



The School Leader's Guide to Joining a Multi-Academy Trust

21 Essential Questions Every Governing Board Should Ask Before Making a MAT Decision

Making the Right Decision for Your School

The Government has determined that all schools will now belong to a Trust. For Governors of maintained schools and Trustees of standalone academies, the question arises: which Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is the most suitable? It is essential to find the right partnership that best serves the needs of their pupils, staff, and community.

School leaders face increasing pressures. Financial challenges, rising levels of pupil need, workforce recruitment and retention issues, accountability expectations and the growing complexity of governance all place significant demands on schools.

At the same time, schools want to preserve what makes them unique. Their values, traditions, community relationships and local identity remain central to their success.

Joining a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is therefore one of the most important strategic decisions a governing board can make.

The best MAT partnerships provide schools with the benefits of collaboration, shared expertise and operational support whilst preserving the distinctive character of each individual school.

This guide explores the most important questions school leaders, governors, and trustees should consider when evaluating MAT membership. It draws on practical experience and addresses the key areas that typically arise during discussions about conversion.

Chapter 1: Governance and Strategic Direction

Question 1: How Is Governance Structured Within a Multi-Academy Trust?

One of the first concerns many governing boards raise is how governance changes after joining a trust.

In most MATs, governance operates at several levels.

At the top level are the Members, whose primary responsibility is to protect the charitable mission of the Trust and appoint the Trustees. Typically, Members do not convene frequently, as their role focuses on oversight.

The Board of Trustees holds ultimate responsibility for strategy, finance, compliance and accountability. Trustees ensure that the organisation operates effectively and that all schools receive appropriate support and challenge.

Many trusts also establish specialist committees focusing on areas such as:

- Audit and Risk
- Finance
- People and Culture
- Growth and Development
- Estates and Capital Projects

Alongside Trust governance, some schools retain a Local Governing Body (LGB). These bodies play an essential role in maintaining strong local accountability and ensuring that each school's unique context remains understood and represented.

The Trust's executive leadership team, led by the Chief Executive Officer, provides strategic leadership and supports schools in delivering excellent outcomes for pupils.

The most effective MATs create a governance structure that combines robust accountability with meaningful local representation.

Question 2: How Much Autonomy Does a School Retain?

A common worry at this stage is that schools lose their identity and decision-making authority once they join a MAT.

In reality, the most successful trusts recognise that local leadership is one of a school's greatest strengths.

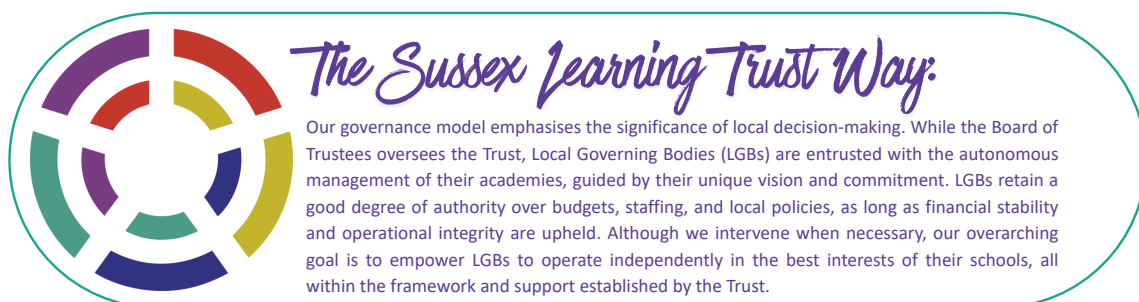
Whilst strategic accountability sits with the Trust Board, significant authority can be delegated to Headteachers and Local Governing Bodies through a Scheme of Delegation.

Depending on the MAT, this means schools may continue to:

- Shape their educational vision
- Maintain their culture and ethos
- Lead relationships with parents and the wider community
- Manage local priorities
- Make decisions that reflect their individual circumstances

The precise balance between central oversight and local autonomy varies between trusts, making the Scheme of Delegation one of the most important documents for any governing board to examine during due diligence.

Schools should seek reassurance that local leadership remains valued and empowered.



Question 3: How Are Strategic Priorities Set?

Every successful Trust requires a clear strategic direction.

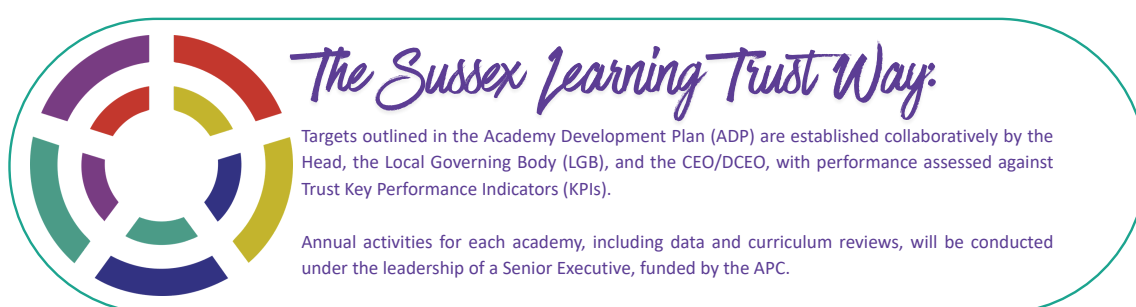
Typically, strategic priorities are determined by the Board of Trustees and executive leadership team. These priorities are often built around a shared vision for educational excellence, pupil outcomes, staff development and organisational sustainability.

Effective strategic priorities usually focus on:

- Improving educational outcomes
- Reducing disadvantage gaps
- Supporting staff development
- Strengthening leadership capacity
- Ensuring financial sustainability
- Delivering safe and effective learning environments

The strongest trusts do not impose improvement plans on schools. Instead, priorities are developed collaboratively and translated into school improvement plans that reflect the specific needs of each setting.

This ensures that schools contribute to a shared vision whilst retaining ownership of their individual improvement journey.



Question 4: How Can Schools Preserve Their Identity?

Many governing boards understandably worry that joining a Trust will dilute the school's character.

However, school identity is often one of the key reasons a Trust seeks to work with a school in the first place.

Successful trusts understand that diversity across schools is a strength rather than a weakness.

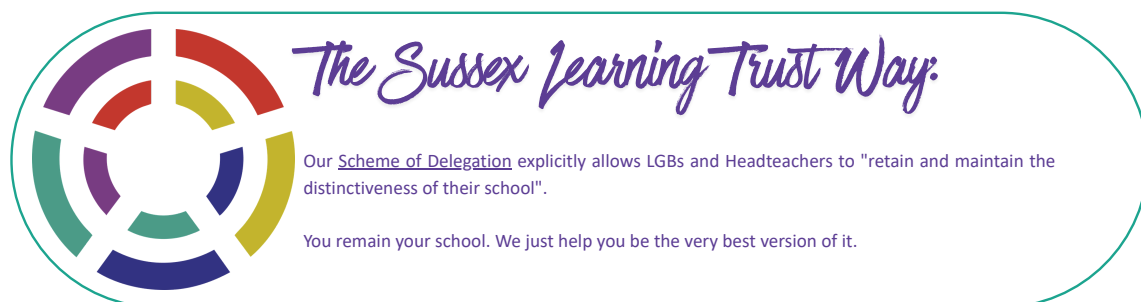
School identity may include:

- Community traditions
- Religious character
- Educational philosophy
- Relationships with local organisations
- Curriculum specialisms
- Historical heritage

Strong Trusts create consistency around values, safeguarding, financial management, and educational standards whilst allowing schools to maintain their unique culture and traditions.

The goal should not be uniformity.

The goal should be a shared commitment to excellence delivered through schools that remain deeply connected to their communities.



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Before considering MAT membership, governing boards should ask:

- ✓ How is governance structured?
- ✓ What powers are delegated locally?
- ✓ How are strategic decisions made?
- ✓ How is school identity protected?
- ✓ Does the Trust's culture align with our values?

The answers to these questions will provide an important indication of whether

a potential partnership is likely to succeed in the long term.

Chapter 2: Admissions, Community and Local Identity

Question 5: How Do Admissions Work Within a Multi-Academy Trust?

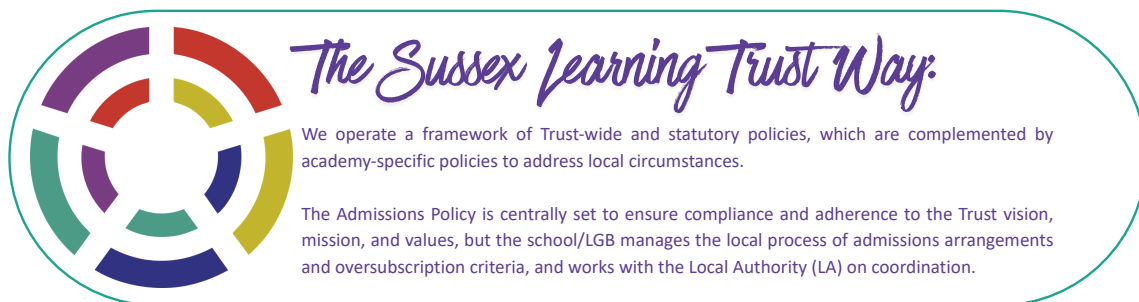
Admissions are often a concern for governing boards and parents alike.

Many school leaders worry that joining a Trust means losing influence over who attends their school. In reality, admissions remain governed by national legislation and statutory requirements regardless of governance structure.

Whilst Trusts often provide central oversight to ensure compliance and adherence to the mission, vision, and values of the Trust, schools typically continue to play an important role in shaping and managing local admissions arrangements.

This means schools remain closely connected to their local communities and can continue to work alongside local authorities to ensure fair and transparent admissions processes.

For most schools, parents notice little or no difference following conversion.



Question 6: How Are Parents and Communities Involved?

Strong schools are built on strong relationships.

Parents, carers, and local communities remain vital stakeholders regardless of

whether a school is maintained or part of a Trust.

Effective MATs actively encourage schools to maintain and strengthen community engagement through:

- Parent surveys
- Community consultation
- School events
- Parent governors
- Stakeholder feedback processes
- Community partnerships

Local Governing Bodies continue to provide an important link between the school and the community it serves.

The most successful Trusts understand that local accountability remains essential to school improvement.

Parents should continue to feel that their voices are heard and valued.

Chapter 3: Leadership, Staffing and Professional Growth

Question 7: What Changes for Headteachers?

Headteachers often describe MAT membership as both an opportunity and a significant shift. While it brings the potential for enhanced support and professional growth, it also requires adapting to new systems and collaborative approaches.

Rather than working in isolation, school leaders become part of a wider leadership community when they join an effective Trust.

This can provide access to:

- Executive leadership support
- Strategic guidance
- Professional challenge
- Collaborative planning
- Shared expertise
- Leadership development opportunities

One of the greatest benefits reported by our own school leaders is having direct access to experienced colleagues who understand the challenges of school leadership:

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“As a new school leader, being part of a Trust has provided a layer of support that I would not have had otherwise. The network of experience headteachers, sharing of best practice and access to expertise in areas such as estates, facilities, Human Resources and marketing have been invaluable. All of that support has helped me lead my school with confidence and (importantly) complete autonomy.

I could not recommend Sussex Learning Trust more! We are truly Stronger Together.”

— James Garner, Executive Principal at Chichester Free

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School

This support can be invaluable during periods of change, inspection preparation, financial challenge or school improvement activity.

Question 8: How Are School Leaders Supported?

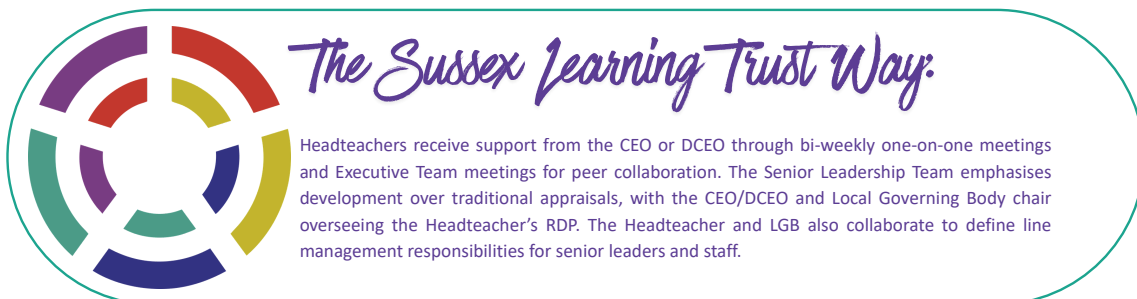
The strongest Trusts invest heavily in leadership development.

Support may include:

- One-to-one leadership coaching
- Peer review
- Leadership networks
- Executive mentoring
- Collaborative school improvement work
- Access to specialist advisers

This creates opportunities for leaders to share ideas, learn from others and develop professionally.

Many Headteachers find that being part of a good Trust broadens their perspective and reduces the sense of professional isolation that can exist in stand-alone schools.



Question 9: What Happens to Staff?

Staff understandably want reassurance about their future when a school joins a

Trust.

In most cases, existing employment protections transfer through established legal processes.

For many staff, day-to-day working life changes very little initially.

However, over time, becoming a member of a Trust like Sussex Learning Trust can create additional opportunities, including:

- Career progression
- Professional development
- Specialist networks
- Shared expertise
- Cross-school collaboration

Trusts are often able to provide pathways that individual schools may struggle to offer independently.

This can improve recruitment, retention, and staff satisfaction.

Question 10: How Are Pay and Conditions Managed?

Most Trusts seek to provide consistency and fairness in employment practices.

Teaching staff typically continue to be paid according to national pay frameworks.

Support staff arrangements often remain closely aligned with local authority terms and conditions.

Schools considering MAT membership should review:

- Pay policies
- Terms and conditions
- Professional development opportunities
- Staff wellbeing strategies

Understanding how a Trust values and supports its workforce is a critical part of due diligence.



The Sussex Learning Trust Way.

The policies we implement are closely aligned with those of the Local Authority (LA) and National Frameworks. All LA schools that have partnered with us have adopted our transfer policies, as there are no significant differences. We adhere to the national pay scales for teaching staff. Furthermore, our support staff pay scale and Terms and Conditions of Service are similarly aligned with those of the LA and are equally favorable. Support staff transitioning from an LA school will retain their existing pay scale and terms and conditions.

Chapter 4: Financial Sustainability and Resource Management

Question 11: How Does Financial Accountability Work?

Financial responsibility ultimately rests with the Trust Board.

This ensures strong governance, transparency, and accountability across all schools.

Schools may retain responsibility for managing delegated budgets and making decisions that support their improvement priorities if they join a Trust which recognises that school leaders are best placed to understand local priorities.

The balance between central oversight and local decision-making is an important consideration when evaluating any Trust.

Question 12: How Are School Budgets Managed?

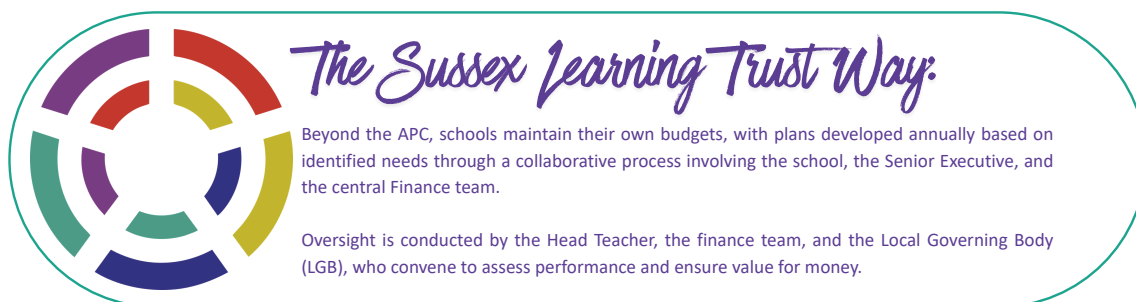
Financial planning should always be aligned with educational priorities.

The strongest Trusts support schools through:

- Budget forecasting
- Financial monitoring
- Risk management
- Procurement support
- Long-term planning

A collaborative approach helps schools to make informed decisions whilst maintaining financial sustainability.

Schools benefit from specialist expertise whilst retaining visibility and ownership of their financial position.



Question 13: What Economies of Scale Can a Trust Deliver?

One of the primary advantages of MAT membership is access to shared services.

These often include:

- Human Resources
- Finance
- Estates Management
- Health and Safety
- Compliance
- IT Services
- Procurement
- Marketing and Communications

By operating collectively, schools can often secure better value and reduce duplication.

This allows leaders to spend less time managing operational challenges and more time focusing on educational outcomes.

Question 14: How Should Schools Assess Value for Money?

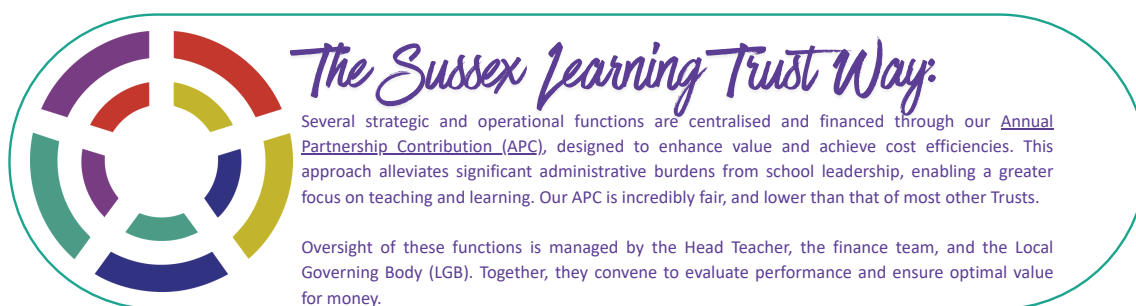
The key question is not simply what a Trust costs.

The more important question is: "What value does the Trust provide in return?"

Governing boards should assess:

- Quality of support services
- Leadership capacity
- School improvement expertise
- Professional development opportunities
- Operational efficiencies
- Specialist provision

A Trust should provide benefits that would be difficult or impossible for a school to secure independently.



Chapter 5: SEND, Inclusion, and Pupil Support

Question 15: How Is SEND Provision Supported?

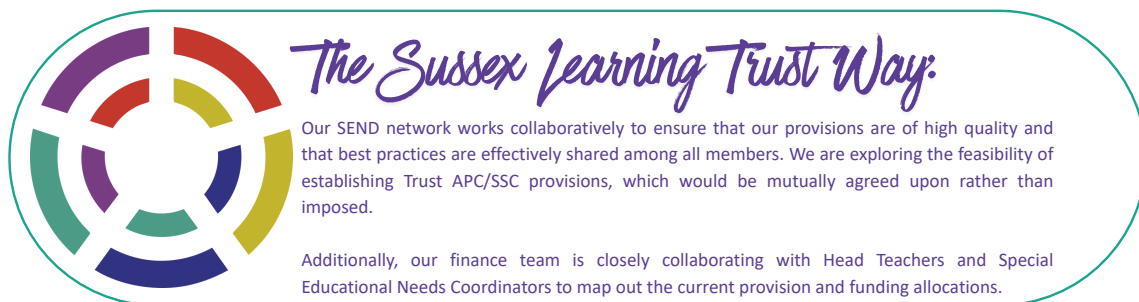
Across the country, schools are facing increasing levels of SEND need.

This presents both educational and financial challenges.

Trusts can support schools through:

- SEND networks
- Shared expertise
- Specialist advice
- Professional development
- Joint problem-solving

The ability to collaborate with colleagues facing similar challenges can significantly strengthen provision.



Question 16: How Can Trusts Respond to Growing Demand?

The complexity of pupil needs continues to grow. Successful Trusts work collaboratively to:

- Share best practice
- Improve provision

- Build specialist expertise
- Advocate for resources
- Support school leaders

This approach often enables schools to respond more effectively than they could alone.

Chapter 6: School Improvement and Collaboration

Question 17: What School Improvement Support Is Available?

Every school is on a different improvement journey.

Strong Trusts recognise this and tailor support accordingly.

Support may include:

- Data analysis
- Curriculum reviews
- Quality assurance
- Self-evaluation support
- Leadership development
- Improvement planning

The goal should be continuous improvement rather than compliance.

Question 18: What About Schools That Are Already Performing Well?

A common misconception is that only struggling schools benefit from MAT membership.

In reality, high-performing schools often gain significant advantages through:

- Leadership opportunities
- Professional collaboration
- Access to innovation
- Research-informed practice
- Wider influence

Strong schools contribute expertise whilst continuing to learn from others.

Question 19: What Happens If a School Requires Additional Support?

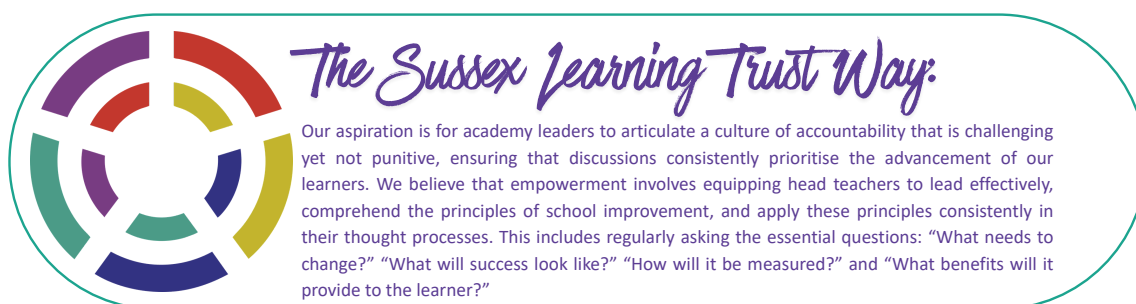
Sometimes schools face significant challenges.

When this occurs, Trusts can often respond quickly by providing:

- Additional leadership capacity
- Specialist expertise
- Improvement support
- Targeted intervention

The most effective support is collaborative rather than punitive.

The focus should always remain on achieving better outcomes for pupils.



Question 20: What Expertise Can Schools Access?

One of the greatest strengths of a MAT is access to collective expertise. This may include:

- Curriculum specialists
- Safeguarding experts
- SEND professionals
- School business leaders
- HR specialists
- Estates professionals
- Experienced school leaders

Collaboration creates opportunities that individual schools may struggle to provide independently.



Chapter 7: Understanding the Conversion Journey

Question 21: What Does Conversion Involve?

The conversion process is significant but manageable when supported effectively.

Typical stages include:

1. Governing board decision
2. Application process
3. Due diligence
4. Legal transfer arrangements
5. Staff consultation
6. Funding agreements
7. Opening as an academy

Most conversions take between six and twelve months. Planning, communication and strong project management are essential throughout the process.

Due Diligence Checklist

Before joining any Trust, ask:

Culture and Values

- ☐ Do our values align?
- ☐ Would our staff feel at home in this organisation?
- ☐ Does the culture described match reality?

Governance

- ☐ Is local autonomy protected?
- ☐ Are delegated powers clearly defined?
- ☐ Is accountability transparent?

Educational Improvement

- ☐ What evidence demonstrates impact?
- ☐ How are schools supported?
- ☐ What expertise is available?

Finance

- ☐ Does the Trust provide genuine value?
- ☐ Are services high quality?
- ☐ Are finances sustainable?

People

- ☐ How are staff developed?
- ☐ What career opportunities exist?
- ☐ How is wellbeing supported?

Community

- ☐ Will our identity be protected?
- ☐ How are parents engaged?
- ☐ Will local relationships remain strong?

Conclusion

Choosing the Right Partner

Joining a Multi-Academy Trust is not simply an organisational change.

It is a long-term strategic partnership.

The right Trust should strengthen what already makes your school successful whilst providing the expertise, support and collaboration needed to thrive in an increasingly complex educational landscape.

The most successful partnerships are built on:

- Shared values
- Mutual trust
- Clear governance
- Professional collaboration
- A relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and young people

Before making any decision, take time to speak to leaders, governors, staff and schools already within the Trust.

Ask challenging questions.

Listen carefully to the answers.

And most importantly, choose the partner that best reflects your vision for the future of your school.

Because when schools find the right partnership, they become stronger together.

Could Sussex Learning Trust Be the Right Partner for Your School?

Choosing to join a Multi-Academy Trust is one of the most significant strategic decisions a governing board can make. It is about far more than governance structures, financial arrangements or operational efficiencies. It is about finding a partner that shares your values, understands your community and is committed to helping your school thrive.

At Sussex Learning Trust, we believe that the strongest partnerships are built on trust, collaboration and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for every child and young person.

A Shared Vision

Every school has its own unique identity, culture and aspirations. We believe these should be celebrated and protected.

Our Trust is united by a common purpose: to provide exceptional educational opportunities for all pupils while supporting schools to remain deeply connected to the communities they serve.

Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach, we work alongside school leaders and governing boards to build on existing strengths and support long-term success.

School Improvement Expertise

School improvement is most effective when it is collaborative, evidence-informed and tailored to the needs of each individual school.

Through access to experienced educational leaders, specialist networks and quality assurance processes, schools within Sussex Learning Trust benefit from professional challenge, support and shared expertise.

Whether a school is already performing strongly or facing specific challenges,

our focus is always on continuous improvement and achieving the very best outcomes for pupils.

Strong Governance

Effective governance provides the foundation for sustainable success.

Our governance model combines robust accountability with meaningful local leadership. The Trust Board provides strategic oversight and assurance, while Local Governing Bodies continue to play an important role in representing their school communities and supporting school leaders.

This balance enables schools to benefit from the strength of a larger organisation whilst maintaining local knowledge and influence.

A Collaborative Culture

We believe that schools are stronger when they work together.

Across the Trust, leaders, teachers and support staff share expertise, learn from one another and collaborate to address common challenges.

This culture of openness and partnership creates opportunities for innovation, professional growth and collective problem-solving.

No school should have to face challenges alone.

Local Autonomy

Joining a Trust should not mean losing what makes your school special.

We recognise the importance of local identity, community relationships and school-level decision-making. Through delegated authority and strong local governance, schools are empowered to maintain their distinctiveness while benefiting from the support and resources of the wider Trust.

Our aim is not uniformity.

It is to create a family of schools united by shared values and high expectations, whilst respecting the individuality of every setting.

Long-Term Sustainability

Schools operate in an increasingly complex environment.

Financial pressures, workforce challenges and growing levels of need require schools to think strategically about their future.

By working together, schools can access shared expertise, achieve greater resilience and create sustainable models that allow leaders to focus on what matters most: delivering an outstanding education for every pupil.

We are committed to building strong, sustainable partnerships that support schools not just today, but for years to come.

Let's Start the Conversation

Every school's journey is unique.

If your governing board is exploring Multi-Academy Trust membership, we would welcome the opportunity to learn more about your school, answer your questions and discuss whether Sussex Learning Trust could be the right partner for your future.

Book a confidential conversation with our leadership team to explore whether Sussex Learning Trust could be the right partner for your school.

Website: <https://www.sussexlearningtrust.co.uk>

Email: enquiries@sussexlearningtrust.co.uk

Telephone: 01444 457881

Together, we can explore how collaboration, expertise and shared purpose can help your school continue to flourish.



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