



Department
for Education

MAT Assurance Framework

How to use guide

May 2021

Summary

This publication provides non-statutory guidance from the Department for Education. It has been produced to help MATs use the MAT Assurance Framework.

Expiry or review date

This guidance will be reviewed before November 2022.

Who is this publication for?

This guidance is for:

- Local authorities
- School leaders, school staff and governing bodies in all maintained schools, academies and free schools

How to use the MAT Assurance Framework

Introduction

1. The MAT assurance framework is a development tool to help Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) understand their capacity to support and drive school improvement. The framework is designed to help trusts build and strengthen their current school improvement capacity and grow their capacity to support more schools.
2. The framework was originally developed by trust leaders in the South West region, in partnership with the Regional Schools Commissioner's team in the South West, Isos Partnership, and Robert Hill. Trust leaders across the country have now used the framework within their own trusts and/or as part of action learning sets, using the framework to guide their discussions.
3. The framework breaks down MAT school improvement capacity into 14 elements, under six main headings. These are based on research about what works in MATs and similar networks of schools internationally¹. The framework does not assume that there is one best way to support and drive school improvement as a MAT; instead, it isolates the questions, issues and practices that should help enable all kinds of MAT to become more effective in supporting their schools to improve.
4. The framework has been updated following discussions with MAT leaders who have used it, to identify a set of questions within each of the 14 elements that newer or smaller MATs using the framework for the first time might want to start with. Each section also contains additional questions within each element that may be more relevant to more mature MATs, MATs that have used the framework previously, or MATs thinking further about growth.
5. The framework is designed to be used to help trusts to look both backwards and forwards. It can help trusts to evaluate the impact of their current work on school improvement and to identify future priorities for improvement. Trusts can apply the framework to look at their capacity in their current state; but they can also use the framework to consider proactively what future school improvement capacity they might need if and when their trust was to grow.
6. The framework is one of a series of tools which exist to help support trusts think about their capacity in relation to school improvement, governance and finance. In particular it complements and sits alongside the Assurance Framework for Trust

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-improvement-in-multi-school-groups>

Governance developed by the Confederation of School Trusts designed to help trustees evaluate their capacity to support improvement – see https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/link_boxes/Improvement-Frameworks/Assurance%20framework%20for%20trust%20governance%20May%202021.pdf.

7. In the rest of this document, we set out how trusts can use the framework:

- To review their own capacity
- To work with other trusts

How can trusts use the Framework to review their own capacity?

8. The following steps suggest how trusts can use the framework to review their own capacity for school improvement, building on the learning and feedback from trusts that have used the framework to date:

1. Review the Framework

- Familiarise yourself with the scope of the framework. The framework breaks down MAT school improvement capacity into 14 elements under six main headings. Review each of the elements.
- In each element there are detailed self-evaluation questions for trusts to consider. The framework suggests a number of questions to start with and some additional questions to consider. You may want to review all of the questions within your trust or select just some of these questions to review.
- Each question also has descriptions of what strong and weak improvement capacity might look like in a trust. The framework does not assume that there is one best way to support and drive school improvement as a trust. The questions, issues and practices covered by the framework should help to enable all kinds of trusts to review their own capacity and identify how to become more effective in supporting their schools to improve.
- Trusts need to feel ownership of the framework and the learning that comes out of conducting a self-review. You may want to explain the purpose of the framework and its potential uses to the board and senior team to ensure questions have been discussed and the aims are clear before beginning any self-assessment exercise.

2. Use the Framework to facilitate discussions within your trust

- You can use the framework in discussions with your senior team, your senior and middle leaders, and/or with your trustees. These can be separate discussions, or a workshop that has representatives from a number of groups. You can review the whole framework in one session or take different elements in separate sessions. Circulating the framework questions and descriptions in advance will help attendees to prepare their thoughts and evidence.
- Use the questions and descriptions to rate your trust against each element using a four-point scale: red (weak capacity), amber-red, amber-green, green (strong

capacity). Descriptions have deliberately not been provided for the amber-red and amber-green ratings. If you think that your trust matches neither the red nor the green description, think about which end of the scale it is closer to and choose the appropriate rating.

- Capture your ratings and also the rationale and evidence for each judgement. Some trusts have developed simple spreadsheets to capture the scores that allows them to analyse differences from different groups. You may also want to turn this into a 'heat map' – a single page showing the RAG ratings against each of the elements.
- Some trust leaders have also used focus group conversations with teachers, phase or middle leaders to test the reality of the ratings that have emerged from the self-review.
- Some trusts have used an external facilitator to support their self-assessment process and provide some independent challenge to the exercise. You could also undertake the review with another trust so there is an element of peer challenge to your own ratings (see the next section for more on this approach).

3. Review the outcomes and identify strengths and priorities for improvement

- The framework helps trusts to diagnose their most significant areas of strength and their priorities for improvement, to help them build their capacity for improvement. A 'heat map' of the RAG ratings against each of the elements can help to summarise the picture for your trust.
- After undertaking one or a number of self-reviews against the framework, use the outcomes to identify where your trust has areas of strength on which to build and then identify the most important and most urgent priorities for improvement.
- Remember: a green rating does not mean that an element is currently perfect, just that it is an area of strength upon which to build. Likewise, a red rating does not imply failure or underperformance, it simply highlights an area where capacity building should be a priority. You will want to prioritise which areas to focus on according to your existing priorities as a trust and your stage of development – you don't need to try to tackle all the reds at once.
- For trusts that are newly formed or small in size the framework may feel overwhelming to start with, but it is designed to help you think through where your immediate priorities may be. You may want to focus initially on the suggested '*questions to start with*' in each section or you may want to select areas that you feel are an immediate priority for your trust to focus on.

4. Build outcomes into trust improvement planning

- You can use the outcomes from your self-review against the framework to help inform your wider improvement planning and reporting to the board. Some trusts have used the headings from the framework as the headings for their plan or board reports.
- You may also want to develop trust-wide school improvement plans to focus on particular areas that you have identified from the self-assessment. This might include considering what improvements and actions are needed, an appropriate

timetable for improvements with milestones and success measures, and how to learn from and review progress during the year.

Case Studies (Part One)

Using the framework with nine primary academies in the South West

Our trust have been using the Framework for over two years. We used it initially as a MAT temperature/reality check. I sent out the Framework to three distinct groups of people: Executive leaders and the trust Chair, Headteachers, and then a larger group of middle leaders. This provided stimulus for further discussion with the combined Heads and Executive group. The discussion for us was more useful than the exact RAG colour rating. We identified areas for improvement, and in the case of our one red area, it stimulated an MDIF bid which allowed us to successfully buy and install a data processing platform that actually met our needs. We replicated the same process a year later to review last year's outcomes and compared them with the trust priorities. It allowed us to check the progress we were making and also show staff how their views had influenced our priorities - the middle leaders group were 'delighted to find we had listened' to them!

Trustees and local governors have been trained on the Framework as it has allowed us to point out to them how all the systems fit together in bringing about school improvement. The non-educationalists that now dominate most trust boards (ours anyway) need the Framework to understand how we achieve the education metrics, not just the financial or HR ones. It has a helpful clarity and provides them with questions for appropriate challenge.

Using the framework with 13 academies including special schools and alternative provision in the South West

Our trust used the framework in a number of ways. Our first step was to complete the RAG rating at CEO and Director level. We did this separately and then came together to see if we shared the same understanding of what was strong and what needed developing in the trust.

Our next step was engaging the Principals of our schools – we asked them to go through the same process but this time in groups – the groups were made up of mixed school types; i.e. primary/secondary/special Principals in each group. We then brought the findings from the first two steps together so we could compare and contrast the score from the CEO and Director with those from the Principals. This enabled us to agree collectively the key priorities for development for the trust.

As a trust we are now looking at how we ensure the framework is a key document that the trust board uses to demonstrate impact. We also have a trust dashboard – our ultimate aim is to match the KPIs of the framework onto our dashboard.

How can trusts use the framework to work with other trusts?

Trusts have started to use the framework to support conversations with other trusts in a number of different ways including:

1. Use by **two or three trusts working informally together** to explore practice in each other's trusts
2. Use by an **Action Learning Set** to identify common strengths and challenges and work together to take forward priorities for improvement
3. Use to support **Peer Reviews** between trusts to structure discussions
4. Use in **Trust-to-Trust mentoring** to support conversations around growth

We outline briefly below more detail about these different uses and give some further case study examples of the ways they have been used by different trusts:

1. Use by two or three trusts working informally together

Trusts might want to use the framework to start working together informally with other trusts to share the learning from their own assessments and to see if there are areas where they might learn from each other. This might involve sharing the full outcomes from their own assessments, or it might involve selecting a particular section of the framework and having discussions with another trust(s) about the particular approaches each trust has taken and their learning to date.

This might be less of a formal arrangement than being part of an action learning set which involves a commitment to working together on particular priorities over a period of time, or a process of peer review which involves visiting each other's trusts to support the

initial assessment process. It may be that starting the process informally in the way described above leads into more formal partnership working, but it may also be that trusts want to form these types of informal sharing and learning opportunities with other trusts, alongside more formal arrangements, to broaden the range and type of trusts they are learning from.

2. Use by an Action Learning Set

The framework has been used as part of formal action learning sets (each set with a small number, typically five to eight, of trusts) in both the South West, and Lancashire and West Yorkshire regions over the last three years. This means that the trusts have worked together over a sustained period of time using the framework to identify the priorities they want to work together on and identify the questions to explore, guide discussions, or structure learning between trusts.

In some cases, learning sets have used the whole framework to guide their work whilst others have decided to focus in on particular elements for a period of time. Typically, the learning set has begun by the trusts undertaking their own analyses of strengths and challenges using the framework and then sharing their results with each other.

They have then used the framework to identify common priorities for development that they want to work on together or areas of strength in one trust which others might want to learn from. In many learning sets, trusts have undertaken visits to each other and shared their learning and resources on an ongoing basis, including establishing online portals to share material with each other. In other cases, they have identified a common priority such as curriculum development and worked across trusts by bringing staff at different levels together and then used the framework to evaluate their progress over time.

In some cases, learning sets have started to use the framework in a more regular cycle of review and improvement planning. They expected to undertake further reviews against the whole framework or specific elements and compare how their ratings have moved on since the previous self-review. This would enable them to identify further priorities and areas for development which they could build into their own planning and also take forward within their action learning sets with other trusts.

3. Use in a peer review process

Some trusts have started to consider the more formal use of the framework as part of a process of peer review between trusts. In the case study below, one trust has already developed a peer review framework and process using the questions from the framework (and other questions around finance and governance from the MAT Development programme) to undertake peer review visits between three trusts. The questions have been used to structure the discussions between trusts and have helped them to identify an agreed set of common priorities for improvement across the trusts, which they have committed to work together on over time.

Other trusts that have been using the framework as part of an action learning set are also exploring the possibility of using the framework as part of a formal process of peer review between trusts, and plan to use it in the same way to structure the questions and priorities they will focus on in the visits between trusts.

4. Use in Trust-to-Trust mentoring conversations around supporting growth

The DfE is using the framework as part of the Trust-to-Trust Development programme which has been designed to support the strategic development of trusts with the potential to contribute further to the system. The aim of this programme is to encourage the sharing of successful evidence-based approaches to school improvement, trust development and sustainable MAT growth.

As part of the mentoring relationship between mentor and mentee trusts, trusts are asked to use the MAT Assurance framework to review their current capacity and use the framework to consider their development needs to support future growth. The framework provides the foundation for discussions between trusts and planning to support strategic development, whilst recognising that there are other areas trusts may want to focus on, such as finance.

Trusts are encouraged to use the framework as the starting point for their conversations but to move beyond the framework where needed; ultimately, the mentoring conversations should focus on the aspects most relevant for strategic development. The framework will be used in the initial diagnostic meeting between trusts to understand current strengths and areas for development, and the mentee trust will then create a development plan with support from the mentor trust based around the six headings of the framework. The mentor trust will then provide continued support around the priorities identified in the plan, and progress will be reviewed with medium term priorities for development identified at the end of the process.

Case Studies (Part Two)

Using the framework across 11 primary and secondary academies in Cumbria

We first came across the framework at a meeting of the RSC/Headteacher Reference Group. We love the focus on school improvement; '...this helps us keep the focus on key priorities and helped me as CEO to step back and ask the right questions. It came just at the right time' (CEO).

We started with the Vision, Culture and Ethos section, then worked through the other sections. We asked the leadership team and trustees to go away and score the trust separately on different sections. Then we came together and discussed. We then used the outcomes to set priorities for improvement. We still use it regularly including to help to develop our strategic plan.

'We don't always agree with each detail, but the questions help us to reflect on practice and what needs to be done - it makes you think and question how you know' (CEO). It has been great in terms of the engagement with leaders across the trust and helps us to have the right discussions. It also helps to make sure you don't lose the focus on school improvement and has helped us to build our school improvement capacity. The next step will be to undertake some collaborative work between trusts using the framework as a focus of discussion.

Using the framework as part of The Mersey City Region learning set

We are a group of five MATs who have used the framework to guide our work as an action learning set. Each of the MATs completed it individually first, then identified areas of strength that they thought others might be able to learn from. As a learning set we have organised visits to each other to share an area of practice that other trusts might be interested in learning more about. The CEO plus other relevant staff have joined these visits. As a group the learning set keeps coming back to specific elements and questions and share what they are doing. It has already had some positive benefits in bringing together teachers across different MATs within the group to work on primary and secondary curriculum development together, for example.

As the MAT CEO leading the learning set said about the framework, 'We've used it as a diagnostic tool, as it was intended as a guide to identifying priorities for improvement'. In terms of advice to other MATs about how to use the framework, the CEO said 'there are things in there that are relevant to MATs at all stages of development' and 'we see it as a take it or leave it approach – it's for you as a MAT to judge which bits are most relevant or most important to you'.

Using the framework to support peer review by primary trusts in Kent

As a trust, we used the questions from the DfE MAT Development programme guidance (the questions on school improvement are based on the assurance framework) to develop our own self-assessment framework, which we have then used as part of a formal peer review process with two other local trusts.

The peer review process involved each trust undertaking their own self review against the questions first, then sharing their results with each other, and then using this to identify challenge questions they wanted to ask each other as part of peer review visits to each trust. The visits focused on school improvement, but also included a focus on governance and finance and included CEOs, trustees and trust business managers.

Following the peer review visits, the trusts identified shared priorities they wanted to work on together and built a joint action plan across all three trusts for taking forward this work; 'it gave us a real purpose to working together' (CEO). They also shared back their learning with the wider MAT network. Now in the third year of using it, the CEO reflected 'as we've used it, there are some questions which have become less important and which we skip over, and we have started to focus on others more'. The big benefit has been 'it starts to create a commonality in the conversation across the trusts between trustees and broader staff' (CEO).



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