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Autumn  
2025

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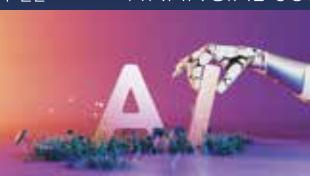
## SHAPING EDUCATION

Julian Drinkall

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# FOREWORD

**T**he Labour Government is now more than a year old, yet – as in so many other areas of public policy – ministers' direction of travel in relation to educational reform remains opaque.

The upcoming schools white paper and the final report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review will, surely, help to provide greater clarity and thereby an opportunity for broader and more focused collaboration within – and beyond – the MAT community.

Julian Drinkall (p6) believes that it is essential to 'break the chains' which prevent educational innovation and argues there is a pressing need to overhaul how we present education to students. In his view, MAT leadership teams have a crucial role to play in driving this outcome; a view echoed by Lorraine Hughes (p11) who urges school groups to work together to deliver the best results.

Alex Russell (p19) focuses on the need to embed partnerships into a sustained system of cross-agency engagement if we are to win back the lost generation of, particularly, male students who have become alienated from education. A loss for all of us.

As Hayley Mintern (p39) asserts, we know the power of people to transform lives. Yet creating and retaining the right team is not easy in the present, far from benign employment conditions; a situation which has been exacerbated by the financial landscape resulting from the increase in employers' NI and the nerve-fraying uncertainty about the upcoming reforms to workers' rights, discussed by Louise Brenlund (p14). Yet people are at the heart of what we do and how we do it, and therefore should be our first priority.

Much is going to be required of us. Are we ready to take up the challenge? Do we have the tools and the will? Can we articulate a shared vision which will provide the way-markers to a successful outcome? The next few months will tell.

**David Moncrieff**

'... WE KNOW  
THE POWER  
OF PEOPLE TO  
TRANSFORM  
LIVES.'

HAYLEY MINTERN

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# SHAPING EDUCATION FOR CONFIDENT AND CAPABLE FUTURES

## ADDRESSING TODAY'S CRUCIAL CHALLENGES



**Julian Drinkall** considers the key challenges facing the educational community and offers his thoughts on what needs to be done if students are to emerge as confident young adults ready to take their place in society and secure worthwhile and fulfilling employment.

The overarching purpose of education is to cultivate young people who are confident, happy, competent and capable. Equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills for a preferred career, as well as the relational and social skills essential for rewarding personal lives and a role in society.

Both formal and informal education need the active participation of family and the community.

In today's dynamic educational landscape, four crucial themes demand our

immediate attention and strategic focus. These themes highlight crucial areas where government policy and education leaders can come together to drive progress.

### THE CRUCIAL CRUNCH MOMENT: ENTERING FORMAL EDUCATION – THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY YEARS

We know that one of the two crunch moments in education occurs when children first start formal education, underscoring the paramount importance of the Early Years stage.

A primary focus here must be on school readiness and ensuring a smooth, effective

transition between nurseries and primary schools. For parents, the convenience and affordability of Early Years provision are critical, enabling them to work and contribute economically, but also giving children the best start. The Early Years are foundational for building essential social and cognitive skills that foster curiosity, competence and the development of positive social relationships with peers and teachers.

This is why lockdowns arguably affected the youngest the hardest. At crucial stages of their development, pre-school children were prevented from the normal range of opportunities to learn, socialise and acquire the skills needed to get the very best start.

The failure has caused many, if not most, of the recent problems in schooling as a generation passed through the system with new and original handicaps. The Early Years charity Kindred Squared's most recent annual survey of school readiness contains shocking findings, such as 1 in 4 children starting school still in nappies and

## ... EDUCATION FACES SIGNIFICANT HEADWINDS.

# ...I HOPE THAT EVOLUTION COMES AS CLOSE TO REVOLUTION AS POSSIBLE.

90% of teachers reporting at least one child in their class lacking expected school readiness skills. Almost half of the 1,000 primary school staff surveyed said that the school readiness problem is now worse than in the previous academic year.

## THE SECOND CRUNCH MOMENT: LEAVING FORMAL EDUCATION – DESTINATIONS AND CAREER PATHWAYS

The second pivotal crunch moment in education occurs as young people leave formal education, focusing on their destinations and career pathways. There is a pressing concern regarding the increasing number of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and the broader issue of student unemployment and unemployability. This, I would argue, is a 'crime' that demands immediate attention. To counter this, there is an imperative to improve and enhance the relevance of Gatsby benchmarks and CEIAG (Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance). Crucially, this requires building strong relationships between schools, higher education institutions and employers. Such collaboration will ensure that young people are better prepared for the demands of the workforce and have

...I WOULD ARGUE THAT THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO TACKLE CHALLENGES HEAD-ON AND BREAK THE CHAINS THAT PREVENT REAL EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS.

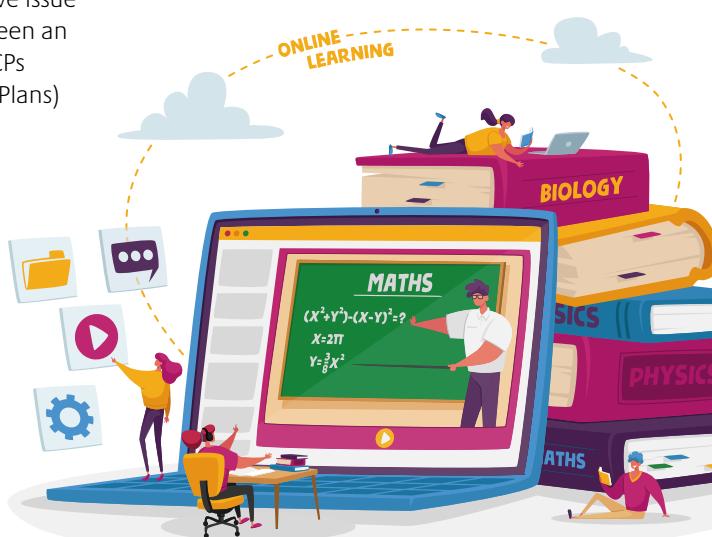
clearer pathways to meaningful careers. I really hope that the forthcoming Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) seizes the opportunity to transform the ability of the curriculum to seamlessly meet the needs of students and the careers of the future. Look at how popular Maths A Level has become; students vote with their feet and they want to do the subjects that they think will be the best preparation for the jobs that will be sought after, and the best paid, in years to come. The CAR has promised evolution, not revolution, but I hope that evolution comes as close to revolution as possible. We need a complete overhaul of the way we present education to students. Too much of what is taught appears ringfenced from the 'real world'; a newly designed curriculum with clear career pathways woven into its fabric will both excite and inspire.

## PERSISTENT CHALLENGES: INCLUSION, SPECIAL NEEDS AND DISADVANTAGE

Another theme that requires sustained focus revolves around the enduring challenges of Inclusion and Special Needs, alongside the pervasive issue of disadvantage. There has been an approximate doubling of EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans) and SEN (Special Educational Needs). Yet we are not seeing this sharp rise in many other developed countries. Addressing these challenges requires robust policy interventions, adequate funding and a commitment from education leaders to ensure every child, regardless of their background or needs, receives the support

required to thrive. The forthcoming Schools White Paper is expected to take on the extremely difficult task of reforming the SEND system, which has been widely acknowledged to be in crisis and described as 'broken' by the MPs on the House of Commons' Education Select Committee. I would argue that there are schools and multi-academy trusts which have been, and are, adapting their own provision for SEND pupils by working around the scarce resources on offer and developing innovative and creative solutions. I've even heard of schools that have bought shepherd huts and placed them on site and also converted houses to provide unique rooms and settings for pupils who struggle with 'mainstream' classrooms. We can provide unique solutions if schools and teachers are given the freedom to work with the very individual needs of the students and their families. ▶

WE NEED A COMPLETE OVERHAUL OF THE WAY WE PRESENT EDUCATION TO STUDENTS.



## EMBRACING THE FUTURE: TECHNOLOGY AS A LONG-TERM IMPERATIVE

While the pandemic did spur much useful innovation in this area, not enough was integrated systematically into post-pandemic educational practices. The world and the workforce are undergoing rapid transformation, with Artificial Intelligence (AI) now a permanent fixture. This necessitates that AI be taught and understood within educational curricula. We still don't have a standalone AI qualification, for example. As AI advances, inherently human skills such as ethics, morality, behaviour and curiosity will become even more critically important. To navigate this evolving landscape, there is a need for clever and inexpensive research and development to underpin longer-term investment and committed technology strategies within education.

Schools must empower teachers to use AI to become more productive and alleviate the burden of drudgery and compliance, which in turn should significantly increase staff motivation. While acknowledging the potential negatives of technology for students – including compulsion, addiction, distraction, pernicious social media driving bullying or social avoidance,

...BY FOCUSING ON THE TRUE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION AND ADOPTING SMART AND BRAVE INITIATIVES, THERE IS A MUCH GREATER CHANCE OF BREAKING THROUGH THESE CHALLENGES AND MAKING A GENUINELY REWARDING DIFFERENCE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE.

and the spread of dreadful or inaccurate content – it is equally vital to recognise its many positives. Technology offers the potential for unparalleled breadth and depth of knowledge and can focus efforts on individual and collective progress. The message is clear: we must not 'throw the baby out with the bath water' when it comes to integrating technology into education. A balanced and strategic approach is needed to harness its benefits while mitigating its risks. In a previous role, I introduced the use of an innovative 'Blackout' app, which limits social media and messaging apps on a phone for a set period of time, in our case, school hours. The welcome we had from families, and indeed pupils, told us all we needed to know about how technology itself can be used to manage the way young people interact with screens and smartphones.

## NAVIGATING HEADWINDS AND LEADING WITH PURPOSE

Despite these crucial themes and opportunities, education faces significant headwinds. These include stubborn challenges around funding, recruitment and retention of staff, and SEND. Nevertheless, by focusing on the true purpose of education and adopting smart and brave initiatives, there is a much greater chance of breaking through these challenges and making a genuinely rewarding difference for children and young people.

Central management and governance, particularly the core aspects of Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) leadership, have a vital role to play. These leaders need to be bold and innovative, actively working towards better serving both students and staff. Merely treading water in these difficult times will be seen through by parents and staff for what it is – a form of work avoidance that favours established interests and currently successful schools.

Instead, I would argue that there is an urgent need to tackle challenges head-on and break the chains that prevent real educational innovations. True change can be quick, cheap and effective if we are open to learning and adopting new thinking. After all, education itself has the power to shape futures for all – including for those who lead. ■



**JULIAN DRINKALL** is NED at Sanoma Group, Europe's leading educational content company, and also at the New Model Institute for Technology & Engineering (NMITE), a pioneer in UK Higher Education.



## HOW ASSESSMENT IS HELPING ONE MAT RAISE THE BAR

Tight budgets, raising attainment and SEND inclusion – MAT leaders are not short of challenges but White Horse Federation CEO **Dr Dan Nicholls** explains how **GL Assessment** can help.

**W**Our combined SAT scores have strongly improved in the last two years – they're now almost 70%,” explains Dan Nicholls, CEO of The White Horse Federation.

“We’re adding real value as a trust. But to embed progress further, we need to look at attainment year by year, so we have fewer children behind in Year 3, then fewer again in 4, and then 5, so we start Year 6 much less behind. And that’s where assessments from GL Assessment really help, because they build year on year and enable us to benchmark nationally exactly where we are.”

The White Horse Federation has 30 schools in the Southwest – 25 primary, five secondary, including two special schools, one in each phase. In total its 1,500 staff cater to 11,000 pupils.

### RAISING ATTAINMENT

Dan joined White Horse a year ago and sees raising attainment, as well as

ensuring financial stability, as his key priorities. Reliable, standardised data has a crucial part to play in both but when it comes to attainment, Dan says it pays to be able to benchmark nationally over time and to be forensic.

“We know from GL Assessment data what a child’s possible SAT score is from where they were in Year 3. So, if a Year 6 child is on track not to make it across the line, but their assessments in Year 4 and 5 indicated they would, it is likely a question of provision and not the child.”

White Horse uses the New Group Reading Test (NGRT) across the trust, as well as its speech and language screener, WellComm.

“We assess using NGRT twice a year in every year from Year 3. We have about

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900 pupils in each of our year groups, and being able to have a standardised, benchmarked assessment across those 900 gives us surety.”

Standardising assessments across a trust is one of those things that pays dividends, he says. “We need a level of standardisation because we can’t afford duplication or to have services and products that aren’t being used. When I meet with school leaders, I need to know we’re talking about the same data in the same way.”

### IDENTIFYING ISSUES EARLY

WellComm, which can identify speech and language issues from a young age, plays an important part: “It fits in with our best start in life approach, which is a key part of our new strategic plan: ‘Catch up, Keep up.’ We aim to ensure that we close gaps before they open, or at least start to narrow them as soon as we can,” Dan explains.

That also applies to children with SEND: “If SEND issues are identified very early, interventions and support can either remove some of the barriers or provide long-term support. It’s also important to remember that early assessment can spot potential that may be masked by issues that are presenting up front.”

An added advantage of the GL Assessment data, says Dan, is the wrap around support – particularly data interrogation and expert analyses – that are always to hand if teachers need it. ■



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## LEADER PROFILE

# LORRAYNE HUGHES OBE

**Lorryne Hughes** talks to **Zoe MacDougall** about the first ten years of Cumbria Education Trust and the role of the Chief Executive of this vibrant organisation.

### AN ANNIVERSARY MILESTONE

September 2025 was an exciting month for Cumbria Education Trust (CET), as they marked their tenth anniversary as a multi-academy trust, celebrating their journey from three schools in 2015 to their current status as education providers for 12 primary schools and five secondary schools.

Ardently, Lorryne shares the Trust's story: "From the get-go, I knew our schools needed to subscribe to a joint vision and a joint understanding of what our values are: Respect, Responsibility and Resilience. Would I change them for the next ten years? Absolutely not. They've served us well. They're embedded into our leadership culture, along with our motto: 'Be the best you can be'.

"In the early days, I made sure I was learning as much from the sector as I possibly could. I reached out to as many organisations as I could, so that I could build my network. I believe passionately about being a family of schools. What does that mean in terms of economy? You get that old argument about trusts - do they make you focus on all doing the same thing? Categorically not. Schools are individual, with individual characteristics and different communities. But absolutely, they can learn from each other. We make sure that at the heart of the Trust we have

joint curriculum, joint assessments, all of those things. Why? Because it's so well researched."

### PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND SIXTH FORM PROVISION

Cumbria Education Trust encompasses an educational journey for students aged 2-18. It's a special feature of its mission. Lorryne explains why this matters: "There's a dip in attainment as children move from primary to secondary settings. With one governance structure, I think you can really drive improvement

around that transition. A lot of our primary schools feed our secondary schools. That's the model at the heart of the Trust. Our secondary schools take children from different primaries too, but I would love



### LORRAYNE HUGHES OBE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, CUMBRIA EDUCATION TRUST

Lorryne Hughes began her journey in education with a BEd degree at the University of Edinburgh. Her first post was as a PE teacher at William Howard School in Brampton, a small market town near Carlisle in northern Cumbria.

Making her way through "just about every job there was", Lorryne became a Headteacher in 2007. During this time, Lorryne was a National Leader for Education, commissioned to go into different schools and support them in diverse ways with their school improvement plans. This was to be a seminal experience: "I became aware that my passion was beyond the doors of my own classroom, I wanted to make a difference within a locality."

In 2015, Cumbria Education Trust was established with Lorryne as its Chief Executive, ready and able to make a difference across the county. In 2024, Lorryne was awarded an OBE for her contributions to education.

it if all feeders were linked into a Trust. Deep collaboration under one governance structure is what I passionately believe in, and I can really see the benefit of that for young people." ▶

# MY CORE PURPOSE IS NEVER TO HAVE A DAY WHEN WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT THE LEARNING JOURNEY OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

## THE CORE PURPOSE OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

In her role as Chief Executive, Lorrynne has shaped CET to reflect her passion for teaching and learning. "I've focused on building the services at the heart of the Trust: Finance, HR, Operations, Media – all my schools get [these functions] provided for them. Because, unconditionally, my job is about creating the opportunity for our Headteachers to lead teaching and learning with passion, and without any of that service noise distraction.

"I want Headteachers to have the headspace to strategically lead their school improvement journey. My core

purpose is never to have a day when we're not talking about the learning journey of young people. I strongly encourage every Headteacher to be out and about in classrooms. Because, unequivocally, school improvement is about classrooms and what happens in them, through that wonderful interaction between the member of staff and the children or young people in front of them."

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Lorrynne's dedication to her members of staff is perhaps a tribute to her understanding of the teaching profession,

inside and out. She knows it can be tough; that rough days happen. She's keen to promote staff training as an integral part of her commitment to them. Lorrynne recently introduced Initial Teacher Training (ITT) to the Trust, working in partnership with Ambition Institute. One of her ITT students from the recent cohort had this to say about her experience: "Team teaching with experienced teachers and receiving constant support has been the best part of the ITT course."

## THINKING LIKE A LOCAL

Although still a proud Scot, Lorrynne has lived in Cumbria for many years, raised her family there, and knows what it means to be Cumbrian. It's a diverse county of rural outposts and market towns, with a heritage of mining and sheep farming, now overlayed with the tourism industry. Lorrynne's work is inseparable from the locality, as she warmly explains: "If you're



thinking about how to improve schools, the one thing you wholeheartedly have to do is engage with the community – the parents, the local groups, the business leaders, all of that. It's about sharing hearts and minds. It's about sharing a culture. You've got to build your culture with your staff, your pupils, your community."

Working closely with families and service providers isn't an easy task in a county as diverse as Cumbria. Lorrynne describes how it works: "In one school you have to have a comms strategy that looks like one thing, in another school it's totally different. It's definitely not one-size-fits-all. In some schools, you need to invite them in for coffee, give them the confidence to come in, when they're not keen to be in the building – that's a culture that often goes back to their own childhood experiences of education. In other schools, our parents love social media, so you've got to find a way of communicating daily with them using different platforms. It's about talking to them, asking them what they want. It's about knowing them."

Getting to know the community was particularly important when Cumbria Education Trust took on Whitehaven Academy in 2018. At the time, the school was in Special Measures and facing significant challenges. Lorrynne describes what happened: "In the midst of a scandal involving its previous sponsor, the Whitehaven community really felt that they had not had a good deal. It was very hard to convince them that they were going to have a brilliant school. Last year, that school was the eighth most improved school in the country, and now it's over-subscribed. We simply could not have done this without the support of the community."

## WORKING WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

If a trust is working closely with its community, then it follows that there exists a strong partnership with the local authority – and cementing that partnership is Lorrynne's fervent mission: "I have always had a working partnership with the local authorities. I set up the Cumbria Alliance



of System Leaders. I'm passionate about system leadership. We've all got great leaders in our schools. Finding ways of working together to support all schools to get better has become part of my DNA."

Filling in the details, Lorrynne constructively describes how collaboration with the local authority might work in practice: "I'm exploring partnerships with some of our health trusts; I'm really interested to investigate how schools, trusts and health providers can work together to support communities in a really joined-up and proactive way. Schools, trusts and local authorities have all got different things that they can bring to the table. But we can get confused about our different roles. We need clarity about who can do what. We all have the same aim but we need to know where we fit into the system."

Moreover, as a parallel aim, Lorrynne wants to see Cumbria Education Trust making a contribution to the wider system: "The more you're willing to give out, the more you bring in, and that raises the bar for everyone. You could be protectionist and think you have to hold on to what you've got. But actually, even in Special Measures schools, you still find something that's brilliant, something that you can use to inspire other people. When you encourage your staff to go and work outside of your institution, they come back energised and ready to re-engage with the continual school improvement journey."

## THE WHITE PAPER 2025

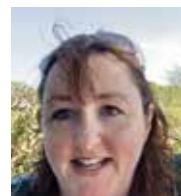
As we await the Government's imminent white paper, there is some nervousness about what direction ministers may take on multi-academy trusts. Lorrynne puts forward her hopes and fears: "I believe that groups of schools, working together under one umbrella, deliver really strong results – so I would like to see that groups of schools are going to continue to work together. In addition, we need to sort out the SEND system for young people who are most vulnerable. It's a complex issue because it's about equality law and parental rights as well. We need clarification from the Government about the direction of travel on these core issues."

## A HEARTFELT THANK YOU

As our conversation drew to a close, Lorrynne was very clear about what the final note should be: "Ten years ago, I had a single handful of people who started this journey with me. I've now got a Trust with over a thousand staff, all of whom believe wholeheartedly in our values. They are the people who make this Trust great. I am so grateful for all the work they have done."

## ZOE MACDOUGALL

is an educational commentator who has worked in both the maintained and independent sectors.



# WORKERS' RIGHTS: THE CONTINUING STORY

## THE IMPACT OF THE EVOLVING LEGISLATION COULD BE SIGNIFICANT FOR TRUSTS AND SCHOOLS

In her previous article covering the Labour Government's Employment Rights Bill, **Louise Brenlund** explained how the putative legislation has been hailed as 'the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation', and that its implementation is likely to have a range of implications for MATs and schools, particularly in terms of employment practices, the protection of employees and compliance with new legal requirements.



**T**he Employment Rights Bill ('the Bill') was initially anticipated to become law in July, with parts of the legislation coming into force this autumn, but there has been a significant shift from this position. This update outlines where the legislation now stands and what schools should be doing to prepare.

### WHEN WILL THE BILL BECOME LAW?

In July, the Government published an implementation roadmap which set

out a timeline which anticipated that initial measures would take effect upon Royal Assent or soon after. The roadmap confirmed that a phasing approach would be taken to both the consultations and implementation for the rest of the measures. We would then start to see more detail as to how it's proposed that the new laws will work in practice.

It is now anticipated that given the extensive consultation planned by the Government, the timetable may slip.

### SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT

The Report Stage took place in the House of Lords in July, when amendments to the Bill were debated and voted upon by the Lords.

There is significant unease about the implementation of the Bill from within British industry, amidst concerns over additional costs and administrative burdens. Those concerns were reflected in amendments made by the Lords.

Government-backed amendments were agreed and published with substantial and previously unannounced changes to legislation, including:

**Dilution of the fire and rehire provisions** – Under the amendments, a dismissal will be automatically unfair only when the employer is trying to impose a 'restricted variation', currently defined as a change to pay, pensions, contractual hours or holiday, or any attempt to add a new flexibility clause on those topics and the six-point consultation checklist has been dropped. All other contractual changes remain subject to the 'ordinary reasonableness' test on unfair dismissal and will not be automatically unfair.

Automatically unfair dismissal will have uncapped compensation unless the employer can prove 'calamitous' financial

# THE ENHANCED RIGHTS PROVIDED BY THE NEW LEGISLATION AIM TO SUPPORT STAFF THROUGH CHALLENGING LIFE EVENTS, POTENTIALLY IMPROVING MORALE AND RETENTION.

distress. If the defence is made out, a tribunal would then revert to the normal reasonableness test.

It will also be automatically unfair to dismiss employees simply to replace them with agency workers or contractors, unless the financial distress test is made out.

This practice is less common in the education sector but may occur if budget constraints require changes to terms and conditions.

**The ban on non-disclosure agreements relating to workplace harassment or discrimination** – The drafting will significantly curtail the use of non-disclosure provisions in employment contracts, settlement agreements or other deals in relation to alleged harassment or discrimination. The protection will be broad to cover allegations against the business or staff, regardless of whether 'the speaker' or someone else was the victim.

This means that routine insistence on confidentiality in these circumstances is likely to become high risk and settlement agreement terms will need to be reviewed. Schools should start reviewing any documentation covering these practices and be ready to make amendments.

## Extending bereavement leave to include pre-24-week baby loss –

Parents who lose a pregnancy before 24 weeks will be entitled to unpaid time off to grieve without fear of losing their job. The Bill suggests at least one week for both the person that was pregnant and their partner. There will be consultation as to if that should be longer and what evidence might be required.

More surprisingly, the House of Lords agreed to several substantial

non-government amendments that materially alter the Government's original proposals (as such, these proposals may not be accepted):

**Zero-hours workers** – The employer's duty to proactively offer a guaranteed hours contract has been converted into a worker's right to request such a contract. Under the amendment, if a worker makes a formal request for a guaranteed hours contract, employers would be required to offer one. This would work in a similar way to flexible working requests.

Only those averaging at least eight hours a week over the previous 26 weeks could apply, removing the leverage for more casual staff. A strict pay parity test will be imposed for agency workers with any guaranteed-hours offer.

**Unfair dismissal qualifying period** – Rather than becoming a day-one right as originally proposed, there will be a six-month qualifying period.

**Enhanced whistleblowing protections** – Under the proposals, the definition of 'qualifying disclosure' would be simplified and broadened.

Protections would only apply where disclosure is genuinely in the public interest, not just that the worker reasonably believes it.

A new statutory body, the Office of the Whistleblower, would be established. They will set standards, offer reporting and have powers to order enforcement or redress.

Large employers, those in financial services or those at money laundering risk – which could include independent schools – would be required to take reasonable steps to investigate protected disclosures.

**Right to be accompanied** – A Lords' amendment provides an extension to the right to be accompanied at disciplinary and grievance hearings to include a 'certified professional companion' (although the precise detail of this remains unclear at this stage).

**Trade union ballot thresholds** – The 50% turnout requirement for industrial action ballots would be retained.

The House of Commons have now rejected these amends.

## WHAT NEXT?

The Bill returned to the Commons on 15 September 2025, the non-government backed amendments made by the Lords were all revoked. There is now likely to be a period of 'ping-pong' between the Houses until both agree. It is most likely ►



## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MATS AND SCHOOLS?

The Government's roadmap is a useful resource for school leaders to stay informed and plan ahead, but it will be important to keep on top of developments and ensure that reforms are addressed appropriately. Some reforms will impact on some schools more than others, but each school will need to assess this and make adjustments accordingly.

The enhanced rights provided by the new legislation aim to support staff through challenging life events, potentially improving morale and retention. These need to be reflected in each school's people strategy and staff wellbeing policies. It will be crucial to review policies to ensure they comply with the 'day-one' eligibility and operational processes that ensure cover is viable for staff absences.

Day-one rights and probationary periods are likely to have the biggest impact on schools as this will mean a fundamental change in how staff are managed in their first two years of employment. For SLTs and other managers, this will mean:

- More immediate and thorough performance management procedures for new starters. Consequently, it is essential to review probation policies and documentation to ensure clarity and consistency.
- The potential for increased disputes or grievances within the first year of employment, given the immediate availability of unfair dismissal rights.

Schools will need to ensure their recruitment procedures are robust and they are able to identify issues early. It will be important that line managers are trained to understand both how probationary periods operate and the processes to follow in order to minimise the risk of successful unfair dismissal claims.

the Lords will give in and the Commons proposal will succeed. Given the Houses recess, it is now expected the Bill will not become law until the end of October 2025.

It is unclear whether the Government will adapt its planned timeline for implementation of the legislation if it is held up in Parliament. Based on the roadmap and developments to date, the following is an indicative timeline that schools should take note of:

The Bill is expected to become law in the autumn of 2025 with some immediate trade union changes. By April 2026, it is expected that:

- the new Fair Work Agency will be up and running
- day-one rights to statutory paternity leave and unpaid parental leave will replace existing length of service qualifying periods
- statutory sick pay will be available from the first day of absence and to all workers
- the maximum protective award for failures

in collective redundancy consultation will double from 90 to 180 days

- there will be reforms to whistleblowing law and electronic and workplace balloting
- gender pay gap and menopause action plans to be introduced on a voluntary basis.

It is anticipated that the other measures approved in the legislation will come into force during 2026-27.

### LISTENING

The delay seemed to be a sign that ministers were finally listening to business about the need to re-balance rights but it now seems most unlikely any of the Lords proposals will proceed.

The Employment Rights Bill represents a substantial shift in the employment landscape. While some measures – such as giving staff more secure contracts and day-one rights to claim unfair dismissal – may initially appear daunting for school

leaders, they also offer potential benefits in terms of improved staff morale, reduced turnover and better work-life balance.

Nevertheless, there will be concerns around costs and administration. Schools that adapt early, engage in forward planning and ensure compliance are likely to see smoother transitions. Here are some next steps to consider:

- **Audit existing contracts:** Identify which staff are on zero-hours or agency contracts; consider whether some could be moved to guaranteed-hours contracts, particularly if they regularly work set hours.

- **Update policies:** Ensure your staff handbook, recruitment policies, probation processes and shift/cancellation policies reflect the new requirements.

- **Communicate with agencies:** Confirm how the new obligations around shift notifications, cancellations and payment will be handled. Clarity here can prevent disputes and unexpected charges.

- **Plan your budget:** Factor in potential increases in SSP and the possibility of paying staff for cancelled or curtailed shifts.

### GREATER CLARITY

Schools now have greater clarity over the timeframe for implementation and are likely to be breathing a sigh of relief at the news that the vast majority of measures proposed by the Bill will not be in force until late 2026 at the earliest.

At this stage, however, schools should begin to reflect upon how the changes may impact their current working arrangements, policies and procedures and plan accordingly. ■

### LOUISE BRENLUND

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# Do more with less: the power of marginal gains

A practical guide to making everyday improvements in schools and trusts



School and trust leaders know the pressures all too well. Budgets are stretched, staff are under strain, and the push to adopt new technology is growing louder. The challenge is clear: how do you improve outcomes without the time, money or capacity for major change?

The answer doesn't have to be a sweeping overhaul. Sometimes the most effective improvements come from small, manageable steps that remove friction and free up resources.

## What you'll find inside the guide:

Our free guide explores how a marginal gains approach can help schools and trusts:

- ✓ Strengthen people and processes – streamline HR, recruitment and compliance with tools that give staff more time back.
- ✓ Make smarter financial decisions – use live data, scenario planning and consolidated contracts to get more from every pound.
- ✓ Simplify tools and technology – cut duplication with integrated systems that reduce admin and improve accuracy.
- ✓ Protect data with confidence – secure, education-specific platforms that reduce workload while meeting compliance standards.

***“Since we've taken this approach to collaborative purchasing, we've probably saved in excess of 30% across all nine schools.”***

– Paul Drew, COO, Lighthouse Federation

Every small gain matters. Whether it's reducing admin, cutting duplication, or freeing up budget for the classroom, these improvements stack up into something bigger: more time, more confidence, and better outcomes for pupils.

[theaccessgroup.com/education](http://theaccessgroup.com/education)

Download your free guide today and see how small, practical changes can make a big impact.



# How the Lighthouse Federation found big savings in small changes

When you're growing quickly, adding schools, staff and systems, fragmentation can quietly drain time and energy. That's the situation the Lighthouse Federation faced: nine schools, over 3,000 pupils and 600 staff across the West Midlands.

They were operating like a multi-academy trust, but without the systems to support it. Each school had its own way of working, its own contracts, its own processes. Leaders were spending valuable time chasing spreadsheets, re-entering data and negotiating multiple supplier agreements, when what they really wanted was to focus on delivering the best education possible.

This is a familiar story across the sector. With budgets tighter than ever, schools and trusts can't always invest in large-scale transformation. But they still need to find ways to save money, reduce workload and support their staff. For the Lighthouse Federation, the answer wasn't a single sweeping change, but a series of small, targeted improvements that added up to something far bigger.

## The challenge: operating like a trust without the infrastructure

"We were operating like a trust, but without the infrastructure," recalls Paul Drew, the Federation's COO. Each school managed its own systems and contracts. That meant no shared visibility, no consistent processes and no way to free up resources for what mattered most: teaching and learning.

The Federation wanted more control and oversight, but without adding to staff workload or layering on yet another system. They needed something simple, joined-up and sustainable.

## Choosing unity over silos

The Federation chose the Access Education Freedom Package, which brings together finance, HR, payroll, budgeting and more in one connected platform. Instead of juggling different suppliers and contracts, everything could run through one system.

Alongside this, they opted for the Premier Customer Success Plan, which gave them ongoing support and advice rather than just technical fixes.



This meant they weren't left to figure things out alone, but had a partner to guide them through the change.

"We didn't want to be managing different suppliers and stitching systems together. We needed one contract, one platform and one trusted partner."

– Paul Drew

## Real savings, smoother processes

### 1. 30% savings reinvested in pupils

By consolidating procurement and aligning operations, the Federation saved around 30% on everything from stationery to heating systems. Those savings weren't just numbers on a spreadsheet, they were reinvested directly into supporting pupils.

### 2. Fewer systems to manage

Staff no longer had to switch between disconnected platforms or re-enter the same data multiple times. Payroll, budgeting and finance now talk to each other, making everyday work faster and less stressful.

### 3. Staff who feel supported, not overwhelmed

With one consistent system, staff found it easier to learn and quicker to get things done. New users could pick it up without feeling daunted, and existing staff no longer felt like they were fighting against clunky tools. "Our staff love it. They feel supported, not overwhelmed. And we know the system is built to grow with us."

### 4. A support relationship that feels like part of the team

The Premier Customer Success Plan gave the Federation a dedicated contact who didn't just solve problems, but shared ideas and examples from other schools. As Paul puts it, "Our Customer Success Manager genuinely feels like part of our central leadership team. They bring insights we wouldn't have seen on our own."

## The power of small gains

The Lighthouse Federation's story isn't about overnight transformation. It's about small, practical changes that add up to something

meaningful. A single platform reduces complexity. Cost savings free up resources. Staff feel more confident. And ultimately, pupils benefit from schools that can spend less time on admin and more time on teaching.

It shows that you don't always need a major overhaul to see improvement. By focusing on small but important efficiencies, the Federation was able to achieve lasting gains that will continue to benefit staff and pupils for years to come.

## What others can learn

If you're running a trust or federation, the lessons are clear:

- One integrated system saves time and reduces errors
- Real savings can be redirected where they matter most
- Support that stays with you helps build confidence and capacity
- Small operational improvements stack up into long-term resilience

Every trust faces different pressures, whether that's budgets, staffing or compliance. But what the Lighthouse Federation shows is that progress is possible without disruption. By taking a marginal gains approach, schools can make changes that are realistic, achievable and immediately useful.

## Download your guide today and see how small changes can make a big impact.





# 'LOST BOYS' BRIDGING THE GAP

**Alex Russell** reflects on the key factors of education, behaviour and cross-agency engagement in the critical work of engaging with the 'lost' generation of male students.

I write this as the CEO of a diverse multi-academy trust with many schools in Surrey, watching with growing concern as many of our male pupils – the so-called 'lost boys' – navigate education and life with fewer supports than ever before.

This is not just anecdotal; recent UK research paints a stark portrait:

BOYS DISPROPORTIONATELY DISENGAGE AT 16+,  
BUT VOCATIONAL ROUTES CAN RE-ENGAGE THEM.

- The Centre for Social Justice reports that young men aged 16–24 are now more likely to be NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) than their female peers – a 40% rise during the pandemic, compared to just 7% among young women.
- Their average earnings now trail those of women in the same cohort by nearly 9%.
- Boys lag behind girls in every stage of education – from school-readiness at age 5 (60% vs 75%) to GCSEs and A Levels, and are twice as likely to be excluded.

These findings are not restricted to areas of socio-economic deprivation; it is happening right across the South East, albeit sometimes masked by local affluence. In my Trust, suspension rates for boys are nearly 30% higher than girls, and boys are three times more likely to be permanently excluded than girls. The national picture is no different. Furthermore, increasing referrals across the sector from youth offending teams highlight a worrying trend.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION

From my perspective, no one school can tackle this alone. Effectively supporting these boys means forging strong ties with:

**Local youth offending teams and local authority violence reduction partnerships or units** – A 2025 study by Hull and Bristol universities found excluded teenagers are twice as likely to commit serious violence within a year – proof that school exclusion without wraparound support has serious consequences. Our schools work closely with our pupil referral units and youth justice services to create 'soft-landing' reintegration plans, ensuring boys are not simply returned after exclusion but engaged with purposeful mentoring and education packages.

**Social services and early intervention teams** – Figures from Save the Children and Bristol University show nearly a million boys already lag behind in Early Years development – a gap that starts widening before they arrive in Year 1. In Surrey, we have the Early Years Aspire Programme that aims to enhance the transition process for children who may need additional support as they move from an Early Years setting into school. This is a joint programme between Early Years settings, Early Years advisers and the Specialist Teachers for Inclusive Practice (STIP) team.

**Mentoring charities** – In the UK, 65% of children aged 12–16, in low-income households, do not live with both parents, about 92% of these living with their mother. Male role models such as male teachers have become rarer, especially in our primary schools. ►

An increase in digital communication and lone working can isolate boys further. Sadly, many boys discover masculinity by finding an alternative path, such as gangs and crime.

Organisations like Chapter2, which place male mentors with boys aged 7-16 to address fatherlessness, offer evidence that consistency matters. In Surrey, we have Mindworks and charities like Buddy Up that offer mentoring for young people. Those who do engage result in fewer exclusions and improvements in attendance and emotional resilience.

### **Mental health and Child and Adolescent**

**Mental Health Services (CAMHS)** – The CSJ report observes a mental health crisis among young men, with suicide now the biggest killer of boys under 19. CAMHS teams run Reach4Welling – Young Person Skills Group. These sessions, supplemented with pastoral check-ins by school staff, help reduce stigma and increase early intervention behaviours. In Surrey, Mindworks offers its 'Reaching Out Service' to support young people, particularly those aged between 10-16 who are known to the Youth Justice System, who are isolated and/or vulnerable.

**Careers and the local skills agenda** – Boys disproportionately disengage at 16+, but vocational routes can re-engage them. In our trust schools, we've co-designed a curriculum that includes academic, vocational and now technical courses to offer something for everyone and dramatically reduce the number of NEET-bound boys.

## **WHAT'S WORKING AND WHAT STILL NEEDS WORK?**

Making 'lost boys' a live issue in our leadership and school discussions has undoubtedly raised the profile of this issue. Boys now frame our thinking and data analysis. We are now more forensic and the link between boys and Special Education Needs and/or socio-economic deprivation is clear for all to see. Like anything in a school, if leaders make it a priority, it will have a greater chance of becoming one.

Whilst it is difficult to say explicitly that leadership priorities and cross-agency collaboration have had a direct impact on our 'lost boys', there are indicators to suggest that we are making some positive inroads. In the last 12 months:

- our suspension rate for boys dropped 39% compared to 18% for girls
- our exclusion rate for boys dropped 23%. However, girls' dropped by 50%, reinforcing that this is a complex picture

- the attendance of boys has reduced by just 0.2% compared to 0.75% for girls
- the persistent absence of boys reduced by 2.5% whilst girls' increased by 0.3%
- our pathway progression is encouraging with no NEETs in the last 4 years.

However, challenges remain. Surrey's Mindworks' services are overstretched. Waiting lists stretch to many weeks, compromising responsive support. Mentoring programmes operate on project-based funding cycles. As one ends, so does a support network. There's a risk of boys feeling abandoned. However, the most significant barrier is within our gift to change. Within parts of the school system, strong, punitive cultures linger; some staff remain hesitant to embrace trauma-informed, relational approaches.

## **URGENT ACTION**

The research is unequivocal: boys are falling behind – academically, emotionally and socio-economically. Without urgent action, this generation risks becoming lost.

Surrey's collaborative initiatives, rooted in multi-agency working, are a promising blueprint. We have begun turning data into action, seeing real improvement in attendance and behaviour for our boys. To truly succeed, however, we must embed these partnerships into a sustained system of support – not as standalone projects, but as fundamental components of the educational and community landscape. ■

**ALEX RUSSELL** is CEO of the Bourne Educational Trust.



## **THE WAY AHEAD IN SURREY: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE, JOINED-UP ECOSYSTEM**

If we are to prevent Surrey's boys from slipping permanently through the net, the following steps are essential:

- Ensure robust long-term funding for speech and language initiatives integrated with early education and social services.
- Embed mental health in education by extending Mindworks' capacity and extend the Surrey pilot of placing counsellors on-site in schools to all schools across the county.
- Scale mentoring as a core entitlement for every vulnerable boy.
- Ensure all professionals in schools recognise boys' developmental differences, avoid bias and engage positively by making this a leadership priority in our schools.

By the end of 2025, the Department for Education (DfE) requires every school in England to have a Climate Action Plan. These plans are central to cutting emissions, protecting biodiversity, preparing schools for climate risks, and embedding sustainability in the curriculum. For Multi Academy Trusts (MATs), this is both a challenge and an opportunity. With multiple schools at different stages of readiness, managing data and ensuring consistency can quickly overwhelm leaders.

What MATs need is a clear, centralised system that simplifies reporting, meets compliance requirements, and drives real impact.

### THE CHALLENGE FOR MATS

Every Climate Action Plan must reflect the four pillars of the DfE's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy:

- **Decarbonisation** – cutting carbon emissions from estates, energy, and travel.
- Biodiversity – enhancing school grounds and encouraging engagement with nature.
- **Adaptation & Resilience** – preparing estates for risks such as extreme heat or flooding.
- **Climate Education and Green Skills** – embedding sustainability in teaching and preparing pupils for future green careers.

For MAT leaders, coordinating these four pillars across multiple schools is complex. Data is often inconsistent, reporting fragmented, and progress uneven. Without the right tools, compliance risks becoming a burden rather than a chance to lead.



### THE SOLUTION: CLIMATE ACTION PLANNING & MANAGEMENT (CAMP) TOOL & SUPPORT FROM BLUE MARBLE

The platform provides an easy-to-use Climate Action Planning & Management (CAMP) tool, designed specifically for MATs. It consolidates every school's Climate

# THE DFE'S 2025 CLIMATE ACTION PLAN DEADLINE — MADE EASY FOR MATS

Action Plan into a single secure dashboard, removing the need for spreadsheets and enabling live oversight.

With the platform you can:

- Consolidate all plans in one place.
- Monitor progress against DfE pillars in real time.
- Generate reports instantly for governors, trustees, and Ofsted.
- Share best practice across your schools.

This transforms compliance into leadership, enabling MATs not just to meet the 2025 requirement, but to embed sustainability across their trust.

### SUCCESS IN PRACTICE – PLYMOUTH CAST

Plymouth CAST, a trust of 36 schools across the South West, chose Blue Marble Sustainability as their partner. Their decision was based on confidence in both the CAMP tool and Blue Marble's expertise:

“We chose to work with Blue Marble because their CAMP tool gives each of our schools the structure to develop Climate Action Plans consistently, while providing the Trust with oversight and visibility. Their partnership with the Department for Education on the national Sustainability Support for Education service gave us real confidence in their credibility and impact. Blue Marble combine expertise with practical solutions that help us live out our mission of stewardship and care for creation.” – Rose Colpus-Fricker, Chief Operating Officer,

Plymouth CAST Multi Academy Trust.



Further

reflections from Plymouth CAST include:

- “With Blue Marble's support, our schools

are turning ideas into action through meaningful Climate Action Plans.”

- “The CAMP tool provides central oversight and reporting we can rely on.”
- “Partnering with Blue Marble, who work with the DfE, gives us confidence in both expertise and delivery.”
- “CAMP standardises climate action across our schools, combining local ownership with trust-wide management.”

### THE BLUE MARBLE ADVANTAGE

Blue Marble are education sector specialists with a strong history of delivering sustainability services and support.

They understand the challenges schools face – from estate management to curriculum integration – and bring a proven track record of helping leaders turn climate ambition into measurable action.

They offer:

- Full onboarding of every school into the CAMP tool.
- Long-term consultancy to guide implementation and impact.
- Shared learning from other MATs to accelerate your journey.

With this partnership, MATs don't just meet the DfE's deadline — they build capacity to lead on sustainability for years to come.

### YOUR NEXT STEP

Visit [blue-marble.co.uk/platforms/climate-action-management-platform-camp-for-trusts](https://blue-marble.co.uk/platforms/climate-action-management-platform-camp-for-trusts) to see how the CAMP tool, supported by Blue Marble, can save time, reduce complexity, and deliver results.

DfE expectations are clear: every school must have a Climate Action Plan by the end of 2025.

With Blue Marble, meeting that requirement is simple, effective, and future-focused. ■



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# FROM SEEDS OF CREATIVITY TO STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

## HOW TRUST CENTRAL STRUCTURES EVOLVE AS THEY GROW

Drawing on recent CJK research, **Chris Kirk** outlines the key phases in the evolution of MATs, examining how central structures start to emerge as trusts evolve and grow, and highlighting key crisis points at each stage.

When multi-academy trusts (MATs) first began to expand in the early 2010s, the logic of centralisation was simple: bring services together, gain efficiencies of scale and free Headteachers from the burden of running business functions to focus on teaching and learning. But over the last decade, the role of the central team has changed dramatically.

Today, the most mature central teams are not just the accountants, contract negotiators and IT fixers of the trust world. They are strategic hubs – using technology, data and specialist expertise to improve educational outcomes, develop talent and serve their communities.

The reason? Trusts don't stand still. As they grow organically or through merger, their central structures go

through distinct stages – each bringing new opportunities and new tensions.

To understand this journey, it's useful to borrow from the Greiner Growth Curve, an organisational model that charts growth through phases, each ending in a 'crisis' that forces change.

### PHASE 1: GROWTH THROUGH CREATIVITY: THE EARLY TRUST (TWO SCHOOLS)

In Greiner's first phase, growth is powered by the vision and energy of the founders. For MATs, this is the start-up stage – often a small cluster of schools led by a strong CEO or Executive Head, with educational improvement taking priority.

At this point, the 'central team' is minimal – typically just the CEO and a Finance Manager to meet statutory requirements. Functions like HR, estates

and IT are largely local, with Headteachers making most operational decisions.

**The first crisis – leadership:** Growth brings complexity. The founding leadership style – informal, hands-on and flexible – can no

### PHASE 1

#### Perceived benefits

- Schools retain autonomy over budgets and suppliers.
- Central costs are minimal.

#### Challenges

- Headteachers are stretched thin, juggling leadership and operational management.
- No economies of scale or central negotiating power.
- No consistent systems or processes, making trust-wide visibility impossible.

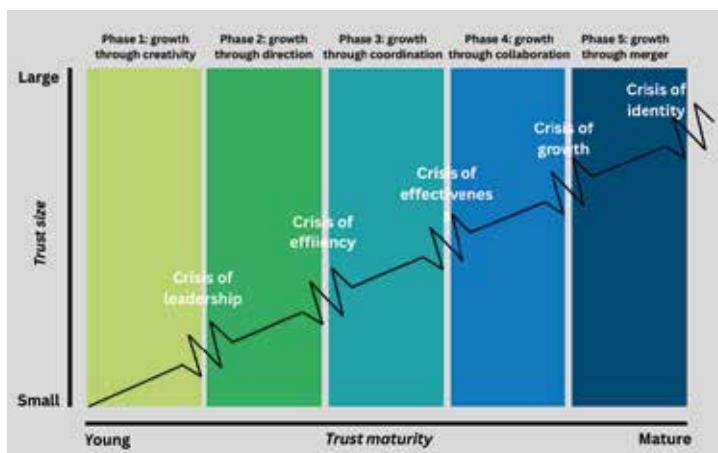
longer cope with the demands of multiple schools. This challenge is compounded in a trust, where accountability sits at trust level rather than school level.

### PHASE 2: GROWTH THROUGH DIRECTION: THE EARLY CENTRALISATION WAVE (SIX TO EIGHT SCHOOLS)

Greiner's second phase is when the first wave of centralisation begins. Trusts create small head office central teams, align payroll and finance systems and begin to track key metrics at trust level.

#### The second crisis – efficiency:

As the central team expands, many Heads feel their workload hasn't reduced. While the trust begins to take on statutory responsibilities, schools are still required to provide the data and inputs that make this possible. At the same time, they continue to manage most operational tasks locally. The result is a perception that centralisation is increasing bureaucracy and cost without yet delivering the promised efficiencies.►



## PHASE 2

### Perceived benefits

- Clearer accountability at trust level.
- Centre begins to relieve some of the statutory burden, reducing risk.

### Challenges

- Central team costs increase before efficiencies are realised.
- Heads feel their workload increases.
- Risk of duplication of effort between school and centre.

## PHASE 3: GROWTH THROUGH COORDINATION: THE CREATION OF SHARED SERVICES (10-20 SCHOOLS)

In this phase, trusts begin to formalise a shared services model. Key operational functions such as finance, HR, IT and estates are centrally and functionally aligned, with responsibilities and roles moving away from schools into the trust office. This creates greater order, reduces duplication and starts to relieve Headteachers of many non-teaching pressures.

As CJK puts it: 'Centralisation for consistency and efficiency is a major strength of trusts – delivering standardised processes, better compliance and a reduced administrative burden on schools.'

## PHASE 3

### Perceived benefits

- Improved consistency and compliance.
- Economies of scale in procurement and delivery.
- Leadership time in schools freed-up to focus on education.

### Challenges

- Tension can arise if the quality of services is poor (which Heads perceive they are paying for out of their 'top slice').
- Heads can feel remote from decision-making.
- Risk that understanding of local context could be 'lost'.

CJK's research shows that most trusts are moving to shared services over time, with nearly 60% of trusts managing finance, HR and IT centrally.

### The third crisis – effectiveness:

Efficiency gains alone are not enough. As central teams grow, school leaders may feel they're losing too much control. Trusts that don't address this risk disengagement – and sometimes active resistance – from their schools. The efficiency crisis forces leaders to rethink how to balance control with empowerment.

## PHASE 4: GROWTH THROUGH COLLABORATION: RESTORING LOCAL AGENCY WITH MATURE BUSINESS SERVICES (25+ SCHOOLS)

Greiner's fourth phase is about moving beyond centralisation to strike a better balance between consistency and local context. Trusts fine-tune their business services, standardising where it adds value while deliberately collaborating with schools to shape how services are delivered. This is the stage where the concept of local agency takes root: decision-making is pushed back to schools in areas where context matters most. At the same time, trust leaders focus on building a strong, shared culture so that all staff – whether in schools or the centre – feel united behind a single mission. The result is a shift towards collaborative standardisation: common ways of working that are co-created based on constant flows of data revealing strengths and weaknesses in operations, rather than imposed without explanation.

As the CJK *Building Trusts 2024* report argues: 'What really matters is local agency, not local autonomy' – the ability of local leaders to make decisions that shape outcomes, within a structured, efficient framework.

As I have observed in other fora, this isn't just about setting rules from the centre: 'You may need to adapt your culture to encourage collaborative engagement in an industrialised way... to ensure that things get done and that working groups don't end up as just "talking shops".'

CJK survey data shows that in larger trusts (21+ schools), central structures expand significantly:

- Senior management roles in central HR grow around six-fold compared to the smallest trusts.
- IT senior management grows ten-fold.
- Leadership of estates, IT and HR becomes more specialised, often with Directors or Chief Officers in each area.

As a further evolution of this phase, we see the central team evolving further into a true strategic centre, leading talent pipeline, wellbeing, allocating resources across a group of schools to where they have the greatest impact, and partnering with other trusts and local authorities to fulfil civic duties, tackle social justice challenges and improve SEND provision.

In practice, the strategic centre in larger trusts now often incorporates:

- Business service hubs – automating transactional processes using AI and workflow tools such as Habitude, Power Automate, and Nintex.



## PHASE 4

### Perceived benefits

- Local leaders feel trusted and empowered, improving morale and retention.
- Better balance between efficiency and local context.

### Challenges

- Striking the balance between freedom and consistency.
- Ensuring local decisions still align with trust-wide strategy.
- Collaboration takes time and effort.

- Centres of excellence – subject-matter experts aligned to the trust's strategic objectives.
- Service Development Managers – acting as 'connectors' between the central team and schools, ensuring local context informs trust-wide decisions.
- Scaled school improvement functions – enabling specialist in-house roles such as SEND advisers, safeguarding leads and attendance improvement officers.
- New professional roles – investing in positions such as data architects, talent acquisition specialists, marketing and communications managers, and strategy directors.
- Shared knowledge – building a central 'corporate brain' through technology, using AI to capture and harness the collective expertise of all staff across the trust.
- One Team, One Mission – ensuring equal opportunities and recognition for both teaching and non-teaching roles.

### The fourth crisis – growth:

As collaboration deepens, trusts face a new challenge: how to keep growing without becoming bogged down in complexity. Too much structure can stifle innovation, and decision-making risks slowing as more voices are involved. At the same time, central teams may fall into the KPI trap – using metrics to enforce processes rather than to drive meaningful improvement. When the metric becomes the goal, activity can be misdirected, such as closing a helpdesk ticket quickly to meet

the KPI, rather than resolving it thoroughly to deliver real value.

## PHASE 5: GROWTH THROUGH MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

In today's climate of political uncertainty, workforce shortages and funding pressures, the current challenge for many trusts is sustainability:

- How to keep delivering high-quality services without over-inflating central costs.
- How to invest in technology that actually makes a difference.
- How to merge with or acquire other trusts while protecting culture and local agency.
- How to move beyond the 'lowest top slice is best' mindset, demonstrating the value of central functions rather than judging on cost alone.

For many trusts, addressing this sustainability challenge will mean consolidation – most often through mergers. Faced with financial realities, leaders increasingly recognise that the best outcomes for pupils, along with the benefits of economies of scale and stronger school improvement capacity, may only be achievable by joining forces with others. CJK's recent research confirms this trend, showing that financial sustainability is now the primary driver behind trust merger.

**The fifth crisis – identity:** As trusts consolidate through mergers and acquisitions, the challenge shifts from growth to identity. Leaders must navigate how to integrate organisations with different operating models and central structures, align distinct cultures, preserve

local agency and still define what makes the new trust distinctive.

## LESSONS FOR TRUST LEADERS

The Greiner Growth Curve provides a potentially powerful tool for trust leaders which can genuinely assist them to better understand their own businesses and deliver the following lessons:

**1. Know your phase:** be honest about where your trust sits on the growth curve. Are you still building basic central functions, or are you ready for strategic integration?

**2. Anticipate the crisis:** the tensions of each stage are predictable. Plan your next operating model shift before the crisis hits.

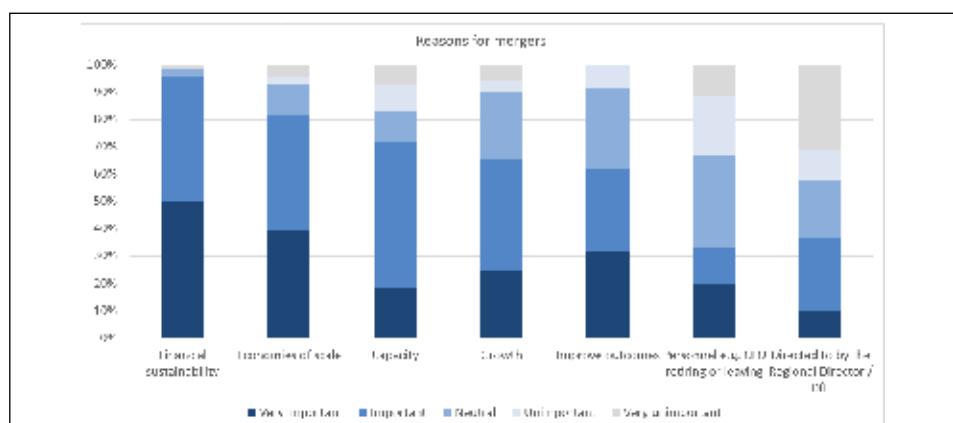
**3. Invest in data and systems:** technology is the enabler for coordination, collaboration and strategic insight.

**4. Balance efficiency with agency:** standardisation works best when it's co-created, not imposed.

**5. Keep people at the heart:** talent development and wellbeing are as central to trust success as financial efficiency.

The central team of the future will be defined not by its size or cost, but by the value it creates through collaboration – combining scale, expertise and technology to help every school, and every pupil, thrive. ■

**CHRIS KIRK** is Director, CJK.



# MISSION NUTRITION:

## EMPOWERING CHILDREN WITH LIFELONG HEALTHY HABITS

At apetito, two of our core values are 'Great food to be proud of' and 'Enhancing health and wellbeing'. Whilst providing schools with high-quality, nutritious meals, packed full of healthy ingredients that broaden pupils' horizons is at the heart of what we do, we see our responsibility to schools as going further than that. Children spend a considerable amount of their time at school, which makes it the ideal place for them to learn about nutrition and foster healthy food habits, which can last a lifetime. As a company with immense in-house nutritional and dietetic expertise, we are passionate about supporting schools to effectively educate their pupils on the benefits of a healthy diet.

To do this, we are launching a suite of lesson plans titled 'Mission Nutrition'. The first in the series are set of Key Stage Two

lesson plans, which are now available for all schools partnering with apetito. All the lesson plans have been created by apetito's in-house Dietitians, Chefs and Nutritionists with the aim of creating educational content in line with the national curriculum that support teachers when delivering lessons on food and nutrition. More lesson plans will be launched in 2026 to further develop pupils' food education.

### WHY MISSION NUTRITION MATTERS

Educating children on the benefits of a healthy and sustainable diet has never been so important. Childhood obesity is a significant health issue, and it is estimated that today in England, one in three children will be obese or overweight when they finish primary school<sup>1</sup>. Obesity can have serious implications for a child's physical

and mental health. Overweight and obese children are more likely to stay obese into adulthood and develop health issues like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases at a younger age<sup>2</sup>.

The figures regarding the high levels of childhood obesity show no sign of declining, demonstrating that too many children are not eating a healthy, balanced diet, and in fact, experience a food environment that pushes them towards unhealthy cheap food with limited nutritional benefits.

While receiving good nutrition in childhood is essential for a strong start in life, it alone is not enough. To truly empower children to lead healthy lives, they must be educated about the vital role food and nutrition play in their overall wellbeing.

In England, teaching pupils about cooking and nutrition forms part of



the curriculum for Key Stages 1-3. Food education similarly falls within the national curriculum for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, despite this, studies show that there are significant disparities between schools in the number of hours of food and nutrition lessons that pupils actually receive<sup>4</sup>. One of the main factors contributing to these differences was found to be a lack of adequate support and resources for teachers. Inconsistent approaches to food education can have a real impact on pupils' food and nutrition knowledge. A survey by the British Nutrition Foundation in 2022 found that 24% of primary-age pupils thought that chicken counted towards the 5-a-day fruit and vegetable target and 19% of 7-11-year-olds thought the same about cheese<sup>5</sup>.

In an attempt to provide pupils with a better and more rounded food education, many schools are taking a whole-school approach when it comes to teaching their pupils about food and nutrition education. When done effectively healthy eating is promoted and integrated into everyday school life. As well as teaching them in the classroom, school catering plays an important role in educating children about nutritious food. Schools should be offering a variety of flavours and meal choices, all underpinned by the guidelines set in the School Food Standards.

## DIVING INTO MISSION NUTRITION

The first lesson plan focuses on teaching pupils about how to build healthy habits which will stay with them for life. A core focus of this lesson is introducing and explaining the Eatwell plate, a tool used to reflect the UK Government's dietary recommendations and healthy eating model. The interactive lesson plan breaks down each component of the plate, enabling teachers to give their pupils a strong foundational knowledge about what makes up a well-balanced diet.

The second lesson plan covers the frequency with which the food types should be eaten, food labelling and the traffic light system, helping to give pupils



a well-rounded understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet. Children are then taught how to cook apetito's vegetable quiche recipe, giving them the opportunity to get hands on and make their very own quiche to take home.

Head Development Chef at apetito, Jethro Lawrence explains why educating pupils about food is so critical:

"It is so important for our children to be educated about where our food comes from and how healthy food can be delicious! The benefit of knowing where certain ingredients come from can help develop important life skills. Food knowledge promotes healthy eating habits, enhances cognitive skills, encourages children to try new flavours and builds their confidence around food."

Through these resources, apetito aims to empower teachers to give pupils a hands on understanding of the importance of having a healthy and balanced diet, a lesson which given the childhood obesity crisis has never been so important.

By building a solid foundation of nutritional knowledge from an early age, children are far more likely to adopt lifelong healthy eating habits, essential for their long-term health.

To learn more about apetito's Mission Nutrition scan the QR code. ■



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**References:** 1. Hicks, D.R. (2025). More Children Gaining Unhealthy Weight in Primary School. [online] Medscape. Available at: <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/more-children-gaining-unhealthy-weight-primary-school-2025a10007u8?form=fp1> [Accessed 8 Sep. 2025]. 2. Sahoo, Krushnapiyal; Sahoo, Bishnupriya2; Choudhury, Ashok Kumar et al Childhood obesity: causes and consequences. Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care 4(2): p 187-192, Apr-Jun 2015. DOI: 10.4103/2249-4863.154628. 3. Food a Fact of Life (2020). Free education resources for teaching young people aged 3-16 years about where food comes from, cooking and healthy eating, and teacher training. [online] Foodafactoflife.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.foodafactoflife.org.uk/> 4. Jamie Oliver Food Foundation (2017). A Report on the Food Education Learning Landscape. Available at: [https://www.akofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2\\_0\\_fellreport-final.pdf](https://www.akofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2_0_fellreport-final.pdf). 5. Food and Drink Technology. (2022). School children display concerning lack of knowledge about the nutritional contents of many common foods. [online] Available at: <https://www.foodanddrinktechnology.com/news/42405/schoolchildren-display-concerning-lack-of-knowledge-about-the-nutritional-contents-of-many-common-foods/> [Accessed 8 Sep. 2025].



# MAKING AN IMPACT

## HOW AI IS HELPING TO STREAMLINE 'BACK OFFICE OPERATIONS'

**Chris Loveday** describes how an innovative, bespoke approach to AI, undertaken collaboratively and sensitively, has transformed the 'back office' function at Barton Peveril Sixth Form College.

When Artificial Intelligence began capturing headlines in 2023, many in education viewed it with a mixture of intrigue and caution. At Barton Peveril Sixth Form College, however, it wasn't the hype that caught our attention, it was the potential. Not to replace staff or rewrite pedagogy, but to reimagine the unseen engine room of education: the 'back office' – those support functions that keep an educational institution operating.

In January 2024, we began our AI journey with a simple question: Could this technology help us work smarter? The answer, it turns out, was 'yes' when approached with purpose, care and a willingness to explore what's possible.

WITHIN OUR STAFF BODY, THERE'S LITTLE TO NO RESISTANCE, BECAUSE THERE'S NO IMPOSITION.

### STARTING WHERE IT HURTS MOST

For us, the teams weren't broken, but burdened, in a period of increasing expectation, additional compliance requirements and growing demand. Administrative teams were stretched thin, spending valuable hours on manual data entry, routine compliance and repetitive processes that left little space for reflection or innovation. It was clear:

efficiency gains weren't just desirable; they would make a meaningful impact.

We made a strategic choice to start where the gains could be immediate and measurable. In terms of AI's potential impact in the classroom, we recognised that many others, including commercial organisations, would start there. That meant focusing first on business services. These were high-volume, rule-based tasks, prone to error and ideal for automation. From enrolment processes to certificate checking, we identified over 100 processes that were ripe for reimaging.

### NOT JUST TOOLS, BUT TEAMMATES

Rather than buy a suite of off-the-shelf AI products, we decided to build our own. Too often in education we procure a system or software that solves part of the problem, we then employ a member of staff to do the rest. Over time, the licence costs go up but our reliance on a system that solves only part of the problem creates a barrier to exit. So, with support from specialist consultants, we created bespoke AI agents. Purpose-built digital tools designed to perform 100% of a specific task, hosted securely within our digital tenancy and removing costly annual licences.

Each agent combined the capabilities of generative AI (such as large language models) with our internal systems, policies and workflows. This meant they didn't just know what to do, they understood how we do it here.



Among the early breakthroughs was our GCSE Results Agent, which automatically pre-populates student data into our MIS, saving 93 hours of staff time in a single enrolment cycle. Another, the Certificate Agent, verifies student qualifications against exam board records, cutting out more than 300 hours of manual effort each year.

These weren't flashy gimmicks. They were digital co-workers, quietly reducing errors, speeding up processes and giving our staff in these teams the gift of time.

### SAFETY FIRST, ALWAYS

Of course, automation brings with it responsibility. At every stage, we've been guided by the principle of safe-by-design. Each AI agent is deployed first in a secure sandbox environment, tested rigorously by staff and students in what we call 'red teaming'; actively trying to break the system to uncover vulnerabilities before going live.

We've built in strict accuracy thresholds. If an agent is unsure of its output, it simply says: 'I do not have the information to help with that question.' This kind of restraint builds trust. It signals to users that AI is here to support judgement, not override it.

Data security is paramount. By hosting the tools internally, we avoid sending sensitive information into external environments, maintaining full GDPR compliance and eliminating recurring licence costs.

### CO-CREATION, NOT COMPLIANCE

One of the most powerful elements of our approach has been the role of staff as co-creators. AI wasn't something we did to them, it was something we did with them. Administrative teams helped define problems, shape solutions and test outputs. As a result, our AI agents reflect not only what the college needs, but how our people work best.

That culture of collaboration has paid dividends. Within our staff body, there's little to no resistance, because there's no imposition. By taking them with us, our staff aren't afraid of AI, they're curious. They see it as a partner, not a threat.

This mindset shift, what we now refer to as a 'cultural pivot', has been critical to scaling. In less

than a year, we went from piloting a few agents to running a digital ecosystem of nearly 20, all becoming embedded within the fabric of college operations.

### REAL IMPACT, RIGHT NOW

Whilst many commercial tools talk of 'Return on investment' (ROI), we feel it is too early to be able to accurately measure a financial ROI. For us, the results are quantifiable in terms of labour hours. With our agents addressing known workflows, we've saved hundreds of hours of labour. Time that's now reinvested in student support, strategic planning and professional development. We've reduced friction in processes that once caused stress. And perhaps most importantly, we've supported our teams and leveraged this emerging technology to improve efficiency.

AI DOESN'T JUST CHANGE HOW YOU WORK, IT TRANSFORMS HOW YOU THINK.

This was never about reducing staff numbers. It was always about making their work more meaningful. When AI takes care of the repetitive and mundane, our people are free to focus on the complex and relational, the parts of their roles that truly make a difference. ►

### LESSONS FROM THE FRONTLINE

As other institutions consider how to navigate AI integration, I often share five lessons from our experience:

1. Start with problems, not products. Don't adopt AI for its own sake. Find your painpoints and work backwards from there.
2. Co-create with your staff. The best ideas come from those closest to the work. Empower them to lead.
3. Build bespoke where you can. Tailored solutions align more closely with your processes, scale more easily and stay in your control.
4. Focus on trust and transparency. Red-teaming, refusal mechanisms and honest communication go a long way.
5. See AI as infrastructure. This isn't a bolt-on. It's a foundation for how we work going forward.

## THE FINANCIAL CASE FOR BUILDING YOUR OWN

While AI's operational benefits are compelling, its financial logic has been equally powerful for us. By choosing to build our own agents, rather than subscribe to multiple off-the-shelf platforms, we avoided the trap of recurring licence fees that grow year on year. Instead, a one-off capital investment in development delivered tools that are fully owned, fully integrated and adaptable as our needs evolve.

This approach also allowed us to address another silent drain on resources: underused legacy systems. Like many institutions, we had accumulated a patchwork of software solutions over time, each with its own renewal cycle, training demands and overlap with other tools. By streamlining our digital estate and replacing some of these systems with multi-capable AI agents, we've reduced the number of Software as a Subscription (SaaS) products we procure, without compromising functionality.

The cost efficiencies here are twofold. First, removing redundant platforms eliminates direct expenditure. Second, consolidating tools into a smaller, smarter ecosystem reduces the hidden 'people cost' of maintaining, learning and switching between multiple systems.

It's worth noting that these efficiencies can extend to staffing budgets, not by replacing roles, but by absorbing increased workloads without the immediate need for additional hires. In a sector where recruitment is costly and retention challenging, AI provides a capacity buffer that can defer or even remove the necessity for certain back-office expansions.

In short, the financial viability of building your own solutions lies not only in the savings made on annual subscriptions, but also in the broader opportunity to rationalise your digital infrastructure and future-proof your operational capacity.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Our next frontier is SEND administration. A new agent is currently in development to streamline the often time-intensive compliance and support processes associated with SEND provision. One of its key capabilities will be sifting through the extensive paperwork linked to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and access arrangements, extracting the salient points into a concise, usable format for staff. This function is particularly valuable given the rapid growth in the number of students entitled to access arrangements, which can place significant strain on learning support teams. By quickly collating essential

information, such as recommended adjustments, exam concessions and support strategies, the agent will allow staff to act sooner and with greater confidence, without wading through lengthy documents. Like its predecessors, it will be tested, refined and launched with the same guiding ethos: solve a real problem, build with care and protect the human heart of the work.

## SOLVING PROBLEMS

At Barton Peveril, we didn't set out to lead an AI revolution. We set out to solve problems. What we found is that when you combine the right tools with the right intentions, AI doesn't just change how you work, it transforms how you think.

Operational excellence is no longer just about doing more with less. It's about doing better, with support, with strategy and with systems that serve the people behind them.

AI hasn't taken over our back office. It's helped improve it. ■

**CHRIS LOVEDAY** is Vice Principal (Business Services), Barton Peveril Sixth Form College.





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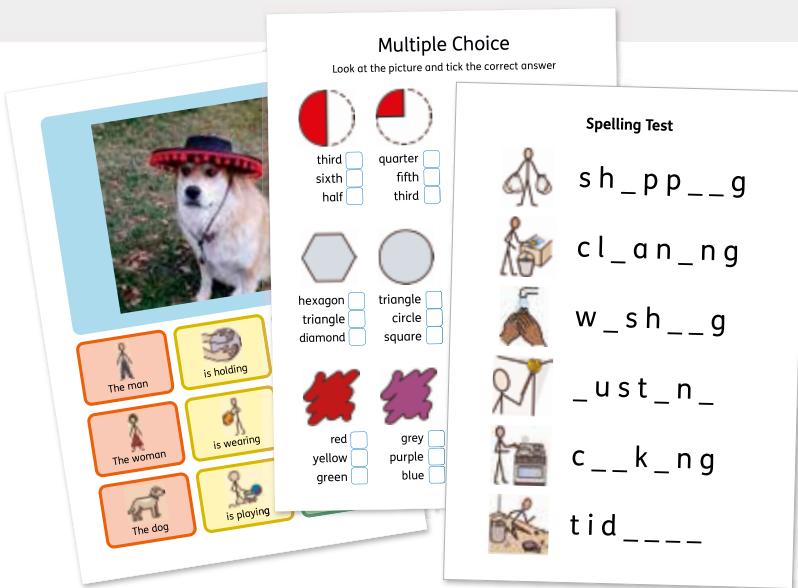
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# RISING NEEDS, SHRINKING RESOURCES AND THE URGENT CALL FOR REFORM

## INCLUSION AND SEND IN ENGLAND'S SCHOOLS

**Steve Price** argues that inclusion is not just about provision but about values and, as the pressures on trusts continue to mount as Ofsted places SEND centre-stage, urges colleagues to recognise there is an opportunity for professional voices to contribute to the discussion this autumn's white paper will certainly trigger.

Inclusion in schools is not a new concept, but in 2025 it feels sharper, heavier and more urgent than ever. Schools in England find themselves at a crossroads: the needs of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are growing more complex and more numerous, while the resources to meet them are becoming

increasingly stretched. Add to this a new Ofsted framework that explicitly measures inclusion, and the stage is set for a profound reckoning with how the system supports children who need it most.

At its heart, the issue is one of equity and sustainability: how do schools uphold inclusive practice in the context of

limited budgets, high accountability and diverse school communities with increasingly complex needs?

### A SYSTEM UNDER PRESSURE

SEND in England has long been an area of both innovation and tension, but the last decade has seen demands rise to levels few could have anticipated. ▶





- **The rise of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs):** The number of EHCPs has grown year-on-year, with many families pursuing them because they see no other way to secure adequate support. This has created backlogs in local authority processes, delays in assessments and a growing sense of frustration among parents and carers.

- **Special school places under strain:** Demand for special school places now outstrips supply, leaving some children unplaced or forced to travel unreasonably long distances to access provision. The geographical inequity of provision adds another layer of complexity, particularly for families in rural or less well-resourced areas.

## ‘THESE PRESSURES HAVE PUSHED THE SYSTEM CLOSE TO BREAKING POINT...’

### • **Growing complexity of need:**

Many schools report that the profile of needs they face is shifting. Increasing numbers of children present with overlapping diagnoses; autism, ADHD,

speech and language difficulties, and mental health needs often combine in ways that strain current systems. Teachers and SENDCOs are finding that traditional categories no longer adequately capture the lived realities of their pupils.

These pressures have pushed the system close to breaking point. The system wasn't built for this level of demand.

### INCLUSION AND THE OFSTED IMPERATIVE

The new Ofsted framework has placed inclusion centre stage, explicitly holding schools to account for how well they serve children with SEND. On the one hand, this is welcome recognition of the centrality of inclusion to a school's



mission. On the other, it comes at a time when schools are already struggling with staffing shortages, stretched budgets, and competing priorities.

For some leaders, this feels like an impossible tension: how do you demonstrate inclusive excellence when your SENDCO is juggling an unsustainable caseload, or when your local authority cannot secure an EHCP in a timely manner?

Nevertheless, the message from Ofsted is clear: inclusion is no longer an optional add-on. It is a measurable, inspectable indicator of a school's quality. This shift in emphasis has sparked both anxiety and opportunity. Schools that were once hesitant to prioritise SEND are now compelled to re-examine their practice.

### THE REALITY ON THE GROUND

Despite the challenges, schools across England are demonstrating resilience and creativity in responding to the needs of their communities. However, the picture is uneven, with some schools disproportionately shouldering the responsibility for SEND. In many areas, 'SEND magnets' have emerged, mainstream schools that, through ethos, reputation, or local authority placement patterns, educate a much higher proportion of children with complex needs than their neighbours.

Meanwhile, investment in new special schools is being heralded by the Government as a solution. But questions remain:

- Will the rate of investment ever keep pace with demand?
- Is the growth of special schools the right direction, or should the focus be on building capacity within mainstream settings?
- Do mainstream schools fully understand that many special schools are now changing their designation, moving away from traditional categories such as 'moderate learning difficulties' to serve children with multiple and complex needs?

If special schools are increasingly focused on the most complex cohorts, it follows that more children who might once have attended them will remain in mainstream schools. This has huge implications for training, staffing and resourcing in the sector.

### WORKFORCE REFORM: THE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE INCLUSION

If inclusion is to succeed, the workforce must be reimagined. The traditional reliance on a handful of specialists, SENDCOs, educational psychologists and therapists, has proven inadequate for the scale of need. Reform must focus on building capacity at every level of the school system.

#### **The 'wave' approach to expertise:**

Instead of therapists being spread too thinly across large caseloads, they can be deployed strategically to skill up teachers and support staff. Visiting lessons, modelling practice and coaching staff can have far greater impact than one-off interventions.

#### **Expanding SENDCO capacity:**

Many SENDCOs report feeling overwhelmed, with roles that are too broad and administrative burdens that limit their ability to focus on strategic development. Increasing the number of trained SENDCOs, or creating deputy and assistant roles, would ease this pressure and allow more consistent leadership of inclusion.

**Cross-school collaboration:** Groups of schools, whether within trusts, federations, or local partnerships, ►

# WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S LONG-AWAITED SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER EXPECTED THIS AUTUMN, THERE IS A CHANCE FOR PROFESSIONAL VOICES TO SHAPE REFORM.

can pool expertise. Auditing existing skills and making them broadly available across a network can prevent duplication and ensure no school is left isolated.

**Cross-phase working:** SEND does not stop at phase transitions. Primary, secondary and special schools need shared training and dialogue to ensure continuity of support.

**Embedding expertise in teacher training:** Ultimately, inclusion is everyone's job. Training for all teachers must include practical, classroom-level strategies for supporting diverse learners. A strong, strategic vision of inclusion must filter down into day-to-day teaching.

## SPECIALIST PROVISION IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

Another emerging trend is the development of specialist provision centres within mainstream schools. Often affiliated with or sponsored by special schools, these units allow children to access targeted support while remaining connected to their local community.

For many families, this represents the best of both worlds: specialist expertise without complete separation from peers. For mainstream schools, it offers a structured way to build capacity while ensuring that inclusion is not left to chance.

However, this model requires careful planning. If units become isolated 'schools within schools', they risk undermining whole-school inclusion. The challenge is to ensure that specialist units are bridges, not barriers, supporting children to thrive in mainstream classrooms wherever possible.

## THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

The debate over SEND provision is not just about resources; it is also about leadership and vision. School leaders, local authorities and trusts must collectively articulate what a sustainable and inclusive system should look like. This requires honesty about current limitations, but also imagination about what might be possible.

Some leaders argue that the current moment represents an opportunity. With the Government's long-awaited schools white paper expected this autumn, there is a chance for professional voices to shape reform. Multiple working groups are feeding into the process, and the hope is that the outcome will balance accountability with support, ambition with realism. We need space and time to build a system that lasts.

## REFORM ON THE HORIZON

The forthcoming white paper carries heavy expectations. Will it deliver meaningful reform, or will it paper over the cracks? Will it focus solely on building more special schools, or will it also strengthen mainstream capacity?

The answers to these questions will determine the future of inclusion in England. Yet reform will not be instant. Even with the best policy intentions, schools will need time, resources and breathing space to embed change.

## A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Ultimately, inclusion cannot be outsourced to special schools, SENDCOs, or external professionals. It must be woven into the fabric of every classroom, every teacher and every policy decision.

That means:

- recognising that mainstream schools will increasingly educate children with needs previously served by special schools
- valuing and investing in workforce reform to spread expertise more widely
- building systems of collaboration across schools and phases
- ensuring that accountability frameworks, like Ofsted's, are matched by the resources needed to deliver on them.

The challenge is daunting, but the stakes are too high to ignore. Every unplaced child, every family fighting for support and every teacher struggling without adequate training represents a failure of the system to meet its most basic promise: that every child deserves an education that allows them to thrive.

## TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Inclusion is no longer a side issue; it is the central test of the education system's fairness and resilience. England's schools are serving more diverse communities with greater needs than ever before, but with less money and mounting pressures.

The system is creaking, but it is not broken beyond repair. With bold reform, imaginative leadership and a renewed focus on workforce development, it is possible to build an inclusive system that works, not just for the most vulnerable, but for every child.

As the sector awaits the white paper, the message from schools is clear: reform must go beyond expansion of special schools. It must equip mainstream schools to embrace inclusion as a core mission, not an optional extra.

The path ahead will not be easy, but it is necessary. Because inclusion is not just about provision; it is about values. It is about the kind of society we want to build, one where every child, whatever their needs, is welcomed, supported and given the chance to succeed. ■

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**STEVE PRICE** is CEO, Tudor Park Education Trust.

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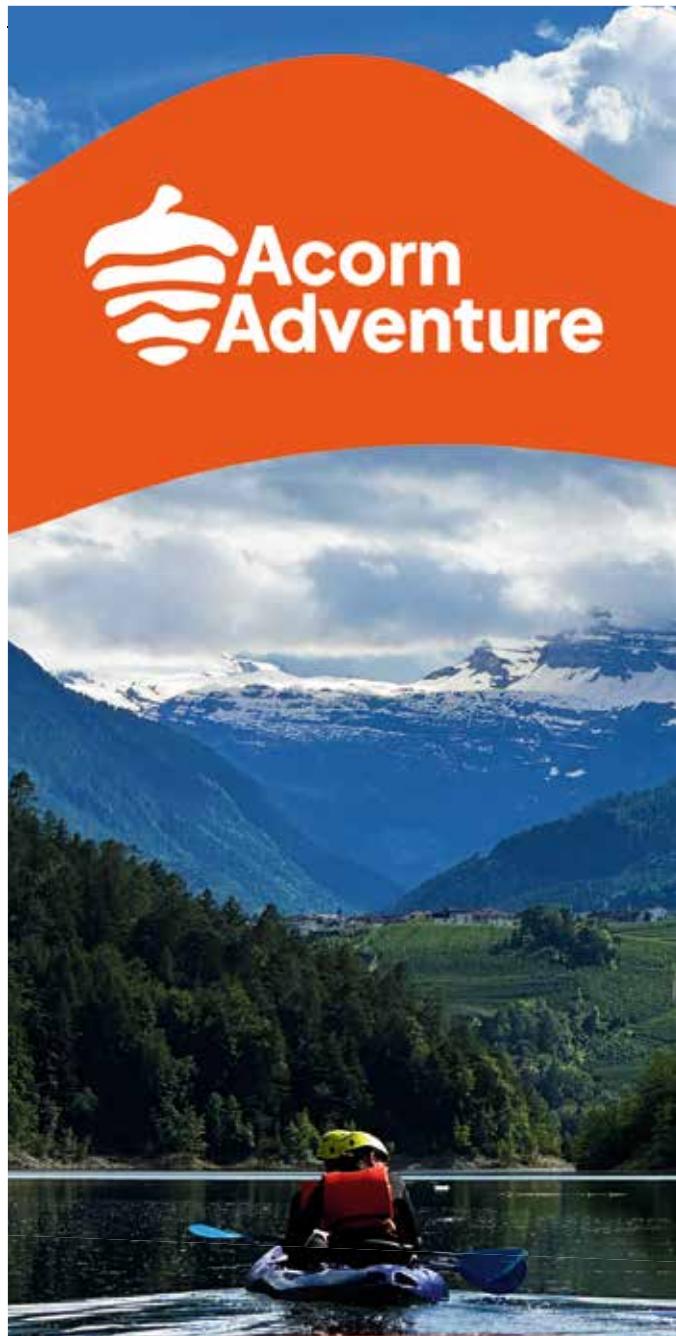


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## ASK THE RECRUITER

# WORKING WITH AN EXECUTIVE RECRUITER

## WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK OUT FOR?

**Hayley Mintern** explains why she believes top-flight executive recruitment agencies can play a critical role in the hiring of senior staff within trust leadership teams.

**Above:** Hayley Mintern.

As the education landscape continues to evolve, so too does the challenge of appointing the right people to lead and shape the future of your multi-academy trust (MAT). Whether you are seeking a new CEO, CFO, Director of Education, or strengthening your central executive team, these appointments are critical to the long-term success and sustainability of your trust and schools.

Yet with increased pressure on trust boards to make the right call – not just in technical competence but in values, culture and long-term vision – it's no surprise that many MATs are turning to executive recruiters for expert support.

### WHY WORK WITH AN EXECUTIVE RECRUITER?

An experienced executive recruiter brings more than just a list of candidates. They offer:

- **Access to wider talent pools:** Recruiters can reach beyond the education sector, attracting candidates from other sectors with transferable leadership experience in finance, operations or strategy, offering a more diverse and innovative pool of talent.

### ...MANY MATS ARE TURNING TO EXECUTIVE RECRUITERS FOR EXPERT SUPPORT...

- **Confidentiality and discretion:** In sensitive leadership transitions, particularly at CEO or CFO level, discretion is key. A recruiter can manage approaches and conversations in a confidential and controlled way. The days of advertising on major job boards are over. You need to have more control over the candidates engaging with the role.

- **Time and resource efficiency:** Running a high-stakes recruitment process demands time, structure and stakeholder management. A good

recruiter will handle the complexity, allowing your leadership team and board to stay focused on delivery.

- **Support with EDI and inclusive processes:** MATs are rightly focused on building diverse and inclusive leadership. Specialist recruiters bring insight and expertise in equitable process design, inclusive outreach and unbiased candidate assessment.

- **Objective advice and challenge:** A recruiter should act as a critical friend, helping you clarify what you need, constructively challenging assumptions and advising on candidate readiness, salary benchmarking and market conditions. ►



# EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT IS NOT JUST ABOUT FILLING A VACANCY.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER: POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS

While the benefits are significant, there are a few other considerations to keep in mind:

- **Cost implications:** Using a recruiter is an investment. For some trusts, particularly smaller ones, this can feel like a high upfront cost. However, it's worth weighing this against the cost of a failed appointment.
- **Quality varies:** Not all recruiters bring the same depth of sector knowledge or commitment to your values. A poor recruitment partner can waste time, misrepresent your trust or fall short on diversity, cultural fit or safeguarding diligence.
- **Loss of ownership:** Some boards feel a loss of control when outsourcing elements of the recruitment process. The key here is to ensure that your recruitment partner works with you, not instead of you.

## HOW INVOLVED WILL A RECRUITER BE AT EACH STAGE?

Look for a collaborative process – one that respects your board's role in defining and owning the final appointment.

Executive recruitment is not just about filling a vacancy. It's about shaping the leadership team that will drive your trust forward in an increasingly complex and high-accountability environment.

When you find the right recruitment partner, it's a relationship not a transaction. They should understand your values, reflect your vision and be as invested in your success as you are.

At Anderson Quigley, we are proud to have supported MATs across the country in



## CHOOSING THE RIGHT RECRUITMENT PARTNER: KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

As someone who has worked with dozens of MATs across the country, I always encourage trust leaders to ask the following questions when choosing a recruitment partner:

- What experience do you have working with MATs and the wider education sector?
- What are your sector insights? (It is essential that recruiters understand the regulatory, financial and cultural context of your trust.)
- How will you support our commitment to diversity and inclusion?
- What examples can you provide of inclusive recruitment practice and recent appointments that demonstrate EDI outcomes?
- Can you provide examples of successful appointments in similar roles?
- Can you provide case studies or references from other trusts? (These can speak volumes.)
- What is your approach to candidate care and safeguarding?

Every touchpoint with a candidate reflects on your trust. A recruiter should be a professional ambassador for your values and meet the highest safeguarding standards.

making values-led, strategic leadership appointments from CEOs and Chairs, CFOs to Directors of Education and Headteachers. We know the challenges, we know the sector and, above all, we know the power of people to transform lives. ■

**HAYLEY MINTERN** specialises in leadership recruitment at Anderson Quigley, having supported the education sector for over ten years, providing executive search, interim and consultancy solutions.

Anderson Quigley are trusted partners of executive search and people advisory services. They support schools to find and develop their executive, senior, interim and governance leaders.

If you would like to discuss any of the areas highlighted in this article, pose a question, or require support in recruiting members of your executive team, you can contact Hayley at [hayley.mintern@andersonquigley.com](mailto:hayley.mintern@andersonquigley.com)

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# PROVIDING EARLY HELP FOR PUPILS WITH SEND

## HOW OUR TRUST HELPS 120 SCHOOLS

**Cate Marsden** believes that sharing best practice is an important way to support more children with SEND sooner.

The pressure on schools to support children with a wide range of needs in mainstream classrooms can be a significant challenge. Pupils with SEND benefit greatly from good-quality, personalised support, but the waiting list for support can feel endless.

In our Trust, we believe in supporting teachers and TAs to provide school-level support before, as well as after, a referral. We've found that when teachers are equipped with the right strategies to deliver early help, it makes all the difference to a child's life chances.

In Special Education, teachers and TAs are particularly committed to exchanging ideas about ways to create an inclusive classroom or activities to help children regulate their emotions.

This culture of collaboration makes it possible for our Trust to deliver SEND support on such a large scale. Our team of 30 SEND teachers and TAs, attached to a specialist MAT, works with 120 schools across the region to improve inclusion

and provide early help for pupils who often have a long wait to get an autism diagnosis, a dyslexia screening, or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

### REACHING MORE STUDENTS

We started out as a small team based in one special school. This quickly expanded to include primaries, secondaries and post-16 settings. Although our service is part funded by the local authority, schools and trusts from outside the area can also buy in services from us such as screening for dyslexia, Irlen Syndrome and other neurodiversity.

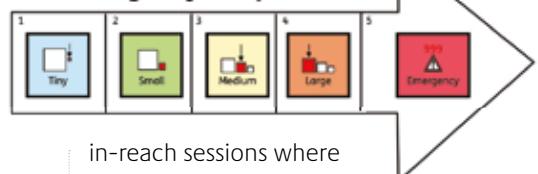
When a teacher or SENCo refers one of their pupils to us, we will often see them within two weeks. This reassures teachers and parents that help is on the way, and we can share practical strategies they can start to use straight away, well before an official diagnosis.

### SHARING WHAT WORKS

With a wider range of SEND needs than ever before, plans and interventions have to be increasingly personalised to the child, and the best way to make that happen is by spending time with them in the classroom. We also hold



### How big is your problem?



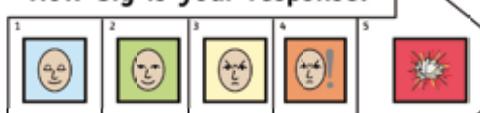
in-reach sessions where mainstream teachers visit our specialist settings to develop their skills and knowledge.

By sharing examples of best practice across a school or trust, we can all help to strengthen SEND provision on a wider scale: whether that's sensory circuits to help children return to a calmer state when emotions run high, or a set of breathing and mindfulness techniques to help overcome social anxiety.

Effective SEND provision relies on collaboration across trusts and local authorities. But for this to happen, it's important to have leadership backing. As our CEO, Mike Sidebottom, explains:

"There's a great deal of SEND expertise within the Trust, but there's no point having a trust if it keeps experts to itself. I'm in favour of our team sharing best practice in every way they can." ■

### How big is your response?

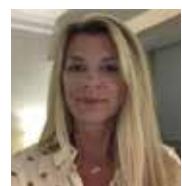


### KEY SEND STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMY TRUSTS:

- Create a central SEND team that can provide consistent support for all schools in the group.
- Focus on early intervention; simple strategies can make a big difference while assessments for EHCPs progress.
- Share best practice across schools to support more teachers and pupils.
- Give schools opportunities to learn from each other and develop their practice.

### CATE MARSDEN

is Director of External Partnerships at Woodbridge Trust in Bolton, where she uses Widgit Symbols to help meet children's speech, language and communication needs.



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# ACADEMY TRANSFERS

## LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS AND PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

**Jamie Otter** outlines the various types of academy transfers which exist, explains the underlying legal processes and shares key takeaways from his experience in advising on transfers involving over 500 academies over the last 15 years.

**A**s the academy programme has matured, the movement of academies between academy trusts (academy transfers or 'rebrokerages') has become increasingly common.

According to DfE figures, in 2013 there were 23 academy transfers nationally (compared to 1,012 academy conversions), whereas in 2024 there were 280 academy transfers (compared to 367 conversions). We anticipate that there will soon be a point where academy transfers outnumber academy conversions for the first time – especially if the national trend of decreasing trust reserves continues.

Whilst the process and documentation surrounding academy conversions are closely regulated by the DfE, academy transfers do not receive the same attention. In my experience, while this sometimes has the benefit of making the transaction simpler and quicker, there is an increased risk factor. The onus is very much on the parties involved to manage these risks themselves.

### WHAT TYPES OF TRANSFER ARE THERE?

Stone King has been advising on academy transfers since the inception of the academy programme. In our experience, although there are many different motivations and rationales behind them, academy transfers fall into three basic types:

- **the Dissolving MAT Transfer**, where all the schools within a SAT or MAT (the 'Outgoing Trust') transfer to another trust (the 'Incoming Trust'), with the Outgoing Trust winding up shortly after the academies transfer. This is the most common type of transfer



- **the Continuing MAT Transfer**, where not all the academies within the Outgoing Trust are transferring, and the Outgoing Trust continues to operate
- **the Multi-Party Transfer**, where the Outgoing Trust is dissolved and all of its academies are transferred to different trusts.

### WHAT IS THE LEGAL PROCESS?

The process for an academy transfer is relatively straightforward:

- **Deed of Novation of Funding Agreement:** The current funding agreements relating to the transferring academies need to be novated to the Incoming Trust. Each transferring academy must also update its supplemental funding agreement to the latest version, aligning with the Incoming Trust's master funding agreement.
- **Transfer of staff:** The parties need to follow the TUPE process in connection with the transfer. Special attention should be given to any central staff potentially affected (particularly in Multi-Party or Continuing MAT Transfers).
- **Transfer of property arrangements:** Extant property arrangements need to be transferred to the Incoming Trust. This typically involves a transfer of freehold(s) or an assignment of leases. An application must be made to the DfE to approve any property transfer. For faith schools, arrangements will also need to be made in respect of any supplemental agreements (either through novation or through termination and restatement). ►

**Commercial Transfer Agreement:** An agreement between the Incoming and Outgoing Trusts is required to regulate how the academies will transfer. This will also cover how balances and liabilities are dealt with.

## KEY AREAS OF POTENTIAL CONTENTION

Areas where conflict can arise include:

- **Governance and leadership structure:** What will the post-transfer governance and executive structure look like? This is particularly pertinent when two trusts are merging. Sensitive decisions should be made early, and legal advice may need to be commissioned to support these discussions.

- **Transferring balances:** How will transferring balances be calculated and when will they be paid? This is unlikely to be contentious in Dissolving Trust Transfers where there's typically little debate over what will come across. However,

it can be more complex in Continuing or Multi-Party Transfers. Early conversations should be held about expectations, and legal advisers can document any agreed approach.

- **Indemnities and warranties:** What contractual protections will the Outgoing Trust provide for liabilities arising during its stewardship? In Dissolving or Multi-Party Transfers, indemnities or warranties are rare as the dissolving trust typically provides little value and may lack the assets to meet liabilities. Trustees may also expose themselves to personal liability by committing to obligations they cannot fulfil.

In Continuing Trust Transfers, however, some contractual comfort may be expected. The scope of indemnities (and any agreed limitations) will depend on various factors, including:

- Amount of budget transferring across
- Financial standing of the parties
- DfE expectations and guidance.

**Transferring SLAs (including MAT-wide contracts):** What SLAs and contracts will transfer to the Incoming Trust?



WHILST THE PROCESS AND DOCUMENTATION SURROUNDING ACADEMY CONVERSIONS ARE CLOSELY REGULATED, ACADEMY TRANSFERS DO NOT ALWAYS RECEIVE THE SAME ATTENTION.

Collaboration is essential in connection with transferring SLAs. Some contracts at the academy level may not align with existing arrangements in the Incoming Trust. Particular care is needed for central contracts – especially long-term ones – where suppliers refuse to split contracts.

In such cases, there may be a transitional period during which the Outgoing Trust cross-charges the Incoming Trust for services until shared contracts can be terminated or restructured.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As the sector continues to evolve, academy transfers are likely to become even more prominent. Trusts embarking on this journey should go into the process with eyes wide open – armed with collaborative mindsets and a clear focus on risk management. ■

## TOP ISSUES TO CONSIDER

In our experience, academy trusts and their leadership teams should consider the following legal and transactional issues:

**Funding:** At the time of writing, most – if not all – trust capacity funding has been withdrawn and its future availability is uncertain. Parties must take this into account when budgeting for transaction costs.

**Due diligence and resources:** Both parties should ensure they proceed with as much knowledge as possible about the educational, financial and commercial positions of the other. Given limited time and financial resources, this will always be a balancing act. A formal report should be submitted to the respective boards before any final decision is taken.

**Elephants in the room:** We strongly recommend open and frank conversations at an early stage regarding any issues that might obstruct the transaction. In some cases, Heads of Terms should be drawn up to record the outcomes of these discussions.



**JAMIE OTTER** is a Partner with Stone King. Jamie's key focus is acting for schools and academies and is based in the newly opened Manchester office. Jamie has vast experience acting for providers across the education sector, and is recognised as a 'Rising Star' in the Legal 500. [Jamie.Otter@stoneking.co.uk](mailto:Jamie.Otter@stoneking.co.uk)

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# PEOPLE FOLLOW PEOPLE



## WHY CULTURE CAN'T REST SOLELY WITH SLTs

**Huw Lloyd** explains why he believes that building a shared culture is the responsibility of the whole school community.

**W**e all talk about school culture. We want it to be positive, calm and consistent. A place where students and staff treat each other with dignity. But how do we get there? Is it down to SLT? MLT? Teachers? Support staff? Even students?

It's tempting to point at someone else and say, "*It's their job*". In reality, culture is everyone's job. It isn't a slogan on a poster; it's the daily experience of '*this is how we do it here*'. We communicate to students, '*When you walk through the door in the morning, you should know what to expect from us and what we expect from you!*'

SLTs can't carry that alone. Our job is to set the vision and take people with us, to reach hearts and minds so colleagues understand the why behind the what and the how.

### WHAT SLTs MUST DO AND WHAT EVERYONE ELSE MUST OWN:

#### **Set the North Star and model it.**

We can deliver INSET and write policies, but people follow people before they follow anything else. If we want calm, we must be calm, especially on corridors and at transitions. Our behaviour is the intervention.

**Win hearts and minds.** Old habits die hard. Explain why change matters, show the benefits for staff and make it feel achievable. Keep it practical and human.

**Connect early adopters.** Identify

colleagues already living the desired culture. Give them visibility and time to coach peers. Make them your go-to team for modelling the approach.

**Make consistency easy.** Shared language helps. Agree one scripted response for common behaviours and one simple routine that everyone can use tomorrow. Reduce choice, increase clarity.

**Close the loop.** Use light-touch walk-throughs and short debriefs to notice what's working, remove friction and keep energy behind the change.

### A LESSON I LEARNT THE HARD WAY

I tried to change the behaviour and culture of my school on my own, running around like a superhero fighting battles, trying to get my points over with only my voice sharing them. I failed because, while it was my responsibility to set the culture, it couldn't be exclusively me who embedded the culture. I needed to reach the hearts and minds of others; I needed to get everyone on board; I didn't!

When I work with schools now, this is the focus: getting people to understand the why behind the change and to understand the behaviours we are working with. We create sustainable change so that months and years later that culture is still there to be seen, heard and felt by everyone.

SLTs are responsible for setting culture; lasting change happens when every adult says with confidence: "*This is how we do it here*".

### TRY THIS IN THE NEXT TWO WEEKS!

- Agree one scripted response for low-level disruption and practise it together.
- Standardise one keystone routine (e.g. corridor transitions at break time). Senior staff model it daily.
- Adopt a simple praise ratio (aim for three positives before a correction).
- Name your early adopters and give them five minutes at briefings to share what is working for them.
- Run a 15-minute corridor 'spot and celebrate'. Leaders should be acknowledging and thanking staff who are modelling the approach. Small, shared habits beat big, one-off launches.

**HUW LLOYD** is Behaviour Expert, CPI. Partnering with CPI supports educators through evidence-based strategies to prevent conflict, de-escalate situations and build respectful learning environments. **W:** [crisisprevention.com/en-GB/cpi-360-education](http://crisisprevention.com/en-GB/cpi-360-education)



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