

# Pre-Opening Resource

*Growing your multi-academy trust*

January 2020

**New  
Schools  
Network**

## Introduction

This guide provides introductory advice about the key factors to consider when growing your Multi Academy Trust (MAT). As you read this you should bear in mind that there is no perfect model of growth and each MAT's situation will be different. For information on how to get more tailored advice from NSN's expert associates about how to grow your MAT, please contact the NSN Delivery Team at [open@newschoolsnetwork.org](mailto:open@newschoolsnetwork.org).

If you are interested in growing your MAT you should contact your [Regional Schools Commissioner \(RSC\)](#). They will assess your capacity to grow and how your plans fit within the vision for their region.

## What type of schools should make up a MAT?

The composition of different MATs varies widely and there is not one specific model that will work in all contexts. A MAT can be constructed in the following ways:

- All free schools
- All 'converter' and 'sponsored' academies (where converters became academies when they were rated Good or Outstanding and sponsored were rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate)
- A mix of free schools, converter and sponsored academies

The type and phase of schools within a MAT might also differ. Some MATs may be made up of only special schools or only mainstream primary schools, for example, whilst others might be mixed. You should consider how much you want the schools in your MAT to differ and what benefits and challenges your proposed model might bring. It is also worth thinking about whether you will begin to serve a particular age range or type of pupil and then expand, and when this transition would take place.

## How large should a MAT be?

At the time of writing, the majority of MATs contain five schools or less, with many of these looking to grow further. Figure 1 shows lessons learnt from existing MATs about the number of schools in a MAT against the rate of challenge of operating with this number of schools.

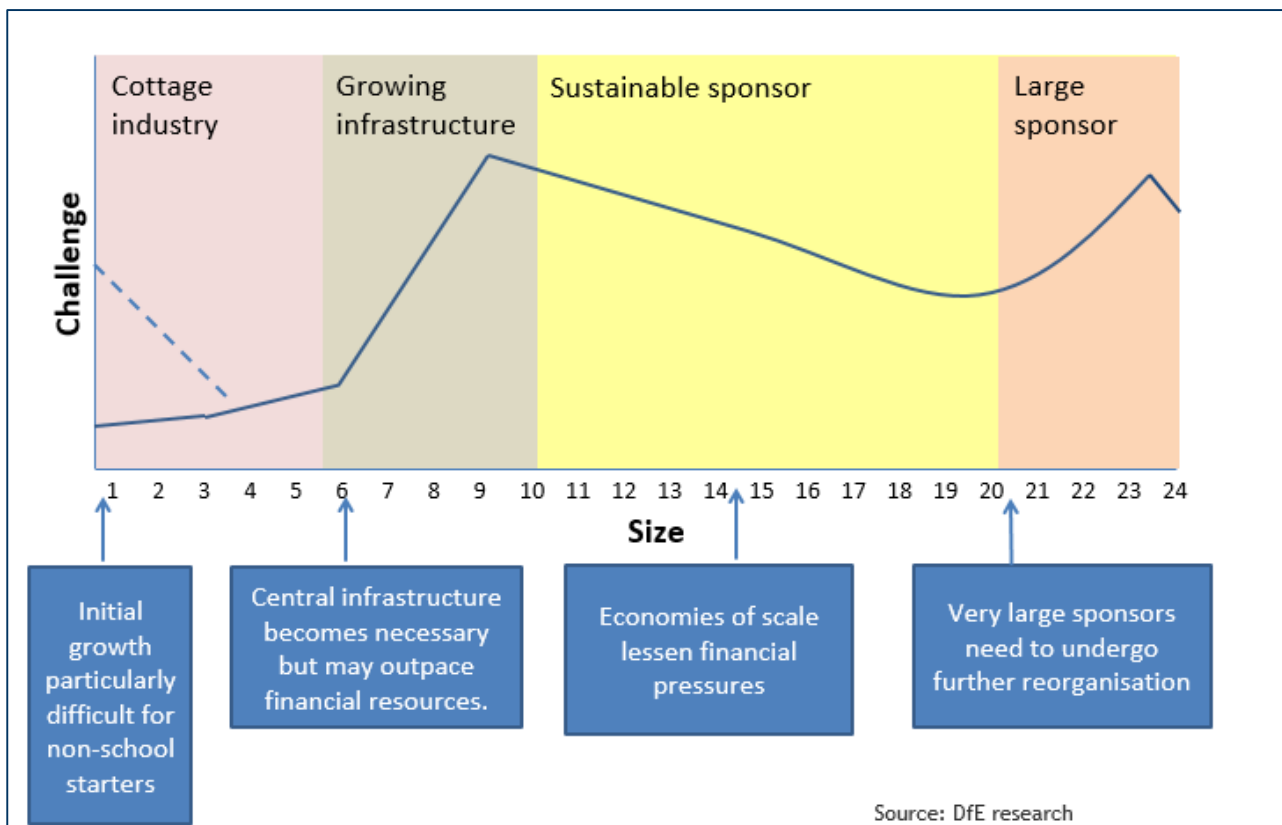


Figure one

## How fast should a MAT grow?

Different MATs have pursued different rates of growth, which can be seen in Figure 2. Growth is unlikely to follow an even rate; most chains have seen steady expansion followed by a 'big bang' at certain points.

Some chains that have expanded very quickly have had problems maintaining the quality of their provision. However, the Department for Education (DfE) has not found evidence that chains of a certain scale or growth trajectory are more likely to underperform.

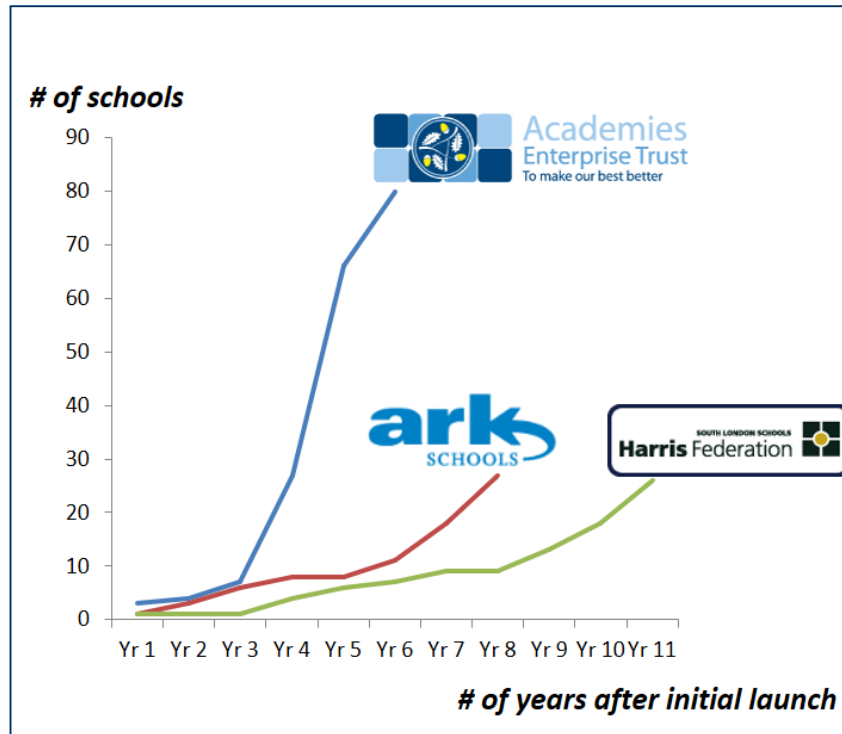


Figure two

## Where should schools in a MAT be located?

High performing trusts stress the importance of proximity between schools to allow for effective collaboration and shared resources. Figure 3 shows two ways in which this could be achieved. Again, you should consider how this will evolve as the MAT grows further.

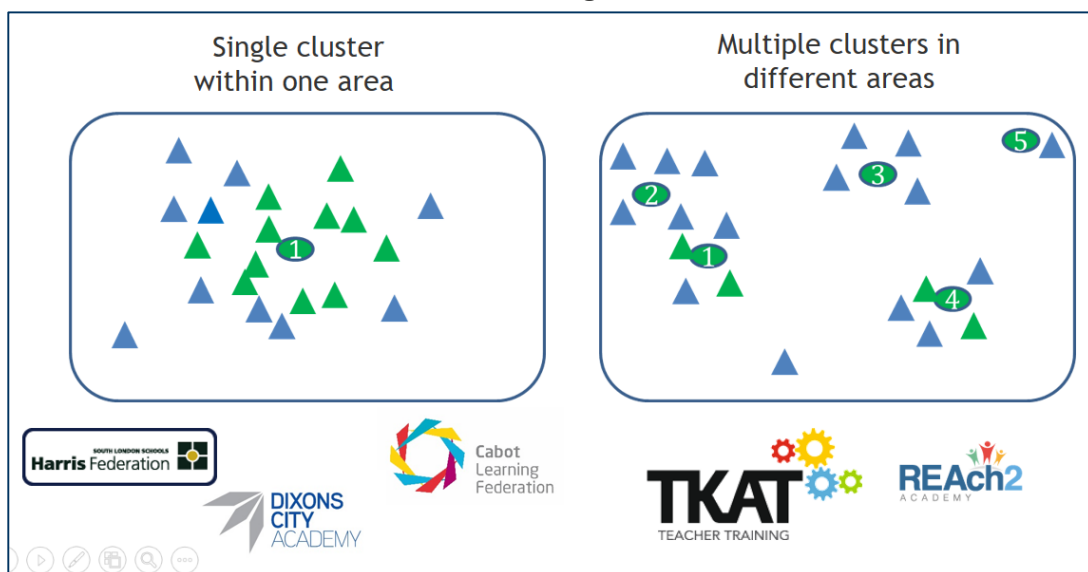


Figure three

## How should a MAT be led and governed?

### Leadership posts

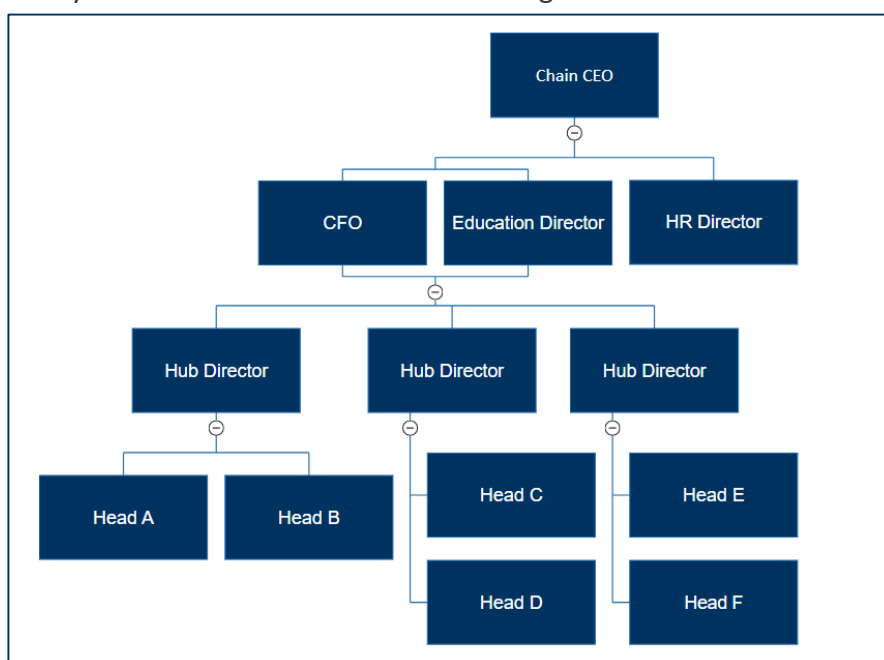
As a MAT grows it will need to develop its leadership structure to ensure that it has oversight over all its schools. It may contain the following posts, although you will need to be clear about what these mean in practice in your specific MAT.

- CEO
- Executive Principal
- Principal
- Head of School

Clarity around who is responsible and accountable for what is particularly important when there are different layers of leadership. You should think about who is responsible for the day to day running of each school and who will be named as the Headteacher on the Ofsted report.

### Example leadership structure

The shape of leadership structures within high performing chains is broadly similar, though varies by size. It may eventually look like this once it contains enough schools:



- Investing in strong financial planning skills, possibly from the business world, is critical
- HR issues become increasingly important as chains grow in size
- Hub director/Executive Principals may be necessary as the chain grows
- Heads of school are nurtured as future leaders
- Heads of school and other SLT deployed flexibly across the chain

## Governance structure

As a MAT you will need to consider whether you will introduce a Local Governing Body (LGB) for each school and how much autonomy will be delegated to these from the trust board. Some (for example converter academies) may have more autonomy than others (for example new free schools).

See our guidance on [governance in academy trusts](#) for more information about this and speak to our Delivery Team about how to access a meeting with an expert associate.

## What should a MAT provide its schools?

### Central services

As MATs grow they would usually centralise particular services in order to benefit from economies of scale and ensure consistency across the trust. These services might include:

- Finance
- School Improvement
- Human Resources
- Legal
- IT
- Building and facilities management
- Insurance
- Health and Safety
- Policies
- Governance Services

### Finance

All funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and Local Authority (LA) is paid directly to the MAT rather than the individual schools within it. The trust will determine a percentage of income to retain from each school to pay for central services. Usually school specific grants and pupil premium will be paid directly to the school.

## Links and further information

### MAT governance

NSN guidance on governance in Multi Academy Trusts can be found [here](#).

### Regional Schools Commissioners

Contact details for the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) in each region as well as their vision statement and outline of their role can be found [here](#).

### Good practice

The Department for Education's (DfE) resources to help MATs thinking about expanding can be found [here](#) and their [good practice guidance](#) gives advice on what [RSCs](#) look for when they assess and approve the establishment of new MATs and plans for growth of existing MATs.

### MAT case studies

[This document](#), accessible to Optimus Education members, includes case studies from MAT CEOs and trustees on governance and gain advice on how to build a trust board.

## Support for schools in pre-opening

NSN has supported free school groups in pre-opening since 2014. NSN's unrivalled knowledge and experience has been informed by our work with over 70% of open and approved free school groups throughout the application and pre-opening phases.

[The NSN Delivery Programme](#) has been meticulously designed to address the challenges of the rigorous pre-opening process. Whilst proposer groups may have a wealth of skills and expertise, the NSN Delivery Programme will fill gaps in capacity and/or capability, providing a range of support options to prepare schools for a successful opening.

Our exclusive packages of advice, support and project management have been developed to comply with Department for Education (DfE), and Free Schools Capital (FSC) guidance and focuses on the areas that our experience shows will provide free schools with the most value in pre-opening.

### NSN Delivery Programme

#### Foundation Advisory Service

All approved projects have access to our core advisory service, which is free of charge. This foundational offer includes:

- An invitation to our annual launch event, delivered in partnership with the DfE
- A telephone and email service
- Key pre-opening resources
- Invitations to our Spotlight events at open free schools
- An invitation to our events focusing on the final stages of pre-opening

#### Site Advisory Service

Relevant to both sequential and concurrent groups, the NSN Site Advisory Service helps groups to navigate the complex process of securing a site and suitable free school building. Developed to complement the support provided by LocatED and FSC, the service includes:

- A named NSN Project Manager
- Access to NSN Site Associates
- Comprehensive and exclusive guidance resources about free school capital projects
- In-depth support meetings with NSN Project Managers and Site Associates
- Detailed feedback from support meetings



### Essentials Advisory Service

Developed to support the project management and delivery of the non-site related challenges you will tackle in pre-opening, the NSN Essentials Advisory Service focuses on areas such as pupil recruitment and admissions, the section 10 consultation, finance, governance, education planning and staffing. The NSN Essentials Advisory Service provides:

- A named NSN Project Manager
- Access to a range of NSN Associates
- Bespoke and exclusive networking opportunities with existing free schools
- In-depth meetings with NSN Project Managers and Associates
- Detailed feedback from support meetings
- Comprehensive and exclusive suite of guidance resources about all aspects of pre-opening
- Spokesperson training for principal designates

### Project Management Partnership Service

Based on our vast experience, and developed with the DfE's Pre-Opening Guidance in mind, the NSN Project Management Partnership is for groups planning to outsource some or all of the project management of their free school in pre-opening.

Split into two phases, the NSN Project Management Partnership takes into account the volume, complexity and timing of tasks in different phases of pre-opening. With additional bolt-on services available to buy, the NSN Project Management Partnership is the most bespoke service offered as part of the NSN Delivery Programme.