



ANNUAL REPORT

2018 – 2019

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FOREWORD

This report sets out the work of the Queen Street Group of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) during 2018–19. This was a year in which change continued unabated in the way publicly funded primary and secondary schools in England are governed, managed and regulated.

The first academies were established in 2002. Within five years, Multi-Academy Trusts were beginning to emerge, with several starting to become nationally known. 2010–13 saw a surge in pace, with a fifteen-fold increase in the number of schools becoming academies.^[1] By 2016 there were 738 MATs in operation.^[2] In 2018, the point was reached when more than half of all pupils in England’s state schools were being educated in institutions governed by a Trust.^[3]

This is the biggest change in state school governance since 1902 and it has come about rapidly.

Innovation in policy has led to innovation in practice. New legal instruments have been created, new funding structures put in place and new forms of accountability established. At times the pace of change has been demanding, with both Trust boards and management teams assimilating new responsibilities and accommodating revised regulations at speed.

Despite this, the first and constant priority of those who govern and manage academies is to ensure high-quality learning among pupils by enabling staff in schools – not just teachers but all those who contribute in various roles – to work as effective and fulfilled professionals.

This report explains how, in furtherance of these principal tasks, 17 Trusts have formed a voluntary collaboration and turned it into a formal organisation in order to share joint experience, deepen collective expertise, increase efficacy and, in an apolitical spirit, affirm the moral purpose of their work.

[1] DfE (2016). *Academies Annual Report. Academic year: 2014 to 2015* (HC 749), p. 14.

[2] The Education Company (2016). Of the 738 MATs managing at least two schools: 587 had five or fewer schools; 111 had 6–11 schools; 27 had between 12–25 schools; and 13 had 26 or more schools. See: besa.org.uk/key-uk-education-statistics/.

[3] DfE (2019). *The proportion of pupils in academies and free schools, in England, in October 2018. Ad-hoc notice: January 2019*, p. 2: “As of October 2018, 50.1% of pupils studying in state-funded schools in England were in an academy or free school”. assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772809/Proportion_of_pupils_in_academies_and_free_schools.pdf.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Queen Street Group: origins

A group of Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) chief executive officers (CEOs) began meeting informally in June 2015. This group became a voluntary alliance that met regularly during 2016–18 to exchange operational insights, peer-to-peer. During 2017–18, the CEOs decided to create a formal legal entity to encourage and extend these discussions, leading to the Queen Street Group being incorporated in October 2018 with 17 Trusts in membership. [Sections 1.1–1.3.]

The Queen Street Group: aims and values

The Queen Street Group (QSG) is a very practical body designed to encourage organisational development, both collectively and within each Trust, through: exchanging insight; identifying the operational goals shared between Trusts and regulators; developing the expertise of specialist senior staff; and undertaking data analysis. Its formal constitution encourages common adherence to ethical standards in the provision of high-quality pupil education. [Sections 1.3–1.4.]

QSG: facts and figures

- ~ The 17 QSG member Trusts educate between them 201,000 pupils enrolled across 374 schools; the schools are located in all of the eight regions of England overseen by Regional Schools Commissioners. The Trusts are highly varied in origin, size and geography but share a commitment to improving the education of children living in disadvantaged circumstances whose schools have lost their way and require a fresh start. [Section 2.1]
- ~ Compared to the national picture, pupils in schools managed by QSG member Trusts are considerably more likely to qualify as Pupil Premium students. Two-thirds of pupils of member Trusts are educated in secondary schools. The remainder are in primary schools, all-through schools, special schools or are being educated in alternative provision. [Sections 2.2–2.3]

Activity in 2018–19

The collective work of the member Trusts in 2018–19 has focused on four substantive themes: quality of education; sound financial planning; recruitment and retention of able teachers; and effective governance and management. These themes have been pursued through three main activities:

- ~ strategic discussion between QSG CEOs and national education leaders;
- ~ operational scrutiny by groups of Trust directors responsible for Education, Finance and HR;
- ~ presentation of results through internal briefings and short analytical reports. [Sections 3.1–3.3]

Key conclusions

The conclusions arising from the work of QSG member Trusts during 2018–19 fall under four headings.

1) GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The aims and operations of well-managed MATs are not widely understood by the public or by professionals in education, including many public officials. This knowledge gap matters, given the role of leading Trusts in:

- ~ bringing coherence to the geography of the national academies programme;
- ~ developing new, value-added ways of managing schools;
- ~ blending financial sustainability, local autonomy and innovation.

They also bring strong national insight to the problem of ‘orphan schools’ and the effectiveness and consistency of the role of Regional Schools Commissioner. Further discussion with officials at the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) is likely to contribute to increased sophistication in the financial management of MATs.

2) QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The year has seen a welcome refocusing on the school curriculum. This work is significantly enhanced in those Trusts which have knowledgeable and well-integrated management functions. It also raises important questions as to whether the curriculum should be differentiated school-by-school to take account of the local situation. In every case the curriculum needs to enhance the education of all pupils in the school, as should the forms of attainment most valued by politicians and regulators. Meanwhile, the puzzle as to whether revised methods of inspection can reduce teacher workload remains unresolved.

3) FINANCIAL PLANNING

Data collected across QSG Trusts in 2018–19 has illustrated the complexities and difficulties of preparing sound long-term financial plans and forecasts in a period of high political volatility. In particular, there are many uncertainties over income and expenditure estimates due to policy processes beyond the control and influence of MATs. Trusts understand that these inhibitors to sound planning are also beyond the control of ESFA. Nevertheless, at the level of each Trust they make accurate financial forecasting and adequate expenditure on capital difficult for even the most experienced trustee board to oversee.

4) RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF ABLE TEACHERS

MATs have a number of built-in advantages when it comes to managing teacher recruitment and retention. This is especially the case in Trusts adhering to principles of ethical leadership and best-practice innovation, such as those found in the membership of QSG. Promising areas for enhanced recruitment and retention of staff include careful planning of the workload of new teachers while also providing coherence and stability in working conditions and cultures, without cramping innovation and initiative. There remains more to do across English education in reaching those community groups from which teacher recruitment is disproportionately low. [Section 3.4]

QSG: priorities for 2019–20

The work of the Queen Street Group will continue to focus on strategic discussion among the CEOs and invited guests, complemented by the more detailed operational considerations of specialist teams of directors in the areas of Education, Finance and HR.

~ CEOs' STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

Among other priorities, generating innovation in the ways groups of schools can best meet the needs of a fast-changing society will continue to be an important goal, especially where technology and artificial intelligence (AI) solutions are harnessed and intelligent but streamlined management of data increases in sophistication. Within QSG, the coming year is likely to see elaboration of the member Trusts' joint stance on ethical leadership, along with a formalised procedure for admitting additional Trusts into membership of the Group.

~ EDUCATION

Priorities for the coming year include a continued focus on the well-being of staff within Trusts and a fresh look at the intrinsic curriculum ethos of schools, including the extent to which curriculum goals should be specific to each school.

~ **FINANCE**

If funding pressures are eased, securely governed Trusts will look afresh at ways of taking on those schools in challenging circumstances where the institution concerned already has significant financial problems; and means to undertake capital projects that meet a higher proportion of the outstanding requirements indicated by condition surveys.

~ **HR**

Recruiting high-quality prospective teachers will remain a challenging but important priority, particularly within the established shortage subjects. So, too, will be the aim of streamlining staff workload at a time when the inspection framework is undergoing substantial change. *[Section 4]*

Conclusions

The Queen Street Group has met the aims set for its first year of formal operation. Processes designed to enable discussion and analysis have worked well, the conclusions drawn have achieved a wide degree of consensus across member Trusts and the priorities identified for the next year and beyond are well grounded, if challenging. The 17 Trusts which have come together to form QSG share an emphasis on institutional learning and, in so doing, they seek to exemplify a reliable constant in school governance and management, informed by shared ethical values. *[Section 5]*

1 INTRODUCTION TO THE QUEEN STREET GROUP

This opening section explains the rationale for establishing the Queen Street Group, introduces its members and sets out its purposes.

1.1 Why was the Queen Street Group founded?

With the development of MATs occurring so fast, Ministers, Whitehall officials, regulators, funding agencies and Trusts have all needed to keep pace with the implications. Assumptions have to be checked, and understandings updated and clarified.

Ministers meet with the chief executive officers (CEOs) of MATs on an ad hoc basis and the Regional Schools Commissioners, established in 2014, meet with the CEOs to discuss matters relating to specific geographical areas. Of the principal regulators, Ofsted (inspection) engages separately with each school while ESFA (funding) deals with both 'stand-alone' academies and MATs on an individual basis.

From the perspective of the Trusts, such meetings as take place face-to-face provide an opportunity to brief those in authority on the operational impact of the government's emerging policies and procedures. However, these are 'vertical' encounters in the sense of being dialogue between those governing and those governed. Undeveloped until recently has been any 'horizontal' discussion through which senior executives across a stable, like-minded and ethically committed grouping of MATs can regularly exchange operational insights, peer-to-peer, and thus test collective understanding and develop joint perspectives and priorities.

It was to meet this need – and to emphasise joint endeavour and collective responsibility – that the Queen Street Group came into being.

1.2 How did the Queen Street Group originate?

In June 2015, a group of 10 CEOs met to discuss how more-effective peer support might be developed between MATs which share similar values, so that the capacity and effectiveness of each Trust might be enhanced. Chaired as a one-off event by Lord Adonis, this meeting was not primarily concerned with examining national policy. Rather, its aim was to pinpoint those key areas of operations that required greater practical sophistication in the way they are jointly shaped by government officials and MAT executive teams.

Three urgent themes emerged from this discussion:

- ~ securing the availability of a quality teacher workforce in each school;
- ~ managing capital and revenue funding to the best effect at scale;
- ~ articulating more clearly how MAT management works in practice, so that the understanding of regulators can become better developed and more nuanced.

Those present also agreed that, in 2015, the first of these themes was the most pressing.

1.3 How does the Queen Street Group operate and who are the founding members?

Following the June 2015 meeting, the discussion group broadened until around 20 MAT CEOs were meeting once each term during 2016–17 and 2017–18. At this stage there remained no formal membership, with those initially involved simply having contacted peers they felt would be interested in joining the discussion and adding further viewpoints.

As a result, several more priorities to increase the efficacy of Trusts were added to the three initial themes: curriculum planning; the problem of MATs assuming responsibility for struggling schools that have substantial financial liabilities; the effectiveness of local planning undertaken by Regional Schools Commissioners accountable to Headteacher Boards; and the operation of the Education Services Grant through which MATs provide services formerly managed by local authorities.

Early in these discussions, attention turned to whether the grouping should become more formal. The practicalities of developing in this way were worked out in detail during 2017–18 and the decision taken to establish the Queen Street Group as a not-for-profit company with a defined membership.

In taking this step several advantages were envisaged.

- ~ The voluntary alliance of like-minded Trusts already in place and like-minded in their ethical commitments could become more firmly established;
- ~ Creating a formal entity of this kind was ‘light touch’, cost-effective and added clear value, while also representing a formal commitment on the part of each participating MAT to share insight and develop expertise on a regular basis.

Establishing a corporate framework would: enable clarity of vision; encourage organisational development, both collectively and within each Trust; underscore a common adherence to ethical standards and high-quality pupil education; and stimulate thinking ahead as to how school improvement more generally might develop.

The Queen Street Group was duly incorporated in November 2018 with 17 founding member Trusts [Box 1] and an elected Board [Box 2].

Queen Street Group member Trusts and their CEOs		Box 1
▶ Academies Enterprise Trust		Julian Drinkall
▶ Astrea Academy Trust		Libby Nicholas
▶ The Brooke Weston Trust		Dr Andrew Campbell
▶ Cabot Learning Federation		Steve Taylor
▶ Creative Education Trust		Marc Jordan
▶ Dixons Academies Charitable Trust		Sir Nick Weller
▶ Education South West		Roger Pope
▶ The First Federation Trust		Paul Walker
▶ Future Academies		Paul Smith
▶ Lead Academy Trust		Diana Owen
▶ Leigh Academies Trust		Simon Beamish
▶ Oasis Community Learning		John Murphy
▶ Ormiston Academies Trust		Nick Hudson
▶ South Farnham Educational Trust		Sir Andrew Carter
▶ Unity Schools Partnership		Dr Tim Coulson
▶ Ventrus Limited		Gary Chown
▶ The White Horse Federation		Dr Nicholas Capstick

1.4 What does the Queen Street Group stand for?

The formal object of QSG is “to advance education for the public benefit”.

The meetings which have taken place in 2018–19 indicate that the member Trusts believe this object can best be met through the structured set of activities described in the next section of this report. These activities have indicated to participants that QSG:

- ~ is a very practical body – it exists so that the leaders of MATs can enhance their joint effectiveness through sharing information, exchanging insight, identifying the operational goals they share with regulators and undertaking data analysis;
- ~ is committed to developing the expertise of specialist senior staff, notably the directors within MATs responsible for Education, Finance and HR;

The Queen Street Group Board

Box 2

▶ Simon Beamish	Leigh Academies Trust
▶ Dr Nicholas Capstick	The White Horse Federation
▶ Sir Andrew Carter	South Farnham School
▶ Sir David Carter (Co-opted)	
▶ Marc Jordan (Chair)	Creative Education Trust
▶ Libby Nicholas	Astrea Academy Trust
▶ Diana Owen	Lead Academy Trust
▶ Steve Taylor (Vice Chair)	Cabot Learning Federation
▶ Sir Nick Weller	Dixons Academies Charitable Trust

Company Secretary: Dr William Richardson

- ~ is active in identifying jointly those steps in the management of groups of academies that lead to greater sophistication, better value and improved pupil education;
- ~ is concerned primarily with operational effectiveness rather than developing a critique of national policy. (The Confederation of School Trusts has this remit as the 'national voice' for academies and its members overlap with those of the QSG.)

2 THE QUEEN STREET GROUP MEMBER TRUSTS AND THEIR SCHOOLS – A NUMERICAL PROFILE

The data in this section was generated through a census of the 17 QSG Trusts undertaken in the autumn term of 2018.

2.1 Overview

PUPILS, SCHOOLS AND TRUST SIZE

- ~ QSG Trusts between them educate **201,000 pupils** enrolled across **374 schools**
- ~ The smallest Trust educates 1,600 pupils in three schools within a single local authority
- ~ The largest educates 34,000 pupils in 62 schools across 28 local authorities

EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENTS IN COMMON

- ~ a strong espousal of the principles of ethical leadership (to be enshrined in a QSG Code of Practice)
- ~ a desire to serve a high proportion of children living in disadvantaged circumstances
- ~ a mission to improve schools that have lost their way and require a fresh start

GEOGRAPHY

- ~ QSG Trusts are distributed among all eight of England's Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) regions and across several dozen local authority areas

SCALE

- ~ The education of between 1,000 and 5,000 pupils – five Trusts
- ~ The education of between 5,001 and 12,000 pupils – seven Trusts
- ~ The education of between 12,001 and 35,000 pupils – five Trusts

PUPIL CHARACTERISTICS

- ~ 15.5% of children in QSG schools have SEND (national average: 14.9%)
- ~ 20.3% do not have English as their first language (national average: 19.3%)
- ~ 33.9% qualify as Pupil Premium students (national average: 28.1%)

DATES OF FOUNDATION

- ~ The various QSG Trusts were founded between 1990 and 2017

2.2 Commentary

The QSG Trusts are highly varied in origin, geography and size and, as such, broadly reflect the national picture. However, the Trusts are unified in having clear commitments in common, including a majority specialism of improving education for pupils in schools where circumstances are challenging.

The **374 schools** managed by the member Trusts break down as follows:

- ~ Primary schools: 216 (58%)
- ~ Secondary schools: 140 (37%)
- ~ All-through schools: 6 (2%)
- ~ Special schools: 12 (3%)

The average number of schools in each member Trust is 22, with the actual number per Trust ranging from 5 to 62.

Of the total number of schools, nine are free schools and four are schools of another specialist type (e.g. Alternative Provider, in-house resource unit).

The profile of the **201,237 pupils** across each of the QSG Trusts is also highly varied. The average number of pupils in each member Trust is 11,914, with the actual number per Trust ranging from 1,559 to 33,548.

The **type of school** being attended by pupils can be broken down as follows.

PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS:

- ~ 67,863 (33.7%), with the actual number of primary school pupils across member Trusts ranging from 793 to 11,637

SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS:

- ~ 132,070 (65.6%), with the actual number of secondary school pupils across member Trusts ranging from 0 to 29,454

SPECIAL SCHOOL PUPILS:

- ~ 1,304 (0.6%), with the actual number of special school pupils across member Trusts ranging from 0 to 551

Of the total number of pupils, 3,541 are free in schools.

The **demography of pupils** can be broken down as follows.

- ~ **SEND PUPILS** (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities):
31,368 (15.5% of all QSG pupils)
- ~ **EHC PUPILS** (Education, Health and Care plan):
7,587 (3.7% of all QSG pupils)
- ~ **MINORITY ETHNIC PUPILS:**
65,448 (32.3% of all QSG pupils)
- ~ **PUPILS WHOSE FIRST LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH:**
41,125 (20.3% of all QSG pupils)
- ~ **PUPILS QUALIFYING FOR PREMIUM FUNDING:**
68,594 (33.9% of all QSG pupils)

When it comes to **geography**, the distribution of QSG Trusts is fairly even across all eight of the districts overseen by Regional School Commissioners.

The varying size of the Trusts means that some are quite localised. Ten of the 17 Trusts have schools in only one region, while one has schools in seven of the regions and another has schools in all eight. Similarly, the spread across local authorities is varied, ranging from a Trust with schools in one authority to another with schools in 28.

2.3 QSG and the national picture

Just as the size and shape of the 17 QSG Trusts is highly varied, so is the picture for MATs nationally. In 2016 it was estimated that 80% of MATs managed between 2 and 5 schools, 15% managed between 6 and 11 schools and 3.5% managed between 12 and 25 schools. Just 13 out of 738 MATs (1.5%) managed 26 or more schools.^[2]

Meanwhile, the pupil demographic across QSG schools indicates that children in these Trusts are: slightly more likely to have SEND and not to have English as their first language; and considerably more likely to qualify as Pupil Premium students.

These proportions are unsurprising given that a large majority of the schools to be found in QSG Trusts are working in challenging circumstances.

3 QUEEN STREET GROUP ACTIVITIES IN 2018–19

This section summarises the work of the Queen Street Group over the past year. The nature of its activities is explained, the results of these endeavours are listed and the conclusions drawn from the overall programme of activities are set out.

3.1 Summary of QSG activity in 2018–19

In its first year of formal existence, the work of QSG has focused on **four substantive themes**:

- ~ quality of education in schools, including the role of inspection;
- ~ sound financial planning in an uncertain and volatile environment;
- ~ the recruitment and retention of able teachers;
- ~ the effective governance and management of groups of schools by Trusts.

These themes have been pursued through **three main activities**:

- ~ strategic discussion between the QSG CEOs and national education leaders;
- ~ operational scrutiny by groups of Trust directors responsible for managing Education, Finance and HR;
- ~ presentation of results through internal briefings and short analytical reports.

Since one of the main goals of QSG members is organisational learning, it has been important in this initial year to focus on productive activities as a precursor to generating useful results. Consequently, a short account of the structure of these activities now follows [Sections 3.2 and 3.3] before presentation of the substantive conclusions they have generated [Section 3.4].

3.2 Operations: QSG practice in Education, Finance, HR

A principal QSG activity in 2018–19 has been the operation of three specialist working groups: Education, Finance, HR. Each of these is made up of executives across QSG responsible for directing these operational areas of Trust work.

Meetings have included internal discussion, preparation of two-way briefings between members and guests from the national regulatory organisations, and data collection across QSG member Trusts. In each case the core purpose has been to identify aspects of management practice that can be improved, especially through feedback loops between operations staff in Trusts and officers in the regulatory bodies.

The perceived effectiveness of the year's work was summarised by the specialist groups of directors across QSG member Trusts in their final 2019 meetings, as follows.

QSG Directors of Education: assessment of cross-Trust work during 2018–19

Box 3

- ▶ There has been significant analysis and evaluation of current and prospective approaches to curriculum across the Trusts during the year. This has focused on the particular curriculum intent of each Trust.
- ▶ Trusts have also concentrated on school improvement, especially the improvement of schools in challenging circumstances and how this is enhanced by an evolving sophistication of quality assurance.
- ▶ The specific and deliberate use of data has also been emphasised. This has typically involved reporting to the Board (and regulators) and detailed use internally to support teaching.
- ▶ These three activities point to an increasing maturity in Trusts' ability to improve the education of their pupils. There is a focus on curriculum detail, especially in challenging schools (typically sponsored academies) and building more effective Trust-wide use of intelligent information.

QSG Directors of Finance: assessment of cross-Trust work during 2018–19

Box 4

- ▶ There has been a valuable opportunity this year to collate joint data about the risks to reliable financial forecasting and shortfalls in capital funding requirements across the QSG Trusts.
- ▶ Sharing of the intelligence has been of major benefit to Finance directors. It is highly strategic and has provided the basis for valuable discussion with the funding regulator.
- ▶ It has also been important for us individually – and for wider QSG capacity building – to be able to consider collectively the financial impact of decisions made by national bodies other than ESFA, including their potential for unintended impacts on sound financial management and planning within Trusts.

- ▶ The opportunity to share intelligence and discuss strategy with Teach First at a national level has been very helpful and generated much new insight during the year. There are clear opportunities to develop Trust-wide refinements to teacher recruitment informed by these discussions.
- ▶ Analysis across QSG member Trusts has also been very helpful in understanding more clearly the changing expectations of both existing and prospective teachers, particularly in relation to flexible work hours and employment patterns across a working year.
- ▶ Given the plethora of national initiatives to boost teacher recruitment and retention, distilling the essentials of sound recruitment through peer discussion is proving very valuable.

3.3 Strategy: QSG CEOs in discussion with national education leaders

Complementing the operational discussions just summarised, a total of six working sessions took place during 2018–19 at which the CEOs of QSG Trusts welcomed the following national education leaders as their guest:

- ~ Geoff Barton, *General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders*
- ~ Sir David Carter, *National Schools Commissioner, 2016–18*
- ~ Russell Hobby, *Chief Executive Officer, Teach First*
- ~ Eileen Milner, *Chief Executive, Education and Skills Funding Agency*
- ~ Jonathan Simons, *Director, Public First*
- ~ Amanda Spielman, *Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools*

These sessions had common purpose – to discuss with each guest how, in the area of education for which they were responsible and expert, MAT operations might be enhanced and refined for the benefit of all pupils.

In each case, this resulted in discussion that deepened the collective insight of the CEOs about the nature of incremental improvement in pupil education in the schools managed by QSG Trusts. At the same time, it allowed each guest to reflect on adjustments to processes in their own organisation that could assist the Trusts in achieving this shared goal.

Some of the joint perspectives generated by this type of process among the QSG CEOs are now summarised.

Taken together, the guest sessions with national figures hosted by the QSG CEOs during 2018–19 reminded all those present that school management through MATs remains a recent innovation. There is much still to be learnt about the most effective ways in which policy and practice can be translated into high-quality classroom and co-curricular education, particularly among schools operating in challenging circumstances.

QSG CEOs: strategic perspectives and priorities

Box 6

- ▶ Most Multi-Academy Trusts are young organisations but many are maturing. The aims and methods of those Trusts committed to high ethical and operational standards are not well understood by most politicians, by many officers in regulatory bodies, by parents and by the wider public.
- ▶ This is of considerable importance, given that more than half of English school pupils are now educated in schools run by Trusts.
- ▶ Dialogue and information exchange between effective Trusts and national influencers is one helpful way of improving professional and public understanding. Another is the better collective dissemination of the work being done by Trusts with strong track records.
- ▶ Trusts are required to focus their operations on quality of education in schools, sound financial planning (despite uncertainties beyond their control) and the recruitment and retention of able teachers. These priorities are reflected in QSG's three specialist working groups.
- ▶ Amid all the pressures of day-to-day operations, it is important for Trusts regularly to review their work and outcomes with a community of like-minded peers.

Several of these discussions have resulted in follow-up activity designed to improve understanding and enhance operations in the core MAT areas of Education, Finance and HR. In particular, several guests enabled one or more senior specialist colleagues from their organisation to meet subsequently with members of the QSG working groups to look in more detail at how refinements to Education, Finance and HR practices in MATs might be assisted by enhanced processes of regulation and governance.

The final part of this section now reports on the more specific conclusions drawn from all of these discussions.

3.4 Key conclusions of QSG discussion, intelligence gathering and analysis in 2018–19

The specific conclusions which follow emerge from the four central themes that the QSG Trusts spent time considering in 2018–19.

CEO PERSPECTIVES: THE EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF GROUPS OF SCHOOLS BY TRUSTS

- ~ Government officials and senior staff in regulatory bodies would gain from accessing deeper understanding of the practicalities of management and operations carried out in effective Multi-Academy Trusts. This is a model of detailed educational organisation with which they are largely unfamiliar.
- ~ MATs, collectively, need to fill this gap in professional knowledge and this is an important role for QSG.
- ~ Linked to this, politicians and the public have a substantial knowledge gap (other than examples of MAT failures covered in the media). In particular, the leaders of effective and enabling Trusts need to explain their role as reliable stewards of finance and energisers of substantial community benefit.
- ~ More generally, many in the education community beyond the proven leading Trusts have a limited understanding of the charities sector, including exemplary models of charity governance.
- ~ The most sophisticated Trusts are trailblazers. Their trustees and senior managers:
 - > bring operational coherence to a geographically muddled national policy programme for MATs;
 - > incubate and model value-added ways of managing schools through the use of focused, intelligent data;
 - > are clear-sighted about the balance to be struck between financial sustainability, local autonomy and innovation;
 - > contain the accumulated experience of the first generation of effective MAT leaders. This expertise – including how to assess the nature of risk – needs to be recorded and disseminated for the benefit of those who follow.
- ~ Due to their geographical reach, QSG Trusts have strong national insight into the effectiveness and consistency of the role of the Regional Schools Commissioner, at a time when this is becoming more transactional (i.e. a return to intervention once individual schools are in difficulty). The work of the Headteacher Boards to which RSCs report is opaque.

- ~ QSG Trusts wish to increase their involvement with ‘orphan schools’, but this is often in conflict with acceptable levels of financial risk.
- ~ Meanwhile, they welcome the prospect of further discussion with ESFA officials over: the best types of predictive financial analysis; how such work enables self-improvement (in both the financial performance of Trusts and the regulatory process); refinement in models of financial audit; the optimum scale of ‘provider burden’ to ensure healthy sustainability; and the problem of forecast data distorted by provider concerns about regulatory non-compliance.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS, INCLUDING THE ROLE OF INSPECTION

- ~ How Trusts manage quality of education for all of the pupils in their schools has been refocused on curriculum in 2018–19, due partly to the launch of a new Ofsted inspection framework.
- ~ QSG Trusts have broadly welcomed this development, although it brings with it specific challenges in the context of sponsored academies. In particular, should the curriculum be differentiated school-by-school to take into account the local situation? What is a good balance between Trust-wide curriculum practice and local variation, and how might the latter be decided?
- ~ This new focus on curriculum comes during a period in which QSG Trusts are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their curriculum decision-making.
- ~ Trusts with knowledgeable and well-integrated management functions are able to assess the trade-off between efficiencies of scale when it comes to curriculum planning, and the energising effect of local responsibility for designing curricula well-matched to the culture of a specific school.
- ~ In every case the curriculum needs to enhance the education of all pupils in a school. Linked to this, QSG Trusts would welcome external judgements that promote a broader view of school accountability.
- ~ In particular, QSG Trusts seek judgements about school quality that loosen the current nexus of a school’s socio-economic profile, the course options available to pupils, and the forms of attainment most valued by politicians and regulators.
- ~ The puzzle as to whether revised methods of inspection can reduce teacher workload remains unresolved.

SOUND FINANCIAL PLANNING IN AN UNCERTAIN AND VOLATILE ENVIRONMENT

- ~ Data collection across QSG Trusts in 2018–19 illustrates the complexities and difficulties of preparing sound long-term financial plans and forecasts in a climate of high political volatility.
- ~ In particular, there are many uncertainties over income and expenditure estimates due to policy processes beyond the control and influence of MATs.
- ~ Information pooled by six QSG Trusts (between them educating 58,000 pupils) calculated the extent of the ‘best guesses’ required when producing a revised income and expenditure forecast for 2020/21. The result indicated that potential variance between revised forecasts and eventual out-turn could amount to up to 5% of turnover in an era where clear policy decisions about school funding are being made by the government only one year at a time. This degree of uncertainty about recurrent income makes it very difficult for even the most experienced Trust boards to fulfil their obligation under the *Academies Financial Handbook 2019* (paras. 2.10–2.11) to “approve a balanced budget” and “ensure budget forecasts for the current year and beyond are compiled accurately”.
- ~ A second exercise pooled data from seven QSG Trusts (encompassing 143 schools educating 68,000 pupils between them) in order to compare the agreed capital funding they are due to receive with cost estimates of necessary expenditure identified from condition surveys, over a five-year period. This showed that, collectively, the Trusts were due to receive £8.6 million in order to pay for investment which the condition surveys calculated as requiring expenditure of £62.9 million. The likely result is that capital expenditure will be skewed to a bare minimum of improvements to site security and safety, rather than cost-effective and proactive maintenance over the longer term.
- ~ QSG Trusts fully understand that these inhibitors to sound financial planning ‘on the ground’ are a result of policies beyond the control of the Education and Skills Funding Agency.
- ~ In contrast, QSG has had useful discussions with ESFA this year on enhancements to services which are under the Agency’s control: consistency in the audit process; a closer relationship between larger Trusts and specific ESFA staff members; and the better meshing of the annual cycles of the work of the Agency and of Trusts.

THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF ABLE TEACHERS

- ~ Multi-Academy Trusts have a number of built-in advantages when it comes to managing teacher recruitment and retention. This applies particularly to those Trusts adhering to principles of ethical leadership and best-practice innovation.
- ~ The restricted budgets of recent years make medium-term staffing goals no less relevant than before. A good example is the aim of making schools managed by Trusts among the most progressive and fulfilling kinds of work environment.
- ~ Some of the HR practices which MATs have the potential to develop further include:
 - > careful planning of the workload of new teachers, allowing them space to grow as they gain experience;
 - > providing coherence and stability in working conditions and cultures, without cramping innovation and initiative;
 - > providing effective in-school mentoring and a managed turnover in staff roles, facilitated by the professional opportunities possible when schools are members of a well-managed Trust.
- ~ Mixing experience and understanding in the development of early-career teachers and future leaders will remain an important discipline for Trusts. This should focus on both the structure and flexibility which characterise the most supple schools.
- ~ Trusts also have a job to do in conveying realistically but with imagination the intrinsic rewards of teaching for the ambitious leader of tomorrow, as well as for the long-serving classroom teacher – and in reaching more effectively those community groups from which teacher recruitment is disproportionately low.
- ~ MATs that have consistent success in creating effective school leaders are able to balance school routines and pedagogic innovation in creative and celebratory ways.

4 THE QUEEN STREET GROUP: PRIORITIES FOR 2019–20

The first year of QSG activity set out in the previous section has proved highly productive. This means that Queen Street Group work in 2019–20 will continue to focus on strategic discussion among the CEOs and invited guests, complemented by more detailed operational considerations of specialist groups in the areas of Education, Finance and HR. The work in the operational areas is expected to be informed by continuing discussion with officers in the relevant national bodies.

A number of themes for the work of QSG during 2019–20 can be anticipated and these are now listed briefly.

4.1 CEOs' strategic overview

THE NATIONAL POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Coherence in the structure and operation of the government's academies programme will continue to preoccupy the CEOs of leading Trusts. The QSG CEOs are well placed to suggest practical refinements to the work of **Regional Schools Commissioners**, especially when it comes to the processes involved in brokering academy sponsorship. (This process perspective runs in parallel with the policy remit of Headteacher Boards in their capacity as advisory bodies.)

THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS

The QSG CEOs have the task of further **explaining to a range of audiences**, professional and lay, what Multi-Academy Trusts with proven track records and clear ethical commitments are **seeking to achieve** on behalf of the pupils for whom they are responsible and as well-governed stewards of public finance.

SMARTER WORK IN SCHOOL-LEVEL EDUCATION

In concert with many other organisations, QSG CEOs will continue to review and commission examples of **innovation in the ways in which schools can best meet the needs of a fast-changing society** infused with digital technologies. Potential areas for innovation within and across QSG Trusts include:

- ~ further streamlining of management data about school processes;
- ~ the need to avoid potential 'stagnation' in the school workforce compared to the flexible working arrangements offered in other employment sectors;

- ~ technology-enhanced learning, including AI solutions such as adaptive on-line marking tools;
- ~ better use of data across QSG Trusts, including annual average: rates of teacher turnover; numbers of school-level senior management vacancies; and numbers of headteacher vacancies;
- ~ providing opportunities within Trusts for early-career teachers with strong leadership potential to observe staff discussions and better anticipate the varied work cultures among QSG Trusts.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF QSG AS AN ORGANISATION

The QSG CEOs are likely in 2019–20 to elaborate their stance on **ethical leadership** in education. They will also need to formalise the **procedure for admitting additional Trusts** into QSG membership.

4.2 Education

KEY CHALLENGES FOR QSG TRUSTS IN 2019–20

The QSG Education group sees these as including:

- i) increased **financial pressure on academies and Trusts**, compounding geographic variations within Trusts that work across local authorities. There can be significant disparity between the funding received by schools in the same Trust;
- ii) a continued focus on the **well-being of staff** within Trusts. Tensions to be managed include reduced workload coupled with reduced funding, while continuing the extra work involved in improving schools in difficulties;
- iii) a fresh focus on the intrinsic **curriculum ethos** of Trust schools, not least: in small primary schools; at Key Stage 3 (age group 11 to 14), including those ‘disapplied’ from the mainstream curriculum; and in relation to the English Baccalaureate, pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and those in alternative provision.

4.3 Finance

KEY CHALLENGES FOR QSG TRUSTS IN 2019–20

The QSG Finance group sees these as including:

- i) securely governed Trusts faced with increasing financial pressures being **increasingly unlikely to take on schools in challenging circumstances** where due diligence highlights significant investment challenges (e.g. deficits and run-down estate, coupled with the need for substantial school improvement measures);
- ii) a continuing or growing gap between the funding required for **capital projects** based on condition surveys and the finance available. QSG Trusts would welcome fresh discussions with the funding regulator on permitted income diversification;
- iii) continued difficulty in **accurate financial forecasting** based on short-term government spending announcements remaining a significant risk for trustee boards to manage and mitigate.

4.4 HR

KEY CHALLENGES FOR QSG TRUSTS IN 2019–20

The QSG HR group sees these as including:

- i) the continuing challenge of **recruiting high-quality prospective teachers**, particularly within the established shortage subjects, and addressing the long-term goal of **a substantial increase in the number of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) teachers and leaders** in English schools;
- ii) support for schools in achieving their aims to **streamline staff workload** at a time when the inspection framework is undergoing substantial change. Indeed, **investment in staff** – to secure not simply their well-being but foster their sense of fulfilment through better training and development – is a crucial activity of Trusts;
- iii) exploring more systematically the roles of different groups of staff within Trusts (teaching and non-teaching) responsible for **school performance and its development**, and how the goals set are supported.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The Queen Street Group has met the aims set for its first year of formal operation. Processes designed to enable discussion and analysis have worked well, the conclusions drawn achieved a wide degree of consensus across member Trusts and the priorities identified for next year and beyond are well grounded, if challenging.

This success is due to all those involved with QSG adhering to the main objectives set for the organisation in the summer of 2018:

- ~ a concerted focus on operational effectiveness;
- ~ development of expertise among the Trusts' specialist senior staff;
- ~ practical discussion with the staff of national bodies and regulatory organisations on enhanced processes and clearer understanding of respective roles;
- ~ an opportunity to think ahead as to how school improvement in sponsored academies in particular might develop.

The opportunity to arrive at a clearer understanding of the respective roles of regulators and Trusts has been particularly valuable and has provided a forum for discussing such questions as: inconsistencies of practice in different parts of the country; the need to ensure that MATs have sufficient time to set an effective course for any school that has lost its way; the application of consistent criteria when matching Trusts to sponsored academies or implementing processes of inspection and audit; and improved dialogue between the Education and Skills Funding Agency, Regional Schools Commissioners and Trusts when authorising the adoption of an 'orphan school' or the dismantling of an underperforming MAT.

The policy process in education constantly throws up new priorities and demands (even when, as during 2018/19, the stasis associated with 'waiting for Brexit' generated operational challenges of its own). However, relentless activity aimed at improvement does not necessarily result in institutional learning, or increased sophistication, across those organisations beyond schools whose remit and reach affect the work of teachers and pupils on a termly, monthly and weekly basis.

This focus on institutional learning across Trusts with substantial responsibilities for young people – including those being educated in challenging circumstances against a backdrop of inevitable social and educational change – is the essence of why these 17 Trusts have come together to form the Queen Street Group. In so doing, they seek to exemplify a reliable constant in school governance and management informed by shared ethical values.

QSG

QUEEN STREET GROUP

Board Chair: Marc Jordan
Company Secretary: Dr William Richardson

Address for Correspondence:
c/o Bates Wells
First Floor, 10 Queen Street Place
London EC4R 1B

Company Number: 11697262