

Cementing a strong school improvement model at Flying High

The Flying High Trust is a primary-only trust of sixteen schools working across Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. As with many multi-academy trusts, the origins of Flying High can be found in the national leaders of education initiative – which was launched by the National College in 2007. Chris Wheatley, the CEO of Flying High was - like many of today's academy trust Chief Executives – one of those designated as an NLE to provide intensive leadership support for schools in challenging circumstances. The initiative was unique at the time in that, rather than taking successful heads out of their schools and parachuting them into schools needing support, it encouraged successful leaders to remain in position at their original school, whilst providing consultancy style support to other schools for an agreed period of time. The NLE model was very much focused on school improvement without putting the quality of other schools at risk; and, indeed, evidence showed that NLEs' own schools generally tended to achieve continued improvements despite the NLE's work elsewhere.

“We were very motivated by the NLE model because it was so focused on school improvement without compromise. In fact it was mutually beneficial because we refined and improved our own practice further through providing support to others” says Chris. “We entered into some really positive partnerships and we achieved some very positive improvements in those struggling schools. The NLE work really showed us how collaboration could achieve school improvement, but there was no framework or structure for a sustained relationship in most cases and whilst some of the schools that were supported went on to do well, others struggled with the lack of direction and continued support from an NLE. It was rewarding and frustrating in equal measure!”

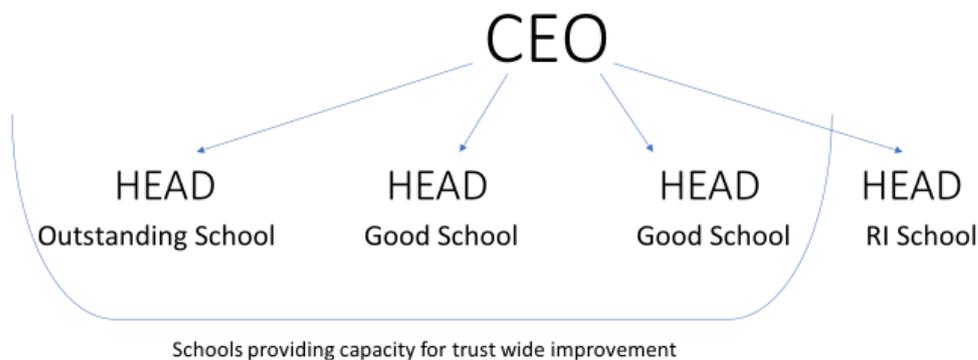
As with many leaders, Chris saw the opportunity to create a more sustained school improvement model through the development of a multi-academy trust. “My vision was based on achieving self-sustaining school improvement, which was informed by much of thinking at that time - such as David Hargreaves' thinkpieces and the Singapore model. We wanted to move things on and create sustained improvement relationships between schools and practitioners, rather than waving goodbye at the end of a deployment and not having any further responsibility for what happened in those schools. Our vision also included the notion of shared accountability, openness between schools, the ability to deploy talent freely across schools when and where it was needed, and also the freedom to share resources. The NLE model had broken down barriers and encouraged a culture of school to school support. However, we wanted to create a school improvement model for the long term.”

Chris established the Flying High Trust in 2012. The trust's initial growth saw four schools join in quick succession – three that were rated by Ofsted as 'outstanding' or 'good' and one that needed support. Much of this growth owed itself to the relationships developed through the NLE work and the Candleby Lane Teaching School Alliance, which was established in 2011. “There was an enthusiasm for even deeper partnership” says Chris “but it was built on a commitment to the long-term success of all our schools and children, and that required a culture of deeper partnership – one that was honest, challenging, open and based on a shared determination for success in every school. The MAT model, we felt, would involve a much deeper commitment to schools that were struggling and would also help us to keep improving our successful schools and help them to avoid complacency.”

Chris' vision required a strong school improvement model. However, that first had to be underpinned by bringing on board the necessary capacity. The trust was mindful of those trusts that

– in their enthusiasm or otherwise – had expanded too quickly and had put great strain on resources and the capacity of their teachers and leaders, leading to failure. “We quickly came to devise a golden rule that we would have three ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ schools for every ‘RI’ or special measures school in the trust. The model we wanted to create would rely heavily on our internal capacity for improvement – so this ratio became the non-negotiable from an early stage or else it would not work.”

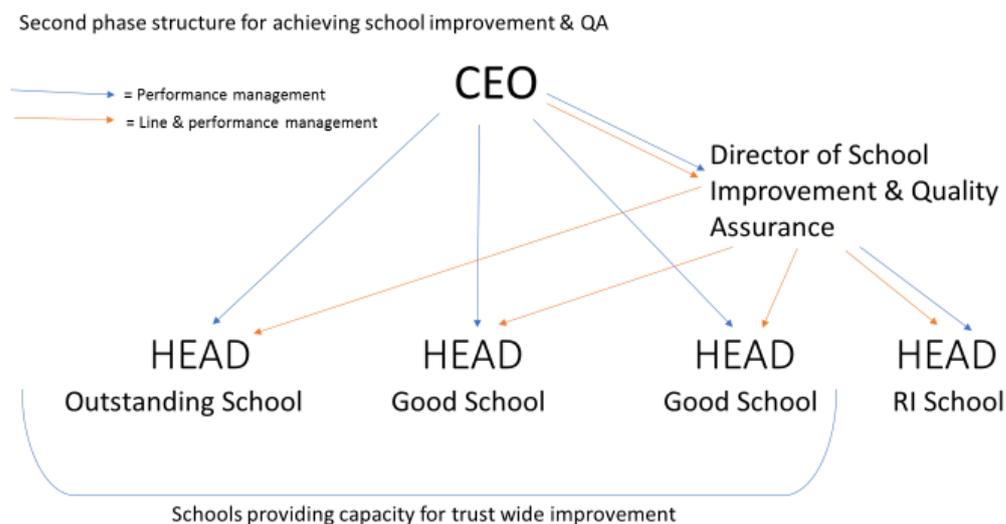
Initial structure for achieving school improvement & QA



The need for time and resource for school improvement was not underestimated. This was in part because Chris and his team believed that intensive support - the ‘tightening up’ approach as he describes it – was required for those schools in challenging circumstances. Indeed, in the early days of the trust’s development, as with many CEOs, Chris was extremely hands on in providing monitoring and evaluation, coaching and support, and modelling leadership within the trust’s requires improvement school. The school improvement model at that stage – although able to draw on expertise and resource from elsewhere in the trust – was not unlike the NLE model in that it fundamentally relied on Chris, only it came with even more accountability and responsibility! The school improvement model could have remained in Chris’ head, but he was clear that as the trust grew further, he needed to step back and build the capacity and systems for wide-scale quality assurance and improvement.

For many trust CEOs this is the most personally challenging experience of trust growth. Recent DfE advice warned growing MATs of the danger of too much over-reliance on the skills, expertise and knowledge of an executive leader who is seeing their wider leadership role grow, yet often seeing their school improvement responsibilities expand too. Yet, for many leaders, letting go of the reigns of day to day school improvement is hard when they have grown to see it as their ‘bread and butter’. Many executive leaders owe their careers up to that stage on their ability in turning schools around. However, this stepping back is a necessary exercise for CEOs within growing trusts, and appointing the right people to step into the work they are leaving behind is probably the most critical moment in growth.

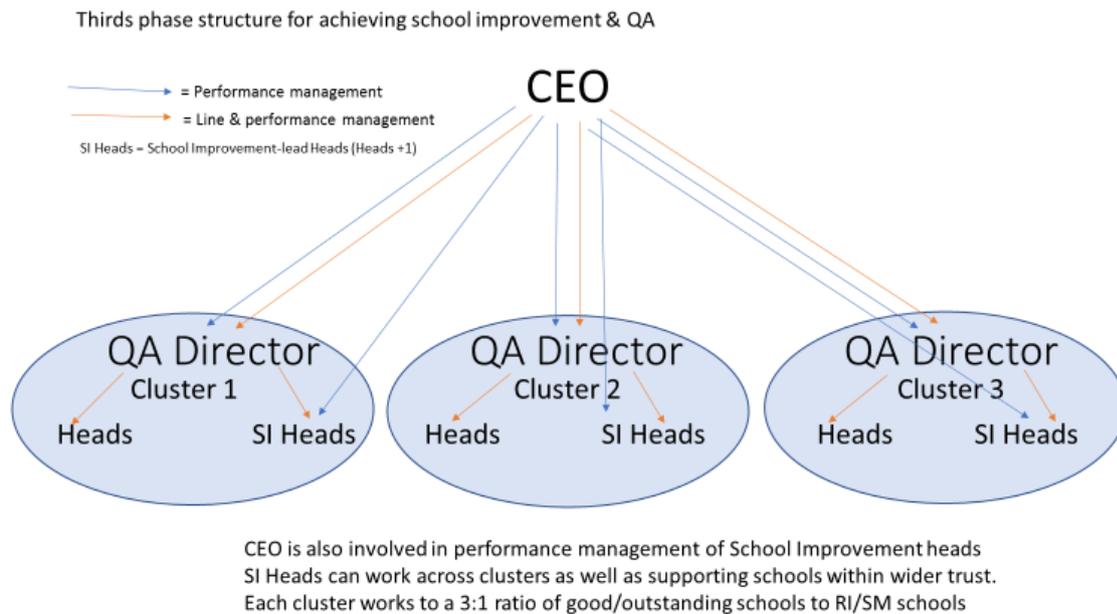
For Flying High, the first key appointment in this area was Graeme Robins, Director of School Improvement and Quality Assurance. The role was created by Chris and the Chair of Trustees with a view to employing someone with significant experience of providing leadership and achieving school improvement across a number of schools – and, as a Local Leader of Education and former Executive Headteacher, Graeme fitted the bill well. Graeme’s role initially involved providing interim executive leadership to one school, whilst also providing quality assurance and facilitating school improvement across the initial group of four. The appointment immediately allowed Chris to step back as the demands of running a growing trust – including line and performance managing a wide range of staff - increased. “Appointing someone of the calibre and experience in Graham into that post was essential to the successful development of the trust” says Chris, “I could immediately trust him to draw on years of experience in school improvement and quality assurance and to be confident in acting with sufficient autonomy.”



As the trust grew, Chris recruited two more QA leads to work alongside Graeme and to take on responsibility for two other clusters of schools. Chris and Graeme were of the view that, given the level of insight and knowledge required of each school, the role would become unsustainable beyond a cluster of eight schools. Where the QA lead was also an executive head, the cluster they are responsible is limited to six schools.

It also became clear that the role of quality assurance and school improvement had to be split. Providing both could sometimes be conflicting and it was also time consuming. As a result – whilst maintaining key responsibility for monitoring and checking standards across the schools – it was decided that the three Directors of QA would delegate key school improvement aspects of their work to a group of serving heads within the trust – known internally as Heads + 1. This has involved identifying heads (through a rigorous performance management process) with the necessary capacity and experience to provide support to their peers and to other schools. As a result, these heads – alongside their day to day roles - are now playing a leading role in providing school improvement across the trust. They are taking on responsibility in a number of ways, including

through coaching their peers, providing training and joint practice development for leaders and teachers, and supporting the development of the curriculum and assessment systems in other schools. The Quality Assurance Directors are line and performance managed by Chris as CEO, and those heads with a school improvement role are performance managed by Chris too (although QA Directors are responsible for their day to day line management).



Alongside the appointment of the additional Directors of Quality Assurance and the wider distribution of school improvement leadership, the trust has also worked hard to embed its systems and processes for school improvement and quality assurance. “The improvement model is not reactive” says Chris. “The systems and processes allow us to regularly monitor changes in data, the quality of teaching and children’s work, and the concerns of heads, so that we can identify issues and respond quickly by deploying the most appropriate kind of support. That is where the QA role really feeds into and determines the nature of school improvement – and for schools that are struggling the QA needs to be very active because the support needs of these schools are evolving all the time.”

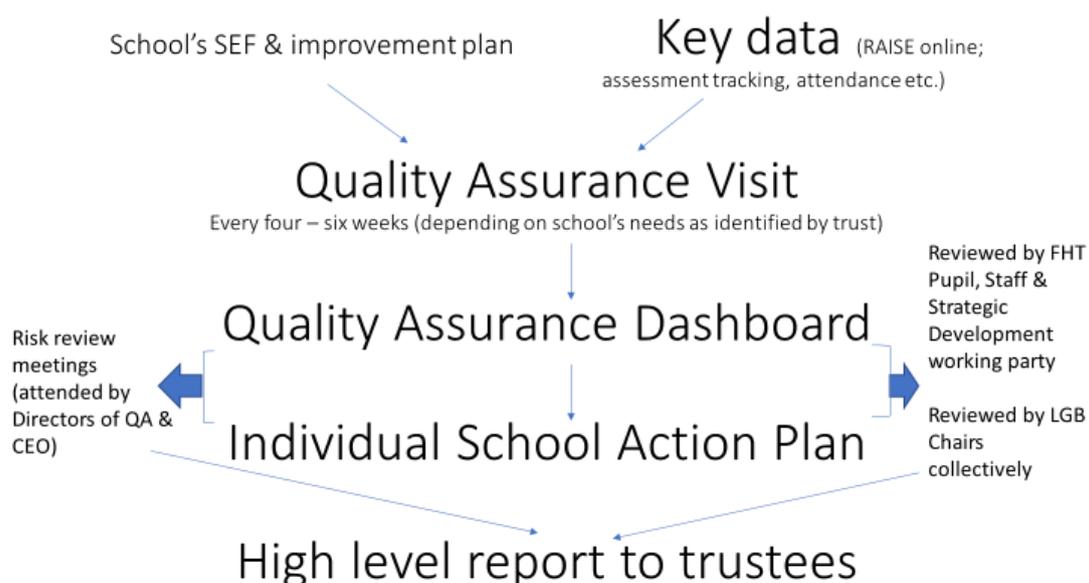
Each school within the trust receives a Quality Assurance visit from the Directors of QA – the frequency of which is determined by the school’s individual circumstances. For those that are in challenging circumstances, these can take place every four weeks (and some schools in these circumstances may also be receiving day to day leadership from one of the QA Directors as a part-time Executive Head), whilst for those that are performing well, these take place – on average – every six weeks. The review visits include reviewing data (including pupil progress and outcomes; attendance; and exclusions) , conversations with the head and senior team, lesson observations, observations of the learning environment, pupil-voice discussions, and book scrutinies.

The Quality Assurance visits ensure that key information is captured and that it informs the trust’s two key school improvements documents - the school’s quality assurance visit proformas and the school’s Individual School Action Plan, both of which are reviewed at the trust SLT’s six weekly risk review meetings.

The **schools' Quality Assurance Visit Proformas** are more summative in nature, and provide a snapshot of the school's performance based on the data and the outcomes of QA visits. The dashboards include information on pupil outcomes, progress, attendance, behaviour, and general concerns/ issues raised by the heads. These are reviewed at the SLT's six weekly review meetings and by the cluster's local governing bodies and provide both a useful accountability tool and a means of comparing performance across the cluster. They are also key to determining the level and nature of support agreed within the Individual School Action Plans. **A copy of the Quality Assurance visit proforma can be accessed here:** <http://www.forumeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FH-Quality-Assurance-Visits-proforma-template.pdf>

The Individual School Action Plans set out the level and nature of school improvement that each school requires (informed by the quality assurance visit), and provides a clear overview of who is involved and responsible for achieving improvement and by when. The action plans evolve in response to the information gathered through the visits, and are the key documents in ensuring that everyone involved is clear about a school's improvement priorities and plans. **A copy of the ISAP proforma can be accessed here:** <http://www.forumeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FH-ISAP-Template.pdf>. The school's headteacher, Director of QA, and the Director of the Teaching School Alliance are all involved in writing and agreeing the ISAP (together with setting key targets and agreeing costings of school improvement).

It is through these visits and documents, and also through their performance management of heads, that the Directors of QA are able to determine the next steps to enable all schools to be able to move to the next level. Those next steps can involve bespoke school improvement and CPD provided by Heads + 1, the teaching school, and other trust experts such as SLEs and Lead Practitioners. The documents are also used by the Flying High Trust's Pupil, School and Strategic Party to analyse each school's progress and to hold leaders (including Directors of QA and the CEO) to account. Headline information on the progress of each cluster and key schools is also shared at the termly meetings of the trust's Directors.



In line with Chris' initial vision, the school improvement model at Flying High is about ensuring accountability, but the emphasis is heavily weighted on making sure that each school has a plan that is well-informed, bespoke, and underpinned by key actions and targets for improvement that are only made possible through a strong culture of school to school support. The model is also very much focused on providing individual schools with ownership of their improvement, with heads and SLTs involved in identifying the QA data and in identifying 'next steps' with their Directors of QA through the ISAPs. The regular and routine nature of the process (including regular review and oversight), as well as the ease of access to wide ranging trust-wide support, is key to the model's success. Indeed, five of the trusts schools have now received an Ofsted inspection since joining Flying High, with each school seeing an improvement in its inspection grading.

Chris is very aware that as the trust grows, his own role in performance managing those heads with school improvement responsibility may need to change, and the trust is looking at how - through the Deputy CEO and the executive team - it can ensure that there remains sufficient executive oversight of school improvement as the trust grows. It is likely that Chris will continue to line manage the Directors of Quality Assurance through the next stage of growth.

Key Documents & meetings:

- **Quality Assurance Visits** – vary in frequency and duration depending on the school's position. These can take place once every four to six weeks and involve
- **Quality Assurance Visit Dashboards** – provide a wide ranging overview of key data for each school. These are updated after each QA visit and reviewed by LGBs across the school's cluster. These dashboards inform the Individual School Improvement Plan and are a key document for enabling leaders to hold schools to account for progress and performance over time.
- **Individual School Improvement Plans** – Updated after each QA visit, these set out the school's improvement priorities and plans for school to school improvement. The ISAP will signpost to specific support, including the nature of support required, the cost and the desired outcomes.
- **Risk Review meeting** – Attended by QA Directors and CEO. Review each school's ongoing progress against improvement plans, with reference to the school improvement plan, and Quality Assurance visit dashboards.
- **Local Governing Body cluster meetings** – provide an opportunity for LGBs to scrutinise data across schools;
- **Trust Board meetings** – Trustees review high level data from across clusters;

Key learning points:

- **Is there an over reliance on the executive leader? Is this at the expense of systemised processes, knowledge capture and bringing in additional expertise to drive school-improvement at scale?**
- **Is there sufficient capacity within the trust to drive school improvement whilst also ensuring the standards in its well performing schools are maintained? Flying High work to a 3:1 ratio of good and outstanding schools to requires improvement / special measures schools.**

- **Appointments to executive Quality Assurance and School Improvement role are crucial. Ensure you employ someone with expertise and experience of undertaking this successfully elsewhere, particularly in the early stages of your trust's growth? Do not, for example, be tempted to promote up someone who is a good head but without experience of driving improvement across schools – it's unlikely that you will have the capacity to train and support them!**
- **Is there sufficient separation of school improvement and quality assurance roles? The Flying High Trust have created a model where the quality assurer has a role in performance managing senior school-improvement leads alongside the CEO.**
- **Is school improvement responsibility sufficiently distributed in order to maximise the skills and expertise of individuals across the trust?**
- **Is reporting regular and routine enough so that evolving needs and challenges can be identified and responded to as quickly as possible?**