



**Multi-Academy Trust
Governance Survey**

Welcome

to the Multi-Academy Trust Survey Findings 2019

Academisation has transformed the landscape of the English education system in the 17 years since the first academies were established. Trusts of several academies were set up in the years that followed, and these have increased in number and, in some cases, scale – the largest exceeding 60 schools.

Each Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) has a huge amount of autonomy over almost every major aspect of school life, from recruitment of staff to setting the schools' strategic direction and allocating budgets. These changes have fundamentally changed the role of the Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) that have long underpinned the school sector.

A clear majority of young people will spend at least a part of their lives learning within one of these institutions. Latest figures show that 68 % of secondary schools and 31 % of primaries have become academies, and these numbers are increasing every year. With this rapid change to the education system in mind, it's crucial to understand how MATs operate on a structural level.

In a time of squeezed budgets, there's a clear need to better understand how these new organisations delegate their responsibilities. With MATs receiving their funding directly from the Department of Education, where are the financial decisions being made? Is it at the MAT level, or do those decisions sit within individual schools? The drive towards MATs has been partially attributed to economies of scale – if financial decisions are made at a local level, what opportunity is there to take advantage of this?

School governance must be fit for purpose and will therefore vary between size, geographic spread and education level. And the state of development of both the MAT and the schools within it must be taken into consideration when drafting a scheme of delegation.

This report is based on a 2019 survey by education charity Governors for Schools and Irwin Mitchell, one of the UK's largest full-service law firms. It looks at the governance arrangements of 51 MATs, accounting for over 520 schools across England. Our methodology for gathering and analysing the results can be found on page 12.

From a Governors for Schools perspective, this will be important for our core recruitment of volunteers as it will give us a thorough understanding of which skillsets are needed and which are not, as well as the capability of the candidates required. Knowing the skillset sought will allow us to tailor our approaches to businesses and members of the wider community accordingly. We believe that by conducting this research we will be better informed of MAT needs, and therefore, this survey will greatly improve our capacity to benefit governance in schools across England.

About Governors for Schools

Governors for Schools exists to improve educational standards, so that children and young people have the chance to realise their full potential. We believe the key to improving school performance is effective governance. By finding, nurturing and supporting a committed network of governors, we help to drive systematic change in how schools operate. Since 1999, we've been connecting schools across England with skilled and committed volunteers, supported by our business and university partnerships.



Multi-Academy Trusts

MATs have a wide degree of freedom over how they structure their internal systems and work outside of the Local Authority model, which has been in place for decades. Little research has been done to understand how MATs delegate decision-making powers. This report aims to fill the gap as they expand across England.

Previously, all state-funded schools fell under the remit of the Local Authority. Many remain in this position and are required to have Governing Boards. Generally, Governing Boards contain between eight and 15 governors, who have the responsibility of ensuring the school's finances are managed robustly, holding the headteacher to account and determining the school's ethos. These governors are also tasked with appointing the headteacher and sitting on disciplinary hearings. They're expected to analyse performance data, and are often given 'link' roles, which give them areas to focus on within the school. These roles are likely to include curriculum subjects, safeguarding, or the school development plan.

These governors are drawn and elected from various sectors, and typically include staff, parents and governors co-opted from the local community. The Local Authority will appoint one governor, and in religious schools, the relevant religious authority (often the diocese) appoints foundation governors.

Within MATs, the traditional structure of governance has changed. With members, trustees and a CEO in place, the Trust is free to implement their own structure of local governance, if they want to. A MAT's scheme of delegation shows the levels of delegation of responsibility to ensure accountability.

MATs can choose how they name their Local Boards, but for the purpose of this study we'll refer to them as LGBs. MATs can decide to delegate any amount of power to LGBs, in any of the following areas:

- > Setting the school's budget
- > Setting its ethos
- > Analysing performance data
- > Appointing their own members
- > Selecting their own headteachers.

Analysing which powers are more likely to be delegated to LGBs is vital to understand the elements of governance first thought of by CEOs and trustees. Do MATs place the key decisions in the hands of the LGB? Are they given responsibility for the appointment of someone as critical to the future direction of the school as the headteacher? What degree of oversight and input does the trust board have, and is there a variance due to size or locality? Our findings aim to answer these questions.

Key findings



1 There's a lack of consistency across MATs in the delegation of duties

Responses to most of the questions varied widely between MATs of very similar size, showing a striking lack of consistency across the sector when it comes to delegating responsibility.

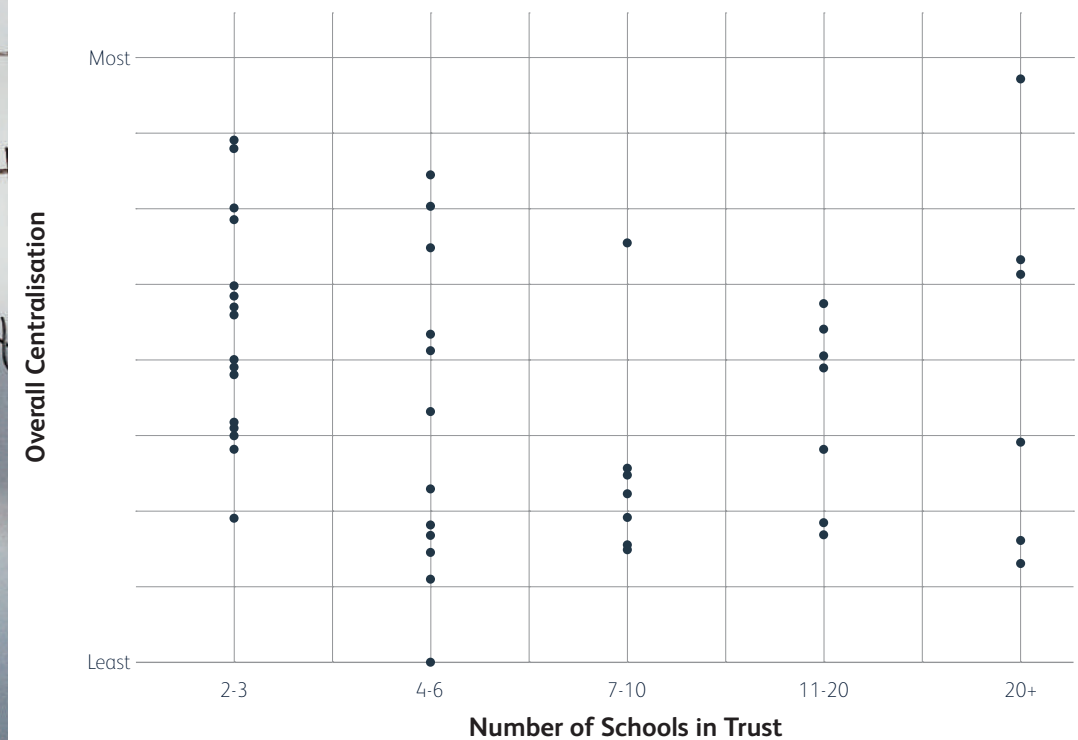
For example, only finance, education and safeguarding skills were consistently sought when looking at recruitment on to MAT boards. There were no consistent results relating to complaints procedures, approval of revenue streams or wraparound care, or who made decisions relating to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision, and the admissions numbers of pupils with additional needs.

2 The size of the MAT has no bearing on its level of centralisation or delegation

Somewhat unexpectedly, the size of each MAT didn't have any effect on its overall Centralisation Score (a score created by combining responses to all questions relating to approval, appointment, review and responsibility).

One very large MAT had the highest centralisation score, but none of the following six high-scoring MATs contained more than five schools.

Figure 1 - Relationship between size of MAT and centralisation score



Interestingly, the two largest MATs to respond to this survey sit at opposing ends of the centralisation spectrum, while the third largest is near the middle.

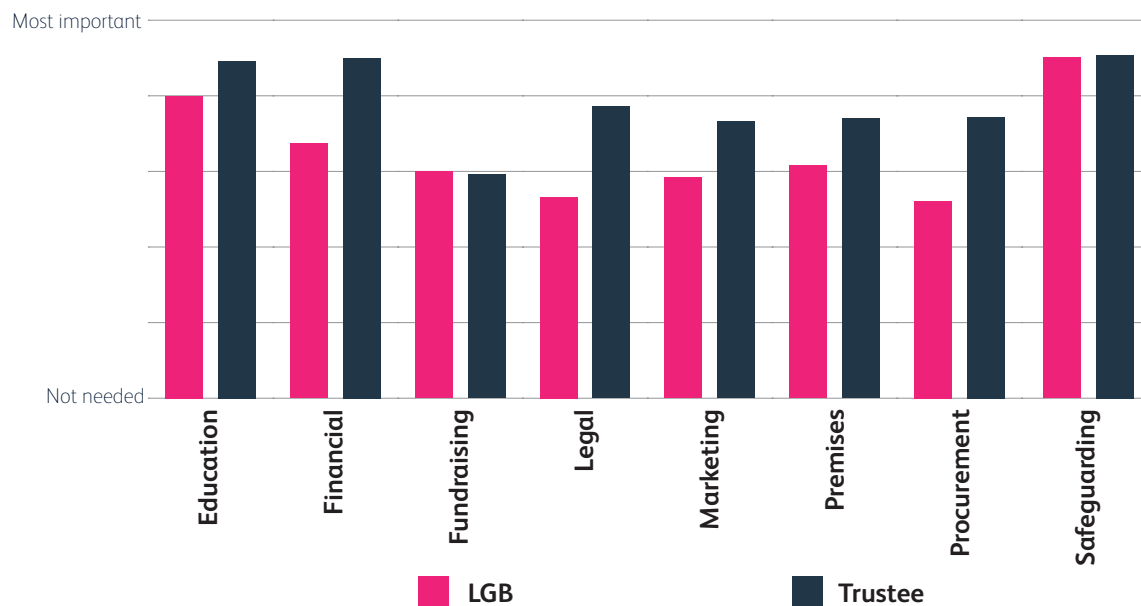
3 MATs want the same skills on their trust boards as they have on the LGBs, and it's more crucial for trustees to hold the desired skills than governors

There's a clear link between the importance of different skillsets across MATs. Our survey found that safeguarding and education are amongst the most important skills at both LGB and trustee levels.

The survey revealed no great difference in the skills sought for trustees and local governors, but there was in their importance. Most skills are deemed to be more important for trustees than LGBs, with finance seen as vital. Legal, marketing, premises, and procurement skills also come close to the top of the list. Interestingly, the need for fundraising skills was slightly lower for trustees than for LGBs, indicating that MATs aren't yet exploring ways to increase their funding at a trustee level.

Placing an increased importance on skills at LGB level wasn't linked to increased responsibilities over appointment of leadership roles.

Figure 2 - LGB and trustee skillsets



4 MATs that delegate more responsibility expect more skilled LGBs

They also expect their trustees to have the same skill level as those in MATs that don't delegate as much.

5 85% of respondents centralise at least some of their budget

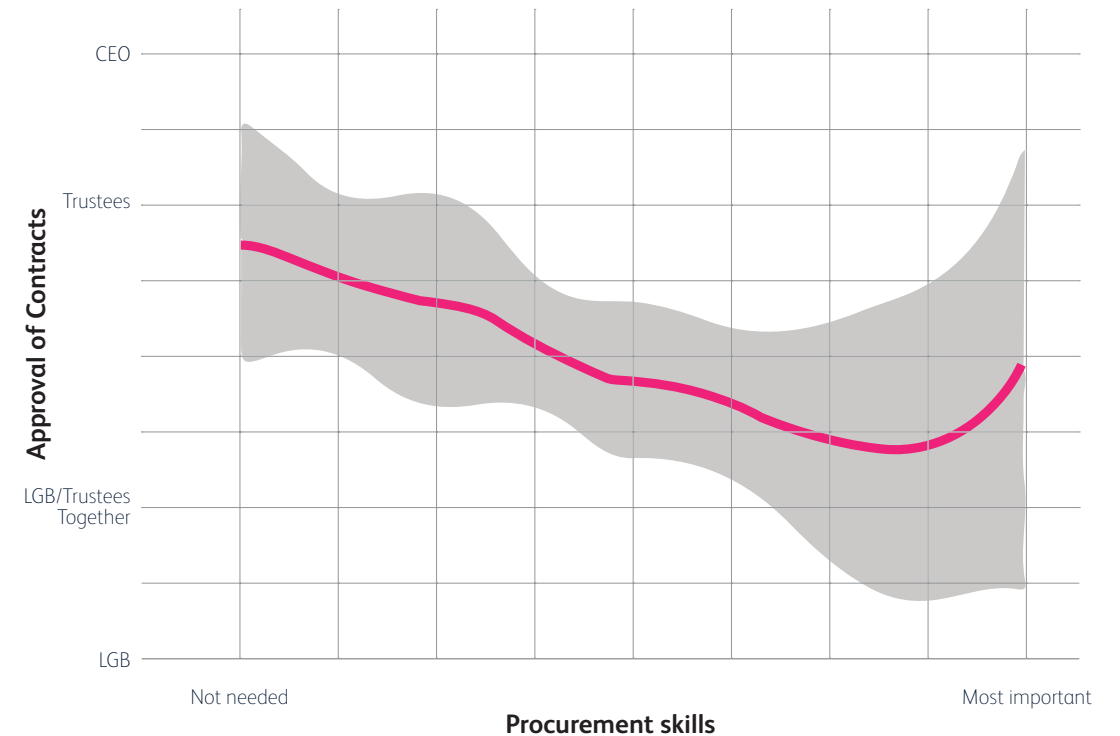
In one case, this was just the executive headteacher's salary.

But for the majority, the centrally-pooled figure fell between 1.5% and 5% of the total budget. Surprisingly, 15% of MATs didn't centralise their budget at all. A further 19 MATs didn't reply to this question.

6 MATs placing a higher value on procurement skills at LGB level are more likely to delegate responsibility when approving contracts with external providers

This alludes to the idea that contracts are signed by the MAT on behalf of the schools, and that economies of scale are becoming embedded in some MATs.

Figure 3 - Delegation and contract approvals



7 Finance skills are desired by all MATs at trustee level, but not necessarily at LGB level

Unsurprisingly, financial considerations are central to MAT thinking. Every MAT said that financial skills were either the 'most,' or a 'very,' important skillset.

The differences over budgetary alignment were stark: the three respondents that centralise their entire budget were far ahead of the next MAT, which centralised just 11%. Where a MAT's budget isn't delegated, there's no need for finance skills, and the amount of the budget delegated has no bearing on the level of skill sought in LGBs.

The importance of financial expertise at the LGB level is much more varied than at the trustee level, demonstrating the wide degree of freedom that MATs have in this all-important area of governance. There's no relation between the stated importance of financial skillsets and the central pooling of the budget at lower percentages of centralisation. However, the few MATs which centralise their entire budgets placed much less importance on local financial skills, indicating that heavily centralised MATs expect their LGBs to be much more focused on other areas of school life with finance being almost completely outside of their remit.

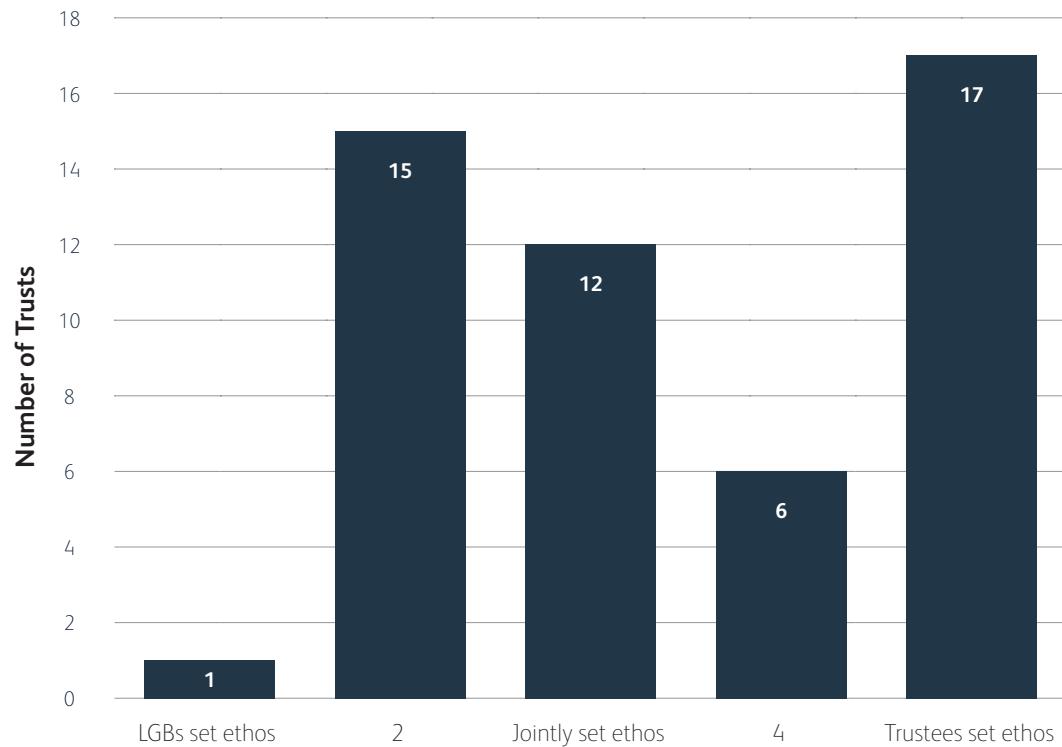
8 In 40% of MATs, LGBs either have a joint role in headteacher recruitment or lead on the decision

One MAT gave all responsibility for the appointment of headteachers to Local Governing Boards.

9 There was a clear split between how MATs set the ethos for their schools

There was no statistically significant link between the size of each MAT and whether they determine the ethos for their schools or give loose/overarching parameters, or whether schools maintain their unique identities.

Figure 4 - Origin of school ethos



10 MATs are thinking about the future and expansion, reflecting the expectations of the Department for Education

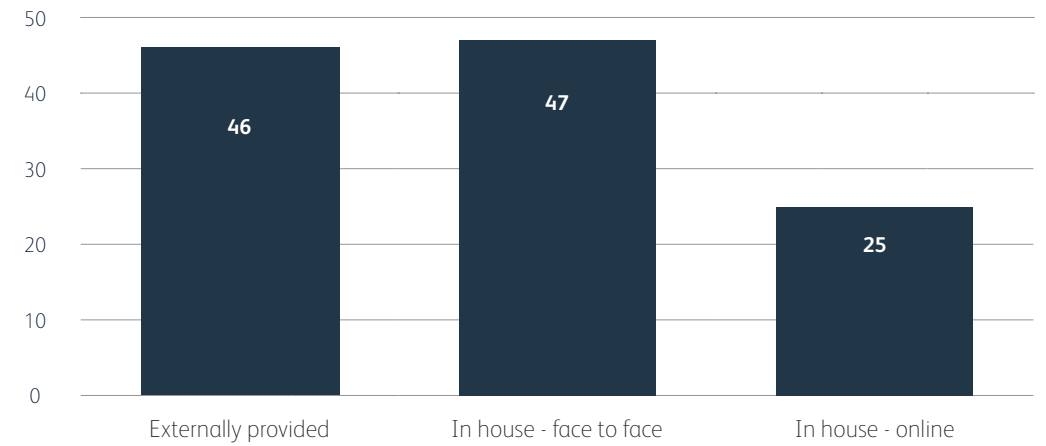
MATs are exploring regional boards and hubs, where schools would be grouped into clusters. These clusters would have a chair who sits on the Board of Trustees. This fits with the drive for MATs to merge and grow.

It seems the role of regional LGBs will continue. For now, and into the future, their role and link to schools on a local level is still seen as vital by large MATs.

11 Most MATs provide in-house face-to-face training

A range of training opportunities are available to governors at most MATs, and most have developed some form of internal training. Half have developed online training for their governors.

Figure 5 - How MATs are providing governance training

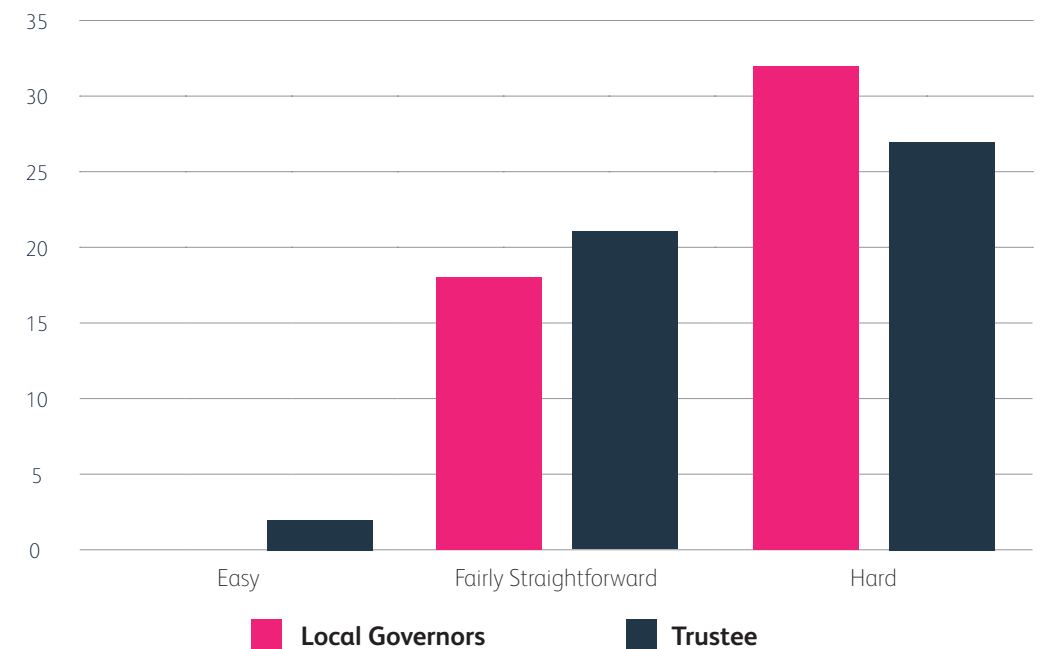


12 Recruitment is difficult for both trustees and local governors

Recruiting new local governors and trustees remains an issue across MATs.

Only two MATs said that it was easy to recruit trustees. No MAT said it was easy to recruit local governors.

Figure 6 - How hard is it to recruit local governors and trustees?



Methodology

Between March and May 2019, Governors for Schools, Irwin Mitchell and The Key conducted an online survey of MATs to understand the spectrum of governance arrangements that exist in practice. In total, 51 MATs of all sizes replied to the survey, accounting for over 520 schools across England.

We broke the respondents into six groups based on their size (Figure 7). This bottom-heavy list has two thirds of respondents coming from the smallest three sections, and is representative of the overall population.

These groups were used when presenting data in order to protect the anonymity of larger respondents. When making comparisons, we've considered each respondent individually with its specific number of schools.

Figure 7 - Survey respondents by size

Size of MAT	Number of Respondents
2-3 schools	17
4-6	12
7-10	9
11-20	7
20+ schools	6
Total	51

Governors for Schools aimed to have respondents from as wide a variety of locations as possible. Figure 8 shows the breakdown of these MATs by Regional School Commissioners (RSC). A number of MATs cross these boundaries, with Academies in two or more RSC groups. In order to avoid double counting, MATs are counted as belonging to an RSC if the highest number of MATs within its boundaries is within this area. In the case of a draw, the registered office is used.

Figure 8 - Survey respondents by location

Regional Schools Commissioner	Number of Respondents
East of England & North East London	7
East Midlands and Humber	4
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	12
North of England	2
South Central England & North West London	5
South East England & South London	14
South West England	4
West Midlands	3

While we received responses from at least two MATs per RSC, there were notably higher responses from the South East & South London and Lancashire & West Yorkshire. This geographic spread lessens fears that the results found in this survey could come from pre-existing local factors. These results are not an accurate reflection of the nation due to this imbalance. The small number of responses from several regions reduces the reliability of any results that take geography into account.

Quantitative evidence from the survey was used to:

- Explore the level of centralisation of governance within each MAT
- Discover whether certain areas of delegation are more likely to be centralised or decentralised
- Uncover whether different MATs approach important areas of governance, such as budgetary consideration, in different ways.

Please note that this survey has not examined the role that Members play within MAT governance. The report does not look at the effectiveness of MATs in terms of their educational performance or Ofsted Grades since the sample size was too small.

Conclusion

With thanks to the MATs that kindly completed our survey, we've been able to shed light on how these new and expanding organisations have set up their governance.

We've found there to be near uniformity amongst MATs when looking at issues such as the appointment of the CEOs, the importance of financial skills for trustees, and safeguarding.

But the report also found wide variance over other noteworthy factors, and some of these require further examination. Some are given substantial powers to make major financial decisions, whilst others can do very little to respond to, or change, spending plans without trust approval. This wide variation isn't affected by the MAT's overall size.

The wide variance in results also covered most of the skill requirements for LGBs. With the exception of safeguarding and education, we uncovered few universal requirements or skills which aren't needed. Respondents also stated that they had trouble in recruiting new governors and trustees. Taken together, this means that Governors for Schools will continue to take a bespoke approach as we place new governors and trustees.

It also reinforces our current approach of partnering with businesses and universities to attract highly-skilled professionals from all backgrounds, and working with community groups to attract quality volunteers who offer a wide range of skills.

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