

Special report

Member exclusive

The MAT Report 2025.

A detailed analysis of the multi-academy
trust landscape



Introduction.

Welcome to our exploration of the current Multi-Academy Trust landscape in England. In these pages, you'll discover what a Trust is, how they came to be, how they are growing, and why schools decide whether or not to join them.

The data we present is drawn from multiple sources and seeks to provide the most comprehensive and update analysis giving you the information you need to develop and deliver your multi-academy trust strategy.

You'll see, for instance, that the total number of MATs has dropped slightly, yet the number of larger trusts—those with six schools or more—continues to rise. This dynamic tells us that many small MATs have either merged or been absorbed, often in an effort to seek a more sustainable financial footing.

Meanwhile, larger trusts have capitalised on economies of scale, bringing in additional schools and pooling resources to help manage tight budgets and balance central services. These changes are important if you're supplying products or services, because you'll be working with fewer but larger "customers," each with its own processes and procurement protocols.

We also highlight the financial realities that MATs now face. Rising costs, staff salaries, and increased demand for special educational support have made budgets tougher to juggle.

Central procurement is now the norm, allowing trusts to negotiate better deals and achieve greater consistency across their schools. For you, this often means dealing directly with a trust's finance or procurement team rather than individual headteachers. Many MATs are also exploring new ways to stretch funding—some pool their General Annual Grant (GAG) across schools, while others focus on growing commercial income. Either way, being aware of these approaches will help you tailor your offerings to match their strategies.

Finally, you'll learn about the varied journeys schools take when joining, or choosing not to join, a MAT. Some seek financial stability and fresh expertise; others prefer to stay under local authority control due to concerns about autonomy or potential cultural clashes. This mix of motivations underlines just how diverse the academy sector is, and why it's vital for suppliers to understand each trust's values and goals.

There are several threads running through this report, namely ; no two trusts are identical, individual school culture plays a big role in everything from the decision to join a trust through to how quickly and easily central procurement progresses.

The provenance of the CFO can have an influence on the focus of a Trust and, MAT size, whilst an indicator of centralisation, is not a guarantee of central decision making.

Innovation is central to the culture of most Trusts, and the changes planned by the current government are not universally welcome.

Many MATS work with schools outside of their own Trust, sometimes as a recruitment model but often simply because it is the right thing to do.

Lastly, but by no means by least, Trusts want to work in partnership with suppliers - however, be prepared to help them with the delivery of centrally procured services – and expect each school within the Trust to influence how a central service is used.

We hope you find this report helpful and wish you the best of luck with your Multi-academy trust endeavours.



Caroline Wright, Director General

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Key Findings.

Trust Numbers Drop -The number of multi-academy trusts has slightly decreased, dropping from 1,204 to 1,158. This shows that while new trusts continue to form, mergers and closures are reshaping the market.

Shift to Larger Trusts - There has been marked growth in medium and large trusts—those with at least six schools—while smaller two or three-school trusts have declined. Many MATs are merging to achieve greater economies of scale.

Significant Trust Expansion - Around 1,800 schools joined a new trust since 2022. Although most trusts added only one or two schools, a small but notable fraction acquired six or more, indicating a trend toward swift, sizeable expansion among certain MATs.

Growing Financial Pressures - Rising costs—especially staff salaries, energy bills, and additional support needs—have placed budgets under strain. More trusts now rely on pooling their General Annual Grant (GAG) funding or consolidating back-office functions to remain financially stable.

Centralised Procurement Gains Ground - Trusts of all sizes are increasingly purchasing core services—HR, finance systems, IT, and utilities—through central deals. This approach drives cost savings and standardises practices but also means suppliers must adapt to more centralised decision-making.

Operational Efficiencies - By centralising HR, IT, facilities management, and school improvement services, MATs have reduced administrative burdens for their individual schools. Many trust leaders report that centralisation saves both money and time, allowing more focus on teaching and learning.

Autonomy vs. Standardisation - Schools often highlight a tension between the desire to preserve their own culture and the need for consistent, trust-wide systems. Although some school leaders worry about losing independence, others welcome the strategic guidance and shared resources that come with MAT membership.

Why Schools Join - Top reasons for joining a trust include improved financial stability, enhanced professional development, reduced paperwork, and broader leadership support. Many schools facing reduced local authority support view MATs as a more reliable framework for improvement.

Why Some Schools Resist - A sizeable group remain outside the MAT structure. They cite the importance of local community ties, concerns over central control, and satisfaction with current local authority arrangements. Some also struggle to find a trust whose ethos truly matches their own.

Supply Opportunities -As more trusts consolidate purchasing and plan strategically, suppliers who offer flexible, trust-wide solutions with proven impact—particularly in areas like EdTech, staff CPD, and resource efficiency—are in a strong position to build lasting partnerships across multiple schools

Key Opportunities.

Leveraging Trust-Wide Agreements - As MATs centralise purchasing, there is strong potential for suppliers to offer discounts to serve multiple schools within a Trust. Providing bulk discounts to supply goods for a number of schools can maximise value for MATs while building more extensive, long-term partnerships.

Cross-School Professional Development - Many trusts look to improve teaching quality through shared training initiatives. Suppliers that offer robust, adaptable CPD solutions—either in person or online—can tap into this growing need for trust-wide staff development, from newly qualified teachers to senior leaders.

Flexible, Integrated IT Solutions - Schools increasingly want integrated, cloud-based platforms for finance, HR, and pupil data. Suppliers that can integrate seamlessly with these systems—offering single sign-on, automated updates, and strong data privacy—are well-placed to appeal to MAT decision-makers.

Specialised SEND Support - Rising numbers of pupils with SEND means trusts are seeking specialist resources, assistive technology, and staff training to meet individual needs. Suppliers offering evidence-based SEND interventions, therapies, or software can benefit from this heightened demand.

Cost-Efficient Energy and Facilities Management - MATs often see significant savings through centralised procurement of energy and facilities services. Suppliers who can guarantee cost-efficient, sustainable solutions—like renewable energy packages or smart energy monitoring—can stand out to trusts looking to cut overheads.

School Improvement Consultancy - With trusts centralising improvement strategies, expert consultancy around curriculum design, leadership mentoring, or data analysis is in demand. Suppliers equipped to collaborate across multiple schools on performance-enhancing interventions will find ample opportunity.

Tailored Parental Engagement Tools - Trusts value consistent, high-quality communication with parents. Software platforms that unify reporting, notifications, and feedback loops—potentially also offering language translation or mobile-friendly features—will appeal to MATs wanting consistent community engagement.

Financing and Payment Flexibility - Budget pressures mean MATs welcome suppliers who offer multi-year or staggered payment options. Structured financing allows schools to adopt new technology or resources quickly and pay off larger investments more manageably.

Staff Wellbeing and Retention Solutions - Personnel costs form the largest share of MAT budgets, and retaining quality staff is a priority. Suppliers with programmes targeting mental health, workload reduction, or flexible staffing models can alleviate some of the stresses felt across a trust's workforce.

Piloting and Co-Development - Because MATs often seek bespoke solutions to meet local needs, suppliers who can pilot new products or services within a small group of schools—and refine them in close collaboration—may build loyal, trust-wide relationships that expand over time.

Part 1: Background.

A brief history of multi-academy trusts.

A brief history of MATs.

The idea of academies and what would become Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) finds its origin in the educational reforms of the 1980s. The Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher laid the groundwork with the introduction of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) in 1988. These were publicly funded schools operating independently from local authorities (LAs), with a strong emphasis on business sponsorship and specialisation in subjects like science and technology. CTCs were an effort to raise standards in urban areas where traditional state schools were struggling, and they reflected a broader Conservative philosophy of introducing market principles into public services.

However, only 15 CTCs were ever established. The model faced resistance from the education establishment and struggled to attract enough private sponsors willing to make large capital contributions. Despite their limited spread, CTCs demonstrated that a state school could operate outside of LA control with direct government funding. This model—publicly funded but independently governed—planted the seed for what would become the academy programme.

The late 1980s and early 1990s also saw reforms like the Local Management of Schools (LMS), which gave individual schools more control over budgets, and the introduction of league tables and national curriculum testing. These changes reflected a shift in

thinking: schools were now seen as accountable institutions whose performance could be measured and compared. Yet, schools were still structurally tied to their local authorities.

With the arrival of New Labour in 1997, the stage was set for more transformative structural reforms. Blair and his education Secretaries were determined to tackle educational inequality, particularly in inner-city areas. Although they initially maintained the existing framework, they began experimenting with school governance and intervention in underperforming schools.

Labour's approach was pragmatic. Influenced by the early outcomes of CTCs and driven by a results-focused agenda, the government adopted and adapted the CTC model. In 2000, the Learning and Skills Act introduced City Academies, which were publicly funded but independent of LA control. The term would later be simplified to "academies."

Unlike CTCs, these new academies did not require the same level of financial input from sponsors. Instead, the emphasis was on the sponsor's ability to support school leadership, governance, and ethos. Early sponsors included businesses, charities, universities, and religious organisations. The goal was to raise standards quickly by bringing in outside expertise, strong leadership, and greater autonomy.

The key concept was structural autonomy: if a school could manage its affairs free from LA bureaucracy and be supported by strong external leadership, it could drive up standards. These early academies often replaced schools placed in special measures by Ofsted and were expected to provide a complete turnaround in performance.

Although the MAT structure had not yet emerged in name, the foundation was being laid. Many sponsors began managing more than one school, creating early groupings that would evolve into MATs. This was the start of a governance shift that would see some organisations running multiple schools under a single trust.

By the time Blair left office in 2007, the idea of schools being sponsored and supported outside of LA structures had gained traction. The Labour government had not yet made academisation a system-wide reform, but the principle of academies was firmly established. The stage was set for a significant expansion of the model under the Conservatives, who would later introduce the Multi-Academy Trust framework in full.

The Blair Years.

Tony Blair's government arrived in 1997 with a bold mission to tackle social inequality through education. Blair made it clear from the outset that school reform would be a centrepiece of his premiership. His slogan "Education, Education, Education" was more than a soundbite—it was the ideological driver of New Labour's agenda.

Inheriting a mixed landscape of educational performance, Labour quickly identified inner-city schools as needing the most urgent intervention. The early years of Blair's government focused on literacy and numeracy strategies, smaller class sizes, and investment in school buildings. But structural reform would soon follow.

In 2000, the Learning and Skills Act established a new type of school: City Academies. These were state-funded but independent of local authority control, with sponsors drawn from the private and voluntary sectors. Sponsors were expected to play a significant role in governance and shaping ethos but were no longer required to make large capital investments. This made sponsorship more accessible and allowed the government to attract a broader pool of organisations, including faith groups, universities, and education charities.

Academies were initially targeted at failing secondary schools, particularly in deprived urban areas. They were designed to

replace these schools entirely, often opening in new buildings with new leadership and staff. The model emphasised high expectations, strong discipline, and innovation in teaching and learning. Academies had freedoms over curriculum (except in core subjects), staffing, school day length, and term dates. They were also allowed to employ teachers without Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

By 2005, the programme was rebranded simply as "academies" and expanded further. The government increasingly used academisation as a tool for school improvement, with Ofsted judgments often triggering academy conversion. In 2008, the National Challenge policy placed pressure on schools with low GCSE attainment to either improve quickly or face intervention—including the possibility of becoming an academy.

Despite controversy, the programme steadily grew. By 2010, there were 203 academies in England. The results were mixed. Some academies achieved significant gains in performance, especially where leadership was strong, and resources were plentiful.

However, critics pointed to high costs, variable outcomes, and concerns about democratic accountability. Unions warned that the programme risked undermining the national education system by introducing too much variation.

Yet the government maintained that academies represented a solution to entrenched underperformance. Alongside the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) initiative, which promised a new generation of school infrastructure, academies were presented as beacons of innovation and modernity.

The Blair years also saw the beginning of MAT-like structures. Although not yet formalised, many sponsors began operating multiple academies, and federations and informal partnerships began to emerge. These early multi-school arrangements showed the potential of centralised leadership, shared resources, and school-to-school support.

By the end of Labour's third term, the academy model was an accepted, though still contentious, part of the education landscape. Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, continued to back academies while promoting a more collaborative and community-focused approach. The scene was set for the Conservatives, led by David Cameron and Education Secretary Michael Gove, to take the model and scale it dramatically through the introduction of Multi-Academy Trusts in the 2010s.

The Gove Years.

The election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 marked the beginning of a new phase in the academies programme. Led by Prime Minister David Cameron and Education Secretary Michael Gove, the new government was determined to accelerate the pace of educational reform. Gove believed passionately that autonomy, competition, and accountability were the keys to raising standards in England's schools—and academisation was the primary vehicle through which he would deliver change.

The Academies Act 2010 was passed within weeks of the new government taking office. Unlike under Labour, where academies were a targeted intervention for struggling schools, Gove's reforms allowed any school rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted to convert voluntarily. These 'converter academies' joined the programme in droves: within a year, over 450 schools had converted. Gove argued that this would unleash excellence by freeing schools from local bureaucracy and empowering strong leaders.

This represented a fundamental shift. Academies were no longer a remedy for failure but a reward for success. The floodgates opened, and the number of academies rose exponentially. By 2016, over 5,000 schools had become academies, and the

majority of secondary schools in England were operating outside local authority control.

Alongside this expansion came the formalisation of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). As more schools converted, it became clear that many lacked the capacity to operate entirely independently. The MAT model allowed groups of schools to operate under a single legal and governance structure, enabling central oversight of leadership, finance, HR, and school improvement. Trusts varied greatly in size and structure—from small, local partnerships to national chains with dozens of schools.

Gove championed MATs as engines of system-wide improvement. He encouraged high-performing schools and sponsors to take over weaker schools, using a school-to-school support model. The government provided funding incentives for MAT growth, and regional schools commissioners (RSCs) were appointed to oversee academies and match sponsors with schools needing support.

However, the rapid growth of the programme raised concerns. Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw warned in 2016 that some large MATs were replicating the very failings they were meant to solve. He cited poor outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and criticised the lack of transparency and accountability.

Financial scandals—such as those involving Perry Beeches and the Education Fellowship Trust—highlighted weaknesses in oversight.

Another point of contention was forced academisation. The Education and Adoption Act 2016 introduced a legal duty for the Secretary of State to issue an academy order for any school rated 'Inadequate' by Ofsted. This fuelled resistance from local authorities, unions, and communities. The 2016 White Paper "Educational Excellence Everywhere" went further, proposing that all schools become academies by 2020. The backlash was swift, and the government was forced to drop the plan.

Despite these challenges, Gove's reforms fundamentally reshaped England's school system. By 2016, MATs were firmly established as the default governance model for new academies. The sector had grown rapidly but unevenly. Some trusts demonstrated strong leadership and positive outcomes, while others struggled with scale, geography, and governance.

Michael Gove left the Department for Education in 2014, but his legacy endured. His belief in structural reform, choice, and autonomy set the direction for the next decade. While the pace of academisation slowed slightly after his departure, the idea of a school system led by MATs remained central to government policy.

The Future.

The incoming Labour government have, for the first time in almost 30 years, applied the brakes on academisation.

One of the most immediate actions Labour has taken is the withdrawal of the academy conversion fund and the MAT expansion fund. These pots of money—worth hundreds of millions under previous Conservative administrations—were used to incentivise schools to convert to academies or for trusts to grow by absorbing more schools. Labour has halted these funds, signalling the end of what Bridget Phillipson has called the “constant structural upheaval” of the school system. Instead of paying trusts to grow, that funding will now be redirected towards school improvement and teacher development initiatives.

In parallel, the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill outlines a suite of legislative changes designed to bring consistency and accountability back to the system—particularly in academies, which have operated under more autonomous rules since their inception. Key proposals include:

- **Mandatory adherence to the National Curriculum** for all state-funded schools, including academies. Previously, academies had the flexibility to deviate from the curriculum in all but core subjects. This change aims to ensure that pupils across the country receive a consistent educational experience.

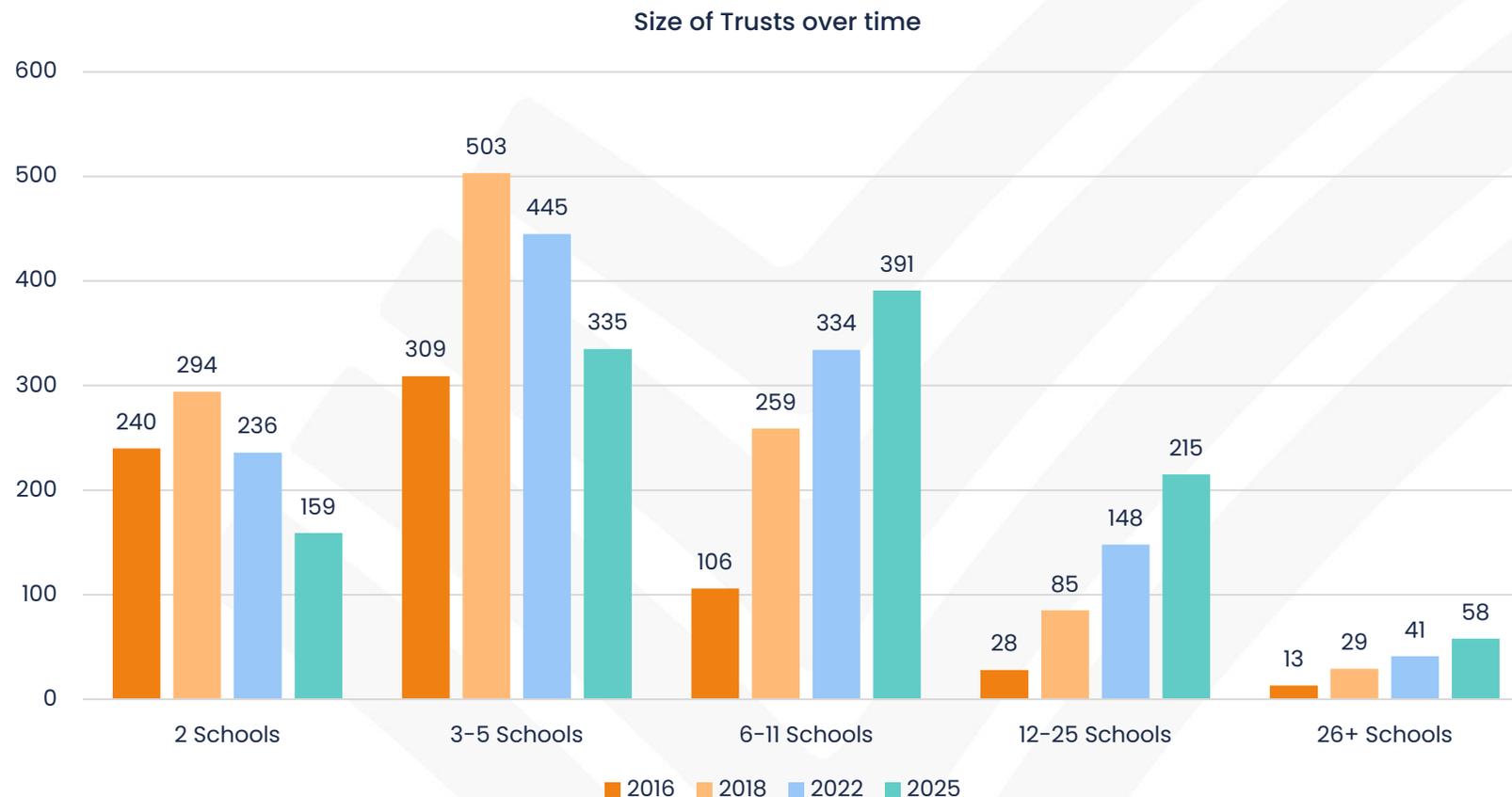
- **Restoration of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)** requirements in all schools. Academies had been allowed to hire unqualified teachers, leading to concerns over inconsistent teaching quality. The new bill mandates that all teachers must either hold or be working towards QTS, reinstating a baseline of professional standards across the board.
- **Standardised pay and conditions for teachers in academies.** Labour plans to extend national pay scales and working conditions to staff in all state-funded schools, aiming to improve retention and reduce pay disparities between schools.
- **Local authority oversight on admissions will be strengthened.** Councils will be able to challenge academies’ Published Admission Numbers (PAN), bringing them into line with maintained schools. This gives local communities a stronger voice in shaping the admissions landscape.
- **Repeal of forced academisation powers.** Under previous legislation, schools rated ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted were automatically subject to academy orders. The new bill removes this requirement, allowing the Secretary of State discretion, and giving space for improvement plans that don’t involve structural change.

Together, these reforms are designed to reduce fragmentation and shift the focus from governance models to educational quality. Labour’s approach is not to dismantle the academy system but to re-integrate it into a more coherent, transparent, and equitable national framework.

While academy leaders have raised concerns that these changes may dilute autonomy, many school leaders and teaching unions have welcomed the focus on professional standards, wellbeing, and local democratic accountability.

In short, Labour’s bill signals a turning point: the era of incentivised expansion is over. The future of education, under this new direction, is one in which structure takes a back seat—and children’s outcomes, inclusion, and wellbeing come first, and while most people agree with the objective, many are very concerned by the proposed method.

Trusts by Size.



Since the 2022 report the number of multi-academy trusts has **decreased** by 46 from 1,204 to 1,158.

The data shows **that the number of smaller MATs has decreased** since the last report.

The number of 2 school MATs has decreased 32.6% to 159. The number of 3-5 school MATs has decreased 24.7% to 335.

By contrast **MATs which have 6-11 schools, 12-25 schools or 26+ schools have all increased** in number when compared to 2022.

-6-11 schools +17.1% to 391 MATs
-12-25 schools +45.3% to 215 MATs
-26+ schools +41.5% to 58 MATs

Trusts by Number of Pupils.

The largest MAT currently educates over 65,000 pupils.

Around 70% of multi-academy trusts have a total pupil roll between 1,501 and 10,000 pupils.

At the smaller end of the spectrum, eight trusts operate with fewer than 100 pupils, highlighting the existence of some very small-scale providers.

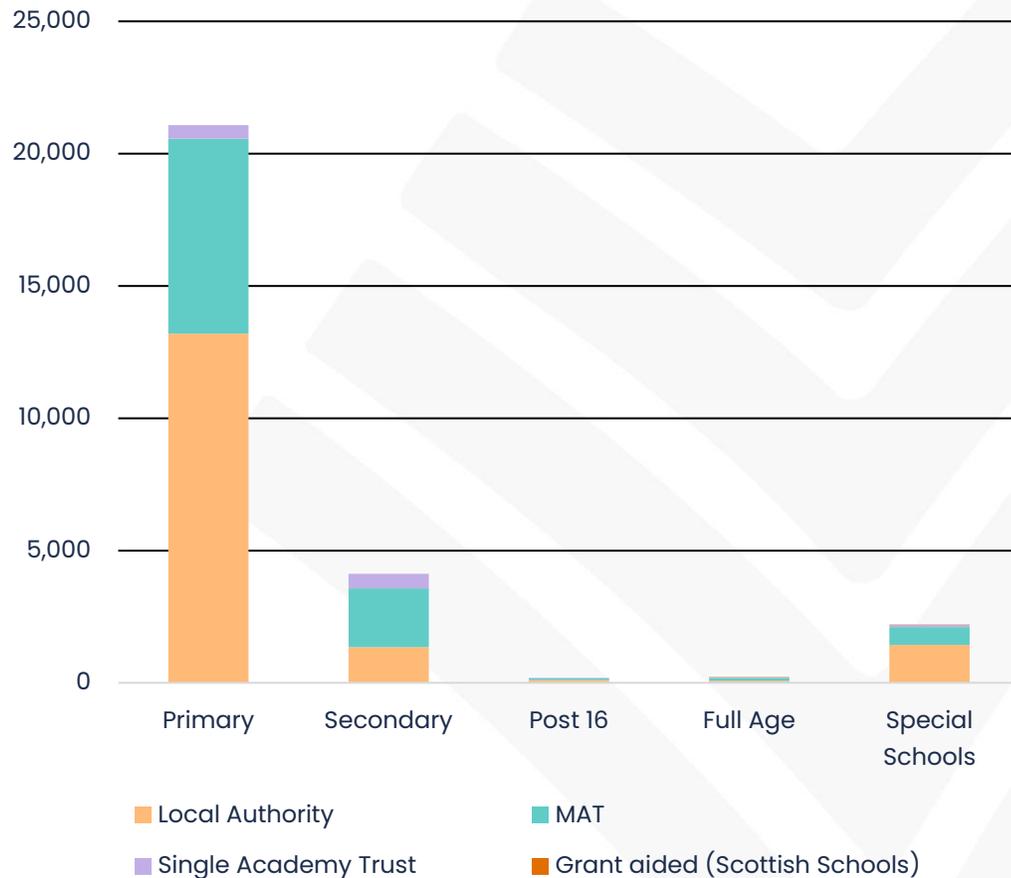
Conversely, at the upper end, ten trusts each educate more than 25,000 pupils showing just how big some MATs have become.

MATs by total pupil roll

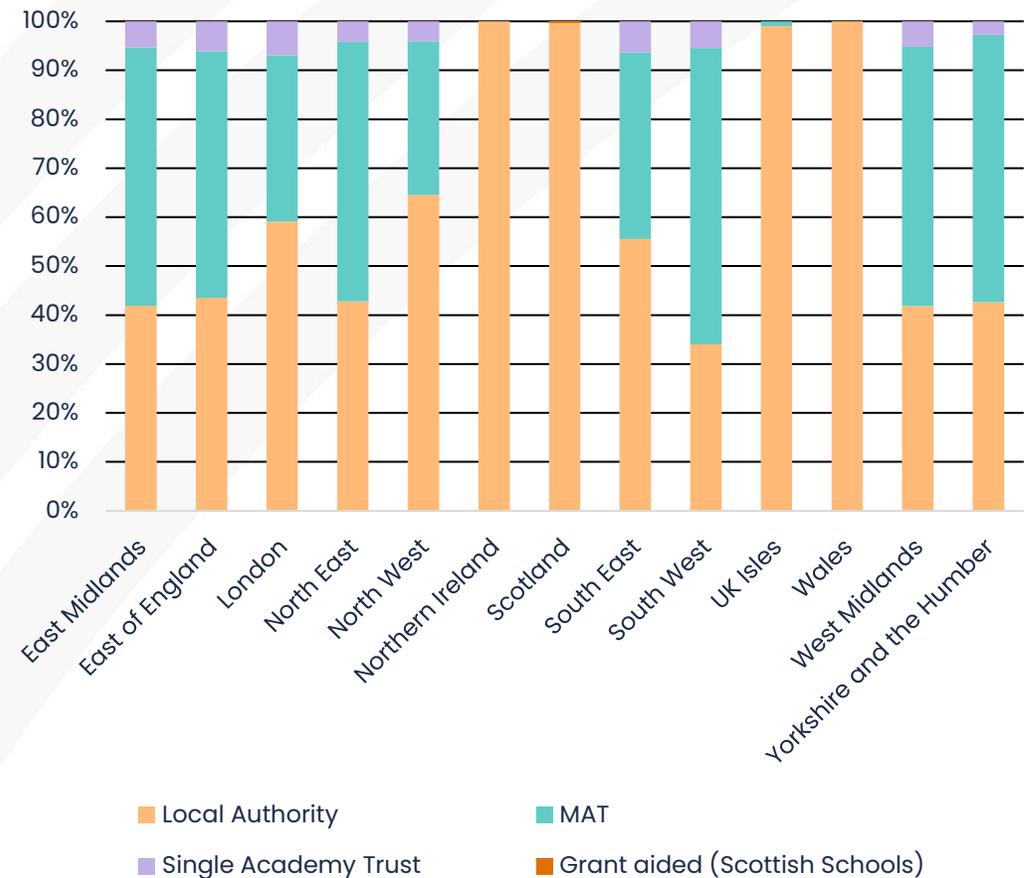


How many schools have become academies?

Schools in trusts by sector

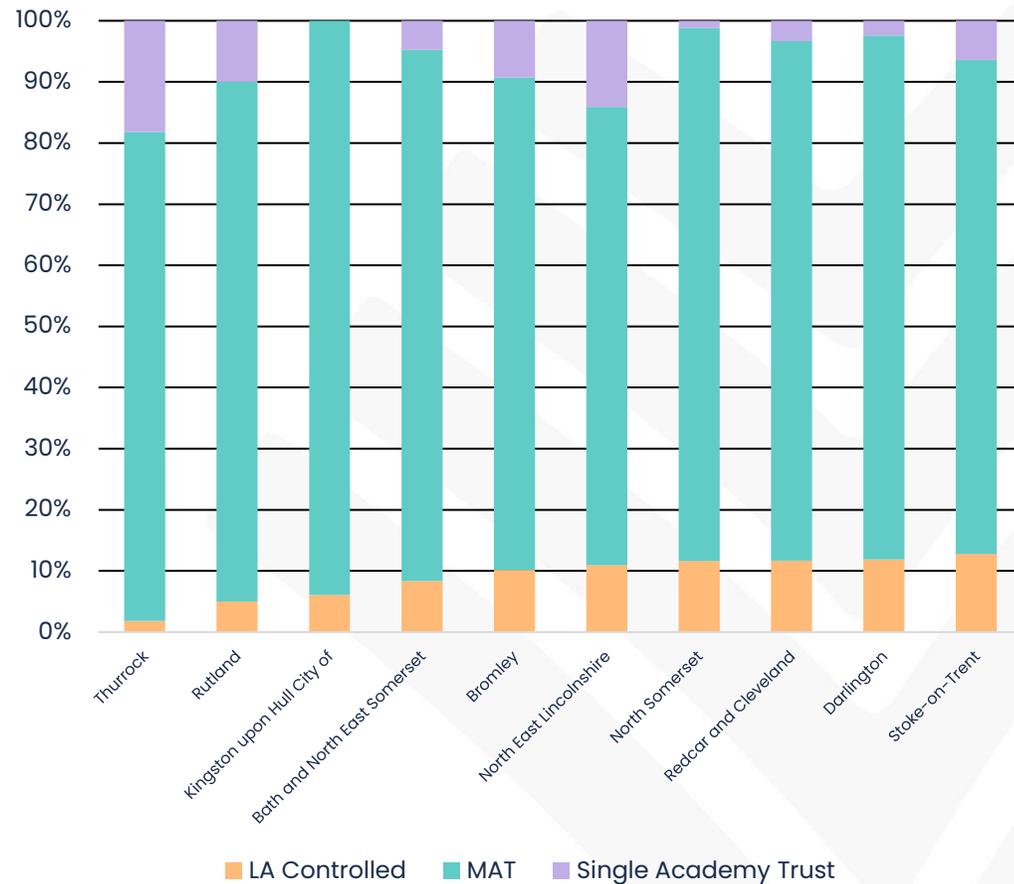


% of school in trusts by region

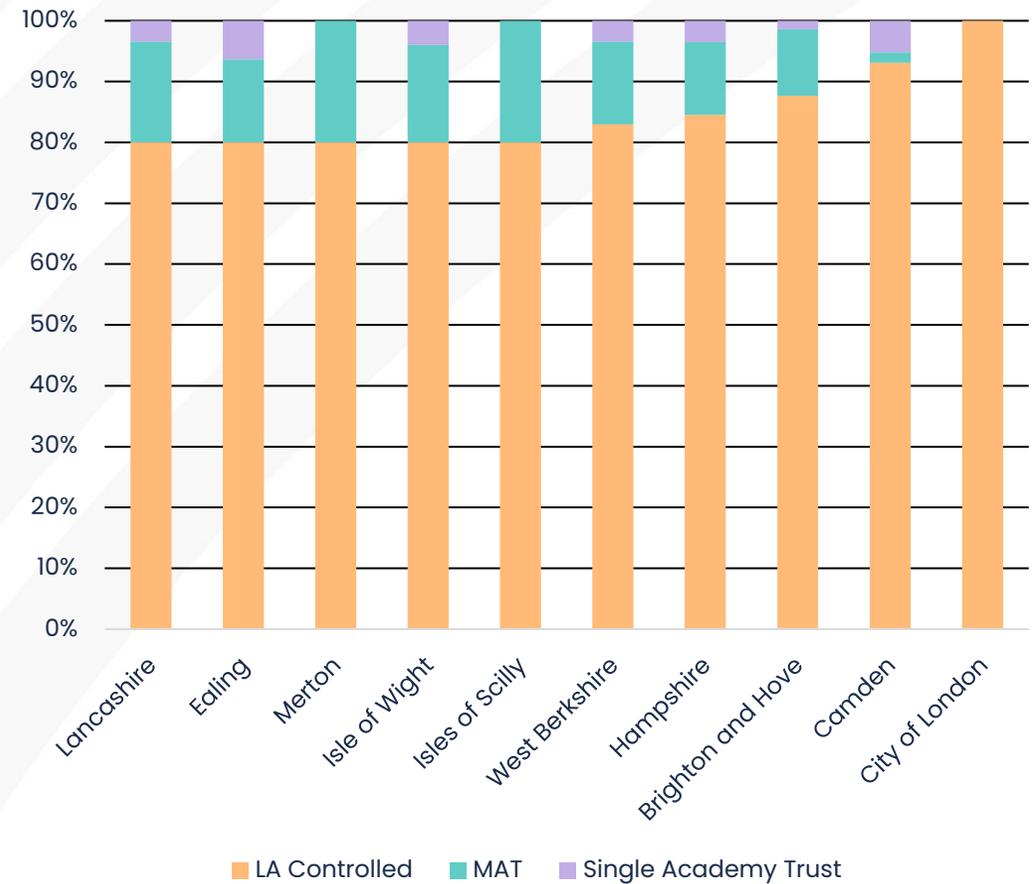


Local authority variations.

Local authorities with the **highest** % of academies

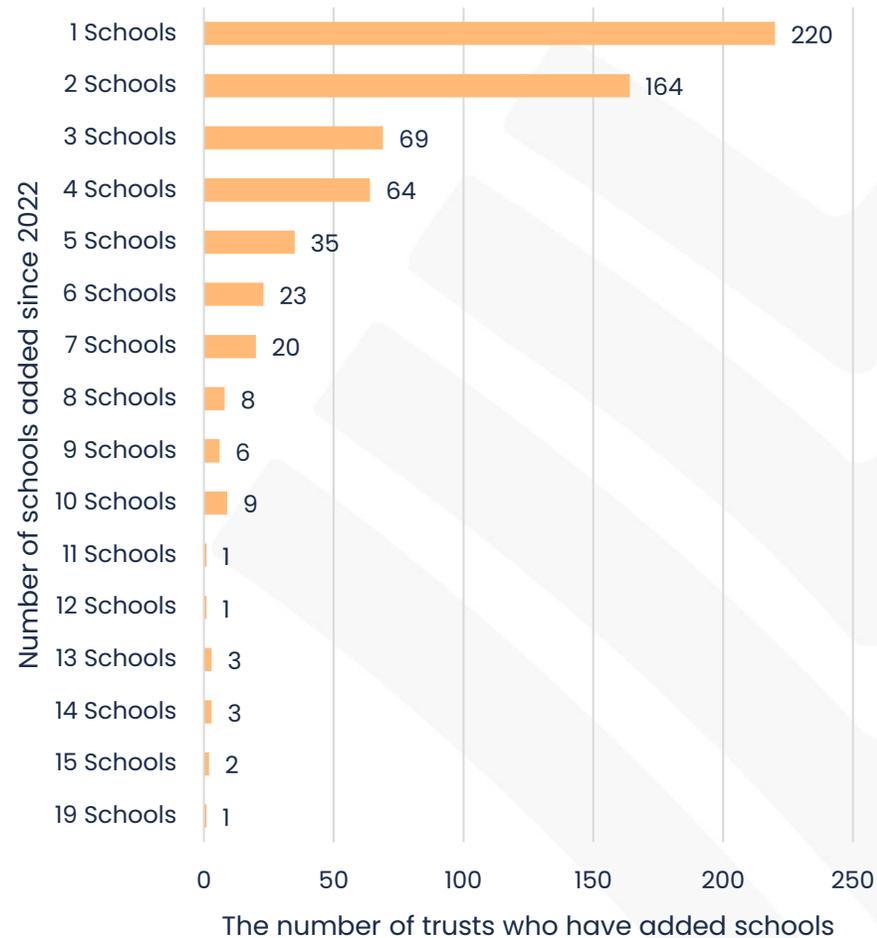


Local authorities with the **lowest** % of academies

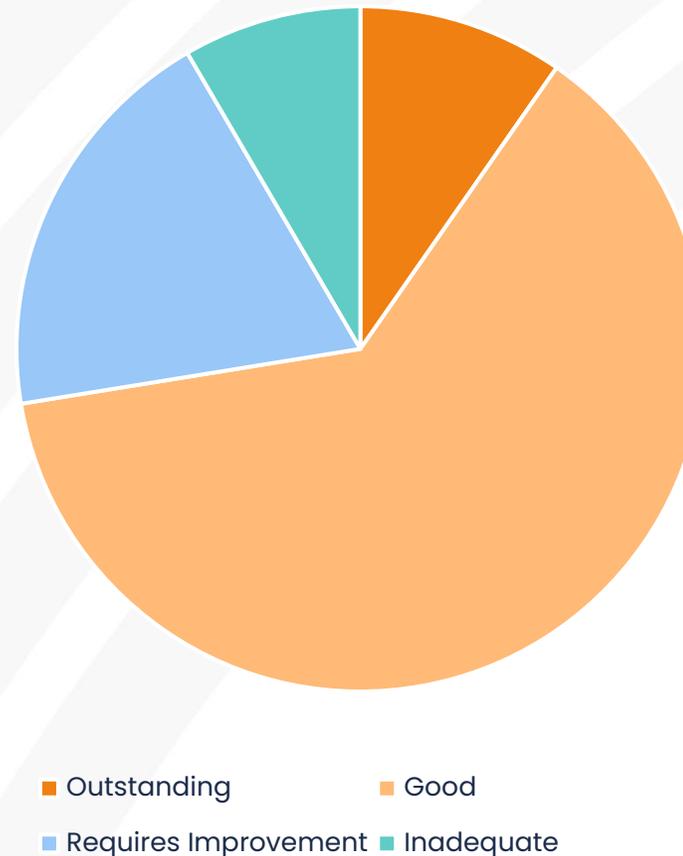


Trust Growth.

How much have Trusts grown in the last 3 years?



Ofsted Rating of Academies joining trusts in the last 3 years*



Since September 2022, approx. 1,800 schools have joined a new multi-academy trust.

Some of these additions are schools opting to join a MAT whilst others come from the merging of existing multi-academy trusts.

Just 6.6% of MATs have acquired six or more schools since the start of the 2022/23 academic year.

*Ofsted Rating taken at the point the school joined the MAT.

Part 2: Joining a Trust.

Why we did. Why we didn't. What we found.

Why did you join a Trust?

The following section explores the motivations behind a schools' decisions to join a Multi-Academy Trusts and assesses how these decisions have subsequently impacted those schools.

Drawing insights from the BESA multi-academy trust 2025 survey, the analysis identifies several key reasons schools opt to become part of MATs. Chief among these are enhanced financial stability, access to shared expertise and resources, improved professional development opportunities, and the promise of stronger governance and leadership.

Additionally, reduced administrative burdens, improved student outcomes, and support for struggling schools were significant motivating factors.

Schools reported that the diminishing capability and effectiveness of local authorities were influential in their decision-making processes. Specific concerns included inadequate financial support, insufficient school improvement provision, and limitations placed upon schools' autonomy by local authorities.

The overarching sentiment indicated that local authorities had lost substantial ground to academisation, prompting schools to seek more reliable and innovative support through MATs.

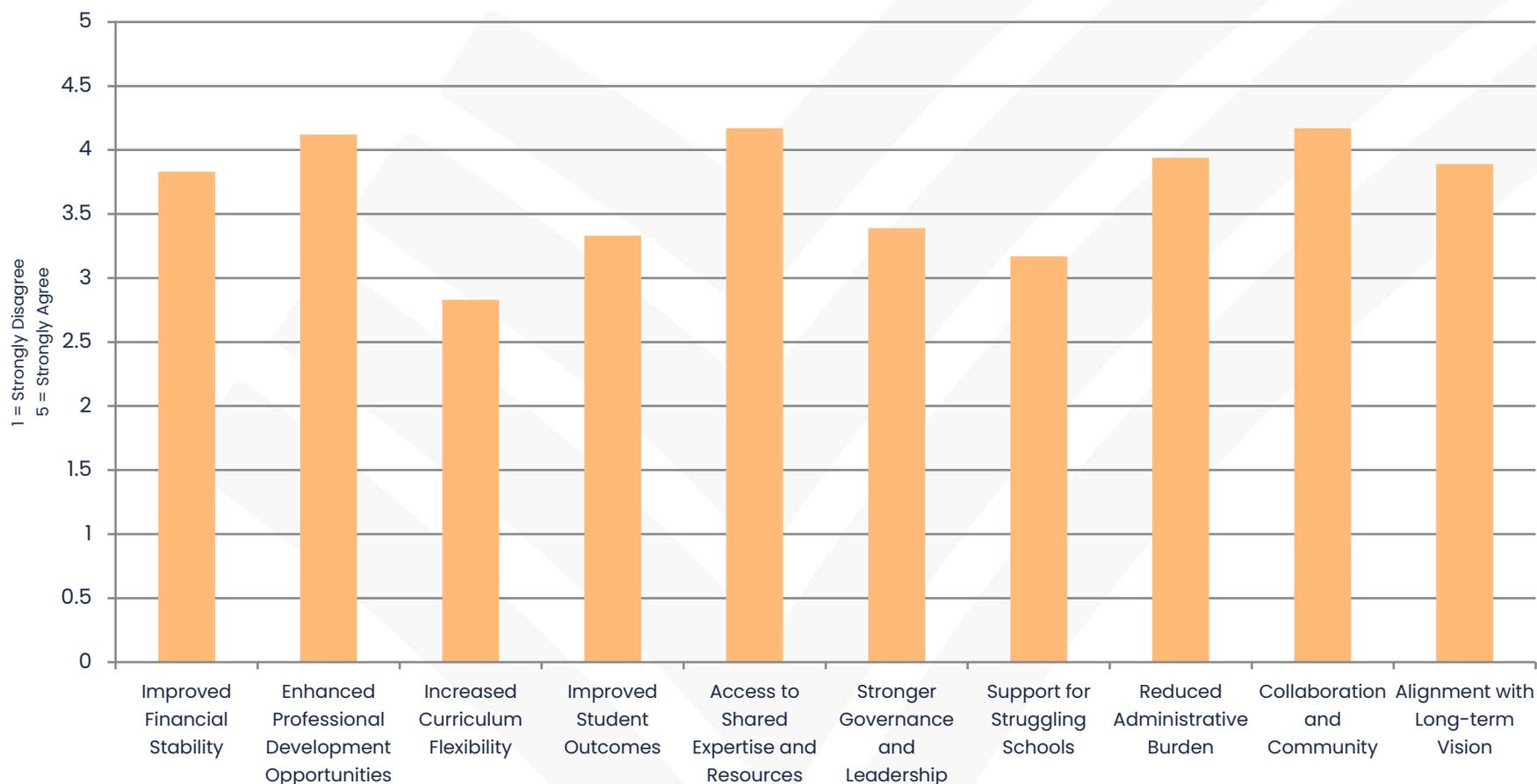
Reflecting on their experiences post-academisation, school leaders predominantly reported positive outcomes. Trust membership generally provided significant advantages, such as better collaboration between schools, increased professional networking, access to shared best practices, and greater financial efficiency through collective procurement and centralised services. MATs also offered clearer career progression pathways and enhanced continuous professional development, which improved staff morale and retention.

However, some concerns emerged around the potential downsides of joining a trust. Notably, some schools highlighted the reduction in autonomy, potential cultural misalignment, and a perceived threat to individual school identity and local community responsiveness.

Despite these challenges, the consensus among surveyed schools suggested that, overall, joining a MAT had met or exceeded their expectations, delivering substantial educational, operational, and financial benefits.

Why did you join a Trust?

Please indicate your agreement with the reasons behind your decision to seek membership of a multi-academy trust?

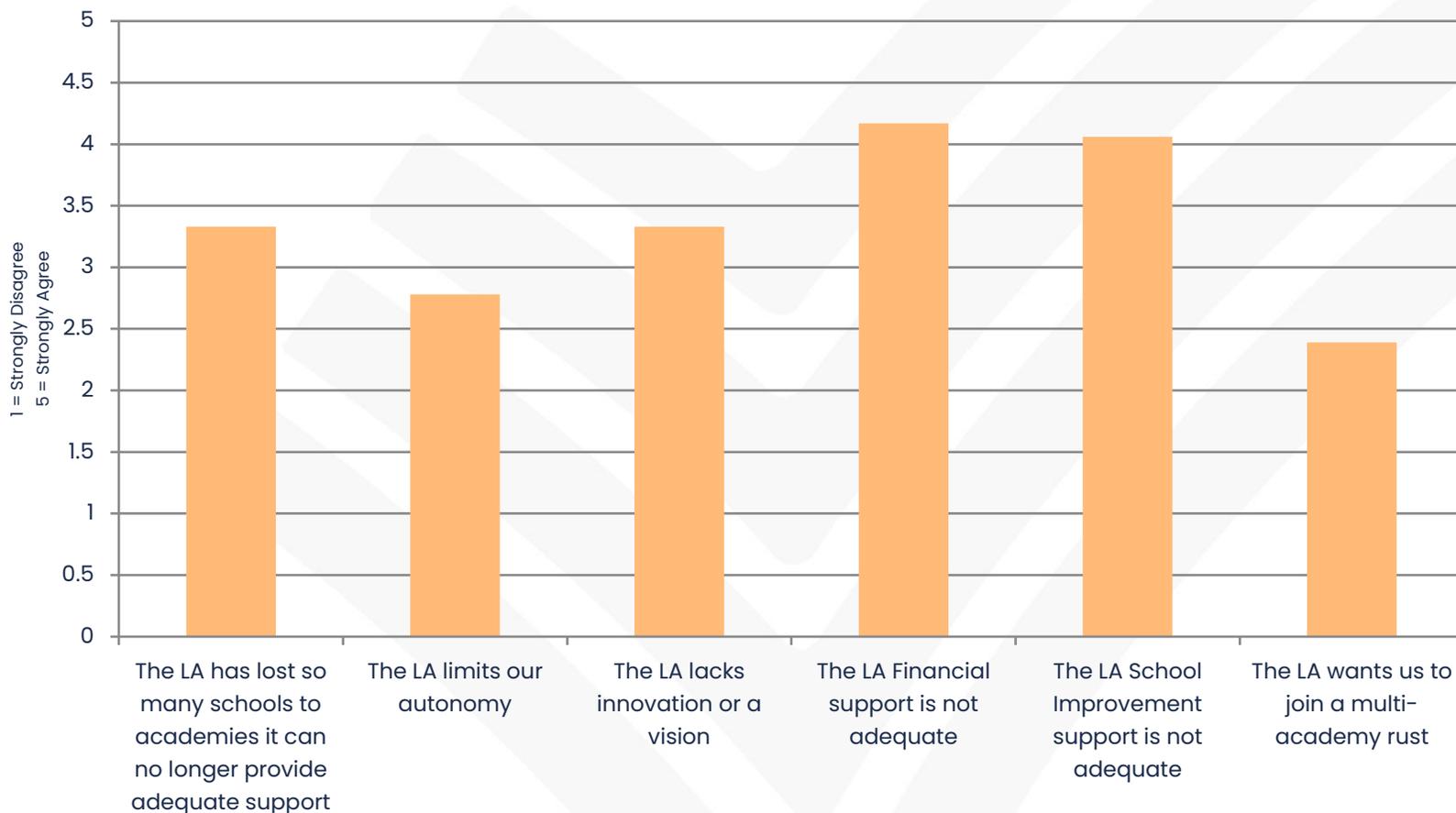


Key motivations for schools joining MATs include improved **financial stability**, **enhanced professional development opportunities**, and **stronger governance**.

Schools particularly value the **access to shared resources and expertise**, alongside significant **reductions in administrative burdens**, allowing leaders to better **focus on strategic educational priorities** and pupil outcomes.

Why did you join a Trust?

Thinking about your local authority, please indicate your agreement with the statements below in the context of your decision to join a Trust.



A key driver for joining MATs was **dissatisfaction with local authority support**, including inadequate financial backing, insufficient innovation, and poor school improvement services.

Additionally, **restrictions on autonomy** imposed by local authorities motivated many schools to seek trust membership, aiming for more **effective and customised support** to meet their specific needs.

Positives from joining your trust?

- 1 My trust has created **strong opportunities for collaboration and professional networking between schools**, which means that staff feel supported and can easily access expertise and best practices from colleagues.
- 2 My trust has **provided valuable access to shared resources, expertise, and best practices**, which means that teaching and learning are enhanced, and individual school burdens are significantly reduced.
- 3 My trust has **significantly increased opportunities for staff professional development (CPD) and clear career progression pathways**, which means that teachers and leaders feel valued and are motivated to remain within the trust.
- 4 My trust has delivered **financial stability and cost efficiencies** through collective procurement and centralised services, which means that schools benefit from economies of scale, greater financial security, and more sustainable budgets.
- 5 My trust has **reduced administrative and operational workload** by offering enhanced centralised support, including HR, estates management, and compliance, which means senior leaders can focus on attention on strategic leadership, teaching, and learning.
- 6 My trust has fostered a **shared vision and strategic alignment**, which means that **individual schools can innovate**, specialise, and respond more effectively to the needs and priorities of their local communities.

Negatives from joining your trust?

- 1 My trust has **reduced school autonomy** and **imposed a one-size-fits-all approach**, which means that individual school identities, creativity, and the ability to meet unique community needs have been significantly compromised.
- 2 My trust has a **top-heavy leadership structure** with highly paid executives and CEOs, which means that funding is diverted from classrooms, leading to fewer resources, less support staff, and reduced capacity to directly support pupils.
- 3 My trust has **increased administrative burdens and workloads for school leaders**, which means that headteachers and senior staff are often overloaded and distracted from focusing on teaching, learning, and pupil wellbeing.
- 4 My trust has **prioritised business-like operations and financial considerations over educational priorities**, which means decisions can be driven by profit motives rather than what's genuinely best for pupils, families, and staff.
- 5 My trust has created **uncertainty around job security and employment terms**, which means staff morale, motivation, and wellbeing are negatively impacted by concerns about changes to contracts, working conditions, and lack of union recognition.
- 6 My trust has **limited responsiveness to local contexts and school-specific needs**, which means curriculum decisions, teaching approaches, and resource allocations are often misaligned with what individual schools truly require.

Why haven't you joined a Trust?

This section of the report delves into the reasons why some schools have deliberately chosen not to join Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), highlighting the concerns and reservations expressed by school leaders.

Drawing from the BESA local authority schools survey completed by over 275 maintained schools, several key factors emerge prominently.

Foremost among these is the strong desire to maintain school autonomy and preserve the distinct cultural identity of individual schools. Many leaders voiced concerns about potential cultural misalignment with a trust's overarching policies, fearing that joining a MAT could significantly compromise their school's unique character and its responsiveness to specific community needs.

Additionally, stakeholders, including teaching staff and parents, often showed significant resistance towards academisation in principle.

Many respondents indicated a high degree of satisfaction with their existing relationships with local authorities, reflecting contentment with the current support mechanisms and scepticism about the perceived advantages of joining a MAT.

There was also considerable anxiety about reduced local community focus, with leaders worried that trust management structures might diminish schools' abilities to effectively engage with and respond to localised challenges.

Other practical concerns cited include uncertainty surrounding trust performance, fears of becoming a 'small fish in a big pond', and potential adverse impacts on staff morale and job security. Some schools reported unsuccessful attempts to engage with MATs due to financial constraints or performance metrics, leaving them in a state of uncertainty regarding the academisation process.

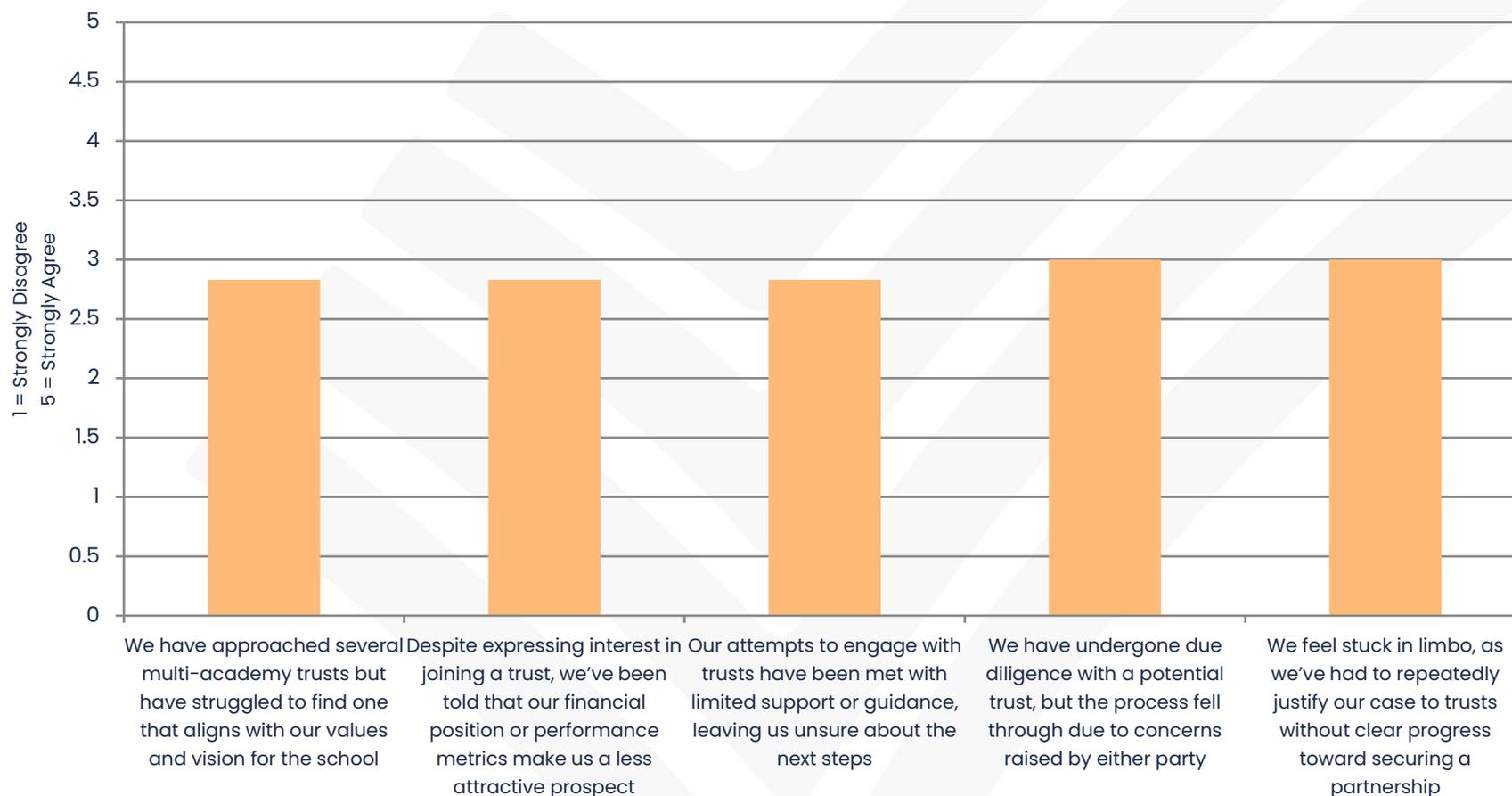
Despite these reservations, there remains notable interest among schools in realising the benefits

typically associated with MAT membership through alternative collaborative models without full academisation.

The findings underscore the need for nuanced and flexible approaches that respect individual school contexts and priorities.

Why are you not in a Trust?

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about the process of joining a multi-academy trust.

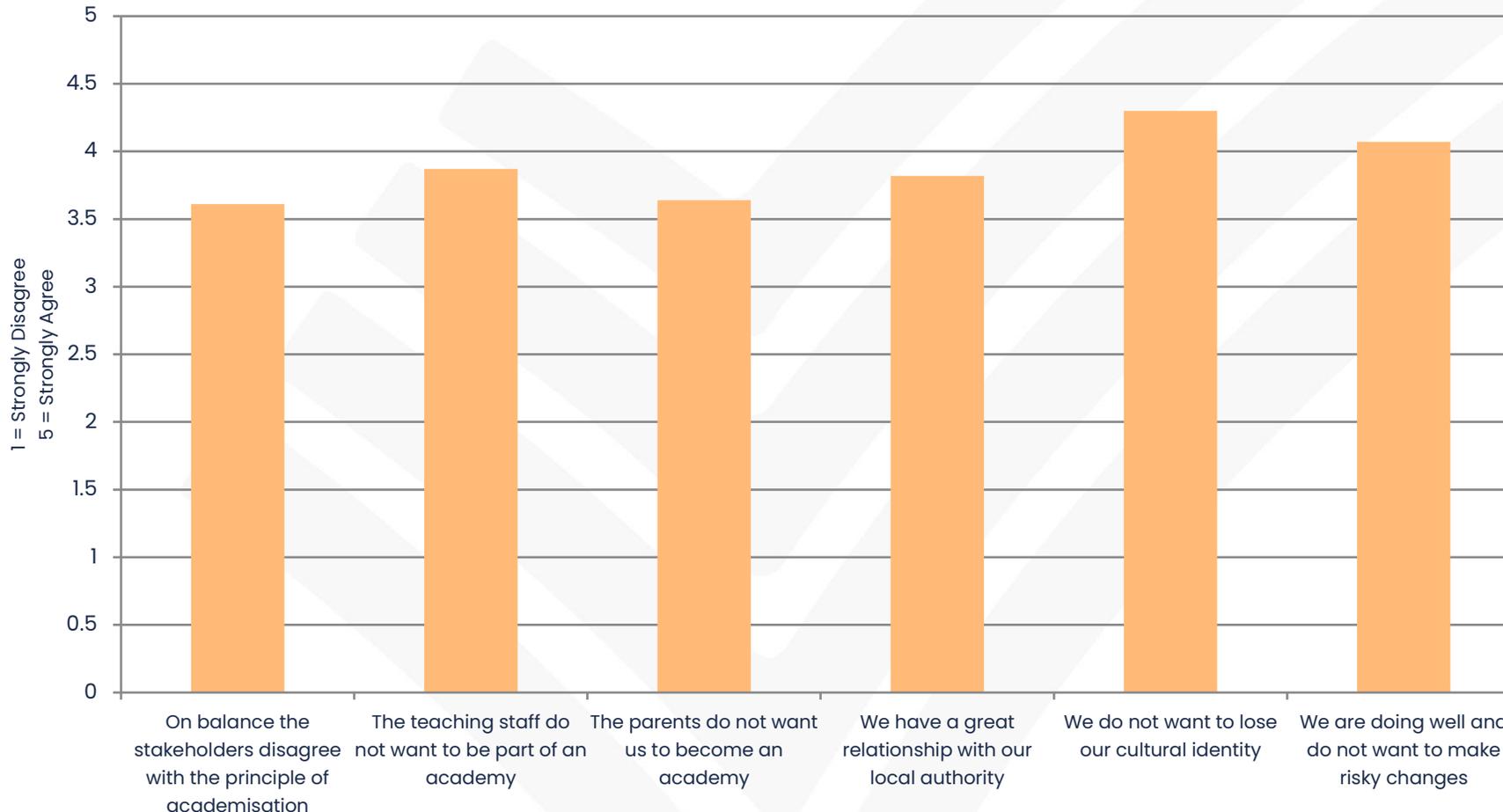


Many schools chose not to join MATs due to **strong stakeholder resistance**, particularly among staff and parents, who generally opposed academisation.

Leaders also expressed **satisfaction with existing local authority** relationships, preferring to maintain their autonomy, protect their cultural identity, and continue effectively addressing specific local community priorities without external interference.

Why are you not in a Trust?

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements



Schools expressed significant concerns about joining MATs, highlighting **fears over losing autonomy, cultural misalignment, and negative impacts on staff morale.**

Leaders worried about **reduced local responsiveness, uncertainty regarding trust performance, and becoming marginalised within larger organisational structures,** leading them to favour maintaining independence and existing relationships with local authorities.

Why are you not in a Trust?

Please indicate your agreement with the following concerns about joining a multi-academy trust.

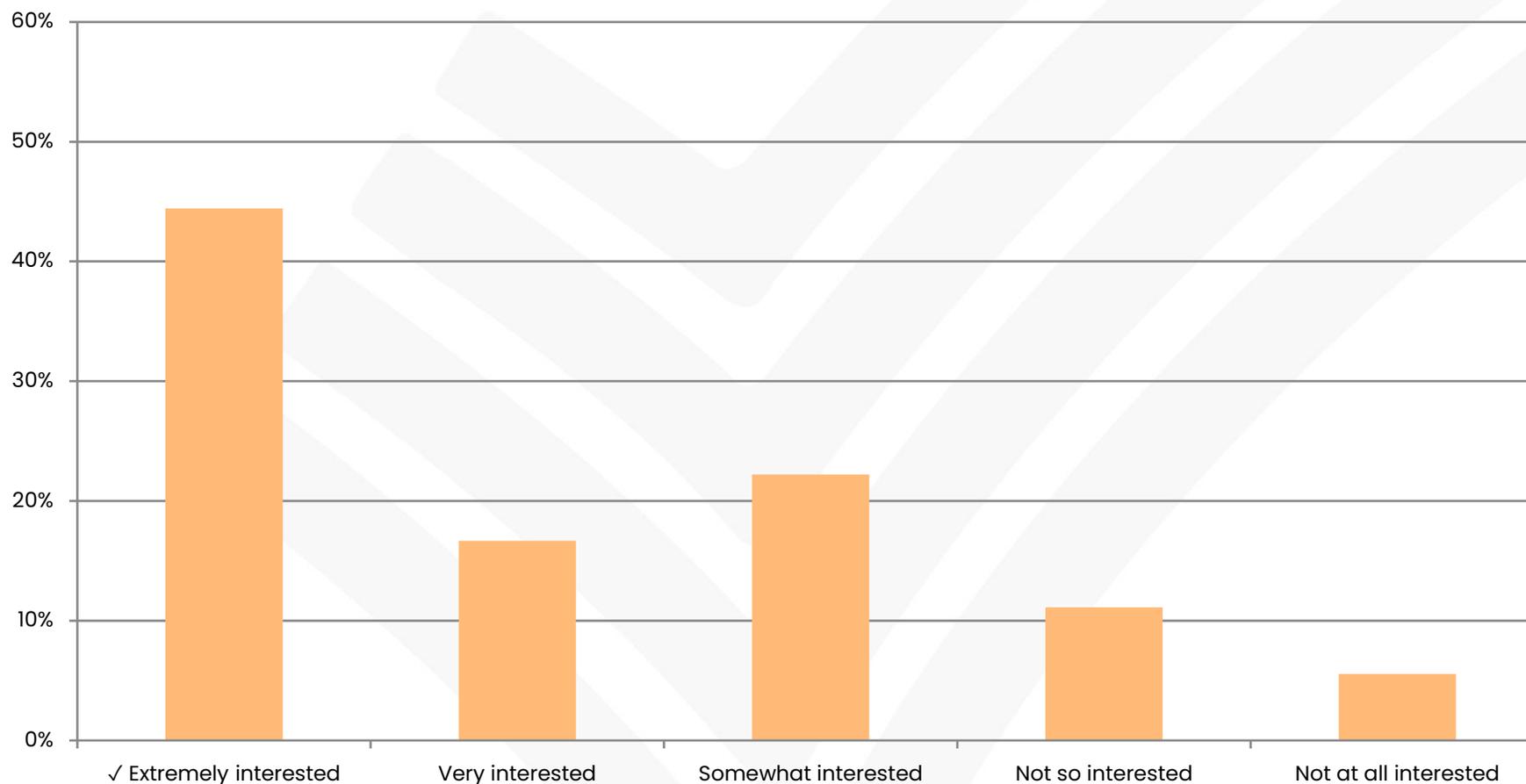


Some schools interested in joining MATs encountered practical barriers, including challenges in aligning with a **trust's values, financial constraints, or performance metrics.**

Others reported difficulties in receiving sufficient guidance or support during the joining process, often feeling stuck in prolonged negotiations or unclear discussions, ultimately deterring them from pursuing academisation.

Why are you not in a Trust?

If you could get the benefits of joining a Trust **without** academisation but instead through collaboration with other Local Authority schools, how interested would you be in doing so?



Many schools indicated interest in achieving the collaborative benefits typical of MAT membership without full academisation.

Schools expressed **openness to alternative partnership models** with other local authority schools, aiming to realise advantages like **shared resources** and expertise, collaborative **professional development**, and reduced **administrative burdens** while retaining their independence and autonomy.

Part 3: Financial Operations.

Financial and centralised purchasing.

NOTE: The following report uses insights taken from the **2024 National School Trust Report by CST** and the **2025 Kreston UK Academies Benchmark Report**

How are Trusts funded?

Academies are funded directly by the Department for Education (DfE) via the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), bypassing local authorities. The main source of income for academies within a MAT is the General Annual Grant (GAG), which is allocated based on a national funding formula and includes both core per-pupil funding and additional funding for factors like deprivation, low prior attainment, and area costs.

In contrast to LA-maintained schools, academies receive additional funding called the Education Services Grant (ESG) (now largely rolled into the National Funding Formula), which compensates for services they would have received from the LA, such as HR, payroll, and school improvement support.

MATs typically fund their central operations by top-slicing a percentage of each school's GAG funding—usually between 3% and 6%. This “central charge” pays for shared services such as finance, IT, governance, legal support, school improvement, and senior executive salaries. In some trusts, this is a flat rate; in others, it's a variable contribution model, where schools that require more support contribute more.

This differs from LA-maintained schools, which historically paid around 8–12% of their budgets to the local authority in the form of central services contributions. These covered broadly similar services, but LAs also provided statutory duties, like safeguarding oversight and SEN coordination, which MATs now manage internally or commission externally.

In addition to GAG funding, MATs can also receive capital funding, pupil premium, post-16 funding, and special needs funding depending on the provision they offer. Larger MATs (typically with more than five schools and over 3,000 pupils) also access the School Condition Allocation to manage estates and building maintenance—funding that is centrally managed by the DfE for smaller trusts and maintained schools.

Trusts' financial reserves have significantly declined, with 30% now below the critical threshold of 5% of total income. Primary SATs, in particular, face heightened financial vulnerability, with more than half operating at a deficit. Even larger MATs have seen reserves shrink to around 8%, down from previous years.

To address declining reserves, trusts are increasingly centralising budgets, implementing cost reductions, and exploring new income streams. Yet, without structural funding reforms, financial instability will persist, particularly threatening smaller trusts.

GAG Pooling.

General Annual Grant (GAG) pooling is a financial strategy used by Trusts to consolidate funding from individual schools and distribute it based on trust-wide priorities. This approach allows trusts to allocate resources efficiently, ensuring financial sustainability and strategic investment.

Trends in GAG Pooling

The adoption of GAG pooling is on the rise. Last year, according to the 2024 CST report, 21% of trusts actively pooled their GAG and 9% planned to, compared to 37% of MATs (20+ schools) already pooling funds and an additional 28% considering implementing a pooling strategy according to the 2025 Kreston report. This trend reflects a shift toward greater financial centralisation within trusts.

- Large MATs (20+ schools) are more likely to pool their GAG, with over 40% engaging in pooling, compared to fewer than 20% of small and medium-sized trusts.
- Fully centralised trusts (accounting for 79% of MATs) are significantly more likely to pool their funds.

Benefits of GAG Pooling

There are several advantages of GAG pooling:

- Greater financial flexibility: Pooling allows trusts to allocate funding based on need, rather than school-by-school formulas, ensuring that struggling schools receive adequate support.
- Improved economies of scale: Large MATs benefit from bulk procurement, centralised services, and better financial planning, leading to more efficient use of funds.
- Strategic investment in school improvement: MATs that pool funds can invest in trust-wide initiatives such as curriculum development, teacher training, and estate improvements.
- Mitigation of financial risk: Schools experiencing declining enrolment or financial instability can be supported through pooled reserves, reducing the risk of individual school deficits.

Challenges and Resistance to GAG Pooling

Despite its benefits, GAG pooling presents several challenges:

- School autonomy concerns: Many schools resist pooling due to fears of losing control over their budgets.
- Administrative complexity: Managing pooled budgets requires robust financial oversight.
- Trust and communication issues: Schools within MATs may lack confidence in the central team's ability to allocate resources equitably.

Outlook for GAG Pooling

With increasing financial pressures, GAG pooling is expected to grow in popularity. Key drivers include:

- Further centralisation of MATs, with a push toward fully integrated financial models.
- Government policy changes, which may encourage pooling as a mechanism for financial sustainability.

MAT expansion, as trusts with multiple schools find it more efficient to manage funding collectively.

Financial sustainability.

Financial sustainability, for many Trusts is now a top priority, possibly even surpassing educational quality concerns. Rising staff costs, inflation, volatile energy prices, and growing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) demands are driving financial problems for almost every school in Britain. Recent reports consistently highlight a widening gap between funding and costs, leading many trusts into financial distress.

According to the 2024 National School Trust Report by CST, over 80% of trust leaders identify financial sustainability as their main strategic challenge, particularly due to uncertain government funding policies and budgeting constraints.

Similarly, the 2025 Kreston UK Academies Benchmark Report confirms ongoing financial deterioration, noting a rise in academies facing in-year deficits. While larger MATs exhibit some resilience, smaller MATs and Single Academy Trusts (SATs), especially primary SATs, have experienced sustained financial deficits for several years.

Staffing costs remain a significant concern, despite temporary relief from government-funded teacher pay increases. Additionally, increasing SEND service demands have become financially unsustainable due to inadequate funding.

To mitigate pressures, MATs have adopted strategies including:

- **Centralisation:** 81% of trusts centralise services like finance, HR, procurement, and IT.
- **Pooling General Annual Grant (GAG) Funding:** 37% now pool resources centrally to enhance equitable distribution.
- **Cost Reduction Initiatives:** Reducing non-essential expenditures, renegotiating supplier contracts, and implementing shared management practices.
- **Diversifying Income:** Generating additional revenue through fundraising, facility lettings, and local business partnerships.

Despite these actions, MAT leaders stress the need for long-term funding reforms from the government. Short-term fixes alone are insufficient for achieving stable financial planning and sustaining high-quality education.

Budget and Reserves Pressure

Budgetary constraints severely impact trusts' strategic planning, with over 85% of CEOs reporting limitations in investments such as staff recruitment, school improvements, and estate maintenance. Financial uncertainty is exacerbated by delayed government decisions on funding, inflation, and rising operational costs.

Trusts' financial reserves have significantly declined, with 30% now below the critical threshold of 5% of total income. Primary SATs, in particular, face heightened financial vulnerability, with more than half operating at a deficit. Even larger MATs have seen reserves shrink to around 8%, down from previous years.

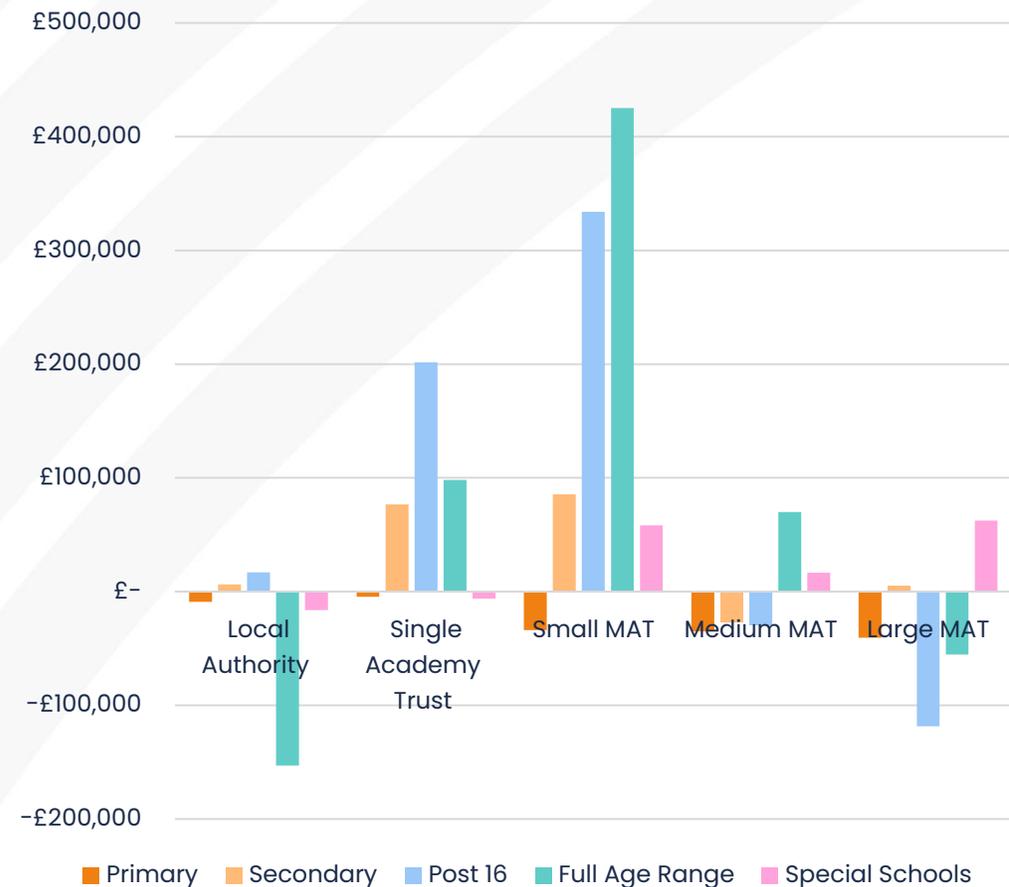
To address declining reserves, trusts are increasingly centralising budgets, implementing cost reductions, and exploring new income streams. Yet, without structural funding reforms, financial instability will persist, particularly threatening smaller trusts.

The numbers.

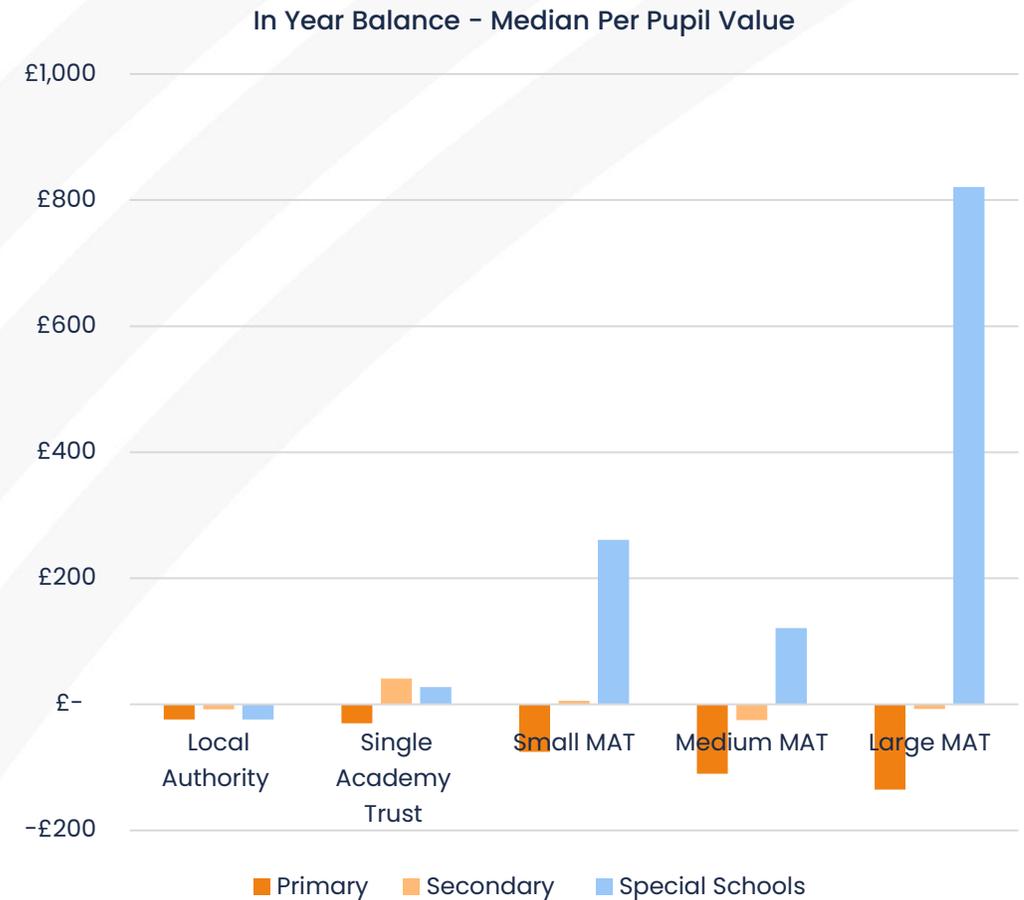
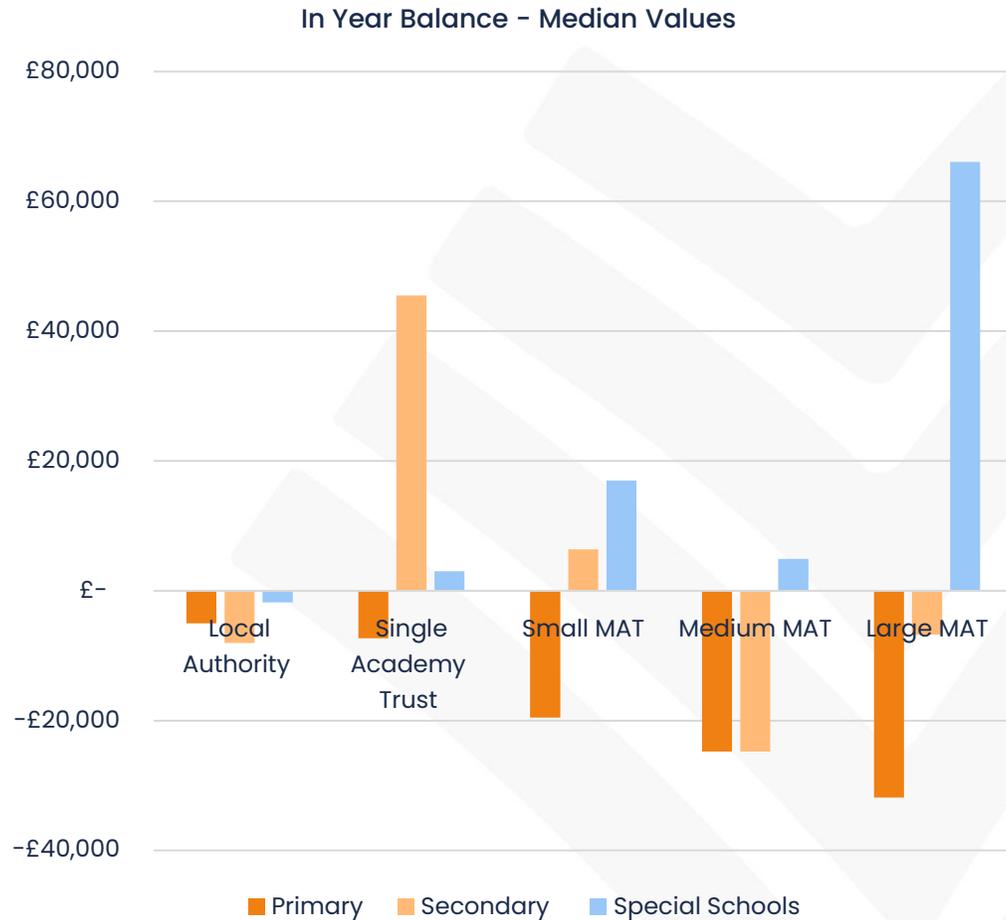
Average Cash Reserve by Funding Method and Org Group



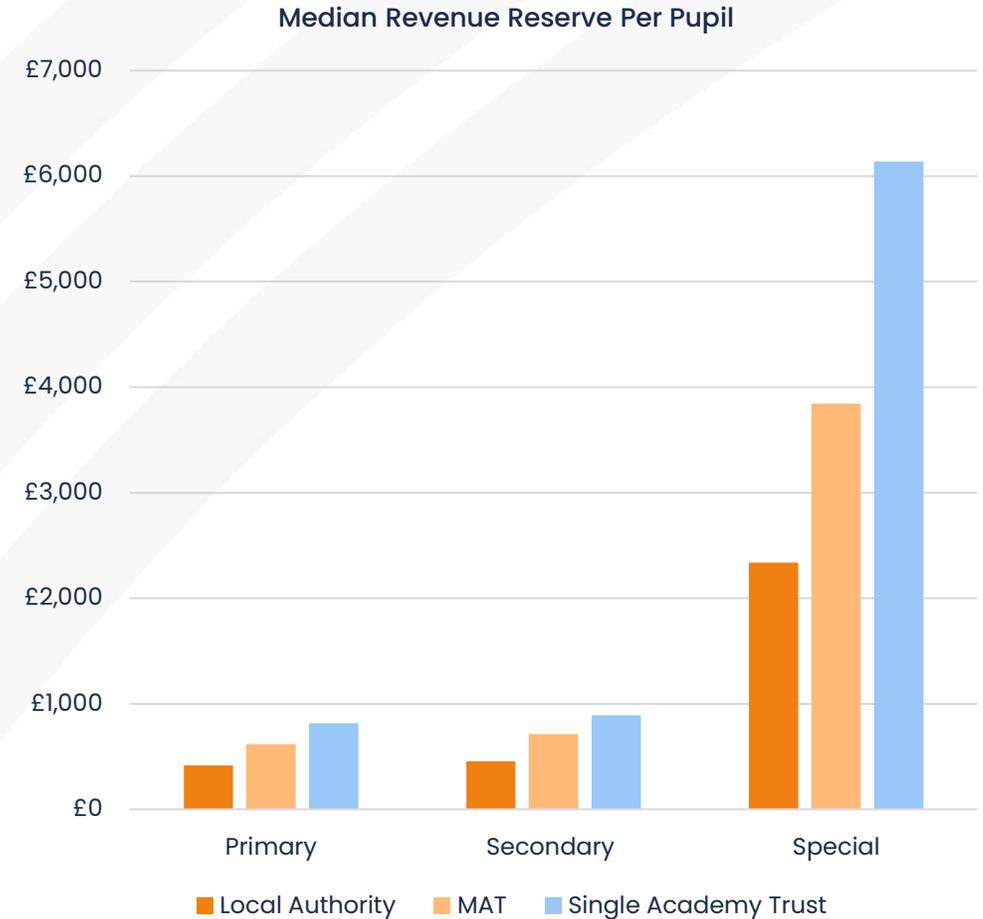
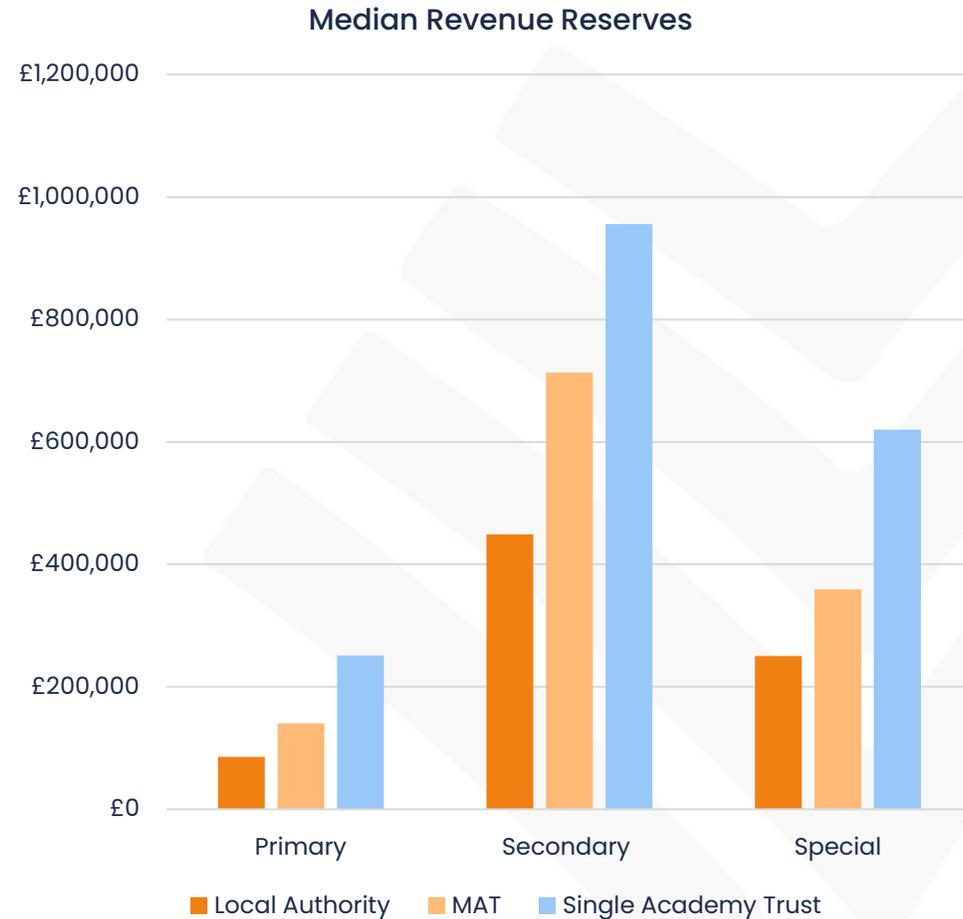
Average in-year balance by Funding Method and Org Group



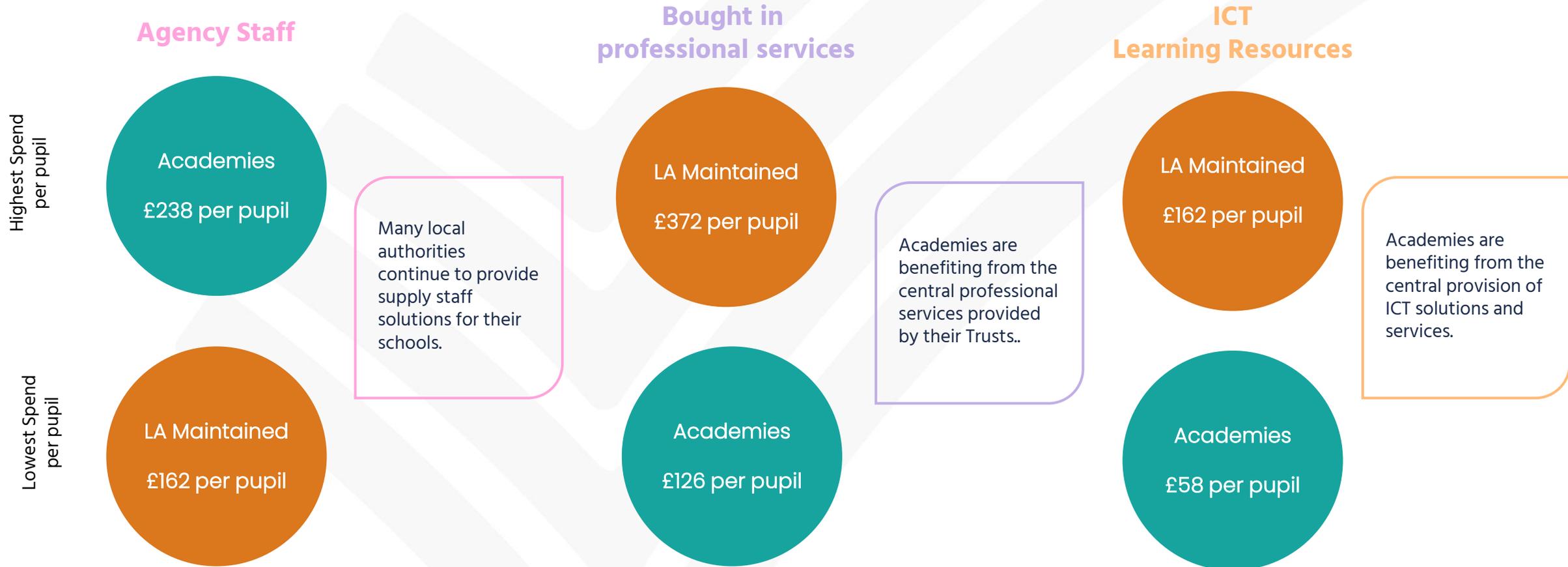
The numbers.



The numbers.



Spending differences : Academies vs LA schools.



Centralisation challenges.

The 2025 Kreston report reveals that 81% of MATs are now centralising most, if not all their back-office functions, compared to just 61% a year ago. This shift demonstrates a sector-wide recognition that centralised services can drive efficiency and cost savings, particularly in finance, HR, IT, estates management, and procurement.

Larger MATs (with more than 7,500 pupils) are leading the growth, centralising finance, governance, IT, and curriculum development. Medium-sized trusts (3,000–7,500 pupils) are also moving in this direction, while smaller MATs and Single Academy Trusts (SATs) remain more decentralised due to concerns over local autonomy.

Challenges and Resistance to Centralisation

Despite the self-evident financial advantages of centralisation, not all trusts have embraced it fully. Many smaller MATs and SATs are reluctant to surrender local autonomy, particularly in areas such as budgeting and curriculum design.

Some school leaders feel centralisation reduces flexibility, making it harder to respond to the unique needs of individual schools. Additionally, trust leaders worry that top-down decision-making could disconnect school leaders from trust executives, potentially affecting morale and engagement.

Another challenge is the cost of transitioning to a centralised model. Trusts must invest in new systems, staff training, and technology infrastructure, which can be expensive, especially for smaller MATs.

In terms of future trends, despite some resistance, the trend toward centralisation is expected to continue, particularly as financial pressures grow. The 2025 Kreston report notes that more trusts are exploring pooled General Annual Grant (GAG) funding, allowing MATs to allocate resources

based on strategic priorities rather than individual school budgets.

Additionally, trusts are increasingly using digital platforms and automation to enhance efficiency, particularly in finance and HR. Many are adopting cloud-based Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems to manage budgets, payroll, and procurement centrally.

In summary, the move toward centralised operating models is accelerating, particularly among larger MATs seeking greater financial control and operational efficiency. While some trusts remain cautious about centralisation due to concerns over autonomy, financial pressures are likely to drive further adoption of centralised finance, HR, and procurement models. Moving forward, trusts will need to balance efficiency gains with maintaining local school identity and responsiveness to individual school needs.

Centralised purchasing.

The following section of the report examines the growing trend among Trusts to centrally procure services. The analysis highlights the considerable financial savings achieved by centralising procurement, with varying degrees of success across service areas.

Back-office services and facilities management saw the greatest financial benefit, with the majority of trust leaders reporting substantial or moderate savings. Conversely, centralisation in IT and EdTech procurement showed slightly less marked financial gains but remained positively perceived overall.

Leaders' responses to centralisation initiatives provide valuable insights into organisational attitudes within MATs. The majority of school leaders are supportive of centralised procurement, recognising the efficiencies, financial stability, and resource optimisation it delivered. Notably, resistance to centralisation was minimal across most categories, though a significant minority expressed concerns about losing autonomy, particularly around curriculum-related decisions and staffing.

The report identifies a clear correlation between the extent of centralisation and trust size, with larger trusts generally showing higher levels of central procurement due to their ability to

leverage economies of scale effectively. Smaller trusts exhibited greater caution, often preferring a balanced approach that maintains individual school autonomy, especially in areas closely related to teaching and learning.

This section also underlines the strategic importance of centralised services as a response to broader financial pressures faced by MATs, including inflation, rising staffing costs, and funding uncertainty. By consolidating services, trusts can better manage resources and reallocate savings to frontline educational activities and improvements. However, the implementation of centralisation strategies must be managed sensitively to maintain school-level engagement, ensuring trust-wide policies align with the individual needs and contexts of member schools.

In every case, the larger the trust the more likely they are to be centralising a service.

However, there are multiple centralisation models:

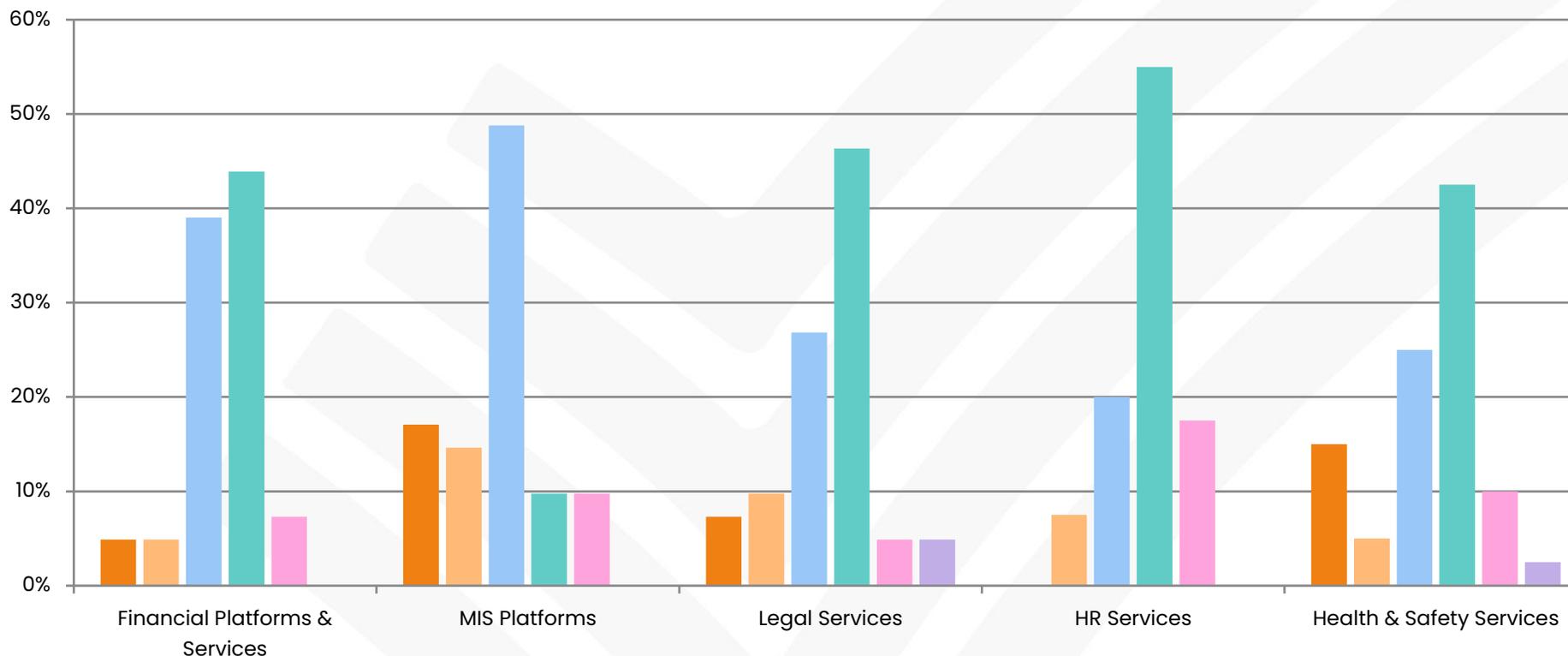
The Trust has a central deal that they **encourage** their schools to use
The Trust has a central deal that schools are **compelled** to use
The Trust resources and **pays** for a service for its schools
The Trust resources a service and **charges** their schools

With this much variety, and the relatively small size of the Trust sector, (approx. 1,000 Trusts) we are not publishing propensity by size of Trust as this could be misleading.

There is no substitute for understanding the unique model each Trust is using.

Back Office Services.

Procurement Model



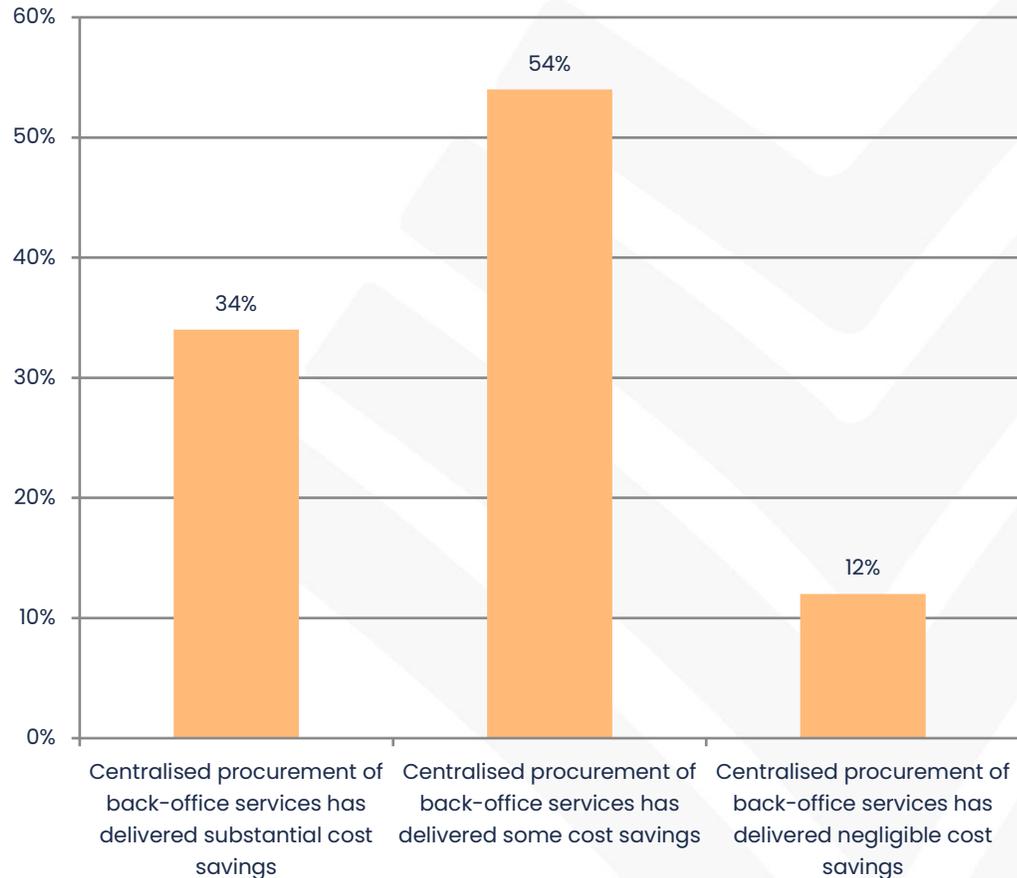
Very few academies have local control of their back-office tools and services

- Our schools select their own provider
- The Trust has a central deal that the schools are encouraged to use
- The Trust has a central deal that the schools are compelled to use
- The Trust resources and pays for this service centrally
- The Trust resources this service centrally and sells it to schools
- I don't know

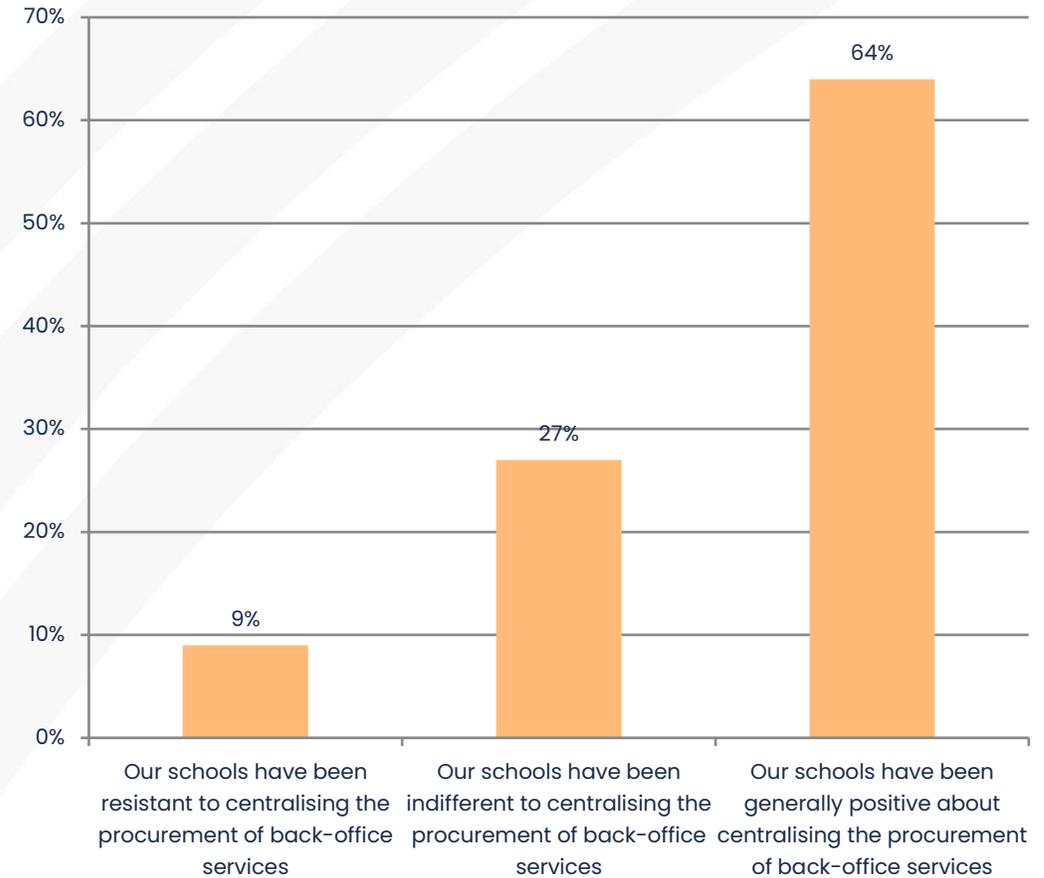
Back Office Services.

Savings and response from academy leaders

Savings from centralisation

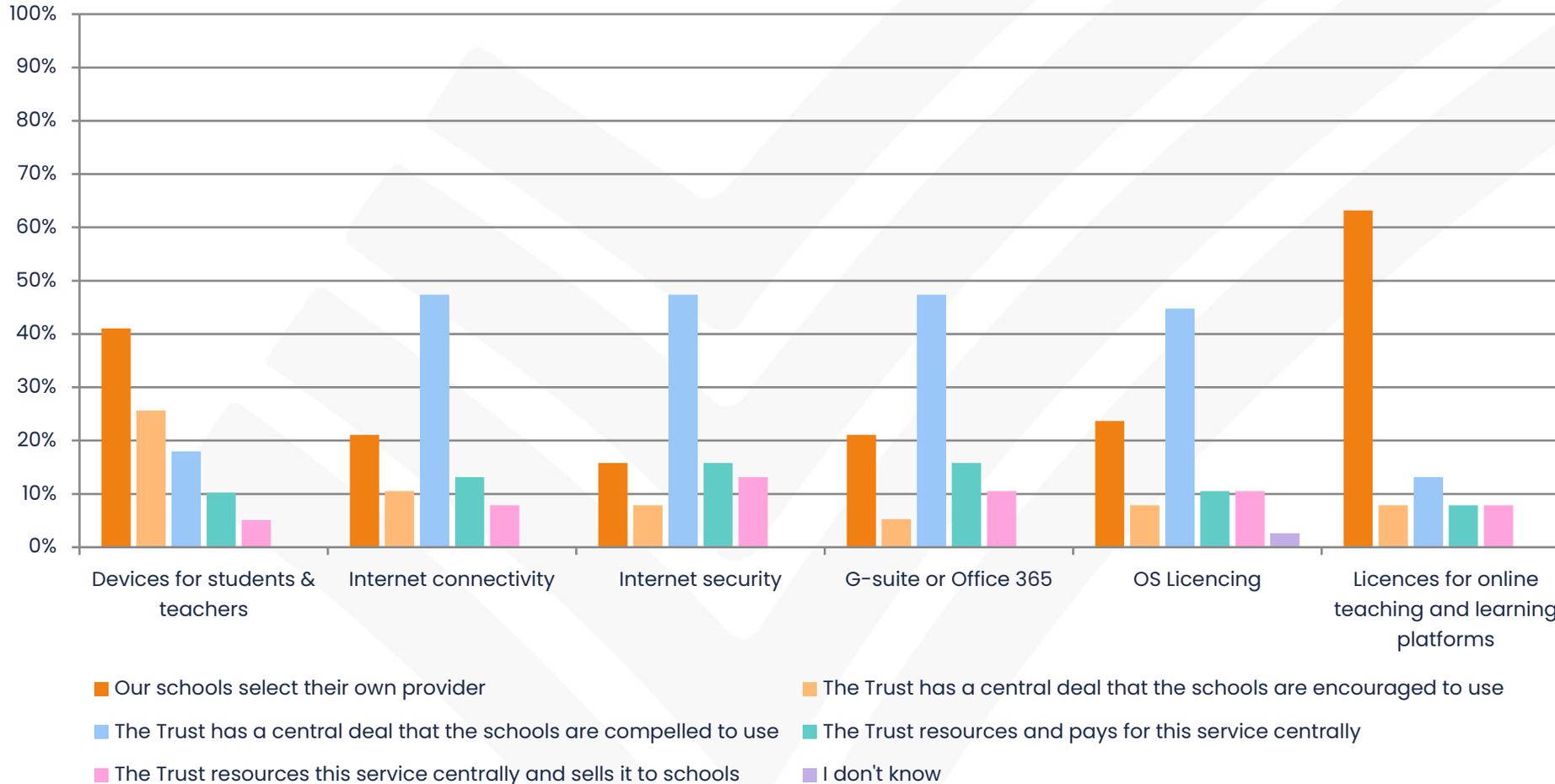


Response from academy leaders



IT & EdTech.

Procurement Model

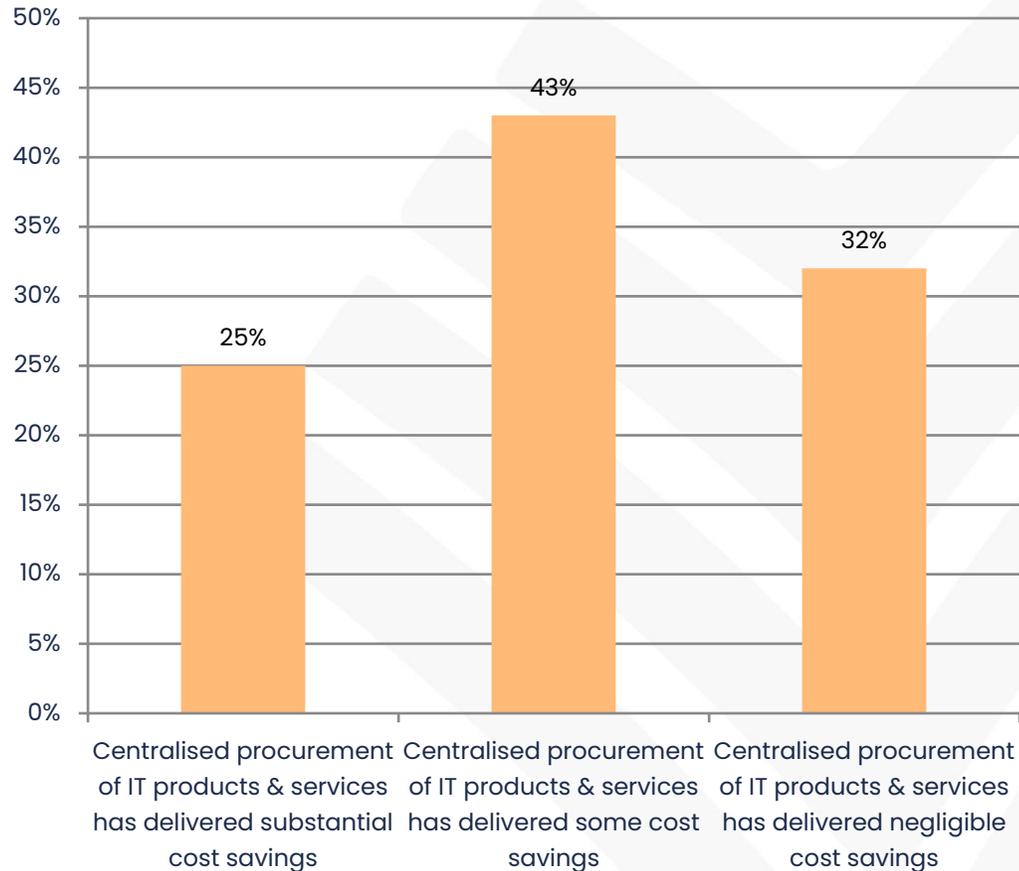


Over 60% of academies retain local decision making over teaching and learning platforms.

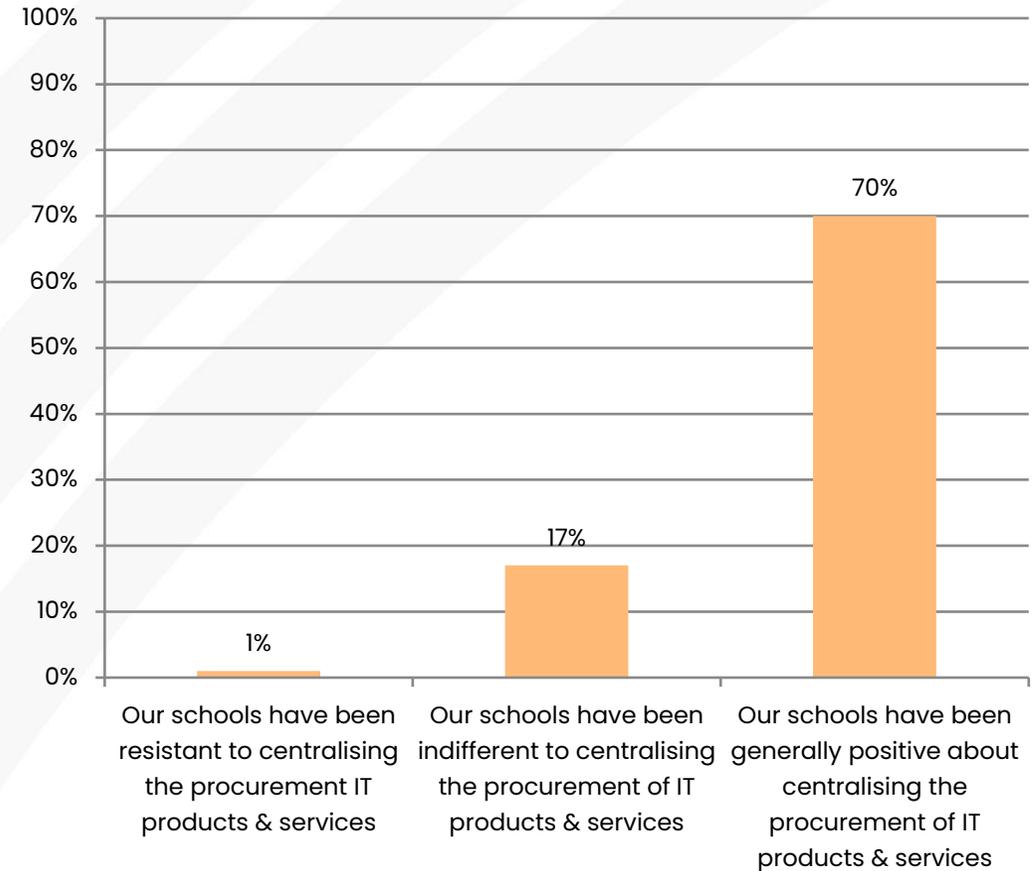
IT & EdTech.

Savings and response from academy leaders

Savings from centralisation

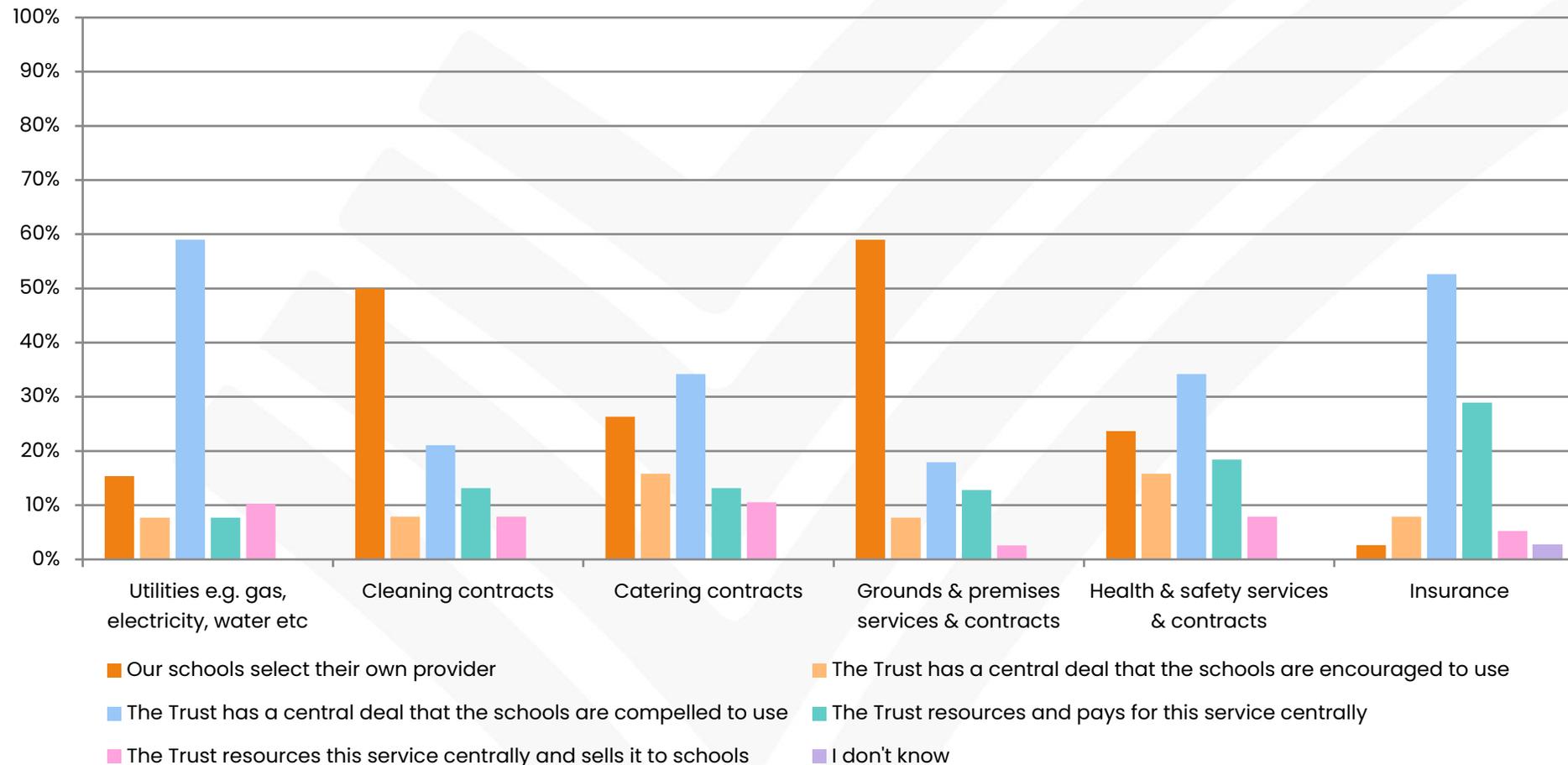


Response from academy leaders



Utilities & Facilities Management.

Procurement Model



Where local providers are easier to procure (cleaning & premises contracts) schools retain control

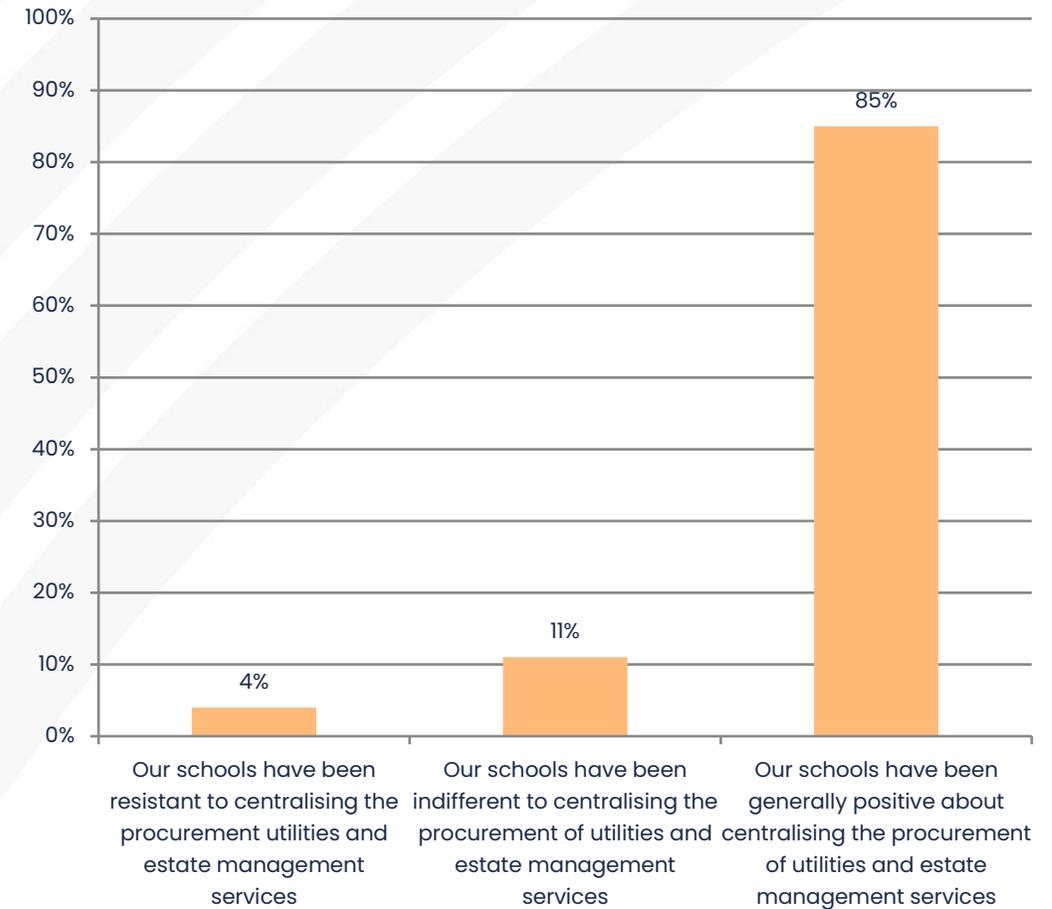
Utilities & Facilities Management.

Savings and response from academy leaders

Savings from centralisation

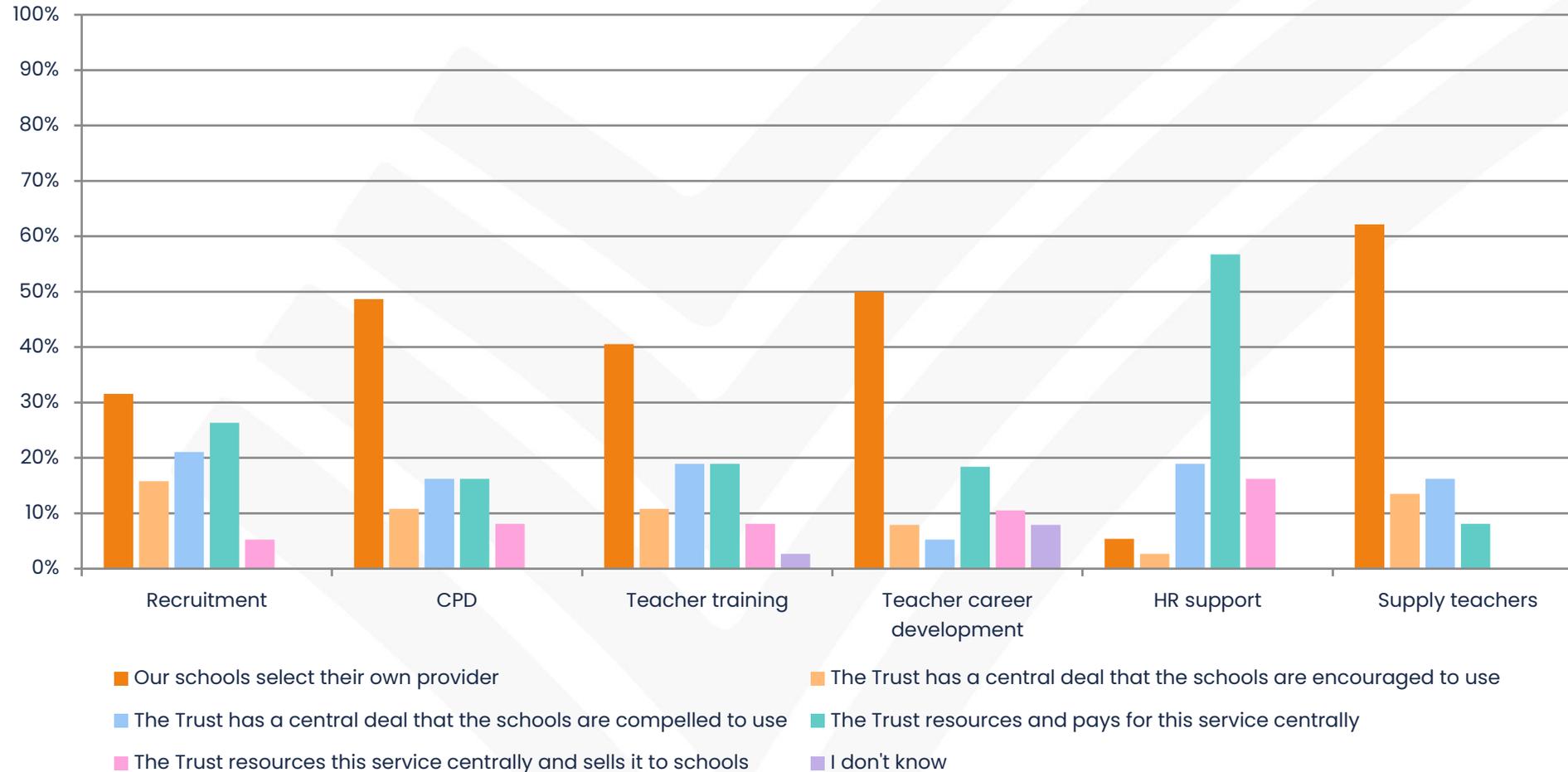


Response from academy leaders



HR Services.

Procurement Model

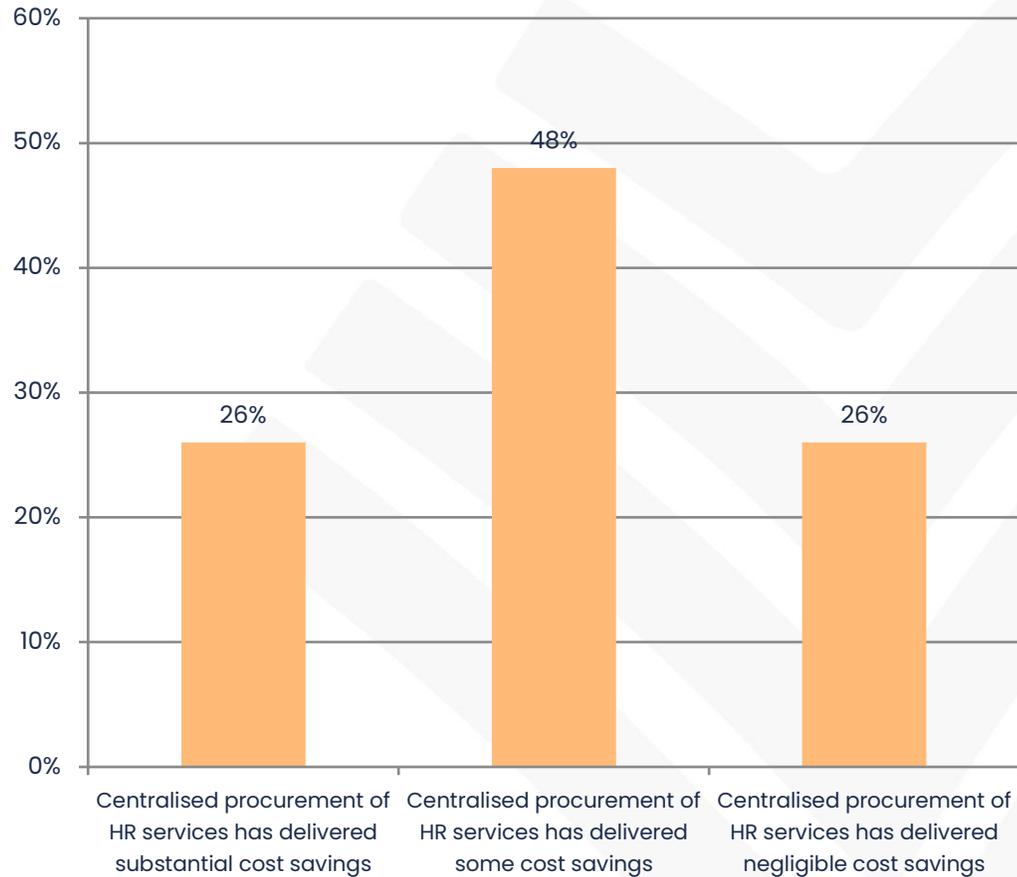


Almost 50% of Trusts allow their school to manage their CPD, teacher training & career development.

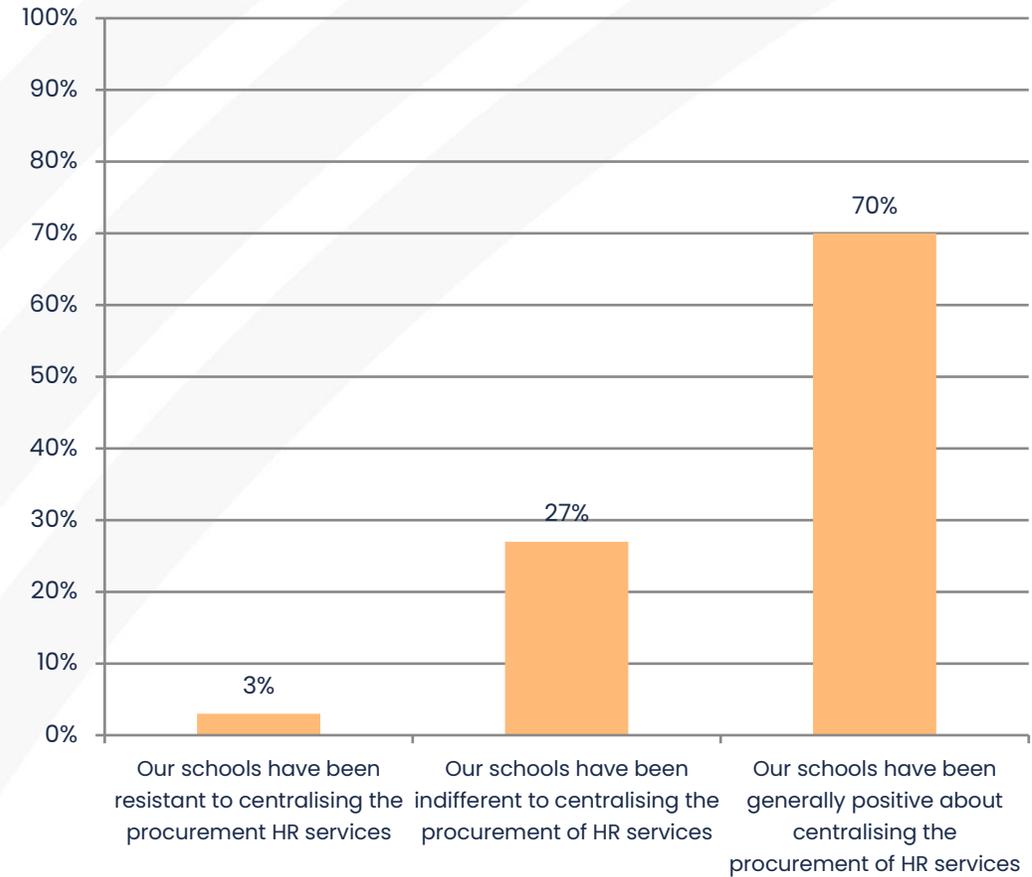
HR Services.

Savings and response from academy leaders

Savings from centralisation

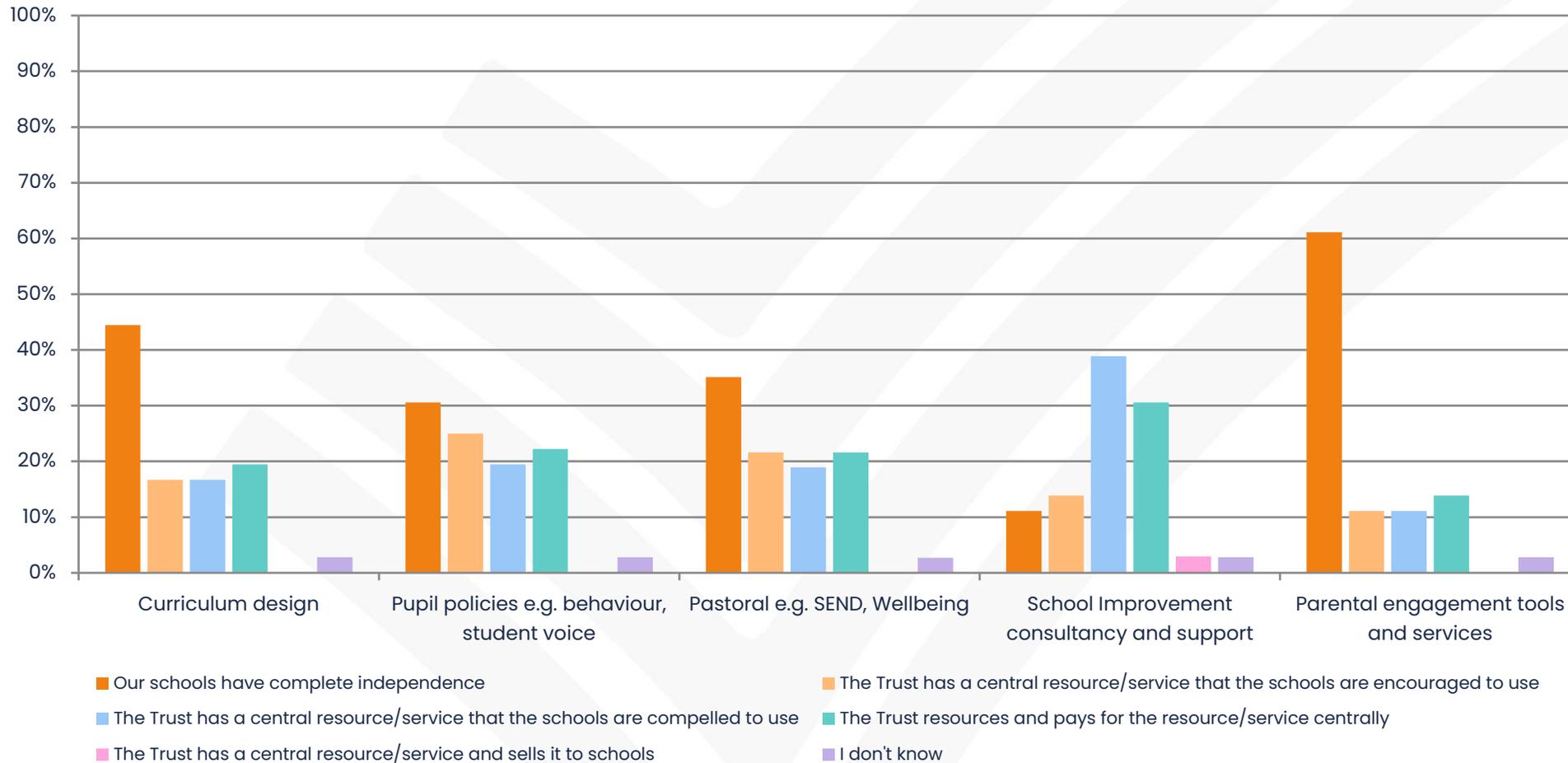


Response from academy leaders



School Improvement Services.

Procurement Model

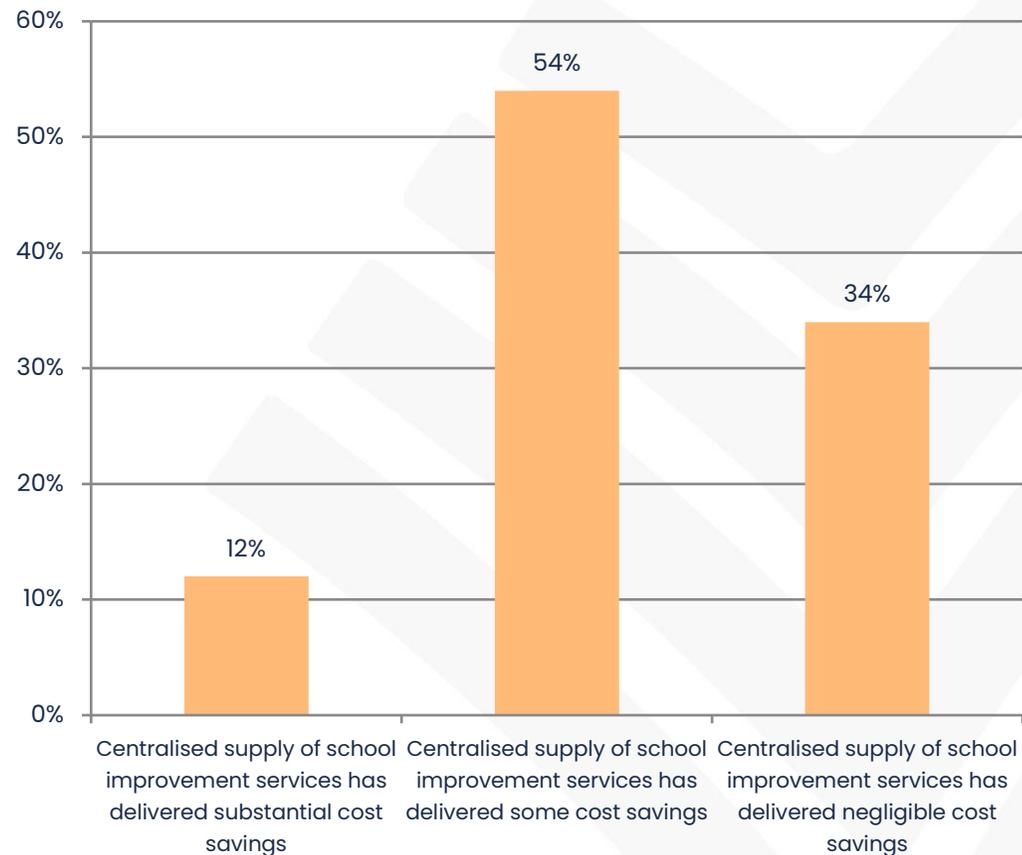


The overwhelming number of Trusts have centralised School Improvement consultancy.

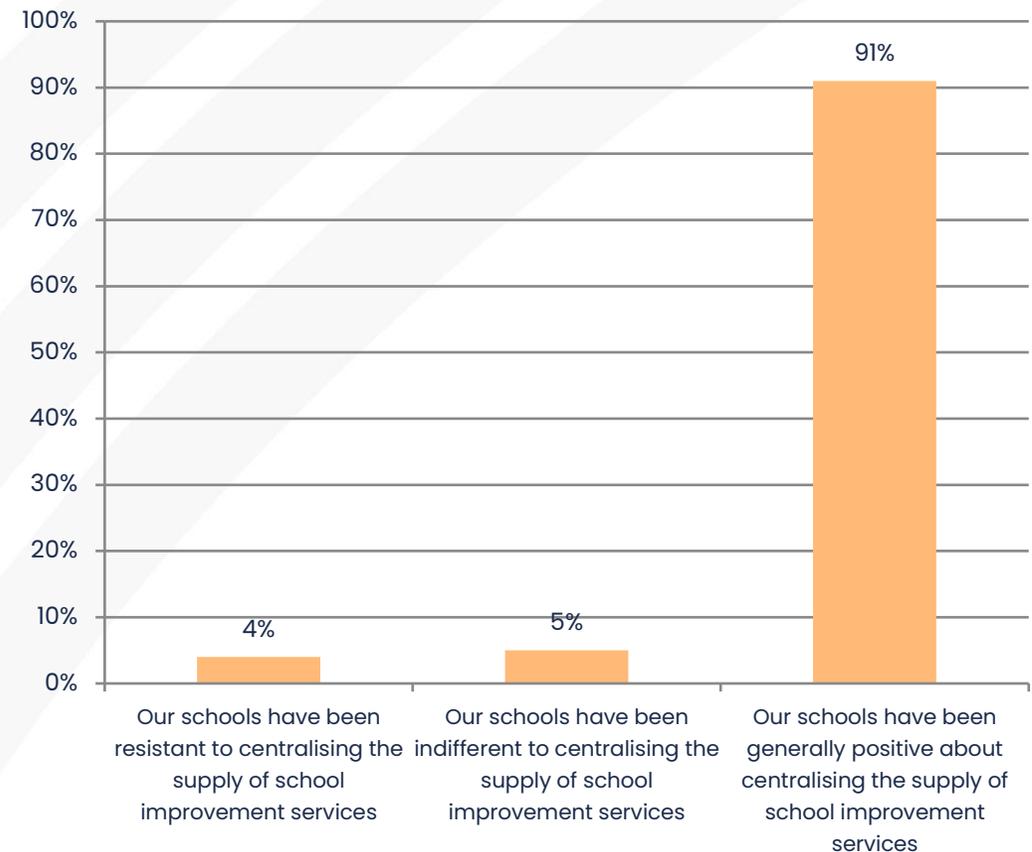
School Improvement Services.

Savings and response from academy leaders

Savings from centralisation

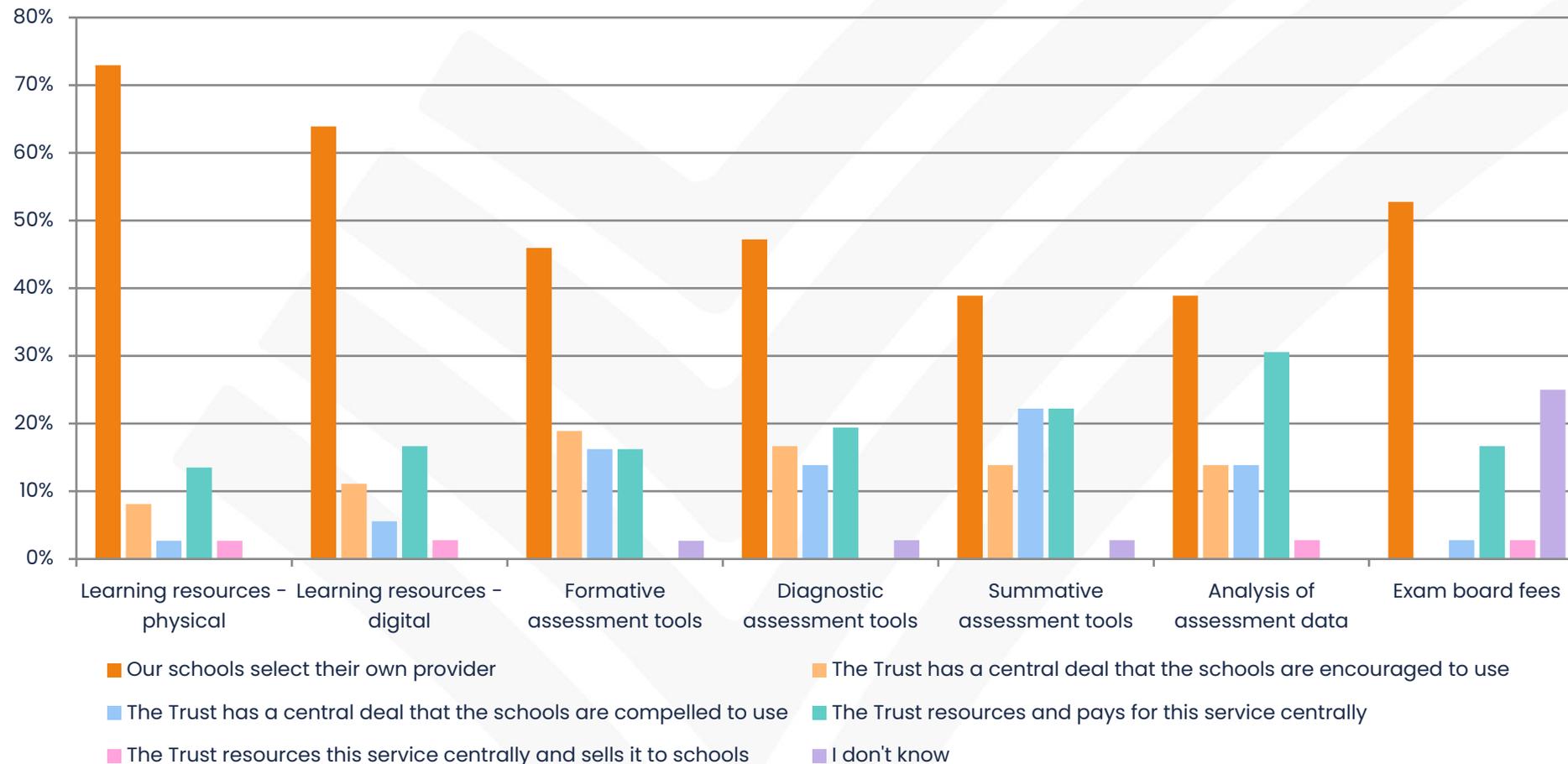


Response from academy leaders



Learning Resources & Assessment.

Procurement Model

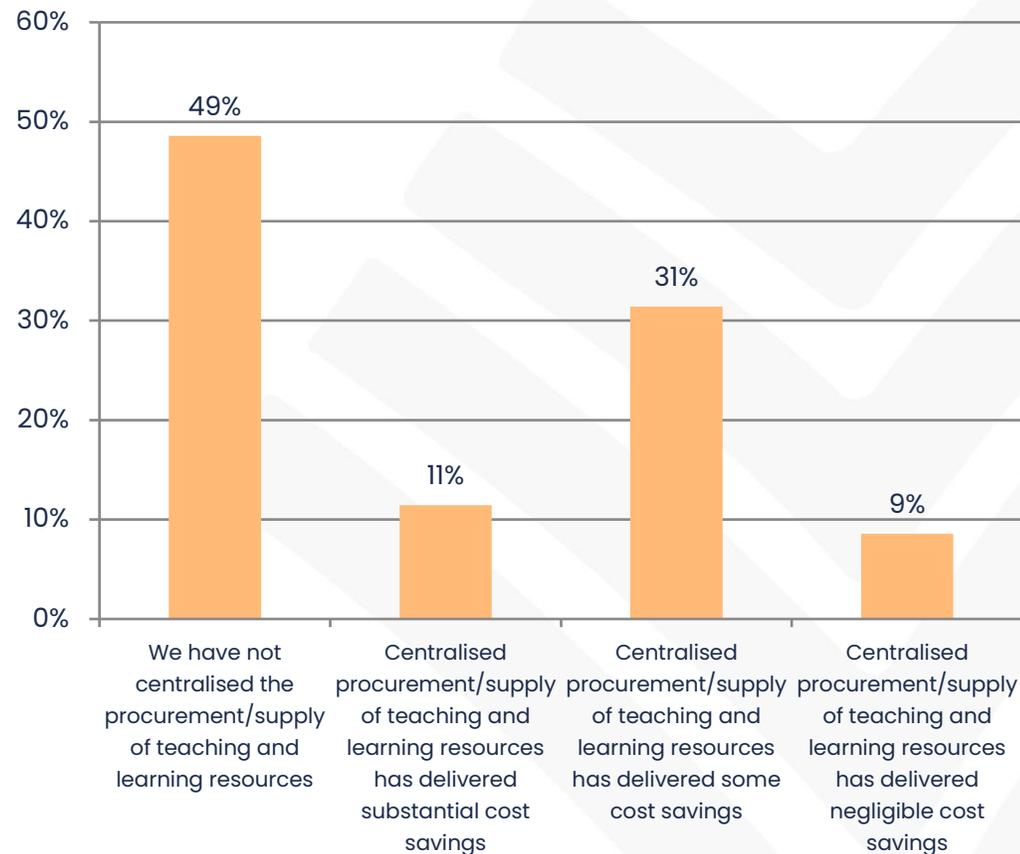


More than half of schools in Trust do not control their choice of assessment tools.

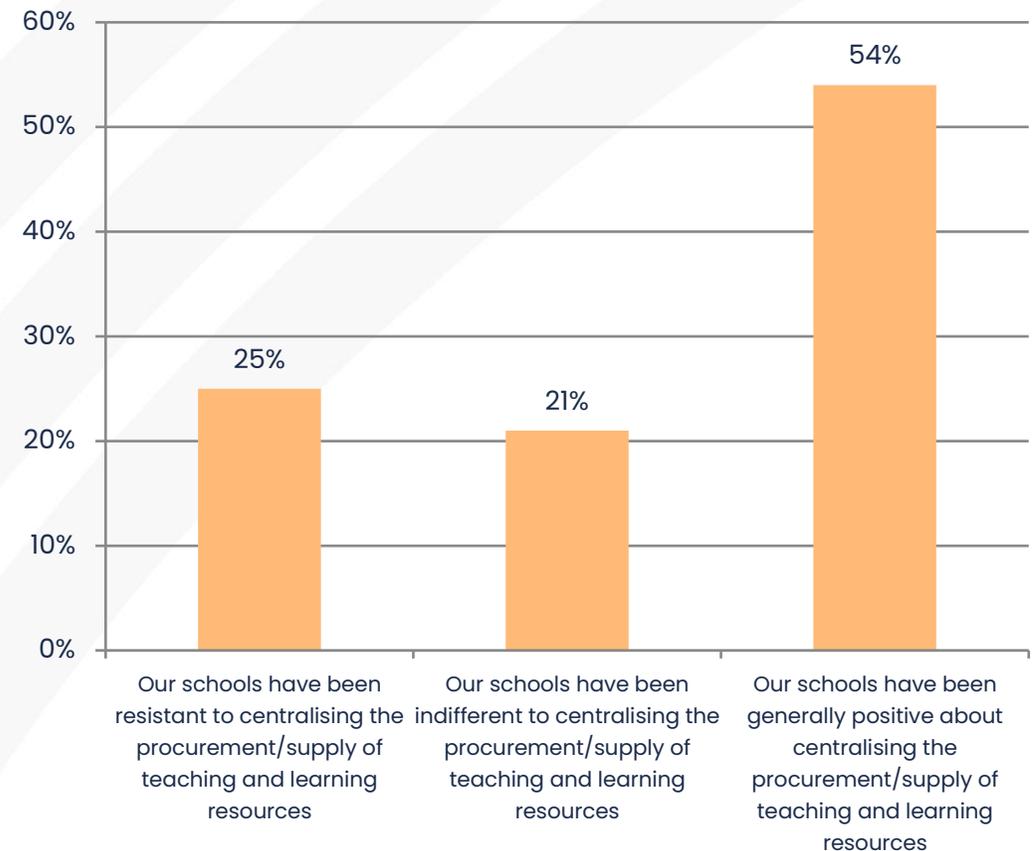
Learning Resources & Assessment.

Savings and response from academy leaders

Savings from centralisation



Response from academy leaders



Part 4: Academy Landscape.

Strategic Focus.

NOTE: The following report uses insights from 14 interviews with CEOs and CFOs in a range of trusts plus data from the **2024 National School Trust Report by CST** and the **2025 Kreston UK Academies Benchmark Report**

Operational Priorities.

Balancing financial constraints with the need to maintain high-quality education and effective school management is a challenge for most Trusts. Key operational priorities for trust leaders, include workforce stability, digital transformation, and improving inclusion and SEND provision.

Workforce Stability and Recruitment Challenges

Staffing remains a major operational challenge, with recruitment and retention difficulties continuing to impact trust management. The cost of staff salaries represents the largest proportion of trust budgets, and while recent government-funded pay increases have provided temporary relief, long-term workforce planning remains uncertain.

Priorities include:

- Flexible working arrangements to improve staff retention.
- Professional development and leadership training to build internal capacity.
- Recruitment campaigns targeting subject-specialist teachers and support staff.

Many trusts are also investing in staff wellbeing initiatives, recognising that high workloads and increasing demands on teachers have contributed to retention challenges.

Digital Transformation and IT Infrastructure

Technology is playing a growing role in operational planning, with many trusts prioritising investments in IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, and data management. Digital transformation is particularly relevant for streamlining administrative processes, supporting hybrid learning environments, and enhancing data-driven decision-making.

MATs are leading the way in adopting trust-wide IT systems to improve efficiency, with larger trusts more likely to implement centralised technology platforms for finance, HR, and student data tracking.

Inclusion and SEND Provision

A significant operational priority is addressing the increasing demand for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support. The rising number of students requiring SEND services has placed additional strain on trust resources, with funding failing to keep pace.

Many trusts are focusing on:

- Expanding specialist SEND teams within central operations.
- Improving staff training on inclusive education.
- Strengthening partnerships with external agencies to support SEND students.

While centralisation and cost-cutting strategies help trusts remain financially stable, long-term challenges such as recruitment, SEND provision, and sustainable funding continue to shape trust operations.

The Growth of Central Teams.

The expansion of central and shared teams within Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) is a growing trend aimed at improving efficiency, reducing costs, and ensuring consistency across schools. We are seeing the increasing role of centralised teams, particularly in finance, HR, estates management, IT, and governance. Larger MATs are leading this shift, while smaller trusts are gradually adopting shared service models to maximize resources and navigate financial pressures.

The Expansion of Central Teams

According to the 2024 CST report, over 54% of trusts expect their central teams to grow in the next academic year, while only 11% foresee a reduction. This trend reflects a strategic move toward consolidating expertise within trusts, allowing for more effective oversight and coordination of critical functions such as budgeting, payroll, IT infrastructure, and human resources management.

The 2025 Kreston report further confirms this trend, noting that 81% of MATs are now fully centralised, compared to 61% in previous years. As financial pressures mount, trusts are investing in specialised central teams to streamline operations, ensure compliance, and drive strategic decision-making across multiple schools.

Key Areas of centralisation

Academy trusts are focusing on expanding central teams in six key areas:

- **Finance:** Centralised finance teams oversee budgeting, procurement, and financial reporting, ensuring greater accountability and efficiency.

- **HR and Recruitment:** Trusts are developing specialist HR teams to handle recruitment, staff retention, payroll, and wellbeing initiatives.
- **IT Services:** A growing number of MATs are investing in trust-wide IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, and data management systems.

Governance and Compliance: The role of governance professionals is expanding, ensuring statutory compliance and strategic alignment within trusts.

School Improvement and Teaching Support: Some trusts are creating centralised curriculum teams to support teacher training and student learning initiatives.

Estates and Facilities Management: Larger trusts are employing dedicated estate teams to oversee maintenance, safety compliance, and long-term infrastructure planning.

School Improvement.

School improvement aims to enhance educational quality and student outcomes by focusing on staff development, governance, financial sustainability, and data-driven decision-making. Naturally, there are a range of challenges and strategies school trusts employ to drive improvement at scale.

Trust-Based School Improvement Approaches have emerged as a leading model for school improvement. They enable collaborative professional development, shared resources, and centralised strategic planning. According to the 2024 'National School Trust Report' by the Confederation of School Trusts (CST), 80% of CEOs report having a trust-wide model of school improvement, with strategic planning meetings (77%) and advisory capacity (74%) being the primary tools for alignment.

Trusts foster collaboration across schools through professional learning communities, leadership mentoring, and cross-school teaching staff deployment. Larger trusts are more likely to prioritise structured professional development programs and evidence-based interventions compared to smaller trusts.

Professional Development as a Key Lever A primary focus of school improvement models is continuous professional development (CPD) for educators. The 2024 CST report indicates that 60% of CEOs prioritise staff training, recognising that well-equipped teachers drive student success. Larger trusts invest heavily in professional learning communities to share best practice and research-driven teaching strategies.

Data and evidence-based decision-making are central to school improvement at scale. Trusts encourage staff to attend external training events, participate in educational networks, and utilise internal coaching structures to enhance instructional quality.

Governance and Strategic Planning Effective governance structures are crucial for sustainable school improvement. The 2025 Kreston 'UK Academies Benchmark Report' underscores the importance of strategic governance in managing financial pressures, maintaining educational quality, and ensuring regulatory compliance. Many trusts are moving towards centralised decision-making, with 81% of MATs now operating fully central governance models.

Trusts use monitoring and evaluation frameworks to align school improvement plans across multiple academies. These frameworks include performance tracking, shared KPIs, and structured intervention models.

Moving forward, school improvement efforts will likely focus on data-driven decision-making, AI integration in education, and long-term financial planning to ensure sustainability and high educational standards across trusts.

Professional Development.

Professional development and collaboration play a critical role in driving school improvement and delivering high-quality education.

Emphasis on Professional Development A key priority for trusts is the continuous professional development (CPD) of staff. According to the 2024 CST report, 60% of trust CEOs identified professional development as their main focus for school improvement in the upcoming academic year. This was closely followed by efforts to build internal school improvement capacity (54%).

Trusts deploy various methods to support educators:

- **Strategic training programs:** Schools are increasingly investing in structured CPD programs that align with trust-wide goals.
- **Evidence-based teaching practices:** Many trusts encourage staff to engage with research networks and best-practice models
- **Conferences and networking opportunities:** Educators are encouraged to attend external events, which help introduce fresh pedagogical perspectives into the school system.

The 2025 Kreston report echoes this priority, emphasising that professional development is a crucial factor in teacher retention and job satisfaction. The report notes that investing in staff wellbeing and CPD is essential for attracting and retaining high-quality educators.

Collaboration across Multi-Academy Trusts Collaboration within and between schools is another significant trend. Trust CEOs report that 88% of school improvement efforts involve trust staff working across multiple schools, and 67% involve school-based staff collaborating beyond their individual institutions.

Key collaborative strategies include:

- **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):** Larger MATs focus heavily on establishing professional learning communities where teachers share best practices and address teaching challenges jointly.
- **Cross-school leadership development:** Senior leaders often engage in mentoring programs across different schools to ensure consistent leadership quality.
- **Joint strategic planning:** 77% of trusts use strategic planning meetings to align their school improvement plans,

ensuring all schools within a MAT work towards shared goals.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the widespread emphasis on professional development, schools and trusts face significant barriers:

- **Staffing shortages and retention issues:** Reports regularly highlight that teacher vacancy rates increased by over 150% between 2020 and 2023, making it harder for schools to retain experienced staff.
- **Funding constraints:** Many trusts struggle with tight budgets, making it difficult to sustain large-scale training initiatives.
- **Time limitations:** Teachers often find it challenging to balance CPD with their daily responsibilities, requiring schools to build more flexible training opportunities.

Governance.

Governance in trusts encompasses leadership, accountability, assurance, and stakeholder engagement. The governing board is responsible for ensuring that the trust delivers high-quality education while maintaining financial stability and compliance with regulatory requirements.

The top governance priorities for school trusts include:

- **Succession planning and recruitment:** Trusts are struggling to recruit new governance volunteers, with a strong focus on training and leadership succession.
- **Board diversity and representation:** Larger trusts prioritise improving board diversity to ensure a wider range of perspectives in decision-making.
- **Local governance evaluation:** Larger trusts focus on assessing the effectiveness of local governance structures, which become more complex as the number of schools in a trust grows.

Governance Structures and Responsibilities

Trusts vary significantly in how they delegate governance

responsibilities:

- **Local tier governance** sees schools responsible for community engagement, monitoring educational outcomes, and student welfare. However, financial management, policy-making, and facility management likely remain centralised.
- **Centralised governance models** are increasingly common, particularly in large MATs, which benefit from economies of scale.
- **Challenges in Governance**
 - Despite clear priorities, school trusts face significant governance challenges:
 - **Trustee recruitment and retention:** Many trusts struggle to attract volunteers, with 61% of CEOs advocating for increased public awareness of governance roles, and 54% supporting paid time off work for trustees.
 - **Changing government policies:** Uncertainty around education policies and funding models makes long-term

planning difficult. Many MATs have concerns about regulatory changes, SEND provision, and government funding constraints.

Future Governance Trends

As trusts evolve, governance models will adapt to increasing complexity, financial pressures, and the need for accountability. Key trends include:

- **Stronger focus on governance professionals:** 81% of large MATs now employ a dedicated Head of Governance, ensuring independence and expertise.
- **More data-driven decision-making:** Trusts are using internal audits and governance reviews to enhance accountability and transparency.
- **Increased stakeholder engagement:** More trusts are emphasising local governance and stakeholder feedback in decision-making processes.

Central Roles in Trusts.



Part 5: Academy Landscape.

Interview Insights.

The following report uses insights from 14 interviews with CEOs and CFOs in a range of trusts.

Interview Insights.

As part of the BESA MAT research programme, 14 CFOs and CEOs of Trusts took part in long-form 1-2-1 interviews. The following is a summary of the discussions, with extended detail on each interview contained within the subsequent appendix.

A unifying theme in the interviews is financial pressure. Nearly every leader refers to budgetary constraints, whether stemming from tighter central funding, rising pupil needs in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or increasing staffing costs.

One CFO, working in a trust of 20 primary schools, highlights that although “secondary schools are more financially sustainable,” many primaries operate on narrow margins and rely on top-sliced or pooled funding to maintain viability. A similar point is made by a deputy CEO leading a 30-school trust, who observes that “significant and immediate investment” is often required to bring struggling schools up to par.

Another widespread worry centres on staffing. Recruitment and retention difficulties remain a structural challenge across the trust landscape. Time and again, leaders point out that teacher pay takes up the overwhelming share of the budget, leaving minimal scope for innovation or capital investment. Many speak of the need for flexible staffing models, improved continuing professional development, and staff wellbeing initiatives—

difficulties only magnified by the financial climate.

Simultaneously, the increasing number of pupils requiring SEND support or who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) places further strain on budgets by necessitating specialist resources and training. Trust leaders across the board mention that current funding is not sufficient to address these heightened demands. Even those who pool budgets through “gag pooling,” for instance, report ongoing pressure around staff allocation, specialist support, and building capacity.

Centralisation—especially of procurement—stands out as another key theme. While most leaders recognise the operational benefits, some smaller trusts and newly formed ones still face challenges in striking a balance: heads may wish to preserve some site-level purchasing autonomy, whereas the trust’s overarching aim is to streamline operations. Finding a way to accommodate both aims remains a tough but recurrent concern, requiring judicious negotiation.

Interesting Innovations

Despite these obstacles, trust leaders shared numerous compelling innovations. The CFO overseeing 20 primary schools describes a deliberate approach to supplier relationships, in which the trust negotiates bulk discounts and then works directly with vendors to determine which products genuinely

suit teachers’ needs. Rather than employing a purely price-based approach, they test stationery, staff-room essentials, and technological tools with frontline teachers. By doing this, they foster collective ownership of procurement decisions, reduce waste, and build a relationship of trust with suppliers, rather than simply treating them as vendors.

Several CEOs also refer to the role of technology in advancing trust operations. Some trusts have started integrating data dashboards that collate attendance, assessment, finance, and HR data in one place. Although each interviewee stresses that these systems are still “a work in progress,” they see huge potential for informed, data-driven decisions. A CFO remarks that they aim for a single software solution to cover finance, HR, and pupil data, so that “once the data is uploaded, we can dissect it however we like” to propel improvement initiatives.

Others highlight the use of AI and automation, whether in generating certain progress reports or drafting standardised communications to parents. While nobody claims to have reached total efficiency, they agree these digital strategies can cut administrative overheads and allow staff to focus more on classroom support or pastoral work.

Interview Insights.

Turning to teaching and learning, standardised curricula are gaining ground in many trusts. Several CEOs of primary-focused trusts discuss using uniform phonics or mathematics programmes throughout their schools. They do so to lighten teachers' workload—by giving them tried-and-tested materials—and to take advantage of economies of scale in resource purchasing. Interestingly, a few leaders still allow local modifications depending on particular school contexts, and all emphasise continued debates about the appropriate degree of standardisation.

Does Background Make a Difference

Significant variations in viewpoint often correlate with whether the interviewee entered leadership from a business or an educational background. Leaders with teaching or headship origins often underscore collaboration, teacher wellbeing, and the significance of shared school culture. One small-primary-trust CEO (a lifelong educator) openly discusses “building a supportive staff community” as her principal goal, even if that slows the centralisation process.

On the other hand, CFOs from more corporate backgrounds are particularly attuned to cost efficiency, contract management, and scaling strategies. One CFO likens re-brokered academies to “acquisitions,” using distinctly commercial terminology. Although they, too, share the aim of raising educational

standards, they often characterise solutions—such as gag pooling or staff restructuring—primarily in the context of cost control.

These leaders seem notably more comfortable implementing robust top-slicing models, spending less time debating local autonomy, and honing in on the capacity of central structures to produce large-scale gains.

That said, a noteworthy overlap is found in how nearly all interviewees, no matter their background, emphasise the central importance of teacher development and morale. The difference is that a CFO might apply a systems-oriented lens to staff culture and internal communications, while an educator-CEO may place more weight on pastoral leadership and professional empowerment.

Insights for suppliers

It is clear that trust leaders expect more from suppliers than simple discounts. Several CFOs note how crucial it is when suppliers “speak our language,” in other words, understanding not only the need for cost savings but also the demands of safeguarding, data confidentiality, staff development, and pupil attainment. A company that offers seamless integration with existing finance and HR software, while upholding data integrity, will naturally gain an edge.

Many trust leaders also desire meaningful, longer-term collaborations rather than brief, transactional deals. Suppliers could, for instance, help in training staff on new systems or adapt resources to fit local school requirements. The CFO of a multi-primary trust recalls a successful arrangement with a stationery supplier, in which the latter adapted product lines to reflect actual teacher feedback—ultimately improving job satisfaction and building trust at leadership level.

For EdTech providers, the message is equally clear: it is not enough merely to have the right features. Leaders want products that truly cut administrative burdens, integrate easily with a variety of platforms, and offer strong data protection. Providers who offer staff training and demonstrate tangible benefits, both in terms of cost and pupil outcomes, will stand out from the crowd.

Interview Insights.

Any surprises?

In all the discussions about finance, recruitment, and procurement, a few unexpected ideas emerge. One CEO leading a medium-sized trust has a vision of recruiting only former pupils by 2030—envisaging a pipeline in which students return as staff members. This slightly radical vision offers a creative way to tackle teacher shortages while strengthening local identity, by allowing “graduates” of the trust’s schools to continue its ethos once they become teachers themselves.

It is also surprising how little conversation about top-slicing and a unified curriculum framed these measures as “taking autonomy away” from individual schools. In fact, everyone interviewed emphasises that headteachers and local staff remain key contributors and still develop their own school identity.

Where disagreements do arise—over how quickly to streamline certain procedures—the dominant view is that centralisation, if achieved consultatively, can actually empower local teams to focus on teaching.

Lastly, it is impressive how many trust leaders appear willing to challenge deeply embedded structures (such as the delineation of teacher roles or typical staff deployment) in order to improve learner outcomes. Whether it is a CFO wanting to restructure budgets so that smaller primaries receive the staff they need, or a CEO investigating ways to strengthen SEND provision across multiple sites, they show readiness to adjust systems at a fundamental level, rather than limit themselves to minor administrative tweaks.

In summary, these interviews with CFOs and CEOs across different trusts depict a sector grappling with financial and staffing constraints yet consistently innovating to deliver high-quality education. Their differing backgrounds influence their approaches—ranging from cost management and

operational consolidation to cooperative leadership and local empowerment—but they share a deep commitment to pupil success under stringent financial conditions.

From a supplier’s point of view, the key is to offer real, proven value, integrate systems smoothly, and provide ongoing support.

For everyone else, it is noteworthy just how broad the inventiveness in trusts can be, pairing commercial acumen with educational passion to navigate the shifting academy landscape.

Appendix.

The interviews.

CFO – 20 Primary School Trust

The Trust operates 20 primary schools, with 12 in London and 8 in East Sussex, serving approximately 5,500 to 6,000 pupils.

The Trust employs around 1,000 staff and has a centralized model for operations, including cleaning, catering, and HR.

Schools join the Trust through a mix of voluntary opt-ins and re-brokered academizations from failing trusts.

Teacher recruitment and retention are generally strong, with many staff being former pupils who return to work for the Trust.

The Trust emphasizes a business model that supports outstanding educational outcomes, separating educational leadership from operational management.

Educational Outcomes and Support The Trust aims to improve life chances for children, achieving above-average outcomes in literacy and numeracy for Year 6 pupils.

Schools are encouraged to self-assess against organizational priorities and TRUST standards, which encompass a range of educational outcomes beyond just academic performance.

The trust aims to provide targeted support to schools based on their distance from TRUST standards, reversing traditional funding models that disadvantage underperforming schools.

Funding Models and Challenges Financial viability for primary schools is a concern; secondary schools are more financially sustainable due to higher funding per pupil.

Discussion on funding models for academy trusts highlights the issue of gag pooling, where schools cease to exist as independent entities upon joining a trust, complicating funding distribution.

Emphasis on funding schools based on staffing needs rather than pupil numbers, advocating for a model that prioritizes necessary staff roles to ensure effective education.

Centralized funding for key positions (e.g., SENCOs, deputy heads) to ensure schools are equipped to handle challenges, particularly in light of increasing SEND needs.

Open conversations between trusts and schools regarding funding needs, with a focus on local pay rates and staffing structures tailored to specific school requirements.

Supplier Relationships and Efficiency Emphasized the importance of being a good customer to suppliers, highlighting the need for clear communication and timely payments.

Accountability and communication with suppliers are crucial, ensuring that both parties understand their responsibilities to foster a productive partnership.

Shared a successful collaboration with a stationary provider, resulting in a tailored list of products based on user testing, which improved the quality of supplies and led to refurbishments of staff rooms.

Acknowledged that the education sector needs to improve its practices to effectively demand value from suppliers.

Technology integration remains a challenge, with a shift from using multiple systems to seeking a single, comprehensive solution for data management to improve efficiency.

Future Aspirations Expressed a personal ambition for the organization to recruit only past pupils by 2030, aiming to create a familiar and supportive environment for staff and students.

Highlighted the potential benefits of hiring former students, including their understanding of the school culture and community.

Mentioned the current lack of further efficiency initiatives due to already maximizing savings and the focus shifting towards increasing pupil numbers.

CEO – Small Primary only Trust

The trust began in 2017 with two good schools and has since expanded to five voluntary primary schools, all of which joined for collaborative support rather than due to inadequacy.

Future growth is anticipated, with plans to centralize more services as the trust expands, particularly if the number of schools increases significantly.

The trust is funded through a top-slice model, approximately 5% of school budgets, with additional services available for purchase, varying slightly based on pupil numbers.

Collaborative Approach and Support The local authority's support has diminished, prompting schools to seek the trust's offerings, which include CPD, collaboration, and school improvement.

The trust emphasizes a non-commercial approach, focusing on collaboration rather than selling services, and invites external schools to participate in network meetings.

Heads and senior leaders generally appreciate the collaborative approach and support centralisation for efficiency, allowing them to focus on teaching and learning.

The trust values recommendations from a network of local CEOs and CFOs, fostering a collaborative environment rather than competition for schools.

centralisation and Decision-Making The decision-making process for centralisation versus school-level management is influenced by both efficiency and feedback from schools.

Centralized services include finance, compliance, and training, with a hybrid model allowing schools to retain some functions while benefiting from centralized oversight.

There is potential for cross-mat procurement, particularly in training, to enhance efficiency and value for money.

Curriculum and Assessment There is a desire for greater alignment in curriculum and assessment tools across schools, with a potential move towards common programs in phonics and math.

Current curriculum discussions emphasize collaboration, with a focus on aligning themes while allowing for some differences based on school structure.

The curriculum review is seen as an opportunity for trusts to standardize curricula across schools, potentially leading to economies of scale and improved pupil outcomes.

Equality objectives focus on improving attendance for minority groups and making the curriculum more reflective of diverse cultures.

Well-Being and Support Initiatives A trust well-being board has been established to address staff well-being, with a focus on reducing workload and improving behaviour management.

Behaviour management is a significant concern, with initiatives in place to support dysregulated students and reduce exclusion rates.

Personal development is a key focus for the trust, especially in

the more deprived areas of Shrewsbury, where they aim to provide strong support for both pupil and staff wellbeing.

Technology and Data Management Software procurement involves collaborative decision-making, with a focus on quality and longevity over cost, exemplified by the choice of Arbor as the MIS system.

The trust views AI positively, utilizing it to reduce teacher workload and improve efficiency in reporting and communication with parents.

There is a growing trend towards data-led management within schools, with trusts utilizing dashboards to integrate assessment, financial, and attendance data.

Future Challenges and Concerns Concerns were raised about the Children's Wellbeing in Schools bill, particularly regarding potential loss of autonomy for academies, but the trust maintains good relationships with local authorities.

There is uncertainty regarding the upcoming changes to the inspection framework by Ofsted, with concerns about the lack of training for inspectors before implementation.

Previous initiatives, such as a cyber security program, did not meet expectations, leading to a more cautious approach towards smaller software companies.

Deputy CEO – 30 school mixed Trust

The Trust was formed in January 2013 and currently operates 27 academies, including 3 secondary and 24 primary schools, serving approximately 11,500 pupils.

Schools join the trust voluntarily, although some are compelled by the DFE due to Ofsted failings; the trust prioritizes schools that actively seek to join.

The trust provides significant support to schools classified as "broken," requiring substantial investment to meet minimum operational standards, often exceeding £500,000 for new schools.

The trust is exploring new structures for senior leadership teams (SLT) to better align with current educational needs, including potential administrative support for SEN funding applications.

School improvement strategies involve a combination of trust-level expectations and individual academy needs, with a focus on incremental progress.

Growth strategies include acquiring smaller trusts rather than individual schools, aiming for bulk capacity building and strategic alignment.

Financial Challenges and Strategies Many schools face financial challenges, with high staffing costs leading to budget deficits; some schools have staffing cost ratios exceeding 80%, necessitating cuts in non-staffing areas.

The current funding landscape is tighter than in previous years, requiring schools to reassess their staffing structures and resource allocation, particularly in light of increasing numbers of students with special educational needs (SEN).

The trust acknowledges that the current funding situation may negatively impact staff well-being and workload, emphasizing the need for significant adjustments to cope with fiscal challenges.

Tighter financial controls are needed, which would benefit from greater centralisation of finance and HR functions.

Staffing and Workload Management Discussions about changes in staffing roles and responsibilities are ongoing, with a focus on balancing workload and staff well-being amidst financial constraints.

The trust advises schools to optimize class sizes and reconsider the deployment of support staff, suggesting a shift towards using teaching assistants primarily for SEN and pupil premium students.

Technology and Efficiency Technology is seen as a potential solution for improving efficiency and reducing costs, though its effectiveness in addressing current challenges remains to be fully realized.

Technology integration in education is still in its early stages,

with current tools not meeting expectations for efficiency and effectiveness.

A focus on cost efficiencies is evident, with a business case projected to save £350,000 annually through software change management.

Efficiency measures have included consolidating contracts and bulk purchasing, leading to significant savings, particularly in supply costs.

The organization generates additional income through commercial activities, including IT services for other schools and businesses, contributing to financial stability.

Curriculum and Standardization There is a trend towards curriculum standardization across primary and secondary schools, driven by the need for consistency, especially in the context of AI integration.

The response to a common curriculum varies among heads, with newer heads likely to be more accepting of standardization compared to those with local authority backgrounds.

The organisation is moving towards standardization of educational products and assessment tools, while still allowing some autonomy for academies to test effective solutions.

CEO – 7 school mixed Trust

The Trust operates seven schools, primarily in Warrington, with significant demographic variation, including a high percentage of pupil premium and an increasing EAL and SEND cohort.

The Trust's structure was previously fractured, requiring a centralisation of leadership and operational strategies to improve efficiency and clarity in purpose.

The CEO has a background in education and business, having been with the Trust for nearly three years, and is involved in both strategic and operational aspects, though less hands-on than before.

Financial Management and Funding The Trust aims to grow by acquiring more schools to achieve economies of scale, with one sizable primary school currently in the process of joining.

The Trust offers school improvement capacity and back-office support, addressing the diminishing capacity of local authorities and providing equitable funding based on need rather than a top-slice model.

The funding model (GAG funding) is designed to ensure that resources are allocated based on current needs.

Conversations with school leaders about staffing and budgeting focus on transparency and fairness.

Capital allocation is guided by two-year building condition surveys and annual school condition allowances, with spending decisions made based on need and strategic priorities.

The Trust absorbs financial risks from schools that joined at different levels, impacting budget reserves.

Educational Strategy and Curriculum A centralized business partner model is used for back-office services, allowing schools to focus on educational priorities.

Schools have autonomy in budgeting for curriculum resources, but their plans must align with Trust strategic priorities. The Trust is debating whether to adopt a fully prescribed curriculum to enhance quality and reduce teacher workload

Centralized procurement is considered for common priorities across schools to achieve economies of scale.

Data Management and Technology Metrics for measuring efficiency include budget performance, examination outcomes, attendance, staff turnover, and absence rates.

Annual staff, pupil, and parent surveys are conducted to assess well-being and engagement within the Trust.

A new Management Information System (MIS) was

implemented to improve data efficiency, alongside an AI strategy for administrative tasks.

Integration issues between different management systems hinder seamless data transfer, impacting efficiency.

Suppliers are evaluated based on value for money, quality, and their willingness to collaborate on data usage and system integration.

Emphasis on the importance of data ownership and the need for suppliers to collaborate effectively with educational institutions.

Decision to hire a consultant for Power BI development based on their personalized approach and willingness to collaborate.

Future Growth and Development Future growth plans include expanding presence in Liverpool and enhancing reputation through initiatives like primary hubs and the Education Exchange project.

Interest in developing specialized provisions for SEND students, including alternative and special schools, to address local needs.

CEO – 14 school mixed Trust

Established in 2015, the Trust currently comprises 14 schools, with plans to expand to 26, located across four local authorities.

Schools join the Trust voluntarily, seeking partnership benefits rather than through forced academisation.

The Trust maintains a balance of 50% mainstream and 50% specialist schools, emphasizing autonomy and individual identity for each school.

Support and Services Each school retains its own curriculum tailored to local needs, with support from the Trust's school improvement leaders.

The Trust offers a strong core support system, including financial benefits, professional development, and operational services, while allowing schools to maintain their governance structures.

Central services include operations, school improvement, and finance, with a focus on collaboration and tailored support for each school.

The Trust has a central service charge of 5% of school income, increasing to 6.5% for schools needing additional support.

Schools are encouraged to manage their budgets effectively, with a focus on maintaining or improving financial health.

School Improvement and Challenges The Trust has successfully improved inspection grades and financial stability

for all its academies since joining.

Current school improvement priorities include enhancing reading, writing, and math outcomes, alongside addressing attendance and progress for SEND students.

Challenges faced include student outcomes, declining pupil numbers, and staff sickness, prompting the introduction of enhanced employee benefits and support services.

Procurement and Efficiency Quality versus cost is a primary consideration when selecting suppliers; preference is given to local contractors who understand the trust.

Outsourcing IT services to local companies has proven cost-effective, providing competitive rates and support.

Efficiency measures, such as centralized photocopying systems, have resulted in significant cost savings (e.g., £96,000 saved annually by limiting colour printing).

Procurement decisions for IT hardware and software involve heads of schools, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration.

Previous inefficiencies were identified in financial systems, leading to a shift towards more integrated solutions.

Catering services were brought in-house to improve quality and reduce waste, resulting in better food provision for students at a lower cost.

Growth and Future Plans The Trust is experiencing significant growth, planning to expand from 14 to potentially 26 schools, which presents challenges in sustainable and rapid growth.

The CEO emphasizes the importance of maintaining control over outcomes by managing services in-house rather than outsourcing, particularly in catering.

The Trust employs an equity funding model to ensure all students receive equal resources, regardless of their school's financial situation.

Recent investments include £1.6 million in a special school to enhance its capabilities and support its development.

CFO – Expanding primary Trust

The Trust has grown from 2 to 7 schools, with plans to reach 9 by the end of the academic year, all of which are primary schools located in Leeds. Schools have joined the Trust voluntarily, with some being forced to academise but choosing the Trust.

The Trust serves a diverse demographic, with pupil premium percentages ranging from 10% to 60% across different schools.

The Trust emphasizes autonomy for schools, allowing them to make decisions based on their unique circumstances rather than imposing uniform policies.

Centralised Services and Support Key offerings include school improvement, finance, HR, governance, and operational support, with 90% of schools opting into these centralized services.

The Trust takes a 5% top slice from all schools for funding, which covers all services without additional charges, although financial sustainability is becoming challenging.

The Trust has a centralised HR contract to avoid complications from differing providers, ensuring consistent service quality.

Schools are encouraged to adopt centralised systems but retain the freedom to choose curriculum products.

Procurement and Supplier Management The trust is exploring centralized assessment products to compare performance data

across schools, with ongoing efforts to implement Power BI for data analysis.

Centralised procurement has led to efficiencies in staff time and cost savings, particularly in utilities and photocopying contracts.

Monitoring of contract efficiencies is done, particularly with utilities, and findings are communicated to finance committees and head teachers.

Head teachers generally take a hands-off approach regarding procurement decisions, trusting the central team to manage contracts effectively.

Recommendations from other trusts play a significant role in supplier selection, with a focus on gathering insights from those with varied experiences.

CEO emphasizes the importance of obtaining recommendations from other trusts when procuring services, as personal experiences can significantly influence decision-making.

There is a preference for smaller, local suppliers when service quality is comparable, as they may offer better customer service and care for their clients.

For IT systems, he acknowledges the need for established solutions over startups, especially when immediate implementation is required.

Financial Challenges and Staffing Needs Funding for schools is being reduced, leading to financial strain and challenges in maintaining staffing levels.

Strategic priorities for the next three to five years include managing rising staffing costs amidst decreasing funding and addressing the increasing needs of students with additional needs, particularly in primary education.

There is a significant increase in students with additional needs, particularly in primary schools, creating pressure on resources and staffing.

Schools are struggling to find appropriate spaces for specialized provisions for high-need pupils due to limited classroom availability.

The trust is open to supporting schools with tailored services without necessarily requiring them to join the trust.

There is a gap in the market for business support services for maintained schools, particularly in recruiting business managers and finance professionals.

CFO – Large mixed Trust

The Trust operates 30 schools, comprising 25 primary and 5 secondary, primarily in areas of high deprivation in South Tyneside, Sunderland, and East Durham.

The Trust has experienced rapid growth, expanding from 4 to 30 schools since 2020, primarily through a diocesan plan for growth.

The Trust employs approximately 1,400 staff, including a central services team of about 50, which supports schools with finance, HR, IT, and school improvement.

Most schools within the Trust have moderate to high levels of pupil premium funding, with only a few having lower levels of deprivation.

Central Services and Autonomy The Trust offers a well-established central services team that provides close relationships and support to schools, differentiating it from local authority services.

Schools can opt into trust-wide initiatives, such as character development and reading phonics, but retain the autonomy to choose their own curriculum and improvement plans.

The Trust is funded through a 5% top slice from school budgets, which supports central services and school improvement initiatives.

Financial Management and Challenges Schools experience varying levels of funding for pupil premium and SEND, leading to resource gaps and challenges in supporting students without formal funding.

Headteachers are protective of their budgets, even in deficit situations, complicating financial management across the trust.

Integrated curriculum financial planning is used to address staffing needs and budget constraints, with a focus on avoiding redundancies through careful planning.

Efficiency initiatives have led to significant cost savings without layoffs, achieved through collaborative budget reviews and staffing adjustments.

The trust aims to maintain educational quality while implementing budget cuts, with agreed principles to protect essential staffing levels in small schools.

There is a commitment to keep financially vulnerable faith schools open, regardless of their viability, requiring support from more robust schools.

Procurement and Supplier Management There is a desire for centralised procurement to achieve cost efficiencies, but concerns about limiting individual school choice persist.

Past procurement issues highlighted the importance of strong school voice and headteacher involvement in contract implementation.

Key factors in supplier selection include cost, quality, workload reduction, and social value initiatives, with a focus on ethical practices.

Trust pricing for educational products is necessary to ensure affordability for smaller schools.

Lessons learned from a failed contract include the need for clear expectations and effective feedback mechanisms between suppliers and schools.

Strategic Priorities and Future Outlook Supporting vulnerable students and those with SEND is identified as the primary strategic priority moving forward.

The trust is cautious about AI, viewing it as an opportunity but recognizing the need for careful governance and implementation.

Centralized IT infrastructure is being developed to ensure consistency and efficiency across schools, with a focus on equitable resource allocation.

There is a focus on balancing centralisation with maintaining school individuality, particularly regarding resource procurement and decision-making

CFO – Early years & Primary Trust

The trust consists of 12 primary schools and 4 nurseries, primarily free schools, with plans to grow to 24 schools in the next few years.

Schools join the trust voluntarily, and all current schools are performing well, with no underperforming schools.

The trust is open to taking on struggling schools but has faced challenges in attracting them despite its strong performance record.

Educational Vision and Curriculum The trust promotes a child-focused vision of "learn, enjoy, succeed," emphasizing holistic education beyond academics.

Each school has the autonomy to develop its own curriculum, with some focusing on unique subjects like finance and STEM.

The Director of Education is currently assessing curriculum adjustments in light of upcoming guidelines, with a focus on mitigating risks.

Centralisation vs. Autonomy There is a tension between autonomy and centralisation; previous attempts at centralisation did not yield positive results, particularly in areas where the central team lacked expertise.

The trust has found value in utilizing school-based champions

for specific areas, such as special educational needs (SEN), rather than relying solely on central team members.

Operational Efficiency and Technology Centralized services include finance, payroll, and compliance, while schools retain control over their budgets and development plans.

A common management information system (MIS) was adopted to streamline operations, with a focus on user-friendly design and comprehensive training for school staff.

The new finance system, Xero, improved efficiency by automating invoice processing and providing real-time access to financial data, enhancing trust and accountability among school leaders.

Integration between systems (e.g., finance and MIS) is currently limited, requiring manual reconciliation, which is seen as a necessary but time-consuming process.

Performance Management & Sustainability Performance management is conducted through termly reports that identify specific areas needing attention, allowing for targeted interventions based on data analysis.

The trust has introduced a 20% sustainability metric in procurement, reflecting a commitment to sustainability in response to net zero initiatives.

Sustainability metrics have been added to procurement processes, reflecting a commitment to environmental considerations alongside traditional evaluation criteria.

Challenges and Future Directions Challenges include a rising number of SEND students, with concerns about inadequate training and resources to support them effectively in mainstream schools.

Funding issues are significant, particularly with decreasing student numbers leading to financial strain and challenges in maintaining experienced staff.

The trust is exploring ways to generate additional revenue, including potential commercialization of services, but faces limitations due to its small size and resource constraints.

AI implementation has been trialled but faced challenges, particularly in maintaining meaningful interaction in primary education; the trust is currently reviewing its AI policy.

CFO – Small mixed Trust

A three-school multi-academy trust comprising an infant school, a junior school, and a secondary school, with a total of approximately 1,746 students. The CFO has a diverse background in education and management, transitioning from roles in retail and hospitality to education administration.

The CFO is actively involved in trust strategy and procurement, overseeing budgets and managing financial reports, while also coordinating software implementation and procurement processes. The trust is not aggressively pursuing growth but is open to opportunities that align with their community-focused mission, preferring to maintain control over their operations.

The CFO believes that the trust offers benefits such as strong leadership, stable staffing, and potential cost savings through economies of scale, despite the diminishing central services from local authorities. Centralized systems are being developed for IT and compliance, while financial procedures remain aligned but largely managed at the school level to ensure contextual understanding of local needs.

Financial Management and Funding The funding model involves receiving GAG funding, with each school maintaining its own bank account and a small percentage (approximately 3%) top-sliced for central services, which is lower than some other trusts. The CFO discusses the financial management of a smaller trust, noting a budget increase from 2.5% to 3% over five years, which is low compared to other trusts that may take

up to 10%.

Funding challenges are significant, with the school being among the lowest funded per pupil in the city, leading to tight financial control and the need for cost-saving measures. Rising costs, particularly in salaries and the level of need not being matched by funding, are creating pressure to make tough financial decisions.

Potential areas for cost savings include catering and cleaning services, though these require significant effort and time to implement. Energy efficiency measures, such as switching to LED lighting, have resulted in reduced energy bills, although initial capital investment is necessary. Staffing strategies include employing cover supervisors to reduce supply costs and ensure continuity of care for students.

Technology plays a role in improving efficiency, with enhanced accounting software allowing for better reporting and tracking of pupil premium spending. The senior leadership team values a broader perspective on cost-saving measures, considering the overall benefits, such as improved reporting and reduced staff workload, rather than just immediate financial savings.

Educational Strategies and Challenges Educational improvements are supported through external partnerships and collaborative professional development opportunities for staff across the trust. The school demographic is changing, with an

increasing number of students with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and special educational needs (SEN).

Surveys are conducted to monitor staff and student well-being and perceptions, aiding in understanding the impact of changes. Ongoing challenges include adapting to post-COVID realities, managing SEN needs, and planning for infrastructure improvements.

School improvement plans are developed with central guidance but allow for school-specific adaptations based on individual needs.

Decision-Making and Compliance Emphasis is placed on evaluating products beyond cost, considering user experience and efficiency in decision-making. Centralized decision-making for compliance and safeguarding software is in place. A collaborative approach in selecting software involves various stakeholders in the evaluation process to ensure unanimous decisions. Uncertainty in government policies and funding complicates long-term planning and budgeting for schools.

Societal changes in parental attitudes towards education are impacting school dynamics and expectations. Risk aversion in decision-making is prevalent due to financial uncertainties, leading to delays in significant investments.

CEO – Large mixed Trust

The Trust consists of 24 schools, mostly primaries, including a mix of infant, junior, and one secondary school. About 50% of the schools joined the Trust voluntarily, while others were forced to academize. The Trust positions itself as a partnership, emphasizing support rather than a sales approach to attract schools.

Leadership and Structure

The CEO has been in office for five years, overseeing significant growth and restructuring within the Trust. The central team was restructured to include specialized roles, such as a Chief Financial and Operations Officer (CFOO) and dedicated education and operations leads, improving efficiency and expertise.

The previous operational structure was deemed ineffective, leading to the creation of specialized roles to enhance accountability and performance.

The CEO emphasizes the importance of having qualified specialists in key roles, which has positively impacted the Trust's operations and educational outcomes.

Educational Quality and Performance The Trust has divided its schools into four hubs for better collaboration and support, focusing on educational quality assurance and school improvement.

The Trust is experiencing growth in pupil numbers despite a general population dip, attributed to the quality of education provided.

Standardized assessments, were implemented to address discrepancies between reported and actual student performance. The use of Fisher Family Trust (FFT) data for monitoring pupil progress and attainment is highlighted, along with daily tracking of attendance, behaviour, and incidents.

Financial Management and Procurement Financial management includes detailed monitoring of budgets and staffing ratios, with a focus on eliminating inefficiencies.

Emphasizes the importance of centralizing procurement to achieve better deals and quality partnerships rather than merely focusing on cost savings.

Highlights the need for quality over price, particularly in energy procurement, and a commitment to carbon neutrality, even if it incurs higher costs.

Discusses the importance of due diligence when selecting suppliers, including seeking feedback from current users and testing products at scale.

Curriculum and Governance There is a desire for a standardized curriculum, but logistical challenges due to diverse school contexts make it impractical; instead, a "freedom within

a framework" approach is adopted.

Subject leads collaborate to share best practices, and while there is some standardization in core subjects, schools retain autonomy in curriculum choices.

The dynamic between school leaders and local committees shows a tension between individual school identity and the push for standardization.

Strategic Priorities and Values Emphasis on collaboration within the central team and schools, focusing on strategic direction rather than details.

Main strategic priorities include quality teaching, well-being, and effective governance, with a strong emphasis on kindness as a core value.

Commitment to empowering school leaders rather than doing tasks for them, reflecting a shift in governance and support.

Openness to engaging with beta versions of educational products, highlighting a willingness to innovate and trial new approaches.

Perspective on the education sector as a whole, prioritizing student outcomes and sector improvement over individual institutional interests.

CEO – Middle sized Trust

The Trust consists of 12 schools, including one high school and 11 primary schools, serving approximately 3,500 students and 520 staff, primarily located in Norfolk.

All schools within the Trust were mandated to academize due to being in a state of failure, but the Trust has successfully improved their performance, with all schools now rated as good or better.

Financial Management The Trust charges a standard top-slice fee of 8% for its services, which includes back-office support, HR, finance, IT, and governance, emphasizing the value of their comprehensive offerings compared to lower percentage competitors.

Financial management is a significant concern, with the Trust willing to take on schools with deficits if they can support recovery efforts, prioritizing the educational needs of children.

The Trust has successfully negotiated energy contracts, resulting in significant savings that are reinvested into school estates for maintenance and decoration.

Operational Efficiency Centralized operations streamline hiring processes, allowing schools to focus on educational priorities.

The organization emphasizes a balance between centralisation and autonomy, allowing schools to cater to their unique

community needs while managing operational tasks centrally.

Feedback from school leaders is collected termly to assess the effectiveness of centralized services, with adjustments made based on their input.

Alignment of HR and finance systems has improved operational efficiency and staff experience.

Curriculum and Instruction The organization utilizes a centrally developed curriculum from the Knowledge Schools Trust, with ongoing training provided to schools.

Autonomy versus centralisation is a key discussion point, with the Trust providing a standardized curriculum while allowing low-risk schools more flexibility to adapt it.

Sustainability and Energy Efficiency Energy efficiency and sustainability are priorities for the Trust, with initiatives like LED lighting and potential solar panel installations.

Behavioural changes among students have led to significant savings in energy usage.

Challenges and Future Growth centralisation efforts have faced challenges, particularly when ops staff lacked educational backgrounds, impacting procurement and contract management.

A failed GDPR contract highlighted the importance of effective contract management and relationship building with service providers.

Future growth is essential for increasing income and improving service quality, with plans to add five schools in three years.

The Trust is exploring centralizing maintenance and supply services to reduce costs and improve efficiency.

Staff Development and Retention Strategies to address teacher workload, recruitment, and retention include developing an employee value proposition and enhancing professional development opportunities.

The organization is undergoing an IT refresh, focusing on hardware replacement and ensuring adequate training for effective use.

Commercialization and Market Expansion The Trust is open to commercializing services offered to other trusts, with plans to formalize and market these offerings.

Concerns exist regarding potential changes from Ofsted and the curriculum review, with a focus on managing the impact of these changes centrally

CFO – Secondary Focused Trust

The Trust operates nine schools, including three small primary schools and six secondary schools, with a total of approximately 6,626 students and around 1,277 staff, which can increase to about 1,500 with casual staff.

The Trust has made notable progress, with one school recognized as the second most improved in terms of progress and for disadvantaged students in the country, although it started from a low base.

Operational Challenges There are challenges related to purchasing and integrating systems across the Trust, as existing systems do not communicate well, leading to inefficiencies in data management and compliance monitoring.

Recruitment processes are hindered by outdated paper-based forms and lack of effective software packages, leading to inefficiencies.

Concerns exist about the limitations of current financial software, which is not evolving to meet the organization's needs, leading to inefficiencies in reporting and data management.

Leadership and Management

The CFO, has a background in sales and marketing before transitioning into education, where she has taken on roles that

support school improvement and operations.

Involving head teachers in the decision-making process for the new MIS was challenging, as many were resistant to change due to familiarity with existing systems.

School Improvement Initiatives Implemented a shared service model for finance, HR, compliance, and catering, enhancing operational structure and support.

Emphasized high standards in behaviour management, leading to reduced classroom disruptions and improved learning time.

Recommended specific educational products and curricula, while allowing head teachers autonomy in spending decisions.

Established a centralized English curriculum, with ongoing development in other subjects, particularly vocational education.

School improvement team actively engages with schools, providing direct support and monitoring through regular lesson drop-ins.

Communication and Collaboration Acknowledged challenges in communication and the need for repeated messaging to ensure staff understand policies and procedures.

Participants discussed the challenges of communication and reporting within schools, emphasizing the need for clear and concise information to avoid overwhelming staff.

There is a trend towards greater centralisation of curriculum and services, with a focus on building trust and collaboration among schools rather than dictation.

Strategic Focus and Technology The mission is to provide a world-class education, with values centred on dreaming big, kindness, responsibility, and possibility, particularly addressing the educational underperformance in regions.

The importance of prioritizing initiatives that directly support educational outcomes was highlighted, especially in HR and operational strategies.

Investment in technology, such as recruitment and budgeting software, has improved tracking and data management, but does not directly increase resources.

AI tools, such as Gemini, are being utilized for procurement and contract management, significantly reducing the time required for tasks like creating business cases and job descriptions.

Workflow management systems have improved processes for recruitment and onboarding, but there is a desire for more advanced AI integration in financial operations.

CFO – Roman Catholic Trust

The Trust consists of 15 schools, including 2 secondary and 13 primary schools, primarily serving three local authority areas.

It is a Roman Catholic multi-academy trust and the largest secondary faith school in the country.

Operational Support and Management The Trust offers a developed centralized operational support system, including finance, HR, data, IT, catering, premises, and safeguarding.

Funding is pooled among schools, with a fixed management fee of 8%, which may vary based on the level of support needed.

Heads of schools are involved in decision-making processes, providing feedback and ensuring that local needs are met while adhering to the Trust's strategic goals.

Curriculum and Educational Approach The Trust aims for a more centralized curriculum approach while allowing for local contextual differences among schools.

School improvement plans are guided by a trust-wide strategic plan, with flexibility for local adaptations.

There is a move towards greater conformity in curriculum resources, particularly in primary education, with a focus on reading and phonics.

The Trust has implemented a one-to-one device program in secondary schools, which has received positive feedback, while primary schools currently operate on a two-to-one ratio.

Challenges and Strategic Priorities There is a significant challenge in managing high levels of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) students, which impacts funding and resources.

The Trust's strategic priorities focus on growth, particularly in expanding nursery provisions and wraparound care, amidst financial challenges.

Future strategic priorities include maintaining staff morale amid potential funding challenges and exploring AI to enhance educational offerings.

Performance Monitoring and Procurement Success is measured through KPIs and benchmarking against similar schools, with regular reporting to the resource committee.

The Trust uses KPIs to monitor various aspects of school performance, including teacher and adult contact time.

Heads of schools have autonomy in budget decisions, allowing them to address specific needs, particularly in enrichment activities like trips and arts.

The Trust prioritizes ethical procurement, ensuring suppliers align with their sustainability strategy and do not engage in child labour.

A significant efficiency initiative involved securing fixed energy rates for multiple schools, protecting them from market fluctuations.

Challenges in procurement were highlighted by a failed integration of payroll and HR systems, leading to time and resource losses.

Collaboration with other trusts and local networks is utilized for sharing procurement insights and best practices.

CFO – Alternative Provision Trust

The Trust consists of two alternative provision schools in Birmingham, formed in 2013, originally stemming from a network of 12 schools.

The Trust is currently experiencing growth and is exploring options for expanding its provision, including potentially taking over underperforming alternative providers.

Educational Focus and Challenges The Trust primarily focuses on academic outcomes, offering six GCSEs, contrasting with many alternative providers that emphasize vocational training.

There is a push from the government to shift alternative provision towards a "revolving door" model, aiming for shorter stays and reintegration into mainstream schools.

Students typically should spend a term in alternative provision, but many remain for longer due to systemic pressures and a lack of available spaces in local schools.

There is a noted increase in students with special educational needs (SEN) being treated as behavioural issues, complicating the identification and support of their needs.

Funding and Financial Management Funding for the Trust comes from the pre-16 high needs block, with a base rate of £10,000 per place, which is insufficient given the high needs of the students.

The trust currently operates on a per pupil charge model for funding, with plans to move towards a pooled funding model in the future.

Funding challenges are exacerbated by stagnant high needs block funding, which has not increased in over a decade, while staffing costs have risen significantly.

Operational Efficiency and centralisation The Trust has centralized operational services, including finance, HR, and procurement, to improve efficiency and consistency across the two schools.

The organization is working to centralize procurement processes across two schools to achieve economies of scale and improve operational efficiency.

Schools are generally supportive of centralisation for procurement and back-office functions, as it alleviates their administrative burdens.

Procurement decisions are initiated at the academy level, with central discussions determining suitable suppliers, while educational resources are primarily managed by the interviewee or the CEO.

Future Directions and Concerns There is a potential shift in government policy towards larger academy trusts managing

their own alternative provisions, which may impact smaller trusts.

The organization is contemplating expanding its offerings to include more vocational training to align with government expectations and improve educational outcomes.

The upcoming curriculum review may influence the trust's decisions regarding subject offerings and qualifications, although significant changes are not anticipated.

The interviewee expresses concern about the sustainability of smaller trusts in a competitive environment where consolidation is becoming more common. Multi-academy trusts (MATs) operate as volume businesses, requiring a larger number of schools to be financially viable.

The cost of providing centralized services within MATs is significant, impacting their ability to grow and develop.

The bureaucratic nature of government regulations complicates financial planning and operational flexibility within educational settings.

Education professionals are motivated by a commitment to student welfare, despite the overwhelming pressures and challenges they face in the system.



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