

Digital Maturity, Ofsted Reform, MAT Inspection and Trust Assurance

Reflections from a Roundtable Discussion
of Multi-Academy Trust Leaders



Executive Summary

At a recent Red Kite Connect CEO Roundtable, trust leaders from across the education sector gathered to discuss four interconnected themes shaping the future of Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) leadership:

1. **Digital Maturity and Transformation**
2. **Experiences of the New Ofsted Framework**
3. **Emerging Approaches to MAT Inspection**
4. **MAT Assurance and Governance**

The discussion highlighted a sector navigating significant change. Whilst digital technologies, automation and artificial intelligence continue to create opportunities for efficiency and improvement, leaders consistently emphasised that successful innovation depends upon strong foundational governance, information management and organisational clarity.

Alongside this, participants shared early experiences of the revised Ofsted inspection framework. Whilst there was recognition that inspections are beginning to focus more meaningfully on school improvement journeys and contextual understanding, concerns remain regarding consistency of implementation and the impact on leader wellbeing.

The anticipated introduction of MAT inspections generated substantial discussion. Leaders broadly accepted the rationale that trusts should be accountable for decisions made at trust level. However, significant uncertainty remains regarding the purpose, methodology and consequences of MAT inspections. Participants questioned whether inspections would evaluate organisational effectiveness, educational outcomes, governance arrangements, financial stewardship, or a combination of all four.

A recurring theme throughout the evening was the importance of assurance. As trusts grow in scale and complexity, boards require increasingly sophisticated mechanisms to understand organisational performance, manage risk and demonstrate impact. This has implications not only for governance but also for digital strategy, data architecture and future inspection readiness.

The discussion revealed a sector that is largely supportive of accountability and continuous improvement but is seeking greater clarity, proportionality and consistency in the systems used to evaluate trust performance.



Key Learning



1. Digital Maturity Begins with Governance

Whilst artificial intelligence and automation dominate current sector conversations, leaders consistently reinforced that digital maturity starts with governance rather than technology.

Successful trusts were characterised by:

- **Clear ownership of digital strategy at executive level.**
- **Strong information governance practices.**
- **Defined processes for technology procurement and approval.**
- **Alignment between technology investments and organisational strategy.**
- **Clear accountability for data protection and compliance.**

Participants noted that many trusts continue to face challenges caused by fragmented decision-making, where individual departments or schools adopt systems without sufficient consideration of integration, security or long-term sustainability.

The consensus was that digital transformation is less about acquiring new technology and more about establishing disciplined governance structures that enable technology to deliver value.



2. AI is Accelerating Existing Governance Challenges

The rapid introduction of AI functionality into existing software platforms has created a new layer of complexity.

Trust leaders highlighted concerns around:

- **Data residency and international data transfers.**
- **AI subprocessors and third-party data sharing.**
- **Transparency of AI models.**
- **Staff awareness of risks.**
- **Procurement and due diligence processes.**

Many participants expressed concern that organisations often complete due diligence at the point of procurement but lack mechanisms to reassess products as vendors introduce new AI-enabled features.

There was broad agreement that AI governance will require a distributed leadership model rather than relying solely on ICT teams or Data Protection Officers.

Key Learning



3. Innovation Requires Structure

A recurring tension emerged between encouraging innovation and maintaining appropriate controls.

Several trusts described approaches that seek to balance these objectives through:

- **Approved application frameworks.**
- **Pilot and trial environments.**
- **Subject or function-based digital governance groups.**
- **Executive sponsorship processes.**
- **Formal review and retirement processes for technology.**

The most mature approaches did not seek to eliminate experimentation but instead created structured pathways for innovation.

This reflects a wider shift from technology control towards technology stewardship.



4. Digital Investment Remains Poorly Understood

Many participants reported discovering significant expenditure on software subscriptions and digital services that were:

- **Under-utilised.**
- **Duplicated.**
- **No longer aligned to organisational needs.**
- **Poorly governed.**

This suggests that software portfolio management remains an underdeveloped discipline across much of the sector.

Trusts that had undertaken systematic reviews reported opportunities for substantial savings whilst simultaneously improving governance and reducing complexity.

Sector Insights



Experiences of the New Ofsted Framework

Discussion around recent inspections revealed a mixed but generally more positive experience than under previous frameworks.

Positive Observations

Participants reported:

- **Greater recognition of school improvement journeys.**
- **More nuanced conversations around context.**
- **Increased focus on support and improvement.**
- **Better acknowledgement of trust-level contribution.**

Several leaders described inspectors working constructively with schools to identify strengths and development areas.

In some cases inspectors demonstrated flexibility by recognising areas where schools faced structural challenges that would prevent achieving particular standards despite strong leadership and improvement activity.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite these positive developments, concerns remain around:

- **Consistency between inspection teams.**
- **Variable interpretation of frameworks.**
- **Inspector experience and confidence.**
- **Continued stress and workload pressures.**

Many participants felt that wellbeing considerations, whilst frequently discussed during inspections, were not always reflected in inspection practice.

The overall view was that progress has been made but implementation remains inconsistent.



Governance as a Growing Inspection Theme

Trust leaders consistently identified governance as an increasingly important element of inspection activity.

Several themes emerged:

Trust Governance Matters More

Inspection teams appeared increasingly interested in:

- **Trust board effectiveness.**
- **Scheme of delegation arrangements.**

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- **Trustee understanding of impact.**
- **Assurance mechanisms.**
- **Strategic oversight.**

Local Governance Remains Variable

A significant debate emerged regarding the future role of Local Governing Bodies.

Models represented around the table included:

- **Traditional Local Governing Bodies.**
- **Advisory Boards.**
- **Community Partnerships.**
- **Locality Governance Structures.**

Whilst approaches varied, participants agreed that inspectors increasingly seek evidence that governance structures can clearly articulate how trust-level decisions influence school outcomes.



MAT Inspection: Broad Support, Significant Questions

There was widespread acceptance that trusts should be subject to inspection. Participants recognised that MATs increasingly make strategic decisions around:

- **School improvement.**
- **Curriculum.**
- **Finance.**
- **Workforce.**
- **Estates.**
- **Digital infrastructure.**
- **Inclusion.**

As a result, trust-level accountability is viewed as logical.

However, significant questions remain unanswered.

Key Concerns

Participants identified uncertainty around:

- **Inspection methodology.**
- **Inspection frequency.**
- **Consequences of outcomes.**
- **Relationship with school inspections.**
- **Definitions of trust effectiveness.**
- **Treatment of trusts operating in challenging contexts.**

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There was particular concern regarding how MAT inspections would evaluate trusts that deliberately take responsibility for schools facing significant disadvantage or performance challenges.

Leaders emphasised the importance of recognising improvement capacity and impact rather than relying solely on outcome measures.



The Risk of Over-Reliance on Data

A recurring theme was caution around the use of aggregated data.

Trust leaders highlighted examples where contextual factors significantly influenced outcomes and could not easily be understood through performance metrics alone.

Examples included:

- **High mobility schools.**
- **Inclusion-focused provision.**
- **Alternative provision.**
- **Vulnerable learner cohorts.**
- **Community-based interventions.**

The concern was not opposition to data, but rather the risk that data without context creates misleading conclusions.

This insight is particularly relevant given ongoing development of trust-level performance dashboards and data aggregation tools.

MAT Assurance: An Emerging Strategic Priority



One of the strongest themes from the discussion was the growing importance of MAT assurance. As trusts increase in size and complexity, assurance is evolving from a compliance function into a strategic capability.

Participants identified several dimensions of assurance:

Governance Assurance

Boards require confidence that:

- **Delegated responsibilities are operating effectively.**
- **Risk management is robust.**
- **Decision-making is evidence-informed.**
- **Strategic priorities are being delivered.**

Educational Assurance

Trusts increasingly need mechanisms to understand:

- **Quality of education.**
- **School improvement impact.**
- **Inclusion outcomes.**
- **Leadership effectiveness.**

Digital Assurance

Boards require visibility of:

- **Cyber security risks.**
- **Information governance.**
- **Technology investment.**
- **AI governance.**
- **Digital capability.**

Cultural Assurance

Several leaders referenced the importance of understanding:

- **Staff engagement.**
- **Parent voice.**
- **Pupil experience.**
- **Organisational culture.**

This was increasingly supported through survey platforms, benchmarking tools and trust-wide engagement mechanisms.

The discussion suggested that future MAT assurance models are likely to become more integrated, combining educational, operational, financial and digital perspectives into a single organisational view.

Future Research Questions



The discussion identified several areas requiring further exploration across the sector.

Digital Maturity

1. What are the defining characteristics of digitally mature MATs?
2. How should trusts govern AI adoption at scale?
3. What digital governance models best balance innovation and control?
4. How can trusts reduce software complexity whilst maintaining flexibility?

Ofsted Reform

5. To what extent has the new framework improved inspection consistency?
6. How effectively are wellbeing commitments being translated into inspection practice?
7. What impact is the new framework having on school improvement behaviour?

MAT Inspection

8. What should be the primary purpose of MAT inspection?
9. How should MAT inspections distinguish between organisational effectiveness and school-level outcomes?
10. How can inspection frameworks fairly evaluate trusts operating in challenging contexts?
11. What balance should exist between trust inspection and school inspection activity?
12. Should MAT inspections prioritise evaluation, accountability or improvement?

MAT Assurance

13. What assurance models best support trust boards?
14. How can trust assurance frameworks integrate educational, operational and digital performance?
15. What role should peer review play within future assurance systems?
16. How can assurance activity avoid becoming an additional compliance burden?

Conclusion



The Red Kite Connect CEO Roundtable demonstrated a sector that is both ambitious and reflective. Trust leaders are embracing opportunities presented by digital transformation and AI whilst recognising that governance, assurance and organisational maturity remain critical foundations.

The emerging MAT inspection agenda represents a significant shift in accountability. Whilst there is broad acceptance that trusts should be inspected, leaders are seeking a model that is proportionate, contextual and genuinely focused on improvement.

Perhaps the strongest message from the discussion was that trust effectiveness cannot be understood through data, compliance or structure alone. High-performing trusts combine strong governance, clear strategic intent, thoughtful use of technology and a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and young people.

As MAT inspections move from concept to reality, ensuring that these dimensions are recognised within future accountability frameworks will be critical to securing confidence across the sector.