



Inspecting Academy Trusts: Recommendations for the Department for Education and Ofsted

Executive Summary

Academy Trusts (ATs) now manage 50% of England's schools and educate 4.8 million pupils. The sector received £39.1 billion in income in 2022/3, of which £31.2 billion was from Department for Education (DfE) grants. As such, they should be held accountable and inspected like other state schools.

Establishing an AT inspection framework helps demystify the AT system and enables Ofsted to provide factual, comparable information to both the DfE and the public. When designed and implemented effectively, such a framework should clarify what constitutes a 'good' AT in its local context and evaluate how ATs support their member schools and help pupils to flourish.

Policy Recommendations

1. *Incorporate an Anonymous Leader Survey to Measure AT Effectiveness*

Incorporate an anonymous feedback mechanism that enables school headteachers and senior leadership teams to comment on an AT's strategic governance, financial effectiveness, leadership well-being, and EDI, without fear of negative repercussions for their job security..

2. *Balance Accountability with Improvement*

The initial phase should prioritise developing a nuanced understanding

of how ATs operate and facilitate school improvement and community engagement. At the national level, adopt a data-driven approach to identifying risks, presenting performance trajectories, and monitoring equitable resource and opportunity allocations across ATs. Produce an aggregated national report to identify system-wide trends and address emerging challenges.

3. *Framework Design, Evidence Triangulation, and Proportionate Reporting*

Engage stakeholders in developing inspection metrics and, potentially, a statutory framework for ATs. Triangulate evidence to ensure that disadvantaged pupils are not disproportionately excluded in efforts to boost AT performance. At the AT level, employ a narrative-based, non-graded reporting approach that highlights exemplary practices and supports the co-creation of improvement plans.

4. *Public Accountability and a Multi-Agency Approach*

Serious concerns identified during an AT inspection—such as persistent underperformance, safeguarding failures, or misuse of public funds—should trigger investigation and intervention by the DfE. Similar to Estyn in Wales, adopt a multi-agency approach involving Ofsted, regional directors, RISE/local authority school improvement advisers, ATs, and schools working collaboratively to

identify solutions and enhance AT performance.

About the research

The above recommendations are drawn from our QR Policy Support Fund project, *The Future of Inspections*. The study involved a systematic literature review of 435 policy documents and research publications, complemented by three focus groups and one conference with 48 participants representing Ofsted, Education Scotland, Estyn, the National Governance Association (NGA), academy trusts, schools, local authorities, professional associations, international consultants, and universities.

Our findings suggest that to ensure system-level accountability and transparency, AT inspections should be conducted alongside school inspections and should adequately account for the diversity and contextual nuances associated with different sizes and forms of ATs.

To mitigate undue pressure on AT leaders and discourage performative compliance, AT inspections should prioritise professional dialogue focused on creating self-improving ATs and schools. All levels of inspection must be anchored in the genuine learning experiences and wellbeing of pupils and young people. Effective financial management by ATs is important; however, it should not come at the expense of disadvantaged pupils' right to education or ATs' social responsibility for community engagement.

Rather than providing a one-off snapshot, AT inspections should assess the broader, long-term impact of trusts. This includes evaluating their

role in sustaining school improvement, turning around underperforming schools, engaging local communities and parents, allocating resources equitably and effectively, ensuring financial efficiency, and fostering educational innovation.

To enhance transparency, the roles and remits of the DfE and Ofsted should be clearly defined. At the national level, Ofsted reports should present overall trends and the performance of the sector. At the AT level, Ofsted reports should provide narrative-based performance reviews and include improvement plans co-created with ATs and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Both the DfE and the public have a right to understand how ATs operate and to monitor sector-wide challenges and exemplary practices. Ofsted, as an independent body, plays a vital role in delivering this oversight. A multi-agency approach should be established to effectively hold ATs to account and to ensure coordinated oversight, intervention, and support.

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