

THE WAY FORWARD

THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



**A conversation with
Andrew Wilson, Chief Executive,
OAK Multi-Academy Trust**

Extract from a report commissioned by:



Powerful Accounting Software

Introduction

A revolution has taken place which will determine the very future of society in this country. And outside of the sector in question, it has largely passed under the radar.

The original intention in having state education re-organised out of local authority control with schools setting up or joining multi-academy trusts reporting directly to the Department of Education was to deliver an up-lift.

Trusts are able to decide whether to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term dates – with the responsibility for budgets which are in the multi-millions.

But while government talks about ‘Opportunity for all – strong schools with great teachers’, trusts are having to address rapidly rising costs, reduced revenue, unfunded staff wage increases, yet no corresponding change in their educational and financial performance targets.

That is on top of a complexity of management requirements – both tangible and psychological – which would make company owners and directors gasp.

In a major report commissioned by iplicit, the cloud accounting software company, to be prepared and published by DECISION magazine later this year, the chief executives and chief financial officers of multi-academy trusts will be highlighting the issues, sharing their thoughts on the way forward.

This is one of the interviews to be included.



Benefit of having more background

A conversation with Andrew Wilson, Chief Executive of OAK Multi-Academy Trust

Andrew Wilson's career could be described as hybrid – a chief executive of a multi-academy trust who came to the post from a teaching background but with the benefit of previous business experience.

“At OAK Multi-Academy Trust, I became the third CEO at an organisation which had only been in existence for four years,” he says. “Previously the post had been held for a year by the head of one of the trust's schools, and then an externally appointed CEO, not with a teaching background, had the job for two years.”

From university, Wilson went into pharma because he wanted that commercial understanding and experience, but he knew that eventually he was going to follow the family tradition and become a teacher.

Starting his career in education as a learning assistant, he progressed to being a maths teacher, head of maths, then head





Andrew Wilson

of a secondary school, taking it to Ofsted outstanding status. He then helped the school through the process of becoming an academy, and then a multi-academy trust which soon brought three local primary schools into its fold.

“There are no tactics which led to that initial growth,” he explains, “because the real driver was that these were local schools in real difficulty, and no-one else would have been there to help them.”

By 2019 the trust had moved to a trust of twenty-one schools and Wilson was executive principal of three of its secondary schools. When he left to take the post of chief executive at OAK Multi-Academy Trust, all were subsequently marked good or outstanding by Ofsted for the time of his tenure.

“I learnt a lot from an excellent CEO about collaboration,” Wilson says. “I realised the importance of making sure that within a multi-academy trust there is genuine collaboration, by which



I mean people are committed to supporting other parts of the organisation, not just their own. Without that and the processes which enable it to happen, a multi-academy trust is just a group of schools with a head office.

“Under local authority control a strong school would have received very little support because that went to those which were facing more challenges. I do think multi-academy trusts were being launched to address the problems faced by failing schools because there needed to be a better mechanism in place for that to happen effectively.

“But with a multi-academy trust, the sharing of experiences and skillsets can be deployed to create massive improvement for all of its schools, not just those which might have particular difficulties.

“A multi-academy trust should be a collaborative organisation where people feel they are all in it working together. When we lost a number of governors at one of our schools at the same time as a new head was starting, to ensure the school’s board stayed strong, other headteachers within our multi-academy trust, and bear in mind the time pressure they were already under, offered to step in as governors. It was over and above the right thing to do, and it happened because we have a culture of working together.”

“Yes, the change to multi-academy trust status made us more professional,” Wilson believes, “with the fusion of charity and



business, the introduction of financial processes, and a really diligent approach to understanding them. That wasn't so apparent in schools before because they had no actual control over money and how it should be spent to keep a school functioning – that was the responsibility of the local authority.

“As a chief executive, finance can take up as much time as you allow or want it to, so really it's about ensuring you have a financial team on board which understands they have two roles: to meet our statutory and financial obligations and to maximise the opportunities for school improvement.

“If the trustees, the members of the multi-academy trust board, are going to be able to effectively challenge the leadership team it will be because of their background and experience, so the trust needs to have gone through a skills audit. We have finance, HR, procurement, and education sub-committees which report to the board, and governance has a really important role. It isn't just about an old-fashioned checklist to follow. A trustee has to have an understanding of how both business and charities work.

“An issue can be duplication of roles and responsibilities with the individual school boards and the trust board. There has to be clarity of each of their roles. We see school governors as being the trust's eyes and ears on the ground.”

“A chief executive,” says Wilson, “will really value the professional development of their staff. We fully fund NPQs at all levels for example. Does that help with recruitment? If we could find ways





to make flexible working achievable in the schools, that would take us closer to Nirvana. Would a nine-day working fortnight be feasible? Would that make a difference?

“If a trust finds the proverbial silver bullet, then it could serve to increase the supply of new teachers into the profession. Our problem actually starts with there not being enough people coming into the profession, and that results in you recruiting a teacher from another school or trust, which simply passes the underlying problem along the line.”

“A challenge for a multi-academy trust is that it has to be prepared and ready for growth,” Wilson maintains. “Schools will want to join largely for two reasons. They need a home because they are unable to support themselves, or their trust isn’t of a sufficient size to provide the means.



“Everyone in senior leadership at a multi-academy trust will have a growth mindset, to be able to identify the rationale and the benefit for both parties. Larger multi-academy trusts will have a formal growth strategy, with acquisition targets which have to be met.

“But I think a multi-academy trust has to look beyond the obvious and maybe reverse the notion that bigger is automatically better. For us, it is about identifying schools and other trusts which would genuinely improve our performance if we provide them with more bandwidth and support.”

There’s another consideration though. “The largest multi-academy trusts take a more homogeneous approach to maximise resource, but that can result in rigidity when it comes to curriculum for example, more of a one size fits all approach,” muses Wilson. “I think that robs pupils of choice and the desire of educators to be innovative. But while smaller trusts might be more capable of being flexible, they might not have sufficient resource to deliver their educational goals.”

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About iplicit

Providing a cloud-based finance and management software solution that allows multi-academy trusts to focus on what really matters. Tailored for those frustrated by on-premise legacy software, iplicit provides greater flexibility and enhanced levels of reporting, integrating with other cloud applications for a seamless migration path from a user's existing system, enabling organisations to 'step up' to next generation finance software without losing the functionality they currently enjoy. iplicit received the Accounting Excellence award for mid-market and enterprise software of the year in 2020, and the top product for enterprise accounting/ERP in the Accounting Web software awards, 2021.

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First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of directors and managing partners responsible for businesses with a turnover of £5million and above.

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