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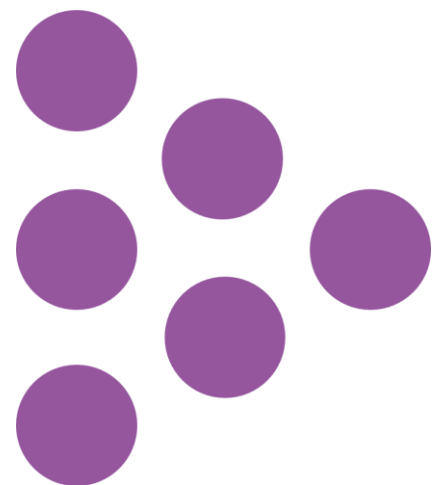
Impact Report

The MAT Factor

Exploring how multi-academy trusts are supporting pupils with SEND

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

The MAT Factor: Exploring how multi-academy trusts are supporting pupils with SEND

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Introduction

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) sector in England faces well-documented challenges, marked by late intervention, low parental confidence, and inefficient resource allocation[1]. DfE figures show that over 1.5 million pupils are now recognised as having SEN[2], equating to 17 per cent of all school pupils[3]. There is concern that the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis may have worsened problems for the SEND system[4]. Moreover, rising demand and increasing complexity of need have left many local authorities (LAs) without enough provision, resulting in a system that many regard as broken[5].

The Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan introduces National Standards, reforms to Education and Health Care Plans (ECHPs) and the creation of new special schools[6]. However, while the Plan outlines roles for a number of stakeholder groups, it says relatively little about the specific role to be played by multi-academy trusts (MATs) in helping to build a more inclusive system. The Government remains committed to all schools joining a MAT. However, to date there has been little research evidence to illustrate the approaches adopted by different MATs in fostering inclusivity within the education system.

This small-scale study, based on 49 semi-structured interviews with staff across 19 MATs, sheds light on some of the diverse approaches to supporting pupils with SEND in mainstream secondary schools, starting to address this gap. While the findings are illustrative, they offer actionable recommendations for MATs to enhance their support systems, and provide valuable insights for policymakers and educational leaders in both the academy and local authority (LA)-maintained sectors.

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[1] SEND Review: Right Support, right place, right time. Government consultation on the SEND and alternative provision system in England (2022) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/624178c68fa8f5277c0168e7/SEND_review_right_support_right_place_right_time_accessible.pdf [07/02/24]

[2] The DfE statistics quoted here do not include pupils with disabilities, hence the reference to 'SEN' rather than 'SEND.'

[3] Government statistics on special educational needs in England (June 2023) https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england [07/02/24]

[4] SEND: teachers struggle to 'paper over cracks' of broken system. TES Magazine (April 2023). https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/teachers-struggle-broken-send-system-support [07/02/24]

[5] Revealed: The spiralling cost of a broken SEND system. Schools Week article (April 2022) https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-spiralling-cost-of-a-broken-send-system/ [07/02/24]

[6] Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan (March 2023) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff39d28fa8f527fb67cb06/SEND_and_alternative_provision_improvement_plan.pdf [07/02/24]

Key findings

1. **MATs and schools are facing significant challenges around SEND provision:** This includes recruiting and retaining SEND staff, high SENCO workloads and navigating relationships with parents and LAs. Moreover, the growing complexity of pupils' needs has strained resources and placed pressure on mainstream schools due to a lack of special school places.

2. **There is no single template for the role MATs play in supporting SEND provision:** It was, however, common for MATs to provide a SEND framework or 'vision' to set culture and expectations across member schools. MATs typically avoided making explicit mandates, emphasising that the MAT's role was to advise and support schools with SEND.

3. **MAT SEND leaders play a pivotal role in SEND provision:** Many of the trusts we spoke to had appointed individuals within their central teams to oversee SEND across their MATs. These MAT SEND leaders played a crucial role in centralising SEND efforts, facilitating collaboration, and providing expertise and support to individual schools.

4. **SENCOs valued the collaboration, learning opportunities and additional resources that MAT membership offered:** For example, SENCOs appreciated regular cross-MAT SENCO meetings, additional training opportunities, templates and toolkits and access to trust-level specialist services and expertise.

5. **MAT-level monitoring and evaluation of SEND provision is perceived as valuable and constructive:** MATs conduct regular SEND audits and reviews. Both MAT representatives and SENCOs viewed these audits as positive and constructive experiences, emphasising strengths and identifying areas for improvement.

6. **Both mainstream and specialist provision can benefit from a 'blended' MAT approach:** Interviewees highlighted that having specialist settings within their MAT allowed them to tap into the expertise that staff in these settings could provide, offered opportunities for tailored provision and increased awareness of SEND within mainstream schools.

7. **School SEND provision benefits from access to a strong MAT and a strong LA:** Inconsistencies in different LAs' capacities to effectively support schools led to interviewees' reporting mixed experiences in their dealings with LAs. To ensure the optimal performance of MATs, it is crucial that LAs are adequately resourced so that their provision is both effective and consistent.

8. **The full potential of the MAT model for SEND provision is still to be unlocked:** While many SENCOs reported experiencing a range of benefits to being part of a MAT (see above), certain challenges and limitations remain, including the geographical distribution of schools, limitations in LA provision, and SENCO workload/capacity.

Recommendations for MAT and school leaders

1. **Empower SENCOs as agents of change:** MAT and school leaders should empower SENCOs as agents of change within their schools. Their ability to innovate within the overarching principles and vision of the MAT allows SENCOs to respond effectively to the unique needs of their schools and pupils.

2. **Strategic workforce planning:** MAT and school leaders should focus on strategic workforce planning to address the staffing challenges. This involves targeted efforts to attract, retain, and adequately support SENCOs and support staff. This includes the need for manageable workloads, competitive pay, and professional development opportunities. MATs should maximise the power of their structures to train and develop SENCOs, teachers and support staff on SEND, utilising existing staff expertise to develop less experienced staff members.

3. **Support staff well-being:** Strengthen measures to support the mental health and well-being of SENCOs and support staff. MAT and school leaders should recognise the value and importance SENCOs place on opportunities for collaboration, both across the MAT and locally. Such opportunities can help to mitigate SENCOs' feelings of isolation and help foster essential support networks. Efforts should be made to strike a balance between in-person and remote meetings to maximise the benefits of these exchanges while minimising the impact of travel time.

4. **Leverage wider benefits of being in a MAT:** MAT leaders should explore further ways to maximise the benefits of their structures for SEND staff and pupils. This includes the collaborative development of toolkits, templates, and guidance to introduce efficiencies and reduce SENCO workload, as well as fostering greater cross-MAT collaboration in general. Where feasible, MATs should also consider creating a Director of SEND role (or similar) to take responsibility for providing strategic direction and to facilitate collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the MAT. Financial resources from MATs should be recognised and valued for their role in enabling schools to enhance their SEND teams and access support and interventions that might otherwise be unaffordable for an individual school.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. **Recognise the pivotal role and agency of MATs in enhancing the SEND system**: Policy needs to place greater emphasis on the importance of the shared responsibility and active involvement of MATs in shaping the overall SEND system. MATs should be explored as potential hubs of innovation, with successful evidence-based strategies and interventions within the MAT community shared more widely. Other school groups may also have a role here, although this was not explored as part of this study.

2. **Improve support from LAs:** Policymakers should strive to enhance the support provided by LAs by clearly defining expected service standards and ensuring they are met. The procedures for EHCPs should be standardised to ensure a common understanding and approach across schools. It is also important that inefficiencies are addressed, communication channels are

improved, and LAs are sufficiently resourced, to ensure that schools and MATs receive timely and sufficient support. The introduction of new National Standards may help with this.

3. **Improve early identification**: Strengthen mechanisms for promptly recognising SEND during primary education, aiming for early intervention to prevent the exacerbation of pupils' needs and supporting primary-secondary transition. This approach also aims to reduce administrative burdens and prevent a backlog of EHCP applications in secondary schools.

4. **Increase funding**: Policymakers should prioritise increased funding for the SEND system to address staffing challenges, provide adequate resources for schools and LAs, and support effective provision for pupils with EHCPs.

5. **More research evidence:** More research is needed to better understand what 'effective practice' looks like within the MAT context. In particular, more empirical evidence is required to understand how different MAT structures and approaches impact on SEND pupils' outcomes. More research is also needed into the potential advantages of a 'blended' MAT approach and into the potential benefits of closer working relationships between mainstream and specialist settings in general.

Introduction

The challenges facing England's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) sector are well known. Years of late intervention, low parental confidence in the system and inefficient resource allocation[7] have led to rising SEND numbers, increased complexity of need and a lack of specialist provision.

DfE figures show that the number of children and young people identified as having SEND has been growing since 2016. Over 1.5 million pupils are now recognised as having SEN[8], equating to 17 per cent of all school pupils[9]. This is up from 1.2 million pupils or 14 per cent of all pupils in 2016. Most are educated in mainstream settings, although numbers in state-funded special schools are increasing each year. The percentage of pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) (those with higher support needs) increased to 4.3 per cent in 2023, up from 2.8 per cent in 2016. At the same time, the percentage of pupils on SEN support (those with lower support needs) increased to 13.0 per cent in 2023, up from 11.6 per cent in 2016.

There is concern that the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis may have worsened problems for the SEND system[10]. For example, two-thirds of teachers who responded to a NASUWT teaching union survey in spring 2023 reported that the level of support received by their pupils with SEND had decreased in recent years, despite teachers reporting a decline in pupils' emotional and mental wellbeing, attainment and attendance. Moreover, rising demand and increasing complexity of need have left many local authorities (LAs) without enough provision to cope, resulting in a system that many regard as broken[11].

The Government's SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan, published in March 2023, sets out plans to improve the SEND and AP system in England. This includes new evidence-based National Standards designed to provide greater clarity on what 'good' looks like in identifying and meeting need, new EHCPs designed to reduce bureaucracy, and the creation of new special schools[12]. However, while the Plan outlines roles for a number of stakeholder groups, including specialist providers, LAs, Regional Expert Partnerships, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission, it says relatively little about the specific role to be played by multi-

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[7] SEND Review: Right Support, right place, right time. Government consultation on the SEND and alternative provision system in England (2022) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/624178c68fa8f5277c0168e7/SEND_review_right_support_right_place_right_time_accessible.pdf [07/02/24]

[8] The DfE statistics quoted here do not include pupils with disabilities, hence the reference to 'SEN' rather than 'SEND'

[9] Government statistics on special educational needs in England (June 2023) https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england [07/02/24]

[10] SEND: teachers struggle to 'paper over cracks' of broken system. TES Magazine (April 2023). https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/teachers-struggle-broken-send-system-support [07/02/24]

[11] Revealed: The spiralling cost of a broken SEND system. Schools Week article (April 2022) https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-spiralling-cost-of-a-broken-send-system/ [07/02/24]

[12] Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan (March 2023) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff39d28fa8f527fb67cb06/SEND_and_alternative_provision_improvement_plan.pdf [07/02/24]]

academy trusts (MATs) in helping to build a more inclusive system. The Government remains committed to all schools joining a MAT and has published Trust Quality Descriptions to inform MATs' improvement and capacity-building priorities. They include a focus on MATs offering 'high quality and inclusive education', whereby MATs create a culture that is 'motivating and ambitious' for all pupils, including those with SEND, and where MATs 'welcome and effectively teach' children with SEND[13]. However, to date there has been little research evidence to illustrate what this might mean in practice.

This study sheds new light on the approaches being used across different MATs to support pupils with SEND. In doing so, this research contributes to understanding the current role of MATs within the SEND system and how it might be strengthened. In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with a total of 49 interviewees spread across 19 different MATs. Interviewees included MAT CEOs, MAT SEND leaders and school special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs). The report explores the extent to which MATs with specialist provision are drawing on this to support their mainstream schools. It also explores the challenges faced by schools and MATs and the strategies employed to address them (see Appendix 1 for the project's underpinning research questions).

MATs were selected based on administrative data and web searching, with the intention of identifying MATs with effective SEND provision (see Appendix 2 for more details). As such, the findings should be considered illustrative rather than representative of MAT provision more widely. Moreover, the relatively small sample size and the lack of empirical evidence on SEND pupils' outcomes means that some caution should be taken when interpreting the findings. Nevertheless, the report highlights some of the key perceived benefits of different MATs' approaches to SEND provision and provides actionable recommendations for MATs to further strengthen their support systems. Additionally, it seeks to provide MAT and school leaders with illustrative options to consider in relation to their own SEND provision. We hope the findings are useful to policy makers and both the academy and LA-maintained sectors.

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[13] Annex A – Trust Quality Descriptions (July 2023) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a68ab94dd8b3000f7fa566/Annex_A_-_MAT_Quality_Descriptions_July_2023_.pdf [07/02/24]

Key findings

1. MATs and schools are facing significant challenges around SEND provision

The interviews provided an overview of the significant challenges faced by MATs and schools in the area of SEND provision, touching on staffing, funding, external support, parent relationships, and inconsistencies between LAs.

1.1. Staffing

Workload was reported to be a considerable challenge, particularly for SENCOs, who reported experiencing a rise in the administrative work associated with EHCPs due to increasing SEND numbers. Many of the SENCOs we spoke to also had teaching responsibilities and spoke of the challenges of balancing their different commitments.

> *Last year I did a huge number of EHCP applications. Each one is hours and hours of work. I do a lot of that in my own time, and that means it's invisible because people don't see it.*
>
> SENCO (2b)

SENCOs also spoke about how isolating the role could be. While most reported feeling well supported, they did not always feel that their school colleagues, including senior leaders, fully understood their roles or the pressures they were under.

MAT CEOs and SEND leaders spoke of the challenges of recruiting and retaining SENCOs and support staff. Interviewees attributed these challenges to a combination of factors, including lack of funding/uncompetitive pay, lack of skilled staff and workload (see also Sections 2 and 4).

1.2. Increasing amount and complexity of need

SENCOs reported experiencing a notable rise in the number of pupils with EHCPs following the Covid-19 pandemic. These EHCPs were primarily associated with communication and interaction needs, as well as social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH). Despite the surge in the number and complexity of pupils' needs, SENCOs reported there had been no corresponding increase in resources to address these challenges.

Pupil attendance was reported to have significantly worsened following the pandemic with a disproportionate number of these pupils having SEND.

These challenges were exacerbated by reports of a lack of special school places, which created additional pressure on mainstream schools to take pupils with SEN. While the MATs/schools we spoke to were doing their best for their pupils with SEND, some interviewees were concerned that efforts to meet the need of these pupils came at the expense of support and provision for non-SEND pupils.

The challenges encountered by secondary schools were partly attributed to what was perceived to be a lack of early identification of pupils' with SEND needs during their primary schooling. This

resulted in heightened administrative burdens associated with obtaining EHCPs and an escalation of students' SEND needs, necessitating additional resources to address these issues.

> *We have got more and more children with very high complex needs coming into mainstream* [and my academies] *don't have the expertise to support them. There is no funding,* [and there isn't the] *external guidance and support that they need to facilitate those places. So, Section F in the EHCP is saying that there should be speech and language support, but there's no therapist, etcetera.*
>
> MAT SEND Leader (4a)

1.3. Relationship with parents

SENCOs reported that the parents of pupils with SEND were increasingly demanding more from them, driven by the increased level of need and (in some cases) worsening LA provision. Some reported that they were increasingly unable to meet parents' expectations due to a lack of resources and/or available support, which pushed them into an adversarial position, with some MATs reporting a fear of litigation.

> *Parents more than anything just want to feel listened to or heard, and showing that you're open to hearing new suggestions and taking that on board. Honesty and fostering a relationship of trust – that's really hard to establish in SEND particularly because often parents have had to battle to have their voices heard and their child's needs recognised.*
>
> SENCO (12b)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some SENCOs reported engaging in persistent efforts or 'fighting battles' on behalf of children whose parents were not sufficiently involved. A recurring challenge involved repeatedly pursuing parents to secure their written consent for their child to take part in a SEND intervention; this had become a frequent source of frustration for many SENCOs.

1.4. Insufficient funding

Interviewees highlighted the challenges they associated with a lack of funding in the SEND system for schools in England. These challenges included inadequate funding for staffing, particularly for SENCOs and support staff. Additionally, interviewees reported that the current system places the most inclusive schools at the greatest financial disadvantage. This is because they attract a disproportionate number of pupils with SEND without this being adequately recognised in the funding they receive.

1.5. Difficulties and delays in accessing external specialist support

Interviewees consistently highlighted that it was becoming increasingly difficult to access external specialist support from various services, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), educational psychologists (EPs), speech and language therapists (SaLTs), and alternative provision (AP). While acknowledging that this has been a longstanding issue, they

expressed the view that it is worsening, pointing to multi-year delays and high thresholds for accessing support. Some interviewees noted that their LA had no access to EP or SaLT services. These challenges were attributed to chronic underfunding and resource issues affecting these essential services.

The process of obtaining a SEND diagnosis and submitting applications for EHCPs, along with the associated funding, relies on access to essential services. Interviewees described difficulties in accessing these services and reported that this was leading to some pupils being unable to receive the necessary support.

Interviewees also stressed the necessity for access to more high-quality, long-term AP, as the existing short-term options were perceived as merely providing temporary relief to the challenges at hand. The current available AP choices were characterised as costly, underfunded, and over-subscribed.

> *There are so many burnt out SENCOs at the moment. Because you've got parents going, why aren't you doing this? You've got local authorities saying we haven't got the money to do this. You're just going to have to make do. You can't access professionals because CAMHS is a three-year waiting list where I am. Getting an OT* [occupational therapist] *is a 2-year waiting list. There's no NHS speech therapist, so I have to go and search and find what's available.*
>
> SENCO (2c)

1.6. Inconsistencies between local authorities

Schools and MATs rely on LAs to provide support for pupils with SEND. This includes identifying and assessing pupils and providing funding and support for pupils with EHCPs. While some MAT CEOs and SEND leaders spoke positively of the support and provision they received from their LA, many expressed significant concerns about the additional stress and workload the LA created for their SENCOs. Indeed, several SENCOs reported that dealing with their LA was the most challenging aspect of their role and that the situation had been getting worse. Instances of LAs being placed in special measures were cited, and concerns around poor LA communication, inefficiency and excessive administrative demands highlighted.

Many interviewees recognised that LAs were themselves facing significant challenges in relation to funding and resources. A high turnover rate amongst LA personnel was identified as a factor contributing to difficulties in maintaining continuity and building relationships. In one particular case, an LA was reported to have initially offered additional support to schools, only for their own capacity to become overwhelmed due to high demand on their services. A minority of interviewees expressed the view that they did not share the same priorities as their LA, and perceived active ill will in their relationship. In a small number of cases, interviewees reported that the LA was not fulfilling their statutory obligations – around EHCP reviews, for example.

> *It can be quite strained at times if I'm honest. I just feel they have got a lack of resources* [and] *a lack of expertise* […] *I've had to broker a package of support from a different LA* [to get an education psychologist]. […] *It's a postcode lottery.*
>
> MAT SEND Leader (5a)

In summary, the research findings highlight the imperative for robust support systems, encompassing training and resources, to aid MATs and SENCOs in navigating the heightened challenges following the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, there is a notable emphasis on addressing communication and interaction needs, as well as Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties. Achieving this necessitates collaborative initiatives involving schools, MATs, Government, and LAs to guarantee the delivery of effective and inclusive education for all pupils.

2. There is no single template for the role MATs play in supporting SEND provision

Every MAT in our sample differed in at least some respect in terms of their approach to supporting pupils with SEND. **Moreover, interviewees expressed mixed views on the degree to which 'standardisation' of SEND provision across a MAT was seen as possible or desirable.** This diversity in perspectives stemmed from concerns about differences in the context and characteristics of pupil populations among schools within a MAT, as well as the necessity for locally customised solutions to address these differences. However, most MATs had adopted some kind of high-level framework (expressed as *principles*, *expectations*, *ethos*, *vision*, etc.) that member schools adapted to their specific needs.

There was a wide variation in how responsibility for SEND was shared between the MAT and its schools. The most common approach was to utilise a MAT-level policy document or policy template, sometimes co-developed by MAT senior leaders and school SENCOs, that schools then adapted to their specific needs. The fact that MAT-level provision or support was rarely mentioned in schools' SEND Information Reports[14] suggests that there was little MAT-level involvement in schools' day-to-day provision. This finding was confirmed by most school- and some MAT-level interviewees. This was generally reported to have resulted in quite high levels of variation in practice between schools within a MAT. However, it was common for MAT CEOs and SEND leaders to describe their schools as being on the same broad journey, just at different stages along it.

There were, of course, some exceptions to this broader picture. One MAT, for example, grew from one flagship school, resulting in that school's SEND policy being used as the blueprint for other schools in the MAT. A small number of MATs appeared to have very little alignment in provision between schools, while others aimed for relatively high levels of consistency in both policy and practice across their schools. Smaller MATs, in particular, tended to be less centralised – usually attributed to limited capacity in the central MAT team. On the other hand, achieving consistency across larger MATs was sometimes reported to be difficult due to variation in practices and provision between different LAs. Smaller MATs based in a single LA with settings serving similar pupil cohorts appeared to be better situated to standardise practice across their schools.

It was common for MATs to provide a SEND framework or 'vision' as a tool to set culture and expectations across member schools – with MAT-level interviewees highlighting the evidence base behind such documents. These frameworks would often encourage or recommend particular approaches, such as cross-departmental working, rather than prescribing it. When asked about MAT-level working around SEND, MAT CEOs and SEND leaders often spoke extensively on the culture they were looking to embed around it – such as every teacher being a teacher of SEND, high expectations for all students, and moving away from negatively

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[14] Every school in England must publish an information report on their website about the implementation of their school's policy for pupils with SEN. This should be updated at least annually. We reviewed a selection of such reports for each of the MATs in the study.

'categorising' vulnerable children. Some interviewees noted that simply having cross-MAT working and dialogue around inclusion raised the profile of SEND within MAT schools.

Both MAT- and school-level interviewees reported that their MATs typically avoided making explicit mandates. Instead, interviewees emphasised that the MAT's role was to advise and support schools with SEND. They argued that it was the schools that understood their needs and pupils best, and so they needed to have ownership of their practice. SENCOs likewise considered this agency to be essential. They reported being free to innovate within their schools as long as they could justify the rationale behind it to the MAT and they remained aligned to the MAT's principles and vision.

> *I think we need to make some amendments to* [the behaviour policy to] *better reflect the needs of SEND pupils within our group of schools.* [...] *This means expectations will still be kept high for all pupils, but there needs to be local procedures based on your cohort, the school site and the age of the pupils.*
>
> MAT SEND Leader (2a)

There were a small number of exceptions to this approach, particularly in larger MATs where high levels of standardisation were valued as a way of ensuring consistent quality of provision across their schools. Even in cases where standardisation did occur, however, it tended to be in the form of MATs providing structures to support schools rather than mandating particular practice or provision. More information about where standardisation/alignment was seen to work less well is provided in Section 8 ('The full potential of the MAT model for SEND provision is still to be unlocked').

The most common area where standardisation occurred was in relation to processes and procedures – including templates, forms (such as SEND referral forms), data management/monitoring systems, individual learning plans, and software (for mapping and recording provision). This kind of standardisation was perceived by both SENCOs and MAT representatives to carry several benefits, such as by:

- facilitating cross-MAT working, collaboration and knowledge-sharing;

- making it easier for new SENCOs to 'hit the ground running' as all the necessary structures were already in place;

- freeing Senior Leadership Team (SLT) staff members to be more hands-on and visible in the school;

- supporting the MAT's strategic oversight of SEND by making it easier for the MAT to access up-to-date and standardised information about each school's situation.

A few instances emerged of specific policies being MAT-wide, particularly around issues that could be seen as related to school culture or ethos. This included, for example, use of suspensions and exclusions, the extent to which schools could adapt the curriculum to meet different levels of need, SEMH/personal development provision and minimum (non-statutory)

release time for SENCOs. A standardised MAT-level curriculum for pupils with SEND, with varying levels of permissible adaptation, was likewise reported in several cases.

There were some instances of centralised staffing decisions, particularly around recruitment. For example, in one case representatives from both the mainstream and Special Schools in the MAT were invited to the applicant interviews to determine which type of provision they would be best suited for. Staffing structures were, however, also standardised in some cases, particularly around how teaching assistants (TAs) were deployed, whether SENCOs were required to be part of the SLT, the (relative) size of the SEND team and the existence of additional roles such as 'SEMH champions' and phonics experts.

Standardisations of assessments and interventions also occurred in some cases – particularly in relation to phonics and literacy. This would not mean, however, that schools would be restricted in terms of the total suite of interventions they could offer, only that particular ones would need to be included within it.

It appeared that SENCOs generally did not perceive MAT standardisation efforts as excessively restrictive as long as they felt they had a voice within the MAT and that their feedback was taken on board. SENCOs reported that it was crucial that there was trust in the vision and rationale behind these decisions. One SENCO highlighted the importance of schools viewing themselves as integral parts of the MAT, rather than viewing the MAT leadership team as a separate entity. MAT-level interviewees stressed the value of maintaining a two-way dialogue with schools, utilising methods such as questionnaires, co-production and one-to-one conversations. One interviewee described their relationship with the SENCOs as 'collaborative', while another underscored the importance of introducing measures gradually, cautiously, and with the support of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to enhance the likelihood of success and integration.

3. MAT SEND leaders play a pivotal role in MAT support for SEND provision

Fifteen of the 19 MATs in our sample had appointed someone in the central team to oversee SEND provision across the MAT. In some cases, this role would be specific to SEND, while in others it covered a broader inclusion remit including aspects such as safeguarding, disadvantage, English as an Additional Language (EAL) and attendance. A small number reported working in a school-based role alongside their MAT-level one. Some MAT SEND leaders were the formal line managers for SENCOs, while others positioned themselves as more of a mentor or coach.

In some large MATs there were multiple people working in inclusion at different levels (e.g. regional, national), different geographical regions and/or different specialisms within inclusion (such as behaviour and attendance, not just SEND). Where the inclusion remit was spread across multiple roles, SENCOs reported contacting different individuals regarding their specific areas of support as needed. MAT-level interviewees emphasised the collaborative cross-team working that occurred within the MAT leadership as well. In some cases, this more holistic approach at MAT-level appeared to cascade down to schools. Indeed, part of the SEND leader's role was often to ensure SEND was embedded across all areas and conversations, not in a silo, and working to create links between individuals around these issues – including at the level of the MAT senior leadership. More than one MAT SEND leader described their role as creating a 'golden thread' of SEND through all the areas of the MAT.

> *We're trying to make sure that SEND is the golden thread that goes through everything, as opposed to just being the kind of bolt-on I think possibly it has been* […]. *Whereas now SEND is part of the teaching and learning. It's part of the quality assurance. It's part of everything.* […] *I get the impression that it probably wasn't really on the agenda that much before I joined.*
>
> MAT SEND leader (13a)

This position typically involved taking responsibility for all other forms of SEND centralisation as well as facilitating collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the MAT. Instances of lower levels of centralisation around SEND often coincided with the absence of such a role within the central MAT team. The loss and/or reduced capacity of someone in this role was perceived by SENCOs to drive reduced levels of support for schools and reduced collaboration between them. For example, interviewees reported instances where cross-MAT SENCO meetings and SEND audits ceased after the MAT SEND leader left. Conversely, the establishment of this role was viewed by SENCOs as contributing to enhancements in the same areas.

> *Since* [the MAT SEND leader] *and* [other MAT SEND team members] *have been appointed that level of support has been much, much better.*
>
> SENCO (4c)
>
> *As a team of SENCOs we now have meetings every term since* [the MAT SEND leader] *came on board – she's that beacon that is bringing all of the schools and the MAT together.*
>
> SENCO (13b)

The majority of SEND leaders in our sample were established within the past few years, with some being as recent as the last few months. This indicates that centralising efforts around SEND are still evolving for MATs, as evidenced by the emphasis placed by MAT-level interviewees on this area of work being in its early stages of development. In some cases, a high-performing SENCO from a MAT school has been elevated to this role to share their successful approach with other schools. The creation of the role was typically motivated by a CEO's commitment to inclusion, although in some cases, it resulted from formal reviews and recommendations for the MAT. A number of interviewees cited a recent perceived increase in the level and complexity of needs as a driving factor for establishing this role.

SEND leaders consistently emphasised how much time they spent 'on the ground' in schools, with visits generally tailored to the specific needs of each school. The focus of these visits was usually to support a particular aspect of SEND provision, such as deployment of support staff, curriculum plans and adaptations, behaviour, reasonable adjustments and onboarding new SENCOs. Several SENCOs spoke of regular meetings with the MAT SEND leader as they found their feet in the role and/or school. MAT SEND leaders also supported the development of school-specific initiatives, such as particular forms of specialist provision. *When* these visits occurred also depended on factors such as a likely upcoming Ofsted visit, reports of good practice, requests for support, perceived poor performance and new staff members in the SEND team.

SENCOs consistently emphasised the importance of the MAT SEND leader role in providing access to SEND expertise. Since SENCOs often possess the most advanced understanding of this area within their school, they can feel isolated and with no one to turn to when looking for advice. This meant it was crucial to have the right person with the right experience occupying the role. Experience in a specialist provision role, for instance, was deemed valuable for SENCOs to tap into, as was a strong understanding of the legal framework. Even in cases where MATs did not have a designated SEND leader, the presence of SEND experience among MAT-level staff was considered valuable in shaping the SEND support and expertise the MAT could extend to its schools.

> *Having a director for SEND and inclusion gives you the confidence when you are struggling with tricky kids and demanding parents, to suggest something completely different as you have the expert there to talk it through with the parents.*
>
> SENCO (11c)
>
> *As you know, there is usually only one SENCO in every school. No one understands what I do. It's hard getting across the complexity of the role to other colleagues. Having someone in the MAT above me who I can trust, and who I know has a lived experience of SEND is a godsend.*
>
> SENCO (2b)

SEND leaders, often having previously served as SENCOs themselves, pointed out that their firsthand experience provided them with a solid grasp of the challenges SENCOs within the MAT encountered, particularly their feelings of isolation. They actively worked to address these

challenges. SENCOs consistently expressed their gratitude for the high levels of responsiveness they received from their SEND leader. Some interviewees perceived that in MATs where SEND leaders had fewer schools to oversee, they had a greater capacity to maintain close relationships with each of the schools compared to those in larger MATs.

> *Just having somebody out there to hold that space to talk through your thoughts is really, really crucial.*
>
> SENCO (4b)

Without the day-to-day firefighting responsibilities of the SENCOs, MAT SEND leaders felt (and were seen) to be able to take a more strategic and long-term view of SEND across the MAT. They also had greater capacity and remit to stay up to date with research in this area and to bring that into their vision for the schools, as well as to draw on data from across the MAT to inform strategy and identify cross-MAT training needs. This meant the MAT SEND leaders were well-positioned to, in turn, provide headteachers and SENCOs with the tools they needed to make the strategic decisions required to meet the needs of pupils with SEND within their schools.

MAT SEND leaders typically did not seem to engage in additional operational tasks within schools, except in specific instances, such as due to staff absence, during particularly busy periods or when a SENCO was new to the role.

Perceived benefits of the MAT SEND leader role

All SENCOs with MAT SEND leaders emphasised the value they drew from this role, including:

- **Access to higher level of expertise and experience:** including for difficult conversations with LAs and SENCOs.

- **Strategic oversight:** while SENCOs face the day-to-day 'firefighting' duties of their role, MAT SEND leaders have the capacity to develop and implement a more long-term strategic vision for the MAT around SEND.

- **Onboarding support:** meeting regularly with new SENCOs.

- **Progression opportunities:** nearly all SEND leaders had previously occupied a SENCO role in the MAT.

- **Port of call:** SENCOs not feeling that they are just making decisions on their own.

- **'Back up'** for legal processes (such as attending tribunals)

4. SENCOs valued the collaboration, learning opportunities and additional resources that MAT membership offered

In addition to the MAT SEND leader role, the primary value SENCOs reported drawing from their MAT was in the form of the formal and informal opportunities for collaboration that it presented, as well as the additional resources to which it gave them access.

Almost all of the MATs in the sample provided a MAT-wide training schedule focused on SEND, utilising both in-house resources and external providers. Access to the latter often came at no cost or at reduced rates for schools, benefiting from economies of scale. MAT support for training and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities was also seen to guarantee access for some SENCOs who felt that they might otherwise have faced challenges obtaining leave from their SLT. This support extended not only to MAT-led training opportunities, but, in some cases, to external training opportunities identified by SENCOs. MATs also reported running SEND induction, development and leadership programmes to support recruitment and retention.

Cross-MAT SENCO meetings and conferences were widespread across the sample. They were typically organised and led by the MAT SEND leader – and did not appear to occur in the absence of this role. These meetings could cover one or both phases, the whole MAT or particular regions of it, but usually there would be at least one whole-MAT meeting per year. Regular meetings tended to occur once or twice per term, sometimes with larger and/or longer ones at less regular intervals. Meetings tended to be a mix of remote and in-person meetings, with many interviewees highlighting the trade-off between the value that was added by being in-person in terms of richness of exchange, and the challenges presented by having to take additional time out of the school for travel (see Section 8). The meetings would involve discussions and knowledge-exchange between SENCOs, as well as presentations by SENCOs about a particular strength their school is seen to have. Each meeting would usually be centred on a particular topic, such as provision maps, difficult conversations with parents, curriculum offers, SEND identification, information reports, trauma-informed approaches, managing behaviour, speech and language tools, and how to write effective EHCP applications. Often these topics were decided in collaboration with SENCOs to ensure their relevance. As with external training, the MAT oversight of these meetings was seen to guarantee SLT buy-in for SENCO attendance – which was not always the case for LA SENCO networks, for example.

> *I find this kind of sharing* [through SENCO meetings] *one of the biggest benefits of being part of a MAT. There are no huge conflicts or barriers to this type of collaborative working.*
>
> SENCO (16c)

Knowledge sharing also occurred through other formalised means, such as MAT-organised visits to a school that they considered to have particularly outstanding SEND practice, peer audits and SENCO participation in SEND reviews (see Section 5). One MAT SEND leader shared a monthly bulletin on recent SEND research with the schools, while another formally recorded examples of

good practice from different schools in a communal area for reference as a 'starting point' for other schools' own thinking about similar situations or challenges.

In a few instances, perceived good practice was disseminated more systematically across the MAT by the MAT SEND leaders, either through a mandate or recommendation. This was observed in areas such as life skills programmes, maths screening approaches, training for TAs and use of interventions. Some MATs also reported piloting new approaches in a small number of schools before considering broader implementation across the entire MAT.

Informal exchanges and collaboration between SENCOs appeared to be less common – primarily due to limitations around capacity (see Section 8). However, interviewees did speak of emails, phone calls and school visits between individual SENCOs, as well as instant-messaging groups offering informal advice and quick responses. Follow-up conversations to SENCO meetings also took place between individuals. In certain instances, especially in MATs with significant geographic dispersion, MATs fostered informal interactions by establishing smaller 'clusters' of schools and/or 'buddy' pairings, often pairing more experienced SENCOs with those less experienced. Some SENCOs also highlighted the positive impact on morale of simply knowing they had a network of other SENCOs facing similar challenges, providing a sense of support and camaraderie. This was particularly significant given how isolated some SENCOs reported they felt in their roles.

SENCOs in larger MATs generally felt their size was advantageous, as it provided them with a larger pool of individuals and diverse contexts to learn from. Several secondary SENCOs reported that collaboration with primary schools had developed their teaching provision for very low ability levels and improved transition arrangements. On the other hand, some SENCOs felt that they primarily benefitted from interactions with similar types of provision to their own and would have preferred, for example, to have more opportunities to collaborate specifically with their own educational phase.

Many SENCOs reported being part of LA SENCO networks and establishing connections with local schools outside of the MAT. This was deemed especially valuable in situations where schools were facing significant local challenges. One SENCO highlighted the creation of an instant-messaging group for local SENCOs to help boost morale. Schools that were geographically isolated from the rest of their MAT tended to be particularly engaged with these local networks and relationships. Information shared by LAs in formal network meetings was also seen to be useful in some cases, for example providing guidance around what the LA does and does not want to see in an EHCP referral. While MAT networks took a broader approach in sharing knowledge, practice, expertise, and effective systems, LA networks provided a specific focus on local concerns.

> *There are benefits and limitations to both* [MAT and LA SENCO networks] *and I wouldn't want to have it otherwise. I think it's really helpful to have both those spaces.*
>
> SENCO (19b)

However, several SENCOs noted that being part of the same MAT did facilitate cross-school collaboration because of the awareness that you are all subscribing to the same ethos and are working towards the same goals, as well as practical elements like easy access to contact details. One SENCO mentioned high levels of SENCO turnover in other local schools as a barrier to building local relationships, while another was aware that SENCOs in non-MAT schools had very little capacity for collaboration. School visits were also seen to be much easier to organise if occurring within the MAT framework. Collaboration between local schools appeared to often rely on individual contacts or pre-existing relationships, such as SENCOs having worked together previously or knowing each other from a training course they had both attended.

In addition, several SENCOs highlighted limitations of LA SENCO networks. For example, knowledge-sharing was seen to be hampered by the amount of variation in practice and conditions between schools. The difference in the number of TAs between schools would make it challenging to exchange ideas on how to use TAs most constructively. Some SENCOs felt that their LA SENCO network was not a constructive environment, and/or that the agenda was driven only by the LA's priorities. This is clearly not, however, a generic MAT-LA divide. One SENCO, for example, described SENCO meetings in their previous MAT as 'so boring I didn't even pay attention and stopped attending because there was no agenda […], external support or looking to improve' (SENCO, 17c).

A particular salient area that emerged from the interviews in terms of additional support offered by MATs was in relation to in-house employment of specialist resources – including legal support, speech and language therapists, counsellors, educational psychologists, family support workers, child psychotherapists and other mental health workers. The majority of MATs were either already implementing this resourcing strategy, or seriously looking into the feasibility of doing so. This supported schools to access support where it was not available through their LA, or where this would involve significant delays. It also enabled the MAT to be in charge of their own thresholds and waiting times, and to increase the available provision beyond the statutory amount. In one instance, a speech and language therapist was employed full-time by the MAT to visit the schools, deliver training, carry out assessment and work with groups of children in need. Interviewees highlighted that MAT leaders played a crucial role in providing both the funding, time and strategic foresight to make this possible. The effectiveness of this solution was, however, tempered in some cases by LA restrictions around the use of in-house EPs for EHCP assessments. In addition, the national shortage of EPs created challenges for recruitment.

Resource sharing directly between schools occurred in a few cases – although only where schools were in geographic proximity. For example, pupils from one school were able to access nature-based learning facilities located in another MAT school. Several MATs also reported sharing *human* resources between schools, to support each other with new initiatives, training, collaboration, peer reviewing and knowledge-sharing, as well as more pragmatic aspects such as filling the gap while another school is looking to recruit a new SENCO. One SENCO explained that they were looking to develop in-house alternative provision (AP) by drawing on staffing expertise across the MAT and sharing the cost between the schools. There were a small number of cases

where staff were shared between schools depending on where their experience and expertise was needed most, and/or to support staff development. Some SENCOs even reported agile sharing of staff between schools, where if cover was required at one school, it would be provided by staff at another. This kind of resource sharing is not unique to MATs, and some SENCOs reported that they were (also) in strong local clusters that were implementing similar initiatives – including joint funding applications and sharing a specialist across multiple schools. Once again, these local networks were seen to be most important when a school was geographically isolated from other schools in the MAT.

Where written resources were provided by the MAT for schools to draw on, MAT-level interviewees tended to emphasise the collaborative process for their development, as well as the explicit ambition of looking to reduce SENCO workload. This perspective tended to be shared by SENCOs as well. These written resources took the form of toolkits, templates and guidance that would be shared in meetings and/or through online 'hubs' or portals. These resources could help SENCOs to better identify evidence-based assessment and interventions, or to improve their adaptive teaching methods, among a wide range of other areas. Some MAT SEND leaders reported developing SEND-related resources for other staff members as well – particularly SLT and subject leaders. It was relatively unusual for MAT leaders to themselves act as additional human resource, although there were instances of direct support with provision development and workload.

> *I know how hard the SENCO role is, so I want to support* [them with] *their workload. I create resources and templates for them to reduce the operational admin jobs, give them training material* [and] *share best practice. They also have a network to support them.*
>
> MAT SEND Leader (3a)

Additional financial resources from the MAT were clearly valued by schools. SENCOs reported that this funding enabled their school to, for example, have a larger SEND team, to purchase books for a school-wide reading project, to purchase software at a subsidised rate, to recruit well-being practitioners and to make initiatives under short-term government funding more sustainable. SENCOs highlighted the value of economies of scale that enabled them to access programmes that they would not have been able to afford as separate schools. MAT-leaders also provided schools with guidance and support around accessing additional support from the LA and other parties, as well around how to best make use of the funding available.

Perceived benefits of collaboration and additional resources

Participation in learning and collaboration opportunities, along with access to additional resources, was recognised as crucial support for SENCOs dealing with the rising levels and complexity of needs. This support, both practical and strategic, contributed significantly to their well-being, job satisfaction, and retention.

- **SENCOs strongly highlighted the value of being part of a learning community and having opportunities to exchange good practices.**

- **MAT-wide communities of practice were not only about learning but also alleviated the sense of isolation commonly reported among SENCOs.**

- **Toolkits, training materials, templates, and established systems were acknowledged for reducing administrative workload.**

- **Access to specialists employed by the MAT was seen as a means to alleviate the stress associated with the challenges of accessing these resources through the LA.**

5. MAT-level monitoring and evaluation of SEND provision is perceived as valuable and constructive

Almost all of the MATs in our sample implemented some kind of regular SEND audit or review process. Typically, these audits would take place once or twice a year, with the process led by the MAT SEND leader. The degree of involvement of the leader in the actual auditing processes varied both between and within MATs. This variance often depended on the size of the MAT but also on the perceived level of need for each specific school. In some cases, where the MAT SEND leader was not involved in the actual audit, they would still carry out some form of Quality Assurance. For instance, one MAT SEND leader reported performing more frequent light-touch checks on school statutory compliance and adherence to the Code of Practice, in addition to the in-depth reviews.

The audit process typically involved some form of self-evaluation, either conducted solely by the SENCO or with the participation of various stakeholders across the schools. Peer reviewing also appeared to be growing in popularity, with several MATs having recently introduced this practice.

Subsequent to the audit, an action plan would be formulated, and individual schools would undergo follow-up procedures. In certain instances, priority schools—those with the lowest and highest levels of performance—would receive additional visits, either to provide extra support or to enable them to support others. The insights gathered from the audits and action plans would also guide the decision-making and strategic direction taken by the MAT SEND leader, particularly in areas such as training provision and focus areas.

> *The MAT came in and did a big review of our school a few years ago now and then as a result of that we've got an action plan that we've followed steadfastly and obviously continue to work on that. I think it's been instrumental in letting our SEND Department improve and giving us a sense of direction as to where to go.*
>
> SENCO (4c)

Both MAT representatives and SENCOs reported that these audits were positive and constructive experiences designed explicitly to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Perceived benefits of the monitoring process for SENCOs

- Some SENCOs reported that these audits helped prepare them for Ofsted visits as they felt so well-versed in the information and what they have to share, making them feel more comfortable and confident about the prospect. MAT representatives also visited schools to help prepare for Ofsted inspections specifically.

- Peer audits not only offered learning and development opportunities for the SENCO conducting the audit but also the SENCO hosting it.

6. Both mainstream and specialist provision can benefit from a 'blended' MAT approach

Among the 19 MATs in our sample, six included special schools and/or alternative provision (AP) settings. In addition, many MATs had some form of specialist resource base within their mainstream schools catering for a small number of pupils with a particular area of SEND.

Interviewees underscored the importance of having specialist settings within the MAT, citing the ability to tap into the expertise that staff in these settings could provide. This expertise was disseminated through formal training sessions, as well as through visits and informal consultations. Staff in special schools and resource bases shared expert knowledge and advice on specific areas of SEND, while AP staff contributed insights on supporting SEMH needs, and in some cases, on establishing internal AP.

Visits to these settings allowed staff to observe different approaches and provisions in practice. Several interviewees highlighted the reciprocal nature of this exchange, with mainstream staff supporting specialist settings in areas such as systems, processes, and curriculum development. A MAT SEND leader emphasised the importance of bringing both specialist and mainstream staff together during cross-MAT meetings to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange. MAT SEND leaders were recognised as playing a crucial role in facilitating these interactions.

> [It's about] *making sure that you haven't just got mainstream schools working together and special schools working together, but that there is collaboration across all. For example, if you've got an English network meeting, that it's not just the mainstream English teachers but the special school teachers too, so you are bringing everyone together and likewise, around behaviour and SEMH, being able to make you are consistently sharing that good practice across all schools so everyone has a solid understanding. And it opens pathways for children so we can utilise the resources and skills across our schools for the benefit of all children. I feel really passionate about that blended MAT approach.*
>
> MAT SEND leader (1a)

The presence of specialist settings within the MAT was also perceived as contributing to a more inclusive environment across mainstream schools by encouraging staff and pupils to reflect more on SEND learning. One MAT SEND leader suggested that having special schools within the MAT helped mainstream school leaders in gaining a better understanding of the SEND system, its context and complexities. This understanding, in turn, was believed to enhance the leadership culture surrounding SEND within the mainstream schools.

Pupils could also directly benefit from the coexistence of both specialist and mainstream settings within the MAT, as it could allow for more tailored timetabling across the two types of provision to best meet pupils' needs. Several interviewees spoke of special school pupils spending periods of time or accessing specific kinds of provision in a mainstream setting, whether to trial a long-term integration or simply to provide the pupil with more opportunities. In the case of AP settings, mainstream pupils could access short-term AP before returning to their original

school, with the established connection between each setting helping to create smoother transitions.

Interviewees from MATs without special schools expressed a belief that their provision would benefit from the presence of a special school within their MAT, especially concerning children with the highest levels of need. In situations where barriers, such as geographical distance, made collaboration between mainstream and specialist settings within a MAT challenging, SENCOs felt that more communication, knowledge-sharing, and formalised training would be beneficial to build trust-wide expertise in different areas of high need. One MAT SEND leader highlighted that sharing expertise from LA-funded specialist provision within one school across the MAT can face obstacles due to the spread of schools across different LAs that were not involved in funding the provision.

However, not all mainstream SENCOs felt they did or could benefit from having specialist provision within the MAT. One SENCO explained that the needs of pupils in the MAT's special schools were so much more severe than in their school that staff members were ultimately doing very different jobs. This did not appear to be a reflection on collaboration at the MAT-level, as another SENCO in the same MAT reported drawing significant benefits from interactions with the same specialist setting.

Several SENCOs also felt that practices in specialist settings were often not feasible in a mainstream setting – although some recognised the value of drawing out the cases that were. Conversely, one MAT SEND leader raised a concern that MAT-level policies can be overly focused on mainstream provision, and consequently not appropriate for the specialist settings in the MAT. Another MAT SEND leader observed that communication between mainstream and specialist settings within the MAT had actually reduced since the creation of their role, as mainstream staff now came to him for specialist advice, rather than their special school colleagues.

Several interviewees also reported experiencing mutually beneficial collaborative relationships with specialist settings that were not part of their MAT. One SENCO mentioned a local SEMH school delivering training to their staff and providing short-term access to different types of provision for the mainstream pupils. Another mainstream school shared resources and facilities with their local special school to help alleviate the financial pressures the latter was under. Pupil exchanges between local mainstream and special schools were also reported. In one case where there was a special school within the MAT, the SENCO reported supporting a local special school with their curriculum development. However, multiple SENCOs noted that establishing a relationship with a specialist setting is often easier when it is part of your MAT, particularly as utilising these settings as local resources often incurs a cost.

7. School SEND provision benefits from access to a strong MAT *and* a strong LA

The findings highlight the dependency and importance of the relationship between MATs and LAs. They suggest it is imperative for MATs and LAs to work together in a collaborative and complementary way in order to optimise outcomes for all pupils, but particularly for those with SEND.

Interviewees provided many examples of MATs expending resource on 'fighting' with the LA – with many explicitly using similar combative vocabulary. Some MATs presented themselves as intervening with LAs on behalf of their schools through meetings, written communications and formal complaints to ensure the LA fulfilled their statutory obligations (such as attending EHCP reviews) and provided schools with their 'fair share' of local specialist services.

> *If the local authority are doing something that is not good enough, then I think we have an obligation to push back and challenge. However, that is against a backdrop of, of course, the right thing to do is to work collaboratively and together for the benefit of these children. So you don't want to damage relationships, but you also don't want to accept poor practice.*
>
> MAT SEND leader (9b)

Interviewees also reported that MATs provided schools with training and guidance on how to resist LA requests to admit pupils when they did not feel they could meet their needs. Additionally, they provided education to SENCOs about their legal rights to challenge LAs. In cases where specialist services were not available through the local LA, MATs endeavoured to provide schools with access to these services through alternative means, such as seeking assistance from a different LA.

> *At the moment my work with my SENCOs is focussed on tightening up their responses to the LA, so that our reasons for not taking on a student are watertight, so if there is any area of challenge* [it can be rebuffed].
>
> MAT SEND Leader (2a)

Due to resource constraints faced by LAs, several MATs reported actively trying to take responsibility for aspects of the LA remit that were not being adequately fulfilled, particularly in terms of specialist services – as outlined in Section 4. In such instances, SENCOs reported finding it highly beneficial to have the MAT to fall back on.

> *Having a MAT layer in there mitigates the risk posed from having a very poor LA.*
>
> SENCO (19b)

However, in cases where the LA was seen as a collaborative, complementary presence, the partnership between the LA and MAT was seen as providing schools with complementary support and resources. This enhanced their experience and provision more than either entity would have achieved alone.

Some MAT SEND leaders reporting collaborating with LAs on local strategies relating to inclusion. Instances were highlighted where the MAT partnered with an LA to develop SEND training packages for school staff, aiming to boost specialist expertise within schools while alleviating some of the pressure on LA specialist services. In another case, a MAT reported that it was participating in an LA pilot around inclusive transitions, with MAT SEND leaders assisting schools in establishing specialist provision on behalf of the LA.

In a small number of cases, regular meetings occurred between the LA SEND team and SEND leaders from different MATs in the area, with one interviewee describing these interactions as 'genuinely collaborative and positive'. There was at least one notable instance of strong cooperation between the MAT and LA, where if a school approached one with an issue, they ensured that the other party was informed. Some MAT representatives reported working with the LA in an advisory capacity. Several MAT-level interviewees spoke of actively positioning themselves to be part of the local conversation, working on local initiatives involving both MAT and non-MAT schools, and encouraging schools to likewise be part of local SEND networks beyond the MAT.

SENCOs themselves spoke of the value of being able to draw on both a strong MAT and a strong LA for different needs. For example, one SENCO explained that they would look to the MAT for advice around teaching, learning and monitoring, whereas the LA for SEND expertise.

The extent to which such MAT-LA collaboration was feasible appeared to depend on the geographical spread of schools within the MAT. In cases where all schools were located within one local authority, the MAT was better positioned to establish a comprehensive relationship with the LA at a strategic level. Exceptions were rare, with only a limited number of cases where the MAT directly interacted with multiple LAs, despite half of the sample serving more than one LA.

Additionally, due to variations in human and financial resources among LAs (as discussed in Section 1.6), the same MAT could experience significantly different relationships with each LA, encountering distinct opportunities and challenges in the process.

8. The full potential of the MAT model for SEND provision is still to be unlocked

Although the majority of SENCOs expressed a belief that their role and the support they received were enhanced by being part of a MAT, certain challenges and limitations regarding the effectiveness of MAT collaboration for SEND did emerge.

The geographic distribution of schools within a MAT emerged as a key factor influencing the extent to which schools could leverage the benefits of MAT collaboration, as outlined in this report. Collaboration and knowledge-exchange between schools was seen to be more challenging for schools that were more geographically isolated from others in the MAT, as was sharing resources such as EPs or internal AP. Organising in-person SENCO meetings was particularly challenging for geographically dispersed MATs, despite these typically being considered more valuable than remote meetings by SENCOs. Similarly, visits to other schools were highly valued but difficult to organise in practice where schools were not in close proximity. Conversely, SENCOs highlighted the value of having MAT schools located in the same local area as they could share knowledge and resources around specific local challenges and opportunities. Being geographically close to the MAT SEND leader was similarly perceived as facilitating easier access to support.

The geographical dispersion of MAT schools posed challenges as they were situated across different LAs, each with their own distinct processes and provision. This diversity made it difficult for MATs to achieve consistency and alignment across their schools. MAT support for SENCO workload would also be limited as standardised resources and templates would not be possible given the different requirements for each LA. SENCOs sometimes reported feeling more isolated in addressing LA-specific challenges, as their counterparts within the MAT were not always facing similar situations. The presence of different types of provisions within the MAT further exacerbated challenges, making it harder to achieve consistency and alignment. This diversity limited opportunities for sharing knowledge and resources and, at times, resulted in prioritising support for one type of provision over others.

> *I think the national standards can't come quickly enough, because for me as a MAT leader, the consistency across all of our paperwork is so different in terms of what LAs require, so if we can get to a place where it's one set of forms, one set of paperwork, that would be brilliant for us to quality assure, to support, model templates, to put our systems in line with that, etc. It would immediately sort our workload and reduce it massively. That would be so powerful.*
>
> MAT SEND leader (18a)

Among both MAT- and school-level interviewees, the constraint of limited SENCO capacity emerged as a significant barrier for MAT-level collaboration. Many SENCOs conveyed a desire for increased collaboration, but they cited a lack of capacity as a hindrance to their ability to engage with or initiate more interactions. Despite acknowledging the value of existing collaborative efforts, SENCOs consistently reported that the demands on their time and workload outweighed their capacity to take on additional collaborative initiatives.

As with geographical distance, time constraints resulted in many in-person opportunities moving online. SENCOs reported feeling torn between their appreciation for in-person events and school visits and the time-consuming challenge posed by travel. Some SENCOs indicated a preference for less formalised collaboration as this offered greater flexibility in terms of when and how they could engage. Moreover, with limited time available to engage with collaboration opportunities, MAT-led initiatives were often prioritised at the expense of local ones, potentially weakening local networks and relationships. While several interviewees recognised the importance of MAT leaders actively prioritising and facilitating time for collaboration, there was no indication of any practical measures being implemented to ensure that this did not further burden their existing workload.

Concerns about increased workload for SENCOs due to MAT membership extended beyond collaboration. **Being part of a MAT was reported to introduce additional processes, administrative duties, and the need for increased monitoring and audits.** In addition, MAT requirements did not always align with those of the LA, particularly where the MAT operated across multiple LAs. 'Flagship' or 'excellence' schools within the MAT, positioned as role models for other MAT schools, faced the additional expectation of hosting regular visits and providing support to other schools. Multiple SENCOs expressed a desire for more support from their MAT in terms of on-the-ground human resources to assist with the increased workload.

Several SENCOs reported that being part of a MAT involved adhering to higher level of scrutiny than had been the case when working in an individual academy or LA-maintained school. This was, again, particularly the case for 'flagship' or 'excellence' schools, where the expectation to lead, maintain high standards, and experiment with new initiatives could create a sense of pressure for SENCOs. These schools were also more likely to receive lower levels of MAT support as other schools were perceived to require it more. Despite these challenges, in nearly all cases, SENCOs emphasised that the supportive MAT environment contributed to a positive overall experience. This underscores the significance of the MAT culture and the manner in which measures are implemented, not solely the content of those measures.

Interviewees consistently emphasised the importance of striking a balance between consistency across schools with local decision-making (see Section 2). In a small number of cases, where the MAT approach was more directive, SENCOs sometimes expressed frustration. This frustration stemmed from experiences such as having a particular intervention imposed on them without consultation, needing an additional layer of approval beyond the SLT for new initiatives, and lacking the authority to make judgements on issues like curriculum adaptations and exclusions. However, even in such cases, SENCOs reported satisfaction with the ability to challenge decisions if they deemed them inappropriate for their school. This suggests varying degrees of success among MATs in aligning schools positively. Even when SENCOs expressed contentment with their ability to make local decisions, they still stressed its importance.

While MAT SEND leaders were highly valued by schools (see Section 3), the role must be developed with an appropriate remit and be filled by someone with the necessary expertise. One MAT SEND leader noted that this role had not been created by people with a good understanding of SEND and its requirements. Similarly, where SENCOs only had access to

someone with a broader Head of Inclusion role, there might not be specific SEND expertise to rely on. Moreover, the consistent emphasis placed by interviewees on the importance of CEO buy-in suggests that not only does the establishment of a MAT SEND leader role depend on CEO investment in SEND, but that this buy-in remains crucial even after the role is in place.

There is room for achieving greater alignment and consistency across MATs. It is important to emphasise that this report outlines examples of SEND practice and provision from a sample of 19 MATs. This does not imply that every MAT we engaged with was implementing all the mentioned approaches, and in almost all cases, they were not. Several MAT-level interviewees emphasised their desire to achieve better alignment and consistency across the MAT to ensure a consistent standard of provision and inclusive practices. Many expressed a need to enhance cross-MAT collaboration, while others sought improvements in their use of data for strategic and monitoring purposes.

Furthermore, it is important to note that this sample of MATs is not representative of all MATs. This was evident when interviewees discussed not only the advantages of being part of their current MAT compared to being a stand-alone school but also in comparison to other MATs they had worked for in the past. This comparison was particularly notable in areas such as MAT culture, support, aligned strategic vision, and cross-MAT collaboration.

Conclusion and recommendations

The final section of this report draws together the evidence that has been collected to succinctly address each of the study's underpinning research questions, and to provide recommendations for policymakers and MAT leaders.

What approaches are being used across MATs in supporting secondary pupils with SEND?

The research findings highlight the absence of a standardised template for the role MATs play in supporting SEND provision. However, interviewees identified several approaches, widely adopted across our sample of MATs, that they regarded as successful components of their provision, including:

- **Implementation of a centralised SEND framework or 'vision'** – used to establish culture and expectations across member schools while allowing some local decision-making in how schools support pupils with SEND.
- **Development of a standardised suite of templates, forms and data management/monitoring systems** – designed to facilitate cross-MAT working, collaboration and knowledge sharing and reduce the administrative workload placed on SENCOs.
- **Appointment of a SEND Leader** – a member of the MAT leadership team responsible for providing strategic direction and for facilitating collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the MAT.

The diversity in approaches among MATs, with varying levels of centralisation, highlights the complex landscape within which MATs operate in addressing SEND challenges. The research underlines the importance of recognising the unique needs and contexts of individual schools within the MAT structure.

Do MATs with both mainstream and specialist provision draw on that expertise across their MATs to support pupils in their mainstream secondary schools?

Among the 19 MATs in our sample, six included special schools, while others incorporated specialist resource bases and AP provision within mainstream schools. The findings provide tentative evidence for the positive impact of a 'blended' MAT approach, where both mainstream and specialist provisions coexist within the same MAT structure. The collaborative nature of such MAT structures was reported to facilitate knowledge exchange, training opportunities, and practical resource-sharing, fostering a mutually beneficial environment. However, within our sample, this integration appeared to be at an early stage, suggesting this was still a work in progress.

To what extent do schools in MATs engage and draw on other schools and support outside of their MAT in supporting pupils with SEND?

Many SENCOs actively participate in both MAT and LA SENCO networks, recognising the distinct advantages offered by each. Local networks outside the MAT context are particularly valued when schools face specific local challenges, with SENCOs engaging in activities such as instant-

messaging groups to enhance morale. Geographically isolated schools, even within the same MAT, reported actively engaging with local networks to address shared concerns. LA networks are appreciated for their focus on local issues and the practical guidance they provide, such as clarifications on EHCP referral expectations. Despite the desire to work with schools outside of the MAT, interviewees reported it was sometimes easier to engage with other MAT schools. Practical considerations, such as easy access to contact details, high SENCO turnover in local non-MAT schools, and limited time/capacity for collaboration were identified as barriers to building relationships more widely. Additionally, SENCOs reported positive collaborative relationships with specialist settings outside their MAT, citing instances of training delivery, resource sharing, and pupil exchanges.

How, if at all, have the challenges which MATs are facing in supporting pupils with SEND changed since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic?

The findings emphasise the notable difficulties encountered by MATs and schools in delivering SEND support. This is particularly evident in challenges related to staffing, variations in LA provision, and the escalating complexity of students' SEND needs following the Covid-19 pandemic. SENCOs in particular report experiencing increased administrative workload due to rising SEND numbers, feelings of isolation and burn out.

The Covid-19 pandemic is reported to have led to a surge in the number and complexity of pupils with EHCPs, especially in communication and interaction needs, as well as social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (SEMH). Mainstream schools, lacking specialised expertise and facing a shortage of special school places, are under pressure to accommodate these pupils. This is reported to have resulted in challenges in meeting the needs of both SEND and non-SEND pupils.

Finally, inconsistencies between LAs are reported to have created additional stress and workload for SENCOs. Poor communication, inefficiency, and excessive administrative demands from LAs contribute to the challenges faced by MATs and schools. Reported instances of LAs failing to fulfil statutory obligations, high turnover rates, and strained relationships further compound the difficulties.

The degree to which MATs can address these challenges varies but is ultimately constrained by what many regard as the chronic underfunding of the SEND system. The findings emphasise the significant value that SENCOs attribute to their membership of being in a MAT, particularly in terms of enhanced opportunities for collaboration, learning opportunities, and access to additional resources.

Recommendations for MAT and school leaders

1. **Empower SENCOs as agents of change:** MAT and school leaders should empower SENCOs as agents of change within their schools. Their ability to innovate within the overarching principles and vision of the MAT allows SENCOs to respond effectively to the unique needs of their schools and pupils.

2. **Strategic workforce planning:** MAT and school leaders should focus on strategic workforce planning to address the staffing challenges. This involves targeted efforts to attract, retain, and adequately support SENCOs and support staff. This includes the need for manageable workloads, competitive pay, and professional development opportunities. MATs should maximise the power of their structures to train and develop SENCOs, teachers and support staff on SEND, utilising existing staff expertise to develop less experienced staff members.

3. **Support staff well-being:** Strengthen measures to support the mental health and well-being of SENCOs and support staff. MAT and school leaders should recognise the value and importance SENCOs place on opportunities for collaboration, both across the MAT and locally. Such opportunities can help to mitigate SENCOs' feelings of isolation and help foster essential support networks. Efforts should be made to strike a balance between in-person and remote meetings to maximise the benefits of these exchanges while minimising the impact of travel time.

4. **Leverage wider benefits of being in a MAT:** MAT leaders should explore further ways to maximise the benefits of their structures for SEND staff and pupils. This includes the collaborative development of toolkits, templates, and guidance to introduce efficiencies and reduce SENCO workload, as well as fostering greater cross-MAT collaboration in general. Where feasible, MATs should also consider creating a Director of SEND role (or similar) to take responsibility for providing strategic direction and to facilitate collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the MAT. Financial resources from MATs should be recognised and valued for their role in enabling schools to enhance their SEND teams and access support and interventions that might otherwise be unaffordable for an individual school.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. **Recognise the pivotal role and agency of MATs in enhancing the SEND system**: Policy needs to place greater emphasis on the importance of the shared responsibility and active involvement of MATs in shaping the overall SEND system. MATs should be explored as potential hubs of innovation, with successful evidence-based strategies and interventions within the MAT community shared more widely. Other school groups may also have a role here, although this was not explored as part of this study.

2. **Improve support from LAs:** Policymakers should strive to enhance the support provided by LAs by clearly defining expected service standards and ensuring they are met. The procedures for EHCPs should be standardised to ensure a common understanding and approach across schools. It is also important that inefficiencies are addressed, communication channels are improved, and LAs are sufficiently resourced, to ensure that schools and MATs receive timely and sufficient support. The introduction of new National Standards may help with this.

3. **Improve early identification**: Strengthen mechanisms for promptly recognising SEND during primary education, aiming for early intervention to prevent the exacerbation of pupils' needs and supporting primary-secondary transition. This approach also aims to reduce administrative burdens and prevent a backlog of EHCP applications in secondary schools.

4. **Increase funding**: Policymakers should prioritise increased funding for the SEND system to address staffing challenges, provide adequate resources for schools and LAs, and support effective provision for pupils with EHCPs.

5. **More research evidence:** More research is needed to better understand what 'effective practice' looks like within the MAT context. In particular, more empirical evidence is required to understand how different MAT structures and approaches impact on SEND pupils' outcomes. More research is also needed into the potential advantages of a 'blended' MAT approach and into the potential benefits of closer working relationships between mainstream and specialist settings in general.

Appendix 1: Research questions underpinning the study.

1. What approaches are being used across MATs in supporting secondary pupils with SEND? How have these approaches evolved over time?

2. Do school MATs with both mainstream and specialist provision draw on that expertise across their MATs to support pupils in their mainstream secondary schools? If so, how and to what extent does this structure support MATs to meet need?

3. To what extent do schools in MATs engage and draw on other schools and support outside of their MAT in supporting pupils with SEND?

4. How, if at all, have the challenges which MATs are facing in supporting pupils with SEND changed since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic? To what extent do school staff feel able to meet need?

Appendix 2: Methodology

Overview of approach to case studies

The project involved semi-structured interviews with staff in 19 different MATs. For each MAT, we sought to undertake interviews with:

- The appropriate staff member with trust-level oversight of SEND support (we expected this to be the trust CEO or director of education in most cases).
- Up to two SENCOs (depending on trust size) from individual secondary schools in the trust.
- Additional interviews with identified key members of staff who were best placed to address our research questions of interest (as identified by initial interview with trust leaders).

This resulted in interviews being undertaken with staff in three main stakeholder groups: MAT CEOs; SENCOs; and MAT SEND Leaders. A total of 49 interviews were undertaken (21 with MAT leaders/MAT SEND leaders, and 28 with SENCOs or other school-level SEND representatives). One of the SENCO interviews took place with an individual from a primary school, while all the remaining SENCO interviews involved staff from secondary schools.

All of the interviews were conducted remotely via video call using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were undertaken between November 2023 and January 2024, with each interview lasting for approximately 30-45 minutes.

The use of semi-structured interview schedules ensured consistency of questioning across trust leaders and SENCOs, whilst allowing for issues of relevance for individual respondents to be explored through follow-up questioning. In this way, respondents were able to discuss the issues in their own words, reflecting their context and experience.

Alongside the interviews, for each trust, we conducted a desk review of trust and/or school SEND policy documentation. This review aimed to offer contextual information to complement the interviews and examine the similarities and differences in how MAT schools articulate their approaches to SEND provision.

Sampling

MATs were purposively selected – as far as possible – to identify good or innovative practice examples of trust-led SEND support mechanisms. This was done using web searching and through sampling using administrative data. Web searching was used to identify MATs that were recipients of recent SEND awards as well as MATs that had received positive media coverage about their SEND provision. Administrative data was used to identify a sample of MATs:

- With at least one mainstream secondary school, with median SEND representation (%SEND Support) for secondary schools in the trust being above the national average
- With different proportions of pupils in receipt of free school meals (%FSM)
- Operating in different regions in England (i.e. North, Midlands, South)
- Of different sizes (ranging from those with three schools to those with more than 20 schools)

- With median Progress 8 scores greater than 0.00 (this was an aspirational target, not all MATs met this criteria).

In addition, MATs with both mainstream and special schools were oversampled, with an additional criterion that all their special schools had a minimum of a Good Ofsted rating.

A total of 89 MATs were contacted with 19 agreeing to participate in the study. Caution should be taken in interpreting the findings due to the self-selection of interviewees and the inability to examine the approaches of case study MATs in relation to outcomes for pupils with SEND.

Analysis

Interviews were summarised and analysis grids were used to conduct initial exploratory analysis. Qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to undertake additional thematic analysis, using inductive coding for each the project's four underpinning research questions (see Appendix 1).

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