

Transcription: MAT-to-MAT collaboration

Interview with: Andy Yarrow (CEO, Anthem Trust) and Helen Rowland (CEO, Focus-Trust)

Interviewer: Jane Creasy

Jane: Hello, everyone. My name's Jane Creasy and I am one of the Education Development Trust's Associates.

I've had the great pleasure of working on the development of the Multi-Academy Trust [Partnership] Programme for Education Development Trust – MPP.

And with me today, I've got two MAT Chief Executives I'm very pleased to say hello to. I wonder if you can say hello, both of you. Helen – let's start with you.

Helen: Good afternoon. I'm Helen Rowland, Chief Executive of Focus-Trust, which is based in West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Cheshire. We have 15 primary academies. We were established in 2012 and we took our 15 academies on between then and 2017. No other schools have joined our Trust in the last four years, so we've done a lot of embedding and further developing.

We're very much values-led and our vision is great academies at the heart of our community, so we try and do a lot of work to improve the opportunities for our children and their communities.

Jane: I know very well that you do, so thank you very much, Helen. Andy, let's say hello to you.

Andy: Hello, everyone. I'm Andy Yarrow, the Chief Executive of a Trust called Anthem. That's a relatively new name for an organisation that used to be called CfBT Schools Trust. We changed our name about 18 months ago.

We have 16 schools – five secondaries and 11 primaries – that are dispersed over quite a wide geographical area from Lincolnshire in the north, down to Wokingham, London, Reading, Oxfordshire further south.

Again, we're quite a well-established Trust. The first school, in fact, was sponsored by CfBT in 2006 and the MAT was created about 10 years ago. Similar to Focus-Trust, we haven't grown in recent years, although we do have an ambition to grow in the future. And again, values and culture are hugely important to us; integrity, collaboration and excellence are our three values, and they are now well-embedded in many aspects of the Trust's life.

Jane: Thank you, both. And I think this point about your values is [going to] come through when you talk about your work together on MPP, MAT-to-MAT peer review, because you two were paired for a peer review pilot as we developed the MAT peer review programme.

Helen – you've been very heavily involved with SPP before that. Tell us about your involvement with that and how you became interested in the MAT review programme.



Helen: We're now in our fifth year of doing peer review across our academies, just with our 15 schools – they're in triads of three schools, five groups – and I've seen the benefits of how it works, the professional honesty and the constructive, challenging conversations that they can have in that mutually-respectful conversation.

I'd been part of a MAT-to-MAT peer review with Forum Strategy as a bit of a pilot, but because we were very committed to the model of the Schools Partnership Programme, when I heard that they were doing a pilot of the MAT-to-MAT peer review that had the framework for us to look at, I was very interested and it worked really well. It was quite time-consuming to go through the framework, but the time that you take to do that then teases out what your line of enquiry is going to be, so it's time well spent and helped us focus on something that was a priority area for us, which turned out to be our curriculum – no surprise there!

Jane: Now Andy, your involvement with SPP is very different in your Trust, and you personally, isn't it? So, what made you interested in this?

Andy: Somehow, I'd got through my whole professional career in education without ever experiencing peer review before. I certainly was aware that some of my colleagues were enthusiastic about the approach, but for me it was a new thing. I went into it with an open mind but was quite astounded by how impactful it was for me personally and for my team, and I've become a firm believer in the power of peer review. We have started to identify a number of areas where we're building that now into our work as a Trust as one of the approaches that we use.

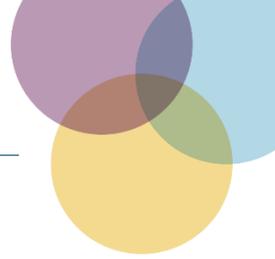
Jane: Thanks, Andy.

Helen referred to the framework and sort of took us into the process and you've just said, Andy, that you were quite astounded at how powerful the process was. I wonder if you could both tell us about the parts of the process that you thought were most beneficial.

Maybe if we started with you, Helen, you could tell us first of all what the process involved.

Helen: There's a process of self-review. First of all, it's identifying who your review team are going to be. You don't just do the review yourself – it's very important that you have the views of all the review team. In our case, that was myself, that was one of our academy improvement partners, one of our Trustees who's the chair of our Board, and then one of our headteachers. So, you're getting a 360-degree view on things, which was very important. From that self-review, you iron out what you think your line of enquiry is. We then went along to a meeting, which seems a lifetime since now, in a very small room in London, and we discussed this in more detail. We introduced ourselves to Anthem, they introduced themselves to us, and then we got asked various questions about why we thought that should be our line of enquiry. Then, Anthem planned the review day for us, based on your line of enquiry. Likewise, we planned it when we came to you.

You've just got to put your trust in the other review team that everything will be done in an atmosphere of confidentiality. This is what we've discovered when doing peer review, that it's only by being mutual respectful and honest that you'll get the most out of this process. If we went along and said, 'Oh, everything was wonderful,' when we saw something that we



knew might help them, and likewise, they said to us, ‘Oh, everything’s brilliant,’ and we knew there was something that was not quite right...it’s best to be honest with each other. It’s about gathering as many views as you possibly can, either on the day or before the day, meeting as many different people [as you can] and then each time you’ve had those conversations, reflecting on what you want to ask the next group of people from what you’ve heard. The ultimate thing, which I think I was quite apprehensive about, was [that] we’ve heard some feedback that might be slightly uncomfortable to some people, but actually we need to share that in an honest and respectful way to be supportive to the other Trust in going forward.

We were always supported by the framework, by the resources, and it was incredibly beneficial for us all.

Jane: Andy, you said you were surprised at how beneficial it was. Don’t tell us about the impact just yet; just tell us about which bits of it [you found beneficial].

Andy: As Helen has mentioned, the self-review process at the beginning – our schools generally are experienced in self-review because they have to do that because of the Ofsted inspection process and our own processes that we have within multi-academy trusts. But actually, for the Trust itself to self-evaluate is harder because there isn’t necessarily exactly the same sort of frameworks to work to. So, the self-evaluation process built into this at the outset is, in itself, a very useful exercise for the leadership team of any MAT to actually undertake. The fact that it then leads on to this process of identifying the area of focus for the peer review is obviously an added benefit.

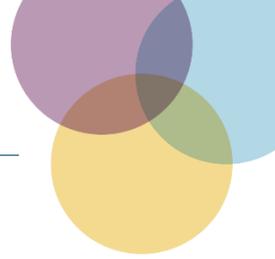
For us, we deliberately made ourselves quite vulnerable because we chose an area that was a priority, that we knew had historically been an area of weakness for the Trust. It was an area that we really needed to address. This was to do with the ethos and culture of the Trust as a whole and, obviously, the schools that make up the Trust. So, we were aware that there would be some tough conversations; there would be some things that would be exposed that weren’t necessarily all positive, though there were, I’m pleased to say, some positive things. It was good to get affirmation and encouragement about the journey of improvement as well.

It’s easy within an organisation to develop blind spots where we think things are okay when they’re not, or equally we think things are not very good when actually perhaps they’re better than they are. That external view is extremely helpful.

Jane: Thank you.

When Helen referred to being nervous about maybe giving some slightly tricky feedback, were your colleagues at all apprehensive about the process?

Andy: If anything, I think the apprehension for us was that because the area of focus for Focus-Trust was the curriculum, we were perhaps concerned that we ourselves may not, within our team, have all the expertise needed to really critically assess the curriculum in place across the school we’re visiting and be able to add value. Although I’ve had a number of years’ experience of overseeing primary schools, I’m a secondary specialist. Going into a primary school classroom for me will always be, in relative terms, a challenge in terms of me adding value with profound insights about the curriculum. But actually, because it wasn’t just



based on our opinion, but it was based on the conversations that we had with children and with staff as well as school leaders, we quickly built up quite a clear picture and we were able to identify some areas for further development, which came out – not with us being inspectorial – but came out of the dialogue that we had.

Jane: Thank you.

You've already referred to the framework and both of you have said that the framework itself, and the process of self-review, is very useful. That gives you structure and makes you think.

The facilitation part of the programme doesn't happen during the course of the peer review itself. How was that useful for you?

Helen: The facilitator guided us through very skilfully on the particular areas we'd identified in the self-review. It was helpful to be able to reflect on why we'd said that was a strength, why we thought that should be looked at. It was based on evidence from research, and that's always really important. In the school peer reviews, we look at evidence from research and take the best practice and think, how can we incorporate that, so that was very useful. Certainly, looking at leadership teams and highly effective teams, we looked at evidence around that and then how we can bring that into the review. The facilitation is a very important part of it because if you just went straight from self-review into the review, having missed out that facilitation, you would be nowhere near as clear on what your narrow, specific line of enquiry was.

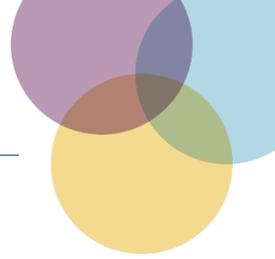
Andy: I would agree with that. It's vital, that facilitation, as you said. That's the consistency that is required in order to bring about the clarity of focus in the exercise.

Jane: If we turn to thinking about the outcomes and the impact of the peer review that your two Trusts did for one another, what changes or improvements do you think, Andy, you have implemented in your MAT as a direct result of this review?

Andy: Because the focus for us was on our culture, the review came at a really important time for us because we had just established, for example, what our values were. It was one of the areas that the peer review probed into – the extent to which colleagues across the schools were familiar with, had ownership and an understanding of those values. Since then, over the past year, I think we've made considerable progress in embedding those values and not just people knowing them but now being really proud of those values and genuinely enthusiastic about modelling those values and their behaviour. That's considerable progress that's been made.

Undoubtedly, the peer review process helped us to gain greater clarity on the necessary steps that we needed to take in order to develop the culture of the organisation in that way.

It also gave us a reference point; while this is perhaps less of a solid impact in terms of things you would now be able to see if you came back a year later, we quite frequently refer to things that we learned through that peer review visit. There will be occasions where we'll have almost said, 'How would Focus-Trust do this?' For us, we felt that Focus-Trust were further ahead in a number of key areas and provided that sense of 'good model' for us to



look at – not that we would necessarily ever be identical but, none the less, how would that work?

For example, a very strong feature, we felt, was the collaborative ethos amongst the headteachers and the amount of trust that Helen and her team placed in the headteachers and the power, to an extent, that they were given to influence the direction of travel of the Trust as a whole. That made an impression on us and we felt that was something we wanted, to be able to get to that place where there was that level of trust and alignment between the headteachers in particular in the Trust, in order for us to be able to operate in that way. That was one example.

One other key thing for us was that we had the opportunity to involve a couple of colleagues who were not on the executive team of the Trust but were experienced headteachers who were keen to develop their experience at working beyond their own school. It was timely for those individuals; it really gave them an opportunity to blossom and flourish. We were delighted to see how much they enjoyed the experience, how much they got out of it, how much they grew through it, and there have been direct benefits as a result of that. Both of those colleagues have now gone to take on more responsibility within in the Trust, critically supporting other schools where their experience is of benefit to those schools. That has been a hugely beneficial outcome for us.

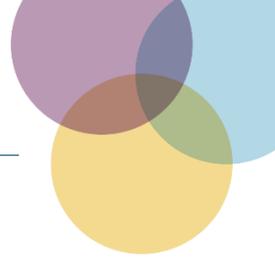
Jane: A very powerful outcome. I was going to ask you separately about it anyway but, since we're on it, those couple of colleagues – you said they enjoyed it, they grew in the process. Was it just their confidence that grew or did they develop more awareness?

Andy: Greater objectivity, I think, and their ability to broaden their horizons in a sense. It gave them a chance to transfer learning, which they developed within their own schools – both impressive and high-performing schools – to be able to use that learning in order to look at another school and be able to draw out, from what they see, the key areas that would enable those schools to be more effective.

Jane: Helen, what about Focus-Trust?

Helen: We were quite brave because it was quite early on in curriculum development. We'd done a lot the previous year, but we were very ambitious in our curriculum and we wanted to check that out. For us, the impact was around 15 schools – your curriculum development isn't going to be exactly as strong in all 15. We asked the Anthem review team to look at the ones that were nearest to our school that were in Oldham so that it was less of a challenge with the travel.

They went first-hand into 5 of our schools and gathered a lot of first-hand evidence but then met, face-to-face, all the other headteachers, so everyone got the chance to talk about the curriculum. They had some messages to give us, which they did in an honest and respectful way, about where the curriculum development was strong under practice and where it was less. That then gave us the opportunity to talk to the heads in those schools to say, this is the evidence that was given, what do you think, this is what we think the next steps should be; really good framework. It gives you a day, or two days in this particular instance, to really home in on an area that otherwise you'd think, I'm too busy to do that, I can't do it justice.



Andy: There are now a few networks for Chief Executives to engage with each other. Not many, but compared with the old days of headteacher partnerships, there are a few. But there aren't really those opportunities for the leadership teams and MATs to work together. It is quite a lonely job sometimes, being a regional director or an educational director in a multi-academy trust, and certainly can be insular.

What's great about this is it's an opportunity, not just for the CEOs (in fact, they're equal partners within the team, quite rightly), this is an opportunity for the team to work together and to meet another team from another Trust. It's all of the conversations that are going on at different levels between Trustees, between Chief Executives, but also between education directors and headteachers. So, there's a huge number of different conversations going on and people learn a lot from the informal conversations, and a bit more of the social time as well, which is an important part of something like that. It's great for those conversations, and it helps people even reflect on their own career development as well.

Jane: Excellent. Thank you very much, both of you. What you're saying about the impact comes across so strongly, it's very good.

What about for yourselves, though? Do you feel that the process contributed to your own development and learning personally as CEOs?

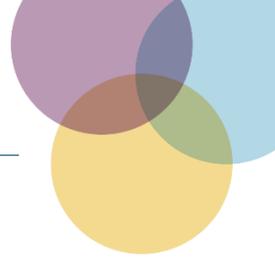
Andy: I would say so. I had been CEO for two and a half years at the time of the review so I suppose [I was] at that point where I was established but still had a lot to do. We always have a lot to do, but there was still a whole host of things on my mind that I needed to tackle. It was helpful from that point of view in helping me perhaps prioritise and identify the order in which those challenges ought to be addressed. That was helpful.

It's also useful to see another Chief Executive in action. Rather than hearing them speak at an event where they could be saying anything, you actually see them in action in their head office, in some of their schools, with their team. You learn a lot from them as a role model. Helen and I have differences in our approach, in our personality, in our leadership style. We have similarities, unquestionably, in terms of our values, beliefs and motivations. I have taken a few leaves out of Helen's book, certainly. I wouldn't necessarily do things exactly the same, but the fact that she approached some things in a particular way made me question, Should I be a bit more like that? Should I do things that way? Maybe yes, maybe no. But I unquestionably had those questions.

One of those obvious things is the extent to which Chief Executives directly manage particular areas or distribute leadership of particular areas. There was a difference there. That was very interesting for me to explore that with Helen, and the reasons why there were certain things that she personally controls that maybe I had delegated to others or visa versa. That was really interesting for us. We're not going to become clones of each other, but hopefully a bit of the good stuff of each of us has rubbed off on the other one.

Jane: Excellent. Helen, what about you? What about your learning and development?

Helen: When [Anthem] came it made me realise that, whilst we're ambitious for our curriculum – as a group of Trustees, a leadership team, our headteachers were – we hadn't



clearly communicated it to all our staff. Just sending it out on a newsletter doesn't always have the impact that you want, does it?

We were quite brave; we asked Anthem to do a survey of all our 930 colleagues in schools so, inevitably, you're going to get learning support assistants, site staff... Had I really clearly communicated our ambition for our curriculum to them? So, it made us keep reflecting on that. Since we met [Anthem] and did the review, our digital strategy has developed ten-fold and we've now got Teams set up, so at the touch of a button I can communicate with all colleagues, Trustees, Governors and staff across the Trust. It enabled us to reflect on how effective our communication about certain things was.

What was very affirming is that our collective efficacy came through our values and where things did need improving, we knew what we needed to do.

Jane: It sounds as though it was quite impactful for you both personally. It also sounds as though you developed quite a positive relationship with one another, too. Do you think that there's a professional relationship that can go on?

Helen: Yes, definitely.

Andy: Yes, certainly. Helen's very good at keeping in touch, I think it's one of her particular skills. She sometimes sends a message just to say, through the Covid-19 period of time, "Hope everything's going okay, thought of you and hope you're surviving," which is lovely. Again, it's quite a lonely world sometimes at the multi-academy trust top level. It's quite a competitive marketplace, isn't it? Sometimes, you don't necessarily have a large network of people you can be completely honest with and I think, because of the experience we've been through and the feedback we've given each other, I would have absolutely no concerns about sharing anything with Helen. I could use her in a peer coaching way if I had a really tricky situation to deal with and wanted another CEO's perspective. Now we've established that trust, I know that she would give me wise, professional, thoughtful advice about that. She would be able to empathise somewhat with what I was referring to because she's seen enough of us in action to be able to understand.

Jane: Through the course of this conversation, you have both mentioned Trustees as being involved. How have your Trust Boards received this MAT peer review?

Helen: We initially did have our Chair of the Board as part of the facilitation session for self-review, but he couldn't make the review day, so we brought another Trustee who was actually the head of a secondary school who [did] peer review in his schools before he retired, and this was a very different model of peer review. It showed him a different way to do it, using that framework, because [his] model was more of an Ofsted, 'Mocksted' type one that he uses. This is obviously very different. He said he gained such an insight into our Trust itself, but then also another Trust, [which] was highly valuable to him because it makes you reflect on what's important to you in your Trust. He was able to come back to our Trustees and say it was really powerful to be part of this experience – for him professionally, personally and as a Trustee.

Andy: Where a multi-academy trust is wanting to develop a stronger sense of partnership between the Executive and the Trustees, this could be a very effective way of doing that. It's



certainly something we would consider for future. The Trustees, of course, received, read and discussed the report that Helen and her team wrote for us, and that was extremely helpful for them to get an external perspective on something that we'd talked about within the organisation a lot. That was useful for them.

Jane: How do you see the place of MAT-to-MAT peer review for your own Trusts going forward, and indeed for the academy Trust system as a whole?

Andy: We would certainly be keen to engage in peer review again, whether that's with Focus-Trust or with another organisation. There would clearly be mileage in both of those things. It's something we would certainly strongly encourage others to do if they haven't tried it before.

Jane: Thank you. I was going to ask you if you would recommend it, and it sounds like you would. Helen?

Helen: I would definitely recommend this process to other MAT leaders. The process of self-review with people beyond myself and my leadership team was really valuable. To bring in another headteacher, to bring a Trustee into that, was valuable, and an academy improvement partner. The time could be effectively used in the facilitation period by doing it remotely, so we'll be able to meet the facilitator and another peer review team via remote technologies. That would save a lot of travel time, and then you could spend the time that was really valuable by meeting each other face-to-face. Obviously, in the current climate, that may not be possible for a while. I know from doing virtual peer reviews in our own schools, you can gain an awful lot of information by meeting each other remotely. We could still do MAT-to-MAT peer review remotely before we can safely engage with each other face-to-face again.

Jane: Thank you very much. I want to say thank you both very much indeed for such open and animated discussion of your experience of the MAT peer review. Thank you.

Andy: You're very welcome.

Helen: Thank you. Lovely to talk to you.