

Frameworks as Assurance:
A Practical Pathway for MAT Leaders
Briefing No. 3





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Multi-Academy Trusts centralise operations, the way they procure services has become as strategically important as the services themselves, particularly where those services relate to safeguarding, security and statutory compliance, and are subject to close scrutiny from auditors, regulators and boards.

This paper explores the growing role of procurement frameworks within the MAT sector, not purely as a route to compliance, but as a mechanism for reducing risk, accelerating delivery and enabling standardisation at scale.

For Trust leaders, frameworks offer more than legal assurance. They provide a way to move quickly and confidently when addressing urgent risks such as safeguarding gaps or cyber vulnerabilities, without prolonged tender processes that delay action.

The paper highlights how well designed framework procurement supports assurance first operating models by enabling Trust wide standardisation and providing defensible audit trails for critical services.

In this context, frameworks are an enabler of strategic assurance, allowing Trusts to procure safeguarding and security services in a way that is compliant, consistent and aligned with executive accountability.

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Start With the Assurance You Must Evidence

Before choosing a route, be explicit about the assurance your Board, Audit & Risk Committee and regulators will expect you to demonstrate. For most Trusts this spans five domains: regulatory compliance, safeguarding and cyber resilience, value for money, operational continuity, and consistency of control across schools.

Procurement frameworks are one of the few instruments that address these concurrently. They provide a pre-vetted supplier pool, standardised terms, defined call-off options, and a built-in audit trail showing how the Trust discharged its duties. Begin by writing down the outcomes you must evidence (e.g., compliance with public procurement rules and DfE standards; measurable protections for pupils and data; defensible spend decisions; continuity during change). Let those assurance outcomes drive your route, your documentation, and your commercial levers, not the other way round.

2

Decide the Pace of Contracting and Set the Governance

Speed matters when you're closing safeguarding gaps or remediating cyber risk, but pace should never come at the cost of weak governance. A direct award can be the right choice where urgency is real and the framework expressly permits it, provided your rationale, market considerations and risk assessment are clearly recorded.

A mini-competition typically offers stronger value-for-money evidence and comparable audit robustness and may be preferable for higher value or multi-year commitments. The critical point is not which you choose, but how you evidence the decision: define the need, show how the framework route is compliant, capture proportional market insight, confirm conflicts are managed, and minute the approval. That creates a defensible line from risk to remedy that auditors and Boards recognise.

3

Match the Route to the Complexity and Risk of Your Estate

The more complex the estate, the more assurance you need baked into your procurement.



A large, multi-site WAN redesign or security uplift introduces continuity risk, interdependencies and long-term commitments. This usually warrants a structured specification, options appraisal, and either a mini-competition or a directly awarded call-off with robust evidence and milestones.



Medium complexity work, for example a multi-school filtering upgrade on consistent infrastructure, can often use lighter competition with clear benchmarks and standard call-off terms.



For smaller scopes or single-school needs, a compliant direct award with a tight statement of requirements may be entirely proportionate. In each case, tailor the assurance to the risk: define service levels that matter to schools, insist on migration and rollback plans, test interoperability, and include change and exit provisions so the Trust retains control over time.



Specify Education Expertise Where the Risk is Educational

When the risk profile is explicitly educational, safeguarding, filtering and monitoring, age-appropriate controls, data handling in schools, sector expertise is not a “nice to have”; it’s an assurance requirement. Your specification should:

- Call out alignment to DfE filtering and monitoring standards
- Safeguard escalation pathways that work with DSLs, term-time operational realities, identity and role-based access for staff and pupils
- Generate reporting that governors can understand

Framework routes that are designed for education can make this easier because the supplier due diligence, terminology and model contracts tend to reflect school contexts. Conversely, where the risk is primarily technical breadth or scale, carrier networks, complex WAN topologies or unified comms, ensure the route you choose gives access to multi-lot telecoms capability, design authority and security assurance across vendors.

The aim is simple:

Align supplier capability to the risk you’re trying to reduce, then use the framework’s standard terms to lock that into measurable obligations.



5

Embed Social Value and Sustainability as Enforceable Commitments

If Environmental Social Governance (ESG) and net zero are Board priorities, treat them as contractually testable outcomes, not narrative. Set out how social value will be delivered and measured across your Trust footprint: energy efficiency and lifecycle emissions of network/security equipment; e-waste and recycling plans; local supply chain participation and apprenticeships; support for digital inclusion; travel and logistics reductions through remote management. Use the framework's scoring or call-off provisions to weight these appropriately, convert them into KPIs, and ensure periodic reporting so you can verify delivery over the term. That turns ESG from a promise into an assurance mechanism your Audit & Risk Committee can rely on.

How to Use This in Practice

Start with a short assurance statement for your Board:

- the risk you're addressing
- the framework route you'll use
- why that route is compliant and proportionate
- how outcomes will be measured

Keep the procurement artefacts, documents and records that evidence good governance, tight and purposeful: a clear statement of requirements linked to risk, an options note (even if brief), and a decision record that ties directly back to the assurance outcomes in Step 1.



Continue the conversation

If these challenges reflect what your Trust is navigating, now is the right time to have the conversation.

Schools Broadband works with MAT leaders to support strategic thinking around growth, consolidation, safeguarding, cyber security and Trust-wide assurance. We can help you explore how assurance-led digital infrastructure and security services can support stronger oversight, greater consistency and long-term resilience across your Trust.

Get in touch to arrange
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Appendix: Common Public Sector Framework Routes Used in Education

This appendix is provided for contextual reference only. Inclusion of any framework does not constitute recommendation, endorsement or preference. Multi-Academy Trusts remain responsible for determining the most appropriate and compliant procurement route for their specific circumstances. This document does not constitute procurement or legal advice.

Public sector procurement frameworks are widely used by schools and Multi-Academy Trusts to secure goods and services through compliant, auditable routes. They are established under regulated procurement processes and are intended to reduce procurement risk by pre-defining supplier due diligence, contractual terms and lawful call off mechanisms.

The categories below reflect framework routes commonly used within the education sector, alongside the assurance purpose they are typically used to support. The examples named are illustrative and non exhaustive.

National Public Sector Frameworks

These routes are commonly used for higher value or complex procurements where Trusts require strong regulatory compliance, broad market access and clear audit trails. They are often associated with multi-site infrastructure, connectivity, security and technology services.

Examples include: GCA Government Commercial Agency, previously Crown Commercial Service (CCS) network, technology and telecommunications frameworks.

Local Authority-Owned Purchasing Consortia

Local authority purchasing organisations operate frameworks designed for public sector bodies, including education. They are frequently used where Trusts value procedural clarity, public sector governance alignment and well documented direct award or competition processes.

Examples include: YPO technology and connectivity frameworks.

Education Specific Purchasing Consortia

These frameworks are designed exclusively for schools, colleges and Trusts, and often reflect sector specific statutory, safeguarding and operational requirements. They are commonly used to support assurance where educational context and terminology are critical.

Examples include: Crescent Purchasing Consortium (CPC) frameworks.

Specialist Education and ICT Frameworks

Specialist routes are sometimes used where proportionality and speed are key considerations, particularly when addressing identified operational, safeguarding or technical risks through compliant direct award mechanisms.

Examples include: Education-focused ICT and connectivity frameworks operating within the schools and MAT sector such as EnFrame.

Social Value and ESG Led Frameworks

Some frameworks place explicit emphasis on social value, sustainability and environmental outcomes. These routes may be used where Boards require contractual commitments relating to net zero, ESG priorities or wider community impact, supported by measurable delivery over the contract term.

Examples include: Social-value-driven and CIC-led procurement frameworks used within the education sector, such as EnFrame.

Key Assurance Point

The effectiveness of a framework as an assurance tool depends less on the framework itself and more on how the Trust applies it. Clear articulation of risk, proportionality of process, documented decision making and ongoing contract management are critical to evidencing value for money, compliance and executive accountability.

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