

THE WAY FORWARD

THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



A conversation with Andrew Aalders-Dunthorne, Chief Executive Consortium 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.



Taking a rather different approach

**A conversation with Andrew Aalders–Dunthorne
Chief Executive
of Consortium Trust**

“Except for one reason, it would be fitting to describe Andrew Aalders–Dunthorne as a true entrepreneur. But actually he’s the chief executive of a multi–academy trust. Not that delving into the background of either would provide any indication that it would even be a suggestion.

Yes, he came out of industry, but as a medical researcher, becoming a science teacher before being promoted to head of year, then deputy head and then headteacher of two small rural schools which (in his words) were “merrily trundling along” under local authority control. “But,” he recalls, “the services we were receiving were contracting and schools of our size were being considered for closure.

“Myself and my governing board had previously looked at academy status, but we thought it might be a form of privatisation by the back door. I suppose initially I discounted academy status



Andrew Aalders-Dunthorne

because I saw it as a political move, albeit with a small ‘P’, and I reasoned with a local education authority there was a democratic element with elected councillors accountable to the community – and I suspected the introduction of multi-academy trust status was really driven by financial imperatives; early academy sponsors were large companies coming into the sector to correct management failures.

“When the services provided by the local authority deteriorated further, we realised we had to take that leap and converted with our two schools and one just up the road to form the Consortium Trust.

“I was appointed principal to start with, then chief executive, a post which came with a significant challenge.”

Which is a perfect example of understatement. He was the scientist, the head teacher, who now found himself managing what today is a £17million organisation, with six hundred staff, and two thousand five hundred pupils spread across two counties.

When Aalders-Dunthorne says the training he was given as a headteacher touched on some of the issues, by touched he means hour-long seminars on particular business related subjects. “It was learning on the job,” he reflects. “A multi-academy trust couldn’t stray from the Department for Education’s academy bible, but the structure of the trust was up to us, as long as it met educational requirements and didn’t make it likely that we would go bust.

That means, according to Aalders-Dunthorne, a multi-academy trust can have unique characteristics compare to others. Which is definitely the case with Consortium Trust, which has introduced commercial elements such as opening a residential field study centre and taking over the largest private nursery in Lowestoft from a failed operator.

“We are closer to the wire with risk appetite,” says Aalders-Dunthorne, smiling as he momentarily wanders into corporate speak. “That means we look out for similar opportunities based on them being an asset for the local community.”

Something else which sets Consortium Trust apart is an ability to turn what would otherwise be an expense into an income stream.

What it calls Learning Pi is software which it has developed to communicate with parents, enabling them to see how their children are learning. And ProSight is a tracking system the trust created with health and safety and facilities management data and reports from each school appearing on a dashboard. Both are being offered to other trusts.

There is also an absence of third-party providers of essential services at Consortium Trust. “Money coming into the trust stays in the trust,” says Aalders-Dunthorne. “We employ our own maintenance staff through to a behaviour management specialist who works with those pupils who are at risk of exclusion.

“Of our £17 million income, £15.5 million is taken by staff costs so we are driven to be really creative to get the most out of that remaining financial resource which has to cover everything else.”

“I do believe that now, because we have freedoms which we didn’t under local authority control, the purpose of a multi-academy trust has changed. I see it as about improving outcomes for local communities.” He makes a point that in some rural locations, the school is the only amenity left.

A local authority wanted to close a rural school on the Consortium Trust’s patch where pupil numbers had dwindled to seventeen. Today, having become part of the trust, it now has eighty



Consortium Trust - one of the rural schools

children. And part of the site was converted into a residential study centre which generates income to support the school and is now a net financial contributor to the trust

“We were able to build pupil numbers because of the trust’s reputation as a good place to have children educated. We believe a multi-academy trust should be inclusive, so we’re open to taking children with additional needs and challenges, even though it means having to find and fund the right staffing,” explains Aalders-Dunthorne. “Doing this reflects our core values.”

The sixteen ‘settings’ in Consortium Trust include two schools for special education needs. “Educating children with particular challenges – fifty per cent of our pupils have education healthcare plans in place for example – presses down on our overall academic attainment figures,” he cedes, “so our published attainment

data can be below the national average. We are constantly having to go to the Department for Education to validate our outputs, because unless they drill down, it could appear that we look like a failing trust. The paradox of course is that if we didn't do it, the children would actually have less academic attainment.

“Children learn in different ways, but as a multi-academy trust, we can not only recognise that but action it without having to seek permission from another body. For example, we have a partnership with The Scout Association so gaining the scouting science badge is linked to our key stage two science curriculum.”

What frustrates Consortium Trust is that an earlier attempt by a secondary school to join was blocked because the trust didn't have experience of having one on board. “How is that going to happen unless we are able to be involved with one in the first place,” says Aalders-Dunthorne ruefully.

“Every child is the equivalent to so many pounds in funding for the following year, so in that respect, they are almost a commodity. Is that a contributory factor to the move for the consolidation of multi-academy trusts? Are smaller trusts waiting to see who blinks first?”

“Because I don't know that an acquisitive trust would want to continue with our rural schools, and although it sounds predatory, we need to be in the growth arms race. But we are aware of the danger that consolidation can mean a trust could lose its soul.”

www.consortiumtrust.org



About iplicit for education

Providing a true cloud-based finance management solution that allows multi-academy trusts to focus on what really matters, now and in the future. iplicit was devised over four years, and later tailored for the specific needs of education and charity customers in partnership with MAT CFOs and sector specialists, providing a compelling alternative to the legacy systems that many schools and trusts currently use but have outgrown. iplicit for education has received multiple accolades, including MAT-Tech Company of the Year (2024) at the National MAT Awards.

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About DECISION magazine

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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