



Department
for Education

REAch2 Academy Trust

In-depth Sponsor Profile

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Introduction

REAch2 is the largest primary-only academy chain in the country with 26 schools (as of March 2014). The Trust is based at Hillyfield Primary School in Waltham Forest, East London. The CEO of the chain is Steve Lancashire, also Executive Headteacher at Hillyfield. REAch2 focus on supporting previously failing primary schools in deprived and challenging areas.

20 of REAch2's schools published results in 2013. Of those, 14 (70%) exceeded the floor standard for Key Stage 2 (60% of students achieving level 4 or more in reading, writing and maths) and six schools (30%) were above the national average of 75% in the same measure.

Key case-study themes

- Rapid managed growth
- School-based sponsor
- Primary-only chain
- Regional MAT structure under umbrella trust parent organisation

Founding and ethos

“It is our moral obligation as an outstanding school to help other primaries that we can. We work in the toughest areas and show that success is possible: if it can be done here, it can be done anywhere.” Steve Lancashire

In 2003, Hillyfield Primary School was formed through the amalgamation of two struggling local schools, the Edward Redhead Infant and Nursery School and the Edward Redhead Junior School. Steve Lancashire was appointed as head teacher to oversee the amalgamation of the two schools. At this point, the six-form entry primary was in Special Measures. The school moved to a new building in 2005. In November 2006, Hillyfield was judged as Outstanding by Ofsted and became a National Support School (NSS). Steve became a National Leader of Education (NLE).

As an NLE, Steve was deployed by local authorities to work on school improvement with schools in challenging circumstances, using Hillyfield as his base. The aim was to impact on individual school performance and to contribute to the resolution of system-wide issues including coordinating other school improvement services across a group of schools. Steve used his staff from Hillyfield to fulfil the contracts and to reform practice in these schools.

Through this work, the Hillyfield team became accustomed to helping support other primary schools, usually working in similarly, deprived communities. They developed a school improvement approach, born out of the bespoke NSS approach and designed to *“show schools how they can become outstanding”*. It was a simple but effective approach, which appealed to other schools and heads.

National Support School (NSS) model:

NSS contracts of support were tailored to meet the specific needs of the school within an agreed period of time. They could range from light-touch input including regular leadership advice and shadowing, to more intensive involvement with directive support in school multiple days per week for up to two years.

Hillyfield converted to academy status in January 2011. They continued to work with other schools but realised the long-term potential of the school-to-school improvement approach across a unified group of schools with central aims and ethos.

In 2012, Steve Lancashire led an application to the Department to become a sponsor under the name REAch2. Once approved as an Academy Sponsor, Steve enlisted the help of Mark Elms, another NLE who had taken Tidemill Primary in Lewisham from ‘special measures’ to ‘outstanding’ prior to converting as an academy in September 2011, to further build school improvement expertise and capacity.

With extensive school reform and proven educational excellence in the core staff, REAch2 set a mission: to help struggling schools to improve their provision and to offer outstanding education to their pupils, from disadvantaged or deprived communities. The drive was not to grow an empire of schools, but rather the compulsion to share their proven approach to sustained school improvement for the benefit of children and their communities.

Growing a chain

The chain has expanded very rapidly. From two schools in September 2012 (Hillyfield in Waltham Forest and Garden City Academy in Hertfordshire) to 27 open academies by April 2014.

Five of these schools joined the chain immediately after the Trust launched in 2012; of those, three schools needed sponsor support to improve and were selected according to what REAch2 thought they could offer that school. They were geographically spread: in Hertfordshire, Waltham Forest, Croydon and Warwickshire. This put a considerable strain on a very young organisation. There were times when the Reach2 team report that they felt “over-stretched”. The attention and focus that these schools demanded put Hillyfield’s staff and leadership under considerable pressure – with the majority of the burden sitting on a small group within the school. They rose to the challenge nonetheless, juggling resources and expertise from Hillyfield and Tidemill to support the schools. Performance improved quickly. However, this prompted Steve to re-evaluate their centrally-led improvement model and consider the alternatives. The improving performance and new-found strength within those schools demonstrated that in time, these schools could become local leaders for the chain and in turn could build the capacity that the Trust needed.

In hindsight, Steve Lancashire likened REAch2 at that point to a swan – “calm and serene on the surface but frantically paddling beneath”. They would have liked to have taken more time to get to their present position in terms of capacity but responded to requests from schools and felt that a ‘leap’ had to be made at some point in order to build a critical mass. Making this leap did lead the Trust to a stronger position to go forwards and helped them identify the best way to build a robust base for future expansion.

Leadership and governance

Since the initial phase, growth has continued organically to some extent. Steve emphasises it has been based on “calculated, cautious risks” thanks to the structural re-organisation and well-thought through model. After the first group of schools joined, REAch2 agreed that a regional multi-academy trust (MAT) structure under an over-arching umbrella trust would be a more efficient way to manage these diverse geographical locations. This meant, initially at least, each local MAT consisting of one or two schools, with at least one of those being a high performing ‘lead’ school. The MATs would be led by a locally based NLE, the head of the strong school, and school improvement would be driven locally with the support of the wider chain.

REAch2 had a task to persuade the department to agree to the model – they were challenged to explain why responsibility was de-centralised from the core Trust and included a middle-tier of regional directors (officially CEOs of the MATs) in a relatively small chain. See Annex 1 for the full organisational structure. The department ultimately agreed the model on the grounds that the chain could demonstrate a proven track record at Hillyfield, supported by a really strong team and capacity. In addition, lines of accountability were clear.

In 2013, the chain launched three new regional MATs, with close geographical links to their existing MATs. This strengthened local governance by forming stronger partnerships between schools, by adding capacity through stronger leadership teams and ensuring sufficient regional representation so that each MAT only handled a small number of schools to really focus on. One of the schools joining the Trust in 2013 was a long-awaited addition: Hillyfield had been working with Eastbrook Primary under an NLE contract prior to the MAT. The contract had transferred across to REAch2 facilitating a smooth transition to academy status for the school and a continuation of a long-standing support relationship.

In spring 2013, REAch2 also started to recruit a team of Executive Principals to oversee the expansion of each of the regional MATs. The first four Executive Principals were appointed and started working in April that year. Recruitment of a further six Executive Principals has been underway and they will gradually come into the Trust as the regional MATs expand with each overseeing approximately six schools. The trust has taken its time in appointing the Regional Executive Principals; pivotal roles in guaranteeing the success of the chain. They set very strict criteria for the posts: Executive Principles must be a NLE, must be (or have been) head of an outstanding school, must be (or have been) an Ofsted inspector, and must have high expectations and commitment to chain-wide improvement. The Trust launched a nation-wide campaign and received a large number of applications, resulting in two internal and four external candidates recruited through a formal interview process.

The REAch2 operational leadership team now consists of the CEO and Deputy CEO, the Business Manager, six Executive Principals, and Heads of Finance and HR. The Trust does not have a central office, operating from its schools to keep central costs down and ensuring that all 'Trust' staff remain in touch with the core purpose of their work. This approach, combined with the delegation of responsibilities to the Executive Principals, has enabled Steve to continue to be Executive Head at Hillyfield, which he values:

"...in this way I can still handle the school and be head, and this in turn allows me to still know exactly what is going on in my school. I do not want people to have to report all the time to tell me what is going on in the schools – I don't want to lose touch here."

The Regional Executive Principals are also based in schools so they are on hand, or in easy reach, to tackle potential risks or resolve issues quickly. It is this regional structure, designed early in the chain's journey, which much of their success is attributed to. The MAT boards also include REAch2 umbrella trust members so there is more control from the centre than may be anticipated in an umbrella trust model. At school level, local governing bodies (LGBs) are made up of two parents, two members of staff and the Executive Principal.

To support the new structure, Steve and his team wanted to ensure they had a 'phenomenal' board of directors. They were especially keen to bring commercial skills in to the Trust, which the NLEs did not feel able to offer. Steve researched and made direct approaches to individuals who would bring passion and commercial expertise to REAch2's board, enabling them to develop quickly in a sustainable way and to maintain their vision and purpose. Peter Little was asked to Chair the REAch2 Board and brings extensive finance, business and commercial acumen. Peter is an active investor helping companies grow by supporting them with operational experience

across the spectrum of management, marketing and finance. The Rt Reverend David Rossdale, formerly the Bishop of Grimsby, was invited to join the board with his considerable experience of charity law. In addition, he “*reminds us of our moral purpose*”. John West-Burnham is an independent teacher, writer and consultant in education leadership development. Dr Louise Askew was invited to bring the stakeholder perspective, as Chair of Governors for Eastbrook Primary Academy in West Sussex, a REAch2 Academy since September 2013. Shane Tewes completes the non-executive Director presence on the board.

Taking on new schools

“The ‘Cornerstone’ of REAch2 is a solid, unshakeable foundation, defined by exceptional teaching experiences and shared ‘Touchstone’ values of learning, leadership, enjoyment, inclusion, inspiration, responsibility and integrity.” Steve Lancashire

When REAch2 are contacted to consider a new school, they begin a detailed due diligence process. The scale of the due diligence depends upon the type of project (sponsored or converter) but will always include an assessment of the quality of leadership, teaching and learning, and behaviour. First, they search information in the public domain – websites, newspaper articles, etc. They then complete a ‘mini-Ofsted’, which provides them with a rounded picture of what action needs to be taken. At this point, they can take an informed decision on whether to proceed with the project.

In 2012, REAch2 appointed a full-time project manager to handle this process, enabling the executive team to focus on school improvement. This also enabled them to put in place more rigorous checks to inform decisions and risk management.

The chain is selective about the schools that they take on. Rather than decisions being driven primarily by geography, they are seeking to achieve a balanced ‘portfolio’ of academies. They evaluate their own capacity and consider which schools will draw on their resources and which will add to that capacity. They admit to being unafraid of making bold decisions and do “*say no a lot*”.

In a recent example, a small one-form entry school approached the chain for help. The school was in a remote location and the chain did not have much existing expertise in the area. They felt a moral compulsion to take the school on. They did have the capacity to help and were prepared to take a ‘risk’, setting aside additional resources to meet the challenges of the struggling school and to accommodate the additional travel necessary to provide the support. Having done so, however, they are clear that they cannot take on any other similar cases until that school is much improved.

As REAch2 gained a higher profile, well-performing ‘converter’ academies have applied to join the chain. They welcomed this, identifying the opportunities to grow capacity and skills that come with bringing well-performing schools and their leaders into the chain. However, they have remained cautious about which converters have the shared vision and the commitment to the chain that REAch2 require – only one converter academy joined the Trust in 2012, with a further two proposed to join in 2014.

REAch2 are now working towards meeting a long-term aim: to have outstanding, good and new provision alongside sponsored academies in every regional MAT so that

each of them becomes more self-supporting. Alongside this, the level of delegated responsibility to the Regional Executives will increase. They continue to build a central ethos and vision that all schools can 'buy into' – centred on the Cornerstone and Touchstone values of the chain. The fact that their approach is based on sharing successful practice and demonstrating how to achieve 'outstanding' through proven school-based expertise is very attractive to other school leaders. It is considered by them to be low prescription and they recognise the value of being in a chain but are able to retain some autonomy and professional pride.

Sustaining a high quality chain

Local solutions

REAch2 continue to work on a varied and tailored programme to turn around failing schools, based on the NSS model. They use existing internal expertise and their bank of experience in supporting schools to deliver a wide range of interventions, including but not limited to: introducing proven aspects of curriculum and timetabling, acting on behavioural issues, putting in place acting or temporary heads and refreshing governing bodies, introducing leadership coaching and school-to-school support at all levels of teaching.

The chain's regional MATs are critical to the delivery of school improvement. The chain wants to ensure that schools retain their local context; this is the reason why they don't rebrand schools and take decisions according to the needs of the children and families in that community. Each school is evaluated anew and decisions are taken based on that information. The regional executive principals take close control of new, poorly performing schools coming into their MAT. They use their local resources to drive improvements and to react quickly to issues, and bring in expertise from across the chain where specific expertise is required. This bespoke approach is made possible by having the regional role, rather than just a central CEO who could not dedicate the same time to each school individually. It also underpinned the importance of having the right people in these roles.

In spite of this regional focus, the chain increasingly wants to encourage cross-Trust working, so that the innovations from one group of schools can benefit all of those throughout the REAch2 family of schools. A new cross-group innovation, "11 B4 11" is being introduced to offer all REAch2 pupils 11 unique and memorable experiences before they turn 11. The aim is to widen their life experiences helping to boost their ambition and expanding their own ideas about what they can achieve. Examples include: climbing a mountain; taking part in a large scale musical event; growing, cooking and serving their own food; visiting a world leading city; camping in a forest; or participating in the REAch2 Olympics.

Earned autonomy

The chain takes pride in its flexible approach to governance and the ability to adapt the system to accommodate different kinds of academies. This enables schools to become part of the REAch2 Trust in a number of ways, with different schemes of delegation according to whether the schools are brokered sponsored academies, well-performing converter academies, new provision schools or diocesan schools. Broadly, REAch2 operate on the principle of 'earned autonomy'. Schools in special measures will be answerable to the MAT, until they begin to improve and demonstrate the capabilities to take on more control. Under their Regional Executive Principal, each 'outstanding' academy is free to make its own decisions.

Each MAT board includes a head teacher representative and a chair of governor representative, plus representatives of REAch2 and the Executive Principal. Every academy, regardless of their performance or status, is subject to two levels of scrutiny:

- Teaching and learning reviews are carried out before the school joins the chain and once it opens, on an on-going basis
- Moderated trust inspections are a quality assurance activity which is completed in every open academy annually.

On a weekly basis, a data dashboard is produced by each school and captures the snapshot of performance data, in terms of attainment and finance, plus provides an opportunity to raise any potential issues. The “School on a Page (SOAP)” dashboard has been developed by REACh2 and is used to report the current status of each school to the MAT board in one consistent format, set out on a single page. If issues arise, then the MAT would start to intervene, taking back control of the school.

The local MAT board has overall responsibility for the performance and standards of its Academies. Academies are kept under close scrutiny by the Executive Principal, who undertakes frequent monitoring and evaluation visits to each Academy in the MAT. Should the school not be performing as required, the Executive Principal and the MAT board have the authority to take swift action. The MAT board has the authority to remove or strengthen the LGB without notice, and to strengthen the leadership and management of the school by appointing additional staff. The Executive Principal can call upon a range of outstanding teacher mentors from across REACh2 who can be brought into the school at short notice to immediately improve the quality of teaching and learning. Should there be concerns about standards the Executive Principal will ensure that additional classes and interventions are put in place.

The intervention system was recently tested when concerns were raised about leadership performance at one of REACh2’s open academies. The MAT board immediately instigated a monitored Trust inspection, which identified significant issues with leadership and subsequently a new head was brought into the academy. The board also brought in additional expertise to strengthen the LGB.

Continuous professional development of staff

REACh2 continue their ‘homegrown’ approach to improving and sustaining high quality leadership across the chain. Of their 26 schools, only one head was made through an external appointment. The rest have come with the schools or through the chain. They do this through ‘talent spotting’ early on in careers and managing a ‘pipeline’ system, so that they will always have a back-up head to bring into a new academy when they join the chain or to parachute into a struggling academy if needs be.

In the chain, there are two teaching schools. These are used to train new staff and to deliver some of the enrichment courses. Through the REACh2 Endeavour Teaching School Alliance, based at Tidemill Academy, the chain offers professional development programmes for current and aspiring leaders in the chain. The programmes are underpinned by mentoring and support from other leaders and they are committed to only using REACh2 staff, not bringing in consultants, for these activities. All heads are required to attend a 14-day training scheme, which contributes to part of professional development.

As part of the chain’s commitment to a system leadership role, Reach2 are enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and knowledge. They are currently developing a series of workshops for other sponsor chains to better understand the primary sector, and the challenges associated with it. They also continue to work

closely with local authorities, as they did under NSS and NLE status. For example, in Waltham Forest in East London, the MAT is part of the Teaching School Alliance and provides NQT training for the borough.

Success in a primary-only chain

REAch2 are committed to working only with primary schools. They believe that primaries should only be sponsored by primaries, as they are best placed to understand their needs. An integral part of the Trust's vision was to demonstrate to the wider system that a primary-only trust could be successful and could deliver the start that many children from deprived areas need.

At times, this focus has caused problems. The economies of scale of working with primary schools quickly became apparent. A larger number of schools are needed to achieve the same level of saving than for other chains working in the secondary sector or with mixed-phase academies. REAch2 understood that in order to build capacity, it was necessary to grow rapidly. Their initial calculations suggested that 25 schools would enable them to reach a point of sustainability. This figure took into account a number of one form entry schools. However, once a group of primary schools was established, the opportunities to streamline central services were greater. This was one aspect driving the growth of the chain, particularly in localised clusters where the savings could be most quickly realised with little additional overhead to set-up (for example, sharing business managers and administrative staff across schools).

In primary schools, one of the key challenges is filling long-term absences and vacancies at short notice. Steve and his REAch2 colleagues have identified innovative ways to both build good practice, offer valuable professional development and to make savings – by sharing teaching staff across schools and being flexible to move staff where there is the most need across the regional hubs.

As one of the largest primary schools in the country (Hillyfield Academy has over 900 students on roll), REAch2 were fortunate to have solid financial backing. The wages for the CEO (as Executive Head) were entirely funded from Hillyfield's budget for the first two years, before the central function was properly set-up. Steve believes that other smaller primaries setting-up chains would find this initial investment a heavy financial burden. Without the funding of the CEO role, REAch2 would not have been able to take on such challenging schools – so this was integral to the chain's success.

Financially, REAch2 admit that including secondary academies could have made their growth journey less pressurised. However, they still maintain their founding vision and on-going passion to improve primary provision – this is their USP and it is valuable to them. Secondary schools have approached the chain to join and they have politely declined. Whilst resisting secondary academies coming into the chain, they remain committed to transition. They are keen to work closely with secondaries to share learning and experiences and to help their students to continue to benefit from outstanding education once they leave primary school.

Summary of Key Learning Points from REAch2

- Setting clear objectives and parameters for chain growth to understand where the chain is going and what is needed to get there can be key to managing rapid growth successfully.
- It is possible to over-stretch and chains need to be able to reflect and consolidate if and when necessary, by keeping the original purpose and aims at the forefront of all decisions.
- Taking calculated risks can be effective and can support growth provided the risks are fully evaluated and understood. By building capacity in advance, risks can be reduced and can put chains in a strong position to take opportunities or react quickly to school demand when it arises. However, some reserved funding is needed to make the investment in that capacity.
- Build the right strategic team to drive forward the chain and to maintain purpose. Breadth and diversity of skills are essential. It is not enough to have strong educational experience.
- Making the most of internal expertise and proven track record is strong and will deliver robust, sustainable school improvement and offer valuable learning experiences for more junior staff.

Annex 1 – REAch2 Organisational structure

Chart A: Regional MAT structure

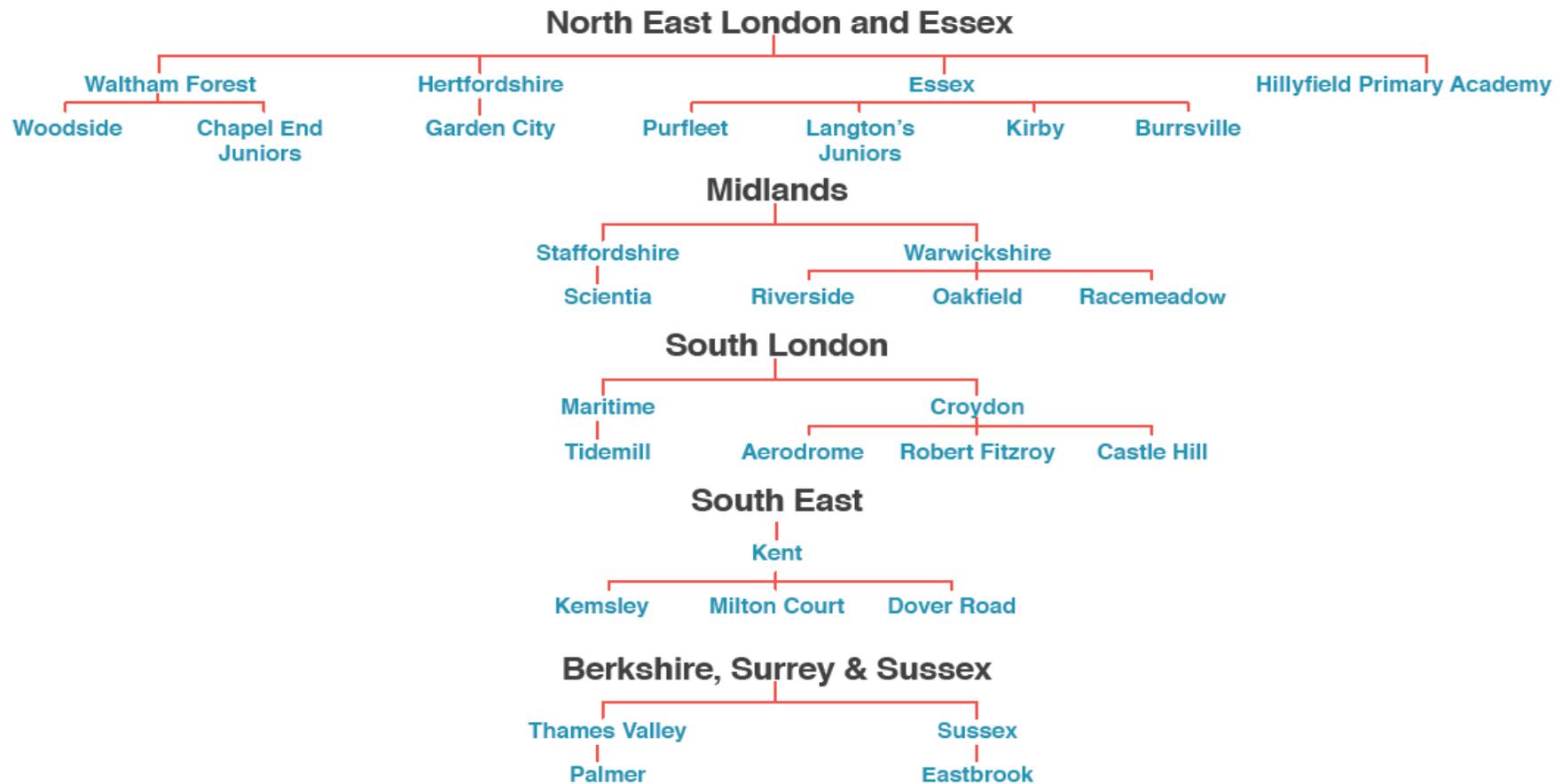


Chart B: Educational governance

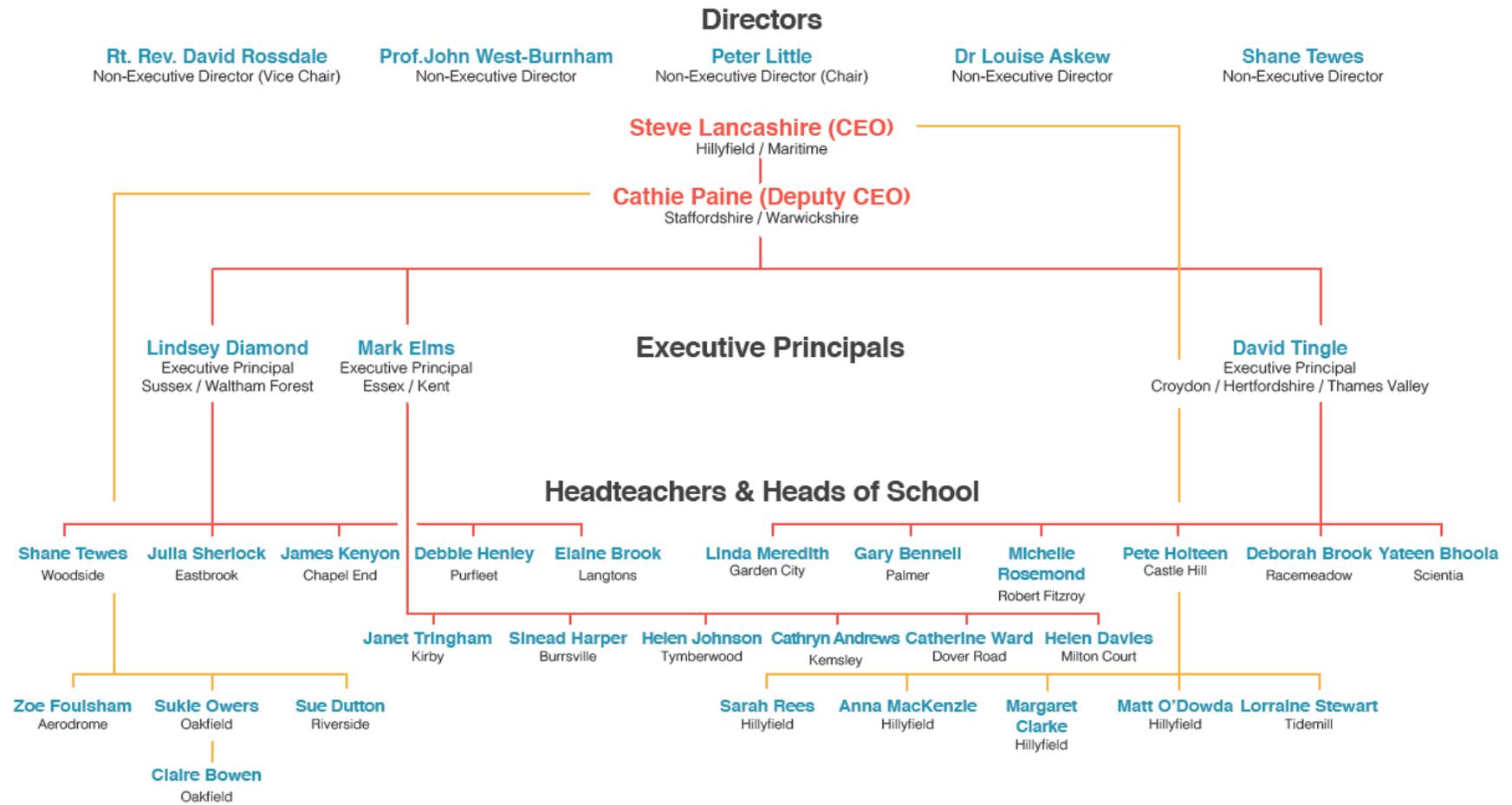
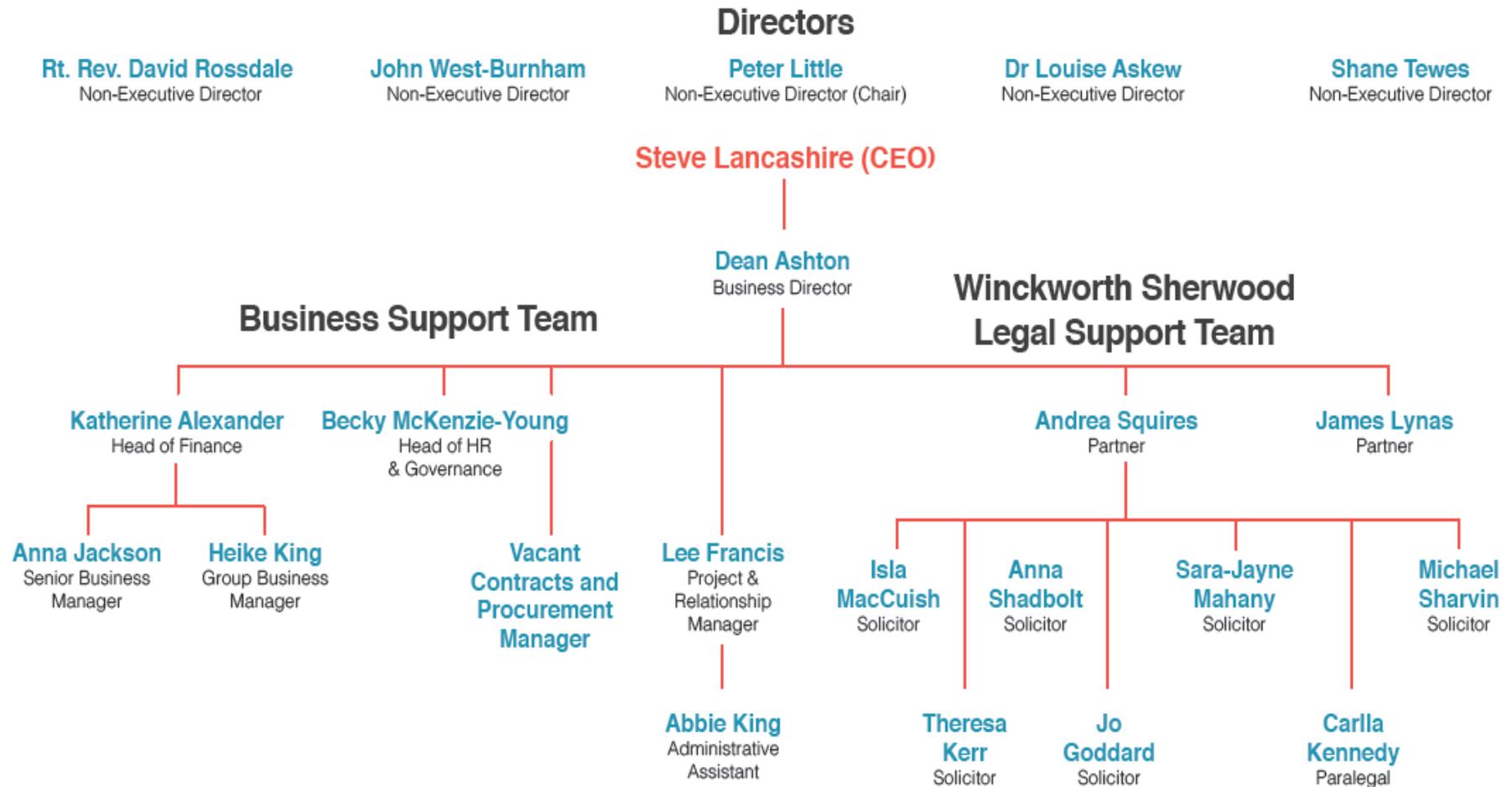


Chart C: Business governance





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