



SBS Internal Scrutiny case study

Pope Francis Multi-Academy Trust

Pope Francis Multi Academy Trust is the first Catholic multi-academy trust to be established by the Archdiocese of Liverpool. The Trust currently comprises three secondaries, four primaries and an associate secondary school, and is preparing to grow to more than 60 schools over the next five years.

Trust expansion at such a pace and scale creates complexity and it is clear to Chief Financial and Operating Officer Dan Hennessy that as they grow, strong governance, consistent systems and practical assurance will be essential. School Business Services' Internal Scrutiny support has been in place throughout his time at the Trust and is set to play an increasingly important role in the future.

"Internal Scrutiny support from an external provider provides an invaluable independent perspective that complements external auditing, says Dan. "It gives us a third-party view, which is exactly what I want," he explains. "When you're looking at the complexity of a trust, you need other people looking at the other things you do because you don't always get them right first time. You need that help."

The relationship is deliberately practical and constructive. Dan describes SBS as "very hands on", with the flexibility to refine the scope of reviews so they focus on the right areas. The process can be challenging but that is why it's valuable, says Dan. "If you don't find it challenging, I'd probably ask 'what's the point'? They are meant to be there as a critical friend and they are very effective at that," he says.

Cyber security is one recent example of the constructive challenge provided by SBS. With schools, the central Trust and third-party providers all involved in delivery, SBS helped bring these parties together and test whether arrangements were robust enough during a time when AI, hacking and phishing risks are increasing.

“The review allowed the Trust to assess whether it was in the best position we could be to respond to those threats, and make sure that we are in a safe, secure environment,” says Dan.

The Trust’s Finance, Risk and Audit Committee uses the action plans that result from audits and returns to them through the year, checking whether recommendations have been concluded or whether decisions not to proceed have been properly considered. “It’s a living document,” says Dan. “It’s very important with internal scrutiny that you don’t just use it as a box ticking exercise and that you do use it as an actual tool to generate improvements.”

This approach helps trustees and directors – many of them volunteers bringing different professional backgrounds to governance. Dan says SBS reports help upskill directors by turning policies and specialist areas into manageable information that provides a clear basis for action.

“Internal scrutiny can bring policies alive by showing what is working and what could be improved,” he says. “That’s immensely valuable.”



The benefits of Internal Scrutiny reach beyond governance papers to make a tangible difference to the lives of children and young people. “Improvements may come in small slices, but the impact is real,” he says. “Are we safer now because of our cybersecurity internal audit? Yes. So therefore, indirectly or directly, our pupils are safer.” The same can be said for health and safety reviews, Dan adds.

SBS’s expertise will be called on more as Pope Francis Multi Academy Trust expands over the coming years, expanding from seven to 21 schools in the next year alone.

“A 7-school MAT and a 21-school MAT are fundamentally different,” Dan adds. “The priority is making sure new systems are not simply implemented around schools but are properly integrated with them.”

“It’s about gaining consistency across the board, and SBS’s Internal Scrutiny support will help us achieve that.”

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