

# THE WAY FORWARD

## THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



### **A conversation with Jon Chaloner, Mentor Confederation of Schools 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.



# Accompanying change with joined up writing

**A conversation with Jon Chaloner**  
**Mentor, Confederation of School Trusts**

“Back in the day, when multi-academy trusts began to emerge, there was a logic to a weaker school being supported by one which is stronger, but what would have been a sensible working model was to have had a family of schools in a community which as well as supporting each other could provide a child with their education from nursery through to sixth form.”

Jon Chaloner is basing that view on experience. The former chief executive of GLF Schools, a multi-academy trust with 18,000 pupils, 2600 staff, and a £150million turnover is now primarily a mentor supporting multi-academy trust CEOs through a Confederation of School Trusts programme.

He was a headteacher who took his secondary school from an Ofsted ‘requires improvement’ rating to ‘outstanding’, only the third in the country to achieve that. In 2010, he was asked by a local authority to take on the role of executive head of a second school which he went on to shape into a multi-academy trust two





*Jon Chaloner*

years later. “We went on to become the largest multi-academy trust no one had ever heard of because the identity of each school should come first in my view, if only because the basic principle of each school is to serve its own, and parents are interested in the school itself, rather than its trust,” he explains.

“Of course in that time, schools have been taking on additional roles which relate to safeguarding because many children are vulnerable and a school is a natural place to be able to identify and support a vulnerable child. What then happens is that schools must take ownership of those issues, especially when other service providers are no longer available. But that handover of



what I suppose you could describe as extracurricular activities to schools has happened by stealth.

“We know that the vast majority of parents trust their school leaders to do what is best for the children, but I’m not sure politicians, regardless of party, have that same level of belief. That said, I believe multi-academy trusts have been able to provide more exposure of what is happening in schools to government ministers and their shadow equivalents, with much more open dialogue.”

The advent of multi-academy trusts changed the career trajectory in education, with headteacher no longer right at the pinnacle, and ushered in outsiders to the new post of chief executive.

“The role of a multi-academy trust CEO is completely different from that of a headteacher,” says Chaloner. “The latter is student facing; the chief executive sees and works with adults all the time, and their identity per se is not wrapped up with one particular school.

“The pinnacle of a career in education would have been to become a headteacher, but it could be that the CEO of a multi-academy trust is someone without a background in education. Having been a headteacher is not a prerequisite as long as they have an understanding that delivering the best possible education is the purpose of their trust. The particular role of a CEO is to manage the business of being a multi-academy trust, and that’s the biggest change.



“A chief executive in the early days of a multi-academy trust held a quasi-educational role because they were predominantly headteachers who had been appointed. There is still a perception that the chief executive needs to have an educational background, but the reality is that they are responsible for a multi-million pound charitable business.”

According to Chaloner, a well run trust shouldn't struggle to fill board vacancies because successful people are prepared to give something back to society without the lure of remuneration. “I can see in the future that to compete for the very best non-execs there might be a need to pay, but the system in place isn't broken,” he says. “Trustees aren't attracted to do this for personal financial gain.

“There is no longer a legal requirement to have individual school boards, although it's a Department for Education preference that a multi-academy trust would retain them. My view is that without local governance, it is less straightforward for a multi-academy trust to really know what the position is at a particular school.”

The government has made it clear enough that it wants there to be fewer multi-academy trusts, which poses an interesting dilemma, Chaloner points out. “Increasingly multi-academy trusts are going to have to decide whether they should merge with one which is like-minded if only to protect themselves from the larger trusts which are ambitious for growth,” he says.



“It begs the question – if we move from having a hundred and fifty or so local education authorities in the UK to having a hundred and fifty multi-academy trusts, arguably aren’t we replicating in terms of scale something which was already in place?”

“The structural change from schools being under local education authority control to a multi-academy trust environment was created in the context of educational improvement, and we need to get back to the essential purpose, the original mission of the change rather than it being primarily for financial and administrative benefit or empire building.

“Education needs to be a priority for financial investment and governments need to recognise the need to focus on a ten-year financial plan with at least the rate of inflation upgrade, a timeframe which would cover a child’s journey reception year to key stage four (year eleven) when they finish their GCSEs.

“At the moment how can a multi-academy trust set meaningful milestones when it doesn’t know how much funding it is to receive year on year?”

“A multi-academy trust is expected to run as a business in terms of financial management and disciplines, but how many companies of the size of a multi-academy trust could work every year with having no more than a twelve-month funding horizon?”



## 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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## 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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