Collaboration:
the school leaders’ journey
Introduction

Recent changes to the educational landscape have made it more important than ever before for schools to collaborate and develop successful partnerships.

Whilst the government has stated that the multi-academy trust (MAT) is their preferred form of collaboration for schools, there remains much to be learnt from the many other models of collaboration in evidence throughout the system.

The decision to enter into a formal collaboration of any kind rests with a school’s governing body. However, it is school leaders who will often be tasked with investigating and taking forward such decisions.

This document draws on case studies of six very different collaborations, and presents a literature review of evidence on school collaboration and partnerships. It highlights to schools considering collaboration what works well, along with the potential difficulties that can occur.

All case studies have been anonymised and the clusters and schools given fictional names.
Whatever the state of government policy on universal academisation, and whatever precise legal structure is favoured at the moment, collaboration between schools is vital. However, this does not mean the sort of ‘coffee morning collaboration’ where we gather to moan about the world, but rather serious, focused, formal and mutually accountable collaboration. The external services and guidance that schools have been able to rely on in the past are fading away. Unless schools look out for other schools, we risk fragmentation and isolation.

Arguments against forced academisation aside, there is nothing to fear in collaboration itself. School leadership can be a lonely job, bearing immense pressure. Working with a group of like-minded colleagues can be supportive and inspirational. It creates more opportunities than existed before. It feels good and does good, if taken seriously.

From our point of view, the legal structure is less important than the reality. It is not the label but what happens inside that counts. The government has a favoured vehicle, and school leaders need to factor that in when building their plans of course, because it affects what is possible. However, focus more on how your collaboration will raise standards of teaching and learning for the pupils you serve.

School collaboration should be about pupils not egos. It is not about the size of the group or how powerful the CEO. Indeed, if you find a trust that dwells excessively on these topics, then walk away. Effective collaboration is about what value the group adds to the work of teachers. Effective collaborations grow carefully and wisely. Effective collaborations do not rely on personality alone – they tackle the difficult questions of accountability and conflict resolution because they are building something bigger than any individual involved.

This report draws on detailed case studies and existing literature to flesh out the journey of collaboration - whether you are building a MAT, developing an alliance or constructing something less easily defined. It points out some of the pitfalls that leaders must navigate, and poses important questions to ask yourself along the way.

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## Robin Co-operative Trust
- **Type of cluster:** Co-operative trust
- **Schools in cluster:** 1 infant, 1 junior, 5 primaries and a federation of 2 special schools
- **Age of cluster:** 4 years at time of interview
- **Region:** West Midlands
- **Interviewees:** Head teachers from 4 schools (including 1 deputy head / acting head teacher) and the Consortium Operations Manager

## Nightingale Schools Group and Swallow Multi-Academy Trust
- **Type of cluster:** The school leader interviewed for this case study worked in a school that had recently academised as part of a multi-academy trust. However, the school was also part of a separate informal (non-legally binding) cluster of local schools.
- **Schools in informal cluster:** 9 primaries
- **Schools in MAT:** 3 primaries and 1 infant
- **Age of informal cluster:** 6 years
- **Age of MAT:** 7 months (from when the case study joined) at time of interview
- **Region:** South East
- **Interviewees:** Head teacher

## Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust
- **Type of cluster:** Multi-academy trust
- **Schools in cluster:** 11 primaries
- **Age of cluster:** 18 months (from when the case study joined) at time of interview
- **Region:** North West
- **Interviewees:** Principal

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### Jay Federation
- **Type of cluster:** Federation - often referred to as a ‘hard’ federation
- **Schools in cluster:** 1 primary special and 1 secondary special school
- **Age of cluster:** 6 months at time of interview
- **Region:** North East
- **Interviewees:** Vice-chair of governors

### Sparrow Schools Group
- **Type of cluster:** An informal (non-legally binding) group - often referred to as a ‘soft’ federation
- **Schools in cluster:** 1 secondary special, 1 PRU and 8 secondaries
- **Age of cluster:** 13 years at time of interview
- **Region:** South East
- **Interviewees:** Head teacher

### Goldfinch Federation
- **Type of cluster:** Federation (often referred to as a ‘hard’ federation) undergoing forced academisation
- **Schools in cluster:** 2 secondaries
- **Age of cluster:** 10 years
- **Region:** North East
- **Interviewees:** Member of the Interim Executive Board

## Structure

Our review of evidence identified five common stages at which important decisions were made in the move towards a collaborative structure, although the order in which these stages occurred differed across structure types. This report is therefore structured into the following stages and decisions:

1. Finding a cluster
2. Agreeing your goals
3. Beginning informally
4. Deciding on a partnership structure
5. Ways of working

Having examined each of these areas, the document also identifies common difficulties and potential barriers to collaboration, before concluding with our own checklist for success.

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1.1 Existing relationships

Informal school partnerships and collaborations are common, and the majority of schools in our study had existing groups with which they worked prior to creating a formal partnership. However, not all of the case studies chose to partner with their existing groups.

There is evidence to suggest that schools that build on existing, positive relationships can be particularly successful. However, there are also warnings that schools with a history of “competitiveness, culture differences [or] a lack of equality between partners” could encounter problems when formally working together. The Jay Federation experience suggests that an existing relationship does not always make the process simpler, but it can still be a positive foundation if managed correctly.

**Jay Federation**

The collaboration is comprised of two schools, one of which (a secondary special school) supported the other (a primary special school) through leadership difficulties. While this arrangement successfully helped the primary school through the difficult period, it meant that the relationship began on an unequal footing.

The vice-chair of governors recalled that a conscious effort had to be made to reassure the secondary school of the benefits it would gain by continuing the partnership on a more formal basis. His advice to other schools is:

"Be as open and transparent as possible. We held regular staff meetings, so that there could be an open and honest information gathering, to put them at ease."

Identifying that both schools had expertise to share created a more equal partnership, as he explains:

"Use each of the school's expertise; if you know you're weak at maths or weak at data, use the expertise of the other school...With the secondary school, category-wise, being the stronger school, they were already looked up to for guidance and support, but we're finding very quickly that the secondary school is getting information from the primary."

**Common concern:** One school has historically been the ‘stronger school’.

**Suggestion:** Identify the expertise of both schools early on and be clear that everyone has knowledge to share.

For the schools in our study that chose not to build on an existing relationship, it was important that any positive existing relationships were not damaged by entering into a separate, formal partnership. The Nightingale Schools Group experience highlights the difficulty of maintaining their informal connection in addition to joining a new partnership as part of Swallow Multi-Academy Trust.

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1. Finding a cluster

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1 Atkinson et al, 2007
Nightingale Schools Group

The cluster is a long-standing informal (non-legally binding) relationship between local schools, who engage in a variety of collaborative activities. Due to concerns about the ability of the local authority to support them, many of these schools are now joining multi-academy trusts. The school of the head teacher interviewed has recently joined a MAT for the same reason and now works with both the informal local group, and other schools within the MAT. However, the head teacher is concerned that, as the trust expands, this will take the school's attention away from the informal group:

“The trust is already talking about working with more with schools from [other cities], so there could be pulls and restrictions about what we might be able to do. My main aim would be to keep the [informal group] together because we’re all being pulled in academy directions; it’s something that we will work very hard to keep.”

However, the school from Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust demonstrates that schools can maintain informal relationships while benefiting from new, formal partnerships. The head teacher explained that they are part of an existing, informal cluster that continues to meet to work on local problems, while the MAT has created new opportunities for subject leads to meet with leads from other schools in order to share good practice. It should be noted that this took careful planning; the school consciously joined a trust that was supportive of their existing networks.

Common concern: Existing relationships may be weakened by joining a new cluster.
Suggestion: Ensure your new partnership is supportive of pre-existing networks that have proved successful, and think about the different benefits you can gain from each.

Summary

When trying to identify a potential cluster of schools, it is important to consider the connections you already have with other schools, and how they could be strengthened through a more formal partnership. Be mindful of addressing any potential inequalities or difficulties arising from historic arrangements. New partnerships can expand connections and add new value, but make a conscious effort to ensure that existing beneficial relationships do not suffer.

1.2 Shared values and objectives

For those schools who choose to enter into a formal relationship and join a trust, a full understanding of that trust will be an important part of the process. Both of the multi-academy trusts in our study, as well as the co-operative trust, said that their choice was largely influenced by the values of that trust. For schools that are moving to academy status, it will not only be the trust’s educational values that are important, but their values as an employer, such as whether the trust is sympathetic to unions. The school from Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust invested a lot of time in looking for the right trust:

Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust

The school decided to join a multi-academy trust due to concerns that the local authority could no longer support them. The head teacher interviewed described the factors they considered when evaluating potential academy trusts:

• Did the trust share the same values and vision as the school?
• Would they be working with like-minded schools that they could be open and honest with, in
order for there to be constructive challenge and strong support?

• Would the size of the trust allow them to take advantage of collective bargaining, without being so large that the school ‘became lost among a group’?
• Did the trust recognise trade unions and facilities time?

They also decided on particular factors that would form part of their choice criteria:

• The scheme of delegation for the school - it was important that the trust retained local accountability with local governing bodies with decision-making powers and a head teacher in every school.
• It was important that the MAT was supportive of them continuing to work with their existing local cluster.
• They wanted to join a trust with a strong primary focus.

Most of the schools in our study particularly emphasised the importance of working with others who shared the school’s values. This will apply as much to the values of other schools in the group as to any trust or organisation with which the school works, so it will be important for more informal partnerships too. **Robin Co-operative Trust** already had a strong relationship between the schools before formal collaboration, but it still invested time in agreeing the values to adopt going forward. The group chose the co-operative structure because of the values of the co-operative movement, but also built upon these values as a group.

In a blog for Schools Week, NAHT General Secretary, Russell Hobby (2016) sets out: **7 questions that schools joining a multi-academy trust should ask:**

1. What truly gets them out of bed in the morning?
2. How do they handle conflict?
3. What value does the group bring to the individual schools?
4. Who will they work with and why?
5. How big do they plan to get?
6. What happens when the leader leaves?
7. What is shared and what is delegated?

This list aims to help schools to understand the culture of the trust they are considering. It particularly focuses on looking beyond the stated values of the trust, to their actions and the way that they operate, by engaging with them at length. You may want to visit other schools in the trust or look at their policies (e.g. exclusion policies and disciplinary procedures) and data collection requirements to learn more about their practices.

**Summary**

Find out about the values of the trust you are joining, both for learners and (where necessary) as an employer. This should go beyond asking about their values to looking at how they operate in practice, by speaking to others in the trust and understanding schemes of delegation, reporting arrangements and policies. The other schools you will be working with should also share your vision and values and it is worth investing time in developing and agreeing these. Decide on a clear list of priorities and spend time finding a trust (or other schools) that meets your criteria.
1.3 Location

Evidence suggests that schools in close proximity to each other are most likely to be effective. Close proximity has also been rated important by schools in academy chains. Many of the schools in our study agreed. Robin Co-operative Trust explained some of the activities they were involved in, which benefited from the schools covering a small geographical area:

“Teachers observing strong practitioners in other schools, co-ordinators meeting together... Many have been to the special school and seen how the TAs work to include children with special needs. The special school does a lot of training for the other schools on behaviour management, a lot of sharing good practice. Physical geography is important... if you’re travelling between schools it puts an unnecessary barrier there.”

Sparrow Schools Group shared a similar experience: “For our students it’s the sheer logistics, for our courses we could be moving youngsters around and getting youngsters to meet up for rehearsals, for science days...all of this works really well because of the geographical proximity of the schools.”

Another advantage related to the effectiveness of the leadership structure, with Jay Federation explaining that the short distance between schools allowed the executive head to go quickly where she was most needed.

However, there were some advantages to working in a slightly wider geographical area than within your own local authority. Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust explained:

“I think it’s quite nice that we’re not all from one authority as we’ve all come with different expectations and ways of working and it makes you challenge things.”

This case study did express concern that one school in the cluster was more isolated geographically, but explained that this was something they would seek to ‘even out’ when expanding the cluster.

Common concern: Schools could be geographically distant from each other.

Suggestion: Ensure all schools have at least one other school close by within the cluster.

Summary

Choosing whether to work with schools in a small local area, or more widely across the country, will have an impact on the type of collaborative activity you can engage in. Think about the type of activities you foresee before choosing to partner with schools that are difficult to reach, or give early consideration to how you will overcome this obstacle.

1.4 Number of schools

Early research on the optimum size of school chains suggested somewhere between eight and fifteen schools. Since then the number of larger chains has increased and there has been some support for the greater economies of scale that these chains can create. However, warnings remain that very large chains can limit the depth of collaboration and there have also been concerns that it is difficult to maintain the quality of collaboration in chains that expand quickly.

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Footnotes:

The schools in our study were cautious about expanding too fast. Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust has been asked by the Department for Education to take on new schools but has so far declined, its priority being to keep the right values.

Nightingale Schools Group recommended no more than ten schools. While Sparrow Schools Group, an informal group of ten schools, has already considered setting up smaller versions of the group within the wider partnership. Jay Federation, despite being one of the smallest collaborations at two schools, ruled out any expansion until both schools were confident in their strong performance.

Common concern: Close relationships may become difficult to maintain in large clusters or if expansion happens too quickly.

Suggestions: Be mindful of potential pressure to expand quickly and try to expand at a slow and manageable pace. Consider setting up smaller ‘sub groups’ or ‘hubs’ within the cluster.

**Summary**

If joining a large cluster, think about how close school-to-school relationships will be maintained, for instance through ‘sub groups’. If joining a small cluster, consider whether you will be able to benefit from economies of scale in the way that you wish. Reflect on whether your expansion plans should be based on number of schools or number of pupils. When expanding an existing chain, do so slowly in order not to jeopardise current relationships and quality of work.

**1.5 School performance**

Partnerships have been shown to help struggling schools improve, but evidence suggests the importance of mutual benefit, with all partners treated with equal esteem within the relationship. This can be key to mutual trust and respect, as well as ensure that ‘stronger’ schools continue to progress. One suggestion is using similar schools’ data to find partners who can share excellent practice on some areas and be challenged on others.

Eight of our nine interviewees talked about the importance of equality between the schools. As Jay Federation has already shown, even if one school has historically been ‘stronger’, benefits can be found for both.

Furthermore, Goldfinch Federation demonstrates that working only with strong schools is no guarantee of success:

**Goldfinch Federation**

Two outstanding secondary schools formed a federation, their primary goals being efficiency and sharing facilities to offer a wider curriculum.

Both schools already felt confident in their strong performance, and therefore did not actively share their best practice, nor did they seek examples of good practice outside the federation. This prevented them from considering how they might need to move forward from current ways of working.

When the schools began to struggle, they did not have a strong support network to draw upon. This left them unable to prevent a decline in standards and inadequate Ofsted judgements for both schools, leading to the local authority deciding to appoint an Interim Executive Board. Although both schools had weaknesses at this point, a member of the Interim Executive Board recalls that the biggest improvements were made by starting the process of sharing good practice between the two schools.

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9 House of Commons, 2013; Simmons et al, 2011.
10 House of Commons, 2013
Robin Co-operative Trust emphasised the importance of looking beyond inspection judgements when sharing practice: “Every school has something to offer the other schools. It’s not about one school being better than the other and it isn’t about your Ofsted judgment, it’s about what expertise you’ve got in your school.”

Summary

While ‘weaker schools’ can benefit from partnering with a ‘stronger school’, this process of sharing practice is important to all schools. A mix of schools with a range of performance levels could ensure strong support for those that need it, as well as a range of environments for everyone to learn from and contribute to. Try to maintain a culture of learning from each other whatever the current performance of the school, by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of all parties.

1.6 School phase and sector

Cross-phase partnerships have been found to help the transition between primary and secondary school11. Jay Federation identified transition as a particular advantage of their partnership between two special schools explaining: “Children with special needs can be very nervous of transition and we found this to be a lot smoother.” However, the case study also highlighted that federating had created some expectations among parents about automatic acceptance to the partner secondary school, which had to be clarified.

Common concern: Collaboration across phases may create an expectation among parents about acceptance to the partner schools.

Suggestions: Provide lots of opportunities for parents to ask questions early on, and use fact sheets to clarify what the partnership means in terms of children’s entitlement to attend the partner schools. If pressure builds, consider whether all-through provision may be appropriate and/or desirable to the wider school community.

However, there have been some fears that the importance and unique challenges of primary schools may become lost in a cross-phase partnership under the dominance of larger secondaries12. This has led some to deliberately choose a MAT with a strong primary focus. Therefore it is worth noting that single phase partnerships can obtain similar benefits. Robin Co-operative Trust, despite having no secondary phase schools in the cluster, felt that collaboration had assisted a smooth transition to secondary education. The cluster arranged joint events which helped children at different primary schools get to know each other, before they attended secondary school together:

“It’s very good for difference and diversity because they’re culturally diverse schools, yet all of these children will go to the same high school and go through that high school together, so to start these connections and bonds before they go to high school is quite powerful and it’s something the children value.”

For mainstream and special school partnerships, the benefit of sharing specialist support staff and equipment has been identified as a potential advantage13. Jay Federation, a collaboration between two special schools, already works informally with a number of mainstream schools to share specialist expertise. Formalising some of these partnerships was a possibility for the future.

Sparrow Schools Group, a large informal group including special and alternative provision schools, found that the collaboration helped to reduce exclusions. The schools use a placement panel to carefully manage moves between the schools, and to work with parents to ensure that pupils move school for the right reasons:

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“We’ve kept exclusions and permanent exclusions to virtually zero in our area because schools have been prepared to accept students for second chances, and to support each other and try to make sure no one is left without a school or excluded.”

Evidence suggests that independent and state school partnerships can also have advantages, such as increasing access to minority and shortage subjects\(^\text{14}\).\\n
**Summary**

Think about how a partnership could benefit the local community, by creating stronger ties between schools to help pupils transition more easily - whether across phase, to a different school or to a specialist provision. Consider whether partnership with another school type could strengthen the phase or specialist expertise in your school. However, cross-phase partnerships are not essential to gaining such benefits, and the cluster’s respect and understanding of the school’s specific phase or type of education should also be a key consideration.

\(^\text{14}\) House of Commons, 2013.
2. Agreeing your goals

2.1 The importance of goals

Research and best practice advice suggests that having strong, clear, common goals can help make a partnership effective. It can focus partnership activity and, through regularly monitoring progress, maintain momentum. It will therefore be important for all schools to agree what they are working towards, and how they will measure this progress.

Agreeing goals early on also helps to ensure that the other schools and organisations you are working with share your vision and values. Greany and Brown (2015) in their research on successful school-university partnerships advise: “Schools must be clear about what external expertise and capacity can add value to their work and about what they most value in a university partner.” This advice can be applied to any school partner and is echoed by advice from NAHT General Secretary, Russell Hobby, who suggests schools should ask of a new trust: “What could you do with them that you can’t do now?” He goes on to suggest that a great trust “has a tight vision and clear idea about how it can help.” This can apply to any type of partner. Establishing what your group has to offer each other, as well as the type of projects you will take on (or not) and the goals you will prioritise, can help ensure a collective focus and shared vision.

Summary

Early discussions about goals can help to ensure that the schools and organisations you work with have the same values and vision, and that everyone is clear about the benefits they have to offer and to gain.

2.2 Example goals and activities

Muijs et al (2010) suggest that collaboration goals fall into three main categories:

- School improvement (e.g. agreeing a shared approach to school development)
- Broadening opportunities (e.g. working with other schools and external agencies to develop a wider curriculum)
- Sharing resources (e.g. jointly planning recruitment and succession)

The goals of the schools in our study generally spanned all three of these categories. In Goldfinch Federation this was not the case, but the experience of this cluster suggests that the group may have been stronger if they had agreed a wider set of goals. A member of the Interim Executive Board reflected on why the federation was not as successful as it could have been:

“[The schools] were both doing different things, using different exam boards. It was mainly just sharing facilities, sharing leadership, but not sharing good practice. We’d highlight that as the pitfall.”


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However, this does not mean that activity within each strand must be extensive, and there are different levels of activity possible within each of these broad themes. Muijs et al (2010) go on to give examples of ‘short term’, ‘medium term’ and ‘long term’ activities within each of the three categories. For instance, a short term ‘broadening opportunities’ activity might be to hold a joint exam preparation day, medium term might be to develop shared vocational course offerings and long term could be to establish joint curriculum planning systems.

Muijs et al highlight that the examples given are far from exhaustive, and other research has provided further lists of potential benefits that schools may wish to draw up when considering their goals. For instance, Hargreaves (2010) lists ten potential goals in his thought piece on a self-improving, school-led system:

1. Find it easier to meet the needs of every student
2. Deal more effectively with special educational needs
3. Find it easier to meet the needs of every staff member
4. Support new leaders
5. Build leadership capacity and boost succession planning
6. Protect the group’s members
7. Distribute innovation
8. Transfer professional knowledge more readily
9. Aid the integration of children’s services
10. Become more efficient in the use of resources

It is worth noting that Hargreaves had not come across any clusters that had achieved all ten of the benefits he set out. This highlights that a key part of the goal setting process is about prioritising goals and finding the group’s ‘niche’.

The most common goal among the schools in this study was resource sharing. It was one of the motivations behind five of the six clusters in our study and all of these clusters were able to make financial savings through their collaboration.

School improvement was also a common goal, but the reasons behind this varied. The schools in Swallow Multi-Academy Trust and Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust felt that the local authority was unable to support them as well as they wished. The school from Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust described what they were missing as “credible challenge backed up by effective support”. They highlight that their workload has increased through the new accountability they feel towards the trust and the other schools in the group, but emphasised that overall this was a positive consequence.

Jay Federation began their partnership as a result of one school supporting another. However, it was clear that their long term school improvement goals were not only for the ‘weaker’ school, but to maintain the performance of the ‘stronger’ school.

Shared CPD was another common benefit, cited by four of the clusters as one of the main advantages the group had gained. Jay Federation explained that when requests for CPD arise, they begin by looking at the expertise within the partnership to see if training can be delivered internally. Nightingale Schools Group highlighted that the benefits here span into resource sharing, as they can now deliver some of the more expensive training courses, such as first aid training.

**Summary**

Consider goals across the full range of partnership areas, but be realistic about what you want to achieve. Activities can vary in scale and time frames; think about the scope and ‘niche’ of partnership activity.

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2.3 Setting your goals

Greany and Brown (2015) point out some key principles that schools might want to consider when agreeing their goals (intended for school-university partnerships but easily applicable to other school groups). These can be summarised as follows:

• Begin by establishing what each school or organisation has to offer.
• Devote time to ensuring goals are clear and that the resources to achieve them are in place (e.g. time and space for staff to work together).
• Consider using contracts and key performance indicators, as well as broader Partnership Agreements for more open-ended goals.
• Review progress regularly, while acknowledging that some benefits may be hard to measure.
• Review the impact of the partnership as a whole and renegotiate with partners if the collaboration is not delivering as intended.

Hargreaves (2010) suggests that the full benefits of school groups are only likely to be attainable through ‘cluster maturity’, so a sensible pace will be important. The warnings about school groups expanding too fast in number of schools can apply to the scope of activity too. Regularly reviewing impact (as described above) may be a good way for schools to consider when they can set additional goals, or should delay some existing ones. For instance, Jay Federation noted that school improvement would be their key focus until they were confident in the strength of both schools in the partnership.

Summary

Make sure all schools agree on what you are working towards and that you have some way of measuring it. This can be redefined later on if you find that it is not working, as well as expanded at a manageable pace. The methods by which the cluster might work together to achieve and monitor their goals are discussed further in the ‘Ways of working’ section of this document.
3. Beginning informally

Evidence suggests that a period of informal partnership prior to formal collaboration may help to get things right\textsuperscript{17}.

3.1 Pace of change

The schools in our study stressed how important it is not to rush the process of establishing a cluster. \textbf{Robin Co-operative Trust} recommended a period of informal partnership:

\begin{quote}
“The first thing you should do is take your time and look at all the options available. Try not to feel pressurised into taking a decision and involve all your school community (staff, governors, parents) in thinking about what is right for your community. The other thing people need to identify is: what are the values of your school?...When you work in a collaboration, relationships are going to be key; it’s about finding people who want the same outcomes as you.”
\end{quote}

\textbf{Jay Federation} also urged that schools transition into a group gradually. During their transition to a federation, the governing bodies continued to meet separately to discuss matters pertaining to the individual schools, but came together for joint meetings to discuss the steps towards federation. Although the transformation happened fairly quickly (within one term), the federation did not feel that the process was rushed: “It was done quite quickly but it was done at our own pace. We thought everything through very thoroughly before we did anything.”

\textbf{Summary}

While it may be useful to set a time frame or deadlines for key milestones during the transition process, ensure that this allows long enough to consider each decision carefully and the process does not feel rushed. Think about setting up an informal joint committee or governing body, without delegated powers, to test out new arrangements during this process.

3.2 Co-ordination

Many of the clusters in our study advised that schools should appoint one person to oversee the collaboration process. For \textbf{Robin Co-operative Trust}, this was a key aspect of their structure:

\textbf{Robin Co-operative Trust}

The cluster is a co-operative trust that wished to work together as group but also still operate as individual schools. The schools felt that it would be difficult to gain the full benefits of working together without a dedicated person to co-ordinate the group and manage activities, so they employed a Consortium Operations Manager.

\textsuperscript{17} Simmons et al, 2011; Ranson & Crouch, 2009.
The schools strongly emphasised the positive aspects of having this role. The Consortium Operations Manager had dedicated time to focus on the benefits of working together, e.g. co-ordinating joint working on things like improving CPD for staff, arranging activities for children and securing the best possible deals on procurement. This meant that the head teachers, who had limited capacity to do more, did not have to take time out of their schedule to facilitate the day-to-day working of the group of schools.

Jay Federation highlighted how important this co-ordinating role was in the early phases, not only in terms of completing the day-to-day work, but being a point of contact for all those involved to find out information or raise problems. The co-ordination role was particularly valuable because of the work involved in moving to a new status. However, even with this co-ordination role, Robin Co-operative Trust stressed the level of work involved in setting up a group and advises schools to be prepared to attend extra meetings during this time.

### Common concern:
The workload involved in establishing a group of schools can be high.

### Suggestion:
Identify one main person to co-ordinate this work, who has the time and resources to dedicate to the project, and can act as a point of contact to help things run smoothly.

### Summary
Ensure that all partners are clear about the process required for formal collaboration. Don’t underestimate the time involved in co-ordinating the move towards a partnership; you may need to appoint someone to take on this co-ordinating role. If this isn’t possible, make sure there is one clear point of contact for all those involved in the work, in order to find out information or raise problems.

### 3.3 Consultation

Jay Federation advised that the consultation process with staff, parents and the community was the longest stage of the process, but it was important to ensure that everyone was on board. This involved information sharing sessions as well as opportunities for individuals to ask questions privately. The schools used these sessions to produce fact sheets addressing frequently asked questions, which were available on the school websites.

The main concern for staff is likely to be the potential for changes to pay and conditions. For Jay Federation, a key part of the consultation process was reassuring staff that their contracts would not change. If moving to a structure that will require a change of contracts (such as a multi-academy trust) this process will be even more important. The school from Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust highlighted that part of the initial process was ensuring there would be protection for staff when joining the new structure.

### Common concern:
Staff may be worried about changes to terms and conditions.

### Suggestions:
Have lots of opportunities for staff to ask questions early on, and (if applicable) negotiate early with the new employer to ensure protection for staff.

There may also be concerns from parents. Robin Co-operative Trust recalls that parents were worried that the new arrangement would mean resources were taken away from their school, particularly because some schools in the group were in more affluent areas than others. They would advise other schools to think carefully about how to communicate with parents about the changes, and try to show unity from the start.
Common concern: Parents may be worried about the implications of the new relationship.

Suggestion: Show unity with the other schools in the way that you engage with the community about the changes.

Summary

Allow sufficient time to consult with staff and the local community, especially if the change will affect the terms and conditions of staff. Identify and address potential concerns early on through lots of opportunities to ask questions (including in private).

For more information visit naht.org.uk
4. Deciding on a partnership structure

4.1 Options for partnership

There is no strong evidence that one model of school partnership is better than another\textsuperscript{18}; the best option is that which is suited to the local circumstances. Theoretically, there are a variety of options for formal partnership, as set out in Appendix 1. However, an individual school's ability to adopt some structures will be limited by their current level of performance and/or current Department for Education (DfE) and Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) thinking on acceptable models. The Department for Education (2016) makes clear in its white paper Educational Excellence Everywhere, that multi-academy trusts are the government's preferred option. It sets out the government’s intention to “promote greater collaboration between schools, particularly through multi-academy trusts (MATs) which we expect most schools will join.”

The schools in our study provide examples of the decision-making process when choosing which option is best for your school:

Robin Co-operative Trust
This cluster developed from a ‘community and learning partnership’, set up by the local authority to improve outcomes for children. The group chose the co-operative trust model because they wished to remain as local authority schools but wanted to work together for better CPD and greater collective buying power. The co-operative model already had forms, paperwork and processes for the schools to use, making it less time-consuming to set up. This model also meant that no changes to staff contracts were needed, avoiding potential financial losses through the TUPE process.

Nightingale Schools Group (informal, non-legally binding group)
The cluster was originally set up through the county council and consisted of nine primary schools, working together informally to help save money and co-ordinate teacher training and inset days. The dynamic of the group is changing because all but four of the schools have become academies. The school of the head teacher interviewed decided to convert to an academy because they felt that the local authority was no longer able to fully support them, while the multi-academy trust they were approaching had a strong improvement partner model. However, the informal partnership continues to work together on training, local transition and monitoring performance. They believe it is important to maintain this cluster alongside any formal multi-school structures, particularly in order to work together on local issues.

Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust
The school explored a variety of different options over a period of years before deciding to join an existing multi-academy trust. They decided to join a MAT because they felt that the local authority could no longer adequately support them. While their choice was also influenced by the direction of government on academisation, they believe this is the right set-up for them. They were able to choose an academy trust that held the same values and priorities as their school and included other schools in a close geographical area.

\textsuperscript{18} Research by Hutchings et al (2016) and the Andrews (2016) found wide variation in the performance of multi-academy trusts, and no clear evidence that schools in the multi-academy trust model performed better than similar maintained schools.
Jay Federation
The cluster is comprised of two local special schools, who had been working together to support one of the schools through leadership difficulties, and wanted to continue this relationship formally. Both schools valued the support they received from the local authority and did not want to lose this relationship, particularly because, as special schools, they worked closely with the local authority around SEND. Choosing a federation structure also ensured no changes to pay or contracts for staff (something that staff were concerned about in the initial consultation phase) and that the two schools could very much keep their own identities.

Sparrow Schools Group (informal, non-legally binding group, often referred to as a ‘soft’ federation)
The founders of the group were head teachers of two schools, in a predominantly deprived area. They wished to pull resources together to help improve outcomes for children and to provide better staff development opportunities. There are now ten schools involved and they have developed a number of collaborative groups which meet regularly. The schools also work together on things like pupil placements and sharing policies. Like Nightingale Schools Group, they are able to maintain this local relationship despite the changing structures of individual schools.

Summary
Spend time fully considering all of the partnership structures available. Choose one that will allow you to keep what currently works well and take advantage of new opportunities. Recognise that you may not get approval for your first choice model. Ensure that all potential partners are clear about models they are / are not willing to consider.

4.2 Level of formality
Research suggests that some degree of formality to a partnership can help to maintain shared commitments19. The schools in our study primarily agreed, with three of them recommending that they would have moved to a more formal structure sooner than they did. However, this did not necessarily mean formally shared leadership or governance. Robin Co-operative Trust had neither, but instead produced a collaboration agreement. This was a key turning point and something they would have done far earlier in hindsight

Common concern: Schools may not feel accountable to each other in an informal partnership.
Suggestion: Develop a collaboration agreement that sets out what is expected from each school at an early stage, including conflict resolution and clear accountability.

Linked to the degree of formal partnership, maintaining the identity of the individual schools was important for many of the clusters in our study. However, they found that having a formal structure did not have to mean losing this individuality. For the school in Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust this was a matter of ensuring their relationship with the trust was flexible enough to consider the needs of the local community.

Common concern: The school is worried about losing its own identity.
Suggestion: Be clear about which local decisions you want to maintain, and work with a cluster or trust that is supportive of these local flexibilities.

Two of the schools in our study maintained informal partnerships alongside joining multi-academy trusts, and did feel that these informal partnerships could work well. Nightingale Schools Group is a long-standing,

informal group of local schools, and did not believe the schools needed to formalise in order to maintain this relationship. As discussed in Section 1, informal partnerships can be successfully maintained alongside formal ones, gaining different benefits from each, but this may require extra effort to be successful.

### Summary

Whichever partnership structure you choose, make sure all schools are clear about what is expected of them, and there is some form of mutual accountability. If there are aspects of your school identity that you want retain, make sure you consider this in both the type of structure you choose, and flexibility allowed.

#### 4.3 Leadership structures

It has been suggested that “school partnerships with clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation, are more likely to be successful in achieving gains from collaboration.” The form that this overarching accountability takes can vary, but many school partnerships employ an executive head or CEO structure. There is evidence that federations that employ an executive head are more successful than those that do not. However, NGA (2016) highlight that the role itself can vary widely. For instance, they found examples of executive headship roles with responsibilities for driving improvement across a school group, but who had oversight of only one school. The size of the group and the schools within it were a key factor. They note that an executive head teacher of two small schools may have a role that “differs little from that of a head teacher of a single school.” While they found that the executive head of a large chain of secondary schools “may take a far more strategic role, spend little time in his/her schools and require a completely different skillset.”

David Carter (2016), in his essay on leading collaboration, also discusses this distinction between system leadership and operational leadership. He argues that leading collaboration requires different skills to the leadership of a school because of the “adjustment to scale, speed and scope of leadership interactions and outcomes.” He also highlights that staff in individual schools must have ownership of any new initiatives for them to work well.

Echoing this, Jay Federation highlighted the importance of ensuring the heads of schools were empowered to make decisions, noting that the executive head teacher performed more of a ‘coaching role’ than a ‘dictator role’. Similarly, Toby Salt warns new executive heads against a ‘controlling role’, instead recommending a ‘coaching, facilitating and influencing’ role.

The leadership structure was an important issue for the schools in our study, both in terms of effective leadership of the partnership, and its impact on the current roles of school leaders. Jay Federation felt that it was important to adapt the structure when forming the federation, to provide overarching leadership as well as leadership of each school. For Jay Federation this process was a natural one, because one of the schools in the partnership already had vacancies within its leadership team, but they recognised the potential difficulties for other schools:

> “What made it easy for us was that we didn’t have a head, a deputy and a business manager in post at the primary school. An issue a new federation might have is who will be that overarching head? You can operate with the two heads working collaboratively but I do think there comes a time for one person to make one decision.”

The potential benefits of an overarching structure were also discussed by one of the informal clusters in our study (Sparrow Schools Group), who said:

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“It’s really important to have someone who has the mandate to challenge, guide and say the things that need to be said. I think a flat structure is really difficult for that. It might be that you elect someone who has no authority but you as a group say, ‘you are the chair’... You could rotate it but make sure that they are empowered to say the things that need saying and to give the impetus and management of it.”

Robin Co-operative Trust did feel that accountability could be achieved without a hierarchical structure, but still emphasised the benefits of some level of formality. In their structure, the schools hold each other to account but are not accountable to the trust. Accountability is achieved by having a collaboration agreement which sets out what is expected of the schools.

**Common concern:** A flat structure may not create clear lines of accountability.

**Suggestion:** Appoint a ‘chair’ of the group who has a mandate to challenge (this role could be rotated), or establish a collaboration agreement.

Whatever the overarching structure, Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust advises schools joining an existing cluster to make sure they clearly understand the scheme of delegation and management structure above them. They recommend that head teachers ensure they will still be making the decisions in their school.

**Common concern:** The new leadership structure may remove the autonomy of current school leaders.

**Suggestion:** Ensure the head teacher / head of school is still empowered to make the key decisions relating to their school.

**Summary**

If establishing a new cluster, think about the benefits that an overarching leadership structure could bring, but remember that this should be in addition to strong and empowered leadership in each school. If joining an existing cluster, spend time understanding what it will mean for your own role and the roles of your leadership team (and therefore who makes key decisions for your school).

### 4.4 Governance structure

The most appropriate governance structure will depend on the circumstances of the schools. Evidence suggests that some key features are needed for it to perform well, such as appropriate representation and expertise. Consider using the Twenty-one questions for multi-academy trusts or Twenty questions for governing boards (devised by NGA and the APPG on Education Governance and Leadership) to assess the effectiveness of your structure and your scheme of delegation of responsibilities. The questions for governing bodies are structured into seven overarching questions:

- **Right skills:** Do we have the right skills on the governing board?
- **Effectiveness:** Are we as effective as we could be?
- **Role of the chair:** Does our chair show strong and effective leadership?
- **Strategy:** Does the school have a clear vision and strategic priorities?
- **Engagement:** Are we properly engaged with our school community, the wider school sector and the outside world?

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• Accountability of the executive: Do we hold the school leaders to account?
• Impact: Are we having an impact on outcomes for pupils?

While the multi-academy trust version is structured into six key themes:
• Vision, ethos and strategy
• Governance structures
• Trustee Board effectiveness and conduct
• Engagement
• Effective accountability of the executive leadership
• Impact on outcomes for pupils

The questions are reproduced in full in Appendix 2.

Some of the schools in our study were able to strengthen their governing bodies by having members of different schools sit together on one board. Jay Federation explained that, by having both primary and secondary on one body, more questions were being asked which provided greater challenge to both schools:

“Because the primary phase didn’t quite understand the secondary phase, it’s brought up extra questions... it’s kind of refreshing the secondary phase, and the same with secondary to primary. We’ve got that equal challenge.”

This can be achieved without formally merging the governing bodies. Robin Co-operative Trust, while still having independent governing bodies, had a governor from another school as an associate member of each board. Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust also retained their local governing body, with each local body feeding into an overarching board. However, the local boards were still able to assist each other by ‘borrowing’ governors:

“We had a difficult situation a few weeks ago around the permanent exclusion of a child. We couldn’t get a panel of governors together, so we borrowed a governor from another academy and that worked really well... they have knowledge of the framework we’re working within but won’t have any knowledge of the child or the member of staff.”

The schools are now going to formalise the procedure of borrowing governors in their policies, and also highlighted that they will be doing more across local governing bodies in future.

Whatever structure is used, evidence highlights that a smooth transition to the new structure is important. The schools in our study advised new groups of schools to ensure that they don’t lose effective aspects of their current governance by moving to the new structure. The school from Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust deliberately chose a MAT that allowed them to keep the local governing body, with local governors. Jay Federation were keen not to lose expertise in merging the governing bodies of two schools. They have therefore chosen to reduce the size of the body gradually, as governors naturally leave.

This does not only apply to the transition to a new structure, but to a shared way of working. In Jay Federation, policies and procedures were also combined gradually. They advise that the most important thing that happened early on was for the new board to meet and agree roles and responsibilities, but the process of fully combining their governance happened more gradually.

Common concern: Combining governance arrangements may risk losing local expertise.

Suggestion: Reduce the current governors slowly or maintain local bodies with some structure of interaction between them, such as observers from another school or the ability to ‘borrow’ governors.
Summary
Use a period of informal transition to a new system as a means of developing the most effective governance structure for your partnership. Consider the degree of local oversight as well as how you would benefit from the greater challenge of having representatives from different schools join together. Finally, make sure the partnership model you choose allows you to work under this governance structure.

4.5 Pooled budgets

All of the clusters in our study highlighted efficiencies as one of the key advantages of forming a group. The case studies had a variety of structures for sharing finances, and showed that schools do not have to formally pool budgets to benefit. Jay Federation decided that the two school budgets should remain entirely separate, largely due to the degree of complexity in special school budgets. Despite this, joint procurement was one of the biggest perceived advantages the schools had gained. This was achieved through one-off joint purchases, whether this was a large purchase (like a minibus), or just bulk buying office supplies. Although the schools’ finances remained separate, the federation did note that they had a School Business Manager (SBM) who oversaw the finances of both schools in order to identify these opportunities.

Common concern: Pooled budgets may not be practical for the group.
Suggestion: Share costs on a case-by-case basis, but make sure someone is in a position to identify these opportunities.

If schools do decide to pool budgets, there are a number of options which could work across the range of partnership types. In Sparrow Schools Group each school contributed an amount based on pupil numbers, while Robin Co-operative Trust had a fund made up of ‘membership fees’ from each school and non-school sources of income.

Whatever the method, evidence suggests that having clear and formal processes for any form of delegation is important; Ofsted have noted that problems arise when the logistics for shared finance are weak27.

Summary
Consider the different options available for sharing budgets, such as a standing pooled-fund, or contributing on a case-by-case basis. Ensure there is a clear protocol, agreed by all schools.

4.6 Shared policies and procedures

When sharing policies and models for teaching and learning, research highlights the importance of taking into account local circumstances in any cross-partnership systems28. For Robin Co-operative Trust, this was achieved by every school being accountable for their own policies, but informally sharing model formats. For many of the schools in our study some policies were shared, while others were unique to the school. In some cases the policies that schools chose to share reflected areas of collaboration. For instance, Sparrow Schools Group had a shared policy on managed moves, as limiting exclusions was a key area of work for the group. Other shared policies explicitly cited by the schools in this study included attendance, social media, HR and finance. Despite only sharing some policies in most cases, the opportunity to share example policies was often cited as an advantage.

Jay Federation noted that although the federation intends to combine policies, this process is happening gradually. They mentioned joint policies as a long-term goal of the federation rather than something that must be implemented from the beginning.

**Summary**
Maintain a degree of flexibility within shared structures to allow each school to make sure it works for their local context, e.g., each school is free to modify certain aspects of shared policies. Combining policies can happen gradually as the cluster develops.

For more information visit naht.org.uk
5. Ways of working

5.1 Structure

Sparrow Schools Group pointed out that collaboration relies partly on the human dynamic, and new leaders in the schools need to be made aware of the opportunities to continue this joint working. It may be easier to achieve if there is a strong structure within which the school undertakes collaborative activity.

Most of the schools in our study used a structure of sub-groups to maintain and monitor collaborative activities. Robin Co-operative Trust established three sub-groups based on areas of collaboration: teaching and learning; parental engagement; procurement. While for Nightingale Schools Group and Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust sub-groups were organised by staff role, such as maths leads from each school meeting regularly together. In all three cases the meetings took place every half term. All clusters in our study indicated that their head teachers met regularly too.

Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust explained that they now have a number of different collaborative structures across their MAT, as well as their more informal local cluster of schools:

“The local group meets every half term. We’re working together on the prevent agenda, doing a joint local risk assessment. Within the MAT we have a leaders forum every half term, where the principals and vice principals get together. There are also other development opportunities for maths leads, SENCos and so on. Plus peer review groups have become quite important; that’s a group of four, and over the year we’ll all conduct a review in each other’s schools.”

Peer review was another common structure through which schools worked together, and happened on a range of different scales. Robin Co-operative Trust used NAHT’s peer review model: a comprehensive process of evaluation against a specially designed review framework, led by an independent reviewer. Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust have established their own system of one day peer review visits and Nightingale Schools Group regularly undertook peer review activities in the form of sharing data, book scrutiny and learning walks in partner schools.

Jay Federation was the only group in our study to discuss staff working across schools in the cluster. The vice-chair of governors noted that it would be useful to be able to cover staff absence between the schools, rather than turning to supply teachers, which can be particularly difficult for special schools. Staff were initially concerned that joining the federation would require them to work at the other school site. Therefore existing staff kept their current contracts, while new staff were hired under a contract to the federation. This allowed flexibility while being clear that they were primarily employed in one school. However, without enforcing this practice, many staff members (including existing staff) are now eager work on the other school site, particularly after having seen colleagues gain experience from doing so.

Deploying staff across schools has been cited as a potential benefit to partnerships. David Carter, in evidence to the Education Select Committee, has suggested that clusters should think of their staff as a ‘talent pool’ and consider how that pool can best support pupils across the group. Other evidence to the committee cited staff working across schools as a development opportunity for the staff themselves.
Common concern: Staff are concerned about being required to work at another school.

Suggestion: Recognise and address staff concerns when agreeing new contracts. For instance, consider the amount of time spent at the other site and travel distance. Think about beginning on a voluntary basis, highlighting the opportunities for development.

Summary
Establish some mechanisms by which the schools will work together, such as sub-groups and peer review programmes. These can be designed in a variety of ways to suit the type of collaborative activities you want to undertake. If considering more formal joint working (staff working across schools), establish this gradually in consultation with staff to ensure that concerns are addressed.

5.2 Monitoring performance

Evidence submitted to the House of Commons Education committee on school partnership and co-operation concluded that school clusters are strong when they have “clear lines of accountability and some element of obligation.” The schools in our study highlighted a variety of ways through which they monitor the performance of the group, both to hold each other to account and help each other to address problems.

Methods of monitoring the overarching performance of the group largely came from collaboration between the governing bodies (already discussed under the governance section) and peer review (discussed in the section above). Jay Federation also highlighted that their executive head was able to provide oversight of the two schools.

In addition, all clusters in our study shared and monitored data. The cluster co-ordinator for Robin Co-operative Trust explained: “We share data at the teaching and learning sub-group, so instead of waiting for something to happen we’re actually constantly monitoring where we all are and holding each other to account.” One of the head teachers interviewed for this case study suggested they should have started doing this sooner.

However, the terms of data sharing should be fully considered. Sparrow Schools Group noted that in the early stages of their collaboration, a school within the group used shared data for the wrong reasons, creating mistrust between the schools. Other case studies raise potential solutions: Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust highlighted that the schools have an agreement about how the data is collated, recorded, shared and scrutinised. While Jay Federation sought advice on sharing data from their Educational Development Partner.

Common concern: Data sharing requires strong trust.

Suggestion: Produce a data sharing agreement or seek professional advice about the best way to share data.

In terms of monitoring this data, Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust gave the example of using a RAG rating system, with an understanding that if a school is rated red on any area, the other schools would come together to support that school.

When considering any data sharing systems it may be worth referring to the report of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group on data management. This identifies some key principles to ensure that sharing data is useful and efficient. For instance, the report recommends eliminating duplication: “collect once, use many times”. Therefore it may be worth considering the data collection and reporting arrangements that schools already use, and how the group can use the same information or systems.

Summary

It is beneficial for schools to have oversight of each other’s performance, in order to identify problems before they develop and help each other to tackle them. This can be achieved through all of the collaborating structures already discussed: joint governance, overarching leadership, sub-groups and peer review. However, this can only be done with great trust between the schools, and under the agreement that if weaknesses are identified in one school, support will be offered from the other schools. Clear agreements about what is being shared, and why, can help establish this trust. Schools should also ensure that any data sharing arrangements are efficient and useful by building on existing arrangements and being clear about how the collection of data will lead to action.

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Process of collaboration

The review of evidence identified key stages at which important decisions must be made in the move towards a collaborative structure. The questions schools may wish to consider are summarised below:

1. Finding your cluster
   • How can you build on your existing relationships with other schools?
   • How will the location of the schools (local or further afield) affect the way you work together?
   • Is your cluster big enough to produce economies of scale, but organised in a way to maintain close relationships?
   • How will you ensure all schools have something to gain?
   • Could the community benefit from stronger ties across school phases or school types?

2. Agreeing your goals
   • What expertise will each partner bring and what do you all hope to gain?
   • Which goals will you prioritise?
   • What are the parameters of the activity you will undertake to achieve them?
   • Within what time frame do you want to achieve these goals and how will you measure your success?

3. Beginning informally
   • Do you have common goals and values?
   • Do you work well together?
   • How will you make sure the staff, pupils, governors and community are on board?
   • What pace of change is right for you?
   • Who will co-ordinate the day-to-day work of setting up the group?

4. Deciding on a partnership structure
   • Which collaborative structure will allow you to keep what works well, while benefiting from new advantages?
   • If joining a trust, do they share your goals and values, both for learners and for staff?
   • How will you maintain your school’s individual identity?
   • What will be the scheme of delegation of responsibilities between the accountable body and each member of the trust?
   • Does the leadership structure need to change, and how will this impact on the way that decisions are made in your school?
   • To what extent will you combine governance structures?
   • To what extent will you share finances, and who will oversee this?
   • What other policies and procedures will you share?
5. **Ways of working**

- How will you structure the collaborative work, e.g. will you have working groups, and how often will they meet?
- How will you monitor the performance of schools in the groups?
- What will you do if weaknesses are identified?

**Checklist for success**

There are some overarching approaches to collaboration that evidence suggests can contribute to success:

- Do everything at a manageable pace; consider every decision carefully and leave time to consult those impacted such as staff, parents and the wider community.
- Work with schools, individuals and organisations that share your values and vision, both as educators and employers.
- Ensure the leadership structure allows strategic leadership and oversight of the group as a whole, as well as strong empowered leadership in each school.
- Identify someone to co-ordinate the partnership, who has the time and resources to invest in the day-to-day work.
- Have a formal agreement about the things you share (like data and finances).
- Get staff, parents and the community on board by sharing information about the new structure early on, in an open and transparent way.
- Agree clear goals and monitor your progress towards them.
- Ensure all schools have parity of esteem within the partnership. Although schools will have differing capacities and expertise, all schools should be expected to contribute something and have something to gain.
- Implement a method of monitoring the progress of the cluster as a whole.

**Potential barriers**

As well as common approaches for success, there were common barriers to effective working. Be mindful of these potential problems:

- The past relationship with the other schools can affect the balance of the group, so be sure to address any perceived inequalities.
- Staff may be worried about changes to terms and conditions; address these concerns early on.
- Changes to the leadership structure may affect the autonomy of the school and your own role. Be clear about who makes the decisions in your school, as well as how decisions are made about the work of the group as a whole.
- Relationships outside of the group can easily be neglected. Try to maintain external relationships and remember to look outside of the cluster for best practice too. The cluster should not set itself off from the rest of the world or from other relationships.
- Limiting the collaboration to a narrow goal (like sharing resources) may limit the effectiveness of the relationship. Start with your biggest priority, but aim to work together across a range of goals (some of these can be smaller projects than others).

In addition to the advice presented here, speak to other school leaders you know who already operate in a cluster, and find out what has and hasn’t worked for them.

For more information visit naht.org.uk
Bibliography


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Appendix 1: Exploring multi-school solutions

The education landscape continues to evolve rapidly. The combination of government reforms (including the autonomy agenda and amendments to the Ofsted framework) is placing greater emphasis on school-to-school collaboration in all its varieties. While collaboration is not new to schools, the range of matters they have to collaborate on, and the importance of collaboration to the success of their learning community, have changed significantly. Schools must be ‘intelligent browsers’ and be highly selective about potential partnership structures if they are to secure the best possible outcomes for their children and young people.

This document, produced by education law experts Browne Jacobson in conjunction with NAHT, briefly explores the options available to schools. The key to selecting the best option will be to have a genuine common understanding of exactly what outcomes your school and your partner schools are seeking to achieve. We do not seek to recommend or suggest an approach because we recognise the importance of schools freely choosing their own destiny. We merely seek to give you full and unbiased facts to support your choices in a field rife with pressure. Collaboration is vital, but there are many ways to collaborate.

Informal / formal partnerships

This is one of the most common ways in which schools work together. These arrangements can be very informal through a verbal agreement, or more formal through signing up to a memorandum of understanding (a short, non-legally binding document setting out the school’s intentions) or more detailed collaboration agreement.

Key features
- Opportunity to work jointly while maintaining complete autonomy.
- Heavily dependent on the personalities involved.
- Quick and straightforward to set up.
- Collaboration agreement details how activities will be funded and what each school will do.

Practical considerations
- Ideal for dealing with a few specific and uncontroversial issues when action is required quickly.
- May not be the most appropriate method when the schools need an enduring partnership model that can be heavily relied on for support.

Hard federations

A hard federation is where two or more schools come together with a single governing body for all the schools in the federation. Hard federations may comprise schools from the same phase, or be used to support an all-through federation that includes all phases and each school retains a full headteacher.

Key features
- School remain as maintained schools.
- Governance and leadership models can be tailored to the schools circumstances.
- Schools collaborate at all levels, including at governor level.
- School pool procurement and achieve ‘shared-service’ type efficiencies.

Practical considerations
- Hard federations can be appropriate when there’s a pre-existing relationship and a high level of trust between schools.
- Potential difficulties can arise when one school within the federation wishes to become, or is required to become, an academy. In this case, the hard federation will be broken if all the schools don’t convert.
Trust schools

Trust schools are maintained schools supported by a charitable trust. While trust schools may be stand-alone schools, they can be used to support collaborative working when two or more trust schools share the same trust. This is a hybrid between a formal partnership and a hard federation where you can access some (but not all) of the benefits of greater collaboration at governor level.

**Key features**
- School remain as maintained schools.
- Either a new or existing trust appoints governors - schools can choose between a minority or majority model in terms of the number of governors appointed by the trust.
- Trust owns the land and buildings. The governing body becomes employer of staff and admissions authority.
- Detailed regulations set out the procedure to become a trust school.

**Practical considerations**
- Trust schools gain some additional freedoms while remaining maintained schools.
- Unlike academy status, there's no longer funding to support schools moving to trust school status.
- Sharing the same trust won’t by itself deliver an effective collaboration; it could also be necessary to enter into some form of collaboration agreement.

Academies

Many schools and academies are looking to explore how they can work with other schools under the academy programme. There are three basic models that can be tailored to your local circumstances: the multi-academy trust, the umbrella trust and collaborative partnerships.

**Multi-academy trust (MAT)**

This is where one academy trust’s board is ultimately responsible for running two or more academies. The academy trust has a master funding agreement with a supplemental funding agreement for each academy. It may comprise academies from the same phase or be used to support an all-through federation that includes all phases.

**Key features**
- Similar to hard federation.
- The board has ultimate responsibility for running each academy and typically delegates running of each academy to a local governing body (LGB).
- The level of delegation to the LGB can be different for each academy. And an LGB can act in respect of more than one academy.
- The fact there’s only one legal entity and therefore a single employer provides potential for shared buying and rewarding career pathways.

**Practical considerations**
- The MAT model is most likely to be appropriate when either there's a pre-existing relationship and a high level of trust between schools, or the DfE requires one or more schools to receive significant amounts of support.
- This approach is the most suitable for schools that want to collaborate at all levels through the organisation.
- Concerns can arise around the feeling of loss of autonomy, but this needs to be balanced with the benefits of greater support.

**Umbrella trust (UT)**

Each academy has its own academy trust and these are connected through a shared ‘umbrella trust’. This approach can be similar to a group of trust schools that share the same trust. The role given by the founding schools to the umbrella trust can differ significantly between umbrella trusts.
Collaborative partnership (CP)

This is the loosest form of academy collaboration. These arrangements are similar to a maintained school's formal partnerships, where each academy trust signs up to a collaboration agreement that sets out how the academies will work together and how joint activities will be funded.

Key features
- Each academy has its own academy trust that enters into separate funding arrangements with DfE.
- It can be used to support school improvement and provide shared services.
- The schools determine at time of conversion the UT's right to appoint governors to each academy's governing body.

Practical considerations
- The UT is ideal when voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools wish to collaborate with other schools, but they're not able to do so under a MAT. It's also attractive when autonomy of each school's governing body is an absolute requirement.
- Schools need to carefully consider the agreement to ensure they're comfortable with the balance between responsibility for school improvement across the academies within the UT.

Collaboration companies

Where schools of all types and phases wish to collaborate to deliver significant activities, a collaboration company may be appropriate. This approach is similar to a formal partnership but here you also have a shared company.

This option will be appropriate if you are looking for a model that can provide reassurance to your governing body that each school will retain complete autonomy, whilst providing a secure and robust arrangement for managing joint activities as they become increasingly significant. This will be important when effectively managing the risk associated with greater reliance on collaborative work.

Key features
- Unlike the MAT or UT models, a CP can very easily involve all types of schools.
- Each academy is completely separate and only linked to the extent set out in the collaboration agreement.
- The collaboration agreement can be very simple or more refined.
- Examples of collaboration include mentoring of senior leadership staff, sharing facilities, and loaning or training staff.

Practical considerations
- Ideal when schools can, and want to, convert on their own, but they also want to establish more formal ties with schools in their area.
- A potential pitfall of this approach is there's not a strong enough bond to deal with really difficult situations.
- Unlike the MAT approach, this is less likely to foster effective collaboration at governor level, but it doesn't mean this can't be achieved with a well-written partnership agreement.

Practical considerations
- The School Collaboration Regulations don’t allow maintained schools to enter academy collaborations when they want to formally delegate decisions. The can create real difficulties for maintained schools and academy collaborations when the collaborative activities become increasingly significant. Using a company model solves this issue.
- As local authorities' capacity diminishes, increasing numbers of schools across the country are seeking to support each other using a collaboration company.
Appendix 2: Questions for governing bodies and multi-academy trusts

The National Governors Association (NGA) and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Education Governance and Leadership have published two sets of questions to help governing bodies improve their practice, and to help multi-academy trust boards ensure their governance arrangements are effective. These questions are reproduced below, and the original documents can be downloaded here:

- Twenty key questions for the governing board to ask itself
- Twenty-one questions for multi-academy trust boards

Questions for governing bodies:

Governing board effectiveness

Right skills: Do we have the right skills on the governing board?

1. Have we completed a skills audit which informs the governor specification we use as the basis of governor appointment and interview?

Effectiveness: Are we as effective as we could be?

2. How well do we understand our roles and responsibilities, including what it means to be strategic?
3. Do we have a professional clerk who provides legal advice and oversees the governing board’s induction and development needs?
4. Is the size, composition and committee structure of our governing board conducive to effective working?
5. How do we make use of good practice from across the country?

Role of the chair: Does our chair show strong and effective leadership?

6. Do we carry out a regular 360° review of the chair’s performance and elect the chair each year?
7. Do we engage in good succession planning so that no governor serves for longer than two terms of office and the chair is replaced at least every six years?
8. Does the chair carry out an annual review of each governor’s contribution to the board’s performance?

Vision, ethos and strategy

Strategy: Does the school have a clear vision and strategic priorities?

9. Does our vision look forward three to five years, and does it include what the children who have left the school will have achieved?
10. Have we agreed a strategy with priorities for achieving our vision, that has key performance indicators against which we can regularly monitor and review the strategy?
11. How effectively does our strategic planning cycle drive the governing board’s activities and agenda setting?

Engagement: Are we properly engaged with our school community, the wider school sector and the outside world?

12. How well do we listen to, understand and respond to our pupils, parents and staff?
13. How do we make regular reports on the work of the governing board to our parents and local community?
14. What benefit does the school draw from collaboration with other schools and other sectors, locally and nationally?

Effective accountability

Accountability of the executive: Do we hold the school leaders to account?

15. How well do we understand the school’s performance data (including in-year progress tracking data) so that we can properly hold school leaders to account?

16. Do governors regularly visit the school to get to know it and monitor the implementation of the school strategy?

17. How well does our policy review schedule work and how do we ensure compliance?

18. Do we know how effective performance management of all staff is within the school?

19. Are our financial management systems robust so that we can ensure best value for money?

Impact: Are we having an impact on outcomes for pupils?

20. How much has the school improved over the last three years, and what has the governing board’s contribution been to this?

Questions for multi-academy trust boards

Vision, ethos and strategy

1. Does the Trustee Board have a clear vision and strategic priorities for the next three to five years, to which all academies contribute and which is understood by each of its academies?

2. How effectively do these strategic priorities drive the governance structure, activities and agenda setting at all levels of the trust?

3. What vision does the Trustee Board have for the size of the trust and how does the strategy ensure there is the capacity to properly support any additional academies?

Governance structures

4. Is the structure of the trust - from its members to academy level governance - conducive to effective working, ensuring check and balances but avoiding duplication at different levels, and delivering good two-way communication?

5. How does the Trustee Board ensure that its governance structure is clear, in keeping with its Articles of Association, and that those at regional, cluster and academy level understand their roles and responsibilities compared to those of the Trustee Board?

6. a) Does the Trustee Board have a scheme of delegation, and is it published on its website and those of its academies? Does the scheme make clear where the following key governance functions are exercised:
   • Determining each individual academy’s vision, ethos and strategic direction?
   • Recruiting each academy’s principal / head of school?
   • Performance management of each academy’s principal / head of school?
   • Determination of Human Resources policy and practice?
   • Oversight of each academy’s budget?
   • Assessment of the risks for each academy?

   b) Is the principle of earned autonomy applied to individual academies or local clusters and if so, do all those involved at all levels of governance within the MAT understand how?
Trustee Board effectiveness and conduct

7. Right skills: Has the Trustee Board adopted a robust and transparent process for the recruitment both of trustees and those at local governance level? Does it include role specifications, skills audits and interview panel to ensure those carrying out governance functions have the full range of experience, qualities and skills necessary to discharge all the Trustee Board’s responsibilities?

8. Clerking: Does the Trustee Board have a professional clerk providing information and guidance on regulatory practice and procedures, including governance leadership to the committees and any academy level governance?

9. Chair: How does the Trustee Board ensure that the chair shows strong and effective leadership?

10. Trustee performance: Does the chair carry out an annual review of each trustee’s contribution to the Board’s performance and ensure that each trustee is investing in his/her own development?

11. Succession planning: Do we engage in good succession planning so that, in normal circumstances, no trustee serves for longer than two terms of office and the chair is replaced at least every six years?

12. Conflicts of interest and conduct: How does the Trustee Board ensure conflicts are avoided and that the Nolan Principles of Public Life are adhered to?

13. Learning from others: Has the Trustee Board regularly reviewed its structures and practice, making use of other Boards’ experiences and periodically seeking external expertise?

Engagement

14. How does the Trustee Board listen to, understand and respond to pupils, parents, staff and local communities across all its academies?

15. What benefit do the academies within the trust draw from collaboration with other schools and other sectors, including employers (locally and nationally), and how is the trust involved in contributing to improving leadership and schools beyond its own academies?

Effective accountability of the executive leadership

16. How well does the Trustee Board understand its academies’ performance data, and how do trustees know that pupils in all their academies are making the best progress they can?

17. What mechanisms does the Trustee Board use to ensure that there is a strong and effective executive leadership structure and personnel in place across the trust with the right skills, clear line management and reporting mechanisms?

18. How does the Trustee Board ensure that senior leaders within academies are challenged to improve the education of pupils, and what intervention would be used if improvement is not progressing according to plan at an academy?

19. How does the Trustee Board ensure that the trust’s financial capability and management systems are robust to ensure compliance with the Academies Financial Handbook, offer best value for money and deliver the long-term strategy?

20. Do the compliance systems give assurance to the Trustee Board that the trust is meeting its statutory and legal responsibilities?

Impact on outcomes for pupils

21. How much have the academies improved over the last three years, and what has the Trustee Board’s contribution been to this?
## Appendix 3: Case studies

### Robin Co-operative Trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cluster</th>
<th>Co-operative trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools in cluster</td>
<td>1 infant, 1 junior, 5 primaries and a federation of 2 special schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of cluster</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>West Midlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>In a local area, mostly feeding the same high school. All schools are no more than 5 miles away from each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>Each school has its own governing body. There is a trust board that is responsible for the strategic direction of the trust and for monitoring performance of the trust. The head and chair from each school are members of the board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared policies</td>
<td>Each school is responsible for determining its own policies, but in practice there is some sharing of model formats, e.g. for attendance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared resources</td>
<td>All the schools contribute towards the salary of the trust Business Operations Manager. This is the only formal sharing of resources, but there is considerable informal sharing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared finances</td>
<td>The group cannot use school budgets for trust costs. They have an independent trust budget which is made up of the membership fees from each school and other non-school sources of income.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### How the group was formed

- The group emerged from a community and learning partnership that existed through the local authority.
- They wanted to formalise this arrangement for greater CPD development and buying power, and increased collaboration and co-operation between schools.
- They explored all different options (including converting to an academy) but felt that remaining under the local authority was the best option for their group of schools.
- They chose to use the co-operative model, which already had processes in place for joint working, and have built upon the co-operative values.

### How they work together

- The trust set three main sub-groups through which they agree and co-ordinate activity:
  - teaching and learning (e.g. visiting each other’s schools for peer review and sharing expertise)
  - community engagement (e.g. joint parent, pupil and community activities)
  - procurement group (e.g. pooling resources and identifying opportunities for collective bargaining)
- They have a dedicated Consortium Operations Manager to help co-ordinate the group and manage activities and meetings.
- They take part in NAHT’s peer review process (Instead).
- If a school is struggling, they will adapt their work to provide support - including sharing staff.

For more information visit naht.org.uk
Advice for other schools

• Choose your partners carefully
• Close proximity makes day-to-day working easier
• Be aspirational but realistic: start with the most important goals
• Have a collaboration agreement from the start
• Appoint someone to lead the group

Nightingale Schools Group and Swallow Multi-Academy Trust

Type of cluster: The school leader interviewed for this case study worked in a school that had recently academised as part of a multi-academy trust. However, the school was also part of a separate informal (non-legally binding) cluster of local schools.

Schools in cluster:
- Informal: 9 primaries
- MAT: 3 primaries and 1 infant

Age of cluster:
- Informal: 6 years
- MAT: 7 months (from when the case study joined the group)

Region: South East

Proximity:
- Informal: 6 mile radius
- MAT: 30 mile radius

Governance:
- Informal: No joint governance
- MAT: Local governing bodies that feed into a trust board

Shared policies:
- Informal: No shared policies
- MAT: There are some policies that the trust delivers and some that are unique to the academy, e.g. teaching and learning and behaviour

Shared resources:
- Informal: Literacy and numeracy working groups; assessment update; SENCo support group; group work within the schools to present an NQT programme and a Directory of Expertise
- MAT: No sharing yet. Plans to share CPD

Shared finances:
- Informal: Some shared finances to support the above activities.
- MAT: No shared budgets

How the group was formed

Informal:
• The group was originally set up through the county council to link inset days together, saving money on training.
• Since then it has expanded in size and in range of activity the group undertakes.
• However, the dynamic is changing because many schools are converting to academy status.

MAT:
• The school felt they did not receive adequate support from the local authority.
• They chose to join a trust linked to a university that they had worked with before, and which had an academy improvement partner, to provide the support they felt was missing from the local authority.

For more information visit naht.org.uk
How they work together

Informal:
• Head teachers meet once every half term and take it in turns to chair the group and act as secretary.
• There are also meetings between staff in certain roles such as SENCos.
• They have established an NQT programme.
• They monitor performance through sharing data and learning walks in each other’s schools.

MAT:
• An academy improvement partner works with the school and visits six times a year.
• There are regular visits and support from HR, Finance, ICT and Estates.
• Termly SMT meeting with the trust
• Conferences

Advice for other schools
• Close proximity is important
• Be open with each other and prepared to show your weaknesses
• As long as there is a chair to lead the group and arrange meetings, a more formal arrangement isn’t necessary.

Kestrel Multi-Academy Trust

Type of cluster Multi-academy trust
Schools in cluster 9 primaries
Age of cluster 18 months (from when the case study joined)
Region North West
Proximity 5 different local authorities, but geographically close
Governance Local governing bodies with a clear schedule of delegation
Shared policies HR, Finance, Operations
Shared resources A small central team is employed
Shared finances 5% of the budget from each school goes to the MAT. This is taken before any additional money is allocated to a school budget, such as pupil premium.

How the group was formed
• The school felt that there was a lack of support from the local authority.
• They explored a variety of options and decided that the academy route was the right one to take.
• They joined a trust led by a company they had worked with before, and that shared their values.
• They set out certain criteria before joining the trust, such as ensuring protection for staff and maintaining local governance

How they work together
• MAT leaders meet every half term.
• There are also groups for staff in certain roles, such as maths leads and SENCos.
• They have established a system of peer review.

For more information visit naht.org.uk
They share and monitor data using a RAG rating system.

Advice for other schools

- Look at the leadership structure of the trust and ensure you will still be making the decisions in your school.
- Ensure the trust you are joining is sympathetic to unions
- Know what you want out of your partnership
- Don’t rush

Jay Federation

Type of cluster: Federation (often referred to as a ‘hard’ federation)

Schools in cluster: 1 primary special and 1 secondary special school

Age of cluster: 6 months

Region: North East

Proximity: 5 miles apart

Governance: Shared governing body

Shared policies: They have begun the process of joining policies, which will happen gradually. The aim is to share all policies.

Shared resources: CPD, teaching and learning materials, minibuses and starting to share staff.

Shared finances: Separate budgets, but they have an SBM who oversees the finances of both schools and share costs on a case-by-case basis.

How the group was formed

- One school was supporting the other through leadership difficulties by sharing their head teacher, and the schools decided to formalise this joint working.
- The schools chose to partner as a federation because they valued the support from the local authority and wanted to maintain existing pay and conditions for staff, and ensure the schools kept their individual identities.
- A new overarching leadership structure was introduced and the governing bodies were combined.

How they work together

- An executive head teacher has oversight of the two schools and leads the collaborative work
- There is now one governing body for the two schools
- Shared CPD
- One-off joint purchases
- Staff visit each other’s sites and are beginning to work across sites

Advice for other schools

- Get staff on board by sharing as much information as possible early on.
- Transition at your own pace and carefully think through all decisions.
- If moving to joint governance, the first joint meeting should be a discussion about roles and responsibilities, for instance consolidating duplicated roles.

For more information visit naht.org.uk
### Sparrow Schools Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cluster</th>
<th>An informal (non-legally binding) group, often referred to as a ‘soft’ federation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools in cluster</td>
<td>1 secondary special, 1 PRU and 8 secondaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of cluster</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>South East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>5 mile radius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>Separate governance arrangements, but governors meet twice a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared policies</td>
<td>Social media and social networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared resources</td>
<td>CPD, teaching and learning resources, joint targeted days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared finances</td>
<td>Schools contribute to a pooled budget based on pupil numbers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How the group was formed**

- Two schools in a predominantly deprived area joined together to share resources.
- The group has since grown in size to involve schools across the district, and has expanded the range of activity it undertakes.

**How they work together**

- There is a strong structure of meetings, with staff in similar roles meeting every three weeks, as well as governors meeting twice a year.
- The head teachers and deputy heads take turns in chairing their respective groups.
- There is a pupil placement panel that manages moves between schools.
- The schools share courses and hold joint events.

**Advice for other schools**

- Regular meetings are crucial; all relationships need nurturing.
- Make sure you keep track of the advantages so that new people joining the schools involved can be made aware of the purpose of the group.
- Ensure there is some form of hierarchy; someone with a mandate to challenge and support.

### Goldfinch Federation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cluster</th>
<th>Federation (often referred to as a ‘hard’ federation) undergoing forced academisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools in cluster</td>
<td>2 secondaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of cluster</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>North East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>5 miles apart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>One governing body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared policies</td>
<td>All policies shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared resources</td>
<td>Shared facilities, e.g. farm and sporting facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared finances</td>
<td>No pooled budget, but costs shared on a case-by-case basis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more information visit naht.org.uk
How the group was formed

- Two schools with strong Ofsted ratings decided to federate in order to share facilities and expand the courses offered, e.g. farm and sporting facilities.
- They employed an executive head across the two schools.

How they work together

- Besides the initial goals of sharing facilities and leadership (i.e. the executive head), the schools did not work closely together or share best practice.
- Following the implementation of an Interim Executive Board (under direction of the local authority), the two schools have been working more closely together, e.g. joint CPD events, using the same exam boards and sharing knowledge in their areas of strength.

Advice for other schools

- Continue to seek good practice from other schools regardless of inspection grade.
- Look outside of the group for good practice too.
- Work together across the full range of collaborative activity (i.e. not just sharing resources).

For more information visit naht.org.uk