Department for Education

Schools' views on the perceived benefits and obstacles to joining a multi-academy trust

Research report

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Executive summary

Background

In April 2021, the Education Secretary set out the government's vision of "a world-class school-led system where every school is part of a family of schools in a strong multi-academy trust (MAT)."[1]This research aims to provide understanding of the views and experiences of schools that have converted (including schools who have recently joined or formed a multi-academy trust and those who have converted as standalone academies) and LA-maintained schools that have not yet chosen to convert.

Methodology

The core element of the research was a survey of headteachers. This was conducted by telephone from 15th June to 16th July 2021 and involved interviews with:

- **300 LA-maintained schools,**[2] often referred to in this report as **"non-converters";**
- **300 schools that have voluntarily joined or set up a MAT with other schools in the last three years**, often referred to in this report as **"recent converters"**;[3]
- **100 long-term standalone academies**: these are standalone trusts or schools sitting in an 'empty' MAT (an academy trust that has the governance and funding agreement structure of a MAT but that has only one academy within it). Though these schools have converted, they are currently not part of a MAT with other schools.

Data was weighted to ensure results were representative for each group based on the latest population data from Get Information About Schools by school phase, region, school size, and whether it was a faith or non-faith school.

In addition, a small-scale online survey exercise was conducted among school governors within LA-maintained schools and long-term standalone academies. The sample for these governors came from headteacher respondents to the main survey. Overall, 29 governors from LA-maintained schools and ten from long-term standalone academies completed the survey.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-speech-to-the-confederation-of-school-trusts
[2] For this report LA-maintained schools covers all types of maintained schools and so includes community schools, foundation schools and voluntary schools.
[3] 'Sponsored academies' were excluded.

Key findings

Recent converters

The overall impact of joining a MAT has been positive

The vast majority of recent converters (82% of primary schools and 74% of secondary schools) reported that the overall impact of joining a MAT had been positive. Most of these felt that the positive impact met or exceeded their expectations (92% of primary schools and 86% of secondaries). Among recent converters, only 4% of primary schools and 6% of secondary schools were negative about the overall impact of converting.

Collaboration and sharing of skills were key themes in both reasons for joining a MAT and in improvements experienced in reality

Most schools (60% of primary and 73% of secondary schools) said that increasing collaboration was a key reason for having joined a MAT and approaching nine in ten described this as a key or important reason. Sharing of skills was the improvement most widely experienced by primary schools that had recently converted: around half (51%) reported significant improvements with regards to the sharing of skills. The next most common areas where significant improvements were reported were staff training (43%) and the school's sense of direction and purpose (29%). Among secondary schools, the most common significant areas of improvements were better sharing of skills and expertise (34%), an improved sense of direction and purpose (34%), and better quality of school governance (32%) and school leadership (30%).

Most experienced some negatives as a result of converting

Around four-in-ten (38%) primary schools and a quarter (23%) of secondary schools said there had been no negatives as a result of converting. For primary schools, difficulty adapting to new procedures and processes (19%), increased workloads (18%) and reduction in autonomy (16%) were the most common negatives. For secondary schools, the most common negatives were reduced autonomy (23%) and control over finances (18%).

Most found the process of converting challenging, though the quality and availability of support and guidance for schools was generally seen as good

Most recent converters (60% of primary schools and 70% of secondary schools) found the actual process of becoming an academy challenging while it took place. Amongst these schools, the main challenge was the increased workload and time spent on the process (30% of primary schools, 23% of secondary schools). In addition, a quarter of primary schools found that dealing with objections from parents or staff (25%) and the volume of paperwork (22%) challenging. Around a fifth of secondary schools reported that liaising with the local authority (20%) and due diligence (19%) contributed to the process being difficult.

Nevertheless, around two-thirds (64%) of primary schools and half (49%) of secondary schools reported that the *availability* of support and guidance on the conversion process had been good, while seven-in-ten primaries (70%) and just over half (53%) of secondaries thought the *quality* of support and guidance good.

Non-converters

Most non-converters were not planning to convert to academy status

A minority of LA-maintained schools ('non-converters') were considering converting to academy status at the time of the research, with secondary schools significantly more likely to be considering it (22%) than primary schools (13%). Most of these schools considering converting felt it was likely that the school would convert within the next two to three years.

Only a very small minority of those not currently considering converting were in favour of becoming an academy in the future (2% of primary schools and 3% of secondary schools). While around four in ten were neutral (45% of primary schools and 41% of secondary schools), just over half of those not currently considering converting were against the idea (52% for both primary and secondary), equivalent to 44% of all non-converters.

The main barriers to converting and joining a MAT were concerns around potential lack of autonomy

The vast majority of non-converters (94% of primary schools and 87% of secondary schools) felt that there would be some negatives associated with converting to academy status. Concern about loss of autonomy and of their culture were the most frequently reasons given for choosing not to convert: two-thirds (67%) of primary schools and three-fifths (59%) of secondary schools said concern about losing autonomy was a *key* reason that they had not become an academy. Concern about loss of culture or what is different or special about their school, while common amongst both, was more frequently a key reason for primary schools (64%) than secondary schools (49%).

Despite the concerns, non-converters could also see the potential benefits

Seven in ten (70% of primary schools and 67% of secondary schools) felt there would be some or significant benefits overall, compared with just over a quarter (28% of primary and 27% of secondary non-converters) that could not see any benefits or virtually no benefits of converting. The most common anticipated benefit was greater collaboration and sharing of skills (cited by 58% of primary and 61% of secondary schools that felt there would be benefits). However, only a minority (10% of primary schools and 12% of secondary non-converters) felt there would be *significant* benefits overall, compared to four in ten that felt there would be significant negatives.

There was some, but limited, space for affecting these decisions

Among those not currently considering converting to an academy, around four in ten (42%) primary schools and half (53%) of secondary schools felt there were things that could potentially persuade them to consider it, most commonly increased funding or budget (28%), assurances of autonomy (20%) and finding the right schools to partner with (16%).

In April 2021, the department announced an initiative that would allow LA-maintained schools to join a MAT on a trial basis for up to 18 months, allowing these schools to 'try before they buy'. Around one-quarter of primary non-converters (23%) and a fifth of secondaries (20%) felt this would help them decide whether or not to join a MAT.

Long-term standalone academies

Overall, their experience of conversion has been positive

The majority (64%) of long-term standalone academies felt that on balance the overall impact of converting had been positive. Just over a quarter (28%) reported experiencing mixed or little change, while only two percent felt that the impact was negative.

Autonomy and freedom over decisions were motivators for converting to standalone status

The vast majority of long-term standalone academies reported having become an academy to gain autonomy. Nine in ten (91%) indicated that greater freedom over decisions had been a key or important reason, while three-quarters (75%) described having more autonomy over their budget as key or important. Another common reason was wanting improved outcomes for pupils (68% cited this as key or important).

Most experienced benefits of being an academy, but experiencing some negatives was also common

The most common benefits that standalone academies had experienced or expected to experience as a result of converting were an improved sense of direction and purpose (75%), a greater ability to direct resources thereby enabling teachers to concentrate on frontline teaching (72%), and cost savings and efficiencies (70%). Improved quality of school leadership (64%) and school governance (62%), and improved curriculum resources (61%) were also commonly mentioned.

At the same time, two-thirds had experienced some negative impacts of becoming an academy, most often an increase in workload and paperwork (26% mentioned this in an open-ended, unprompted question) and increased financial burdens (21%).

Aligning with the non-converters, perceived lack of autonomy was the main concern about joining a MAT

A number of reasons were given as to why they had not wanted to join a MAT when they converted, with the fear of losing autonomy key: when prompted with potential reasons, 80% indicated that they been concerned about losing their autonomy over funding, and 86% had been worried about losing other aspects of their autonomy. Over three-quarters had been concerned about a loss of the school's identity (77%) and a similar proportion (74%) had been unconvinced about the benefits of joining a MAT.

Although most long-term standalone academies were aware of potential benefits of joining a MAT (76% cited economies of scale, 68% more opportunities for staff professional development and 66% reduced burden through shared responsibilities across the MAT), nearly all felt there were potential downsides, in particular loss of autonomy (mentioned spontaneously by 55%)

A minority felt they were likely to be part of a MAT with other schools in the next three years

Overall, a third (34%) of long-term standalone academies thought that it was likely their school would form or join a MAT or sponsor another school to join their MAT in the next two to three years (15% thought this very likely).

Among standalone academies excluding those within a MAT which contains no other schools, 13% reported their school was broadly in favour of the idea of joining a MAT. The majority (68%) said their school was against the idea, at least for the moment, with a fifth (19%) neutral.

With regards to the department's 'try before they buy' initiative, around a third (35%) said that this would help them decide whether to join a MAT, higher than the figure reported by non-converters.

1. Introduction

Background to this study

In April 2021, the Education Secretary set out the government's vision of "a world-class school-led system where every school is part of a family of schools in a strong multi-academy trust (MAT)."[4]

The department has previously surveyed schools who have chosen to remain local authority (LA)-maintained[5] and MATs about changes made in their schools following conversion.[6] The current research was commissioned to update this evidence and to provide a deeper understanding of the views and experiences of schools that had converted relatively recently and those that remain LA-maintained.

Research aims

The key aims of the research were:

- To help identify what prevents LA-maintained schools from converting to an academy and long-term standalone academies from joining or forming a MAT, to help the department to identify ways in which such barriers might be overcome.
- To examine the experiences of schools that have recently converted and joined a MAT, which will help the department to develop policies and programmes to make converting a smoother process as well as updating communication to schools who have not converted.

Methodology

The core element of the research was a survey of headteachers. This was conducted by telephone from 15th June to 16th July 2021. Three types of schools were included in the research, as follows:

- **LA-maintained schools**, often referred to in this report as **"non-converters";**
- **Schools that have voluntarily joined or set up a MAT with other schools in the last three years**: these are schools that have voluntarily joined a MAT or set up a MAT with other schools in the last three years (those who were forced to convert due to poor OFSTED ratings were excluded); often referred to in this report as **"recent converters"**
- **Long-term standalone academies:** these are standalone trusts or schools sitting in an empty MAT (an academy trust that has the governance and funding agreement

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-speech-to-the-confederation-of-school-trusts
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academies-insight-project-understandingsystem-capacity
[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-trust-survey-2017

structure of a MAT but that has only one academy within it). Though they have converted, they are currently not part of a MAT with other schools.

The questionnaires for each of these three strands were developed in discussion with the department and piloted in May 2021 with 27 schools.

The schools that were sampled for the survey were contacted via email by the department on 11th June 2021, which informed them about the research and asked them to take part in the survey when they were contacted by IFF.

The survey achieved the following number of interviews:

- Non-converters: 300 interviews;
- Recent converters: 300 interviews;
- Long-term standalone academies: 100 interviews.

For non-converters, in order to ensure there was adequate representation of all types of LA-maintained schools in the survey data, quotas were set by school phase, region, school size, and whether they were a faith school or not. Similarly, for recent converters, quotas were set to ensure that 40 of the 300 schools interviewed were secondary schools. There were no quotas set for long-term standalone academies due to the smaller sample size for this strand.

Tables 1 and 2 show the profile of interviews achieved for each of the three groups covered by the research.

Table 1. interviews achieved - non-converters and recent converters

	Non-converters	Non-converters	Recent converters	Recent converters
	Primary schools	Secondary schools	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Non-faith schools	120	79	158	31
Faith schools	80	21	102	9
North	67	37	64	11
Midlands	67	27	119	16
South	66	36	77	13
Small (<150 in primary schools, <800 in secondary schools)	63	35	107	23
Medium (151-300 in primary schools, 801-1,200 in secondary schools)	69	39	81	9
Large (301+ in primary schools, 1,201+ in secondary schools)	68	16	72	8
Total:	200	100	260	40

Table 2. Interviews achieved - long-term standalone academies

	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Non-faith schools	54	18
Faith schools	23	5
North	17	8
Midlands	34	6
South	26	9
Small (<150 in primary schools, <800 in secondary schools)	4	7
Medium (151-300 in primary schools, 801-1,200 in secondary schools)	33	10
Large (301+ in primary schools, 1,201+ in secondary schools)	40	6
Total:	77	23

At the analysis stage, in order to ensure the results were representative of each of the three groups, weighting was applied based on the profile of the initial available sample, using the following variables: school phase, region, school size, and faith school/non-faith school.

In addition to interviewing headteachers, an online exercise was conducted among school governors within LA-maintained schools and long-term standalone academies. The sample for these governors came from the headteacher survey, where respondents were asked to provide contact details of a school governor. Where an email was supplied, the governor was sent an email with a link to the online survey. There were no set targets or quotas for the governor's strand. Overall, 29 governors from LA-maintained schools and ten from long-term standalone academies completed the survey. Due to these small base sizes, where governors'

data is reported raw counts are presented rather than percentages, and more generally the low base sizes mean results among governors should be treated as indicative only.

The report structure

In the rest of this report we set out the findings from this research, as follows:

- Chapter 2 explores the findings among recent converters (those currently part of a MAT with one or more other schools, and who chose to convert to an academy in the last three years). It details why these schools converted, the challenges faced when converting and their views of the support and guidance that was available when they converted. It also looks at their experience of being an academy and the perceived benefits and the negative/downsides of converting to a MAT.
- Chapter 3 examines the findings among LA-maintained schools, covering current and previous considerations of conversion, and the reasons for wanting to remain as LA-maintained schools. It then looks at what could persuade these schools to convert, including what they see as the potential benefits. It finishes by examining current intentions around converting.
- Chapter 4 focuses on the long-term standalone academies. It examines their reasons for converting to an academy and their experiences of being a standalone academy. It then explores their future plans for joining a MAT, what might encourage this and the potential benefits of becoming part of a MAT.
- The final conclusions chapter draws together overall themes, and discusses how non-converters and long-term standalone academies might be persuaded to join a MAT.

2. Recent converters

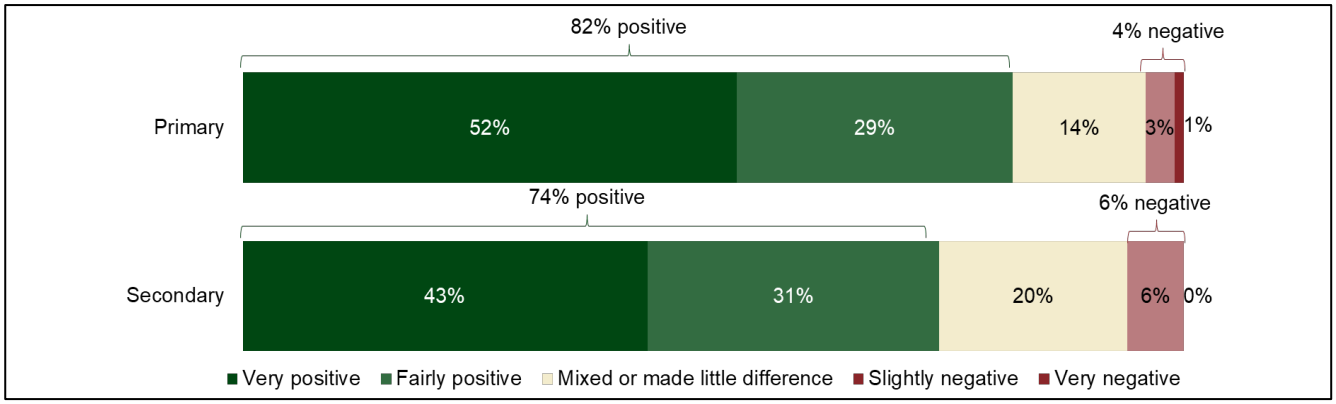
In this chapter we discuss the experiences of schools who have converted to academies and joined MATs in the last three years, excluding those that converted as a sponsored academy. Throughout, these schools are referred to as 'recent converters'. It includes schools which joined an existing MAT (72% of the schools interviewed) or who established a MAT with other schools (28%). However, for brevity we will refer to all schools in this chapter as having 'joined a MAT' unless explicitly specified.

The chapter explores why schools joined MATs, the challenges faced when converting, and their views of the support and guidance that was available when they converted. It also looks at their experience of being an academy and the benefits gained since converting.

2.1 Overall impact on schools of joining a MAT

The vast majority of recent converters (82% of primary schools and 74% of secondary schools) felt the overall impact on the school on joining or forming a MAT had been positive. Few recent converters felt that the overall effect had been negative (4% of primary and 6% of secondary school that had recently converted).

Figure 1: Overall impact on the school from joining a MAT

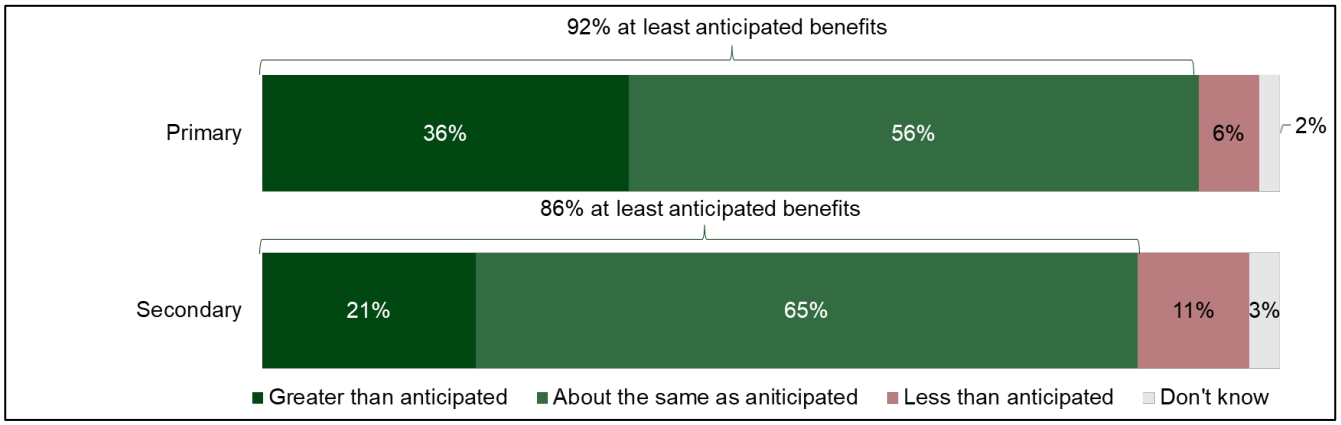


Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260), secondary schools (40).

Amongst schools who reported that the overall impact had been positive, the vast majority felt that the impact either met or exceeded their expectations: this applied to 92% of these primary schools and 86% of secondaries. Primary schools that had recently converted and who were positive about the overall impact were more likely than secondaries to say the impacts had exceeded their expectations (36% vs. 21% respectively; this is equivalent to 30% of all primary and 17% of all secondary recent converters reporting positive overall impacts that exceeded their expectations).

Few recent converters reporting positive impacts overall thought these had been less than anticipated (6% of primaries and 11% of secondaries).

Figure 2: The extent of overall positive impacts compared with expectations



Base: Recent converters reporting a positive impact overall from converting; primary schools (213), secondary schools (31).

2.2 Reasons for joining a MAT

Recent converters were read a list of potential reasons for having joined a MAT and asked if each had been key, important, partial, or not a reason at all in their decision. Results are shown in Figures 3 and 4 separately for primary and secondary schools.

Most recent converters (60% of primaries and 73% of secondaries) described increasing collaboration as a key reason for joining a MAT, and among both primaries and secondaries approaching nine in ten described this as a key or important reason. Following this, for primaries there were five factors mentioned by around three-in-ten as key and by over six-in-ten as key or important:

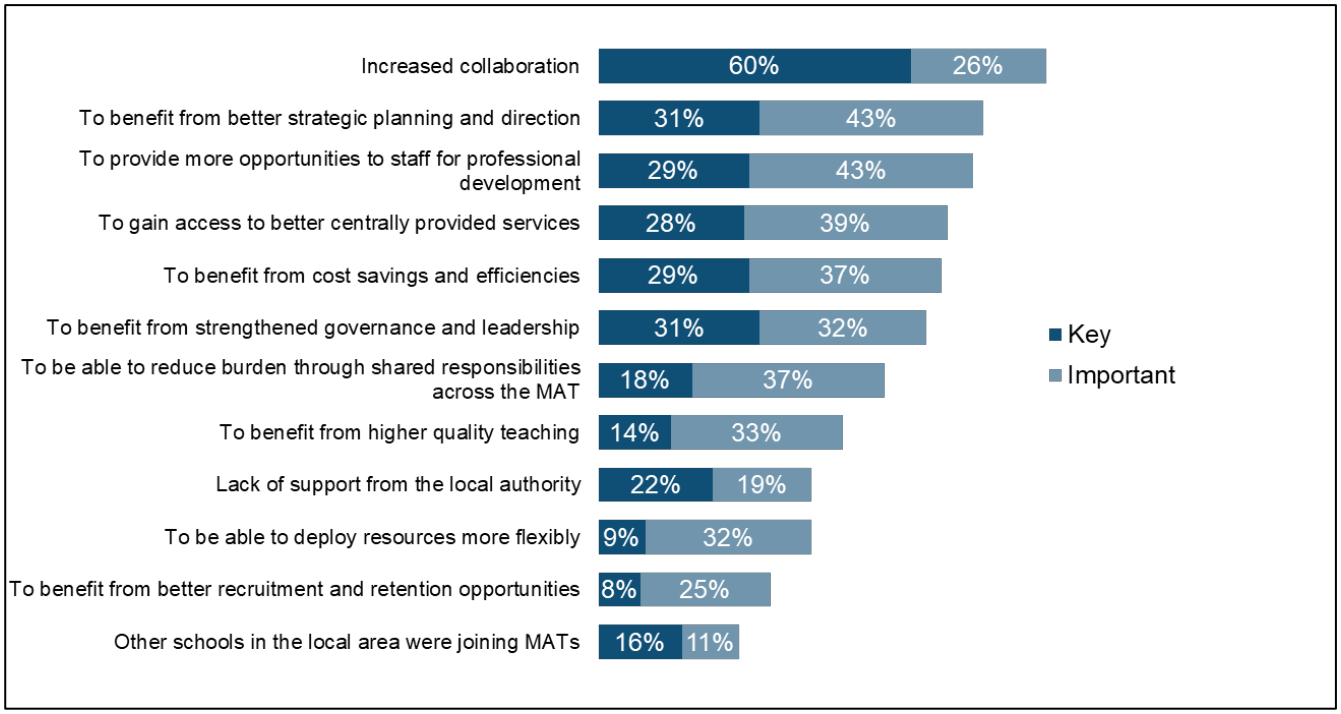
- To benefit from better strategic planning and direction;
- To provide more opportunities to staff for professional development;
- To gain access to better centrally provided services;
- To benefit from cost savings and efficiencies;
- To benefit from strengthened governance and leadership.

For secondaries, three other factors (beyond increased collaboration) were mentioned as key by at least a third (33% - 37%):

- To provide more opportunities to staff for professional development;
- To benefit from strengthened governance and leadership;
- To benefit from better strategic planning and direction.

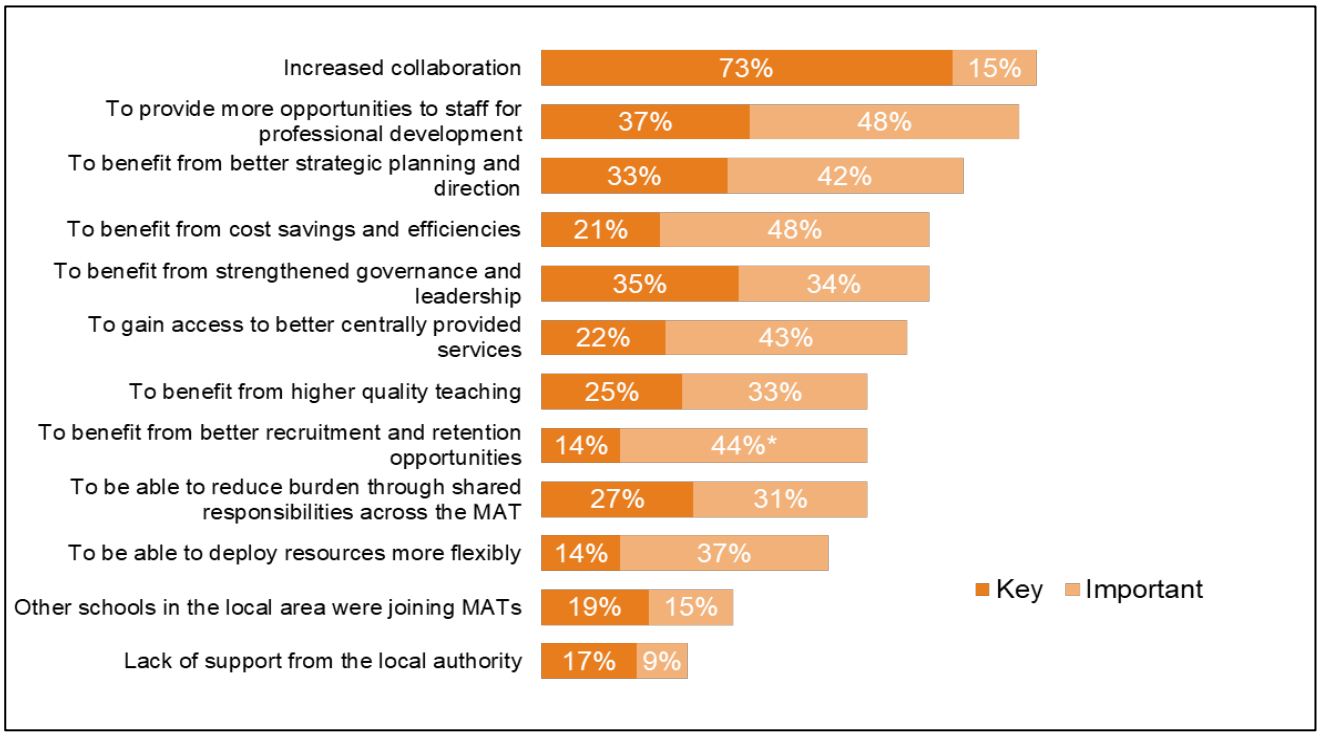
For the most part, primary and secondaries had similar motivations for joining a MAT.

Figure 3: Reasons for joining a MAT (primary) – prompted



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260).

Figure 4: Reasons for joining a MAT (secondary) - prompted



Base: Recent converters; secondary schools (40).

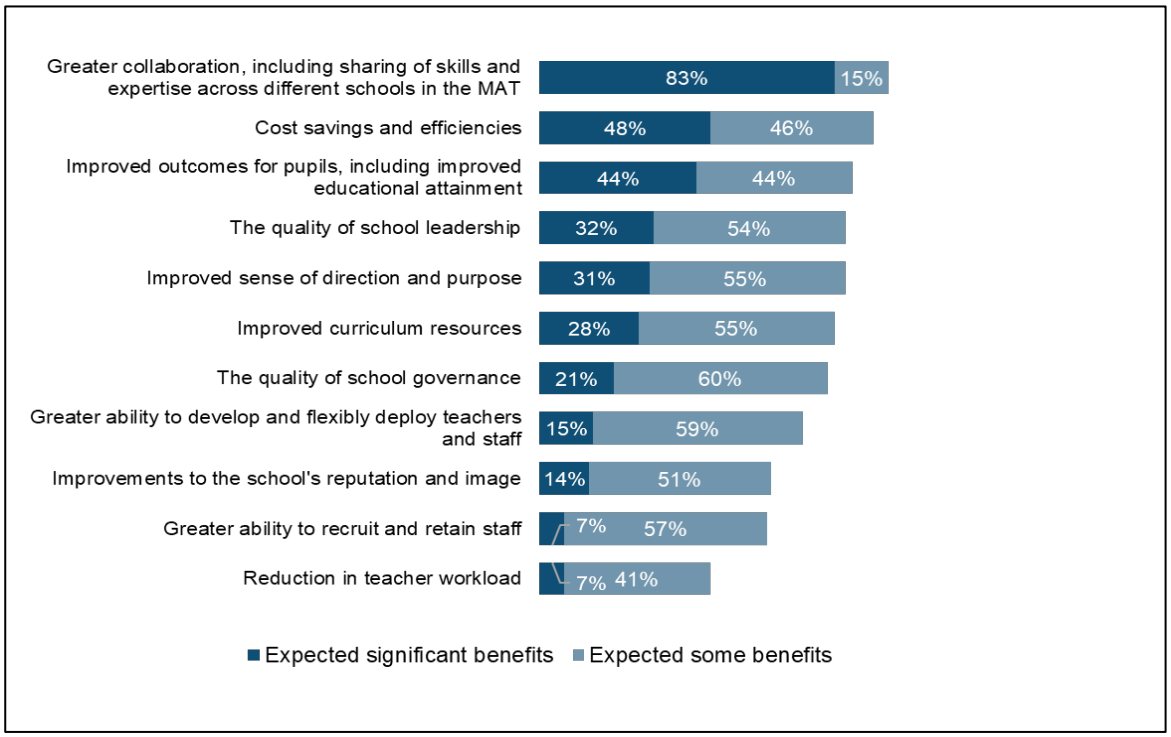
* Indicates a statistically significant higher figure between primary and secondary schools

Related to the reasons for having joined or set up a MAT, when asked about the expected benefits of being part of a MAT, the majority of recent converters (83% of primary schools, 78% of secondary schools) expected significant benefits from greater collaboration, including sharing of skills and expertise across different schools in the MAT.

Other expected significant benefits expected by at least four-in-ten primaries were cost savings and efficiencies (48%) and improved outcomes for pupils, including improved educational attainment (44%).

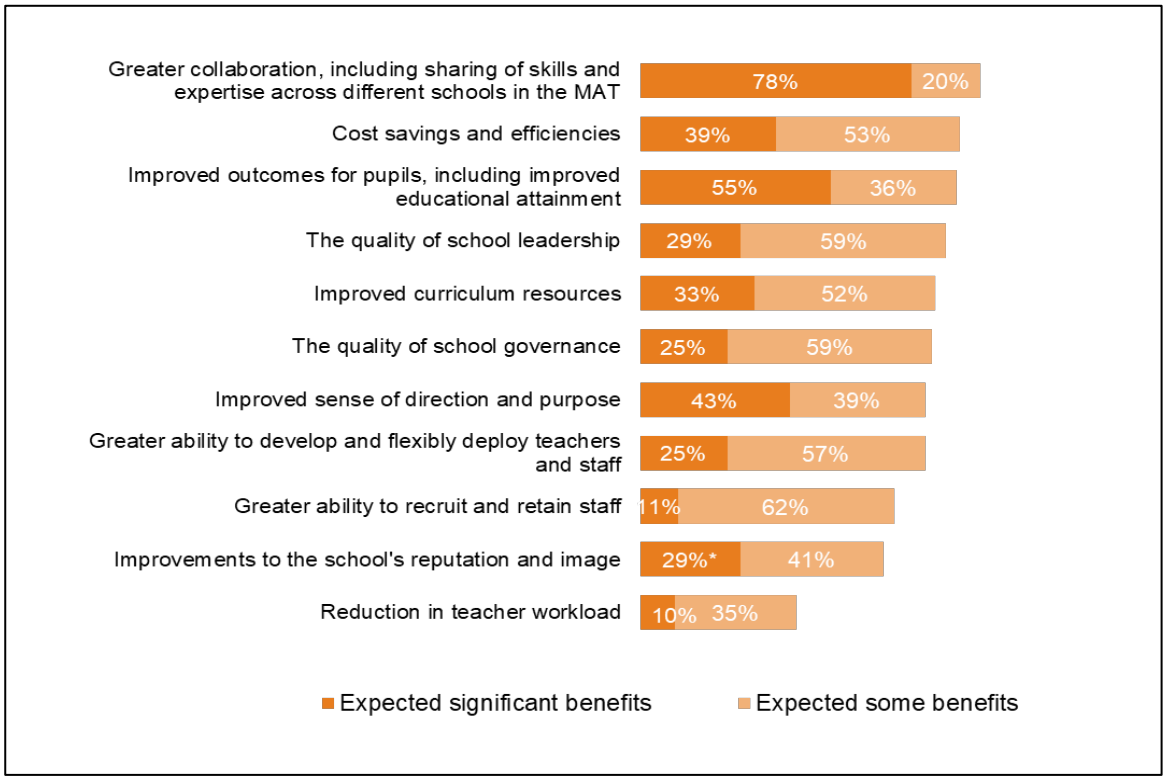
Among secondary schools that had recently converted, over half (55%) expected significant improvements in outcomes for pupils and over two-fifths (43%) and in the school's sense of direction and purpose. Secondary schools that had recently converted were more likely than primary schools to have anticipated significant improvements to the school's reputation and image (29% vs. 14% respectively).

Figure 5: Benefits anticipated from school joining a MAT (Primary)



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260).

Figure 6: Benefits anticipated from school joining a MAT (Secondary)



Base: Recent converters; secondary schools (40).

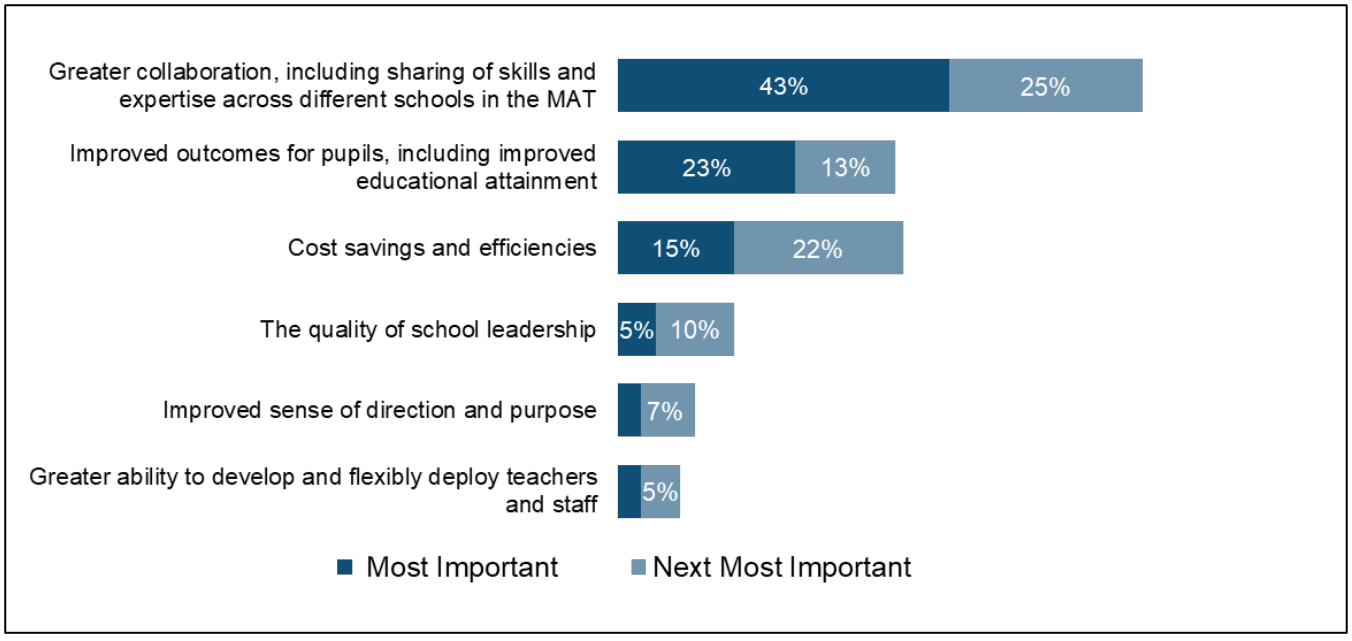
* Indicates a statistically significant (higher figure) between primary and secondary schools

Recent converters were asked which benefit from joining a MAT they considered the single most important and next most important. Results are summarised on Figures 7 and 8. Just over four-in-ten primaries (43%) and three-in-ten secondaries (30%) identified 'greater collaboration, including sharing of skills and expertise across different schools in the MAT' as the most important benefit. A further quarter (25%) of primaries and a fifth (20%) of secondaries said it was the second most important reason.

Another key benefit anticipated was improved outcomes for pupils, including improved educational attainment, with around a quarter reporting this as the most important anticipated benefit the school would gain from joining a MAT (23% of primary schools and 27% of secondary schools).

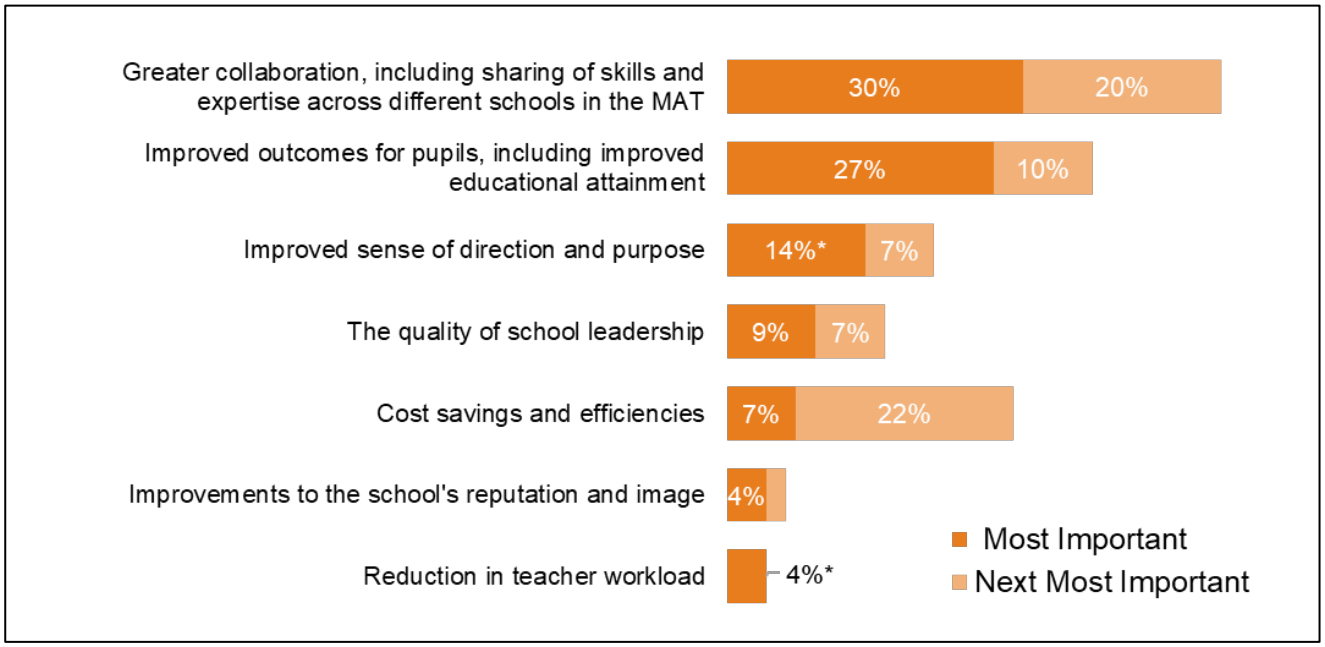
Secondary schools were more likely than primary schools to view an improved sense of direction and purpose as the most important benefit (14% of secondaries vs. 3% of primaries). Results are summarised in Figures 7 and 8 – for simplicity only factors mentioned as the most important factor by at least 3% are shown.

Figure 7: The most and next most important benefit primary schools felt they would gain from joining a MAT - prompted



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260). Only factors mentioned as the most important factor by at least 3% are shown.

Figure 8: The most and next most important benefit secondary schools felt they would gain from joining a MAT - prompted



Base: Recent converters; secondary schools (40). Only factors mentioned as the most important factor by at least 3% are shown. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher figure between primary and secondary schools.

2.3 Benefits and downsides experienced as a result of joining a MAT

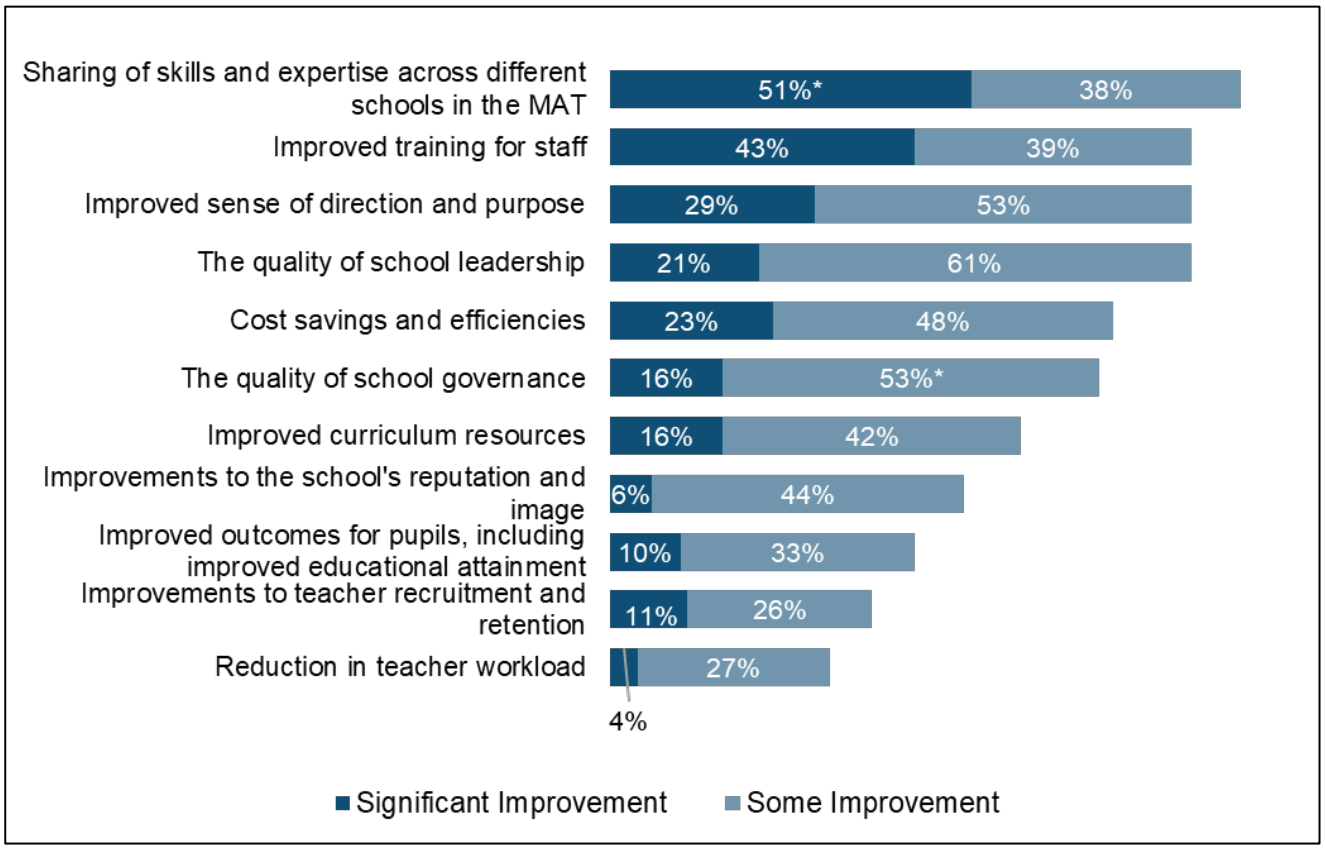
In line with their expectations about collaboration being the key potential benefit of joining a MAT, sharing of skills was the most widely experienced improvement among recent converters. Around half (51%) of primaries experienced significant improvements with regards to the sharing of skills. Improved training for staff (43%) and an improved sense of direction and purpose (29%) were the next most common areas where primaries had experienced significant improvements.

A number of areas of significant improvement were reported by a similar proportion of secondary schools (around a third): better sharing of skills and expertise (34%), improved sense of direction and purpose (34%), improved quality of school governance (32%) and school leadership (30%).

Secondary school recent converters compared to their primary counterparts were more likely to report significant improvements to the school's reputation and image (18% vs. 6% of primaries) and the quality of school governance (32% vs. 16%). In comparison, primaries were far more likely to have experienced significant improvements with regards to the sharing of skills (51% vs. 34% among secondaries).

Results are shown in Figures 9 and 10.

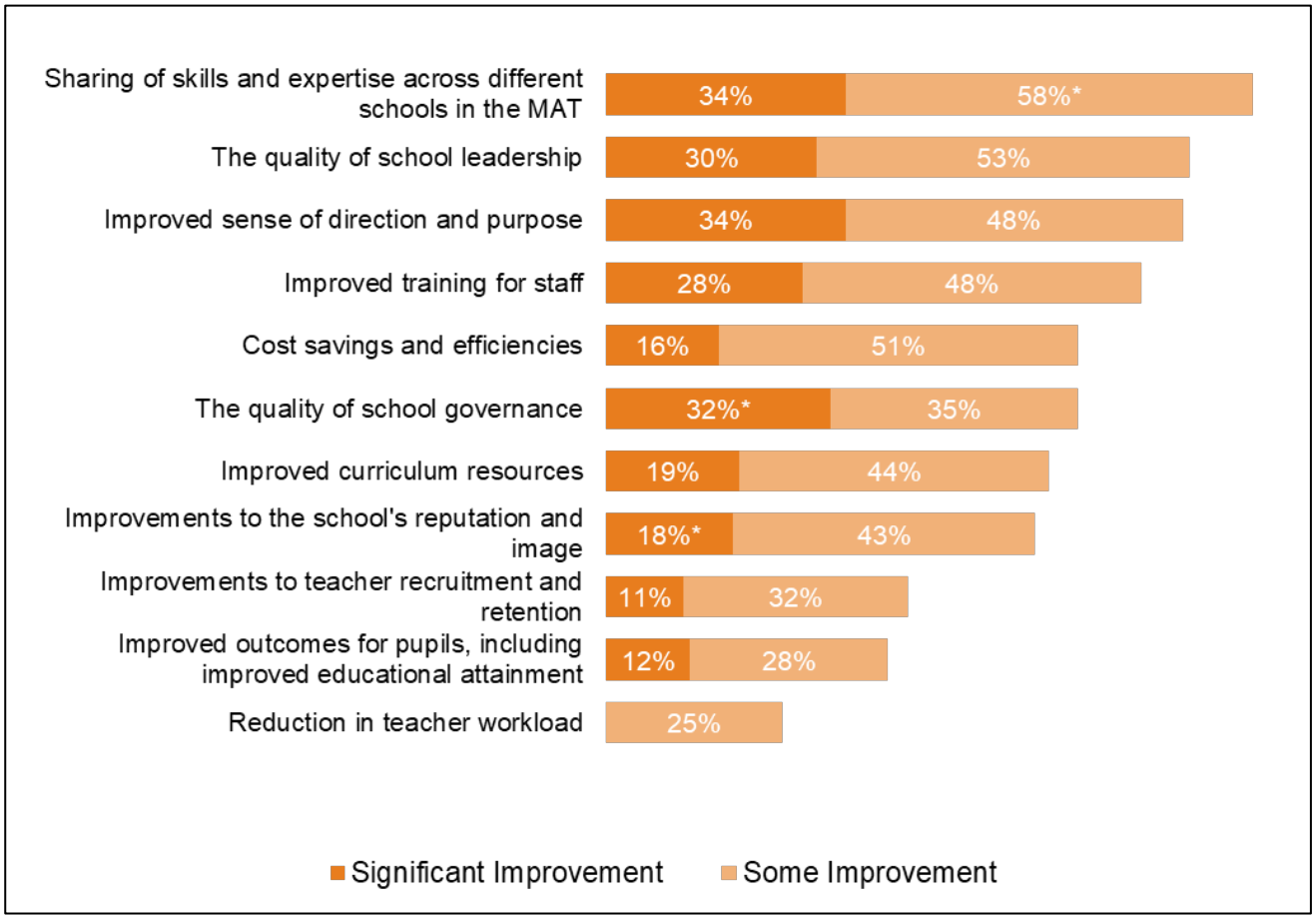
Figure 9: Improvements experienced among primary schools joining a MAT - prompted



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260).

* Indicates a statistically significant higher figure between primary and secondary schools.

Figure 10: Improvements experienced among secondary schools joining a MAT - prompted

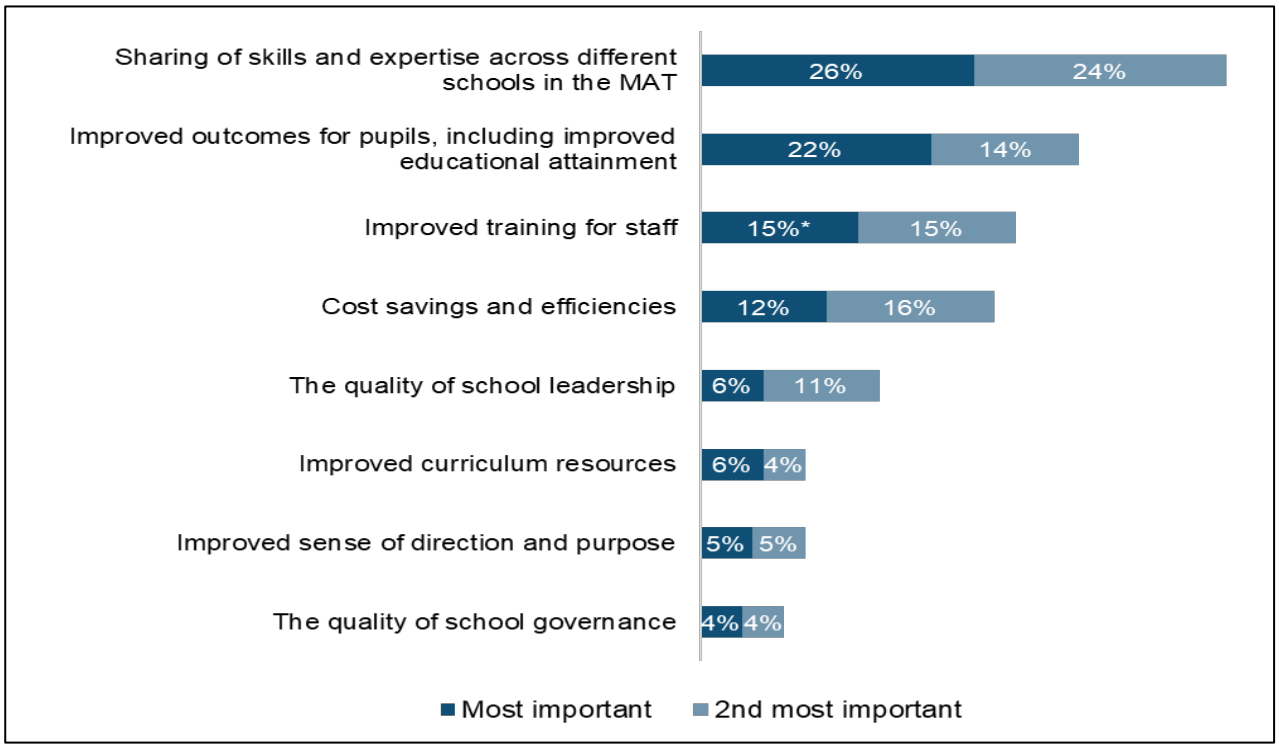


Base: Recent converters; secondary schools (40).

* Indicates a statistically significant higher figure between primary and secondary schools.

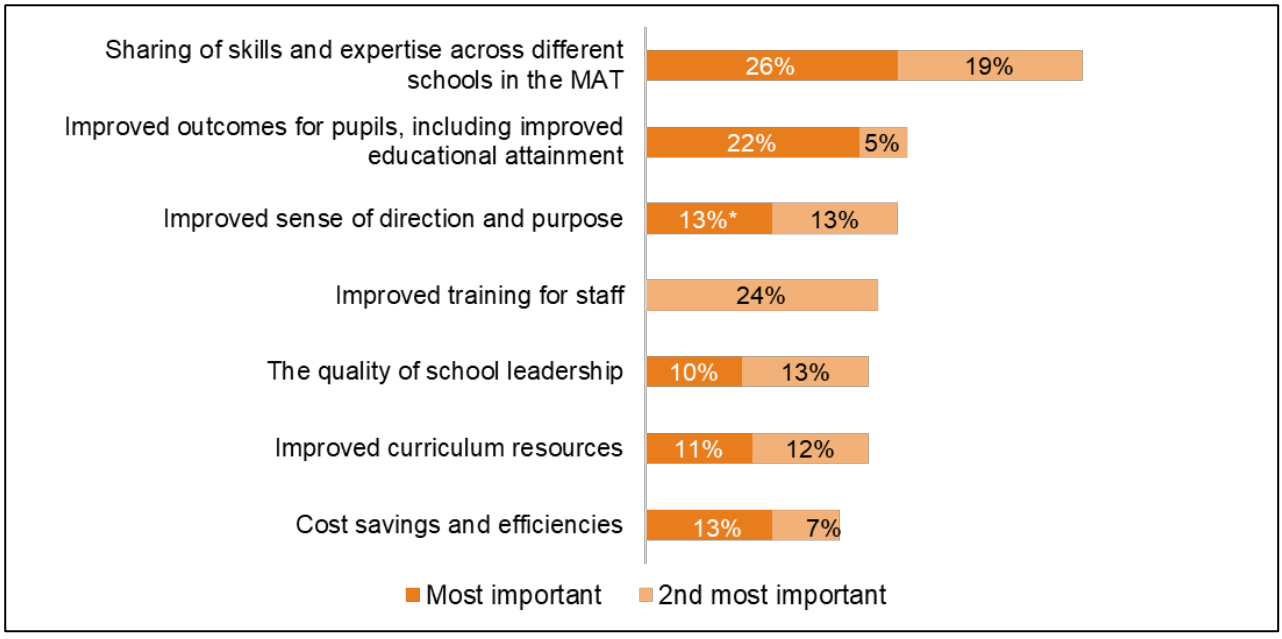
Both primaries and secondaries were most likely to report that the sharing of skills was the single most important benefit experienced since they converted, as shown in Figures 11 and 12. Both school phases had similar views on the most important benefits, with the exception of improved training for staff, which 15% of primary schools felt was the most important benefit, whereas this was not mentioned by any secondaries as the most important improvement. Although relatively few recent converters had experienced significant improved outcomes for pupils (see Figures 9 and 10), where they had, these improvements tended to be viewed as the most important benefit, and were mentioned by around a fifth (22%) of both primaries and secondaries.

Figure 11: Most important benefits experienced (primary schools)



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260). Only benefits mentioned as the most important benefit by at least 3% are shown.

Figure 12: Most important benefits experienced (secondary schools)



Base: Recent converters; secondary schools (40). Only benefits mentioned as the most important benefit by at least 3% are shown with the exception of 'improved training for staff' as a substantial number listed it as a second most important benefit.

Where schools had seen improved outcomes for pupils as a result of becoming an academy, respondents were asked as an open question, in what way and why they thought pupil outcomes had improved. Almost half (47%) said this was because greater collaboration has improved teaching, and a quarter (24%) said it was because teachers now had better access to training. Other reasons were closer monitoring of standards (19%), clearer focus/expectations (17%) and improved leadership of the school (16%).

"[Outcomes have improved] because of the "quality assurance" role of the MAT. Because of the improved collaboration you get a sense of things that are working in other schools which we can try ourselves."

Primary, Midlands, non-faith

"Because of sharing of skills, we've become more focused with clear direction and teacher confidence."

Primary, Midlands, faith school

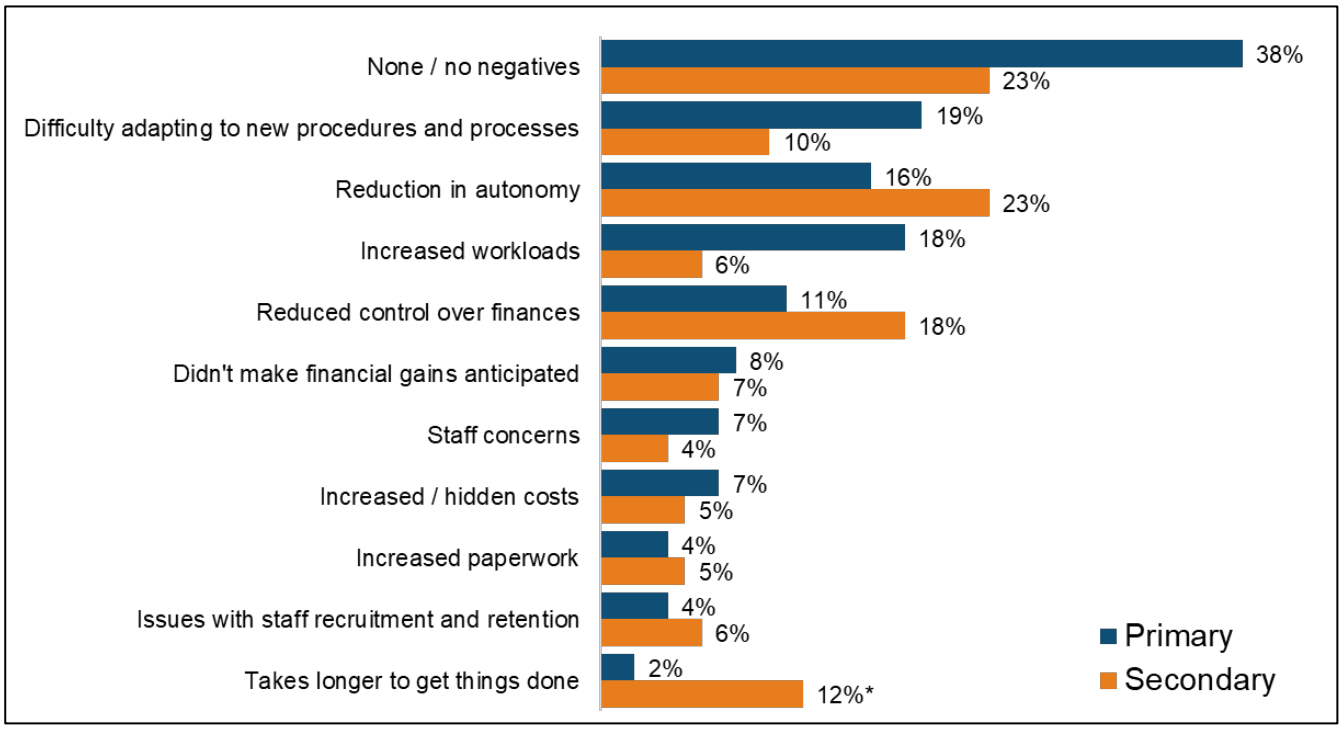
Schools who reported that school governance had improved as a result of joining a MAT were asked as an open question in what way and why they thought it had improved. Answers tended to focus on more support and / or training being available (40%), improved processes and procedures (30%) and that governors have a better understanding of their roles (30%).

"Because of collaboration, there's more governors working together and being a bit more collaborative and strategic."

Primary, South, non-faith

Recent converters were asked as an open question what negatives or downsides, if any, the school experienced as a result of joining a MAT. Around four-in-ten primary schools (38%) and a quarter of secondaries (23%) said there had been no negatives. For primaries, difficulty adapting to new procedures and processes (19%), increased workloads (18%) and reduction in autonomy (16%) were the biggest negatives. For secondary schools, the reduction in autonomy (23%), reduced control over finances (18%) and taking longer to get things done (12%, significantly higher than the 2% reporting this among primaries) were the biggest drawbacks.

Figure 13: Negatives experienced as a result of joining a MAT (spontaneous)



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260), Secondary schools (40),

The following two quotes shows examples of the loss of autonomy as a result of converting:

"An expected negative, as a head I don't have autonomy, so I have had to adjust as I now have an executive head. The decisions I would make day to day, I have to consult with the executive to make sure that is part of the strategic plan."

Primary, Midlands, non-faith

"The only one I can think of is that we have been used to making our own decisions but now everything gets referred to the executive level, that means decision making process takes longer and we've lost autonomy. So leaders including myself were used to having a certain autonomy but that has gone. I do consider that a small price to pay for the positives."

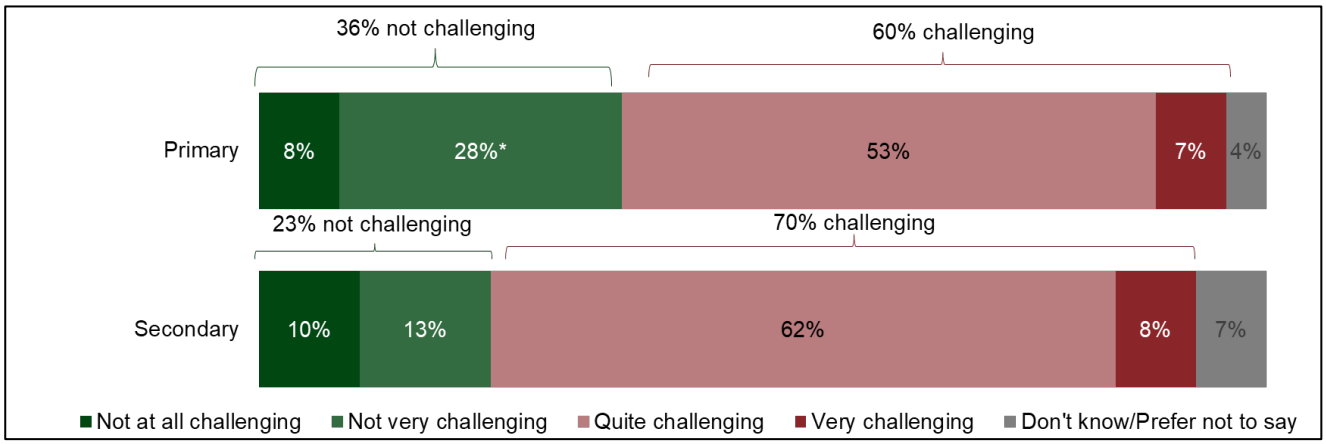
Primary, North, non-faith

Despite these negatives, on balance the picture was positive for recent converters.

2.4 Challenges of converting and joining a MAT

Most recent converters (60% of primaries and 70% of secondaries) felt the process of becoming an academy had been challenging, as shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14: How challenging the process of becoming an academy has been

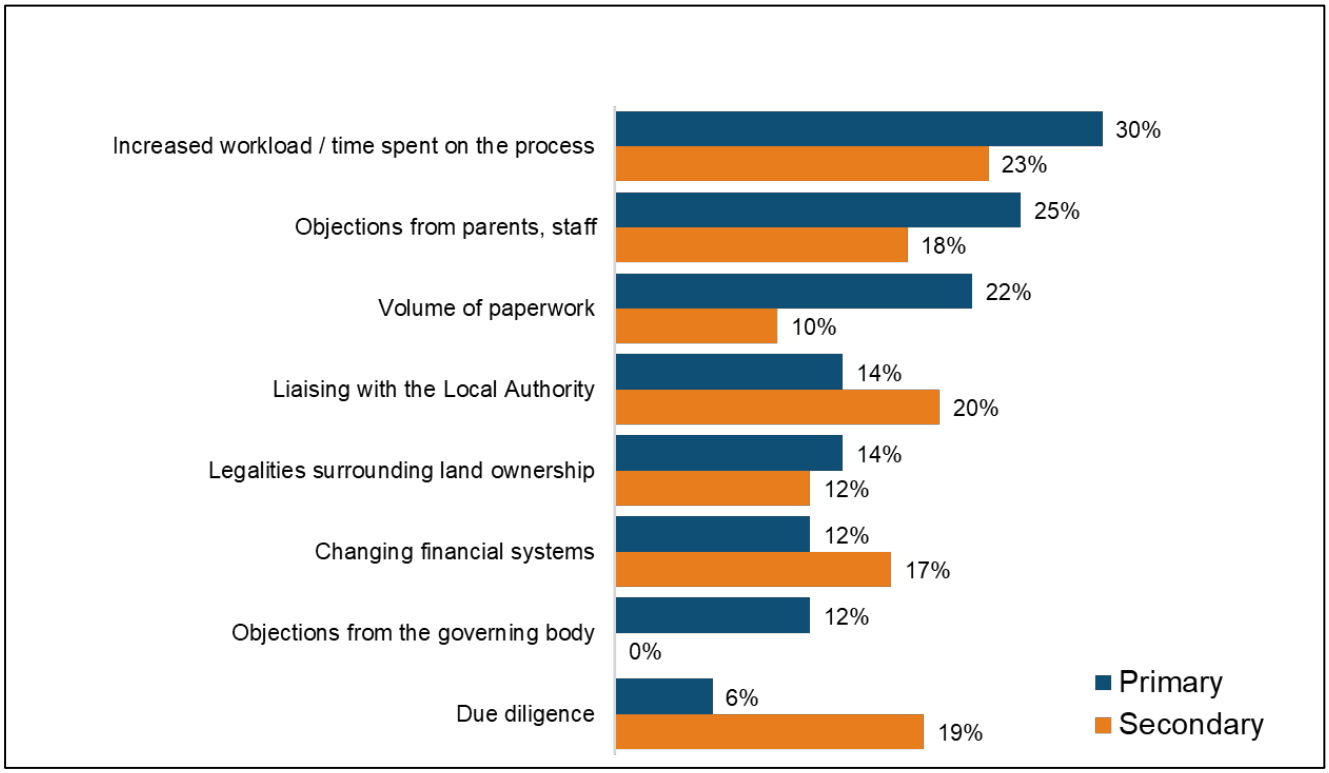


Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260), secondary schools (40).
* Indicates a statistically significant difference between primary and secondary schools.

Amongst those schools who found the process of becoming an academy quite or very challenging, the main difficulty identified was the increased workload or time spent on the process (30% of primary schools, 23% of secondary schools). In addition, a quarter of primaries found that dealing with objections from parents or staff (25%) and the volume of paperwork (22%) had made the process difficult.

Around a fifth of secondaries reported that liaising with the local authority (20%) and due diligence (19%) contributed to the process being challenging. A full breakdown is shown on Figure 15.

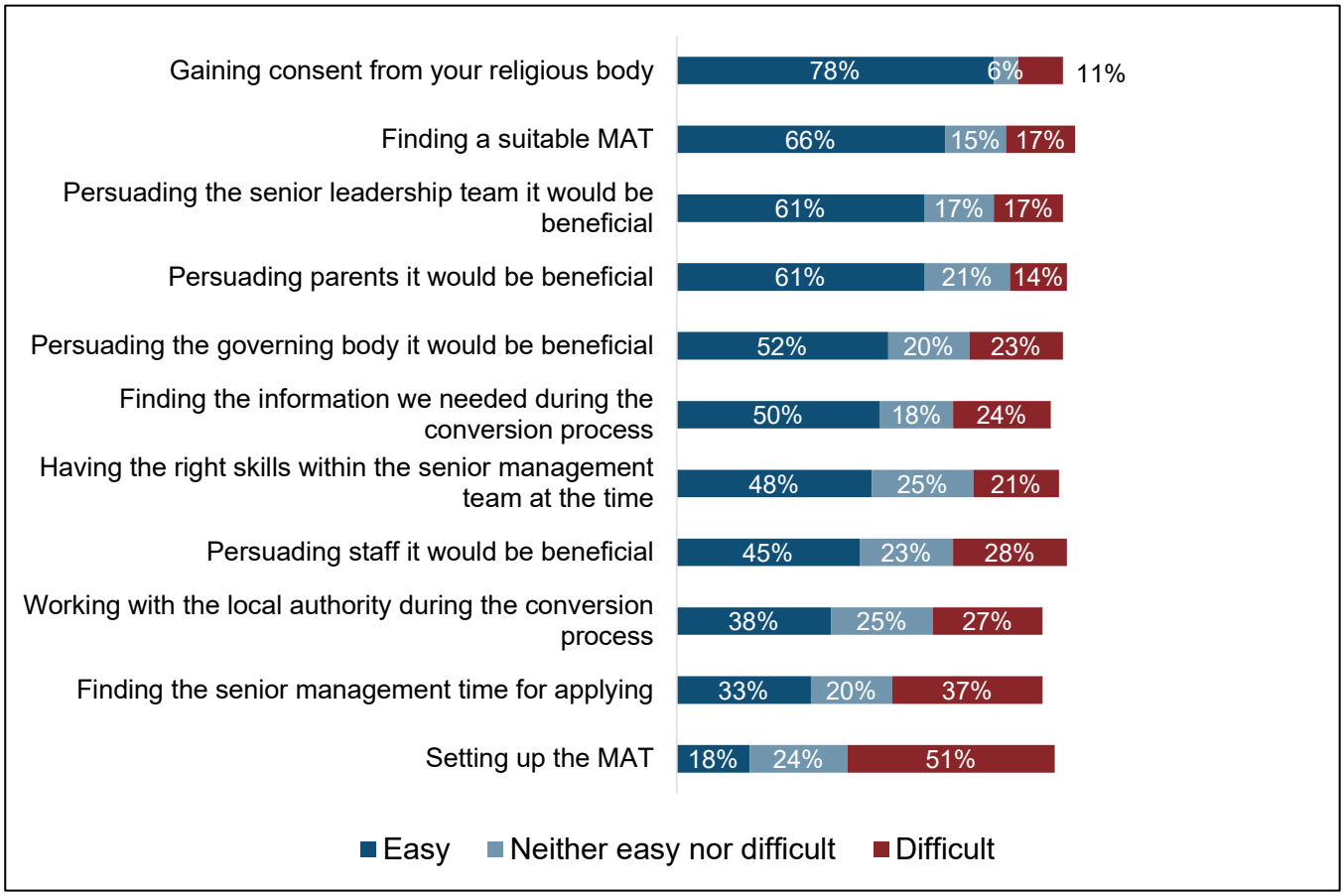
Figure 15: What recent converters found challenging about the process of becoming an academy (spontaneous)



Base: Recent converters who found the process of becoming an academy quite or very challenging; primary schools (155), secondary schools (27).

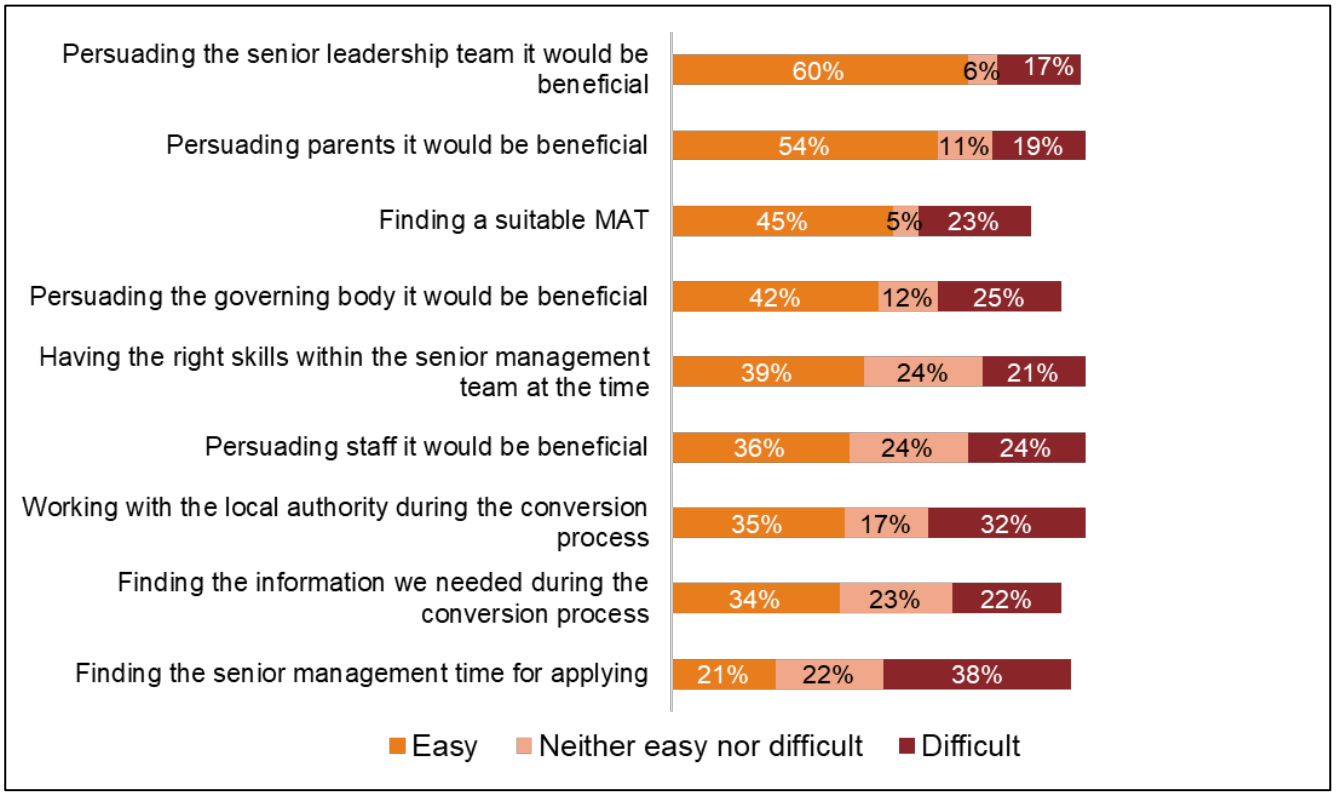
Schools were asked to rate whether specific aspects of converting had been easy or difficult. The most difficult aspect was finding senior management time for applying, difficult for around two-fifths (37% of primaries and 38% of secondaries). Additionally, setting up the MAT was identified by half (51%) of primary schools that established a MAT rather than joined an existing one as difficult. For all other aspects, on balance more recent converters thought they were easy than difficult. Finding a suitable MAT and persuading stakeholders such as the senior leadership team and parents that converting would be beneficial were the easiest aspects, as shown in Figures 16 and 17.

Figure 16: How easy or difficult various aspects of converting were (primary schools) – prompted



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260). “Gaining consent from your religious body” was only asked to faith schools (base for primary schools: 96), “setting up the MAT” was only asked to those who established a MAT (base size for primary schools: 69).

Figure 17: How easy or difficult various aspects of converting were (secondary schools) - prompted

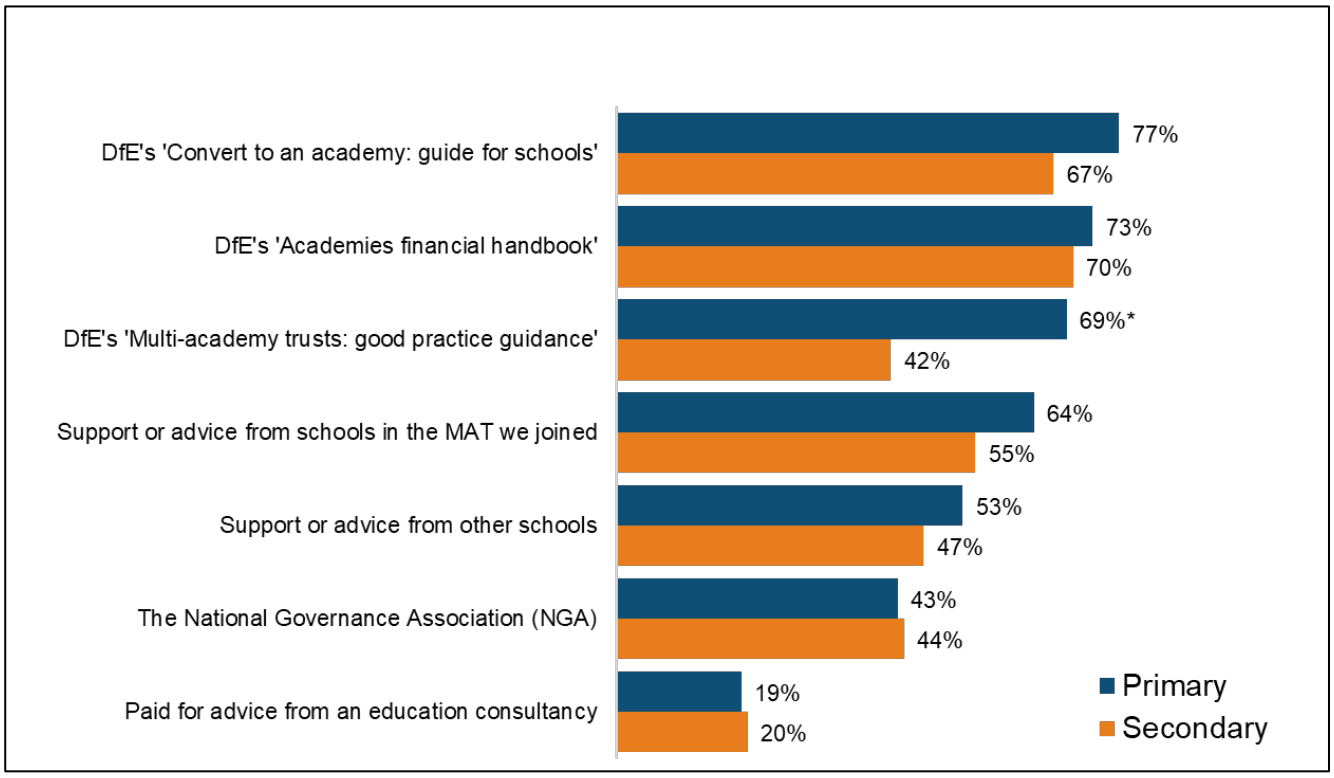


Base: Recent converters; secondary schools (40).

2.5 Support and guidance

As part of the process of converting to an academy, schools used various sources for guidance and information. Most schools used the department's guidance, although the department's 'Multi-academy trusts: good practice guidance' was used more often by primary recent converters (69%) than secondaries (42%). Around half (53% of primaries, 47% of secondaries) had used other schools for support or advice. Around a fifth (19% of primaries, 20% of secondaries) had used paid for advice from an education consultancy before converting.

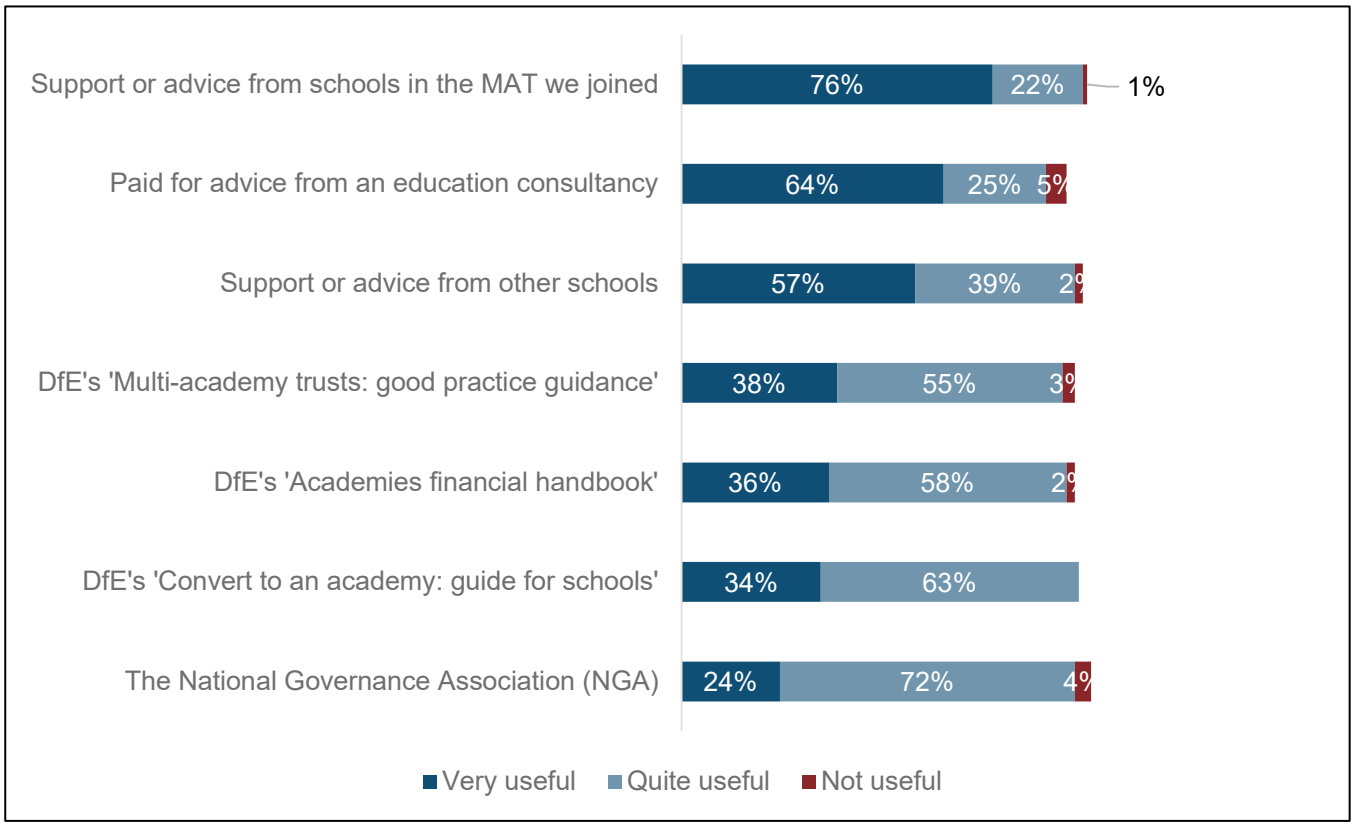
Figure 18: Sources of guidance or support used (prompted)



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260), secondary schools (40).

The vast majority felt that each type of support they used had been very or quite useful. Around three-quarters (76%) reported that support or advice from schools in the MAT they joined was very useful. The department's support sources were seen as useful but were less likely to be seen as 'very useful' compared to sources such as advice from other schools or an education consultancy.

Figure 19: How useful schools found each type of support or guidance

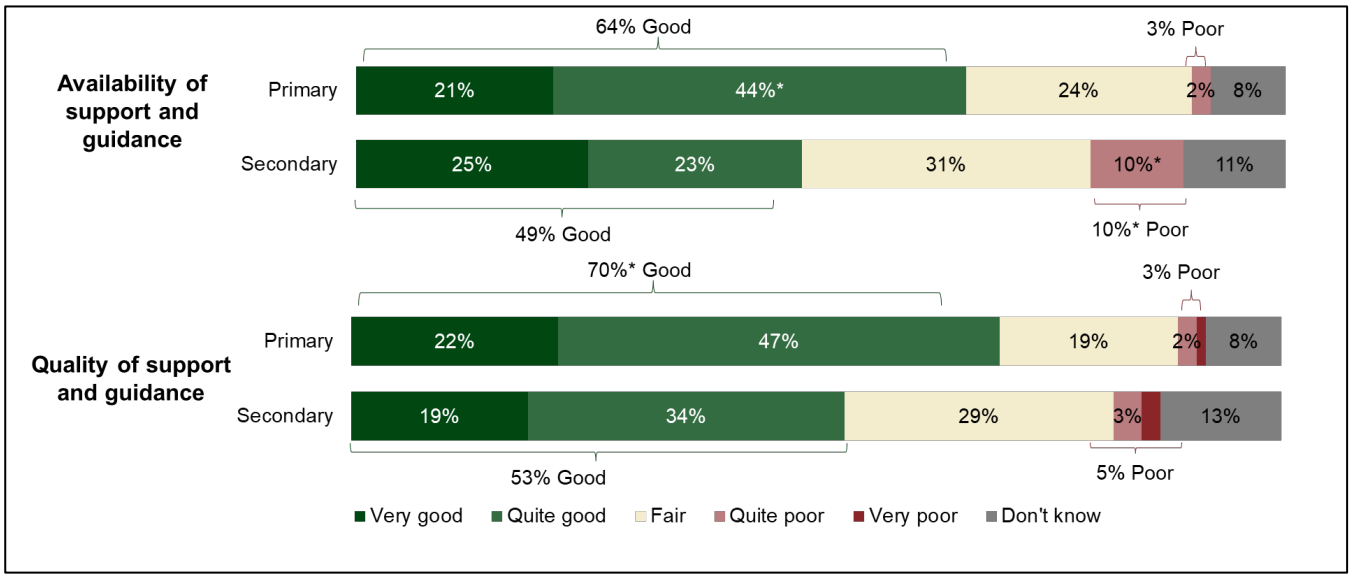


Base: those who have used each source so varies for each source and ranged from 55 to 225.

Around two-thirds (64%) of primaries thought the overall availability of support and guidance was good, this was the case for only around half (49%) of secondaries. Very few schools felt that the availability was poor, though secondaries were more likely to say this (10% vs. 3% of primaries).

In terms of the quality of support available, seven-in-ten primaries felt this had been good, significantly higher than among secondaries (53%).

Figure 20: How schools rated the availability and quality of support and guidance



Base: Recent converters; primary schools (260), secondary schools (40).

The comments from those who felt that the availability of support and guidance was poor often focussed on the lack of practical support or poor communication.

"It's not as good as it should be. The advice that came from the DfE was very factual but not flagging up the pitfalls and what to avoid. Something like useful dos and don'ts would have been really useful."

Secondary, Midlands, non-faith

"It's just overly complicated, there's so much of it, having a real person and other schools guiding you through it are what you need."

Primary, Midlands, faith

Around a quarter (26%) of primary and a third (35%) of secondary recent converters said there were issues or areas that the school would have benefitted from, or would still benefit from in terms of additional or better support or guidance about joining a MAT: these schools were most likely to mention in response to this open question more support regarding finance (20%), followed by greater clarity in the process (13%), having a dedicated advisor or mentor (12%), more support before the process begins (11%) and simplified, more straightforward guidance (9%).

Two example responses follow:

“Just an overview of the whole process and to manage expectations so that we know timescales, relevant evidence and other expectations prior to conversion. I'll say all the same following conversion as well. A standard phrase we've been using since we converted in September 2019 is "we don't know what we don't know" and maybe a formal mentor would have been useful to guide us through the first 12 months.”

Primary, North, non-faith

“Better support for finances. Setting up a MAT without a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) is very difficult. If you are setting up a MAT you don't have the budget to employ a CFO, but they are needed for things like budgeting, VAT reclaim, pensions for e.g. There were errors in setting up that became apparent when we did appoint a CFO.”

Primary, North, non-faith

Despite these concerns, very few recent converters rated the guidance as poor suggesting it is mostly satisfactory and meeting most of their needs.

3. Non-converters

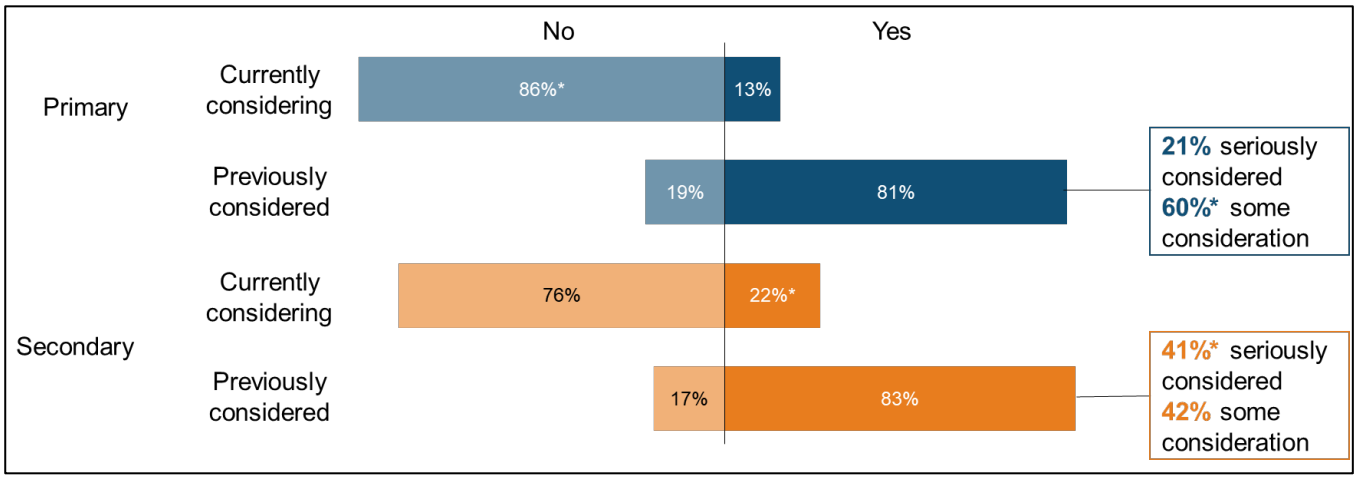
In this chapter we discuss the findings from LA-maintained schools (referred to in this research as “non-converters”). It starts by covering current and previous considerations of conversion, and the reasons for wanting to remain LA-maintained schools. It then looks at what if anything could persuade these schools to convert, including what they see as the potential benefits. It finishes by examining current intentions around conversion.

3.1 Current views on converting and joining a MAT

3.1.1 Current and previous considerations around conversion

A minority of non-converters were currently considering converting to academy status at the time of interview (Figure 21). Secondary schools were significantly more likely to be considering it (22%) than primary schools (13%).

Figure 21: Whether currently considering or previously considered converting to an academy



Base: All non-converters; primary 200, secondary 100. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between primary and secondary schools.

Most non-converters (81% of primary and 83% of secondary schools) had given conversion at least some consideration in the past (Figure 21). Secondary schools were significantly more likely than primary schools to have given it serious consideration (41% vs. 21%). Where non-converters had previously considered converting, the majority had done so before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (88% of primary schools and 91% of secondary schools).

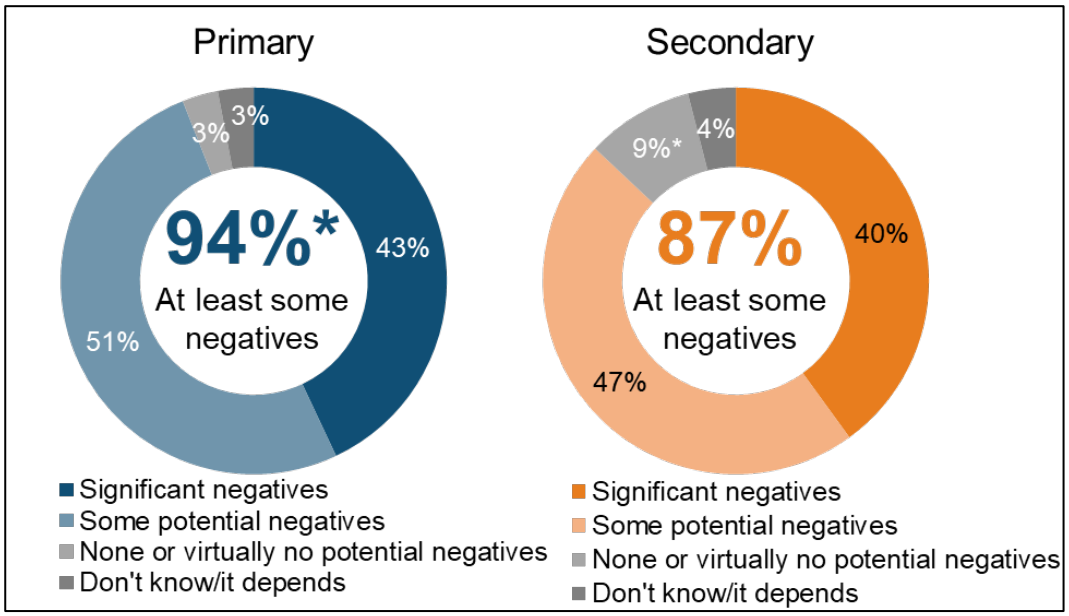
Governors corroborated these findings: just a minority reported their school was currently considering converting (4 of the 29), but most said their school had done so in the past (19 of the 29).

3.1.2 Reasons for remaining as LA-maintained schools

The vast majority of non-converters (94% of primary schools and 87% of secondaries) felt that there would be negatives associated with converting to academy status (Figure 22). In comparison, only a small minority that felt there would be no or virtually no negatives, with this view more common among secondaries (9%) than primaries (3%).

Governors were similarly concerned about potential negatives of converting, with 26 out of 29 feeling there would be at least some negatives associated with it.

Figure 22: Proportion of non-converters that think there could be negatives of converting to an academy

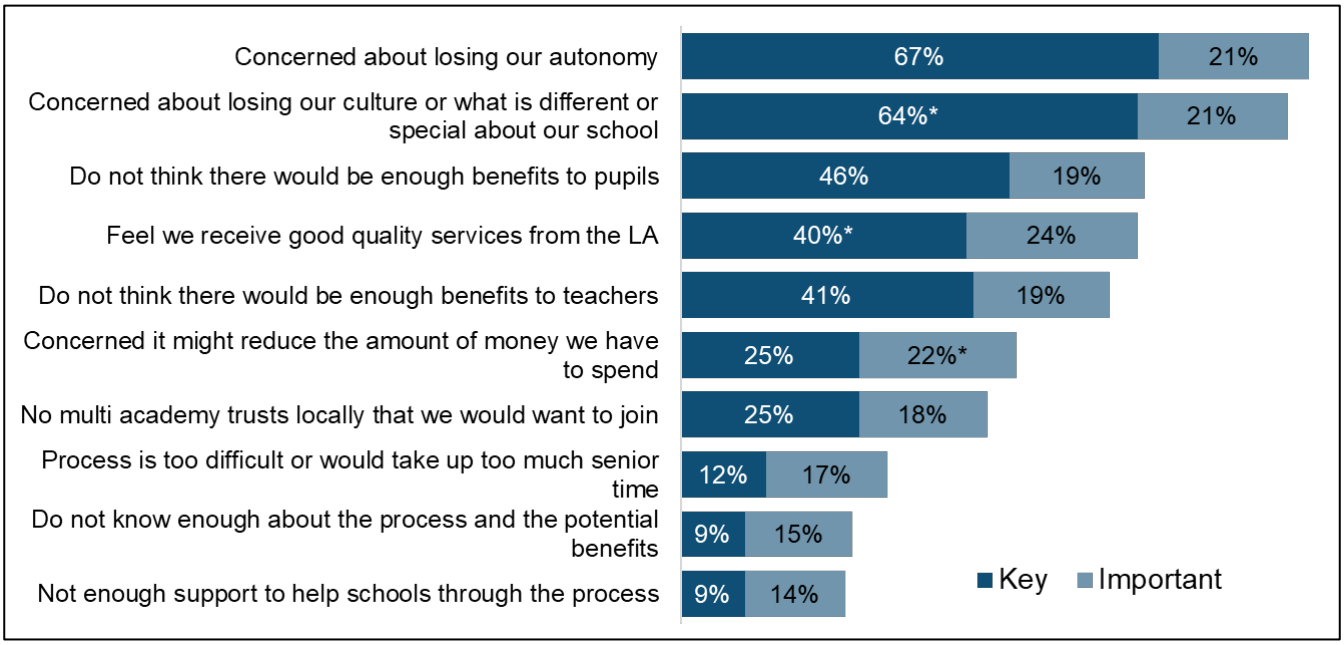


Base: All non-converters; primary: 200, secondary: 100. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between primary and secondary schools.

Concern about loss of autonomy and culture were the most frequently cited reasons for choosing not to convert amongst both primary and secondary schools, as shown in the next two charts.

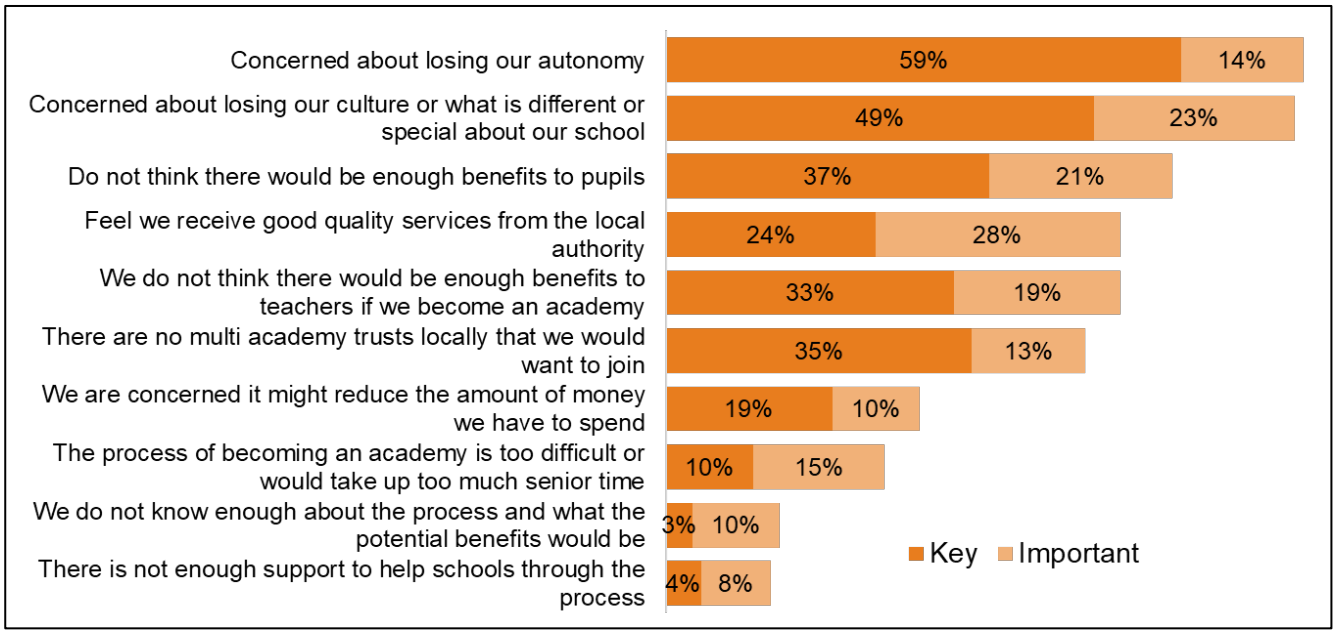
Two-thirds (67%) of primary schools and three-fifths (59%) of secondary schools indicated that concern about losing autonomy was a *key* reason that they had not become an academy. Concern about loss of culture or what is different or special about their school, while common amongst both, was more frequently a key reason for primary schools (64%) than secondary schools (49%).

Figure 23: Key and important reasons for not being an academy amongst primary non-converters (prompted)



Base: All non-converters; primary 200. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between primary and secondary schools.

Figure 24: Key and important reasons for not being an academy amongst secondary non-converters (prompted)



Base: All non-converters; secondary 100. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between primary and secondary schools.

Schools often saw loss of autonomy and loss of culture or what is special or different about their school as closely intertwined. Many[7] had concerns about losing their school's unique identity and their ability to make decisions, and worried that the school would be required to take on a new 'homogenous' identity consistent across all schools in the MAT.

"The school has a [long] history and has clear traditions and heritage which may get consumed by a standardised MAT format, for example having the name, logo, timetable, curriculum, and all aspects. It becomes a one-stop shop type of thing"

Secondary, North, non-faith

"I came from a school that was previously in a MAT. [The schools in the MAT] became clones of each other. You could walk in, and they'd be nigh on carbon copies. The school I'm at now is respected for its uniqueness and any attempt to lose that or any erosion of that, or perceived erosion of that would be a huge negative"

Secondary, Midlands, non-faith

For some, their concern about loss of autonomy was about a more general desire to retain control over decision making. They felt that being one school in a wider MAT would reduce the role of headteachers and governors, leaving them with concerns about what that would mean for them and their school. Related to this, there were also some concerns about how they would find delivering on decisions that had been made at the MAT level, especially if they did not agree with those decisions.

"As a headteacher you're appointed to lead the school, not be part of a cabinet with a head above you that can change direction. Why would I surrender my ability to make a difference and bring a vision to the school, why would I want to surrender that to someone else?"

Secondary, Midlands, non-faith

Related to this, some schools felt that the department's move to encourage schools to be part of MATs moved away from some of the original benefits which academisation provided to schools:

[7] N.B. these findings have not been reported quantitatively, as follow-up questions on autonomy and culture, in order not to over-burden survey respondents, were not asked to all schools that gave them as a key reason.

“When schools were first able to convert to academies there was a huge amount of freedom for schools. There is increasing pressure in the DfE that centralisation is good, so it's not surprising that schools [are] concerned about losing autonomy”

Secondary, Midlands, non-faith

Schools did also provide specific examples of areas that they wanted to retain control over. Most frequently, these were budgeting and finance, pupil wellbeing, relationships with the local community, school ethos and values, curriculum, and staffing.

Governors agreed that loss of autonomy was a major concern: 22 out of the 29 governors reported that loss of autonomy was a key concern, and 21 of the 29 cited the loss of their school’s culture.

“Becoming part of an existing MAT would mean handing over too much control to an existing organisation that may not match with our standards, aims and values”

Primary, Midlands, Faith

As autonomy is such a clear concern for non-converters, if the department would like more schools to become part of MATs, then emphasis must be placed on the findings from the recent converters. The previous chapter shows that, despite some reporting loss of autonomy as a result of converting (Figure 13), on balance they felt that converting provided them with more benefits than drawbacks, particularly around collaboration (Figure 1, Figure 9 and Figure 10).

It was also fairly common for schools to cite a perceived lack of benefits to pupils and teachers as reasons for not converting to academy status (Figure 23 and 25). Around four in ten schools mentioned that there would not be enough benefits to pupils as a key reason for not converting to an academy (46% of primary and 37% of secondary schools); slightly fewer saw lack of benefits to teachers as a key reason (41% of primary and 33% of secondary schools).

Many were also satisfied with their current relationship with the LA, suggesting they saw no reason to change. It was more common for primary schools to view this as a key reason for not converting than secondary schools (40% vs. 24%).

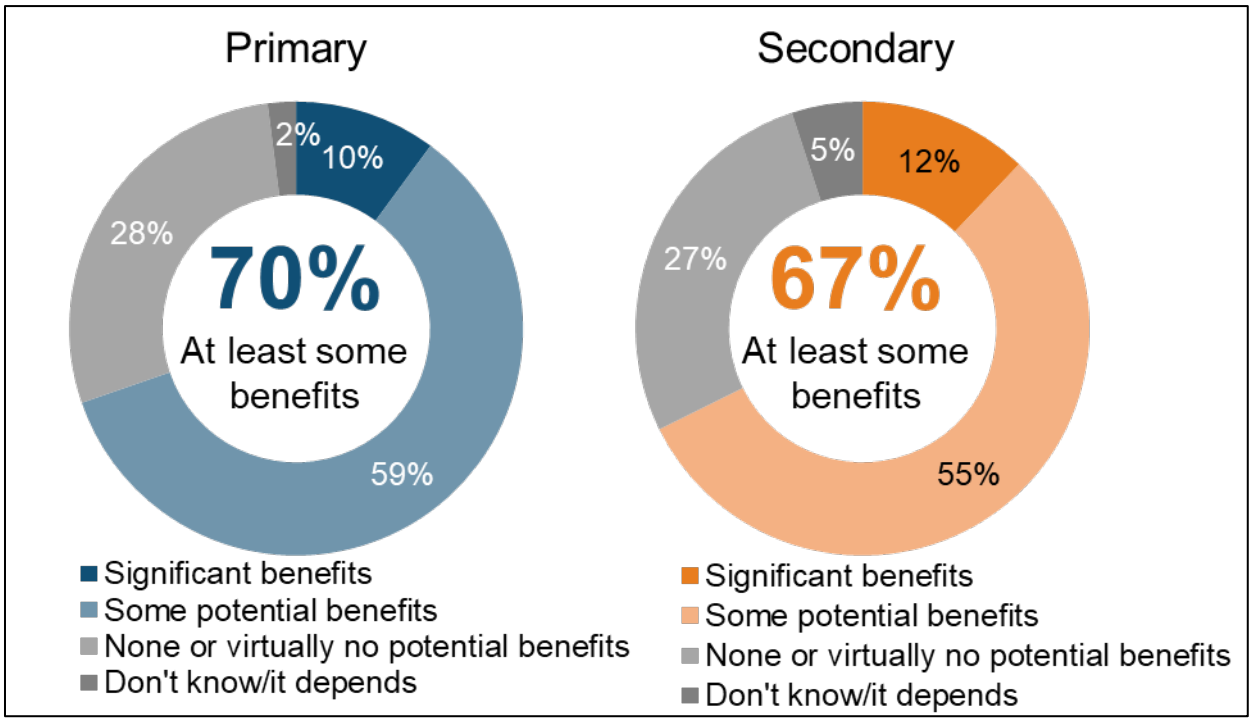
Compared to the factors discussed, less common reasons were there not being a MAT locally the school would want to join (key for 25% of primaries and 35% of secondaries) and concerns about the school having less money to spend (key for 25% of primaries and 19% of secondaries). A lack of knowledge about the process of becoming an academy and the potential benefits, and a perceived lack of support to help schools through the process, were rarely key or important reasons for not becoming an academy.

3.2 What could persuade non-converters to convert

3.2.1 Potential benefits

Despite the concerns they held, most non-converters felt there would be at least some benefits of converting. Seven in ten (70% of primary schools and 67% of secondary schools) felt there would be some or significant benefits. However, it is worth noting that non-converters appeared less convinced of the potential benefits than they did of the potential negatives; only a minority (10% of primary schools and 12% of secondary schools) felt there would be *significant* benefits, compared to four in ten that felt there would be significant negatives (Figure 22). Additionally, there were slightly over a quarter (28% of primary schools and 27% of secondary schools) that could not see any benefits or virtually no benefits of converting.

Figure 25: Proportion of non-converters that think there could be benefits of converting to an academy



Base: All non-converters; primary 200, secondary 100. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage between primary and secondary schools.

Governors were less positive about the potential benefits. Only 13 out of 29 felt there would be any benefits, while 14 out of the 29 thought there be none or virtually no benefits.

In terms of the specific potential benefits that non-converters thought there would be (Figure 26), this was most commonly greater collaboration and sharing of skills (58% of primary schools and 61% of secondary schools). This aligns with the most frequently experienced benefit amongst recent converters (Figure 9 and Figure 10).

“More rapid school improvement and creating opportunities for drawing on expertise from across the trust”

Secondary, North, non-faith

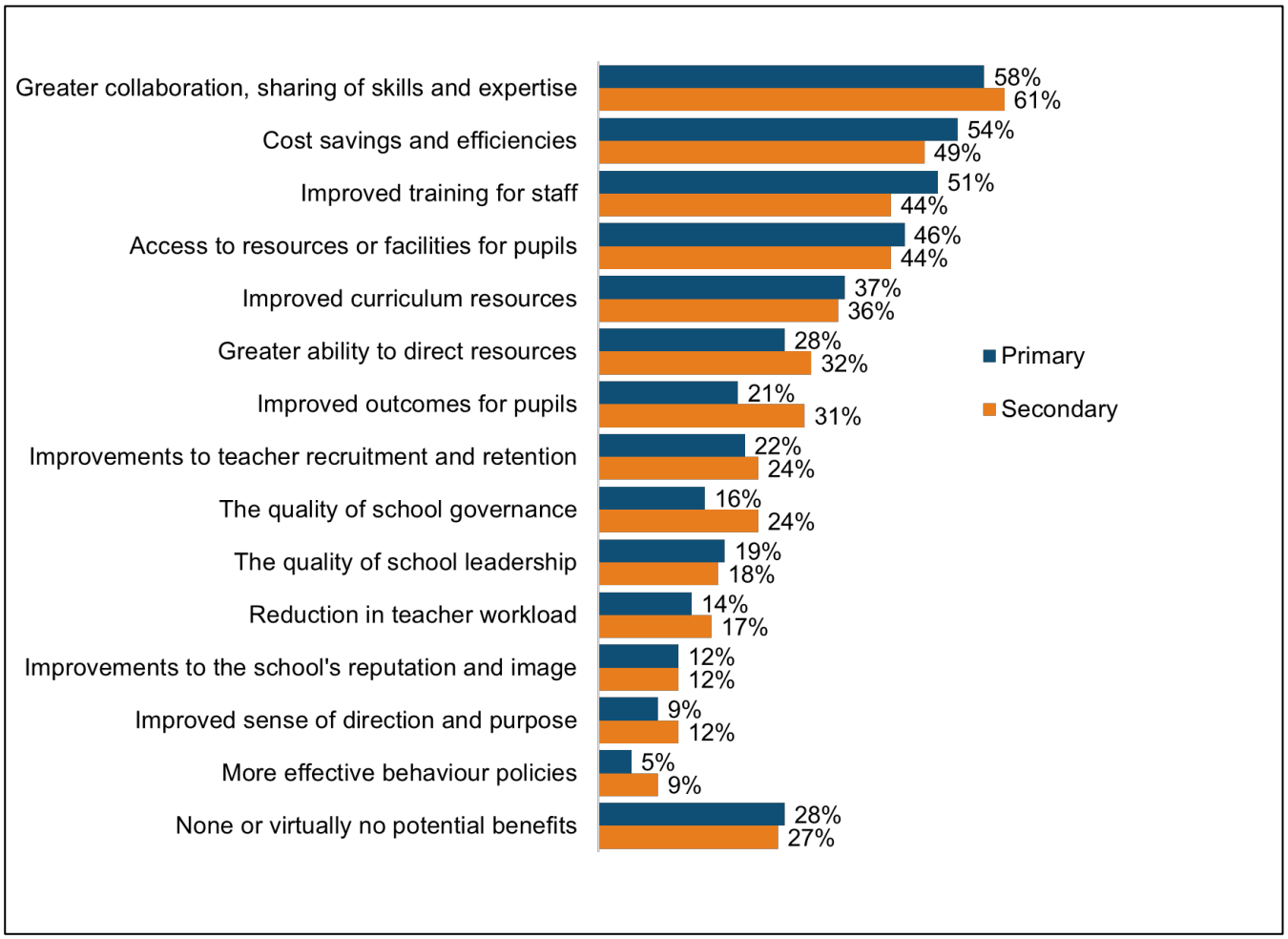
Other commonly anticipated benefits included cost savings and efficiencies (54% of primaries and 49% of secondaries), improved training for staff (51% primary, 44% secondary) and access to resources or facilities for pupils (46% primary and 44% secondary). Generally the views of primary and secondary schools were similar.

Governors’ views of the potential benefits were broadly similar. The top three benefits according to governors were:

- Greater collaboration, sharing of skills and expertise (all 13 of those identifying any benefits);
- Cost savings and efficiencies (12 out of 13); and
- Access to resources or facilities (10 out of 13).

There were a few benefits that were anticipated by relatively low proportions of non-converters, despite being commonly experienced by recent converters. Fewer than three in ten non-converters (27% for both primary and secondary schools) anticipated there would be benefits to the quality of school leadership, and fewer than a fifth (13% of primary and 18% of secondary schools) anticipated improved sense of direction and purpose. However, the majority of recent converters experienced improvements to these (Figure 9 and Figure 10) suggesting that there was potential scope for increasing awareness of the likelihood of these benefits.

Figure 26: Main potential benefits of becoming an academy (prompted)

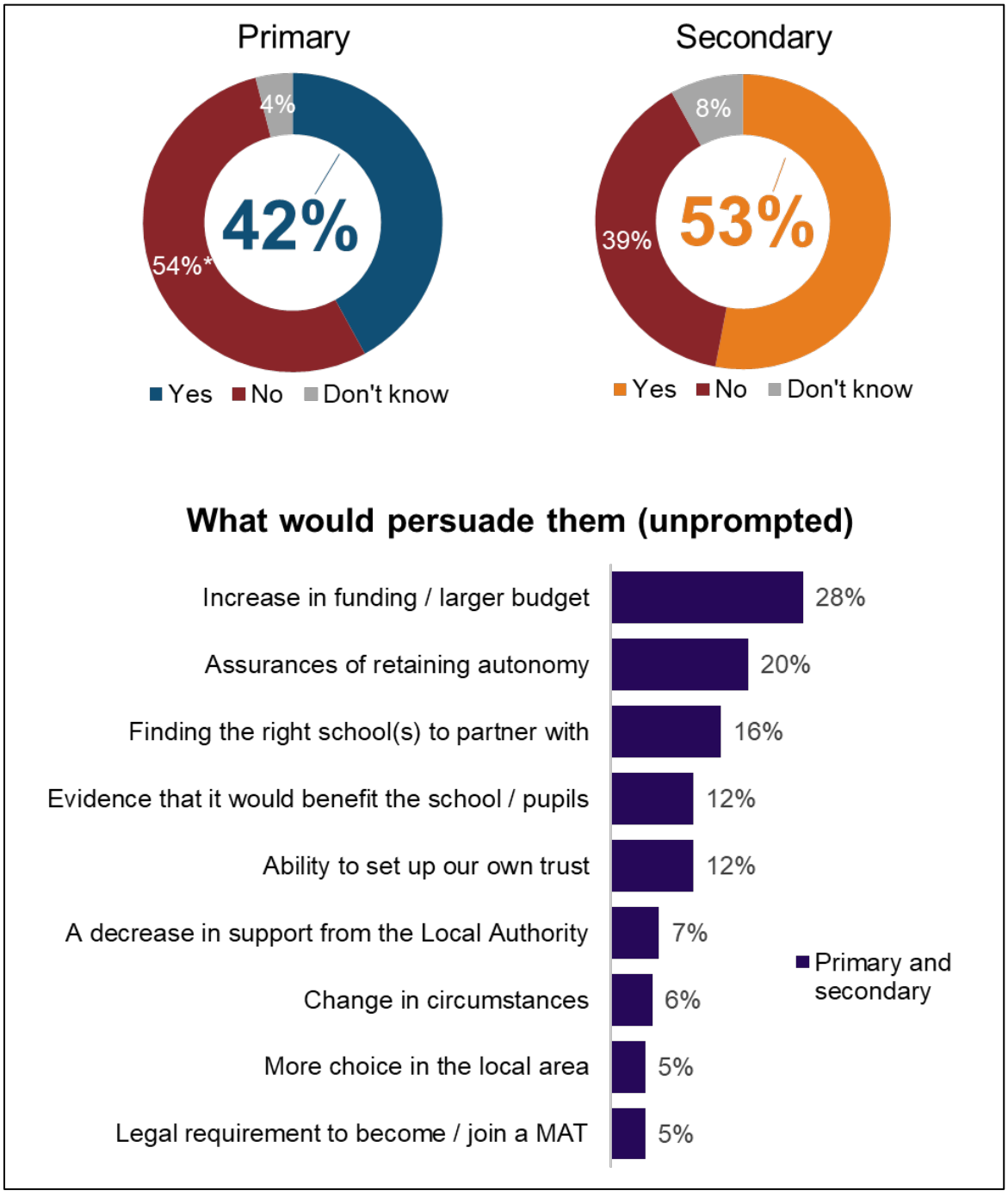


Base: All non-converters; primary 200, secondary 100. * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between primary and secondary schools.

3.2.2 What might persuade those currently not considering converting

Among those not currently considering converting to become an academy, around four in ten primary schools (42%) and half of secondary schools (53%) felt there were things that could make them want to become an academy (Figure 27). Most commonly, these schools mentioned increased funding or budget (28%), assurances of autonomy (20%) and finding the right schools to partner with (16%).

Figure 27: Whether there was anything that would make non-converters want to be an academy



Base: Non-converters who are not currently considering becoming an academy (primary 173, secondary 77); non-converters that have something that would make their school want to become an academy – reported at combined level due to low base of secondary schools (primary and secondary: 110). * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between primary and secondary schools.

Generally the responses from schools suggested it would need to be something significant that would make them want to become an academy:

"Maybe if it were to increase our budget or offered us something we don't have at the moment. But it would have to be a long-term benefit."

Primary, Midlands, non-faith

"A guarantee that we remain as we are, our identity is protected, the day-to-day operation of our school remains under the direct control of the staff and governors."

Primary, North, Faith

"If the right [trust] came along and it blew us out of the water…the whole ethos behind their trust and looking at how a school may have started at a lesser position and have made good progress. For example a group of five schools that started with special measures and if they have helped transform those into good schools then it is a trust worth looking at, as they have a good reputation in doing things right."

Primary, Midlands, non-faith

Only a third (36% of both primary and secondary schools) felt they would benefit from more information, support, or guidance about the process of converting, suggesting that this is not a major immediate barrier.

In a speech in April 2021, the Secretary of State announced an initiative that would allow LA-maintained schools to join a MAT on a trial basis for up to 18 months, allowing these schools to 'try before they buy'. Overall 23% of primary and 20% of secondary schools felt this would help them decide whether or not to join a MAT. Schools not currently considering converting were particularly unlikely to feel this would help their decision (18% compared to 41% of those currently considering), suggesting it will have limited impact in persuading those currently against the idea of converting. Governors were similarly ambivalent, with only 9 out of 29 feeling like it would help them decide.

3.3 Current considerations around converting

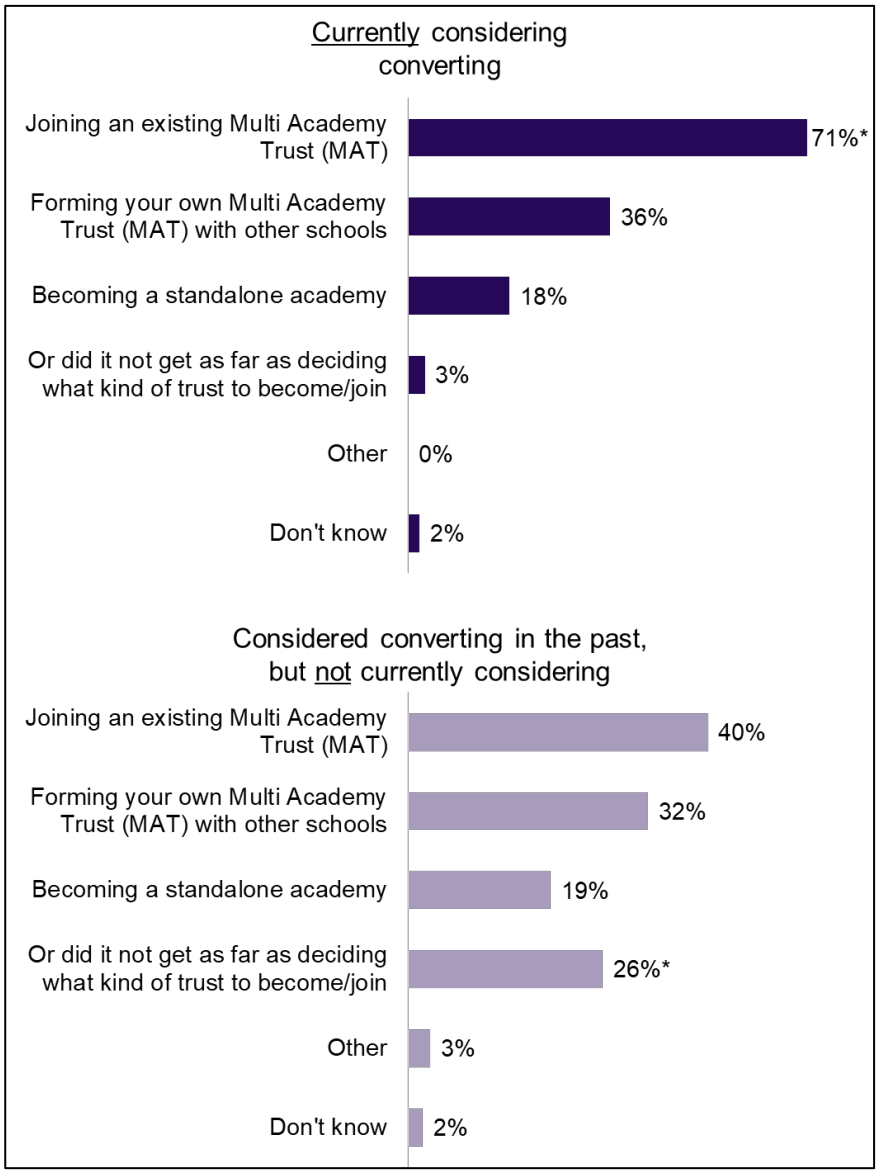
For the remainder of this chapter, the data is presented split by those currently considering converting and those not currently considering converting. Due to the low base sizes, these findings are not split into primary and secondary but instead combine both phases.

Amongst those currently considering converting at the time of interview (22% of secondary schools and 13% of primary schools), most were considering either joining or forming a MAT

(Figure 28): seven in ten (71%) were considering joining an existing MAT, while just over a third (36%) were considering forming their own MAT. Less than a fifth (18%) were considering becoming a standalone academy. (Note, this was a multi-code question and respondents were able to give more than one answer.)

Those that had previously considered converting were more evenly split between having considered joining an existing MAT (40%) and forming their own MAT (32%). Again, around a fifth (19%) had considered becoming a standalone academy. Around a quarter (26%) had not got that far in the process to decide on the type of trust.

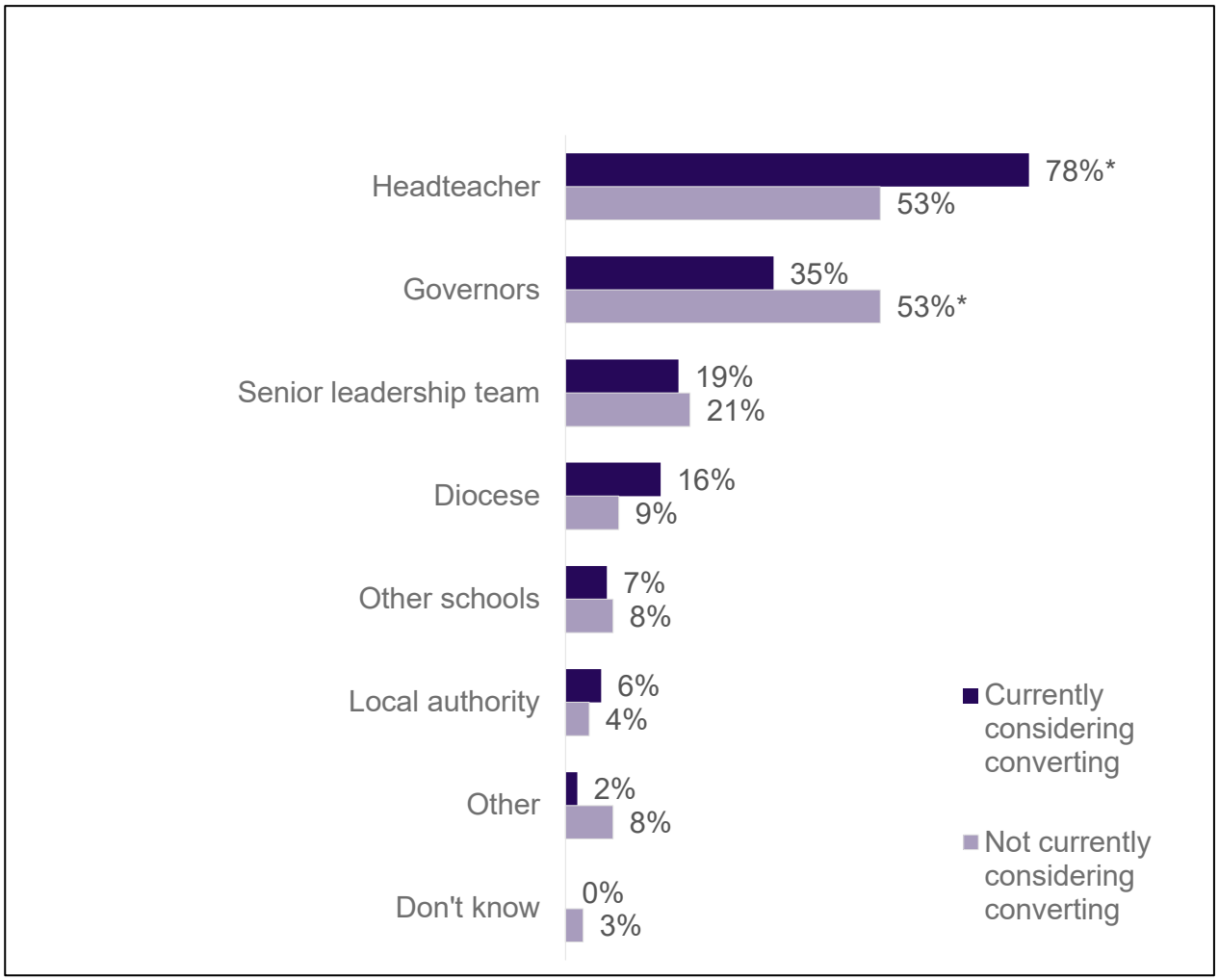
Figure 28: Type of trust non-converters were considering whether to become or join



Base: Non-converters who are not currently considering becoming an academy (50); non-converters who considered in the past but are not currently considering becoming an academy (191). * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between schools considering and not considering converting.

Headteachers and governors were the most likely to have initiated the idea of becoming an academy (Figure 29), especially for those currently considering it. Other stakeholders, including the senior leadership team, diocese, other schools, and the LA only initiated the idea to convert in a minority of cases.

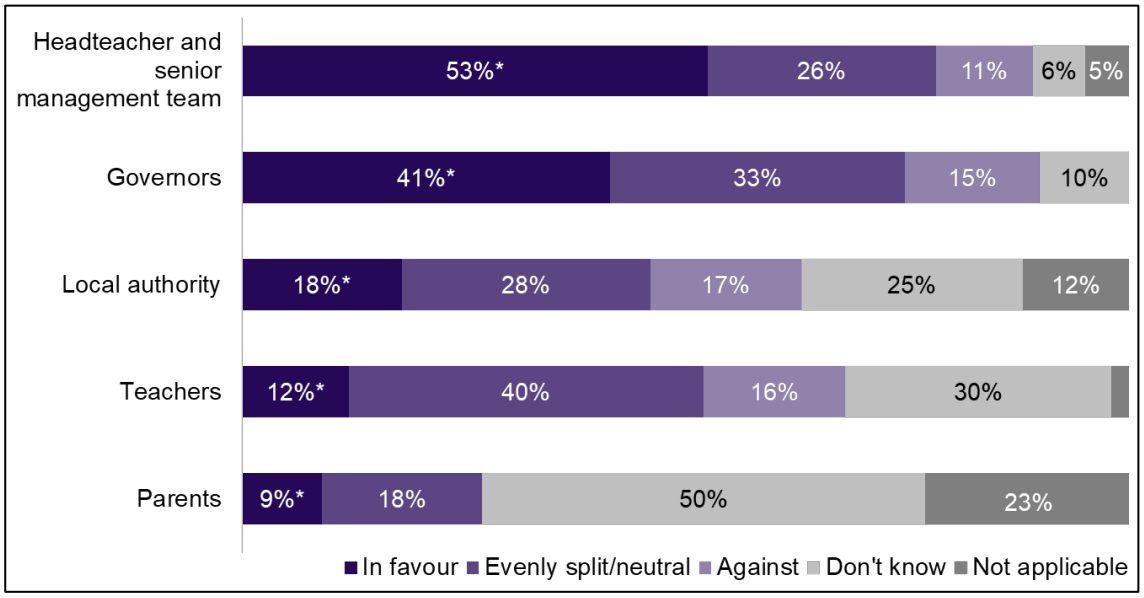
Figure 29: Stakeholders who initiated the idea of becoming an academy



Base: Non-converters who are not currently considering becoming an academy (50); non-converters who considered in the past but are not currently considering becoming an academy (191). * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between schools considering and not considering converting.

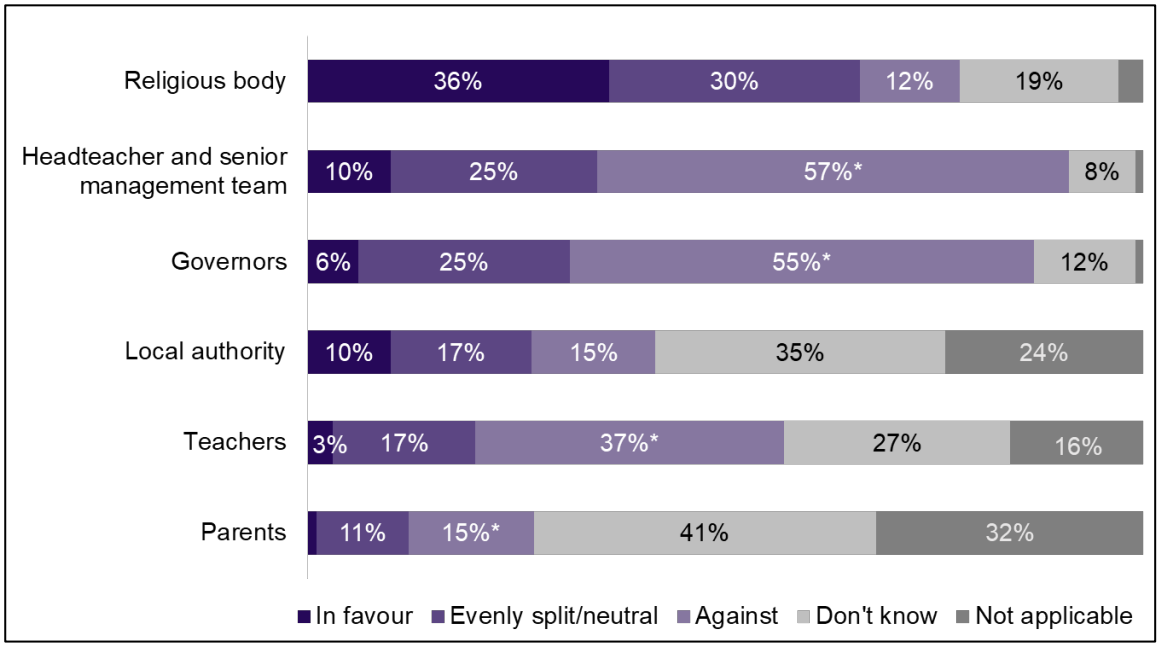
The headteacher and senior management were the stakeholder group most likely to be in favour of converting amongst those currently considering it (53%) compared with a quarter (26%) neutral or split, and 11% against. Governors were the next most likely to be in favour (41% in favour, 33% evenly split or neutral, 15% against). Local authorities and teachers were broadly as likely to be against the idea of converting as in favour.

Figure 30: Stakeholders in favour, neutral or against the idea of becoming an academy amongst those currently considering converting



Base: Non-converters currently considering becoming an academy (50); "Religious body" not shown due to low base (19). * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage difference between schools considering and not considering converting (see Figure 33 for not currently considering).

Figure 31: Stakeholders in favour, neutral or against the idea of becoming an academy amongst those not currently considering converting

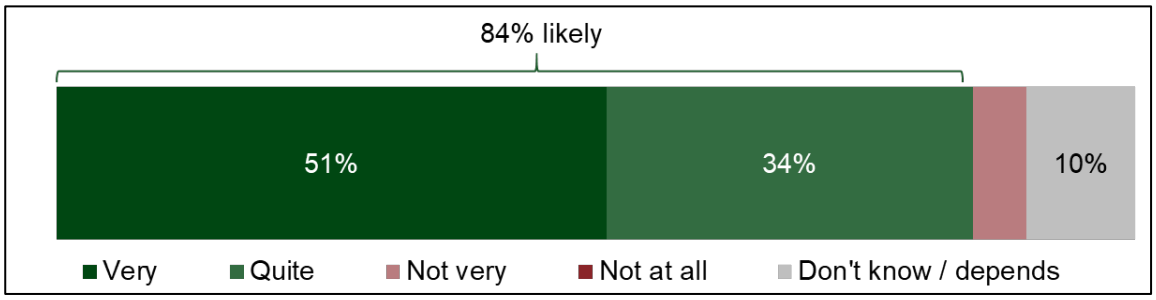


Base: Non-converters who considered in the past but not currently considering becoming an academy (191). "Religious body" only asked to faith schools (58). * Indicates a statistically significantly higher percentage between schools considering and not considering converting (see Figure 31 for those currently considering).

Amongst those not currently considering converting, headteachers (57%) and governors (55%) were the stakeholder groups most commonly against converting (Figure 32), with few actively in favour (10% of headteachers and 6% of governors). Religious bodies were felt to be the most positive about the idea (36% in favour vs. 12% against). Although other stakeholders were less likely to be against converting in these schools, this was usually also because survey respondents did not know how they felt, or they were not involved.

The vast majority of those currently considering converting felt it was likely the school would convert within the next two or three years: half (51%) thought this very likely and a third (34%) felt it quite likely (Figure 32). None of these schools felt they were not at all likely to convert in that timeframe.

Figure 32: Likelihood school will convert in the next two to three years amongst those currently considering converting



Base: Non-converters who are currently considering becoming an academy (50).

In answer to a follow-up question, many of the schools that were likely to convert explained that they were either already in the process or would be starting it shortly:

"We are, at the moment, doing our due diligence on a number of trusts and we will have made a decision on the trust we want to partner with by the next academic year. We are looking to convert at the start of the next financial year on 1st April 2022."

Primary, South, non-faith

"We've got a deficit budget and we're working in partnership with a MAT and will be formally applying to become an academy in the next 12 months."

Secondary, North, non-faith

The next most common reason for being likely to convert in the next two to three years was being aware of the department's aim for all schools to do so, or because their local authority had suggested it, rather than necessarily being driven by the school's own wishes:

"Direction of travel for all schools from the DfE is for all schools to become academies. If that is the case, then you want to control your own destiny."

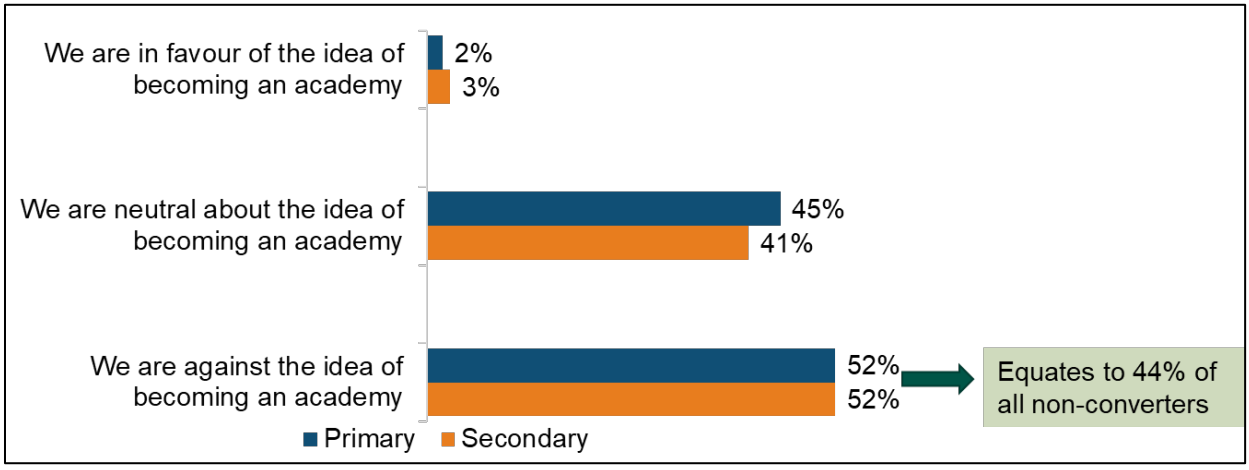
Secondary, North, non-faith

"I don't think we are being given a choice. If we could hold off for another ten years we would."

Primary, South, non-faith

Only a very small minority of those not currently considering converting were in favour of becoming an academy in the future (2% of primary and 3% of secondary schools, Figure 33). While around four in ten were neutral (45% of primary and 41% of secondary schools), just over half of those not currently considering converting were against the idea (52% for both primary and secondary). This means that based on all non-converters interviewed (rather than those not currently considering converting), 44% were against the idea of converting.

Figure 33: Whether non-converters not currently considering converting were in favour, neutral or against becoming an academy



Base: Non-converters not currently considering becoming an academy; primary 173, secondary 77.

4. Long-term standalone academies

This chapter focuses on schools that converted to academy status before September 2018 but have either not joined a MAT or have set up their own MAT but are the only school in that MAT. These schools are referred to in this research as standalone academies. It begins by exploring the experiences of being standalone academies, including the improvements and negatives experienced as a result of converting. It then looks at schools' initial considerations around joining a MAT and the reasons for choosing to remain standalone academies. It concludes by presenting their current considerations around joining or expanding a MAT.

4.1 Experiences of being a standalone academy

4.1.1 Overall impact of converting

All standalone academies provided feedback about both the benefits and drawbacks of converting to an academy, and the overall impact of the decision to convert. The majority (64%) felt that on balance their experience had been positive. Just over a quarter (28%) reported experiencing mixed or little change, while only two per cent felt that the overall impact was negative.

The vast majority of schools that felt the impact of converting had been positive reported that those positives matched (60%) or exceeded (27%) their expectations. Very few (6%) reported lower overall positive impact than they anticipated.

4.1.2 Improvements experienced or expect to experience as a result of converting

Figure 34 shows the specific benefits that standalone academies have experienced or expect to experience as a result of converting. The most commonly mentioned benefits (each experienced by at least seven in ten) were:

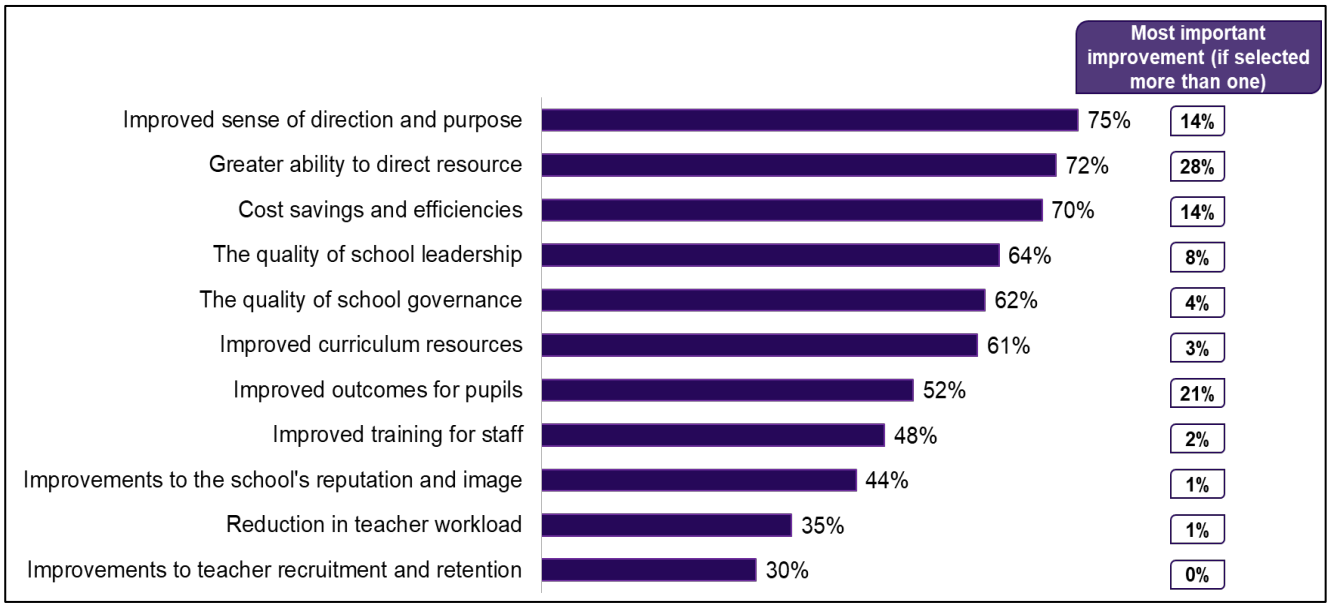
- An improved sense of direction and purpose (75%);
- A greater ability to direct resources, enabling teachers to concentrate on frontline teaching (72%); and
- Cost savings and efficiencies (70%).

Between three-fifths and two-thirds of standalone academies had or expected to experience the following benefits:

- Improved quality of school leadership (64%);
- Improved quality of school governance (62%);
- Improved curriculum resources (61%).

Figure 34 also shows the single most important benefit that standalone academies have experienced or expect to experience as a result of converting. One of four improvement areas was selected by over three-quarter of respondents: greater ability to direct resources and enable teachers to concentrate on frontline teaching (28%), improved outcomes for pupils, including improved educational attainment (21%), improved sense of direction and purpose (14%), and cost savings and efficiencies (14%).

Figure 34: Improvements experienced or expect to experience as a result of becoming an academy, and the single most important benefit (prompted)

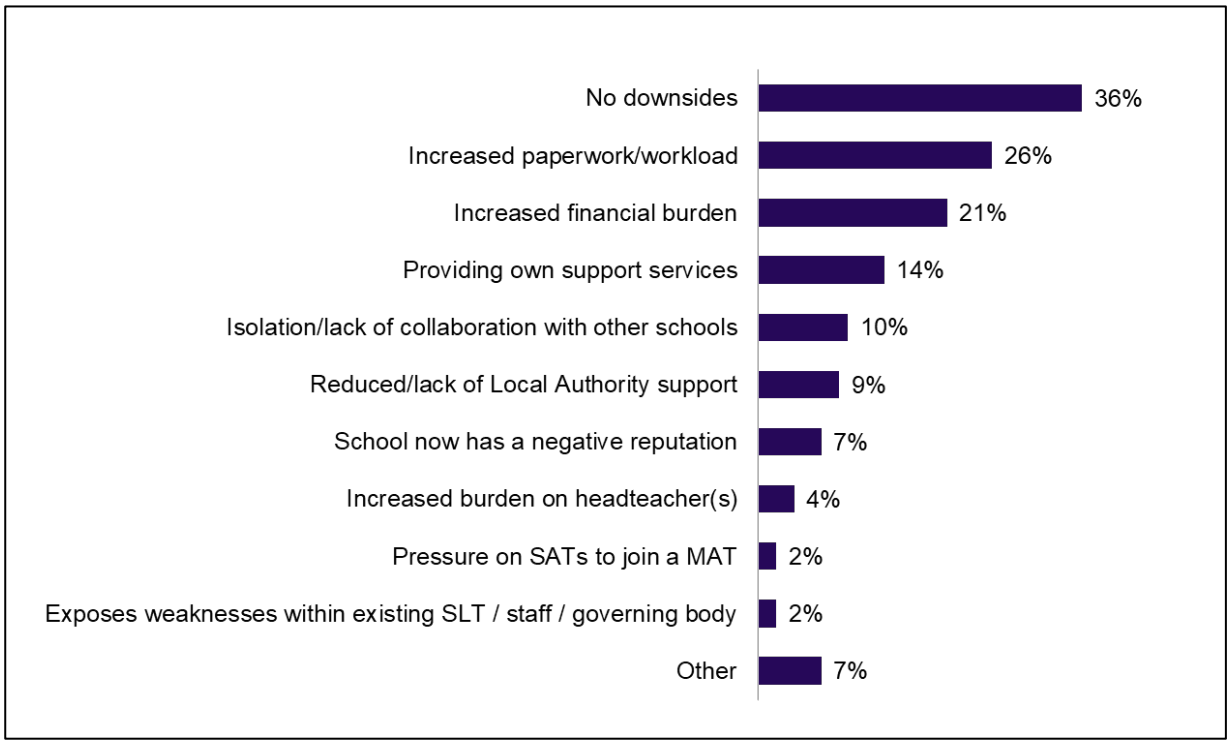


Base: All standalone academies (100); those that selected more than one improvement (95).

4.1.3 Negatives experienced as a result of converting

All standalone academies were asked what negatives or downsides, if any, they had experienced as a result of converting. Approaching two-thirds had experienced some negative impacts (compared with 97% that had experienced positives). Figure 35 shows the two most frequently mentioned drawbacks of converting for long-term standalone academies were an increase in workload and paperwork (26%) and increased financial burdens (21%). Around one in seven (14%) had needed to provide their own support services, and around one in ten complained of feeling isolated and having less collaboration with other schools (10%); and having reduced or lack of local authority support (9%).

Figure 35: Downsides of becoming a standalone academy (open responses)



Base: All long-term standalone academies (100).

4.2 Reasons for choosing to be a standalone academy

4.2.1 Reasons for converting to an academy

Respondents that had been involved at the time in the decision for the school to convert to an academy (this applied to 56 of the 100 respondents) were asked if each of nine reasons (listed in Figure 36) were key, important, partial or not reasons why the school became an academy. Greater autonomy and increased freedoms were major factors. Nine in ten standalone academies (91%) stated that greater freedom over decisions was a key or important reason, while three-quarters (75%) described having more autonomy over their budget as a key or important consideration.

Another common reason was improved outcomes for pupils. Just over two-thirds (68%) cited this as a key or important reason in the schools' decisions to convert.

Half of schools (50%) said a key or important reason for converting was a desire to be independent from the LA. When asked to explain this further, this was often in terms of their having more autonomy. Many also felt that this would lead to improvements in various aspects of running the school.

"We wanted the autonomy to make decisions in order to improve the quality of recruitment, retention, capability, etc."

Secondary, South, non-faith

"We wanted the independence from the local authority and [to] decide what curriculum we were delivering. I wanted the freedom to make the decisions myself without any red tape. At the time we were an outstanding school, so we were comfortable standing on our own two feet"

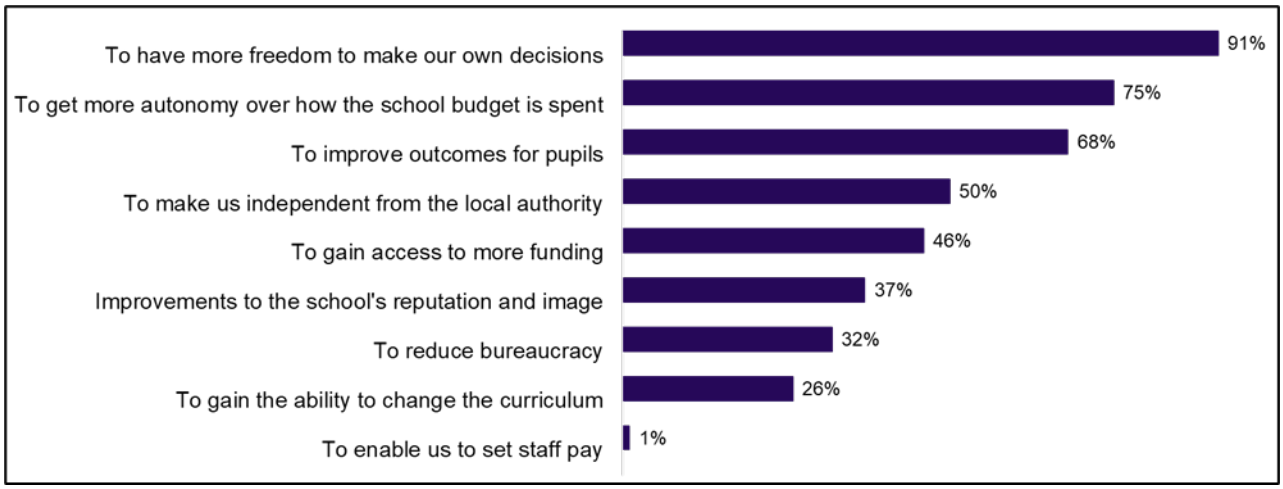
Primary, Midlands, non-faith

"[We] wanted to expand the school and the local authority were not supportive of that, we needed to serve the community"

Primary, Midlands, non-faith

Another common reason was improved outcomes for pupils. Just over two-thirds (68%) cited this as a key or important reason in the schools' decisions to convert.

Figure 36 Key or important reasons for becoming an academy (prompted)



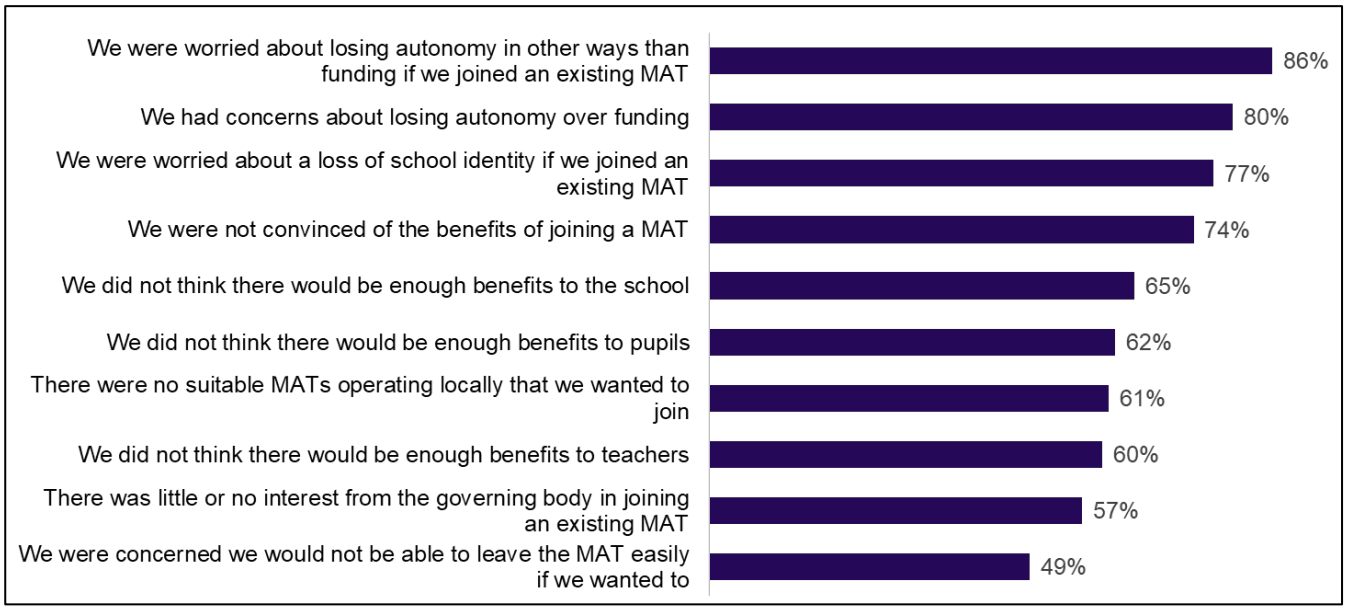
Base: Respondents involved in decisions about converting (56).

4.2.2 Considerations around joining a MAT

Most long-term standalone academies had not considered joining a MAT at the time they converted. Two-thirds (66%) of academies that were not in a MAT had neither considered joining a MAT at the time of converting nor setting up one of their own. Similarly, just over half (53%) of academies that had set up their own MAT had not considered joining an existing one.

When asked for the reasons for not wanting to join a MAT, the theme of autonomy was raised again (see Figure 37). Four out of five (80%) had been concerned about losing their autonomy over funding and just under nine in ten (86%) had been worried about losing their autonomy in other ways than funding.

Figure 37: Key or important reasons for not joining a MAT (prompted)



Base: Respondents involved in decisions about converting (56).

Given that it is one of the most important reasons for having converted to an academy (see Figure 36), it is interesting that that the potential loss of autonomy was a major concern among standalone academies in not joining a MAT. Some mentioned not wanting to risk the autonomy gained by coming away from the LA, while others felt that they might even have less autonomy as part of a MAT than they did as an LA-maintained school.

"We became an academy to become independent, so then what would be the benefit of joining a MAT? Lose autonomy over financials, staffing, curriculum…"

Primary, Midlands, faith

"Budgets, ethos, school improvement drive—we would have had more autonomy staying with the local authority."

Primary, Midlands, non-faith

"You lose autonomy over everything, over who you appoint, how you spend money, how we deal with difficult children, how we deal with stake holders. Everything I do as a principal that I would want to do I would have to go to someone else, it's my whole job list we would lose autonomy over."

Secondary, South, non-faith

Related to the theme of autonomy, there was also a worry among more than three-quarters of standalone academies (77%) about a loss of school identity if they joined a MAT (Figure 37). This was often intertwined with the loss of autonomy, with many schools referring to a loss of one as the loss of the other.

"We wanted to maintain our autonomy…we didn't want to be branded; we wanted our own identity."

Primary, South, faith

We pride ourselves on being a very friendly school with key beliefs and values that strongly represent our community. The worry of moving to a MAT would be those values would come from the trust and there would be an erosion in those values as they would become something different".

Secondary, South, non-faith

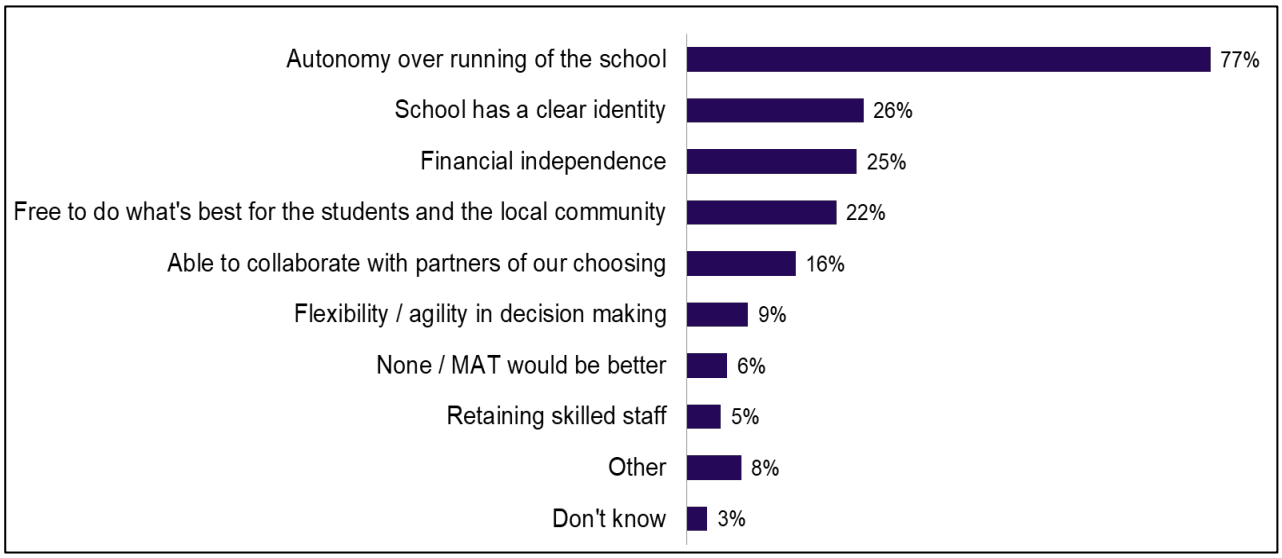
Perhaps underlying these concerns was the fact that almost three-quarters (74%) of standalone academies felt unconvinced of the benefits of joining a MAT (Figure 37).

4.2.3 Benefits of being a standalone academy

Standalone academies were asked as an open question what they saw as the benefits of being a standalone academy. These largely reflected the potential downsides of joining a MAT and related to autonomy and a sense of control. More than three-quarters (77%) felt that autonomy over the running of their schools was a particular benefit of remaining a standalone academy. (Figure 38). The next most common benefits of being a standalone academy, mentioned by around a quarter of schools, were:

- The school having a clear identity (26%);
- Financial independence (25%); and
- Being free to do what is best of the students and local community (22%).

Figure 38: Benefits of not operating in a MAT with other schools (spontaneous)

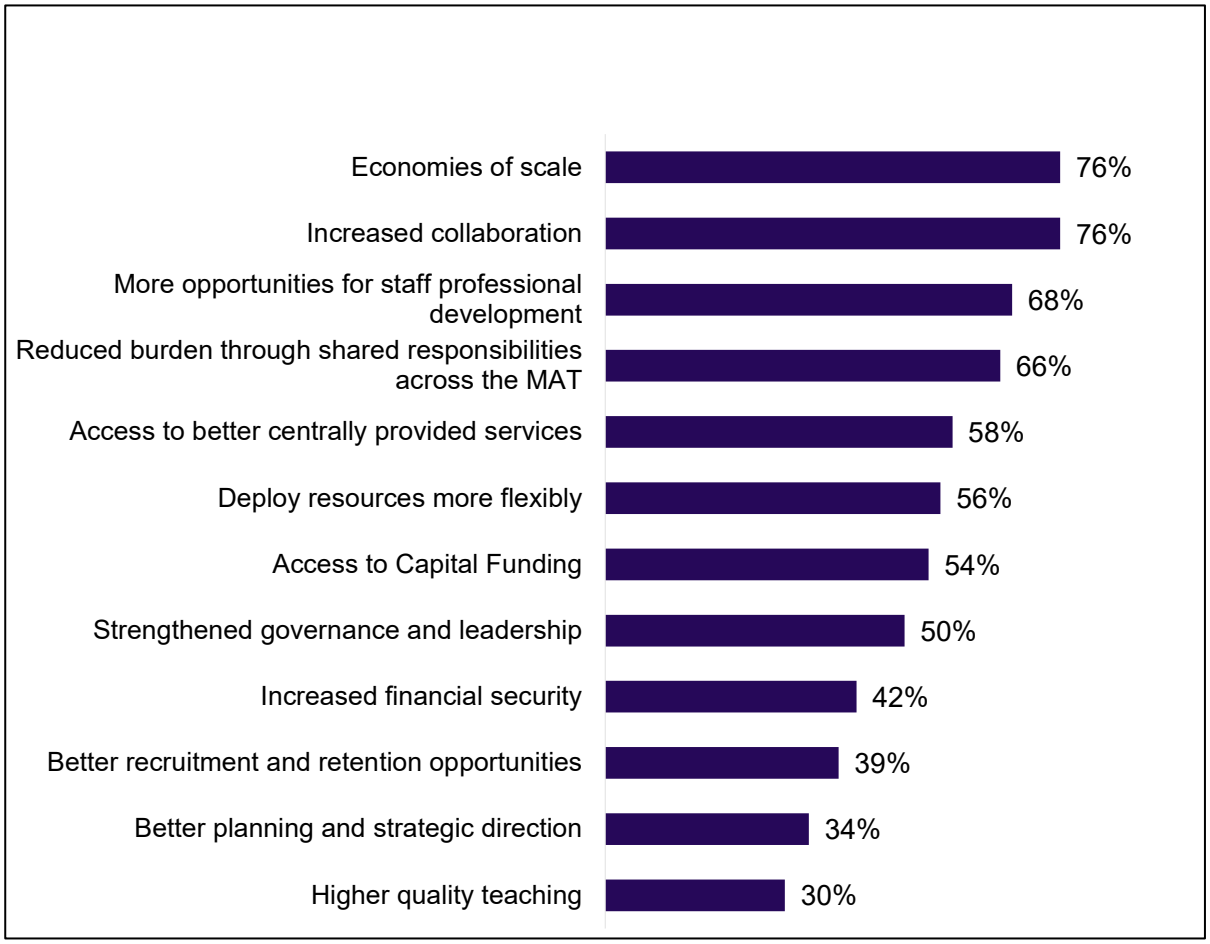


Base: All long-term standalone academies (100).

4.2.4 Potential benefits and drawbacks of joining a MAT

Despite their concerns about forming or joining a MAT, most standalone academies were aware of potential benefits that could be gained (Figure 39). Three-quarters (76%) cited each of economies of scale and increased collaboration as potential benefits. The next two most common benefits (mentioned by around two-thirds) were more opportunities for staff professional development (68%) and reduced burden through shared responsibilities across the MAT (66%).

Figure 39: Benefits of joining or forming a MAT (prompted)

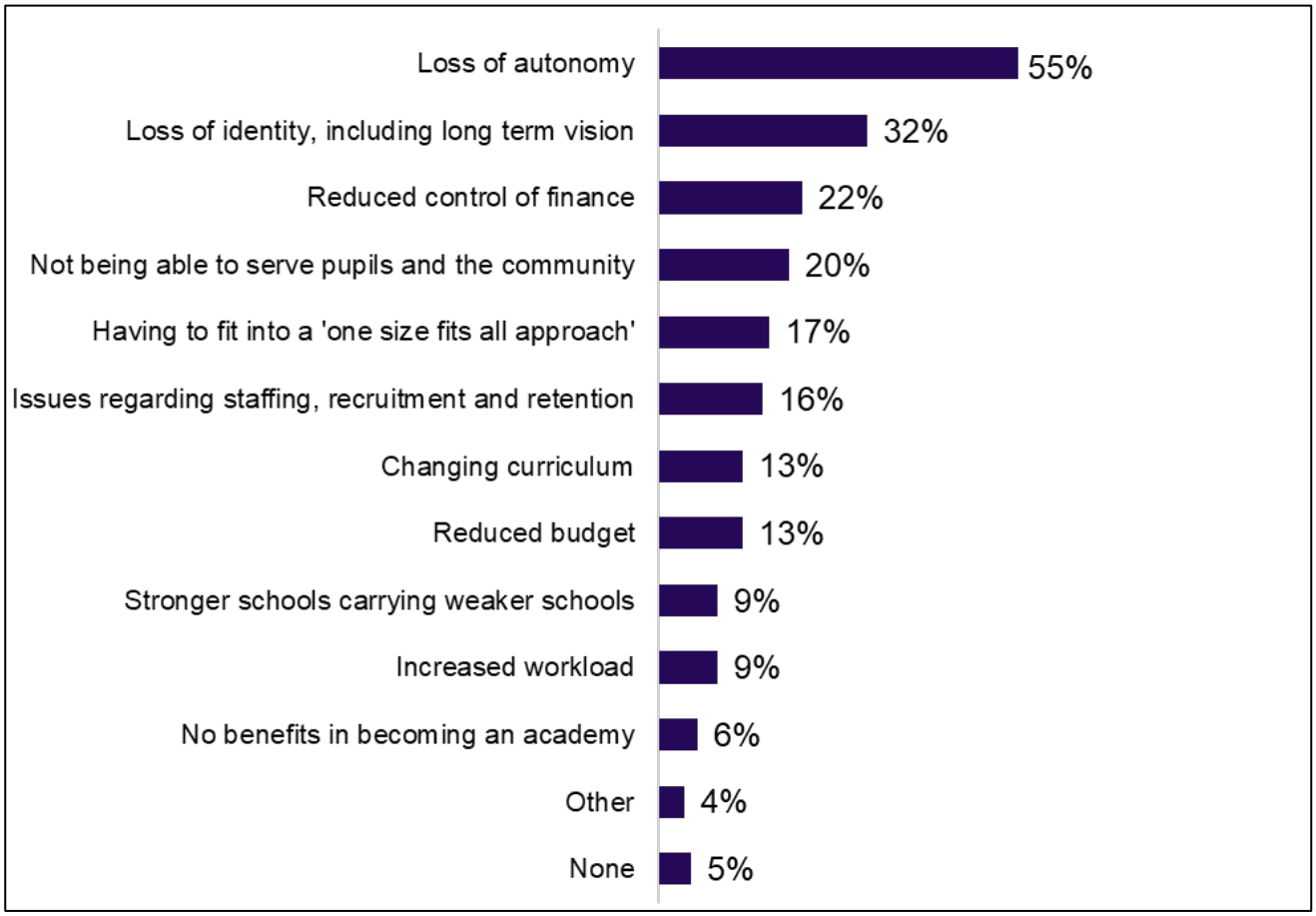


Base: All long-term standalone academies (100).

Although a small base (of 10 respondents), governors had similar views to heads: all ten felt that increased collaboration was a potential benefit, and eight mentioned economies of scale, while six thought there could be more opportunities for staff professional development.

Alongside the potential benefits, schools also mentioned a range of potential drawbacks of joining or forming a MAT (Figure 40) when asked this as an open-ended question. Again, the theme of autonomy was commonly raised. Over half (55%) felt that loss of autonomy would be a negative impact, and this was by far most frequently mentioned drawback. Around a fifth to a quarter mentioned loss of identity (26%), reduced control of finance (22%) and not being able to serve pupils and the community (20%).

Figure 40: Drawbacks of joining or forming a MAT or of other schools joining their single school MAT (spontaneous)



Base: All long-term standalone academies (100).

4.3 Current plans around joining a MAT

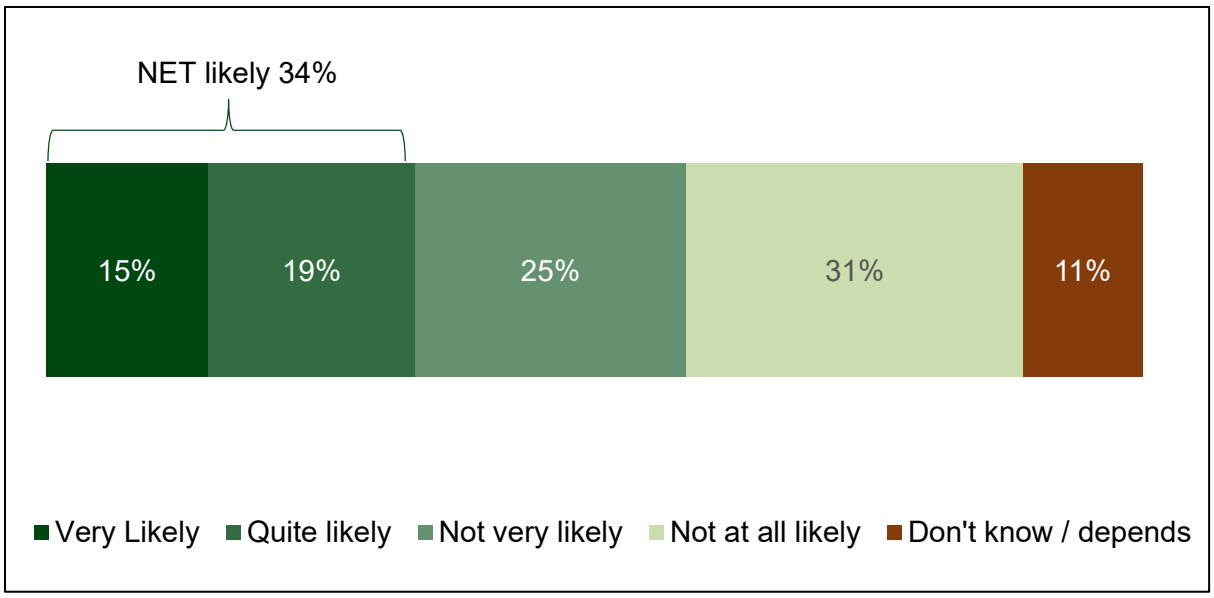
4.3.1 Likelihood of joining a MAT or expanding their MAT

Around a third of standalone academies (35%) were currently considering forming or joining a MAT in the next two years. Just over two-fifths (42%) had considered it in the last two years (though only 7% said they had given it serious consideration), leaving almost a quarter (23%) that were currently neither considering it nor had considered it in the last two years.

On a similar question, a third (34%) of standalone academies thought that it was likely their school would form or join a MAT or sponsor another school to join their MAT in the next two to three years (15% very likely and 19% quite likely, Figure 41). Conversely, 56% felt that it was unlikely that this would happen in the next two to three years (31% not at all likely and 25% not very likely). Despite a low base in the governor survey, the balance of views was similar, with

more thinking it was unlikely that their school would join a MAT in the next two to three years than who thought it was likely.

Figure 41: Likelihood of school forming or joining a MAT or sponsoring another school to join its MAT in the next two to three years



Base: All long-term standalone academies (100).

4.3.2 Reasons behind likelihood of joining a MAT or expanding their MAT

Standalone academies who said they were *likely* to join a MAT and single school MATs who said they were likely to sponsor another school or schools to join their MAT in the next two to three years were asked why they thought it was likely. Reasons tended to focus on the fact they were already currently looking into it (31%), that it was the government's 'direction of travel' (25%) or that the decision has already been made (13%).

"We are actively meeting with MATs and looking for those that meet our ethos."

Primary, South, non-faith

"The government are making it clear that's their expectation and that money will only be available to schools in larger trusts; if we do go ahead then we would contact DfE."

Secondary, Midlands, non-faith

“We've all got to become a MAT, but we can see some benefits. It’s great to have support helping our governors to make the right decision.”

Secondary, North, non-faith

Similarly, standalone academies who said they were *unlikely* to join a MAT or expand their MAT were asked the reasons why they thought it was unlikely. Two-thirds (66%) said that not joining a MAT was an active decision from the school. This was often because they were in a good position as a school at the time and/or felt no need to join a MAT.

“All the indicators at the moment are positive for us as a [standalone academy], we have good Ofsteds to our name, we are fully staffed, we have subject experts in every subject area, we have an Senior Leadership Team providing strategic direction, we have a committed governing body who effectively hold us to account, we have positive progress scores, and finally we are financially secure, our budget shows we are viable for the next 3 years. Additionally, we've been able to secure capital funding to upgrade our site. It’s an active decision not to join a MAT.”

Secondary, North, non-faith

“The governors have considered the options. We get the same benefits with the associations we already have without joining an MAT.”

Secondary, South, non-faith

As well as this, one in five (21%) felt that other MATs were unsuitable. A small number also mentioned that no other schools were willing to join their MAT and that their school currently has other priorities.

“It will happen but further down the line, but at the moment there isn’t a MAT we want to join, the schools we could form a MAT with are not yet ready to do so.”

Primary, South, non-faith

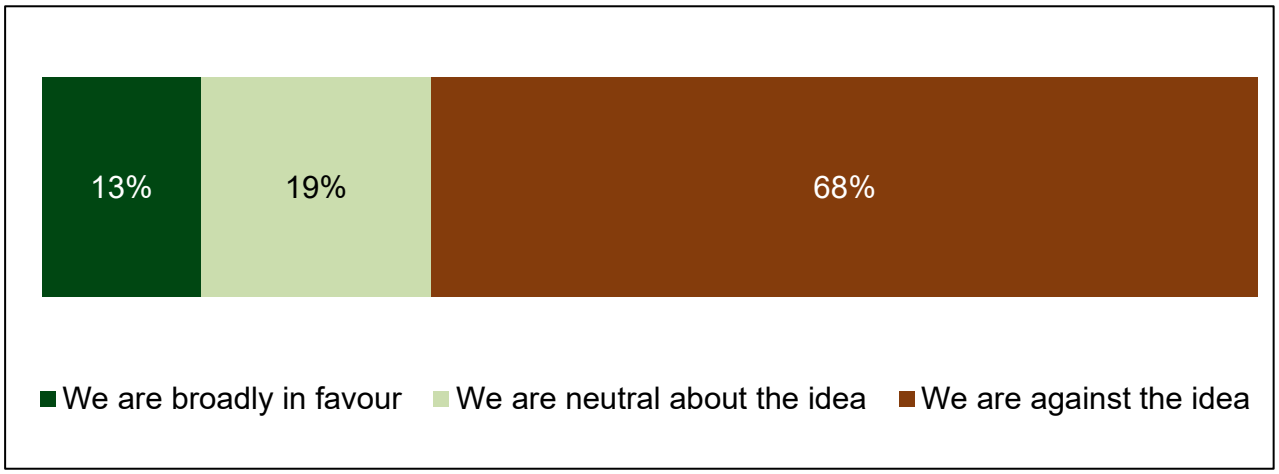
“We'd consider forming one but not joining one because of the financial implications and loss of control over how we teach our children. Additionally, not being able to find a suitable MAT would be a factor.”

Primary, North, non-faith

4.3.3 Opinion on becoming a MAT, forming a MAT, and expanding a MAT

Among standalone academies (excluding those within a MAT which contains no other schools) only 13% reported their school was broadly in favour of the idea of joining a MAT (Figure 42). The majority, almost seven in ten (68%), said their school was against the idea of joining a MAT, at least for the moment, with a fifth (19%) neutral.

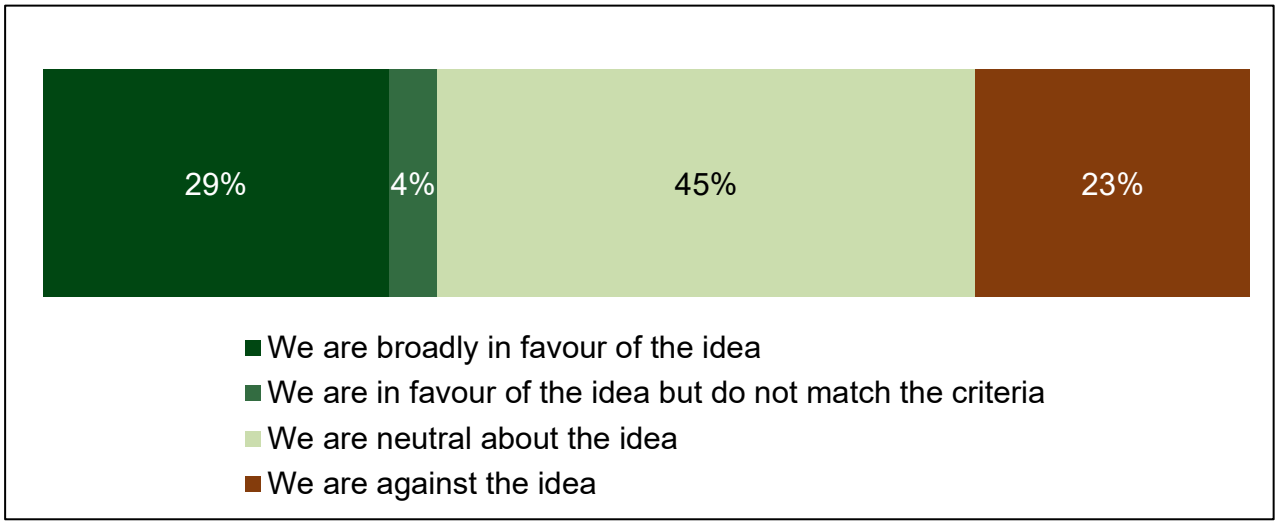
Figure 42: Whether long-term standalone academies were in favour, neutral or against the idea of joining an existing MAT



Base: All long-term standalone academies excluding those within a MAT which contains no other schools (85).

Standalone academies were slightly more in favour of forming their own MAT (29%) than joining an existing one (13%, as shown in Figure 43). Around a quarter (23%) were against the idea of establishing their own MAT, with approaching half (45%) neutral.

Figure 43 Whether long-term standalone academies were in favour, neutral, or against the idea of forming their own MAT

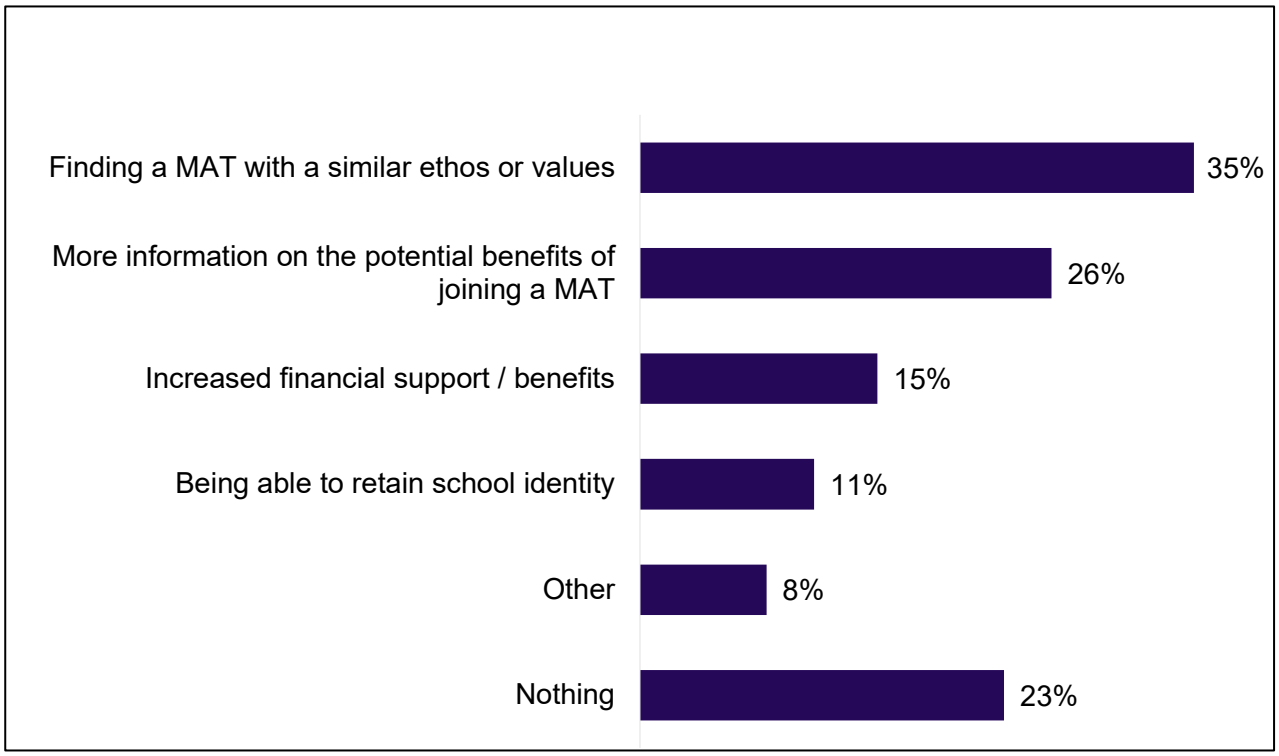


Base: All long-term standalone academies excluding those within a MAT which contains no other schools (85).

4.3.4 How schools could be encouraged to join or create their own MAT

Amongst the standalone academies that were not against the idea of joining a MAT, around one in three (35%) felt that they might be encouraged to join MAT if they found a MAT with a similar ethos or values. A quarter (26%) felt if they had more information on the potential benefits of joining a MAT that might encourage their school to join one. Standalone academies also suggested increased financial support (15%) and being able to retain school identity (11%) as ways to encourage schools to join a MAT

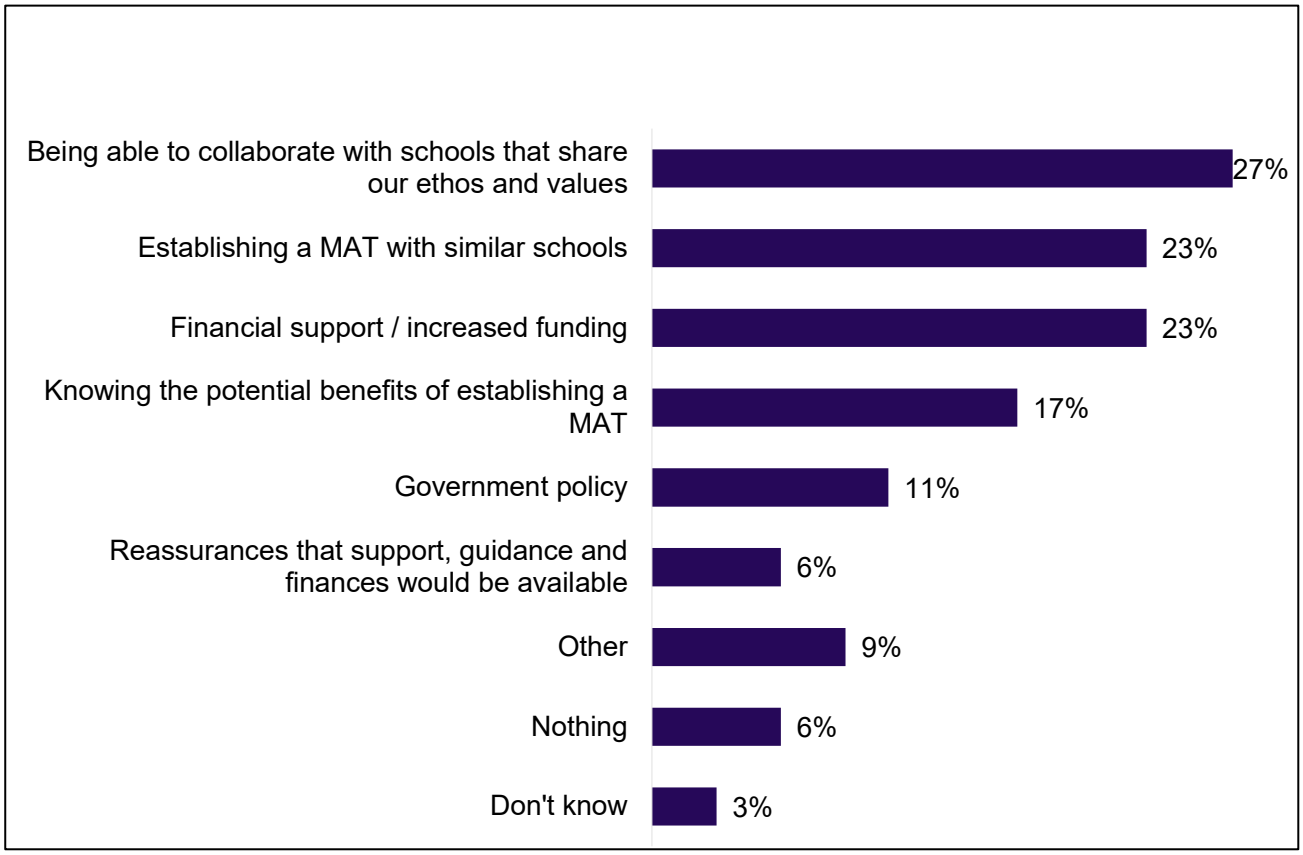
Figure 44: Ways schools could be encouraged to join a MAT (spontaneous)



Base: Long-term standalone academies not against the idea of joining an existing MAT (31).

Standalone academies not against the idea of establishing their own MAT were also asked as an open question, what might encourage them to establish a MAT, Again, finding similar and suitable schools was key. Over a quarter (27%) said that they would be encouraged to form a MAT if they were able to collaborate with schools that shared the same ethos and values and 23% mentioned finding similar schools to join the MAT (23%). Around a quarter (23%) mentioned that increased funding or financial support would encourage their school to establish their own MAT.

Figure 45: Ways schools could be encouraged to establish their own MAT (spontaneous)



Base: Long-term standalone academies not against the idea of establishing their own MAT (60).

All long-term standalone academies were told about the Secretary of State's speech on 28th April 2020 introducing the 'try before they buy' initiative that would allow schools to join a Multi-Academy Trust for a limited period of time (up to 18 months) and asked if this offer would help their school decide whether to join a Multi-Academy Trust. Just over a third said it would (35%), higher than found among non-converters.

5 Conclusions

Most schools that had chosen to form or join a MAT in the last three years felt that converting had a positive overall impact on their school. Only one in twenty felt the overall effect had been negative. Recent converters reported a wide range of improvements from becoming part of a MAT, with sharing of skills and expertise across the MAT the most frequently experienced (and the one considered the most important). Improvements in the school's sense of direction, training of staff and quality of leadership were all experienced more frequently than had been anticipated, suggesting there is potential to increase awareness and raise expectations of these benefits amongst schools that are not part of MATs.

That said, most recent converters did find the process of converting and adapting to their new status challenging. The main challenge was the additional senior management workload associated with converting. Support and guidance (from the department and others) was widely used and mostly seen to be useful; some suggested the department's guidance would benefit from simple practical advice (e.g. with useful 'dos and don'ts'). Primary schools were generally satisfied with the availability and quality of support available, but secondary schools were less so. However, any perceived lack of suitable support or guidance did not appear to be a reason for schools deciding not to be part of a MAT.

Only a minority of LA-maintained schools and standalone academies were considering becoming part of MATs with other schools at the time of the survey (around a third of standalone academies, fewer than a quarter of secondary LA-maintained schools, and fewer than a fifth of primary). This suggests the rate of conversions in the coming two to three years to academies will be limited to a steady rate and is unlikely to increase without any change to current policies.

Although most LA-maintained schools considered that there would be benefits from converting to an academy, more (nearly nine in ten) felt there would also be negatives. A fear of loss of autonomy is the main barrier to converting, for example over the culture, ethos, and values of their school, and over the school's budget. While both non-converters and standalone academies were concerned about these issues, they have an additional meaning for the latter since autonomy (i.e. being independent from the local authority) was a key reason for many having originally converted. Standalone academies were more open to the idea of forming their own MAT than joining an existing one, as they felt this would allow them more autonomy over the types of schools in the MAT, and therefore over the MAT's ethos, values, and culture.

There was a significant proportion of LA-maintained schools and standalone academies that were opposed to converting to an academy or being part of a MAT. Very few non-converters that were not considering converting at the time of interview were in favour of becoming an academy in the future. Additionally, around half of non-converters reported that there was not anything that would make their school want to become an academy. Only a

relatively small proportion felt that ‘try before you buy’ initiative would help them decide, suggesting it may only have a limited impact. While the department’s vision is likely to influence some schools to become part of a MAT, it is unlikely to be a key driver without schools seeing benefits for their school to convert.

At the same time, it is important to note that schools not in MATs could see the benefits, but they felt these would not outweigh their concerns. If the department wants to implement its vision of having all schools in a strong MAT, evidencing the positive experiences of schools in MATs will be critical. Both non-converters and long-term standalone academies frequently saw collaboration with other schools as a key potential benefit of being part of a MAT. The fact that this was the most commonly experienced benefit amongst recent converters could be compelling for those yet to convert. Additionally, as mentioned above, there were some benefits experienced by recent converters more frequently than they had been anticipated, so there could be value in broadening awareness of these.

On top of this, the positive rating of recent converters of the overall impact of joining a MAT suggests that the downsides associated with any loss of autonomy experienced was outweighed by the benefits. To reach their aim, the department may want to consider communications that emphasise these positive aspects of being part of a MAT, and how recent converters feel these outweigh any lost autonomy

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