

Local governors & MATs: a time and opportunity to rethink

David Brown, chief executive of Eynsham Partnership Academy and a trust chair in Birmingham, explains how celebrating the local tier works in one trust in Oxfordshire

Eynsham Partnership Academy (EPA) Trust had done some work in building up relationships with school local governing bodies, and both of our recent trust board chairs had been chairs of governors. Despite this, I think we all would agree that it has not been a dynamic part of the vision or direction of the MAT.

I joined as CEO just before COVID-19 and like other trusts, we were very active in ensuring our chairs of governors were in regular close Zoom contact as a group with myself and the trust board chair during this period. This was both for COVID-19 planning but also focused on our strategic goals. During this time the previous MAT three-year plan came to an

end and it became clear that no one really felt they had a connection to it – it had been a requirement rather than a driver of change.

We all know that values sit at the heart of great organisations, so we asked ourselves what that should actually mean for EPA. We already do good work on standards, safeguarding and so on with a vision statement probably similar to many others. So we became more interested in what role the MAT strategic plan plays for trustees, governors and the wider communities we serve.

Achieving as a partnership

We're a successful, growing trust, we don't need another layer of 'monitoring'. Schools have development plans, we are active in performance management and clear that heads and executive officers have very defined roles in fulfilling their statutory duties, raising standards and reporting on progress in these areas. The scheme of delegation is fine but hardly excites people.

We talked directly about what colleagues wanted the trust to be like in five years' time – what is it that we could achieve together as a

partnership and what is it we want to use this partnership for? This led us to a 'relatively' short statement about what we were going to be about for the next five years.

For governors and trustees, as well as school leaders, this led to asking: "What do we do to bring to life what adds value – which is deeper, broader and about longer-term success rather than just being another set of annual objectives?" Some key themes emerged:

- special needs is a huge area of concern especially post-COVID-19 – we are focusing on early intervention for KS1 pupils displaying challenging behaviour and support for their parents
- planning for sustainability, biodiversity and zero-carbon – to make it real
- greater intellectual challenge with a focus on science, mathematics and tech
- ensuring that disadvantaged





pupils and those who have fallen most behind during COVID-19 were catching up.

We were determined that this would be a whole-trust plan, not a board or senior officer plan. We needed to look for wider leadership and capacity to make it happen. What we think marks us out is the role of chairs of local governing bodies (LGBs) in leading this new trust approach.

The role of LGBs

LGB chairs lead most strategic groups and each has at least two senior leaders supporting them. Significantly we have used our governor, trustee and community connections to recruit external advisers/ambassadors who are focused on single issues. This has added significant capacity to our resources.

As we have grown, we have more standardisation in statutory systems and more

single procured contracts to generate efficiencies for schools. And where intervention has been needed, such as in the failing school that joined us in 2020, we have taken decisive action to turn them around.

This July 2022 EPA's primary SATs combined score rose compared with 2019 while they fell 6% nationally so we're now 12% above national. Standards are rising and the disadvantaged gap closing. But we need the strategic plan to go further still and relate this in part to having the best people in our voluntary governance roles. We want their skills and experience, the added capacity and sometimes their influence and networks – they want to make a difference.

None of this should impede good governance where our 'normal' activity is focused. The trust is able to intervene where necessary but on the basis of a much stronger relationship and shared perspective with key school governors. We value the autonomy of our schools, their leaders and governors, who have a strong commitment to their school community while being part of a larger trust – that's not an issue for us, it's an opportunity. 🍌

OUR LOCAL CHAIRS IN ACTION

JENNY FAULKNER IS CHAIR OF HEYFORD PARK SCHOOL AND STANTON HARCOURT PRIMARY

Jenny chairs the Trust Advisory Panel on Intellectual Challenge (Science) which has begun to coordinate work on our Years 5-8 Curriculum as well as wider work on chemistry, Mandarin, future careers and related projects.

LUCY DICKINSON IS CHAIR OF BARTHOLOMEW SCHOOL

Lucy chairs the Trust Advisory Panel on Climate & Bio-Diversity. This group links to the community as well as schools and has already been successful in attracting Natural England funding, led a Youth Summit and featured in Governing Matters March 2022.

HILARY EMERY CBE IS CHAIR OF EYNHAM PRIMARY SCHOOL

Hilary chairs the Trust Advisory Board for our Early Intervention Hub for all primaries. This has had considerable success, attracted two-year pilot funding from Oxfordshire CC, support from Family Links and has a board of many experts from related fields and backgrounds. This board was one of the key reasons why we achieved the pilot funding.

Next year we are ready to develop a more radical and cross-phase approach to reading support and already have another chair of governors who will lead this for us. **Lindsay Nadin:** "The support of the trust and a strong relationship with key trust leaders has been central to our school's improvement journey. I look forward to leading a new trust theme to drive even more progression in reading."