

Diocese of Worcester Board of Education

Collaborative Models Strategy

2026-2027



Deuteronomy 33:27

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

1 Peter 4:10

Each of you should use whatever gifts you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms

Loving together, Learning together, Serving together

Summary

Various legal structures exist within which schools can collaborate formally together or work within groups. These include Federations in the case of maintained schools, and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in the case of academies or converting schools.

A school federation is defined in the Education Act 2002 as two or more maintained schools operating under a single governing body. The School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012 set out the structure and arrangements for leaving, joining and dissolving a federation.

A multi-academy trust or MAT is a single legal entity with a board of trustees which is accountable for a number of academies.

This paper covers the main aspects of forming a federation or a MAT and describes how they should be organised, constituted and run. The paper should be read alongside diocesan [policy](#) and [strategy](#) for academisation and [maintained](#) school and [academy](#) governance guidance.

Practical Application

Working Together

Government policy in recent years has increasingly been to encourage schools to work together where this is to the benefit of individual school standards and of benefit to the pupils in an area. The forthcoming Education White Paper (Autumn 2025) is also expected to offer greater clarity and guidance on collaborative models moving forward. To date, legislation has created the legal mechanism for schools to collaborate and to form legal partnerships, such as Federations in the case of maintained schools, and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in the case of academies or schools seeking to convert.

Collaboration is seen as positive in a number of ways. Schools may be stronger together as they can support each other, sharing expertise, knowledge and resources. They can also achieve cost savings by re-structuring their senior management and governance for example.

The latest governance guidance by the Department for Education identifies that *'The establishment and membership of a federation means that the governors and school leaders commit to improving the outcomes and life chances for all children across the federation, as opposed to just a single school'* and that *'Every governing body should consider whether converting to an academy and forming or joining a multi-academy trust under the leadership of a single trust board would be in the best interest of the school'*.

Multi-academy Trusts (MATs)

Most academies now operate with MATs, however based on earlier legislation, there are still a number of single standalone trusts. These are often Secondary schools but not exclusively so. The government are currently allowing schools to continue operate as single academy trusts (SATs) provided they are successful and sustainable, however there is an expectation that they will join a strong MAT overtime.

Church schools can join an existing approved MAT and MATs can expand by offering membership to other SATs or converting maintained schools. The Diocese of Worcester Academisation Strategy and Policy offer greater detail into MAT structures and options.

Collaborative Partnerships

A collaborative partnership is an informal arrangement which does not carry any formal governance or accountability. Each academy trust carries its own governing body but agrees to work together on particular areas of interest.

Trust partnerships or Associate Membership

A trust partnership or associate membership is a sector-led arrangement where a school and trust work together, testing whether a formal partnership will benefit both parties. [Trust Partnerships — Guidance for Academy Trusts and Prospective Joiners](#), published by the DfE in October 2021, provides non-statutory advice for trusts who wish to set up formalised partnership arrangements.

The guidance states that trusts considering a partnership should:

- ensure they are clear from the outset on the objectives of the relationship
- consider the “hidden costs” of any arrangement — particularly the amount of time and resource needed from academy trust leaders
- carry out due diligence.

Schools considering a trust partnership or associate membership are advised to take time to consider and engage the right academy trust. Church schools should consult with the diocese prior to seeking a trust partnership and receive consent to do so. Such partnerships would only be considered where the MAT is a viable option for academisation. In some circumstances (pyramid school models) the diocese may consider the partnership of a church school with a MAT not featured in the diocesan academisation strategy, if this of specific benefit to the pupils. However, the diocese will provide written clarity that this will not become a formal MAT home for the school.

MAT Governance

A MAT is governed by a single overarching trust board.

The MAT is accountable for all of the academies within a trust. This means that MAT trustees must govern in the interests of the trust as a whole, setting the vision for the trust and holding the executive leader to account.

The board oversees strategic relationships with external stakeholders, including the involvement of parents, schools and communities. Where appropriate, it will also involve dioceses and the religious authorities, so that decision-making is supported by meaningful engagement.

There should be no “lead school” even if one school initiated the formation of the MAT.

The boards of academies and MATs, like all schools, should be “tightly focused” and no larger than they need to be to have all the necessary skills to carry out their functions effectively, with every member actively contributing relevant skills and experience.

The trust board should be structured with the expertise to deliver on the 5 pillars of academy trust quality as outlined in the [Commissioning High Quality Trust Guidance](#).

1. High-quality and inclusive education
2. School improvement
3. Workforce

4. Finance and operations
5. Governance and leadership

The exact relationship between the MAT and its family of schools varies according to need. However, there will be a shared vision, aims and procedures to which all the schools subscribe. In a mixed MAT containing both church and community schools, the church school must have its own unique Christian vision with a theological underpinning.

Both committees and local school boards or equivalent within a MAT are made up of representatives reflected in their previous instrument of government. It should be recognised that local school board members are not trustees of the MAT and overall accountability sits with the trust board.

Federations

The DfE encourages any maintained school that wishes to join with another school to explore the multi-academy trust model for collaboration. However, local authority-maintained schools are also able to group together in “federations” in much the same way as academies can in a MAT.

A school federation is defined in law under the Education Act 2002 as two or more maintained schools operating under the governance of a single governing body. The purpose of such a federation is to bring advantages to all the schools involved, sharing expertise and resources as a group, but also continuing to function as individual schools.

The School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012 set out the federation structure, how schools may join and leave and how a federation may be dissolved. Also applicable are the School Governance (Constitution and Federations) (England) Amendment Regulations 2016.

Further guidance is provided in:

- [*Federations: Guidance on the Governance Processes*](#), online guidance from the DfE updated in September 2022.

In 2016 the National Governance Association launched a campaign to raise awareness of the advantages of federations to school improvement. Details of [Federation First](#) can be found on the NGA website. Tools include an FAQ and links to NGA Federation Champions.

All categories of maintained school can federate together, including voluntary-aided, voluntary -controlled, foundation schools and maintained school nurseries. Academy schools cannot federate or join a federation, neither can Pupil Referral Units (PRU) as they are not legally defined as maintained schools.

Federation structures as set out below and are described as ‘Soft’ and ‘Hard’ federation. In a ‘Hard’ federation, one governing body will be created to govern both schools. In a ‘soft’ federation both schools will retain their governing body but will create a sub-committee to assure school alignment.

Where a ‘Hard’ federation is instigated, both the diocese and DfE must be in agreement and statutory approval is needed. Governance will reflect the makeup of the Voluntary-Aided (VA) school where present. If there is no VA school, then governance will reflect that of a Voluntary Controlled (VC) school. If entering into a ‘Hard’ federation with a community school, they must be in agreement that the church school governance model is adhered to.

In creating a single federated governing body, it is important for schools to also understand that the existing governing bodies of both schools do not simply amalgamate into one body. This is because the original governing bodies are dissolved upon the date of federation and a new governing body of the federation is incorporated.

Federation Structures

A federation can include any number of schools from two upwards. The original governing bodies of the schools are dissolved and the governing body of the federation is formed.

[Federations: Guidance on the Governance Processes](#) sets out the main features of federation.

The DfE states that each federated school is treated as an individual school and:

- does not gain, lose or change its religious character through being part of a federation
- continues to have its admissions determined by the appropriate admission authority
- will receive individual budgets
- is inspected individually by Ofsted
- church schools will be individually inspected by SIAMS
- can still be subject to a Direct Academy Order (DAO) — a legal instruction which leads to a maintained school academising and joining a multi academy trust (MAT).

Although governance might be shared, partner schools retain their separate identity and are inspected separately. They also feature separately in league tables. Schools continue to receive separate delegated budgets but will need to consider whether they wish these to be pooled within the federation.

Additionally, the federated governing body, upon receiving the delegated budget for all the schools in the federation, can allocate the budget to each individual school or pool all or part of the budget, with the agreement of governors.

Admissions to each school are determined by the appropriate admission authority (the local authority in the case of community and voluntary controlled schools, and the federated governing body in the case of foundation and voluntary aided schools). Schools do not gain, lose or change their religious character.

Federation Governance

From September 2015, federations must be constituted under the School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012. The 2012 Regulations replaced the earlier 2007 arrangements. They state that the governing body of a federation cannot have fewer than seven governors and must include:

- one parent governor for each school in the federation
- the Head of each federated school (unless the Head resigns as a governor)
- one staff governor
- one local authority governor.

Federations that include foundation or Voluntary-Aided schools must also have foundation or partnership governors.

In a 'Hard' federation there will be one single instrument of governance.

Every time a new school is incorporated into a federation, the instrument of governance has to be rewritten to include another parent governor and possibly the Head of the new school.

Types of Federation

Different types of federation are possible within the regulations, spanning a continuum between “Hard” and “Soft” federations. Schools may opt when beginning their collaboration to take the soft option and incrementally progress to developing a hard federation model.

Federation continuum

Hard 1. Single governing body.

2. Two governing bodies but sharing a committee with delegated powers.

3. Two governing bodies but sharing a committee without delegated powers.

Soft 4. Two governing bodies but sharing an informal committee.

Options 1 and 2 have statutory implications whereas 3 and 4 do not.

Different federations are brought together for different reasons. In some cases, this might be because of difficulties that one school is experiencing and the problems encountered in raising its capacity for improvement. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 originally gave local authorities the option of requiring schools in an Ofsted category to enter into a collaboration or federation.

Categories of Federation

There are five categories of federation, each of which is linked to a specific purpose:

1. Cross-phase federations (all-through) bringing together primary and secondary schools.
2. Size federations — bringing together very small or small and medium-sized schools.
3. Performance federations — bringing together low- and high-performing schools.
4. Faith federations — two or more schools of the same denomination occasionally overlapping with one of the other types of school.
5. Mainstreaming federations — one or more special schools combined with one or more mainstream schools.

Becoming or Joining a Federation

Under the School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012, the procedure governing bodies must follow for becoming or joining a federation is as follows:

- Attend a meeting for which seven clear days’ notice has been given to discuss and consider a report on the proposal to federate.
- If joining an existing federation, give notice of the proposal to the governing body of the federation.
- The federation should decide whether or not to give preliminary consent.
- Publish the proposals and make them available for inspection, sending them to stakeholders and parents.
- Consider the response to the proposals and decide whether to proceed.
- Within one week of determination, whether the decision is to federate or not, inform the local authority and the Secretary of State of the outcome.

- Prepare a new instrument of government.
- Prepare a report about the actions taken by the governing body and make minutes and papers available.
- Make available to the governing body of the federation all minutes and papers of the governing body, including the above report.

In Church of England schools, the governing body must seek consent and consult with the diocese before seeking any kind of federation.

Federations: Guidance on the Governance Processes, states that a formal proposal for consultation must be prepared and approved by all the governing bodies concerned. The proposal can be completed by a joint governance working party set up by the governing bodies involved. This joint committee should include at least one governor from each of the schools proposing to federate.

The DfE states that it is important for the joint committee to discuss leadership and governance structures to avoid misunderstanding and confusion later.

According to the DfE, the governing body of the federation should be no larger than it needs to be to undertake their role and must not be an amalgamation of the existing governing bodies. Furthermore, the DfE states that it should not include all previous members of the federating schools' governing bodies.

The DfE states that schools intending to join an existing federation must give notice of the proposal to federate to the federation's governing body. The governing body of the existing federation then considers whether to:

- give preliminary consent to the school to join the federation
- decline the proposal.

To add a new school to an existing federation the federation must:

- dissolve the existing federation
- set up a new federation with all schools involved
- constitute a new governing body, including elections for elected governor positions.

The guidance stresses that the constitution and size of the new federation's governing body should be considered carefully. It should not be a case of simply adding governors to the existing federation.

Leaving a Federation

In order for a school to leave a federation it must provide a written request to the governing body of the federation signed by:

- two or more governors
- one fifth of the parents of registered pupils
- two-fifths of staff who are paid to work there
- the local authority (LA)

- the trustees of the federated school
- the diocese or body entitled to appoint foundation governors on the governing body.

The governing body must give notices to:

- the LA
- the Head of the federation and each Head of a federated school
- all staff
- all the parents
- anyone else deemed necessary.

Where it is agreed that a school will leave the federation, the LA and diocese must establish a temporary governing body and issue a new instrument of government for the school.

Growing Federations and MATs

As the number of schools that a board governs grows, it should review its existing governance model. Growth beyond three schools usually represents the first real need for a small MAT to overhaul governance arrangements, the DfE state. Likewise, they advise that the governance structures of a small MAT will start to become “stretched” at around six to seven schools and by 10 a further overhaul will be needed.

In order to transition or grow successfully, the DfE suggest that a board should commission a robust independent review of its effectiveness and readiness for growth.

Boards are also advised to refer to [*Trust Partnerships Guidance for Academy Trusts and Prospective Joiners*](#), published by the DfE in October 2021.

This guidance provides non-statutory advice for academy trusts planning to grow, including those establishing new trusts and existing trusts. The document provides a framework which helps trusts at all stages of their development.

Larger MATs and Federations

The organisation a board is governing becomes larger and more complex organisationally and financially the governance model may need to change in a number of ways.

These include changes in:

- culture
- skills
- executive oversight
- structures
- processes and
- risk

Regarding culture, the board must recognise that each school in the group will have its own ethos, but these need to be reconciled into a joint vision across the entire governance structure. This will involve a move away from any sense of “my school/your school”.

Skills wise there will be a growing need to recruit, develop and retain high calibre board members and an effective chair who are able to lead an increasingly complex organisation.

In a larger Federation or MAT, there will be increasing opportunity for a central professional executive team which will include roles such as finance director and chief executive officer (CEO) and possibly executive headteachers. Additional tiers may be needed within non-executive and executive governance structures and there must be absolute clarity on the role and remit of each part of the structure.

In relation to process, there will be an increasing need for the board to be professional in the way it conducts its business and to have standardised procedures in areas such as financial planning and human resources. A more sophisticated understanding of financial, organisational and educational risk is also needed, including risk assessment, mitigation and minimisation.

Converting to Academy Status in a Federation

The governing body of schools in a hard federation need only submit one application to convert all the schools within the federation to academy status. Once schools have converted, the maintained federation ceases to exist and the federated governing body dissolves. Schools will then need to establish an individual local school board or equivalent in line with the articles of association.

An increasing number of trusts are responsible for federations of schools. The exact relationship between the overarching trust and its family of schools varies. However, there is usually a shared vision, aims and agreed procedures across schools that are defined by the trust. It is expected that individual schools will subscribe to this and that in addition to developing according to their own improvement priorities, they will also take a trust-wide approach to improvement and development.

The Academies Act 2010 allows a federated school to convert to academy status without the agreement of the whole federated governing body. The application can be made by no fewer than three governors and must include:

- the Head of the federated school where he or she is a governor
- a parent governor
- a staff governor
- a foundation governor (where applicable).

Under the School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012, if a federation was established after 1 September 2012, a school can close or revert to academy status without going through a statutory procedure. This means that the federated governing body no longer has to dissolve.

Benefits of Federations and MATs

Government strategy is to support the development of MATs and Federations because they believe there are a number of significant benefits in schools and academies working together.

Boards of maintained school federations and the boards of MATs will have a more strategic perspective and will benefit from being able to “compare and contrast” between schools in their group or chain. The DfE also believes

that governing a group of schools through a single board also creates the opportunity for the skills of high-calibre people to be brought to bear in overseeing more schools.

Additional benefits that may be prevalent are:

- sharing safeguarding and safer recruitment best practice and opportunities
- developing a richer and wider curriculum, partly through the ability to recruit and deploy more specialist staff, such as subject specialists or faculty heads who work across schools
- better professional development and career progression opportunities for staff, and better retention of key staff as a result
- bigger leadership challenges for middle and senior leaders, while also easing the overall leadership challenge through more supported leadership roles
- financial gains and efficiencies, including those achieved through economies of scale and shared procurement
- other economies of scale that make employing specialist roles such as finance directors and business managers with vital skills more feasible
- improved relationships between clusters of schools and local services, for example, with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), improving referral and response times
- better prospects for pupils through improved quality of teaching.

The ability to federate under a single governing body or join a MAT with a single board can be particularly beneficial to small schools, or schools that are underperforming, as they are able to share management and governing body responsibility and curriculum expertise.

Where schools, particularly small ones, have been finding it difficult to recruit a new Head, a federation or MAT provides a possible alternative leadership model. Federations and MATs can also help ensure that small schools in some areas are able to continue when threatened with closure.

To work successfully federations and MATs need:

- strong high-calibre leadership
- the presence of a strong middle leadership group
- high levels of trust between the schools
- collaboration at all levels and sound working relationships
- a sense of shared identity and common purpose
- a strong management infrastructure
- a system of monitoring and review a good communication network.

While there are many benefits to working together in a MAT or a federation, it is important that all member schools are committed to a shared vision and strategy. Failure to adopt such a position can create resentments and disagreements, especially where issues of underperformance are involved. In such cases all issues must be clearly and honestly discussed so that a joint way forward is agreed that is to the benefit of all.

Governors' Skills in Federations and MATs

The governing body of a federation or a MAT should have the appropriate skills to ensure the success of the federation or MAT and of all of the schools within it.

Schools and governor should ensure they consider that governing a group of schools is different to governing a single school and inevitably more complex. It is incredibly important to attract people into governance with skills appropriate to the “scale and nature” of their role, including people from a business background. It, therefore, calls on more schools to fully identify the skills that they need in their board and to make use of more specialist recruitment methods to fill governor vacancies.

Governing Bodies and Trust Boards should engage in regular self-review exercises in order to ensure that they have the right skills and structures in place. The NGA guidance, [Governing Board Self-evaluation Questions](#) or equivalent should be followed to ensure robust self-evaluation.

The NGA recommends that boards undertake self-evaluation activity on an annual basis. The suggested self-evaluation questions cover:

- board culture and practice
- board structure
- core functions
- compliance
- evaluation and impact.

Different sets of questions are provided for single schools and for MATs. A RAG (red, amber, green) rating system is also provided to help individual board members respond to the questions.

The Government is keen to see everyone involved in governance, having the confidence to tackle underperformance, to challenge mediocrity, and to set the “highest of expectations,” refusing to accept “second best” for any child. The Government clearly views the development of MATs as an important element in this school improvement agenda.

It is important that federation governors or MAT board members view the Federation or MAT as more than just about “structural change,” but adopt a positive commitment to a shared vision about improving the outcomes and life chances for all pupils throughout the schools involved. They must embrace the advantages that the federation or MAT brings and work collaboratively.

Role of the Head and CEO in a Federation or MAT

There are different possible models that federations or MATs might choose in determining the role of Head.

Trust Partnerships Guidance for Academy Trusts and Prospective Joiners provides the following examples for a federation.

- Each school in the federation has its own headteacher and therefore all headteachers are entitled to a place on the governing board.
- One headteacher has responsibility for all the schools in the federation (and may have the title executive headteacher), and therefore that one headteacher is entitled to a place on the governing board.
- One executive headteacher oversees all the schools in the federation and each school has its own headteacher or head of school, therefore all headteachers or heads of school will be entitled to a place on the governing board.

The DfE often decides against proposals, when constituting a proposed federated governing body, where it carries a headteacher vacancy.

The CEO, or chief executive office, of a MAT is the senior executive leader of the multi academy trust.

The role varies from MAT to MAT but, typically, the CEO leads the executive team and, in some trusts, the headteachers of the various academies in the MAT. The CEO is responsible to the Board of Trustees and is the chief accounting officer of the MAT. They are also responsible for the academic and financial performance of all schools within the MAT.

A CEO is a requirement for all MATs, providing leadership and the link between individual schools and the board.

[*Multi-academy Trust Leadership Development: CEO Content Framework*](#), was published by the DfE in March 2023. The guidance provides a framework outlining the knowledge, skills and behaviours that chief executive officers need to effectively lead a large MAT.

Executive Leadership Development

The National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL) supports the professional development of aspiring and serving executive headteachers and multi-academy trust (MAT) chief executive officers (CEOs). An NPQ can only be taken with a provider accredited by the DfE. The NPQ concerned must also comply with the [*NPQ content and assessment framework*](#) and the [*NPQ quality framework*](#). Applicants must be current or aspiring executive headteachers or CEOs of MATs with responsibility for leading several schools.

List of Relevant Legislation

- School Governance (Constitution and Federations) (England) Amendment Regulations 2016
- Academies Act 2010
- Education and Inspections Act 2006
- Education Act 2002
- School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012
- School Organisation and Governance (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2009