The knowledge and understanding of the school that the ex-LGB chair brought to the role of HAB chair facilitated a smooth transition to the new governance model. It demonstrates the importance of investing in HAB members getting to know the context of all the schools that they will be advising on to develop a deep understanding of what the school reports mean when they are received.

We have never had a visit and there hasn't been a lot of contact or impact of note [with the HAB model]. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Factors influencing perceptions of effectiveness

Senior leaders who expressed a less positive view of the HABs' effectiveness as a governance model identified several key challenges as contributing factors. Similarly, feedback from parents/carers who shared concerns about the model largely aligned with senior leader perspectives and expanded on them. In some cases, feedback on the model's effectiveness mirrored the risks of the model explored in section 3. The key factors identified as challenges to the HAB model's effectiveness were:

1. *Loss of local governance and a strong connection with school community*

Senior leaders and parents that reported a lack of understanding by HABs of each school and their community typically compared the HAB model with the previous LGB model. LGB governors in the previous model were visible at events and had defined remits for focus on, such as safeguarding or SEND, activities that were perceived to have created stronger understanding of the school at a local level. HAB members were not perceived to engage meaningfully with the local school community or staff. A few senior leaders suggested that HAB members had either never have visited a school, or had completed fewer than the required number of annual school visits. HAB members were also described by senior leaders as disconnected from individual schools.

Miss [with the HAB model] a strong link to the school community that an old-style chair of Govs would have had. (Senior leader, July 2024)

It is difficult to understand how the current model of operation represents the views of my school and how it is able to offer appropriate levels of challenge and support. (Senior leader, July 2024)

The removal of LGBs remained contentious for some parents, who reported valuing LGBs for their visibility and accessibility within the school community, and in many cases the familiarity of LGB members with the school, parents, and pupils. Parents suggested that their was more trustworthiness, dedication, and advocacy for the best interests of children through the LGB, with HAB members alliances being with the MAT and MAT priorities, not issues relevant to their schools' needs.

I feel the HAB model has been detrimental for parents. We no longer know who to contact and feel we have absolutely no way of influencing school policy or decisions anymore. The HAB feels remote and not specific to our school. (Parent, July 2024)

I experience it [HAB] as remote, disconnected, and self-serving. (Parent, July 2024).

2. Reduced governance effectiveness for accountability with loss of school level community representation

Senior leaders who believed the HAB model to be ineffective justified this by explaining that its governance consisted predominantly of reviewing policies. The HAB members were considered to lack sufficient knowledge about all of the schools in their HAB to be able to challenge effectively, and in some cases this meant that they provided insufficient support and oversight when compared to the previous LGBs. The relationship between the individual school and the HAB is clearly an area for development if the model is to be effective. Trust between senior leaders and the HAB members is essential for good governance, and this requires both parties to fully understand the contexts they are working in. Providing information to HAB members on school in report form, with few face to face engagements with the schools they are governing, is reported by senior leaders as being insufficient to develop any deep knowledge of, or connection with, individual schools. They also see the model to represent less their school's views or community, with some local stakeholders they report, including ex-school governors, feeling disaffected by the HAB model leading to less community engagement and input than before and a lack of parent volunteers in some schools.

> *It is too early to tell [if the HAB model is effective]. I don't feel that any HAB governors as yet understand individual schools or that, at the two meetings that we have already had, there has been anything of value added to my school.*
> *(Senior leader, July 2023)*
>
> *There is not the challenge that previous models of governance would have [with HAB model]. (Senior leader, July 2024)*

Parental/carer feedback also highlighted perceptions of the HAB model's limitations in supporting accountability and local representation, extending to a sense of frustration over the inability of the HAB for their school to contribute meaningfully to governance. In more detail, parents/carers referred to:

- The HAB model's inability to cater to the unique needs of individual schools within a hub of multiple schools, which was seen to inhibit HAB member understanding of individual school needs and to advocate effectively for each of them.

- The shift from localised governance to a more centralised model led to concerns that the HABs lacks the representation and accountability that LGBs had previously provided.

- Concerns that HAB members lack the capacity to effectively hold schools and the MAT to account.

- Frustrations with the lack of follow-up or resolution to their complaints, resulting in some parent/carers feeling unheard and powerless.

- Concerns that headteachers use the Trust's centralised governance model as an excuse to deflect parental complaints, leaving parents without a clear route for resolution. The advisory nature of HAB members recommendations further exacerbated this perception, as recommendations were seen to be easily ignored and go unimplemented.

- A few schools were felt to be directing parents/carers away from HAB members, but with inadequate guidance on who and how to voice and resolve the school level challenges they wanted to raise.

Further challenges in the implementation and perception of the HAB model were raised by a small proportion of senior leaders and parents/carers and focused on concerns about transparency and the relative lack of consultation the HAB enable in the Trust's decision-making, particularly around the change to the HAB model and its constituent members. Some parents felt that their feedback was either not sought or disregarded during the model's rollout. Others expressed concern posed questions about fairness and transparency over the appointment of new HAB members. Resource allocation was another point of contention, with some parents/carers suggesting that the funding allocated to establishing the HAB model could be better spent directly on schools, such as hiring additional teachers or improving learning resources. It should be noted that parents/carers appeared unaware that the HAB member role was unremunerated.

Interestingly, some parents/carers who were not aware or engaged with their school's HAB appeared to view the effectiveness of the HAB model as a reflection of their own child's school effectiveness. For example, parents who were satisfied with their child's school suggested that the HAB would probably be effective even though they did not understand how it worked. Similarly, parents/carers who were concerned with their school's behaviour policies, education standards, or communications between them and the school, suggested that the HABs model probably needs improving too. These findings suggest that the HAB model of governance and its effectiveness is not necessarily being

evaluated by parents/carers on its direct contribution to school governance for the MAT as a whole. Instead, perceptions of the HAB model's effectiveness fluctuates based on school performance rather than governance performance, which can obscure the effectiveness of the model as a governance strategy.

SUMMARY

PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS

Perceptions of the HAB model were generally more positive in 2023 than in 2024. Whilst executive leaders and trustees were more pragmatic and acknowledged the challenges of implementing the new governance initiative, and the need for continuous improvement, senior leaders' views shifted more negatively, often reflecting the HAB models' perceived responsiveness, or lack thereof, to individual school contexts and needs.

Key factors contributing to positive perceptions of the HAB model among senior leaders included the development of trusting, supportive relationships with HAB members, especially when HABs provided visible support during critical school milestones, e.g. Ofsted inspections; when HAB members demonstrated strong understanding of the school, including through visits; and when the reduced workload for headteachers was realised, enabling them to view the HAB model more favourably.

Factors contributing to negative perceptions of the HAB model included the perceived loss of robust school level accountability and individual school-level representation, due to HAB members' perceived limited knowledge of individual schools and weaker community connections; challenges in effectively advocating for individual schools within a multiple school HAB; and concerns raised by some parents who felt voiceless and powerless due to unclear communication paths with the HAB for resolution of school concerns.

Transitions at school level to the HAB model were smoother when former LGB members took on HAB member roles, helping to retain school-specific knowledge and maintain existing positive relationships.

4. Hub Advisory Board Members: experience versus confidence

The analysis of Hub Advisory Board (HAB) members responses to the two sequential surveys conducted in February 2023 and July 2024 highlights shifts in governance confidence and competence over time. The data reveals notable changes in self-perception and confidence across multiple governance domains over this 19-month period, providing valuable insights into how board members' understanding of their roles for this new school governance approach evolved.

Governance experience

One of the most striking differences between the responses of the two surveys appears in governance experience. In the first survey, none of the HAB Members reported having prior governance experience in a school or academy trust. This experience grew over the course of 19 moths to 79%, with those reporting no experiencing having recently been appointed to their roles. For this reason, the analysis used the data of HAB members who completed both baseline HAB implementation and post-HAB surveys to support an understanding of governance skills development through the HAB model over the 19-month period.

Overall Governance Confidence

Despite their initial lack of experience, HAB members began their tenure with remarkably high confidence. In February 2023, 90% expressed confidence in their ability to undertake governance roles (40% strongly agreeing, 50% agreeing), with only 10% disagreeing. By July 2024, among all respondents, confidence levels remained high at 93% (28.57% strongly agreeing, 64% agreeing). This sustained confidence suggests that the development of practical governance experience reinforced rather than undermined HAB members' general self-assurance, though the shift from "strongly agree" to "agree" responses hints at a more nuanced understanding of the role's complexities.

Strategic Knowledge and Vision

The development of governance confidence and experience appears to have prompted a reconsideration in self-assessment of strategic expertise. At the start of their HAB member role, 70% of respondents claimed significant strategic development experience (20% reporting "a great deal," 50% reporting "a lot"), with 20% reporting a "moderate amount". By July 2024,

those reporting significant experience remained at 50% but with a different distribution (29% reporting "a great deal," 21% reporting "a lot"), while those reporting a "moderate amount" increased to 50%. This redistribution likely reflects a more reflective and considered self-assessment following direct engagement with strategic governance work. Sometimes you do not know what you do not know until you do the job.

This pattern of a more considered and moderated response is even more pronounced in HAB members' familiarity with the Trust's strategic priorities. Initially, 60% reported being very familiar with these priorities (10% "extremely familiar," 50% "very familiar"). After developing governance experience, this high familiarity decreased to 29%, with most respondents (64%) now considering themselves "somewhat familiar". This shift toward a less confident self-assessment likely represents a more realistic evaluation of what they thought they knew after deeper engagement with the Trust's strategic framework.

School-Specific Knowledge

Understanding of hub schools' key priorities showed a similar pattern of reconsideration of knowledge once more governance experience had been acquired. In February 2023, 70% felt knowledgeable about their schools' priorities (10% strongly agreeing, 60% agreeing), with no respondents actively disagreeing. By July 2024, only 57% expressed such knowledge (14% strongly agreeing, 43% agreeing), with 29% now disagreeing. This change suggests that practical governance experience led to recognition of the complexity and depth of school-specific priorities, resulting in more measured self-assessment.

Risk Assessment and Financial Understanding

The most dramatic moderation of understanding for HAB members appeared in their ability to identify and evaluate key risks to hub schools. While 80% of inexperienced HAB members felt capable of this in February 2023 (10% strongly agreeing, 70% agreeing), by July 2024, only 43% of all HAB members expressed such confidence (14% strongly agreeing, 29% agreeing), with the percentage who disagreed rising from 20% to 57%. This marked change reflects growing recognition of the complexity involved in school risk assessment following direct governance experience and training from the MAT. It is somewhat reassuring that the HAB members were able to reflect on their role critically and identify areas for their development as governors.

Financial literacy remained challenging throughout the period of developing governance experience. In February 2023, only 44% of respondents felt aware of the Trust's funding and spending patterns (11% strongly agreeing, 33% agreeing)1. By July 2024, this confidence had further decreased, with just 36% expressing awareness (14% strongly agreeing, 21.43% agreeing). This persistent gap in HAB members financial understanding identifies an area for governance development for the MAT, or at least an opportunity to explore basic financial literacy to build HAB member confidence in their governance responsibilities.

Educational Understanding and Analytical Capability

In contrast to the pattern of declining confidence in technical areas for HAB members, understanding of educational matters improved as governance experience developed. Regarding how the Trust's curriculum meets pupils' needs, confidence increased from 60% in February 2023 (10% strongly agreeing, 50% agreeing)1 to 86% in July 2024 (7% strongly agreeing, 79% agreeing). This significant improvement suggests that educational understanding was a clear focus for HAB members and represented an area where governance experience built rather than tempered HAB member confidence.

Similarly, confidence in interpreting key Trust and school reports and asking relevant questions increased from 80% at the beginning of their role to 93% by July 2024, with the proportion strongly agreeing rising from 10% to 29%. This enhancement in analytical capability represents an important development in governance effectiveness that directly compares with increased practical experience of HAB members.

The Experience-Confidence Relationship

The data reveals a nuanced relationship between developing governance experience and confidence levels. Rather than producing uniform increases in confidence, practical governance experience appears to have resulted in domain-specific reconsideration of skills. In technically demanding areas like risk assessment and financial understanding, experienced HAB members demonstrated more measured confidence after 19 months in the role. This pattern suggests that direct experience with governance responsibilities provided a more realistic understanding of these domains' complexities.

Conversely, in areas more directly accessible through regular board activities, such as curriculum understanding and report interpretation, confidence increased as members gained knowledge through experience. This divergent pattern indicates that governance experience builds confidence selectively, enhancing it in some domains while prompting more regulated self-assessment in others.

It is likely that the HAB members, appointed to a governance role in a MAT to advise on a number of schools, were focused on understanding education matters and the workings of the MAT, as this was fundamental to the success of their role. This would explain the increase in confidence in these areas of governance over the more complex, and technical elements of governance that form part of regulatory compliance.

Implications for Governance Development

The observed changes in HAB member confidence who developed governance experience has important implications for governance training and support. The data suggests that initial governance confidence may involve some degree of 'unconscious incompetence', with new HAB members overestimating their abilities in complex domains. As they gain experience over time, a more reflective and moderated self-assessment of their skills emerges.

This pattern highlights the importance of providing targeted support in technically demanding areas like financial oversight and risk management, where developed experience appears to reveal rather than resolve lack of skills. It also suggests the value of celebrating growing confidence in areas like educational understanding and analytical capability, where practical experience appears to build genuine competence over time.

Executive Leadership Team, Trustees and School Leaders Perceptions of the HAB Member Role

ELT, Trustees, and senior leaders identified the following strengths and risks related to HAB member and their governance role. It is interesting to note that the confidence that HAB members reported on their understanding of education matters was not reflected by the MAT and school leaders.

Strengths

- Localised HABs enabling members to focus on a group of schools, develop a deeper understanding of what works, and have a greater impact on individual school contexts.

"Greater consistency (hopefully) at local tier of governance." (Executive leader, March 2023).

"Manageable timewise for governors to only have a group of schools to know about rather than all schools in the MAT. Deeper knowledge of those schools in in their HAB." (Senior leader, July 2024).

- Experienced HAB advisory members with a diverse set of relevant skills.

"Members have an increased level of governance knowledge and skill." (Executive leader, March 2023).

- Training opportunities that strengthen HAB members' capacity to fulfil their governance responsibilities effectively.

Risks

- Challenges in recruiting and retaining HAB members with the appropriate knowledge, skills, experience, commitment, and time availability.

"Recruitment, retention and HAB's going 'off script'." (Trustee, July 2024)

- Clarity in the role of HAB members.

"Clarity of role. Evaluation of their [HABs and HAB members] effectiveness. Training and communication." (Trustee, July 2024)

- Gaps in knowledge and skills related to educational issues, effectively challenging school. leaders or conducting school visits with a focus on school improvement.

"Ensuring HAB members have sufficient training and expertise to conduct useful school visits. Ongoing recruitment of HAB members with the correct skill set." (Executive leader, July 2023).

- Concerns about long-term sustainability, due to the over-reliance on a small number of existing members, alongside insufficient training, support, and resource allocation to enable them to carry out their roles effectively.

SUMMARY

HUB ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

The comparisons between the February 2023 and July 2024 HAB member surveys reveals that those who developed governance experience underwent a significant evolution in the self-assessment of their governance skills. Rather than showing a uniform growth in confidence, the data shows a pattern of domain-specific reconsiderations of skills, with increased confidence in some areas and decreased confidence in others. It demonstrates that HAB members were authentically engaged in reflecting of their governance skills.

HAB members demonstrated a maturing understanding of governance responsibilities as they gained practical experience over the 19-month period. This highlights the importance for MATs in recognising that individual governance skills development involves both building confidence in accessible domains, and accepting and recognising more nuanced, and modest, growth in technically complex areas.

For governance development programmes, these findings suggest the value of preparing HAB members for a 'confidence recalibration' process, emphasising that decreased

confidence in technical domains often represents growing awareness rather than diminished capability. Supporting governance development may therefore require both building capabilities and helping board members develop appropriate self-assessments of their skills across different aspects of their role. However, the investment in HAB members will secure the strengths HAB members bring to school governance identified by executive leaders, senior leaders, and trustees, and enable the MAT to mitigate the identified risks.

5. Priorities for HAB Model Development

The priorities of the executive leadership team and trustees for the HAB model implementation and development were, as would be expected, strategic and overarching for MAT governance. For senior leaders, the priorities for the HAB were practical and implementation focused. The priorities for executive leadership evolved over time, exemplified through the longitudinal data collected with priorities centred on the initial implementation of the HABs, information sharing across stakeholders, and HAB member recruitment in the first survey. By July 2023 and July 2024, some priorities were sustained by leadership alongside the need for new ones, reflecting the next stage of implementation and the growing maturity of the governance framework. Executive leaders and senior leaders demonstrated a clear commitment to refining governance practices for the MAT and its schools. The HAB model was intended to enable the MAT to recruit fewer but more highly skilled governors and foster stronger connections between Trust-level governance and individual schools. In this section, we outline the key priorities for future developments in the HAB model implementation identified in the data that would benefit its effectiveness.

HAB member role

In the July 2024 surveys, executive leaders, trustees, and senior leaders prioritised the HAB member role as an area for development to improve the effectiveness of the HAB model. Issues specifically reported included HAB member role clarity, development of HAB member understanding of governance processes (including skills development), the recruitment and retention of HAB members and governance sustainability through HAB member succession planning.

- **Clarity of HAB member roles, responsibilities, and functions** - in both executive leader and trustee July 2023 and July 2024 surveys, respondents emphasised the need for clarity in the roles and responsibilities of HAB members, particularly during high-stakes contexts like inspections, and whilst visiting schools. This clarity was sought to ensure HAB member engagement was purposeful and aligned with governance expectations. The development of a more detailed and consistently applied role description and HAB terms of reference were identified to improve HAB effectiveness.
- **HAB member training and skills assessment** – in both July 2023 and July 2024 surveys, executive and senior leaders mentioned the need for 'better' training and development of HAB members, whilst in July 2024 prioritising skills assessment to gauge governance quality and areas for improvement/training was highlighted.

- **Recruitment and retention –** It was identified that the HAB members should be clearly informed of the benefits to them of being part of school governance. One senior leader called for the communication of "what's in it for them?" as a strategy to attract and retain HAB members.
- **HAB member succession planning** - in both July 2023 and 2024 executive leaders and trustees pointed to HAB member succession planning as a key priority going forwards.

Better training for [HAB] governors. More governor recruitment. (Senior leader, July 2024)

Training for [HAB] roles & responsibilities. (Trustee, July 2024)

Clarity in the HAB members visits/meetings in schools, (Senior leader, July 2023)

HAB Administration

The reduction of the governance administrative burden for HAB members that was mentioned in July 2023 by senior leaders appears to have been resolved by July 2024 through the appointment of HAB administrators. The ongoing development of the HABs is evident throughout the executive leader, trustee, and senior leaders responses. It is encouraging to identify that the MAT supported improved HAB meeting structures that included:

- clear direction from the Trust on expected input and outcomes for HAB meetings;
- spaces in meetings for individual schools voices to be heard;
- a framework for HAB members to share questions and responses before meetings as a way to prepare for productive discussions;
- HAB members posing questions to schools in advance of the HAB meeting for the school leader to present on; and
- Clarity in the requirements for meeting preparation.

There is a clearer structure now within the [HAB] meetings. It is much better for headteachers in terms of workload. (Senior leader, July 2024).

Building HAB model awareness to addressing representation

Leadership across the MAT recognised the importance of stakeholder awareness and engagement for effective governance. In July 2023, more senior leaders prioritised increasing awareness of the HAB model among stakeholders than in July 2024. This shift may indicate that some schools had addressed the issue, or that attention had shifted to new challenges. However, parent/carer feedback in July 2024 highlighted ongoing variability in how schools supported stakeholder awareness and understanding, suggesting inconsistencies in the implementation of engagement strategies across the schools of the MAT.

In July 2024, executive leaders and trustees prioritised addressing gaps in school-level representation, an important step forward for the effectiveness of the HAB model. Reviewing and refining the HAB governance model is essential, it ensures that stakeholder concerns feel heard and responded to, and that individual schools feel represented and engaged within the Trust. Increasing the face-to-face presence of HAB members in school communities and activities, and ensuring communities have a stronger voice in governance decisions, can only strengthen the model, and support all members of the MAT community feeling engaged with governance.

The MAT leadership's priorities for HAB development indicate a belief that awareness and understanding of the HAB had been sufficiently established across all schools of the MAT and that the model was ready to move into its next phase of implementation, addressing more complex issues of inclusivity and representation. However, the parents that responded to the survey suggest a potential tension for the development of governance priorities in the variability of parent/carer awareness and understanding of the HABs.

HAB visibility and Structure

Senior leaders suggested priorities related to governance structures and processes, including:

Visibility and purpose

in July 2023 executive leader and trustee priorities focused on HAB visibility and its role within the accountability framework of the MAT. By July 2024, these priorities seem to have shifted toward strengthening communication and providing strategic direction to HAB members to ensure governance aligned with the MATs overarching priorities. This shift suggests that executive leaders and trustees believe progress has been made in enhancing HAB visibility and clarifying their role in accountability, and, although this maybe true in cases, senior leader and parental data suggest that experiences vary, and further work may be needed. This said, the response does align with feedback

from senior leaders and parents/carers, demonstrating the executive leadership commitment to listening and responding to stakeholder concerns.

There is now a systematic approach to meeting Governance needs which is shared widely and communicated well (Senior leader, July 2024).

HAB structure

A recommendation by one senior leader was to re-consider the HAB structure and create smaller HABs, with same phase schools to support more specific understanding of school contexts for HAB members, also reducing the burden on them to understand primary and secondary education. This is an interesting suggestion and suggests a consideration for reducing the burden of skill acquisition for HAB members.

SUMMARY

PRIORITIES FOR HAB MODEL DEVELOPMENT

HAB member effectiveness could be supported by clarifying the HAB role, particularly around accountability, school visits, involvement in inspections; and capacity building through skills assessment and the identification of gaps for more targeted support and improved training.

HAB meeting effectiveness has been improved by the appointment of HAB administrators and opportunities for pre-meeting questions and discussions across HAB members and school leaders.

A key priority for executive leaders in the first 19 months of the HAB model was enhancing school-level representation, and strengthening the visibility and presence of HAB members within school communities. Concerns in parental awareness and understanding of the HAB model suggest the need for broader communication strategies and targeted engagement mechanisms to reach a wider range of school-level stakeholders.

Over time executive leaders have prioritised driving more consistent and effective outcomes across all Trust schools by strengthening communication with HABs, and providing strategic direction to HAB members on the Trust's overarching priorities.

Conclusion

Context and Rationale

The study addresses a fundamental challenge facing MATs across England, the recruitment and retention of skilled governors capable of providing effective oversight and support to schools[43]. With 88% of MAT Trustees reporting that their Trust has some form of local tier governance, and governor recruitment difficulties increasing, the pressure to develop innovative governance solutions has intensified[44]. The studied MAT, serving 26 schools across rural and coastal areas characterised by educational isolation[45], implemented the HAB model to replace traditional Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) with five hub-based advisory boards, each overseeing multiple schools.

Governance Vision and Implementation

The HAB model demonstrates significant potential as a governance innovation that balances centralised strategic oversight with localised accountability. The research reveals that the model successfully addresses several systemic challenges: it reduces administrative burden on headteachers through streamlined processes, enables more strategic trustee focus by consolidating reporting mechanisms, and creates opportunities for cross-school collaboration and resource sharing. These findings align with National Governance Association principles emphasising the importance of "clear delegation" and "separation between layers of governance".

Executive leaders and senior leaders consistently reported that the HAB model promotes standardisation and coherence across the MAT whilst maintaining capacity for contextual responsiveness. The geographical clustering of schools within hubs enables face-to-face collaboration and addresses place-based challenges particularly relevant to educationally isolated schools. This approach mirrors successful models identified in other contexts, where geographical hubs have proven effective in fostering "trusted relationships among school leaders" and enabling resource-sharing[46].

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[43] National Governance Association (NGA). (2023). *Local governance here and now*. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/i2gpp15m/local-governance-here-now-20230512.pdf

[44] Sam Hensen and Megan Tate (2021) Governing in a multi academy trust. Trust Governance in 2021. National Governance Association. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/y3hak0y5/mat-governance-report-sep-2021-final.pdf

[45] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2019). Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England. Plymouth Marjon University and Plymouth University. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[46] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2023). Locality Matters: Understanding the challenge of how to support educationally isolated schools. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

Stakeholder Engagement and Awareness

The research also identifies critical gaps in stakeholder awareness and engagement that threaten the model's long-term effectiveness. While executive leaders, trustees, and senior leaders demonstrate strong understanding of the HAB model's purpose and structure, significant deficits exist at both HAB member and parent/carer levels. Only 18% of surveyed parents reported full understanding of how their school engages with its HAB, and 90% could not identify their HAB chair. This represents a substantial disconnect between governance structures and the communities they serve.

The study reveals that HAB members themselves experience uncertainty about their core functions and expectations, with nearly half reporting lack of clarity about their role after 19 months of implementation. This finding is particularly concerning given research indicating that governance effectiveness depends heavily on role clarity and appropriate training. The confidence recalibration observed among HAB members—where initial high confidence in technical areas like risk assessment decreased from 80% to 43% as experience developed—suggests that while learning occurred, systematic support gaps remained unaddressed.

Accountability and Oversight Challenges

The research documents a complex picture regarding accountability mechanisms within the HAB model. While streamlined reporting processes and improved communication between governance tiers represent clear strengths, significant concerns emerge regarding the model's capacity to provide robust school-level accountability. Senior leaders increasingly reported that HABs lack sufficient understanding of individual schools to provide effective challenge and support, with this concern growing rather than diminishing over the implementation period.

The advisory nature of HAB recommendations, combined with limited authority to effect change, creates potential governance gaps that may compromise school improvement efforts. This aligns with broader research indicating that effective governance requires both the capacity and authority to hold school leaders accountable[47]. The finding that 57% of senior leaders by July 2024 believed HABs did not effectively engage with stakeholders suggests fundamental implementation challenges that extend beyond initial transition difficulties.

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[47] Ofsted (2106) Improving governance.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a804e05ed915d74e33f9a88/Improving_governance.pdf

Professional Development and Capacity Building

Important insights about governance skills development within the HAB model are revealed by the research findings. HAB members demonstrated authentic engagement in self-reflection, with confidence increasing in accessible domains like curriculum understanding (from 60% to 86%) while appropriately moderating in technically complex areas like financial oversight. This pattern suggests that governance development programmes should anticipate and support "confidence recalibration" processes rather than expecting uniform skill growth across all domains.

The research indicates that targeted support in technically demanding areas like financial oversight and risk management becomes increasingly important as HAB members develop practical experience. This finding reinforces National Governance Association guidance emphasising the need for "investment in professional, expert support" and "a lead governance professional in any MAT"[48].

Community Representation and Local Voice

Perhaps the most significant challenge identified relates to community representation and local voice within the HAB model. The transition from school-specific LGBs to multi-school HABs has created substantial barriers to meaningful parent and community engagement. Parents reported feeling "distanced from the governance of the school" and experiencing the HAB model as "remote, disconnected and self-serving".

This represents a critical tension between operational efficiency and democratic representation that requires careful consideration. Research consistently demonstrates that parental engagement correlates with improved educational outcomes, making the preservation of meaningful community voice essential for long-term success[49]. The finding that former LGB chairs transitioning to HAB roles maintained more effective relationships with schools suggests that continuity of local knowledge and relationships significantly influences implementation success.

Implications for MAT Development

The study provides valuable insights for MATs considering hub governance models, particularly those serving geographically dispersed or educationally isolated communities with challenges in recruiting skilled governors. The evidence suggests that while hub models can address recruitment challenges

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[48] Sam Hensen and Megan Tate (2022) Governing in a multi academy trust. Trust governance in 2022. National Governance Association. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/y3hak0y5/mat-governance-report-sep-2021-final.pdf
[49] Clare Campbell (2011) How to involve hard-to-reach parents: encouraging meaningful parental involvement with schools. NCSL. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d5d0440f0b60aaa293fa6/how-to-involve-hard-to-reach-parents-full-report.pdf

and improve operational efficiency, successful implementation requires substantial investment in communication strategies, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and ongoing professional development.

The research demonstrates that governance innovation must balance efficiency gains with preservation of local voice and community connection. The most successful aspects of the HAB model - reduced administrative burden, improved strategic focus, and enhanced collaboration - can only be sustained if fundamental accountability relationships remain intact. This requires explicit attention to role clarity, communication pathways, and mechanisms for meaningful stakeholder engagement throughout the implementation process.

The findings contribute to broader understanding of governance effectiveness within the evolving MAT landscape, where 76% of MATs maintain individual school committees and 12% employ cluster or hub models[50]. The research suggests that the future of local governance within MATs depends not on the specific structural model adopted, but on the quality of relationships, clarity of roles, and effectiveness of communication systems that underpin governance practice.

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[50] Sam Hensen and Megan Tate (2021) Governing in a multi academy trust. Trust Governance in 2021. National Governance Association. https://www.nga.org.uk/media/y3hak0y5/mat-governance-report-sep-2021-final.pdf

Recommendations

The findings of this research have demonstrated that the HAB school governance model implemented by a large MAT in the South West of England has the potential to provide a robust system of governance in areas where it is hard to recruit high numbers of skilled governors. The HAB model is in its infancy, and it is encouraging that executive leaders and trustees are reviewing its implementation as an ongoing process and that the HAB model is evolving in response to feedback from stakeholders. Our recommendations are for MAT CEOs considering the implementing a HAB model of school governance, or for MATs that are evolving existing hub models; policymakers and the National Governance Association (who make such a positive contribution to school and Trust governance in England).

Recommendations for MAT CEOs

1. Strategic Planning and Preparation

Conduct thorough stakeholder consultation before implementation, ensuring all community members understand the rationale for change and potential impacts on local representation.

The research demonstrates that insufficient stakeholder engagement leads to persistent communication gaps and reduced community trust. **Develop clear role definitions and terms of reference** for HAB members that specify their responsibilities, authority levels, and interactions with other governance structures. Evidence shows that role ambiguity undermines effectiveness and creates operational confusion that persists throughout implementation.

Design geographical groupings strategically to balance operational efficiency with meaningful school relationships.

Hub clusters should consider geographic proximity, shared community contexts, and manageable distances for collaborative activities, particularly in educationally isolated areas.

2. Implementation Framework

Invest in comprehensive HAB member development programmes that address both foundational governance skills and technical competencies.

The research reveals that initial confidence often reflects "unconscious incompetence," with members requiring targeted support in complex areas like financial oversight and risk management as they gain experience.

Establish professional governance support through dedicated clerking and administrative assistance to reduce volunteer burden and improve meeting effectiveness.

The research demonstrates that professional support significantly enhances governance quality and member retention.

Create robust communication systems connecting HABs with parents, school communities, and the trust board.

The study found that 90% of parents could not identify their HAB chair, indicating fundamental failures in stakeholder engagement that require systematic address.

3. Stakeholder Engagement and Accountability

Maintain meaningful community representation by ensuring HAB members have regular, structured interactions with individual schools and their communities.

The research shows that effective governance requires deep understanding of local contexts that cannot be achieved through reports alone.

Develop clear escalation pathways f**or community concerns and ensure HAB recommendations carry appropriate weight in trust decision-making**.

The advisory nature of HAB roles can undermine accountability if not supported by robust feedback mechanisms.

Establish transparent communication channels including visible HAB membership information on school websites and accessible contact procedures for parents and community members.

The study indicates that stakeholder engagement failures significantly compromise governance legitimacy.

4. Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

Implement regular skills assessment and training programmes that acknowledge the "confidence recalibration" process as members develop governance experience.

Targeted support in technically demanding areas becomes increasingly important as practical experience reveals knowledge gaps**.**

Monitor governance effectiveness through systematic evaluation of stakeholder satisfaction, HAB member confidence, and school leader perceptions.

The research demonstrates significant variation in experiences across different stages of implementation requiring ongoing adjustment.

Plan for succession and recruitment by developing clear value propositions for potential HAB members and maintaining pipelines of skilled volunteers.

Recruitment challenges intensify without proactive strategies addressing volunteer motivations and capacity constraints.

5. Risk Mitigation

Preserve local voice mechanisms alongside hub structures to address concerns about reduced community representation and democratic accountability.

The study consistently identifies tension between operational efficiency and meaningful stakeholder engagement that requires careful balance.

Ensure adequate resourcing for ongoing professional development, communication activities, and governance support to prevent implementation failures due to capacity constraints.

These recommendations reflect evidence that HAB models can enhance governance efficiency and strategic coherence while requiring substantial investment in implementation quality to achieve intended benefits.

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. Review Governance Framework Requirements

Policymakers should review current guidance on MAT governance to explicitly address hub and cluster models, providing clear frameworks for their implementation and evaluation. The research demonstrates that while hub models can address recruitment challenges and improve operational efficiency, they also create new risks around accountability and community representation that require policy attention. Current academy trust handbook requirements should be updated to reflect the diverse governance models now operating within the MAT sector.

2. Address Educational Isolation and Place-Based Challenges

The research provides compelling evidence that governance challenges are exacerbated by educational isolation, with rural and coastal schools facing particular difficulties in recruiting skilled governors. Policymakers should develop targeted support mechanisms for educationally isolated schools, recognising that place-based challenges require differentiated solutions. This includes

reviewing current education policy in relation to priority areas and target schools, ensuring that governance support reaches schools serving geographically dispersed communities.

Funding frameworks should explicitly recognise the additional costs associated with governance in educationally isolated areas, including travel costs for board members and the need for enhanced professional support. Research demonstrates that educationally isolated schools require specific and additional support to access national interventions and maintain effective governance[51].

3. Support Innovation While Protecting Community Voice

Policymakers should encourage governance innovation while establishing safeguards to protect community representation and local voice. The research demonstrates that operational efficiency gains can come at the cost of democratic engagement, requiring careful balance in policy frameworks. This includes ensuring that any governance model maintains meaningful mechanisms for parental and community input into school-level decisions.

Policy frameworks should explicitly recognise the value of local governance and establish minimum standards for community engagement within hub models. Research indicates that "the future of local governance within MATs depends not on the specific structural model adopted, but on the quality of relationships, clarity of roles, and effectiveness of communication systems"[52].

Recommendations for the National Governance Association

1. Develop Hub Governance Best Practice Guidance

The National Governance Association (NGA) would add value to the system by developing comprehensive guidance for implementing hub governance models, drawing on the evidence from this research and other emerging practice evaluations. This guidance should address the specific challenges identified in this report, including role clarity, stakeholder engagement, and accountability mechanisms. The research findings demonstrate clear learning points that could benefit other MATs considering similar governance innovations.

Guidance should include practical tools for HAB member development, stakeholder communication strategies, and accountability frameworks that balance efficiency with effectiveness. This should

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[51] Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2019). Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England. Plymouth Marjon University and Plymouth University. Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University. Available at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/educational-isolation/

[52] Sam Henson (2022) MAT governance: the future is local. NGA. https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/mat-governance-future-is-local/

build on NGA's existing work on local governance while addressing the specific dynamics of hub models.

2. Enhance Professional Development Resources

The NGA should consider developing specialised training programmes for hub governance, recognising the unique challenges and opportunities identified in the research. This includes creating resources that address the "confidence recalibration" process observed among HAB members, helping new governors understand that decreased confidence in technical areas often represents growing awareness rather than diminished capability.

Training programmes should emphasise the importance of maintaining community connections while operating across multiple schools, addressing the tension between efficiency and local representation. This includes developing skills for engaging with diverse stakeholder groups and maintaining visibility within school communities.

3. Advocate for Governance Support Investment

The NGA should consider advocating for increased investment in governance professional support, particularly for MATs implementing hub models. The research demonstrates the crucial role of governance professionals in supporting effective communication and coordination within hub structures. This includes arguing for protected funding for governance professional roles and establishing minimum standards for professional support within different governance models.

The NGA should also consider advocating for recognition of the additional costs associated with governance in educationally isolated areas, supporting policy development that addresses place-based challenges in governor recruitment and retention. This includes promoting understanding of the specific support needs of rural and coastal schools within the governance community.

4. Support Research and Evaluation

The NGA would be a welcome champion in the promotion of ongoing research into governance effectiveness across different MAT models, building on this study's methodology and findings. This includes supporting longitudinal studies that track governance outcomes over extended periods and comparative studies that examine different approaches to school governance. Such research would contribute to evidence-based policy development and support continuous improvement in governance practice.

AFTERWORD: EMMA KNIGHTS OBE

Former Chief Executive (2010 – 2024), National Governance Association

This is an important piece of research. There is little published on the development of multi academy trusts (MATs) even though this move towards MATs has transformed the English schools sector, introducing a very different form of school management, governance and accountability. And apart from NGA's own research, there is absolutely nothing on the development of the local tier of MAT governance. So thank you to Plymouth Marjon University for doing the work pro-bono and thank you to the trust for opening itself up to this scrutiny. Your collaboration has produced a thought-provoking and timely report.

At the heart of the transformation to governing a group of schools, rather than a single one, is the need for the board of trustees to understand their schools and their contexts. Knowing what you govern is one of the eight elements of effective governance.

After NGA's 2019 Moving MATs Forwards report, the value of strong local governance became increasingly apparent to the sector, but understanding the full potential of local governance was not universal. For some considerable time, many MATs struggled with meaningful practice, leading to confusion, inefficiencies for heads, duplication of effort between volunteers and executives, and in some case little for governors to get their teeth into. Some still do struggle as NGA's annual survey 2025 report points to.

NGA continued to write about local governance extensively, bringing experience and wisdom together in the thought leadership piece 'The Future is Local' by Sam Henson in March 2022. We were delighted when later that month, the DfE's White Paper, Opportunity for all, said "So that trusts continue to be responsive to parents and local communities, all trusts should have local governance arrangements for their schools". This statement, lobbied hard for by NGA, spurred others in the sector to turn their minds to local governance, then convinced of its continuation. NGA's 2024 survey revealed that local governance exists in almost all MATs. Only 5 out of 1081 MAT respondents had no form of local governance.

The main governance experimentation by MATs has been with an approach often called cluster or hub committees as we see here. But the term 'hub' has been used to encompass a number of models. First, hubs may provide a way for staff from across the area to collaborate. Particularly as MATs grow, cluster groups for heads and staff make absolute sense, an example of which was documented in Locality Matters in 2023. There is no need to mirror that arrangement for non-

executives; that leads to duplication, confusion about roles and a crossing over the line into the operational. If hubs were an additional layer of governance as well as academy committees, they added bureaucracy, but not value.

Second, some MATs have a single academy committee which serves two or three small primary schools in the same locality, mimicking a small, maintained federation. The schools need to be relatively close, and governors need to be drawn from both school communities. The MAT does not do the same for any larger schools or those too far apart to know each other's communities. These shared committees have sometimes been called hub or cluster committees, but their delegated roles are the same as others within the MAT and can work just as well.

Third is the example studied here where hub committees replace all academy level committees. Despite the schools being fairly local, they seem to have lost the all-important knowledge of place and school needs and the connection with the communities. Parents were generally disconnected from the process, when the MAT had hoped to improve engagement. This is understandable given the number of schools in each hub.

Talk about cluster or hub level governance instead of a local tier has surfaced again in the sector in the last two years, driven by the difficulty of volunteer recruitment. I would encourage all those considering such a change to read this report.

If I were a trustee of this MAT in receipt of this evaluation, I would support change, one which gave each secondary school its own academy committee and then considered the small primaries one by one. Where they are close to each other, two or three primaries can share an academy committee. This report underlines what has been experienced elsewhere: that if the role of local governors is to be meaningful, five schools is too much to cope with well.

While NGA had been keen to facilitate innovative approaches, the reality is this has not developed as we once imagined it might. NGA's model schemes of delegation (SoD) first published in 2016 had four variations (including a SoD delegating to committees covering clusters of schools), but over the years as our knowledge of local governance in practice increased, we published just one template with room for amendment. The hub template was dropped as the evidence coming through suggested it wasn't working and the numbers using it were dwindling. No-one related to the artificial clusters invented. This didn't matter for staff structures, but it does when communities are being considered.

The difference is here you have documented the experiment which was carried out for all the right reasons. This will benefit the system far wider than just one trust.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Methodology

Plymouth Marjon University was commissioned to research the new approach to school governance by the MAT Chair of Trustees. The University undertook the research pro-bono as part of its commitment to prioritising 'Place and Social Purpose' impact regionally[53]. The research was conducted over 19 months (January 2023 – October 2024) as a qualitative longitudinal study with mixed method design hat included; a desk review, and quantitative and qualitative data collection through surveys, and analysis. The research question running throughout the study was:

In what ways does a governance hub model meet MAT local advisory board level governance requirements effectively?

The research sub-questions were:

What are the outcomes of the MAT restructure of governance on:

1. Securing appropriate (based on skills audit needs) local advisory board members
2. Local advisory board member self-efficacy
3. Retaining local advisory board members
4. MAT trustee perceptions of school governance effectiveness at local advisory board level
5. School leads satisfaction in relation to school level governance
6. Parental satisfaction in relation to their school meeting their children's needs

The research design established data collection tools that enabled these questions to be answered. To establish the context for the study a desk review was conducted that reviewed all publicly available data on the MAT from its website and that of its constituent schools. The MAT also gave the researchers access to the Teams page established for the

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[53] Plymouth Maron University (2024) Marjon 2030: The Case for Inconvenient Excellence. Plymouth, Plymouth Marjon University. Access at: https://www.marjon.ac.uk/about-marjon/governance--management/university-strategies--policies/Marjon-2030-Strategy.pdf

implementation, running and review of the HABs. These data were used to cross reference findings from the primary data collected.

Primary data were collected using eight surveys that were administered between February 2023 and October 2024 (January 2023 being the implementation of the HAB governance model in the MAT). The surveys were constructed and administered using survey monkey, were distributed to participants by the MAT administrators and were live for the durations of two months from issue. There were four distinct survey groups, and each were invited to participate in surveys that were purposefully different in frequency and content in order to support more informed responses from respondents. The four survey groups were:

1. Executive Leadership team (ELT) and Trustees
2. Hub Advisory Board Members
3. School Leaders
4. Parents and carers

However, all groups' surveys were designed to explore the perceptions of the HAB governance model in the MAT and to capture both quantitative and qualitative data, utilising a mix of closed and open-ended questions. This dual approach allowed for the collection of quantifiable data to allow broad descriptive statistics, while also providing the opportunity for participants to share more detail on their perspectives and experiences.

A longitudinal design was adopted for the ELT, senior leaders, and HAB members to track changes in their governance awareness, understanding, and perceptions of the HAB model over time. This design enabled the study to identify persistent trends and shifts in perceptions as the governance framework evolved. Parents and carers were invited to respond to one survey after the HABs had been in place for five terms in the MAT, giving the new governance model time to become established enough for the parents to be able to comment.

The surveys focused on the following topic areas and varied slightly based on the participant group:

- Awareness and understanding of the HAB model, responsibilities, and functions.
- Strengths and risks of the model.
- Perception of its effectiveness.

- Priorities for future implementation.
- Confidence in speaking out about issues related to the model.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data survey timetable; the population being surveyed and the sample contributing to the findings. The average response rate for an online survey is considered to be 44.1% (Wu, Zhao, and Fils-Aime, 2022)[54] which suggests the response rate for this research was above average in all but two surveys and offers robustness for the analysis for population representation. The parent/carer survey response rate was low and the limitations this presents are discussed below.

Table 1: Data Survey Timetable and Response Rate by Participant Group

Survey population and timetable	Number of respondents	Response rate
Executive leadership team and Trustees		
HAB implementation February 2023	12	66%
Early phase HAB implementation July 2023	7	39%
Post-HAB implementation July 2024	8	44%
Senior leaders		
Early phase HAB implementation July 2023	13	50%
Post-HAB implementation July 2024	17	65%
HAB Members		
HAB implementation February 2023	27	61%
Post-HAB implementation July 2024	14	32%
Parents and carers		

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[54] Meng-Jia Wu, Kelly Zhao, and Francisca Fils-Aime (2022) Response rates of online surveys in published research: A meta-analysis. Computers in Human Behavior Reports, Volume 7, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2022.100206

Post-HAB implementation July 2024	461	3%

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative data were analysed using Saldana's (2016)[55] qualitative analysis method, aiming to achieve high-deep learning, focusing on conceptual richness while also requiring a deep dive into the data. It is interpretative, flexible, and iterative, encouraging reflection throughout the analysis process. The survey questions were designed to inform the research questions. Trends in responses were identified using descriptive statistics and themes from narrative responses were used to illuminate the quantitative data collected.

All populations (except parents and careers) had sequential surveys administered over time to provide a chronological view for perceptions of the HAB model for school governance. These populations were all directly involved with the HABs in their roles for the MAT. The survey timetable can be seen in Table 1, which also identifies the type of survey used. There were three types of survey used sequentially:

1. HAB implementation (February 2023) – this survey was designed to capture baseline perceptions as the HAB model was being rolled out across the MAT. Those responding to this questionnaire were new to the HAB model and their responses were expected to capture how well they had been informed about the new HAB model in relation to their own governance and/or leadership roles.

2. Early phase HAB implementation (July 2023) – this survey was administered after two terms of the MAT experiencing the HAB model of school governance. The timing of the survey was purposeful, giving respondents an opportunity to work with or within the HAB model and use this operational experience to inform their responses.

3. Post-HAB implementation (July 2024) – this survey was constructed to gather perceptions of the HAB model after it was well established within the MAT and its schools, having been operational for five terms.

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[55] Saldana, J. (2016). The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. London, Sage Publications.

These sequential surveys data supported an analysis of how the MAT leaders, HAB members and school leaders responded to and engaged with the HAB model over time, including any change in their confidence on school governance and the effectiveness of the HAB model. Parents/carers were asked to provide their perceptions of the HAB model after it had had time to embed in school culture, because parents/carers were unlikely to be engaged with the HABs explicitly but would be effected by the HAB governance of their school, with more effect over time.

Participant Populations

Executive Leadership Team and Trustees

The survey questions for the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and Trustees surveys were constructed to elicit an understanding of their confidence in: understanding the governance requirements of the Trust; the Trust priorities; the HAB approach, core functions and legal compliance for governance; overtime the challenges/risks and strengths of the HAB governance model and the effectiveness of the HAB governance model, including how the Trustee engages with the HABs to inform their decisions, the appropriateness of the HAB members skill set, the priority areas for HAB governance effectiveness; perceptions of school leader and parent/carer understanding of the HAB mode; and being able to speak up about governance concerns. Understanding the confidence of those leading the MAT in their Trust governance responsibilities, which included the HAB model of school governance being rolled out, is important when establishing the efficacy of the approach.

Senior Leaders

The survey questions for Senior Leader surveys were constructed build a picture of their confidence in understanding Trust governance, the MATs priorities for its schools, the new HAB model and its strengths and weaknesses, and the way the HAB model of governance was supporting their school. School leaders were then asked to comment on their understanding of the HAB model, including its core functions and whether it was an effective approach to governance for the MAT, including the way it supports them as school leaders in making decisions about the school. School leaders confidence in the sills of the HAB members was also gauged to understand if it was felt that the new model of governance was an effective way to secure the skilled governors needed by the Trust.

HAB members

The National Governance Association for Trusts and Schools skills audit framework for governors in single schools (NGA, 2023[56]) was utilised in HAB implementation baseline and post-HAB implementation surveys to evaluate the skills and competencies of HAB members and how these changed over time. The surveys included questions related to:

- Governing experience
- Strategy and risks management
- School funding and budgets
- The curriculum
- Stakeholder engagement
- Board business and relationships
- Legal responsibilities
- Diversity and inclusion

Parents and Carers

The parent and carers survey was administered after five school terms of the MAT implementing the HAB model of school governance. A clear definition of governance was given to the parents and carers in the survey to support the answering of questions referring to governance. The questions were designed to show parents and carers understanding of governance for their child's school, their understanding of the MAT priorities for the education of their child; their confidence in understanding the HAB model for the MAT, for their school and the perceived effectiveness of the HAB model; whether they know how to contact the HAB chair, and their confidence in speaking up about issues with their child's education or school and who they should speak to. After more than 1.5 years of the HAB model in the MAT, this survey was intended to show parents and careers views of its impact on school level governance.

Limitations of the data

The demographic composition of the respondents shows subtle but potentially significant shifts across surveys in each of the population groups (except parents and carers, who received one survey only). This shift makes any claim for population perception changes over

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[56] NGA (2023) Skills audit for governors in single schools and academy committees. National Governance Association for Trusts and Schools. Access at: https://www.nga.org.uk/knowledge-centre/governing-board-skills-audit/

time more challenging. For example, in the ELT and Trustees first survey, respondents comprised 45.45% Executive Leaders (Directors of Education) and 54.55% Trustees, survey 2 showed a similar distribution with 42.86% Executive Leaders and 57.14% Trustees, but survey 3 had Executive Leaders at 28.57% and Trustees at 71.43% and this changing composition can be mitigated by weighting the responses of each group in the population to remove variance. The Trustees and Executive Leaders potentially have different perspectives and experiences within the operational aspects of governance in the MAT and disaggregating their responses also mitigates for variance in findings.

The response rates for the sequential surveys range from 32% to 66% and can be seen in Table 1. These response rates are above average for those expected from surveys[57], but should be treated cautiously when making generalisations about the population. As this research was commissioned by the MAT, a higher level of engagement from ELT, trustees and school leaders was expected. Achieving the response rate reported required the surveys to be opened beyond the initially agreed two weeks, to two months to secure a greater number of responses. The survey was sent out by email through the MAT administrators to the ELT, Trustees, HAB members and school leaders at least three times in every sequence of surveys. The parent and carer survey achieved a 3% response rate. This is very low and is not treated as representative of the population. The findings from parents and carers responses are therefore treated as a snap shot of parents' perceptions who have an interest in school governance.

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[57] Meng-Jia Wu, Kelly Zhao, and Francisca Fils-Aime (2022) Response rates of online surveys in published research: A meta-analysis. Computers in Human Behavior Reports, Volume 7, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2022.100206