



Transform**ATIVE**

Connected Intelligence: Building a Trust-Wide Data & EdTech Ecosystem

A TransformATIVE Roundtable Networking Dinner
Event partner – Assurly, The Ivy, Birmingham

Executive Summary

TransforMATive recently hosted a senior leadership roundtable dinner in Birmingham, bringing together MAT leaders responsible for data, digital transformation, information governance, technology strategy, operations and executive leadership.

The discussion explored a central question facing the education sector:

How can Multi-Academy Trusts build connected intelligence ecosystems that enable better decision-making, stronger governance and improved educational outcomes?

Participants represented trusts at different stages of maturity, from organisations still establishing foundational data practices to some of the largest trusts in England operating at significant scale. Despite this diversity, a number of common themes emerged.

The conversation highlighted that the sector's challenge is no longer simply acquiring data. Most trusts now possess more information than ever before. The challenge is determining which data matters, ensuring that it is trusted, and creating organisational capability to translate information into meaningful action.

Trust leaders consistently described a tension between the desire for a "single source of truth" and the reality of operating increasingly complex organisations. Whilst interoperability remains a priority, participants recognised that complete standardisation is neither practical nor desirable in many contexts. Instead, trusts are increasingly focusing on identifying the critical datasets that require consistency whilst allowing flexibility elsewhere.

The discussion also reinforced that data maturity is fundamentally a leadership challenge rather than a technology challenge. Governance, organisational culture, digital literacy, procurement practices and executive sponsorship emerged as equally important factors alongside technology architecture.

Finally, the conversation demonstrated growing awareness that artificial intelligence, interoperability frameworks and emerging data standards will significantly reshape how trusts manage information. However, attendees consistently emphasised the need for a cautious, governance-led approach that prioritises educational outcomes, privacy and long-term sustainability over short-term technological enthusiasm.



Key Learning



1. A Single Source of Truth Requires Strategic Prioritisation

Participants challenged the assumption that every system and dataset must be fully standardised across a trust.

Several leaders described moving away from the ambition of complete standardisation towards a more pragmatic model:

- ✓ Standardise where trust-wide comparison and accountability are required.
- ✓ Allow flexibility where educational value outweighs standardisation.
- ✓ Establish clear definitions of which datasets are considered authoritative.
- ✓ Focus on consistency of outcomes rather than uniformity of tools.

The consensus was that successful trusts explicitly identify where trust-wide consistency matters most and invest effort accordingly.



2. Technology Is Rarely the Primary Barrier

Whilst interoperability challenges remain significant, attendees repeatedly highlighted that technology is often not the limiting factor.

Common barriers included:

- ✓ Unclear ownership.
- ✓ Lack of executive sponsorship.
- ✓ Competing organisational priorities.
- ✓ Reactive dashboard requests.
- ✓ Insufficient governance processes.
- ✓ Procurement decisions made without considering wider ecosystem implications.

Many trusts reported situations where leaders requested sophisticated reporting outputs without recognising the foundational work required around data definitions, governance and quality assurance.



3. Data Governance Must Be Shared

No participant advocated for governance sitting exclusively within a data team. Instead, attendees described governance as a distributed responsibility requiring:

- ✓ Executive accountability.
- ✓ Operational ownership.
- ✓ Technical oversight.
- ✓ School-level compliance and engagement.

Key Learning

Information governance leaders, data specialists and operational teams all play a role, but successful implementation requires a shared culture rather than a single owner.



4. Data Quality Depends on Context

Several examples illustrated how seemingly simple metrics can become misleading when local context is ignored.

Participants highlighted challenges around:

- ✓ Attendance reporting.
- ✓ SEND data.
- ✓ Assessment measures.
- ✓ Workforce metrics.
- ✓ Compliance reporting.

The discussion reinforced an important principle:

Data accuracy is not simply a technical issue. It depends on understanding the processes, behaviours and operational realities that generate the data.

Trusts that understand these nuances are better positioned to interpret information appropriately and avoid drawing incorrect conclusions.



5. Executive Sponsorship Is Essential

One of the strongest themes was the importance of executive leadership. Participants described the need for leaders who can:

- ✓ Prioritise competing requests.
- ✓ Protect strategic roadmaps.
- ✓ Challenge reactive reporting demands.
- ✓ Maintain focus on long-term transformation.

Without executive sponsorship, data functions risk becoming overwhelmed by ad hoc requests and tactical reporting activity.



6. The Future Is About Data Literacy

A recurring theme was that future success depends less on technology skills and more on organisational understanding.

Participants argued that data literacy should become a core capability for leaders across education.

Key Learning

This includes understanding:

- ✓ Data quality.
- ✓ Governance.
- ✓ Information risk.
- ✓ AI implications.
- ✓ Evidence-informed decision-making.
- ✓ Appropriate interpretation of metrics.

Several attendees noted that whilst digital systems have evolved rapidly, workforce capability has not always developed at the same pace.

Sector Insights



Interoperability is Becoming a Procurement Requirement

Trust leaders increasingly expect vendors to provide:

- ✓ Open APIs.
- ✓ Modern integration capabilities.
- ✓ Data portability.
- ✓ Transparent data structures.

There was strong support for trusts using collective influence to shape supplier behaviour. The emergence of collaborative initiatives focused on interoperability demonstrates a growing desire to reduce dependency on proprietary systems and create more sustainable technology ecosystems.



Trusts Are Moving Beyond Dashboard Thinking

Historically, many data projects have focused on reporting outputs.

The discussion suggested a shift towards asking:

- ✓ What decisions are we trying to improve?
- ✓ What actions will this information drive?
- ✓ Who will use the insight?
- ✓ What outcomes are we trying to influence?

This represents a significant maturity shift from reporting activity towards decision support.

Sector Insights



AI Is Accelerating Governance Conversations

Participants viewed AI as inevitable rather than optional. However, concerns focused less on the technology itself and more on:

- ✓ Data ownership.
- ✓ Data sovereignty.
- ✓ Vendor incentives.
- ✓ Privacy implications.
- ✓ Long-term dependency risks.

Trust leaders expressed particular concern about the growing number of technology companies seeking access to education datasets as AI adoption increases.

The consensus was that governance frameworks must evolve alongside technological capability.



MAT Inspections Remain a Topic of Uncertainty

The discussion explored potential future trust-level inspection frameworks. Participants questioned:

- ✓ What problem MAT inspections are intended to solve.
- ✓ Whether sufficient expertise exists to inspect trusts effectively.
- ✓ How trust diversity could be reflected fairly.
- ✓ Whether inspection would improve outcomes or simply increase compliance burden.

Many attendees suggested that peer review, collaborative assurance and sector-led improvement models may offer more value than traditional inspection approaches.



Smaller Trusts Face Disproportionate Challenges

A recurring observation was the difficulty faced by smaller trusts operating with limited capacity.

Challenges include:

- ✓ Recruiting specialist expertise.
- ✓ Establishing governance structures.
- ✓ Managing digital transformation.
- ✓ Maintaining strategic focus alongside operational pressures.

Sector Insights

Participants recognised an increasing responsibility for larger trusts, sector bodies and collaborative networks to support capacity-building across the wider system.

Future Research Questions



The discussion generated several areas worthy of further exploration and sector-wide debate.

Data Strategy & Governance

- ✓ What should a MAT data maturity framework look like in 2026 and beyond?
- ✓ Which trust-wide datasets genuinely require standardisation?
- ✓ How should governance responsibilities be distributed across a trust?
- ✓ What role should trustees play in overseeing data strategy?

Interoperability & Technology

- ✓ What minimum interoperability standards should trusts require during procurement?
- ✓ How can trusts collectively influence supplier roadmaps?
- ✓ What role should open standards play in future EdTech ecosystems?
- ✓ How can trusts balance flexibility with consistency at scale?

AI & Data Sovereignty

- ✓ What educational data should never leave trust-controlled environments?
- ✓ How should trusts evaluate emerging AI providers?
- ✓ What governance frameworks are required for AI-enabled decision support?
- ✓ How can trusts benefit from AI without increasing strategic dependency on external vendors?

Future Research Questions

Workforce Capability

- ✓ What does good data literacy look like for school and trust leaders?
- ✓ Should data literacy become a core leadership competency?
- ✓ How should trusts develop capability across non-technical teams?
- ✓ What new roles will emerge as AI and automation mature?

Sector Leadership

- ✓ How can larger trusts support smaller organisations more effectively?
- ✓ What role should CST, DfE and sector organisations play in defining standards?
- ✓ What would an effective trust-level assurance model look like?
- ✓ How can collaboration be encouraged without reducing autonomy?

Closing Reflection



A consistent message emerged throughout the evening:

The future challenge for Multi-Academy Trusts is not collecting more data. It is creating the governance, capability and culture required to transform information into better decisions.

Trusts that succeed will be those that remain focused on purpose, invest in data literacy, build strong governance foundations and adopt technology in service of educational outcomes rather than technological novelty.

As one attendee reflected, the question is no longer whether connected intelligence is possible. The question is how trusts build it in a way that is sustainable, secure and meaningful for the pupils and communities they serve.