



A transcript of our conversation with Charity Main

Will Jordan

At IMP Software. We provide forecasting, budgeting, planning and reporting software to Multi-Academy Trusts, and we spend all day, every day working with trusts. So, we're quite conscious of the challenges that a lot of trusts go through and they're very similar, and there are no right or wrong answers.

What we wanted to do in this series was focus on the stories of MAT leaders from across the sector in lots of different trusts, just to understand the journey that they're on, in their trust. What they've struggled with, the challenges that they're having, what they've done, the successes, just to share as many perspectives as we can to help other CFOs & COO's, Heads of finance that are going through, similar stories.

So today we are very kindly joined by Charity Main, who is CFO, at Anglian Learning. So, thank you very much, Charity for agreeing to take part in this. I guess we will start off with, how did you get into the wonderful world of MAT finance and end up as CFO at Anglian?

Charity Main

Okay, so I suppose I came from a slightly, I didn't come a very traditional route, so I know a lot of CFOs kind of have come up, you know, perhaps through school business manager and those sorts of roles. but I had no experience in (Educational) finance whatsoever when I joined Anglian Learning. I have predominantly, a local authority, local government background. I had worked in local government for 14 years, prior to joining Anglian Learning. But again, that was not in an educational authority, in fact, that was, that was just in a district council and was really just ready for my next role.

Really since I'd started in local government, but actually even before that had decided that kind of working in the public sector was where my interest was. I don't particularly have an interest in the overtly commercial world. I never really saw myself as a kind of, you know, accountant in manufacturing and had really enjoyed sort of being involved in projects or rooted in communities and making a difference.

Will Jordan

So not a traditional finance background. So where does your finance knowledge and expertise come from? Just because you've given us loads of grief over the last year or so, around exactly what you want to get out of the software.



So how have you accumulated that knowledge and strong desire of where you want to get to with the finance at Anglian?

Charity Main

I think a lot of that comes from the fact that actually the challenge is it's the same everywhere. So the challenges in local government were exactly the same as the challenges that, that we experienced as a Multi Academy Trust in terms of, what should our reporting look like. I'd been involved in actually quite a big project across three district councils, in Cambridgeshire who all got rid of very aged finance systems and replaced them with a new finance system. And I was, heavily involved actually in project managing that and driving the reporting for that and the budgeting for that and so on. So actually, I think it's the same everywhere.

Will Jordan

Well, there's clearly a lot of experience there. In terms of Anglian, could you just introduce Anglian in terms of what the trust looks like and how long you've been in post there and how that position and trust has changed in that time?

Charity Main

So I joined two years ago, I joined in January 2019 and the trust has actually grown significantly. We've basically doubled in size, during that period. So when I joined, we were four secondaries and three primary schools. We are now six secondaries and seven primary schools. We will be eight primary schools on the 1st of April, and we also have a free school that has DFE consent to be constructed and should open in September 2022. So, we have grown very significantly. We took five schools who transferred from another trust on the 1st of April during the lockdown So quite, quite a significant change in the size of the trust

Will Jordan

How has finance had to change? Can you describe how it was in January-19 to where it is now, what's that journey been like, where you've come from. And where are you now? And also, where do you see that going into the future?

Charity Main

When I joined centrally, there were just two people in the central team, me and one other accountant, finance generally devolved. So in a secondary school there was a finance manager and a finance assistant, in a primary school, somebody doing finance, but alongside, you know, lots of other things, but basically all the transaction processing, devolved. So a finance system that was perfectly functional, but was very silo based. It had



been set up effectively as a separate database for each school. Any consolidation that we wanted to do, we had to do manually. If somebody said to you how much electricity do you use across the trust, we'd have to run a report eight times and then add it up.

Will Jordan

And was that actually called the same thing in all of those schools?

Charity Main

Yes that piece of work had been done. So that was quite a significant piece of work that had been done around chartered accounts in terms of, of them being on a common chart of accounts. We could report consistently it was just very time consuming and at month end we had to close eight purchase ledgers just because we had to close the central trust purchase ledger as well.

Will Jordan

How do you control chartered accounts in that world where it was eight separate silos? If someone wanted to add a new code for toilet rolls and those sort of things? How were you able to control the structure and outline of those systems?

Charity Main

We were able to, although they were siloed databases, they were in a kind of common system, so we were able to control who was able to do what effectively, so actually to lock down a lot of that.

Will Jordan

That was two years ago, fairly traditional, light central team, very school led in both systems and functions. That's quite different from today, so how, did you go about that?

Saying right we've got some challenges here and consolidation is the obvious one, but I guess there was other by-products of that set up. How did you go about at that point thinking, right we're doubling in size over the next two years, we've got this position. How did you then map out what that journey is going to look like and what was kind of the running order of that?

Charity Main

Well, what I'd say is that we're not there. You know, what I would say to anybody is you've just got to bite it off in chunks and that you can do it but just don't expect to be able to do it all overnight because you can't, there's, just too much happening.



Will Jordan

Is that the people or the technology or all of it together?

Charity Main

All of it together. It's the people, it's the technology, it's the fact that all sorts of things that have gone on in this trust in terms of significant capital projects and other things. It's just other things will get in the way and you just need to be realistic about what's achievable while still trying to push things forward.

It became very clear that it wouldn't be sustainable. We had one secondary school join us on the 1st of January, 2020. As part of that, we said, even for eight schools in the central trust, this isn't sustainable, we need to make a change.

So we decided to do a scan of the market in terms of our core financial system, we use Sage. We actually went for a different version of Sage that allowed us to have a consolidated single database. We got project resourcing to support that implementation. We recognized that it was going to be difficult to do.

Will Jordan

So that was a mid-year switch? So you didn't go on the 1st September?

Charity Main

Yes, I've, I've actually done a number of finance system switches and actually sometimes not going, at the start of the year is easier because you don't have the whole pressure of trying to do year end and cope with this.

Will Jordan

You only get one shot at the 1st of September, if you're first of January, actually it can be first of February, 1st of March. It doesn't matter. You can say ok we've not done what we should have done, let's just do it next month or the month after, it just gives you that breathing space to make sure it's right, because you haven't got that fixed point.

Charity Main

So we got project resourcing, went for a single database product and that's given us a number of advantages, we now have a single purchase ledger. Schools actually still do their own purchase runs at the moment and we might choose to look at that in the future, but it's things like we've only got suppliers set up once and therefore we, and we have better control over things like changes in bank accounts and all the stuff that otherwise, you know,



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it is a little bit of a concern. So it enabled us to do that and it means we only have to close things once. We do a purchase ledger, control account reconciliation sales, ledger control account reconciliations once. VAT reconciliation, so we have one VAT reconciliation and submission now, not having to do something lots of times and consolidate it together. We still do have balance sheet accounts for schools, but they tend to be their prepayments and their accruals and their payroll control and things and that's just because of, again, how our relationship works with our payroll advisor, but payroll stuff.

Will Jordan

So, what does that look like now in terms of today, what financial processing and responsibility sits at the centre versus what's then carried out and maintained as kind of accountability at school?

Charity Main

So if I talk a little bit about what the central team looks like now, the central team has now got four people in it. Me as Finance Director, two trust group accountants and a trust assistant, , accountant, as well as some additional part time resource just to provide some additional resource when we need it. It's an arrangement that works for that person who is somebody who came to the trust years ago and has never been able to escape!

Will Jordan

To have that expertise that you can call upon it's a nice thing to have up your sleeve and if it works both ways, fantastic. Cause it's really difficult to find people with the expertise that can actually hit the ground running.

Charity Main

So actually much of the transactional processing is still at school level, but as I said, we manage purchase ledger, supplier additions and changes and so on, although that sort of reconciliation piece is now all done centrally we've kind of enhanced what we do in terms of we post centrally all the payroll transactions, just as part of making sure that we've got appropriate linkages and things in terms of a reconciliation. An increasing number of central contracts, we've just moved to a new photocopying multifunction device contract and things like that, so we're starting to say, actually, we don't need an invoice to each school, can we just have one central invoice and we'll manage the recharges.

Will Jordan



Can suppliers cope with that? Is that a fundamental requirement from the outset that they can cope with a different delivery address too? I mean, it's a simple thing, but you know, probably what a challenge that can be?

Charity Main

I would say that, that the sector is at the start of that piece of work, and some, suppliers can cope with it better than others, but where we have been re tendering, we've put into the tender, actually, this is how it needs to be and that is one of the things that we need to start to drive. I think it's very easy to look at trust procurement as getting the best value for the contract, which it is, but it's also saying what about the administration of this contract? If I've got 15 schools, do I really need 15 electricity bills a month? Or actually could I have one electricity bill a month? So I don't think we're there yet, but we're definitely starting.

Will Jordan

Just going back to the trust accountants. So there's two trust accountants in terms of the split of roles there, do they have particular schools they look after, do they have functions that are theirs? How does that work?

Charity Main

How that works is that generally for a secondary school we have finance managers, so we don't do the sort of management accounting piece for a secondary school. So we are there to support and we will help them with their budget and with their management accounts pack and those sorts of things, but we don't actually prepare those. So those trust group accountants effectively have between them our primary schools and they support those primary schools alongside a number of central functions, including maintaining the purchase ledger and the sales ledger, sorting out the VAT, sorting out banking things. So we manage all the banking stuff. Schools still have their own bank accounts, but we manage a lot of the administration of banking and things all centrally.

Charity Main

What I would say is a big change is that as the trust has grown we get school condition allocation. So quite a significant chunk of capital money. We first got that in 19/20, and we started off in the first year saying, all right, well, we're going to distribute that, because the funding comes centrally, we're going to distribute that funding out to schools, and then they can pay all those invoices and we'll do a bit of a tot up, and then we'll distribute cash around the place. And actually after the first year we realised that this just isn't working. We thought instead why don't we administer all of the capital stuff centrally because for a lot of schools anyway, it's unusual expenditure. So it always causes a bit of an issue about where it's supposed to be coded. Actually If we control this centrally because a lot of the



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operational aspects are controlled centrally because we've got a director of office operations and an estates manager, we basically do all the processing and managing of school condition allocation, expenditure.

Will Jordan

How does the allocation, I guess before it's all come to the centre, was it distributed out based on pupil numbers? Kind of on the same mechanism or is there now a needs based view? Is there a bidding process? How does that whole piece work?

Charity Main

Okay, so the way that we allocate the funding hasn't actually changed. What we have is an asset management plan that's prepared for us by our property advisors. They do this as an independent objective view if you like of the condition of the estate and then effectively we sit down and look at projects and decide where the greatest need is and you know, school condition allocation is there, predominantly for health and safety things. So it will be things like, this school needs a new heating system because otherwise it's actually at risk of closure, so we have a process to decide where and what we're going to spend that school condition allocation on. It was just that then we would estimate, this project would cost, I don't know, £100,000, and then we'd give the school a £100,000 and then of course, when the bills are added up, it wouldn't be £100,000. It would be well, usually £110,000 inevitably because builders are involved. We build contingency in. It was just I suppose the admin was getting a bit much and we were making this more complicated.

Will Jordan

Do you think that's been a deliberate thing from the department to move to this because it's ultimately GAG Pooling. That method of SCA is GAG Pooling and in terms of GAG Pooling, I think has got a varied reputation and kind of varied views on it. But ultimately that process is precisely what GAG Pooling can look like. So have you looked at that and thought, actually this could really work in other areas, you know, we're seeing people thinking about I.T. because of what's gone on over the last 12 months, can you see that spreading?

Charity Main

Yes, I think we probably can. We haven't at this stage done any work, particularly on GAG Pooling, I think there is naturally some sharing of resources across the trust in, in various ways. I mean, I suppose at its simplest level, even the flat central charge that we have is a little bit, I mean, it's not GAG Pooling, but it's a little bit of sharing resource because inevitably at the centre, some schools take more of our time than other schools do. So there is a little bit of that that goes on already. I think my suspicion is that this may well be the direction of travel of the department. As you say if they're distributing capital money in that



way, why would they not distribute other funding in that way? I think of course the barriers are all sorts of complicated things around the fact that we still don't have a hard national funding formula and those sorts of things and I wonder if we managed to get to hard NFF when that might be the moment where they say, actually it's going to work on a different basis.

Will Jordan

On reserves at the moment, then you've got schools, how broad are your schools as well?

Charity Main

We don't have any aspirations to be a nationwide trust and our general sort of rule of thumb is that no school should be more than 60 minutes from Cambridge, which is the area around which the majority of our schools are based. So actually, the furthest that they are is probably 45 minutes from Cambridge at the moment. The furthest East we go is, Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. And then the further West we go is a village on the border or Hertfordshire.

Will Jordan

So you're already across local authorities so funding then is different? Or have they moved more to the funding formula or how do you bridge that gap at all at the moment? Or are there just differences between the schools?

Charity Main

No. There, there are just differences between the schools. I mean, for a lot of our secondary schools, they actually reach the minimum per pupil guarantee. So because we are in a relatively better off area. Cambridge here in particular is historically underfunded, but a lot of our secondaries have found themselves at a national minimum per pupil guarantee, so actually it hasn't made so much of a difference. Primaries are probably where there is a little bit more of a difference and no we haven't done anything to formally bridge that gap yet.

Will Jordan

I've seen some interesting adoptions of GAG Pooling, where one trust has done it, where they've got schools in different local authorities and some of those are going to be hit really hard by national funding. So their theory and reason for GAG Pooling was to offer. Five years of relative, certainty. They were able to say, look, we can almost guarantee your budgets over the next five years because we'll work out our own formula with the backdrop of everything else that's going on.



Local government bodies and schools just like the service and they were fed up with every year, something changes on funding and they're having to restructure all the time. That was certainly an, interesting use of GAG Pooling, which again, highlights one phase, which is not particularly well marketed. I think it's running up against the problem with its name.

I think there's really interesting use cases of it, which is not we're taking the money from the schools and taking it in the centre it's just a sensible way of managing budgets and helping that long, to medium term planning.

So on GAG Pooling, do you think it's probably going that way but no plans afoot?

Charity Main

No, I think it's something that we just sort of keep an eye on and because the trust has grown so significantly, we kind of need a period of consolidation as well.

Will Jordan

So as you've grown quite a lot over the last period, I imagine your top slice has been put through the mill in terms of, in that growth. I mean were the schools converted, were they sponsored?

Charity Main

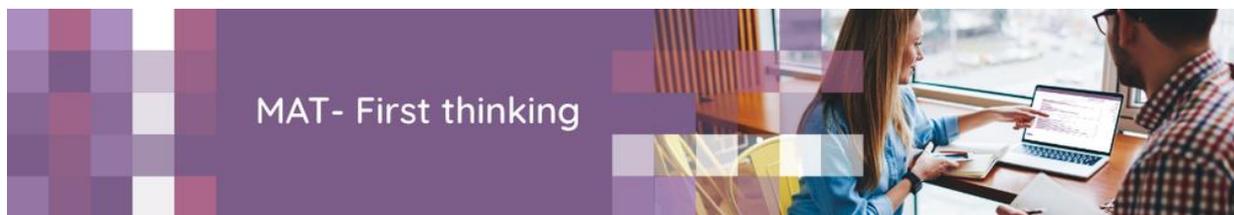
Actually six of the schools that have joined us were just transfers from an entire trust for five schools and just a single Academy trust for the other. The school that is joining us in April is a converter so we will have some, some conversion grant associated with that. So yes, the central charge has come under quite significant pressure but obviously has been able to grow because we've had more schools so that has certainly helped, but it continues to be a challenge.

Will Jordan

How's that included within that central charge change over that period of two years. Has there been a deliberate move to think this is what we really need to use this for?

Charity Main

When I joined there was still a little bit of a lack of clarity about what happened for certain sorts of system costs about when they were born by the school and when they were born centrally. So one of the things we did is said, okay, these systems are all paid for centrally. So things like our finance system and our budgeting system and our estates compliance and we've got some HR systems and various other things. Those are now all funded centrally and my concern as well, our safeguarding so that's all funded centrally.



Actually in terms of staffing, we've probably been reasonably stable and we've been able to use the increase in the number of schools, for example, to increase the number of finance staff to provide additional estates staff.

Will Jordan

That's really interesting. So you've coped with that growth by ultimately changing the technology landscape. That's enabled you to keep the staff in the same. So rather than double the staff to cope with the new schools, you've thought about the systems piece to think, how can we manage the schools better with the resource we've got?

Charity Main

I think, that central charge is under pressure. But I think any increase in it would be to pay for things that we know were clearly identified. So inevitably SEND, professional development, family, workers educational psychologists, where schools are really saying we like that resource. So I think if we did look at the central charge, those would be the sorts of things that we'd be looking at.

Will Jordan

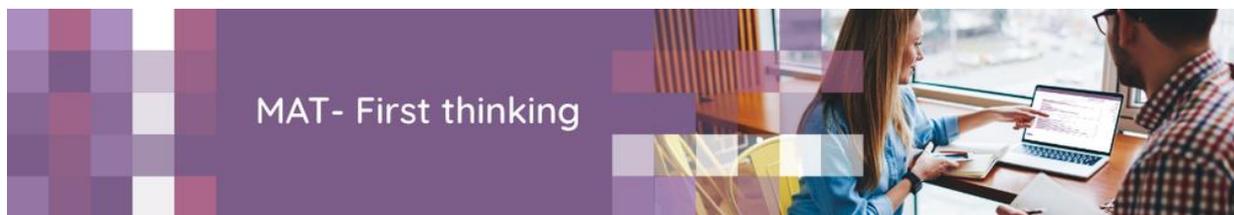
So you're reviewing spend within the schools, what services the schools are buying in across each of them and how can we incorporate that spend and provide specific expertise? Is that an active process in terms of reviewing those contracts and those services, or is it just evolving over time?

Charity Main

It's evolving over time. We've done quite a lot of the big things, we have done catering contracts over the years. Although because lots of schools have joined from various points we actually now have a bit of a hybrid of a number of different catering contracts. But what we've done is make sure that we've aligned, we're extending to align them all. So that next time round we can put them together. We've done cleaning and again, those are now all aligned across the trust and I said, we've done multifunction devices and we've made some quite significant savings.

Will Jordan

We've seen a number of trusts where they look at their schools and the schools are buying into a payroll service, say a payslip cost. Centrally they've procured HR payroll system and kind of built the team and they then carry on with the payslip cost to the schools that's been coming into the centre. Have there been any of those where you've kind of bolstered



central services, people or technology and added individual charges for things in addition to the standard top slice?

Charity Main

Not at the moment, we've only got the central charge. There is a little piece of evolving work around how we support the ICT and it's likely that we probably will move to a model where we share ICT more formally across the trust and that we have some charging mechanism, which is based on number of pupils or devices, or whether you're a secondary or a primary and those sorts of things. So we are looking at it in the context of that.

Will Jordan

Obviously over the last 12 months, I.T. has come under the spotlight quite a lot because it's suddenly a strategic priority, did you find that you had different concurrent I.T. strategies in place in different schools and this is more about an holistic approach to I.T. rather than anything else in terms of numbers? I.T. is not a savings piece.

Charity Main

No, it's not a savings piece and actually, I think it's probably going to be the opposite. It's around having very different I.T. provision across schools and saying, actually that's not acceptable. Why should a child in one of our schools have an experience that's very different to that of people in another school? We inherited some third party contracts and some of our experiences of managing those third party contracts have been quite difficult just because there's different types of infrastructure in place across schools. So also part of a bigger piece around improving the, the ICT support in primary schools which can quite frankly be not very good. Traditionally primary schools have bought into support contracts where they might've seen somebody for half a day, a month and, what we're trying to do is to develop a system where we've got kind of geographical patches and some staff work out of a secondary school, but they can go to the primary school down the road and respond when something goes wrong.

Will Jordan

And do you see that being more integrated in teaching and learning? I mean, I know nothing about teaching and I won't profess to, but in Google classroom or Teams or any of those, was it used sporadically in different schools in different ways? Is there a recognition that actually, there's an opportunity to really use these tools to do something. Let's look at this collectively and understand what that can be?



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Charity Main

We had some use of those things, but actually our Director of ICT was able to get everybody up and running on, Google classroom almost overnight. So yes, there's a much more, but it's about bringing everything together to be much more cohesive in terms of, of looking at those systems or at least. One of the things that we talk about and he (Director of ICT) talks about in particular is it's not necessarily saying you can't have something different, but saying that we will have two or three things that we support, not 14 different things.

Will Jordan

Thank you so much. I know I sent you some broad questions on what we thought we might talk about. I think we started off on the first question going along those lines and then it's just developed, it's been really, really useful to hear what you've been through, what that's been like and what you guys are doing at Anglian from your perspective.

Thank you very much for taking part in this. And I'm sure viewers and people watching this will be grateful for your sharing your time. Thank you very much Charity and for everybody else, we're going to be doing a series of these. So keep an eye out on email and Twitter and LinkedIn and wherever else we are. [IMP software.co.uk](http://IMPsoftware.co.uk), and we're on all of those main channels.