Policymaking in disruptive times: the development and impact of School Trust-designed policies on teacher and student outcomes

(Research report)

University of Nottingham School of Education in Partnership with the Confederation of School Trusts[1]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and theoretical framework

This research is funded by the ESRC IAA[2] and was conducted by the University of Nottingham in collaboration with the Confederation of School Trusts. It builds on a foundational 'pathfinder' project, involving 15 Multi-academy Trusts in the Midlands during the lockdown period (January – March 2021), which explored the role of Trusts and their senior leaders in policymaking and implementation in disruptive times (cf. Day et al., 2021). The research reported here and refferd to as the 'flagship project' was conducted between April and September 2021 (i.e. at the beginning of the 'recovery' phase), when schools were open to all students.

The underpinning theoretical stance of this research is complexity theory. This conceptual framework offers a way of thinking about schools, and therefore school Trusts, as complex adaptive systems that are characterised by self-organising properties. These systems (e.g. schools, teachers, students, parents) interact with each other, but are also partially constituted of other interactions with larger systems of governance.

The flagship project tracks the leadership of 14 Trusts from some of the most deprived areas in the Northern region of England (Lancashire and West Yorkshire, East Midlands & Humber, and North East), with a particular focus on how they managed the transitions to the 'new normal' over the period from April to September 2021. The key objectives were to:

- Identify the key approaches, barriers, facilitators and outcomes regarding Trust policymaking and policy enforcement during a period when society is starting to recover from social and economic perturbations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Extend the evidence-informed national knowledge base of system-level policy responses and their impact on school Trusts in the 'recovery' period through securing new, multi-perspective data about as yet unexamined system-level policy enactment in a range of school Trusts across England.
- Inform national education policy and decision-making.

The research followed a mixed-method approach, which comprised of three stages of data collection between May and September 2021 and was conducted in line with the ESCRC and the University of Nottingham's research ethics policies.

Key findings

The key findings from the flagship project are summarised in the following three categories, outlined in the below paragraphs: i) policy focus prior to the 'recovery' period; ii) policy focus during the early 'recovery' period; and iii) future development planning.

Policy focus prior to the 'recovery' period

Trusts mobilised their efforts towards developing strategies for building and sustaining successful Trust-wide leadership with a vision of both the short- and longer-term priorities. This process included establishing agile and centralised decision-making systems, (re)positioning Trusts as civic institutions, developing new hybrid teaching and learning systems, and prioritising vulnerable students and families. Across the Trusts, there was near unanimity in criticisms of Government guidance, for its lack of clarity, timing and focus.

During the lockdown period (prior to March 2021), Trusts created and established systems to develop more central approaches for financial matters, remote teaching and learning, health and safety, monitoring of student attendance. This early streamlining of decision-making processes by the central Trust teams had reduced the stress felt by individual academy heads and their staff. Processes of decision-making were reported to be collaborative, collegiate, keeping the communication very strong between schools, and sharing practices.

Also, during the pandemic (lockdowns) and beyond, Trusts had strengthened working relationships with the parents and carers of their students, and other key stakeholder organisations. CEOs of Trusts with schools in the highest quintile for deprivation, and those smaller Trusts within close geographical proximity had formed strategic teams of school head teachers which worked together on daily communications with parents. All spoke of the 'professional generosity' that other Trusts had shown during the pandemic in sharing strategies and documentation.

Consequently, having a single infrastructure across Trusts and early provision of high quality, responsive professional development in delivering remote education had enabled every member of staff to benefit. Importantly, all Trusts had prioritised those students and families who were most in need of academic and economic support, especially those serving disadvantaged communities. They provided support around students' mental health, wellbeing, welfare (e.g. in the provision of food and other resources) and managing children's home learning.

Policy focus during the early 'recovery' period

During the early 'recovery,' post-lockdown phase, Trusts had reinforced core values; continued to streamline centralised systems and processes; adapted teaching and learning approaches developed during the lockdown period; closely monitored student attendance and behaviour as they returned to full-time schooling; tracked student progress as they managed 'catch-up' and 'recovery,' taking into account variations in academic gains and losses; and provided on-going, tailored support for the wellbeing of students and staff. The actions they had taken demonstrated not only a concern for the academic progress of their students, but also a deep and continuing care for the wellbeing and welfare needs of students and their communities.

The experiences of the previous twelve-month period had for all the CEOs reinforced the efficacy and fundamental importance of their core values of care, commitment, collaboration, positive relationships with families, collective understandings, expertise, and civic service. These core values under-pinned their key priority areas for the transition to a new 'normal'. CEOs planned to continue establishing, extending and streamlining agile decision-making frameworks which had been developed during the pandemic. For example, the Trusts (through their senior leaders) had recognised the value of the uses of home learning approaches which they had developed and were intending to adapt these into forms of blended teaching and learning.

Most notable for this period was the shift towards rigorous monitoring of student engagement and performance with the aim to identify areas of developmental needs and to provide extra support. With the notion of 'catching-up' and 'recovering', Trusts had moved swiftly in establishing baseline assessments for all students in order to establish as soon and as clearly as possible learning losses, to identify priorities. Judgements of learning loss were

used formatively, as benchmarks, with some Trusts relying initially on teachers' professional judgements.

All Trusts (CEOs and head teachers) identified that whilst their students had progressed as expected, there were significant gaps in progress between particular vulnerable groups across all key stages, especially between disadvantaged, 'pupil premium' students, those with special educational needs (SEN) and the youngest students in schools. They found it too early to quantify with absolute certainty, in part because a significant number of students and families continued to be impacted by the (Covid-19) virus, and in part because there was no national data available against which they could benchmark. Both CEOs and head teachers estimated that it was likely to take up to two years for students to reach pre pandemic expectations of progress and achievement, despite additional support provided both in school and through increased home visits, the establishment of Trust improvement groups and rigorous tracking of progress.

Another key area of policymaking and implementation for Trusts during the post-lockdown period was students' wellbeing and welfare. Trusts prioritised a wide range of individual and group activities for all students, with increased emphasis on supporting students' return to school and (re)adaptation to school life. Most concerns were around the potential negative effects of the changes in the teaching and learning processes, disrupted everyday routines, insufficient family support for some students during the lockdown period, as well as the external expectations regarding school performance post-lockdown, on students' wellbeing, behaviour and academic achievement.

Longer-term student wellbeing was a priority for all CEOs from the project's sample. A major effort was dedicated to re-establishing routines, increasing student engagement through tailored learning approaches and additional engagement activities with both students and their families/carers, and, overall, following a multi-agency approach in supporting students' wellbeing. Once again, the post-lockdown period was marked with significant developments of the ways in which student wellbeing and behaviour was monitored across Trusts and schools, many of which ensured that their monitoring systems were holistic and built upon solid scientific foundations.

During the 'recovery' period, staff wellbeing and development also remained in the Trust CEOs' priority list. CEOs were unanimous in their appreciation of staff during the pandemic, recognising also that their capacities for resilience had

been tested and, in many instances, had become depleted. As with students' wellbeing, Trusts introduced more advanced monitoring approaches to identify and meet staff wellbeing needs post-lockdown. Monitoring approaches varied widely across Trusts, ranging from informal meetings to the administration of online survey questionnaires and psychometric measures.

Moreover, Trusts extended the range of formal and informal strategies for supporting staff health and wellbeing. The emphasis now was on improving the existing wellbeing policies and strengthening the existing implementation structures. This resulted in the provision of extended support through multi-faceted 'packets' to all staff, but also bespoke interventions where needed. Another policy contribution during this period was the acknowledgement of the extended pressures on senior leaders in schools and in the central Trust team and the support systems designed in this context.

Future development and planning

Changing the narrative. In re-framing the challenges ahead, CEOs were critical in response to the use of the terms 'catch-up' and 'recovery' by Government, though there was an acknowledgement that there were gaps in students' learning. Overall, a more desirable way of expressing the situation for these Trusts was 're-connecting' and 're-charging', and 'broadening the curriculum'. The wellbeing and welfare of students had become an integral part of curriculum planning. The learning needs of vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged students remained a priority.

Embracing 'best practice' models. All CEOs acknowledged the difficulties faced during the previous period, alongside a need now to move forward at pace in order for students to engage with school-based academic learning again, and for staff to provide the best possible learning opportunities. This period was regarded as an opportunity to re-set and move forward. All CEOs reviewed their Trust's curricula, defining teaching and learning more broadly within a values-led framework, to include attention to the academic and welfare needs of students, and to capitalise upon the technological advances made during the pandemic. They also began to explore more flexible patterns of working for staff.

Ensuring a systematic leadership approach. During the pandemic and in this first period of the 'recovery' when schools were open to all students, CEOs were determined to maintain their upward trajectories of academy improvements. They remained optimistic, hopeful and resilient, despite concerns over present

uncertainties, and continued to work closely with their Trust teams to ensure they and their schools were confident that that the systems and processes are robust.

Moreover, the findings in this report clearly point to a range of values, qualities, dispositions, intra and interpersonal skills in the leadership of CEOs, which together rather than singly contributed significantly to the successes of the schools in their Trusts in responding to and managing the challenges of the pandemic. These include values-led/agile/adaptive leadership, agency, sustained interactivity, resilience, combining academic rigour with robust care, and optimism and hope.

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PART 1 The research

1.1. Theoretical foundations: complexity theory and systems thinking

The underpinning theoretical stance of this research is complexity theory. This offers a way of thinking about schools, and therefore multi-academy Trusts, as complex adaptive systems that are characterised by self-organising properties which cause emergent system-wide effects (Stacey, 2001; Gell-Mann, 1994). These systems (e.g. teachers, schools, parents, students) interact with each other, but are also partially constituted of other interactions with larger systems of governance (Haggis, 2008). Thus, leaders of Trusts are a group of people who are part of a profession, part of a school organisation that is also part of the whole educational system, that is part of a country's culture heritage. The system affects the environment, and the environment affects the system (Morrison, 2002).

'There is no objective reality out there waiting to reveal its secrets. There are no recipes or formulae, no checklists or advice that describes 'reality.' There is only what we create through our engagement with others and events. Nothing really transfers; everything is always new and different and unique to each of us.' (Wheatley, 1999)

Systems thinking may be seen as being closely associated with complexity theory. It is common in the field of organisational behaviour which studies what people do, and how what they do affects the organisation's performance (Robbins, Judge, Millett & Boyle, 2016). Like complexity theory, systems theory rejects recipes, formulae, checklists and singular, generalisable 'models' which claim to represent, for example, successful Trust leadership, though they may hold similar values and demonstrate similar characteristics. Rather, it acknowledges the interrelated, often reciprocal nature of human and non-human elements from within and across schools, school systems and government which influence the whole (Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016; Shaked, Schechter and Daly, 2018).

Shaked and Schecter (2017) suggest that systems are comprised of the following elements within systems: leading wholes, using a multidimensional view (collectively seeing the whole beyond the parts), influencing indirectly and evaluating significance (collectively seeing the parts in the context of the whole). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1995) offers a view that progress in the leadership of Trusts as systems, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic,

when systems are likely to be 'teetering between a sense of equilibrium and disequilibrium' (Van Nuland et al, 2020: 449), is unlikely to indicate a smooth, uninterrupted trajectory.

1.2. Context

Over the last year, the attainment gap between poorer and the wealthier students has widened dramatically, exacerbated by a multitude of factors from the quality and quantity of teaching, access to digital technology and broadband internet and the educational level, skills and spare time of parents at home … the bulk of students have suffered a 'learning loss', with those on Free School Meals particularly affected … As schools reopen to the majority of students from April 12th, stakeholders will need to consider strategies to address lost school months, reduce inequalities and perhaps build back a more equitable education system …As pupils begin to return to schools, more long term thinking from the government, devolved administrations, schools and other stakeholders will be required to deal with both the Covid-19 gap and the disadvantage gap that has been created and exacerbated respectively by the last year. (cf. Public Policy Exchange, 2021)

Multi-academy Trusts are now major stakeholders in the national educational landscape. As of January 2021, there were in excess of 2000 Trusts of which 1190 are Multi-Academy Trusts, with a total of more than 9620 academy schools in England. Fifty seven percent (57%) of all academy schools and 54% of all academy Trusts are members of the Confederation of School Trusts UK (CSTUK) (CSTUK, 2021). The Trusts, and their leadership, occupy a unique position, by virtue of their ability to influence directly the consistency, quality, and robustness of their pupils' education over a range of schools in the Trust.

The research discussed in this report is funded by the ESRC IAA and was conducted by the University of Nottingham (UoN) in collaboration with the CSTUK. It is the first of its kind. Complementing a foundational pathfinder project (January – March 2021, cf. Day et al., 2021), it was conducted immediately prior to and during the first phase of the 'recovery' period, from April to September, 2021, when schools were open to all students. The foundational project had involved 15 Trust CEOs from the Midlands region and was focussed on what happened in the previous twelve month period of uncertainties, fears and discontinuities (March 2020 – March 2021). It found that system leaders had been able to take account of contextual variables in

schools in their Trusts, whilst at the same time responding quickly and knowledgeably on their behalf and in conjunction with them to anticipated and unanticipated changes at local and national level.

CEOs and their teams, by being overwhelmingly responsive rather than reactive, had 'buffered' the head teachers of their academies by centralising responsibilities for the development and implementation of policies relating to, for example, health and safety, HR and finance, and building and personally supporting relationships and networks of intensive interactivity. This had brought a degree of stability to the leadership of individual academies, which were then able to more easily focus on the welfare of pupils and their families, and the wellbeing and capacities of teachers to provide and enhance their teaching.

That report provided substantive empirical confirmation that robustness, "a property that allows a system to maintain its functions against internal and external perturbations" (Kitano, 2007), was a key characteristic of successful Trust leadership; and revealed the important role played by core values and agency in the planning, enactment and adaptation of an effective range of inter-connected Trust-wide policies. Key to Trusts' success were:

- The additional leadership layer of CEO leadership created by Trust governance structures. This had enabled the creation and on-going management of a secure administrative infrastructure, freeing head teachers to focus on the core educational and welfare needs of their own school communities.

- Their ability to deploy a range of fit-for-purpose resources to support home learning. This had assured continuity of all pupils' educational provision, progression and welfare, as disruptions continued.

- The use of additional digital and human resources to minimise the potential disengagement from learning of a wide range of vulnerable pupils.

- The additional, differentiated support for the learning needs, welfare and wellbeing of their staff.

- Sustaining their broad, values-led curriculum offerings.

- The growth of collegial relationships between schools.

This school year (2020/21) represented a unique opportunity for capturing rich, complex national, real time data about policy responses, and their effects on students and teachers in disruptive times and during the first phase of the 'recovery', when all students were able to benefit from full-time schooling.

The research reported here and referred to as the 'flagship project' tracks the leaders of a further thirteen Trusts (this time from some of the most deprived areas in Northern region) as they managed the transitions to the 'new normal' over the following six months (i.e. April – September 2021). It is especially relevant because the extended lockdown for the majority of students had challenged the continuing resolve, resilience and skills of all teachers, during this early phase of 'recovery'. However, they were now meeting new challenges as they worked to re-engage school-based students and remote learners, addressing learning losses and gaps in the educational progress of various groups of students, a significant number of whom were experiencing problems with their mental health and welfare.

1.3. Objectives

The objectives of the flagship project were to:

- Contribute to an evidence-informed national knowledge base of system-level policy responses and their impact on schools during a period when society is recovering from social and economic perturbations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Track Trust-wide strategies designed to mitigate learning loss among students over the span of the 2020/21 school year.

- Explore the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on students and Trust staff, and especially on the most vulnerable groups of students.

- Inform national education policy and decision-making through securing new, multi-perspective data about as yet unexamined system-level policy enactment in a range of school Trusts across England.

1.4. Participants

In May 2021, CST and the University of Nottingham approached 17 Trusts across the Midlands region, with an initial invitation for participation in the project. Fourteen (14) CEOs (Trusts) responded positively to this initial invitation and were, consequently, approached by the UoN team with specific invitations for participation in each of the stages of the flagship project (see the following sub-section for more detail). As a result, 14 fully completed survey questionnaires were collected and 14 interviews were conducted in the period between May and July 2021. In addition, a total of eight head teachers from two Trusts (one medium-sized (12 schools), and one smaller (4 schools) participated in focus-group interviews in July 2021.

Overall, the Trusts which participated in this project are situated in different parts of the Northern region of England (Lancashire and West Yorkshire, East Midlands & Humber, and North East). They are illustrative of a range of size, geography and student populations. There are eight small (2-5 schools), one medium (6-10 schools), and five large (12+ schools) Trusts. Six Trusts include primary schools only, four are multi-sector (i.e. with primary and secondary schools), two are a combination of primary and 'special', one is 'special' only, and one is secondary only. Four Trusts serve highly disadvantaged urban and rural communities with one serving a socio-economically advantaged community. Most participants became the CEOs of their Trusts between 2016 and 2019. The longest reported CEO tenure was six years (i.e. since 2014) and the shortest about a year (i.e. since 2020).

1.5. Data collection and analysis

As with the pathfinder project (cf. Day et al., 2021), the size of the main sample for the flagship project was specified as a minimum of 13 participants. This followed recommendations from the qualitative methodology literature that the adequacy of the sample size in qualitative studies should be guided by the "information power" of the sample, which refers to the aims of the study, the sample's specificity, the use of established theory, the quality of dialogue, and the analytical strategy (cf. Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015). Given the established theoretical framework (i.e. 'system leadership') and the aim the project presented here, the analytical approach involved and the role of the participants as strategic leaders of their Trusts, it was decided that a research sample of 13 or more participants would have sufficient information power.

The research followed a mixed-method qualitative approach, which comprised of three stages of data collection between May and September 2021 and was conducted in line with the ESCRC and the University of Nottingham's research ethics policies.

During the first stage (May/June 2021), data were collected through an on-line qualitative questionnaire (administered by the online survey tool Qualtrics) with Trust CEOs. The survey included open questions about the policies and strategies developed and implemented by the Trusts in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the 'recovery' period (March – September 2021) and key outcome areas including students' engagement, learning, welfare and wellbeing, as well as staff morale and wellbeing. In addition, the survey participants were asked about the type of data which their Trusts were collecting regarding student attainment and wellbeing, staff wellbeing, as well as about the timing of data collection. Once retrieved from the software, the data were coded and anonymised.

During the second stage (July/August 2021), individual online semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same 14 CEOs, who had completed the survey questionnaire. Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were video or audio-recorded, with the permission of the study participants. The audio-recordings were transcribed and anonymised. The interviews included sets of extended questions around the CEOs' general and bespoke approaches to policymaking during the pre- (prior to March 2021) and post-lockdown ('recovery') period and were partly based on the outcomes of the survey data analysis.

During the third stage (also July/August 2021), two focus group interviews with a total of eight head teachers from two Trusts were conducted. Interview questions were focused on further exploring the policy implementation processes across Trusts in the post-lockdown period. As with the individual interviews, the focus group interviews were video-recorded and subsequently transcribed and anonymised.

The data collected at three of the research stages were analysed through employing a phenomenological approach, where the focus is on exploring inductively the participants' authentic experiences of policymaking and implementation in disruptive times rather than testing a strictly predefined conceptual framework. Instead of relying on processes of categorising and

quantifying things, phenomenology focuses on describing how things are experienced by the people directly involved (cf. Denscombe, 2007) and was, therefore, suitable for the purposes of this study. Interview transcripts were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004).

1.6. Report organisation

The following five sections of the report outline the research findings grouped into key themes. Part II presents the trends and outcomes of school Trust policymaking during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e. the lockdown period) in 2020/21. Parts III, IV, V, and VI reflect on the key policy changes and outcomes during the early stages of the 'recovery', post-lockdown period in 2021. More specifically, Part III reports on the Trusts' policy priorities around strengthening their overall structural systems and identifying learning gaps, while Parts IV and V discuss the complexity of two major policy – student wellbeing and staff wellbeing and related policy outcomes. The final Part, VI captures Trusts' longer-term vision on how to further streamline and strengthen their policy approaches in order to support their students and staff in a sustainable way.

PART 2 Leading and managing during the pandemic: strategies for building and sustaining successful Trust-wide leadership

Policy development and implementation pre, during and post pandemic have been strongly supported by an extremely agile Trust decision-making framework. This was implemented very early on with delegated powers to a small group of Trustees who continue to meet regularly with the CEO with decisions reported back to the Board...Development and implementation of policy has then been supported by key strategy 'driver' groups made up of colleagues from each academy across the Trust. This has ensured both alignment and efficiency of implementation of Trust strategy and has continued to operate effectively since our return from lockdown. (T1, Survey)

2.1. Establishing agile decision-making systems

Trusts had created and established systems to develop more central approaches so that they could deal with issues that were arising (T7, Interview); and reviewed and extended the use of their recently developed teaching and learning technologies so that, *'all schools could be connected with their staff, communities, each other and beyond the Trust' (T13, Interview).* They had also broadened their assessment of Trust effectiveness beyond traditional accountability measures to ensure the best holistic outcomes for students (T2, Survey) and created roles which were fit for purpose.

When we did come back and we had to manage bubbles, we had one person that manages. If a bubble goes down in any of our schools, that person manages it for the other schools. So, I think it's the collaboration and then the systems we've developed for across the Trust in centralising some of them. (T13, Interview)

All saw the benefits, from having *'great health and safety and safeguarding consultants' (T4, Interview),* to centralised risk assessment procedures and contact tracing (T7, Interview), Trust-wide Covid Committees which met weekly, and fiscal support so that they were able to *'afford to do things that you couldn't do if you were a mainstream school' (T12, Interview).*

Delegated powers had also been complemented by Trust-wide policies for financial matters, remote teaching and learning, health and safety, monitoring of student attendance, templates for behaviour management which individual schools could personalise (T3, Survey), learning and engagement (T2, Survey), the appointment of Trust-wide leads, for example SEND (T10, Survey), common frameworks for behaviour policies which were able to be personalised according to schools' contexts (T3, Survey), and sharing of best practices (T8, Survey).

I remember there was a day where they announced that the health and safety executive were going to start doing checks to make sure that risk assessments were in place. Overnight we were able to look at what they were looking for and develop all of our schools' script. The next day, ten of our schools, one after another, got the HSE call and sailed through them because we'd helped to support them on what they needed to say and we've given them the evidence to meet those answers. I think as a standalone had always me, if I got that call, had a panic, but because I've got health and safety person who works in this room, she was able to very quickly make sure that, well, first of all, she developed the risk assessment, but she was able to make them give them the really efficient answers to show that what they were doing was right. And for me that was a real success because we could. The schools were dealing with Covid cases, dealing with being half open, half closed, dealing with staff sickness to then have a health and safety visit. It would have just been another thing on their plate. So, to be able to just take that burden away and see them go, was a really good example of how operationally we could take workload off school. (T2, Interview)

This early streamlining of decision-making by the central Trust teams had reduced the stress felt by individual academy heads and their staff. It was not one but a combination of several Trust-wide strategies that served to reduce uncertainties across all Trusts, taking the pressure away from staff at the chalk face, to do as much as possible to protect them, being proactive (T8, T12, Interview).

The staff have been prepared to wait and been reassured they know it's going to come and I know it's going to be very measured and they know it's going to be very rational and thought through, and I think that's the benefit of being in a multi-academy Trust as opposed to being single school by yourself. (T5, Interview)

The agility of Trust engagement meant that at Trust level I personally felt well supported, challenged by the board, largely through the delegation of responsibility to a smaller number of Trustees to make policy decisions and to answer quickly or give approval quickly on anything that we might need to do, and that's probably manifested itself in at times. Weekly meetings at times, fortnightly meetings. We haven't drifted, fortunately, very far from fortnightly meetings at the moment. Every time there's a change in guidance risk assessment [X] would update risk assessments and operational plans, and they would be taken to a Friday meeting and agreed by Trustees and then published. I think the policy is being real. Obviously, the guidance that we've had as well, and following that guidance and the implementation I think has been supported by what I've described here around those different 'Trust driver' groups of people working on strategy. So, for example, particularly inclusion groups had a heavy emphasis on different policy developments in terms of safeguarding, attendance, behaviour, et cetera, and colleagues coming together to work on those has been really good and the flexibility of strategy and planning and policy, particularly around different groups of pupils, obviously disadvantaged, and then the mechanism to report back on policy implementation on a regular basis to that to that group of Trustees, and also for [X] to report back on a regular basis through the SharePoint Governors section to governors as well on policy implementation locally. (T1, Interview)

However, there was a general acknowledgement that: *'If the central team weren't there doing the day- to- day stuff, we wouldn't function. It is as simple as that. The support that we were giving our schools is quite differentiated from the support that some of the other schools were getting.' (T3, Interview)*

2.2. Building Trust-wide cultures

Processes of decision-making were reported to be collaborative, collegiate, keeping the communication very strong between schools, and sharing practices. CEOs wanted people to collaborate both in person and virtually to share their learning experiences, *'so that staff can learn from one another' (T13, Survey).*

We've collaborated more at all different levels, even office staff, for example, searching out the free school meal vouchers. That was a nightmare. Schools worked together instead of one school doing it. We pulled together, and we had one person doing it for the Trust. And that reduced people's anxiety. (T13, Interview)

It's about the principle of being stronger together…supporting and challenging each other…accepting that we're going to learn together through the process…Trusting in each other's intentions at all times. (T7, Interview)

The team are very, very skilled. Everyone has a specialism that they can bring to the table as well, so we work very much collaboratively on things like that; and I think that that's good for making sure you haven't missed anything. My heads say that if they had been a head teacher of a standalone local authority school, they would have had to make all of those decisions and interpret the local authority thinking. Our public health [team] have been very supportive to us, but it's a lot of weight to carry as a head teacher. So, we've been able to sort of share some of the anxiety around that, and make sure between us we were confident that that the systems and processes are robust. We also have a very good Trust business manager who whose eye for detail is phenomenal, mostly helpful, but sometimes really difficult. (T9, Interview)

Boards of Trustees played an important part in reinforcing Trust wide cultures.

They've not missed a meeting throughout the whole thing. They've been rigorous in terms of holding me to account in in terms of what I've done, which is their job, and that's fine. (T10, Interview)

This isn't about just teachers, is it? It's about the whole team actually working together so things like PPE orders all of those things, the business manager was making sure that we had absolutely everything that we needed. So, I think I think in terms of robustness it's about having those clear, a clear way of working that people do understand by into that people know what their roles and responsibilities are. And the Trustees were there with us as well, offering help. We've worked very closely as a leadership team, with the chair of the Trust as well, and that's meant that you've got a peer who will check that you haven't missed anything. They've got very different backgrounds in terms of business understanding, so they were reading materials that we were sending to them as well to give us that external view. So, the system that we have is quite robust, collaborative working as well as the, you know, clear responsibilities. I think that really helped. (T9, Interview)

Throughout, one of our key things really has been to develop a stronger governance board because initially when we started, we used our local governing bodies to provide the support, you know, sort of. The Trustees,

because of the Trustees felt the local Governor's wanted to be part of that transition. But it was a model really that wasn't fit for purpose. So, for the past 12 to 18 months we've been working with Academy ambassadors who have been really supportive in finding us new governors, appointing new governors and Trustees and also working with the National Governors Association as well. (T13, Interview)

Trustees formed a steering group, and they were amazing. If something came out, and we needed their decision on something we met at 8 o'clock in the morning, we met on Saturdays, Sundays we could meet. I could literally contact them the night before, and we would meet at 8 o'clock the next morning and get out these decisions that we needed to make. So, I think that helped a lot in that we reacted very quickly to what was going on, and we adapted as well. (T3, Interview)

2.3. Working with others: extending external stakeholder engagement

We want to collaborate wherever possible. We are realistic enough to know that we do not have all of the answers ourselves, so that we are very happy to help others and are clear we can learn from others. We have recently been mentoring a Trust in [another region] under the DfE. (T3, Survey)

We have become much more externally focused over the last year and have devoted specific energy into relationships with both RSCs; the DfE more widely; other Trusts. (T3, Survey)

We have engaged with a wide range of agencies, including working on policy guidance with the DfE and increased collaboration between CEOs in the local area, as well as Local Authorities in the region. (T7, Survey)

CEOs of Trusts with schools in the highest quintile for deprivation particularly, benefited from a Trust appointed mental health counsellor (T12, Interview), and those smaller Trusts within close geographical proximity were able to form strategic teams of school head teachers which worked together on daily communications with parents (T1, Interview).

We have received support from the range of stakeholder groups and engagement was constant. It was exhausting. There's no getting away from it, but the robustness made sure that we tried to bridge the expectations from

central government with the reality of our families, life on the ground but exercised our roles and responsibilities as those civic engineers. (T11, Interview)

All spoke of the 'professional generosity' that other Trusts had shown during the pandemic in sharing strategies and documentation:

I think one of the things which we really benefited from is that we're a Trust which works with a lot of other Trusts. I am so impressed by how much professional generosity there was across the school led system. So, sharing risk assessment, sharing templates, sharing Covid action plans, sharing all kinds of documents. And you'd get four or five different examples, and I think, Trusts working with Trusts helped make the system robust, which I think is something we will continue to do (T2, Interview).

Our vision is 'Great schools at the heart of our communities' and we continue to look beyond the Trust to other Trusts, groups, businesses, charities and research to learn from evidence-based research and practice (T4, Survey).

We have worked to support other primary schools in our region in a number of ways, including sharing effective online learning pedagogical techniques, supporting subject leaders and providing practical support, e.g. in relation to health and safety. (T7, Survey)

By no means all Trusts were made up of academies that were strangers to each other. Some in this study had a prior history of working in close collaboration over a number of years. One CEO spoke of his central team - Deputy, Head of HR, CFO and Chair of the Board of Trustees – as giving him *'the strength to do what I knew was right.' (T4, Interview).* Another spoke of being *'blessed'* by having, *'a raft of senior leaders who have been very proactive through the process' (T8, Interview).*

We have worked together now for anywhere between three to five years. We have some commonality of systems, particularly management information systems, our digital structure, and the language around both business administration and learning and special needs. So, we had quite a solid platform on which to be able to go into the pandemic and formulate our strategic planning and policies…if we're writing a policy across the Trust for curriculum areas, everybody contributes. (T11, Interview)

Pre and post lockdown, the CEO has continued to work with the Local Authority as Chair of the Alternative Provision and Inclusion Strategy Group, the impact of the work of this group has been of pivotal importance in reducing rates of exclusion and improving provision. (T1, Survey)

Many also spoke warmly about the on-going supports received from the CSTUK Community:

The Confederation of School Trusts has been key to keeping the Trust informed of changes as well as addressing school improvement. Having the support of CST during the pandemic and the weekly online briefings made you feel less isolated. It also reassured you as the questions raised were similar to those being asked within your own Trust. The regular updates were excellent in providing a wide range of information that was much more accessible than other briefings. Although the briefings etc. were for a wide audience, the CST made you feel valued. (T13, Survey)

The common sense and interpretations of the nonsense we were receiving down the line from Central office kept me sane. [The CST] worked their socks off. They were brilliant. They would go back to ministers and say what about this and this then and then they would get some sort of semblance of response. There was daily communication. (T8, Interview)

We attend the opportunity area briefings and are linked to CST to ensure we feed into national policy developments. (T2, Survey)

Support and advice from CST during the pandemic have been incredible and laterally from TGI. (T3, Survey)

The Trust monitors closely advice and guidance received from CST to ensure that any changes to national policy are reviewed and that innovative strategies are considered. (T5, Survey)

2.4. Re-positioning Trusts as civic institutions

We have collaborated with councils, charities, third sector organisations, social workers, housing, medical agencies and police…We became the civic institution for the community - the only go-to service for a time. (T11, Survey)

This Trust was committed to *'honouring our civic duty and putting it down as being an anchor institution and linking with the enterprise in the area' (T11, Interview).* During the pandemic and beyond, this and other Trusts had taken the opportunity to strengthen working relationships with parents and carers of their students, and other key stakeholder groups and organisations.

During the last year our relationships with parents and carers, although previously good, have strengthened. Many relied on us for support around their own mental health, provision of food and resources and with managing their child at home. We were open throughout the pandemic and were able to offer a range of support. We are now able to engage learners in a range of new projects including home reading because of the relationships we have built. (T9, Survey)

All our schools have Community Champions who liaise with local and wider community groups/charities to support them and meet their needs. Likewise, many other groups support the needs of our schools. To achieve our aim of being civic leaders, we've made our 'Learning Together' website accessible to all beyond the Trust. Colleagues regularly tweet and share resources/photos to support others across Edu Twitter. (T4, Survey)

I've got a story called the five balls that are red. This underpins what we do, and I give it to every new teacher and any new member of staff and it's that you are really busy at work and you realise you're juggling 5 balls called family health, friends, integrity and work, and you're juggling them all. And you realise one day that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it somebody will pick it up. It will bounce back in somebody else's hands, but if you drop family health, friends or integrity, it will smash and be irrevocably shattered. So, you've got to understand that. (T4, Interview)

2.5. Developing and implementing hybrid teaching and learning

A strategy shared by almost all Trusts from the onset of the pandemic had been the development of Trust-wide remote learning systems. Like many other schools, most had not been prepared for supporting home learning when the pandemic hit.

It hit us through the back door, really. We had to develop the infrastructure of getting staff, parents, pupils trained on a platform, then also making sure that we asked staff to work at home. But children didn't have access, so we really were firefighting, training staff, training children, training parents, addressing

what they didn't have. Some families didn't even have Internet and hardware to access. That was the biggest issue for us. (T13, Interview)

One of the biggest ongoing challenges initially were the different levels of student learning engagement.

It was fine delivering it and putting it out there, but without too much knowledge of how much the students were responding and engaging with it. I think because the emphasis is on people and pastoral. (T8, Interview)

I don't think our schools were prepared to get that ready as quickly as they could have done, because they haven't had that planning because they were basically working on their children in the classrooms trying to do the recovery curriculum with them, and perhaps not putting in the effort in to get in the VLEs. (T2, Interview)

Trusts set out ground rules for the at-home learning process, for example, that parents could not interrupt a lesson, though they could discuss with the teacher outside the lesson (T7, Interview). Secondary academies were in a stronger position because they already had VLE and IT support systems; and because in some homes there were multiple devices in use within the same family, Trusts organised their primary academies to prepare recorded lessons which could be accessed flexibly (T2, Interview).

The transition to engaging with learning at home had not been helped by delays in the supply of devices for students, and by parental expectations.

You got two or three children sharing devices and laptops at the beginning. The government also said they were giving us lots of devices, but the allocation wasn't swift enough, or they didn't get enough, or we've got some remote areas where the Wi-Fi is very poor. (T3, Interview)

Initially, also, parents had unrealistic expectations of access to teachers. They thought that because it was remote, they could have access to teachers 24 hours a day to fit in with their work life. We had to make it very clear to parents that no, it was nine till 3. Otherwise, teachers were getting emailed at, for example, 9 o'clock 10 o'clock at night where they were being asked for resources for the next day. (T13, Interview)

The early provision of high quality, responsive professional development in delivering remote education and having a single infrastructure across Trusts had reportedly enabled every member of staff to benefit. Those key strategies had enabled teachers to feel supported in the infrastructure as well as all the wrap around HR support that Trusts had been able to provide.

We moved to a shared online platform across the Trust on Teams and provided funded CPD for all staff and support networks. We continued to support with this and share good practice, including researching the pedagogy behind effective remote learning and the difference between in person teaching. We then coached and mentored staff returning to in person teaching each time to support them to shift their pedagogy back to in person teaching. We provided staff with updated IT to work more effectively from home and introduced more flexible working. (T7, Survey)

One Trust had developed a distance learning toolkit which had been shared with parents, IT technicians had helped set up laptops and dedicated helplines for staff and parents (T12, Survey), another had created an interactive diagnostic and examination question bank (T10, Survey), whilst another had developed a digital strategy.

We had digital champions in all our schools, and it was very much let's all come together. There is a core level you've got to get to in competence and then we kept bringing people together, making sure there was time in staff meetings to train people up. (T4, Interview)

We gave family learning packs and art material out to every child. We didn't ask whether or not they could afford to buy books themselves. We gave packs and pencils to every child. We had the money in our budget. We weren't going to be using it in our classrooms, so that's why we did it. So, everybody got the same. (T11, Interview).

2.6. Managing disruptions: prioritising vulnerable students and families

All Trusts had prioritized those students and families who were most in need of academic and economic support.

The first thing we prioritised was our vulnerable students. So, the first thing I had schools do was to identify cohorts of students that, if school shut, we needed to have 'eyes on.' (T5, Interview)

A number of interrelated concerns were also expressed in this early 'recovery' phase which related to disruptions caused by the effects of the ongoing and unpredictable outbreaks of Covid – the numbers of students isolating (T8, Survey), unanticipated closures of 'bubbles' (T12, Survey), increasing demands in specialist academies to support learners who were struggling in mainstream environments (T9, Survey), convincing some families that it was safe to send their children to return to school (T2, Survey), and the engagement of the 'most vulnerable, disadvantaged pupils' (T1, Survey).

The big challenge came when you got 70 kids that you got to send home because they've been in close contact with someone and then someone else had got it. That became a huge logistical task for us in all our schools. Really, really hard (T10, Interview).

2.7. Psychological, economic and social support for parents and families

During the pandemic, many parents had come to rely on Trusts, especially those serving disadvantaged communities, to provide support around their mental health as well as in the provision of food and other resources and managing their children's home learning.

Free school meals were a huge issue in [Area]. We've got a huge amount of free school meal people, so initially we were going out and our staff were delivering door to door before the voucher scheme we were doing was delivered. Drop offs, doing hampers. And it was making sure that they were fed, which is really, really sad, and we continue that as most schools did through the holidays as well. (T2, Interview).

We have prioritised spend for 18 months on accessibility to education for all. We serve a population of children across the Trust who are all in the bottom decile of poverty, and some of whom have complex and significant special educational needs. We made sure our pastoral and community offered an hour engagement with a range of charities, with housing associations. Because unless you have a roof over your head and, bearing in mind a lot of our parents have got zero hour contracts, were some of the first to be lodged with family of five children with both parents who had zero hour contracts in one of our academies and the mum was just in absolute floods of tears. That's no way to live in the 21st century. It's appalling, so we literally made sure they were fed, watered and had some energy. When communities almost turned feral as well, we were some of

the only people they would allow in, so we managed to be able to harness some positivity of engagement and productivity around family learning – that is what we called it - with a whole range of sort of history, geography, some maths and English. Some reading, you know, in the first lockdown, and then we have systems in place around the food that hampers the, the contact with the local authorities and the additional funding where that came through, so we brokered that significantly. (T11, Interview)

The support for families which were experiencing deprivation was extensive. As with Trusts serving disadvantaged communities in the earlier project, members of staff were not only teaching the children but also *'going out with boxes of food and handing them out to all the children in the area who needed them (T3, Interview), 'worked closely with hard to reach families, including doorstep home visits and planned outdoor activities where risk assessments and guidance allowed' (T7, Survey),* because they *'felt that, values wise, that was the right thing to do' (T6, Interview).*

We helped families of extremely vulnerable children, many of whom have special learning needs. They don't understand half of what the government says. It was blind panic. We provided psychological reassurance in the interpretation because we are at the front face for these communities…We have reform packages around pupils that you would be concerned about in terms of remote engagement because of their own home circumstance or context, but that's where our emergency care provision on both sites coupled with our welfare checks has allowed us then to say okay, you're not logging onto Teams, you're not able to work remotely. We were able to build that and get more and more pupils on site. As time passed (and not high levels), there were still students that didn't engage, but we had welfare checks. We had people knocking on doors every day. We were making sure that those pupils were well looked after with some of the basics. You know, food, sanitary products, things like that. It is a fine balance, but I would say that we would always put the care of pupils and their wellbeing first, in the context of delivering high quality education. (T1, Interview)

Such economic and social support was matched in all Trusts, by close family engagement, to provide psychological reassurance through regular interaction. This had been a priority during the pandemic, and continued beyond (T4, Survey).

Families have had to be reassured about the systems that the schools have put into place to keeping their children safe in school before they would send their children back to school. Family support workers have been key to working with families who have been anxious about sending their child into school both during and post the pandemic. (T13, Survey)

These parents had regular weekly calls during the pandemic, and these had reshaped the home-school relationships over the longer term.

We have weekly contact with our parents just to give them an update because their previous experience of school has often been quite negative. They are getting calls to say your child is misbehaving, or, you need to come and collect your child, or they are excluded in a fixed term exclusion. So, we try and reshape that relationship, because otherwise we can't get to the root causes of the behaviour and the approaches and be more successful. I think the parental relationships really changed because we have more time to build those relationships. The parents wanted to go through how they were feeling, and they wanted someone to listen to them as well, which of course we do. But I think that that's what helped in terms of parental relationships. They understood that we were there to sort of support them even more than usual. (T9, Interview)
All the way through lockdown, every single child got a weekly phone call to their parents, so they have a chat with the parent. The parents loved it because they were feeling isolated, because they couldn't see anybody. So, a lot of them were really looking forward to those phone calls with school - and every member of staff did that. So, teachers, teaching assistants, senior staff, everybody. We had lists of children that would get phone calls, some that would get them more often, if we knew a family was really struggling we would be regularly phoning them and doing home visits just to check everything was okay. (T12, Interview)

As a result of these now established relationships, Trusts had been able to engage learners in a range of new projects including home reading (T9, Survey). Alongside these, however, at least one Trust had experienced a loss of parental engagement.

We've lost some of those parental relationships where we had parents in school really regularly. For example, accessing family learning and those really vulnerable families where we would support them in a lot of ways. We physically haven't been able to have that happen, so some of that Trust and relationship with those particular families has gone, which makes some of those tough social care questions and conversations more difficult. (T7, Interview)

2.8. Policy Enactment: challenges and opportunities

Across the Trusts, there was near unanimity in criticisms of government guidance, for its lack of clarity, timing and focus.

The biggest challenges we have faced is a complete lack of clarity and timing. You don't know which parts is guidance, which parts is legislation, what is the funding and the timeline to be able to put that into place. The underpinning infrastructure that would have made our schools and academies much safer institutions just was not there, and there was absolutely no knowledge or recognition of what this meant to children with special educational needs. Clueless. (T11, Interview)

Trusts were *'very confused'* as guidance *'trickled out' (T12, Interview),* but managed the challenges by 'bringing leaders together' so that there was one clear message and one clear response.

We were very confused. Sometimes it was contradictory from one day to the next because it was being updated. That makes sense to the person that's updating it but for the recipient it can be quite confusing. (T8, Interview)

Even the offer of a national tutoring service had been problematic: '*We initially registered with that last summer holidays, the day it was announced. I registered and I heard nothing for two months and then I chased DfE up again and I was told, ''We haven't got it in place yet. We will get in contact with you''. They never did. When they finally got it in place, the times that they wanted to offer us weren't suitable, because why would you want to take a child out of a maths lesson to have some maths tutoring. You want it either before school, after school, at lunch times, or you know, in afternoon sessions' (T12, Interview).*

Government policies were perceived as unhelpful, also, in relation to the needs of rural schools and those for students with special educational needs. In the former, online learning was difficult because of poor broadband connections; and in the latter because: '*The impact for us is the remoteness of some of our kids and the remoteness of some of our schools. The government policies aren't designed for small rural villages in [Area]. The government's policies are directed towards bigger schools. We had far fewer laptops than we needed. The laptops were allocated according to deprivation rather than any other kind of need. It's not straightforward to just link into the Internet in a rural*

village where the connections are pretty poor' (T3, Interview); When it came to special schools DfE made an incorrect presumption that we were in clinical settings. If you were to visit our special schools, you would know they are the old 1970s buildings with no space and no annexes and leaking roofs. That's what we've got. We want to get kids in, but having separate clinical areas for changing, for AGPs, aerosol generated procedures is just not possible' (T6, Interview).

The lateness of guidance, particularly arriving at weekends or during school holidays had added to stress levels, for example: *'The stress and pressure put on senior staff has been abhorrent. I have seen some very senior school leaders at a depth of worry that I think will mean that people will leave the profession earlier [because of] the lack of care and understanding towards school leaders'* (T5, Interview).

2.9. Head teachers' perspectives

Heads rated their Trusts very highly for the support they received. They all spoke primarily of five kinds of benefit: i) Consistency of collective response to the pandemic, ii) High levels of interaction and collaboration, iii) Sharing practices, iv) Security, and v) The challenges.

Consistency

The level of support from the MAT has made it consistent across all [Trust] schools in terms of support with risk assessment, documentation, procedures and systems. In terms of tracking the children, in terms of the remote learning, home learning and I feel that we've all collectively been able to work as a group to support that and make sure that obviously we're giving that level of support and time for each other. Because in certain schools it's different for others in terms of needs and how things are working, but in terms of policy, systems and procedures, a lot of that legality side and that statutory side was produced by the Trust to support schools which was helpful and then we amended it, personalised it for each school. The structure and the formats were there. (T3, HT5, Focus group)

They contrasted their situation with that of heads in standalone academies known to them: *'Heads in non-Trust schools locally have found a real lack of support. They've really sort of wanted the support, they wanted clarity, they wanted to really understand what, cause the guidance at times has been really*

unclear, to put it politely, and I think some schools who aren't part of a collective group have felt really isolated, and I think it's been a huge amount of pressure for heads. I'm not saying it's been easy for Trust heads, but I think we've had a huge amount support around' (T3, HT6, Focus group).

Collaboration and interaction

Our Trust has a lot of very good heads that work very closely together as well as with the Trust. So, if there's anything that you weren't sure about, you had a support network to be able to rely on, even down to the small things like having a WhatsApp group where people can just ask a question, you get that information very quickly from someone. So, I think one of the benefits of the MAT is not just the central team aspect, but it's that collaboration between the heads, both in a formal and informal way. I think that's what helps make these situations, where it's as chaotic as it could be, run as smoothly as possible. (T3, HT7, Focus group)

Sharing practices

From a Trust perspective, when things started happening, we got a template letter to go to parents of those children who were going to go into isolation. We got a template letter to send to the rest of the school. We got a template letter to let [X] know who is isolating, then we got a template model of how to track that bubble and what learning they were getting. That is exactly what has made it manageable. You fire them out. You get those things out of the way, then they're done. Mentally, you can move on. You see those children out. You do the pastoral care, but it means you can get on with your other jobs. (T2, HT3, Focus group)

Security

For me, having worked as a standalone Academy before I came to this multi Academy Trust, I was doing all that on my own in the last lockdown and with very little point of reference - compared to coming into a MAT where the risk assessments were 80% done for us, that was a massive improvement for me. To start from scratch in March 2020 with, write your own risk assessment was just like, where do you start. So that was for me, very much the benefit of having the Trust because we would just get the latest update, or we would get that tweet. It gives you that sense of security that there are X schools all pulling together

doing the same thing so you don't feel that you're taking a decision that might be wrong on your own. (T2, HT2, Focus group)

We've been able to allocate additional funding for the needs of the children to cover most of the needs. (T3, HT5, Focus group)

I have worked with the local authority and I don't want to say any more about that. But the security and the comfort, and just the ability to be able to speak to somebody who has got expertise and can help you, is invaluable. And as a head teacher, all the heads that I know, certainly all the secondaries, feel exactly the same. I've been a head a long time and worked on my own and it's just not fun. And it is a very lonely place to be. And having people to help does make a massive difference. We want to do the right thing. We absolutely do, because with all those children and staff, their safety and our care for them comes first and if you've got somebody helping you do that, what more do you want? (T2, HT4, Focus group)

The challenges

Heads spoke of three stages that had presented different challenges. The first had been a time for diagnosing learning needs and planning systems of welfare and academic support, whilst managing multiple disruptions to existing systems. The second stage consisted of ensuring the capacity to implement the newly developed systems for teaching students who were learning from home. The third stage was managing transitions, as students moved in and out of different school and home learning environments.

Stage 1…
The first stage was people viewing their learning very differently in terms of remote learning and systems in place, systems for risk assessment, systems for knowing the children and key workers, and everybody wondering who was a key worker, and did we have that level of information, and who were passing as key workers; and when we were initially having to close schools, and working out how we were going to develop learning…
…Stage 2…
Since that journey, over the last year we've moved hugely in terms of remote learning, in terms of what learning looks like remotely, the capacity of teaching from home. The capacity of transition has been a big change and development within the Trust…
…Stage 3…

…Transitioning from home to school and then going to home again happened frequently for lots of different reasons for lots of different children and families. It's been a turnaround in terms of knowing your children and taking that time to really understand children and their needs emotionally and socially as well, not just from their attainment and their academic progress that they're making. (T2, HT, Focus group)

Within each of these stages, Trust schools developed basic routines as a means of establishing a sense of order: '*We've got very good at rearranging routines, because at the end of the day with Covid, that's what you got very good at. You had to routine it, because if you didn't then it just dominated what you did. So, every time there was something new, you would make sure that you put it into a 'routine' and you had people who could manage it. And as soon as you had done that you went back to school improvement. And then, two weeks down the line, you got something else, another bubble. Our bubbles were breaking a lot, but we just put it into a routine and the children got used to a routine. And it made everybody feel safer and everybody had a part to play, and we would find the routines all the time, because when you're dealing with children and parents, there's always something you haven't quite thought of (T2, HT2, Focus group).*

As a consequence, staff not only had been able to gain new appreciations and understandings of each other's work, but also had become more collegial in their working practices: '*The other thing that's come out of it is that staff have got a better appreciation of each other's jobs now because they've had to muck in. But you put all your routines in place and then your key members of staff that were implementing those routines have to isolate. So, it's like, okay, who can pick up that bit? And who can pick up that bit? And what's the essential and desirable and, that constant reassessment? I think it's moving people out of working in silos, particularly in secondary school, where it can be quite divided. It's much more collaborative because it's had to be. I see that as a real positive because it's laying the foundations for working, moving forwards. There's a lot more support for each other in every sense, not just the job. It's the emotional support, it's the backing each other up. It's the pre-empting things. It's not always top-down now, it's much more distributed across the school, and I think that's a real positive coming from this (T2, HT3, Focus group).*

PART 3 Creating a new normal: policy priorities in the recovery period

> *The Trust vision is learning together to be the best that we can be, and that is as applicable to me in my relationship with directors, relationships with one another, as it is to our approach and ethos to helping children learn. And in many ways, particularly through times of crisis, that vision and the commitment and fidelity to that vision is probably being as much of a saving grace for me as it has been a liberating factor, because if we've got something wrong while the Trust vision is learning together, to be the best, we can be now within their our values, our professional standards, ethics. Those have been the guiding principles for us. (T6, Interview)*

3.1. Continuing to reinforce core values

The experiences of the previous twelve month period as schools in their Trusts had managed the most challenging of circumstances, had for all the CEOs reinforced the efficacy and fundamental importance of their core values of care, commitment, collaboration, positive relationships with families, collective understandings and expertise, and civic service. As a result of these, relationships internally, with families and external stakeholders, had been strengthened and they had been able to emerge stronger as Trusts. The experiences had *'re-affirmed that their priorities were the right ones'* (T4, Survey).

I think it goes back to our Trust values. We've got four key values which are very simple: that everybody within our Trust should be happy, proud, successful and challenged. And that's what kept us going through the pandemic as well. Were all the children happy and safe in school or safe at home? Making sure the children still felt part of the school community and were proud of that community, that they're still a pupil at one of our schools in one of our Trusts and we're there for them, we're there to care for them. (T13, Interview)

We always had 'Going the extra mile' as one of our key values, core beliefs, particularly those of the communities that we serve, but even more so during the pandemic. And we did a lot of communication with staff. A bit like the World War Two blitz spirit type of attitude, talking about how we were going to make sure that none of our children or families suffered. We had staff at all levels, not just

pastoral, doing home visits, teaching assistants going out to families because Grandma was doing the childcare and she didn't know how to use a computer. Actually, standing at the end of the path training Grandma how to use the computer - millions of examples of that; families where Dad had been furloughed and their whole family had got Covid. They were really poorly, with no family that could help them. They couldn't get any help in terms of food, and we delivered bags of shopping to their front door. (T12, Interview)

These core values underpinned their key priority areas for the transition to a new 'normal'. The Trusts were not content with focussing only on the pursuit of academic excellence: '*We all work hard to shape our young people into fully rounded individuals, ready to face the demands of a rapidly changing society. We access a comprehensive range of support and development services, in-house and externally, to ensure barriers to learning are tackled and their impact on attainment is reduced to allow every young person to make significant progress' (T5, Survey).*

These were expressed through policies which targeted i) streamlining the centralised systems and processes for policymaking and implementation; ii) reviewing teaching and learning processes, ultimately narrowing the learning gaps; and iii) supporting the wellbeing of students and staff**.**

3.2. Streamlining centralised systems and processes: policymaking and implementation

CEOs planned to continue establishing and extending and streamlining agile decision-making frameworks which had been developed during the pandemic.

We are developing the capacity within our central team so that many more things can be done centrally, and this then allows the schools to focus on school improvement. It also ensures that there is consistency across the Trust and all schools are compliant. (T13, Survey)

Policy development and implementation pre, during and post pandemic have been strongly supported by an extremely agile Trust decision-making framework. This was implemented very early on with delegated powers to a small group of Trustees who continue to meet regularly with the CEO with decisions reported back to the Board through the Governance Hub in the Trust's SharePoint. Development and implementation of policy has then been supported by key strategy 'driver' groups made up of colleagues from each academy across

the Trust. This has ensured both alignment and efficiency of implementation of Trust strategy and has continued to operate effectively since the return from lockdown. (T1, Survey)

3.3. Adapting teaching and learning: developing a blended approach

CEOs had recognised the value of the uses of home learning approaches which they had developed and were intending to adapt these into forms of blended teaching and learning.

The restructuring of IT across the Trust will provide an opportunity for cross Trust working on aspects of the remote learning offer through the appointment of a digital lead technician and the establishment of working parties (primary and secondary) to enhance this further. (T5, Survey)

We are developing an IT strategy to look at how we use IT to connect with people and connect learning. To improve and develop our use of technology we are appointing IT staff so that we can have expert staff to develop IT across our Trust to raise the profile of IT and use it to its maximum benefit. (T13, Survey)

We have maintained a blended approach with children who are required to self-isolate being able to access on-line learning through MS Teams. In many ways the pandemic has pushed our remote learning strategy forward much more quickly than would otherwise have been the case…. During lockdown, teachers offered both in-school learning and remote learning; with 1 to 1 for SEN children and small group sessions for those who were identified as needing additional support. (T3, Survey)

Trust schools had established blended learning models which best met the needs of their cohort of pupils (T6, Survey). There was more use of remote learning for homework especially the pre-recorded lessons, and more intuitive use of IT for leadership across the Trust (T12, Survey).

We use a blended approach when pupils cannot manage full days within school. This has allowed some learners who are anxious about coming into the building to complete more work and we feel this is something to build on within all academies. (T9, Survey)

The biggest change was around the online platform to engage parents and children and making sure that was accessible by telephone, tablet or laptop. This

needed further adaptations for our children with significant learning needs. (T11, Survey)

Parental response overall is much more positive now than it was. We initially had challenges with parents around what on earth was happening. Now, because we got our remote education sorted out, they think we're amazing. They sat in the corner of the younger ones, especially they listened to our live lessons. They saw what the children were doing; and they say they didn't realise, they just didn't realise. Because some of those standalone schools weren't able to pull that together and use that shared resource and expertise, our offer was stronger. It's not about a competition, but we were aware that parents were telling us, well, the school down the road isn't doing that. (T7, Interview)

Significantly, strategies for addressing mental health and student welfare and learning engagement issues had now become a core consideration and integral part of their post-Covid curriculum framework, as they gradually returned to pre-Covid levels of engagement in learning and mitigated learning losses. One Trust had devised a two-phased approach: March – April focused on re-integration, triage support (reading and language), diagnostic assessment and consolidation with no mention of 'catch-up' (T8, Survey).

Our post-Covid curriculum framework has emphasised the need to address mental health and wellbeing as part of the curriculum design. All schools have made this a priority. (T14, Survey)

We are providing a wider approach to the curriculum to impact on student welfare, e.g. holding planned parties after school for our younger pupils who have never had to learn to lose in a game as they have spent so long in lockdown without socialising. These opportunities have served the dual purpose of allowing staff to support with social skills, but also have improved children's wellbeing. (T7, Survey)

On returning to school, teachers have commented that they have had to spend a significant amount of time explaining the expectations for behaviour for learning both in and out of the classroom and being very explicit about what is expected. They have also had to spend time re-establishing routines and systems for behaviour. (T13, Survey)

The events of the last 18 months have highlighted how important the work we do in giving life chances to children from all backgrounds is. We are relaunching

our Resilience curriculum, we are currently researching and writing an aspiration curriculum. (T10, Survey)

In terms of the academic curriculum, one Trust was using a combination of '*re-teaching, addressing gaps as they arise on the planned curriculum, slowing down the pace of delivery with increased modelling and using intervention where needed for individuals or groups. Common themes include pre-teaching sessions and same day interventions as well as increased phonics/S&L screening…As part of the recovery curriculum, there will be a balance of academic and social/enrichment opportunities for every pupil across the Trust'* (T5, Survey).

For at least one mid-size Trust, however, doubts remained about online learning. In its view, although it had been necessary, it was an insufficient substitute for 'immersive' school-based learning.

Online learning has not been anywhere near as suitable as classroom-based learning. It couldn't be because it's so immersive, so personalised and structured and differentiating. Online learning was a necessary means of keeping some families engaged with an offer that reflected elements of their EHCP. But we always knew that it was never going to be as a supplement for it, nor could it be. No CEO wants to come out there and say online learning didn't achieve anything. It achieved some things. But, compared to what it could achieve in mainstream, we can pretend that it's given us what we need, but it has absolutely not. (T6, Interview)

3.4. Monitoring student attendance and engagement in academic learning

On return to full-time, school-based learning, students' level of academic learning had been rigorously monitored, as their academies re-engaged with recovery in different ways. Attendance across the Trusts was reported as being generally positive, with almost a full return to pre pandemic levels. However, there were greater challenges in this respect in the secondary phase, particularly in schools serving the most deprived communities, which had seen the slowest return (T1, T14, Survey). Trusts defined 'engagement' at Trust level, establishing clear expectations for student behaviour. One Trust recruited and deployed a temporary additional staff member to improve attendance through ''*door knocking' targeted pupils and families'* (T1, Survey). Another provided induction and professional development for staff and induction for students (T2, Survey).

Engagement issues are more pronounced with EYFS and KS1 pupils than KS2. This is being monitored during the summer term with the focus of learning on re-engagement and re-learning onsite routines. Teaching of social skills including social communication groups. (T5, Survey)

I devised a system to track engagement of children in their learning and attendance by placing all the phone calls on a spreadsheet - and that was incredible evidence. So, we put them on Teams and all staff involved with that family could add in their bits and their results. (T12, Interview)

We adapted our support for pupils who were presented with additional requirements linked to behaviour or mental health needs. This ensured that behaviour in our schools was settled and enacted through an empathic, clear approach that worked closely with families and support services. Attendance of vulnerable pupils was successful by ensuring close work with families. (T7, Survey)

We have a specialist team focussed on improving behaviour with a 3-step process. Our Home and Hospital Teaching learners have needed most support due to anxiety. The specialist staff have re-engaged them through family contact, calls, visits and remote learning. (T9, Survey)

Each academy already has a pastoral and welfare team, as well as an identified member of SLT (usually a DHT) who is responsible for delivery in this area. We weight it equally with academic and enrichment. (T11, Survey)

The words of one CEO illustrate a recognition implicit in all Trusts of the need and benefits of listening to the voices of their students.

Since March it has been about listening to student voices, rather than presume what we think that the wellbeing issues are - and do what we think children need us to do to make their lives better. It's about listening to what they actually do want. So, we were really proud to be one of [X], which did a student summer as an example back in March where we got together secondary school colleagues with children from each of our 15 secondary academies. We asked them, what had been the impact of the pandemic? What was still going on? What we need to do differently in the future? And they came up with the four key things which came out as mental health and supporting them when they were worried about, for example, racism, cultural capital, the opportunities they'd lost in, for example, the sports in the arts; and how they could catch up with that; and then

poverty and disadvantage that they'd seen themselves. Some people haven't been able to log on because they haven't got a computer. That made us decide that we're going to continue to move forward. We need to listen to what is worrying, what is impacting our student health and well, be much, much more. I don't think, it's not that we didn't do that before, but we probably didn't do it quite so comprehensively and then formulate our plans based on what they are telling us they need rather than what we think they need. (T2, Interview)

3.5. Tracking student progress: planning for 'catch-up' and 'recovery'

[There was] clear regression for most in September. Where face-to-face lessons were held and were uninterrupted, great progress was made. This was clearly limited by each bubble closure and the remote offer, no matter how good it was…It really depends upon: attendance (in person or digitally), how often bubble closures happened, range of needs, family circumstances. Overall, most children, when regularly in school, have made excellent academic progress… However, with more children who had limited engagement, it means there are more children behind where they would have been had school been open properly. This includes a [plethora of cultural and childhood experiences (museums, residentials, visits)]. (T11, Survey)

Trust CEOs reported that they had moved swiftly in establishing baseline assessments for all students to establish as soon and as clearly as possible learning losses, to identify priorities. They were *'…very mindful of not burdening Head teachers/Senior Leaders with additional demands from the centre, particularly on the return to school in March. We agreed principles that would be used to assess students' academic progress and performance; in the first instance this focused on teacher diagnostic assessments; some baseline testing after Easter in core subjects and perhaps the use of external assessments in the summer term. This data has not been collected from across the Trust as it is our intention to do this in the second half of summer term; providing us with key data to inform priorities for next academic year'* (T8, Survey).

At this early stage judgements of learning loss were used formatively, as benchmarks, with some Trusts relying initially on teachers' professional judgements.

Teachers used their knowledge to plan for the cohort, groups and individuals and deploy staff accordingly. We agreed as a Trust to formally assess at the end of the summer term to validate teachers' judgements. (T13, Survey)

In our mainstream school we have opted out of standardised testing exercises, with a view to running mock SATs for English & Maths in summer to give a better sense of where children are once they have resettled into school. We're trying to take a coordinated approach with secondary but have resisted their push to put kids through SATs in the normal manner, as the Trust and school view is that this is measuring false levels. (T6, Survey)

When the children came back, in those first couple of weeks they did Pirate and Puma reading and math tests. And that was to inform what gaps so we can see what we don't know, we can see what the teacher needs to teach. So that's been very informative. Then, in the last week in June and first week in July across the whole Trust we did the same tests again, and they're sending the results to us of who's on track, what percentage are working at the expected level, what percentage are working below, what percentage are at greater depth; and then any areas of need we need to teach the children. (T4, Interview)

We've asked head teachers to continue to report where children are in terms of our special academies in terms of expected, below expected student results. Head teachers have done some baseline against age related expectations in core subject areas, but we've asked head teachers to undertake that baselining with a view to helping inform them how they structure their curriculum planning for next year. (T6, Interview)

Almost all Trusts had decided to accumulate data of learning losses over time.

What we're trying to do now moving forward, is bring them more into an alignment, so testing will likely run for the existing year seven and year six into year seven. That will give us a direct comparison between two year groups, as well as some of the baselines that we didn't have before all of this happened, when they were much younger. We're trying to move that on it at MAT level now but allowing the schools to look into individual needs. (T8, Interview)

All children will participate in end of year assessments and any gaps in knowledge will be shared with their new teachers in readiness for September...via the Summer Term Partnership Visits held with SLT, the Trust and governors. Follow up will take place at the Annual Roundtables meetings in July. (T4, Survey)

For secondary age pupils in year 11 and year 13, academic progress and performance will be finalised as part of the non-examination assessment process concluding on 18 June. For all other year groups, the Trust formal data collection window closes on 4 July. (T1, Survey)

Continued assessment and formal mock exams have been undertaken throughout the year in order that we are fully cognisant of where intervention needs to take place…Process as above followed for vulnerable students with access arrangements where needed. (T10, Survey)

We will use a Summer Term Data Drop for this. Collating spring term data was less useful as we weren't prescribing an approach to schools. (T14, Survey)

Analysis of planned NFER testing will support Trust wide recovery plan underpinned with individual Academy catch up and pupil premium strategy plans…Primaries are undertaking diagnostic testing via teacher assessments and NFER testing. Also, all are undertaking multiplication tables pilot. The Secondary Academy has undertaken two data cycles during the academic year with a third planned for the summer term and has focused on the collation of data through a series of mini assessments to enable Teacher Assessed Grades to be issued for Years 11 and 13 in line with Centre Policy. (T5, Survey)

3.6. Variations in learning gains and losses

Progress in learning prior to academies being open to all from March 2021 was mixed, and unsurprisingly related not only to ability but to family support. Trusts were alert to this, as examples of their responses demonstrate.

They weren't falling off a cliff academically. I'd be a liar if I said some haven't, they have. The numbers aren't big, and I know a lot of those kids would have been challenging if they'd been coming into school anyway. (T10, Interview)

The progress made by learners may not be quite as much as if they'd been in school full time, but we've got very robust systems to make sure we know what progress they are making, where the gaps are, and where everybody is engaged in that process. We do a three weekly progress meeting as our usual practice. So that looks at progress academically across different subject areas. It looks at attendance and engagement within lessons, and then any other concerns that we need to be aware of. You could really see the difference in terms of the evidence coming forward for their centre assessed grades. (T9, Interview)

We saw reading levels in the primaries largely unaffected, which goes against the national trend. However, there were gaps, writing: nightmare writing is the area that all kids are behind. We're putting in specific across Trust strategies for writing in the primaries. We found that there's been a reliance on typing that, and I think also the parents find writing more of a challenge. (T5, Interview)

Key messages emerging from aggregated data are: Primary Phase – whilst the older pupils have returned, having engaged well in remote education, we are seeing the largest gaps in learning from those pupils in EYFS and Key Stage 1…Secondary Phase – early indications are that strategies to ensure curriculum continuity through remote education have had a positive impact for the majority of pupils. (T1, Survey)

For some children there aren't gaps. They've come back exceptionally stronger because they have had that quality one to one support at home and we've got to acknowledge that as well, we know they need moving on. They need accelerating as well. It's taking account of both ends of the spectrum as well and not just presuming that Covid has had a negative effect. Some children loved working at home. They loved the lack of distraction in the classroom. Some of our autistic children loved the lack of noise. (T13, Interview)

Trust CEOs were clear that, whilst there were variations among and between cohorts and individual students, there was a consistent pattern of differences in learning loss between the more disadvantaged students and others.

We have baseline assessed all pupils on their return in March and gaps identified there are differences in different cohorts and schools, with an inconsistent pattern related to subject or area of subject. The only consistent pattern was that our more disadvantaged pupils' gap with less disadvantaged pupils had widened in all 3 schools in our Trust. (T7, Survey)

All pupils have been baselined against ARE since returning to school, so we have clarity over the extent of the gap. (T6, Survey)

Academic progress of vulnerable students has already informed our approach to 'catch-up premium spend' although this has been at an individual academy level in conversation with Director of School Improvement. (T8, Survey)

Despite extensive recovery intervention, we are seeing the largest gaps in learning from those pupils who are most difficult to engage, disproportionately those from disadvantaged backgrounds and with attendance being a barrier. (T1, Survey)

There is clear evidence that learners from the most disadvantaged areas have been more significantly impacted. Some schools have had particular year group cohorts that haven't engaged well but the nature and context of these groups isn't consistent. (T14, Survey)

At the end of the first full term when schools had been open to all students, CEOs were asked to make judgements about the general level of academic progress, achievement, 'performance' gaps between students, and to predict when they might be expected to reach the levels of progress expected before the pandemic. Not surprisingly, they found it too early to quantity with absolute certainty, in part because a significant number of students and families continued to be impacted by the virus and so not all students had been able to engage in continuous full-time school-based education (T1, Interview) and in part because there was no national data available against which they could compare themselves.

This is difficult to gauge as we are still suffering from the impact of Covid absences. (T10, Interview)

It is also dependent upon the individual child and the numerous social, economic and emotional considerations which affect the resilience of individual pupils. All factors need to be taken into consideration and a broad-brush approach is not appropriate. (T8, Interview)

Whilst all identified that whilst their students had progressed as expected, there were significant gaps in progress between particular vulnerable groups across all key stages, especially between disadvantaged, 'pupil premium' students, those with special educational needs (SEN) and the youngest students in schools in all Trusts that responded.

We are seeing the most significant gaps in pupils' academic progress and achievement amongst our youngest pupils in the Trust (EYFS and Foundation stage). It is these pupils (and families) who were most impacted by the pandemic in that whilst remote education provision was effective, it was more difficult for our youngest pupils to engage. (T1, Interview)

CEOs reported that the time taken by students to progress was dependent on conditions, and that these were likely to vary.

This is very difficult to answer because of the complex relationships between academic learning and personal/emotional, social and economic aspects which have affected many pupils during the pandemic. In general terms, we are finding that in pupils who have undergone significant periods of transition during the pandemic (e.g. starting school, moving to high school) the recovery period is likely to be longer. (T8, Interview)

Nevertheless, with few exceptions, they estimated that it was likely to take up to two years for students to reach pre pandemic expectations of progress and achievement, despite additional support provided both in school and through increased home visits, the establishment of Trust improvement groups and rigorous tracking of progress.

3.7. Head teachers' perspectives

For the head teachers, the disruptions caused by 'lockdowns' and 'bubbles' and the resulting 'transitions' had not been easy to manage. These were ongoing in the 'recovery' phase of the pandemic.

Once we'd actually got a routine and you knew the children who were attending and the children who weren't attending, you got yourself into a routine and a good system; and the staff got themselves into a good system as well. The changeover happened when children have returned, the transition of returning. Then you've got some bubbles closed, some children in isolation. That's been more difficult to manage than the whole system itself. We started to transition back into school again and you had some children isolating, some bubbles isolating. It's manageable, and it's been manageable, but that's been the part I think that's been more difficult when you're in the classroom and you've got some children that you still need to remote learn. We had to have a split system where the teacher would teach in the classroom and then that TA would take that role while a member of staff went to do the remote learning. How do you make sure that you are meeting everybody's needs? The children's needs, the parental needs? (T3, HT5, Focus group)

Heads reported variations in the learning progress of the students in Trust schools. One asserted that her Trust preferred 'keep up' to 'catch up', by

forward planning, being responsive rather than reactive to needs and engaging parents from the outset of the pandemic. Surprisingly, many of the heads reported that there had been few learning losses among their students, though for different reasons. For example, because many of the more disadvantaged students had been in school throughout the pandemic, and in smaller than usual classes, their learning progress had been only marginally affected. Younger children had benefited also, as had those with parental support. All schools in their Trusts had monitored progress against their 2019 benchmarks.

In our Trust, part of our keep up, not catch up approaches, is all about engaging parents very quickly and not waiting for things to happen before we tackle them. For us, some of our data is being really positive at the end of this year, and I think the children that have had those skill of resilience and perseverance and can really keep going at home have actually learned really well because they haven't had the distractions; and a lot of them have had some kind of one-to-one support, a parent or grandparent sitting with them. So strangely enough, our phonics has been really strong this year, and it just so happened that the group of children we had all did have someone who could sit next to them. We had a really great early years phonics teacher, and she used that opportunity to do lots of little interventions later in the day. I know that doesn't apply to everybody (T3, HT8, Focus group)

The engagement with remote learning and level of support children received at home was very varied across my schools. However, my data hasn't particularly dropped off as a result of Covid. So, I think the remote learning has obviously been working, or because we only had between 50 and 75% of our children in smaller classes. (T3, HT6, Focus group)

My disadvantaged seemed to do better during the lockdown, which I was surprised at. Because they were in school, there was a lot of support there for them. They struggled more in the transition when the other children returned, even though we increased levels of adult support within the bubbles. The progress is fantastic, they've made very good progress, and sustained the progress. But their attainment still isn't there, and I think what's happened is because of that level of transition. The support during the lockdown was more. They had more adult support and one to one that that help them sustain where they needed to be. That gap has widened a little again, though it isn't greatly widening, but obviously it's a focus that we need to look at in September. (T3, HT5, Focus group)

We had to produce teacher assessed grades at the end of year 11, also for year 13 for going to university. That gave us a very good feel. We've stuck to our normal assessments for children. The schools were very pleased. They've been done and they've been moderated across the piece. We showed that our grades are strong and the same at A-level, and that's given us a really good feel for where the children are. (T2, HT4, Focus group)

We've done a lot of very, very close monitoring of pupils' work. I looked at 8 pupils from each class in great detail, photographing all the pages of the books because we couldn't take books home, and really examining whether or not the teachers are really teaching to the gaps that the children have got. I've been able to build up quite a good picture. (T2, HT1, Focus group)

We continue to do internal exams in an exam hall setting because that's also part of the training that our kids needed to do, and because they are socially distanced in an exam. So, we just increased the distance between the desks. It was horrendously stressful but very productive. Having the Trust there, having colleagues at different subject level to be able to moderate each other's, to talk things through. And then the meetings with all my subject leaders, for them to explain the process to talk through their evidence and to have that verified by the Trust. I physically could not have been any more robust in the process we've gone through. (T2, HT2, Focus group)

Support for the vulnerable and disadvantaged

As with their CEOs, the teaching and learning provision for pupils who were variously classified as 'socio-economically disadvantaged,' 'vulnerable' and 'Special Educational Needs' were prioritised from the beginning of the pandemic by all Trust schools, closely monitored and regularly supported.

It quickly became apparent that we would need to get some of the disadvantaged pupils back in because they weren't accessing home learning to the same extent that some non-disadvantaged pupils were. We had the disadvantaged children come back in if they weren't accessing learning remotely, if they weren't logging onto the live lesson, if they weren't submitting the work each day, then they were invited to come back into school. Same with children with SEND, significant SEND particularly, but anybody who wasn't accessing remotely became disadvantaged. You know the criteria changed, anybody who wasn't accessing learning became 'disadvantaged' children. We did 3 times a week check-ins from personal, social, emotional points of view as well, where

teachers phoned the children three times a week when we were in lockdown. (T3, HT6, Focus group)

We have quite a high number of children that are disadvantaged. When we were in that first lockdown, it was well over 60 from the 330. So, it was sorting out food parcels for the children. The other key issue for us in that first lockdown was about the devices. The government roll out devices hadn't yet even got close to kicking in, but we had so many children that couldn't access any online learning that was being provided. So, we had to then work out the logistics of getting food parcels out, getting work to the children as well. That was certainly something that was part of that first lockdown, which I think all made the second lockdown easier to move into. Although we had a lot less time- it was 8 o'clock at night, the night before when we were told that there was a lockdown in January - because we had all the strategies in place to meet the needs, the children were able to get things running straight away. We knew which children we needed to get devices to. We knew which children we needed to get food parcels to. We had like a RAG rated system where those that were on green, we were kind of checking weekly, those who were amber three times. If we had a child that was in red, but they weren't in school, that was a daily check-in that we were doing just to keep up. Because with them not being in school, we couldn't have eyes on them which just led to kind of raised concern for us. But for that second lockdown it was just a case of trying to work out who were the disadvantaged that were coming in, who were key workers and how the guidance had changed as to who was a key worker and who was eligible. Trying to get your head round those were the key issues at second lockdown. (T3, HT7, Focus group)

Despite this, however, many of the heads were painfully aware that, although learning losses were minimised among the vulnerable students, nevertheless the period of the pandemic had accelerated the achievement divide between those who were disadvantaged and those who were not.

In the area that I work in, we've got a lot of very vulnerable pupils, and I think that, definitely, we can see that divide widening significantly. And for our younger pupils, children in year one, have missed half, now, of their education. The most important thing, I think, in primary schools, is to teach children to read. Those early years are extremely important for that. And that's been compromised. (T2, HT1, Focus group)

We've had to pull away from a lot of our curriculum non-core subjects just to make reading be a priority throughout school. And it is year one who are flagged up as being the ones who have needed the most support. (T2, HT3, Focus group)

PART 4 The importance of wellbeing: students and families

> *Being very honest, I think a success is we didn't lose any children [during the lockdown period], and I do know that some schools did. We didn't lose children to self-harm. We didn't lose children to suicide. We didn't lose children to medical issues. We didn't lose children … to Covid. (T11, Interview)*
>
> *Social and emotional mental health has been the biggest challenge for us since coming back ['recovery' period] - not just the children, their families - and that's having an impact on behaviour. (T1, Interview)*
>
> *We have launched this wellbeing strategy, which has been a number of years in the gestation, but it feels like now is absolutely the right time to be looking at that and making a big point of that. And it's not just tokenism, it's deeply felt. (T3, Interview)*

4.1. Increasing student and family support

Since March 2020, there had been two pronounced, consecutive changes in Trust policy direction and enactment regarding student wellbeing. The first key change (March 2020 – March 2021) entails increased focus on nurturing the wellbeing of the students, their families and the school staff looking after them (see also Day et al., 2021). The second major change involves a shift in policy development and implementation during the 'recovery' period (i.e. since March 2021) from emphasising safeguarding to extending wellbeing policies and practices with a vision for the longer-term future.

At the interviews and through their survey responses, CEOs spoke at length about the challenges and policy priorities associated with children's health and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Post lockdown, most concerns were around the potential negative effects of the changes in the teaching and learning processes, disrupted everyday routines, insufficient family support for some students during the lockdown period, as well as the external expectations regarding school performance post lockdown, on students' wellbeing behaviour and academic achievement. Moreover, these factors were believed to have

varied effects on children, depending on their background and form of education. For example:

Student wellbeing has been really high up the list because after coming back after quite considerable lockdowns there was a lot of anxiety from our students. There was a lot of feeling that they had missed out and it was just getting them back into the routine and the normal expectations. (T2, Interview)

The real difficulty and dilemma were that the academic and individual welfare were interwoven for pupils because the failure to engage in the academic programmes as effectively as they could have done. It had a knock-on effect in terms of the wider welfare and wellbeing because they were in bed until 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock in the morning, they weren't logging on unless they were asked, and a number of families didn't push the kids. Therefore, kids got out of that cycle of readiness to learn more broadly, but also were at home and not particularly challenged or stimulated, which equally had an impact on their mental health. (T6, Interview)

For some of us it's not been the children that you'd think it would be. It's been some of our more affluent families. Some of the children are hearing things in the media about catch-up and then getting really anxious about being behind and not catching-up. And engagement has been difficult, engaging them since January to March [2021] and then since March. We're now picking up on families that have had four or five periods of isolation. There are catch-up and recovery pressures for all our schools. (T1, Interview)

The main anxiety appears to be for the year-six children who are transferring to high school and who have not had the same opportunities of visiting their new schools as they would have done previously. Year-six also feel that they have missed out on the many activities that happen in year six due to Covid. (T13, Survey)

In response to these challenges and building upon the extended safeguarding and family engagement policies introduced during the lockdown period (March 2020 – March 2021), in the post lockdown period Trusts prioritised a wide range of individual and group activities for all students, with increased emphasis on supporting students' return to school and (re)adaptation to school life. These policies were being implemented through various pathways, including for example, the adaptation of the former welfare and wellbeing principles and processes, provision of guidance (to schools) on policy implementation,

investment in new structures and additional resources (e.g. specialist units), adaptation of the curriculum, improved monitoring systems to identify areas of further support, and development of a multi-agency approach. Across Trusts, a generally shared perception was that of 'walking the extra mile' to ensure that students' wellbeing needs are met as much as possible. Some CEOs also felt that they had to provide an extended service in compensation for the lack of adequate support from some external agencies. At least one of the Trusts went a step further, by encouraging and considering student voice in their policy-making approach. The variety and complexity of the policy development and implementation approaches is captured in the following quotes:

The Trust has been huge in our Covid response (especially considering that in [the area] there is currently inadequate police force and an RI children's service)…All staff have been involved in a herculean effort to support our children and families…we have our own health and wellbeing team, we have our own educational psychologist…So, we made sure that this was ramped up and sourced additionality through a range of charities and, as soon as we could, make sure we did the risk assessments and got people in and got people accessing services, yes? We undertook doorstep home visits. We spoke to staff, we talked about how we were going to manage it. It was all risk assessed. It was health and safety signed off… Food parcels, packed lunches, vouchers and charity donations including foodbanks and breakfast club have been used. Grants given, support for benefit applications, washing facilities at school used as well as counselling and parental mental health support. (T11, Interview)

We've also used 'catch-up' money to provide extra counselling. We have something called Support service. It's quite a unique thing that we have in our Multi Academy Trust. Instead of buying it out, we brought it in house. So, we have the manager, the admin family, support worker, life coach, safer Schools Officer, Counselling Services and SLAs. We took some of the secondary captured money and put it into LSS in order to buy extra days of counselling, core therapeutics for the benefit of all across the Trust and secondary. (T5, Interview)

We championed the student summit, which gave students a voice on concerns during the pandemic…However, this is generally done at school level as part of student voice and student councils. We have an inclusion focus for this year which embeds further activity on student voice following the pandemic…Our student voice has informed us about students' mental health, wellbeing and underlying issues such as racism worry young people. We are looking at ways we can improve our practice to celebrate diversity and difference. (T2, Survey)

4.2. Re-building student learning capacities

Longer-term student wellbeing was a priority for all CEOs from the project's sample. A major effort in this context was directed to rebuilding students' learning capacity and making sure that ongoing support is available to everyone who needs it. Once again, alongside their general concern of how students on average may have been impacted by the periods of isolation and disrupted learning, CEOs expressed a deeper concern about some students, who were perceived to be in higher (than the average) risk groups. These, for example, were students who had been witnesses to or victims of domestic violence over the lockdown period: '*Like many for Trusts, there was an increase in domestic violence, there was an increase in children in poverty, and there was an increase in children not being where they should be at the right time (T13, Interview)'*. Also, many year 6 students had not experienced a transition period when they would normally have been preparing for entry to their new school: '*Children who were starting a new school in September. Not having had any of that sort of really good induction process in the June-July that we would have normally done. And then children who were leaving school, as well the anxieties for the year (T13, Interview).* Other, younger students had not acquired basic skills necessary for school-based learning: '*It was tiring for them, even for primaries, like pen holding skills you know that they are out of practise of it cause a lot of it's been done remotely, or just not slouching and sitting up straight. You know school chairs have got hard backs. Well, if you've been sat on a sofa doing e-learning. It's just different. A lot of this term's challenges are around wellbeing (T2, Interview)'*.

In their attempts to tackle their general and group-specific concerns about the wellbeing issues underpinning students' learning capabilities, Trusts came up with innovative solutions. For example, some invested in increased leadership capacity at pastoral level (e.g., T8, Interview), while others acknowledged the critical need of support at certain time points, e.g. '*Support is especially important after Teacher Assessed Grades are submitted (T10, Survey)'*, and/or extended the support for children's physical health, e.g. '*One school has invested in a set of scooters to encourage better physical health having noticed that many children had returned to school lacking stamina (T13, Survey).* Some CEOs described a more holistic approach to rebuilding children's learning capabilities (i.e. developing a 'resilience curriculum'), which is best outlined in the following quote:

It's just about really doing the best we can for the kids. We have something called 'the resilience curriculum'…One of the things we do is called 'rise and read'. Three mornings a week we bring the year-sevens in at half seven to read before school and they love that... We will do a 'Resilience Camp England' in September. We will pay for every kid in year seven to go caving and canoeing and stomping up hills and all of that… and then at the end of year seven we will take all of the kids in year seven to the South of France, to do resilience camp…so you can imagine how much we give over to it... And so, trying to really drive that message of stickability of this is really, really important. But also, I suppose just to make sure that the bedrock of skills and knowledge was being reinforced all the time. (T10, Interview)

All Trusts recognised the dynamic interaction of wellbeing and engagement in school-based learning, as well as the potential effects of this interaction on students' academic progress. Thus, a major effort in the post lockdown period was dedicated to increasing student engagement through tailored learning approaches and additional engagement activities with both students and their families/carers. These activities were generally perceived as efficient, resulting in increased engagement and reduced anxiety in students returning to school.

Some of our learners really struggled to be in a busy environment. We built really positive relationships with them so that they could have that higher attention level, you know. And there was less distraction around, so we use blended models of learning for that, and it works in hospital teaching as well, where someone's anxious and you're not going to get them straight back into full time education. (T9, Interview)

We are using the teachers, who our pupils know, to top up learning in breaks and after-school clubs, so that we get the most effective personalised intervention for pupils, but our priority has been supporting wellbeing and engagement in routines so pupils are ready to learn again. (T6, Survey)

We did it outside in school fields with some children who weren't coming in, we did it at front doors, you know, gardens, doorways to flats, that kind of thing. So, all that makes a big difference. We did little videos to welcome families back to school. When you come back to school next week, you'll see these signs, and that just allayed a lot of concerns. (T4, Interview)

A 'welcome back to school' booklet was created for parents and a 'child friendly' version for pupils for use in all schools. This helped prepare for changes to routine and to the physical changes in school. (T12, survey)

4.3. Monitoring wellbeing and behaviour

The post lockdown period was marked with a significant change in the ways in which student wellbeing and behaviour is monitored across Trusts and schools. All Trusts invested in improving their monitoring systems, with the aim to capture better any potential areas of development and required support. As with the Trust wellbeing policies more generally, monitoring approaches were both informal and formal, ranging from general risk assessment, individual and group meetings with students, parents and staff, Trust board meetings, records of sick absence, wellbeing support requested/provided, engagement and attendance, to online surveys with students and parents. Moreover, Trusts shared a vision of establishing a standard practice of monitoring student wellbeing.

Moving forward, we need to think about how we measure engagement in the classroom, in school. It's just not good enough to be there, is it? You've got to actually be engaged. We didn't collate the data ourselves for every single school, but what we did is that each school collated it in the same way. So, we had a standard practice of how we're pulling the information it. But then we'd analyse it at Trust level. (T2, Interview)

We developed common systems across the Trust for monitoring pupil wellbeing and a spreadsheet for all schools was introduced that collected info including behaviour and attitude logs, welfare checks, referrals, food hampers, and increased welfare checks for vulnerable families etc. (T12, Survey)

Our focus is re-engagement in learning and wellbeing. So, we've used the Leuven scales to try and determine where children are with their mental wellbeing and happiness as our first priority. We've had positive findings from that. But again, what I've not asked head teachers to do is to feed a bureaucratic reporting centrally. That's reported through governors, but in very much a summary narrative way. (T6, Interview)

We use Edukit - learners complete a series of questions focussed on how they feel. This is then compared with previous answers and national comparators. (T9, Survey)

Acknowledging the importance of evidence-based research for robust policymaking, some CEOs ensured that their monitoring systems were built upon solid scientific foundations and in a holistic way. For example:

Having previously been involved in Anna Freud research project on pupils' mental health & wellbeing, we have been developing metrics for measuring this area during April/May - recognising that surveys alone may not provide the detail/information. (T8, Survey)

Once collected, the data are analysed to feed into the development of Trust-wide and bespoke interventions.

Now we're seeing a lot more social and emotional and that is for all of the children. We have a 'Barriers to learning' analysis that we do for every child. We come up with some kind of intervention. So, for example, we picked up our year 5 pupils in particular who did not really engage that well on return to school. (T12, Interview)

Progress in students' welfare and wellbeing is not being formally collected but this is continually monitored by teachers, discussed with Head and SLT, fed into the Leadership Group and School Improvement team which is reported to [Trust] Standards committee. (T3, Survey)

Data have been collected and analysed at Local Review Board level to inform creation of a Multi-Agency Team. (T10, Survey)

4.4. Developing a multi-agency approach

Another key priority for Trusts in the post lockdown period was to strengthen their approach to policy development and implementation through building successful collaborations with external stakeholders. This was particularly evident in the complex area of student wellbeing, where multiple layers of support were often required. At the interviews and through their survey responses, Trust CEOs painted an impressive picture of how they had worked together with various external partners to ensure robust policy responses to students' wellbeing needs. These collaborations, outlined in the following sample of quotes, involve social workers and healthcare practitioners, housing and medical agencies, the police, local authorities, charity and third sector organisations.

We worked with staff to ensure that all multi-agency support was engaged. (T7, Survey)

Collaborated with councils, charities, third sector organisations, social workers, housing, medical agencies and police in order to keep our children and families as safe as possible. It was also to mitigate the hunger throughout the term and holidays as well as supporting the pressure that furlough meant or the zero-hour contracts for benefit applications. (T11, Survey)

We work with a range of external partners to provide appropriate support through statutory and commissioned provision…All staff are trained in a relational approach. This includes THRIVE practitioners, ELSA and other recognised approaches. I employ an Emotional Wellbeing Lead who is a Learning Disabilities Nurse with experience of working in CAMHS. She works with higher need learners and trains and supports other staff to identify need and make referrals for support. (T9, Survey)

4.5. Head teachers' perspectives

The additional focus group interviews with head teachers shed more light on some of the issues around student wellbeing in the post lockdown period. Heads emphasised particularly the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on parents' well-being and engagement, which consequently had a negative effect on children wellbeing and engagement.

I felt parents this term have been so much less patient and understanding and supportive of school at times as well...I've always had really positive relationships with parents, but I think in the summer this year [2021] everybody's been a bit at the end of their tether….but particularly I felt it from parents, so some things that they might have just wanted to chat about, emails have been really quite aggressive and, or confrontational conversations at the gate - and that's never how it's been…I think everybody's found the last couple of years really stressful. (T3, HT6, Focus group)

The parents that have suffered hugely within this, their mental health. As soon as lockdown finished, they [children] were fighting in the streets because they've been kept apart, having a pop at each other on social media and because the schools are open again they were all mixing together and you know, and in a

very quick space of time it went wrong for some of our families because the parents really struggled during the lockdowns. (T3, HT7, Focus group)

Once again, (re)establishing routines was seen as a major and immediate challenge for the 'recovery' period. This was further reinforced by the fear of continuing insecurity in the post lockdown period.

Our challenge is the routine of coming back into school on time, because they'll [children] come in at lunchtime because a lot of our older kids turned nocturnal through lockdown, so they weren't getting up till lunchtime because they were on computers until the early hours. And that parental discipline has totally gone out the window. So, we're having to shift body clocks as much as anything and talk about the importance of coming in in the morning and getting out of bed before lunchtime and that's been a real adjustment. I think, it's that nobody knows what normal is anymore…We're still trying to get over that barrier of the fear driving a lot of decisions at parent level that affects coming into school. (T2, HT2, Focus group)

We saw a definite shift in behaviour [in children] in an afternoon and very much in secondary, probably not the same in primary. I think everybody's got out of the habit of sending children to school regularly…so, we talk a lot about attendance and pupil premium attendance. (T2, HT4, Focus group)

Looking forward, some schools had already invested in additional resources and established robust systems to supporting children in their return to school, which they felt was having a positive effect on children's wellbeing. For example:

I am a huge believer that everything should run on a routine and be very systematic. I think with our children, particularly, as they're vulnerable, this is where they meet safety through routine. They know what's going to happen, and everybody's behaviour improved incredibly. So, for the school I'm working with, the routines they've had to run this year, it's as if the penny has dropped for them all. This is why the behaviour has been so much better this year, why lessons have been so much better. My ABC is attendance, behaviour and then consistency. That is how you improve school. (T2, HT1, Focus group)

With catch up funding as well, we've been able to allocate additional resources for the needs of the children. That supported, in some cases, children that have returned, but it's been supportive in terms of allocation, to cover most of the needs….Once they [children] started and they [teachers] managed to teach the

whole class again, they've very much realised it was just levels of differentiation and using and applying the staff effectively and that worked really well. (T3, HT5, Focus group)

PART 5 Staff wellbeing: going above and beyond

> *The resilience of teachers and the flexibility of teachers has to be celebrated because at no point have we had any kickback across the Trust at all… A success for me was the response from staff to the challenge, and the response of kids. As a Trust, we've also not only been able to support ourselves, but to support others as well. (T1, Interview)*
>
> *The challenges since March 2021, I'd say have still been wellbeing and workload of staff. I think it took a toll on staff… something which we've been really mindful of. (T2, Interview)*
>
> *It's the job of the senior leaders to make them [staff] feel supported, so that they can do the most important job that there is. I think, that's been an educational shift over time. The old model of senior leaders who I worked for and lots of other people have worked for was, they did not make us feel that. We were dispensable and they were the more important. (T7, Interview)*

5.1. Appreciation of service

Another highly prioritised area of Trust-level policy development and enactment during the 'recovery' period was the physical health and mental and psychological wellbeing of staff. In the interviews and through the survey, CEOs talked with admiration and humility about the gigantic effort of all staff, but especially teachers, in looking after students in school and beyond, while also dealing with complex personal situations, increased workload, and insecurity. Moreover, this was a time for reflection and major shifts in the Trusts' approach to policymaking, most visible in the increased number and the improved quality of the strategies for supporting staff wellbeing, as well as in the changed role of the Trust CEO from a relatively detached authority figure to 'one of us'. Consequently, these shifts led to a significant culture change characterised with increased wellbeing awareness and staff cohesion.

The examples below provide evidence of the CEOs' acknowledgement of staff dedication in managing the extraordinary challenges welfare, wellbeing, teaching, and supporting each other during and in the post-lockdown periods:

We have absolutely brilliant, dedicated teachers in our schools. During the remote learning in the morning they were teaching the class, and then the afternoon they were teaching online, or some of them were teaching online and a class at the same time. (T3, Interview)

The staff have absolutely stepped up and, you know, delivered, they've been in school every day, and that has been the success…. and everyone is a bit tired now. We've still got a lot of things to do before the end of this term but, we've been able to really pull together in terms of team working. Everyone has supported everyone else. So, I think those have been the real successes. (T9, Interview)

The people in the classrooms are the most important. We couldn't have opened the schools without them, it's as simple as that. (T3, Interview)

Notably, CEO's appreciation extended to those staff members who often felt 'invisible', but whose support was instrumental for coping with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. As with the teachers, many of these people had to take on additional roles, to adapt new ways of working and to 'walk the extra mile'. In the words of the CEOs:

And it's not just the teachers, our TAs have been phenomenal, I mean utterly phenomenal. They really, really have. (T3, Interview)

I was really proud of my central team. So, we did have periods where some of our schools were literally on their knees, many staff sick. I remember one of our schools had 47 staff and we got down to 9, and we were able to get members of my central team to go in and actually lead. I was so impressed by how school staff and central staff flexibly supported each other. It feels like we're now a proper family of schools and we're there for each other. (T2, Interview)

The care and that they all provide for the children was way and above beyond 'nine till three' care. (T13, Interview)

Nevertheless, when all schools finally opened to all students, the pressures on staff of the previous five terms were evident.

The fear for CEOs across the Trusts was of *'burnout'*, and that many of their staff were likely to *'crash and burn when they hit the summer'* (T5, Interview).

Concerns about the longer-term impacts of lockdown and post lockdown pressures on staff wellbeing echoed across Trusts. CEOs were unanimous in their recognition that the capacities for resilience by staff had been tested and, in many instances, had become depleted over the period of the pandemic. The awareness of these issues prompted senior leaders to think about how to adapt current wellbeing policies but also their leadership role with an increased focus on participation, so that the wellbeing needs of their staff are better catered for. This process of adaptation is captured in the following sample of interview quotes:

My great fear at the moment is staff burnout. I think that the staff were really, really tired after we came back. The staff have worked really hard on getting that right. I've never seen teachers looking as tired as they do now. So, for me, that's about proactively now doing as much as I can to take all of the burden, apart from teaching their classes, off them during this term. (T10, Interview)

The lockdown has caused gaps in some pupils' learning and teachers are constantly adapting their teaching to take account of this. We continually ask ourselves, what we are doing, why we are doing it and what impact it is having? We are carefully monitoring that teachers are not overloading themselves or the curriculum. (T13, Survey)

A major area of concern for the CEOs were the longer-term effects of the staff added workload. Many worried about the morale, energy levels and mental health of their staff, for example in undertaking the teacher assessment grading process, described as *'an excessive amount of workload in an organisation that has already felt the hit of the Coronavirus and the contact tracing work which 'layered up' on top of the other work (T1, Interview)'*. Another Trust leader explained this in more detail, emphasising the challenges for senior leaders: *'On the ground, it's about the morale, the energy of staff, making sure that staff were still doing what they needed to do in terms of the basics such as duties or the behaviour management of individuals, despite the fact that they were incredibly tired and you know they were, they were worried and concerned. So, that kind of thing is a challenge because you're holding it together and being the person who can drive things forward at the same time (T1, Interview)'.*

Furthermore, given the increased pressures on staff over the past 18 months or more, some of the interviewed CEOs were concerned about maintaining staffing levels: *'We've not had major issues with staffing so far, but I think we're going*

to start to see some people actually realise the extent of how they've been affected by the whole pandemic, beginning to see a bit of mental health coming through and stuff now, anxiety, depression, that kind of thing. I suspect we're going to see more of it (T5, Interview)'.

5.2. Strengthening support strategies

In response to the challenges described in the previous section, Trusts established a wide range of formal and informal strategies for supporting staff health and wellbeing. The emphasis was on improving the existing wellbeing policies and strengthening the existing implementation structures. This resulted in the provision of extended support through multi-faceted 'packets' to all staff, but also bespoke interventions where needed. For example, some Trusts ensured that all staff had access to two vaccinations, others created WhatsApp staff support groups and organised socialising activities such as competitions and games, free yoga sessions. Appreciation of staff service was frequently communicated in conversations, group meetings and through formalised events (e.g. by sending letters from the Chair of Trustees) and prizes. At least one Trust took away the connection between performance management and pay awards, enduring that all staff received an award. All Trusts regularly distributed information materials on wellbeing, many provided counselling availability on request, and organised health and wellbeing activities to raise money for charities. The below quotes provide more insight into the Trusts' strategic approaches to supporting staff wellbeing. Once again, the instrumental role of the Trust leader in designing and implementing these approaches was highlighted.

Adoption of Education Staff Well-being Charter alongside development of well-being portal. (T5, Survey)

A governor well-being working group was established in autumn 2020 and a number of strategies implemented. (T12, Survey)

We have developed and launched a Trust-wide Wellbeing Strategy bringing together different offerings from yoga and breathing meditations to mental wellbeing and coaching sessions. (T3, Survey)

Every staff member was given a small thank you/launch gift at the launch of the [staff wellbeing] strategy. The strategy has had fantastic feedback. (T3, Survey)

We developed our networks further across the Trust to enable staff to meet online, share difficulties and resolutions and support each other. (T7, Survey)

We as leaders are trying to model this which staff have commented positively on. (T13, Survey)

Setting achievable targets and providing the necessary extra support were common elements for the staff wellbeing strategies of all Trusts in the flagship project sample. For example:

It was about making sure staff were only asked to do things which they were comfortable with, and if they weren't comfortable giving them the support to become comfortable with it. 'Cause it was a completely different task for a lot of them…and not pushing them too far out of their comfort zone when they're also already going through quite a lot of personal stress… (T2, Interview)

At the back of my mind all the time is 'don't kill the teachers'. Don't work the teachers into the ground and I think that's the danger, isn't it? When you are wanting things to be robust and doing well and you make them work harder and harder and harder, they can fall off a cliff. (T10, Interview)

We had a really clear cohesive approach, just being calm, compassionate and measured in terms of the demands we put on teachers and expectations were really important. (T6, Interview)

Another, related strategic approach was to monitor staff workload and ensure that people were able to pace themselves and take enough breaks. For instance:

Specific emphasis on school leaders to managing staff workload. Decluttered processes. (T10, Survey)

Following the return to school, we are encouraging our staff not to stay too late on site each day at the end of the day and to leave at a reasonable time as they did during the lockdown. (T13, Survey)

Great flexibility offered to as many aspects of work as possible. Including timing of training, working off-site as necessary, days for parents' evenings and meetings. (T5, Survey)

Staff morale has been boosted by the enthusiasm of our pupils returning and joy of having our children back in school, but we are mindful of staff workload. Central team do all contact tracing in the holidays to relieve HTs. (T7, Survey)

5.3. Monitoring staff wellbeing

During the lockdown period, it became apparent that more robust systems for monitoring staff wellbeing were needed (also cf. Day et al., 2021). This prompted the introduction of more advanced monitoring approaches post-lockdown, where monitoring of staff wellbeing went beyond monitoring of workload. As with the support strategies, monitoring approaches varied widely across Trusts, ranging from informal meetings to the administration of online survey questionnaires and psychometric measures. All Trusts shared their determination to regularly capture any arising issues and adapt their support strategies in response. The processes of collecting staff wellbeing data and the various pathways of channelling this information to improve Trust wellbeing policies are outlined in detail in the below example:

We have carried out a wellbeing survey across all staff in the Academies and the central team. The outcomes of this have been fed back and the Heads and central team are in the process of developing a bespoke strategy/action plan on specific issues… The staff wellbeing strategy has just been completed. We intend to carry out a follow-up strategy in the autumn term to see whether those things which we have put in place are having an impact. (T3, Survey)

Co-ordinated staff survey prior to reopening in March with some Academies conducting follow-up 1:1 conversations. Feedback to Trust and analysis of data to inform future practice…HR monitoring absence and providing support to Academies where necessary. Regular communication with all staff through line managers…Prior to the return in March individual academies collected data via a staff wellbeing and workload survey which was aggregated across the Trust. As a standing agenda item on the Head teacher Forum, we have collected anecdotal data from across the Trust…Staff working parties focusing on 'lessons from Covid' are ongoing and have reported at the end of May. We will repeat our staff survey which we did prior to return in March during June and analyse data at the beginning of July. (T8, Survey)

We have increased our annual staff survey to two staff temperature checks this year with questions focussed on safety, wellbeing and workload during the pandemic and now… Second staff temperature closes May 28th. Current and

year-to-date trends to July board and fed back to each school to consider development areas…Retention is collated and reported to the Board annually (September). (T2, Survey)

Whilst no formal questionnaire has taken place, a Trust-wide Wellbeing strategy and related portal is being developed…Staff attendance figures are being monitored. (T5, Survey)

A staff consultation will take place in September 2021. (T12, Survey)

The outcomes of monitoring staff wellbeing in the 'recovery' period revealed a mixed picture of optimism and enthusiasm for returning to in-school teaching, gratitude for the support provided so far, but also worries for the immediate and longer-term future. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

Positive feedback from staff about the support that they have been given during lockdown and the flexibility that they had to fit in with their own personal circumstances. (T13, Survey)

There has been nearly 100% attendance in all academies (with only illness being the reason for absence). Staff wellbeing group reported high levels of thanks and Trust between all staff and clear communications, including weekly face-to-face briefings were well received. (T11, Survey).

Staff were never away from school in person - whether face to face learning or online learning therefore there was no return just a very long continuum. They were unbelievably stoic but overjoyed when they could see their whole class again. (T11, Survey)

Very few staff raised concerns that related specifically to Covid, most had felt well supported by school leaders, issues with stress and morale were often associated with family issues arising from the lockdown period, i.e. furloughed family members, carer responsibilities, etc. (T14, Survey)

5.4. Looking after senior leaders

The survey and interviews with the Trust CEOs in the 'recovery' period also revealed increased focus on supporting the wellbeing of senior leaders in schools and in the central Trust team. While the pressures on school leaders (head teachers and senior leader teams [LST] more generally) were more

generally acknowledged, those for Trust leaders were somewhat less visible. This is probably partly because of the relatively novel nature of Multi-Academy Trusts as organisations. Many of the CEOs in this research sample took on leading their Trust shortly before, and some of them during, the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, many of the Trusts have been gradually expanding, with new schools joining them shortly prior to or during the pandemic. This complexity of factors led to increased risks for CEO's wellbeing and the need to think of how leaders can be better supported. The following quotes call for recognising the importance of supporting senior leaders:

The senior leaders, predominantly the head teachers, are exhausted. I don't think people realise it is the impact on the central teams and CEOs who have spent the last year and a half, carrying things for their head teachers. Teachers saw that the head teachers could make it through a pandemic. And when you got a small central team, it's on us and we're exhausted. We haven't had a holiday break because we picked up the contact tracing in the holidays, so we're exhausted as well. We're a smaller team and the CFO and I take it in turns on Saturdays and the CFO and I check the inboxes. If there was a positive case, she/he would ring me, and I would ring public health while he/she sorts the letters. Contact tracing carried on for us through holidays for the next year or so. It's being on call like a doctor is on call, but just to a lesser extent. You're not going to get up and go out and do a shift as a doctor, but you are going to have to switch yourself on pushing kids out the room. That's a challenge we haven't solved and haven't resolved. (T7, Interview)

It becomes tiring for leaders to be the people who are emotionally strong and are keeping things together. I think, when you operate in crisis management, you have to occasionally step back to realise that this is not normal. This is not what we are normally going to do. We all need to just remember what kind of work it is. (T1, Interview)

In the acknowledgement of the importance of supporting senior leaders' wellbeing in particular, some Trusts had already gone a step further by introducing new support systems. For example, one Trust (T3, Survey) developed a comprehensive buddy support system, where the SLT monitored the wellbeing of their staff, while head teachers monitored wellbeing of SLT staff, and the Chair of Governors monitored the wellbeing of head teachers. Other Trusts ensured that: *'24/7 support available for senior leaders across Trust from MAT Executive Team, including holidays and weekends (T8, Survey)'* and *'…staff wellbeing is a standard agenda item on all Board meetings, Governor*

meetings and weekly Executive Leadership Team meetings', which '…also act as an opportunity to support senior leader wellbeing (T7, Survey).'

5.5. Head teachers' perspectives

Through the lenses of the head teachers, a similar mixed picture of staff wellbeing was revealed. Heads were unanimous in their praise of the responses of their teachers over the course of the pandemic, and equally concerned that, as they approached the end of the summer term, their capacities for resilience were now depleted.

I would say how incredible our teachers are, and our teaching assistants - it is not just the teachers…It surprised me how much the teachers meant to me, and I think it surprised them how much the children meant to them in a situation like this…how quickly they all stepped up to be there for the children without really considering safety for themselves. That was secondary. (T3, HT7, Focus group)

Teachers within our Trust wanted to be in school, and I think the other thing that's had a bigger impact on their health and wellbeing is the fact that from March 2020 not one of them has had a proper break. They haven't had an hour for lunch since March 2020. They're still cleaning at lunchtime and they're still with their bubble at breaks. You know, they are planning, they're still teaching with the laptop in the corner to someone who is isolating at home as well…and some of our children in this last period, coming back into schools, really struggle with social, emotional, mental health issues, and it's come out with some quite different behaviour…If you've got a child who is really struggling with their behaviour, with their mental health, that's hard as a teacher…So I think that they've absolutely stepped up and they've never whinged, they've not complained once. (T3, HT6, Focus group)

Similarly to the Trust CEOs, head teachers were concerned about the longer-term impacts on the pressures of the pandemic on teachers' wellbeing and, consequently, work performance. These issues are depicted by the following quite: '*I think the impact of the last 15 months is hitting people now because they see the end in sight, and they've had this resilience to keep going and keep going and keep going and keep going, and they're running on empty…People are starting to feel that they've got nothing left to give, that the really little things tip them in a way that wouldn't normally…I think people are tired, and I think the impact is hitting people now much more than it did 12 months ago (T2, HT2, Focus group)'.*

Some head teachers shared their disappointment with the Government, who they felt left out by, as the vaccination of school staff was not prioritised: *'I notice, in my school, quite an increase in teachers' anxiety levels, and I think because we weren't getting vaccinated…Because they felt like they've been coming in and doing everything that they could to support and they were really happy to do that. But then when it seemed like everybody in the whole world around us well, whole country around us were getting vaccinated but school staff were not being prioritised at all. I think that's had quite an emotional effect on them [staff] (T3, HT8, Focus group).*

In contrast, school leaders spoke warmly about their Trusts' ethos of care, and the individually tailored support provided to them by the CEOs and central teams: *'The Trust has very much seen that it's a balance between making sure that everybody is safe and well looked after both in terms of mental and physical health and safe and secure. And that that balance has gone alongside making sure that we're doing our job and that progress is happening and all of those other things. I personally felt very well looked after from a head's perspective. I find our MAT has got its ethos right in the centre about what our values are and the way we look after our staff…And, from my perspective, that is what [the Trust] is being about this time… (T2, HT4, Focus group).*

One clear characteristic of all head teachers was that, like the Trust CEOs, they were already focussed on and planning for the year ahead, identifying the on-going challenges and moving their schools forward, knowing that to do so depended in part on re-establishing routines for learning and teaching, re-establishing study habits among the students and staff members, and re-designing the curriculum to address identified learning and wellbeing needs. Some of these challenges were also seen as opportunities for personal and professional development. For example:

We've spent the past half term re-developing how to do a school development plan, making it less hefty, easier for us to work on…these fortnightly Trust meetings have pushed us forward to prepare for September. So, I feel somewhat ahead of the game. (T2, HT3, Focus group)

We are redesigning our curriculum to be year group based. We're having to look at what did they [students] miss? When did they miss it? We can't stick with the schemes that we were on before. We're having to adjust all the time; and I think it's going to be like that with mental wellbeing as well. I think people's resilience,

and there will be peaks and troughs and I think we're going to have to manage that over the next, probably two to three years, you know, alone Covid is the physical symptoms of one, but I think there's emotional and mental wellbeing symptoms that are going to hit people at different times. (T2, HT2, Focus group)

We're still working to the unknown…but there's a lot that we can plan for as we think about staff, wellbeing, et cetera, but so much of it will be unknown. It is not going to go away in my opinion. We just need to learn to manage effectively for everybody. (T2, HT3, Focus group)

We're doing a lot in our personal development programme, tutorial time and skills that we wouldn't potentially have thought of before, but really, we're emphasising routines and sleep patterns and healthy eating and things to keep you well, holistically. Some of our staff development time next year is also planned for staff wellbeing as well, we're making it more of an issue to sort of look after yourself so you can look after your kids. (T2, HT2, Focus group)

PART 6 Future development planning

> *We are just at that stage now, deciding which of the new ways of working we want to leave in the past and which we want to take forward, because we have found better ways of doing it. (T5, interview)*
>
> *Things are not going back to normal, but they have eased a bit (T3, Interview)*

During the period of the research, it was clear that CEOs, head teachers and school staff were actively engaged simultaneously in five key areas of development: i) taking stock; ii) re-framing the challenges they now faced; iii) managing the continuing uncertainties of absenteeism caused by Covid outbreaks; iv) revising curricula to fit present and future needs of students, and expectations of government and parents; and, in all of this v) ensuring that they combined academic rigour with robust care.

6.1. Taking stock

The report on the findings of the previous 'pathfinder' project, concluded just prior to the opening of schools to all students, the key strategies in responding to the challenges of the pandemic had been to re-distribute responsibilities; build trust-wide collegiality; create innovations in teaching and learning; support pupil engagement in home learning; minimise disengagement; focus on vulnerable and hard-to-reach pupils; connect with others; optimise communications with families; ensure students' academic progress and welfare; support staff morale and wellbeing; monitor and evaluate pupil progress; and sustain a broad curriculum.

Essentially the Trusts had re-framed the environments in which the academic learning and welfare challenges posed by learning and teaching discontinuities that had occurred, so that there was a high degree of 'felt' stability, sense of belonging and optimism for the future in their schools and the communities which they served. The system leaders in that research had been able to take account of contextual variables in schools in their trusts and the communities which they served, whilst at the same time responding quickly and knowledgeably on their behalf to anticipated and unanticipated changes at

national level. They had been values-led and pragmatic, resilient, rigorous and robust.

All participants in that research had sought to build upon and embed changes made during the previous year into their longer-term planning intentions. They were at the stage of deciding on ways of combining past and more recent practices. In responding to the restrictions of the pandemic rigorously and robustly, they had been led by similar values as those CEOs in the preceding 'pathfinder' project. As presented in Part 2 of this Report, they had established agile, fit-for-purpose decision-making systems; built trust wide collegial cultures; developed new hybrid teaching and learning approaches; formed and developed working relationships with other trusts, and external agencies and organisations; successfully managed anticipated and unanticipated disruptions and perturbations; prioritised the provision of psychological, economic and social support for vulnerable students and their families; and met the challenges of inconsistent and sometimes untimely government policy interventions.

The actions they had taken demonstrated not only a concern for the academic progress of their students, but also a deep and continuing care for the academic and welfare needs of students and their communities, and wellbeing of all staff, as Parts 4 and 5 demonstrate. Part 3 illustrates their concerns during the early 'recovery,' 'post-Covid' phase: to reinforce core values; continue to streamline centralised systems and processes; adapt teaching and learning approaches developed during the pandemic; closely monitor student attendance and behaviour as they returned to full-time schooling; track student progress as they managed 'catch-up' and 'recovery,' taking into account variations in academic gains and losses and the mental health of students and staff.

6.2. Re-framing the challenges

In re-framing the challenges ahead, CEOs were critical in response to the use of the terms 'Catch-up' and 'Recovery' by government, though there was an acknowledgement that there were gaps in students' learning. For some, it was more a case of *'getting the children back on track'* (T13, Interview). Others felt strongly that their students should not believe that they were having to catch up, because they had been working hard over the whole period, whilst accepting that not all had thrived.

I think they need to be careful not to catastrophize these children. It's 18 months of their life now for our early years and for our key stage one children. That's a

significant portion of their time. For current year two's the last time they had a full year in uninterrupted education was reception, so when we're talking about a 'recovery' curriculum, we need to be genuinely looking at what it means for childhood development, not just catching up on the academic, although that needs to be planned. We face losing their opportunity to build children's ability to be children in all of this, and I think that's particularly prevalent around our special educational needs. (T11, Interview)

It's rather insulting. It infers that we haven't done enough whilst we have been in lockdown. There are some children who have thrived, though not all, and I accept that. The notion that we're going to 'catch up' would infer that we have missed something out. We've reordered things, certainly, but I just think it's an unfortunate term, and I also think it puts huge pressure on the kids. Learning loss really is being concerned about children's welfare and other aspects of their mental health and social skills, and perhaps more. That is right at this stage. That seems more pressing than some of the more academic targets and more appropriate because you won't get that academic stuff if you don't sort out the bottom of the brain. (T5, Interview)

'Recovery' is a bit negative. To me, it's getting the children back on track as to where they should have been in terms of, you know, sort of that age-related expectations. It's as simple as that; and addressing any of the gaps that they've missed in the curriculum because they have not been in school, or even if they have been in school, when we've not offered the full curriculum. For example, in terms of science and science experiments, they haven't been able to do all of those. If the teachers were at home teaching and doing online stuff, we've had to really narrow it. So, it's about broadening the curriculum out, giving children that full offer again but being very aware of the gaps, and what is going to stop them moving on; and how can we address those and accelerate progress really. (T13, Interview)

Overall, a more desirable way of expressing the situation for these Trusts was 're-connecting' and 're-charging', and 'broadening the curriculum'.

We've avoided using the phrase 'catch up'. We don't want students to think that they're behind and they're having to catch up with themselves, because while they've lost some learning, they've worked really hard. So, we've avoided the phrases 'catch up' and 'recovery.' We used the language of 'reconnection' and 'recharging', getting back to where we need to be, building up our resilience, but

also reconnecting. So, 'catch up' for me has a negative connotation. (T2, Interview)

We had a number of conversations as a Trust about the idea that we should 'catch up'. We said first and foremost, we have to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing at the students. Because if we don't look after that then learning isn't going to happen. So, it is about making sure that we did it in this kind of stepped approach, first of all, thinking about reintegrating students. Let's get the habits right. Let's get the routines right, having been out of school for three months. (T8, Interview)

We can't make up for a lost year. What we can do and what we must do is have a clear understanding of where pupils are in their learning so we can have a clear picture of where they are cognitively in terms of learning, then follow the audit plan. (T6, Interview)

6.3. Managing uncertainties

CEOs acknowledged the difficulties faced during the previous period, alongside a need now to move forward at pace in order for students to engage with school-based academic learning again, and for staff to provide the best possible learning opportunities.

Operating with uncertainties and at pace had been difficult, and a 'key challenge' for many, particularly in relation to making you take some quite significant policy and operational decisions largely that involved the welfare of large numbers of people - families and staff. (T1, Interview)

Now the challenge had become how to balance the need to start driving forward and making sure that students were catching up on what they've lost, and that staff are happily settled back, to move from short termism to strategic planning. (T2, Interview)

A year later the key challenge is getting other people back into strategic planning. When you go through such a traumatic time, you have to have a level of command and control. To a point you have to have a level of short termism. You have to lift yourself out of today to be able to have a longer viewpoint. The bottom line is that what we call our mirror test coming look ourselves in the mirror and think today or this week or this month we've done everything in our

gift to ensure our children got the maximum possible life opportunities. (T11, Interview)

Two CEOs whose Trusts served highly disadvantaged communities, spoke of continuing issues of safety and capacity.

Capacity is still a huge issue. Covid hit us massively. A lot of schools in the North West got hit hard. We got hit particularly hard, so for one of our schools 70% of the staff there have actually had Covid and so, you can imagine what that's done, but some of them are still off with long Covid. Three members of staff are still off with long Covid. (T12, Interview)

Safety first and foremost both for our children and our staff, and the communities that our children are in. I am talking here about psychological safety, and physical safety. I am talking about the ability to be fed and nourished. I'm predominantly working from home because I can't go in and share a tiny office like I would normally with the heads because of social distancing, and I can't be moving from school to school. That also applies to some of the other staff. (T11, Interview)

One CEO spoke of standalone schools that were not in a Trust and did not have the same level of organisation seeking assistance with, for example, learning resources (T12, Interview). Others spoke of their delight at the high staff morale: *I think for me, the fact that my staff were happy was a real success and leading into that what we found this year is our recruitment and retention is better than it has been in previous years, so we've lost hardly any staff and where we are, well, where staff are moving, they tend to move across our schools at the moment so we're keeping staff within the family. This year we filled all vacancies. (T2, Interview)*

6.4. Reviewing and revising the curriculum

All Trusts reviewed their curricula, defining teaching and learning more broadly within a values-led framework to include attention to the academic and welfare needs of students, and to capitalise upon the technological advances made during the pandemic. This was regarded as an opportunity to re-set and move forward.

Let's not just look at this as a problem. This is an opportunity. There's going to be a lot of staff who aren't actually in school. So, what are they going to be doing

with their time? So, let's use this as an opportunity to rewrite the curriculum. We've done a lot of work on our curriculum intent prior to lockdown. This is not changing. Now to have a lot of time that teachers wouldn't normally get to write schemes of work programmes of study and that has been done across both high schools and will put them in a very strong or a much stronger position come September when we were coming back and having to deal with other things. (T8, Interview)

Our priority is to ensure all educators in our schools have high quality responsive professional learning to enable them to deliver the most effective pedagogy for our children to achieve great outcomes. All schools share our Trust Curriculum Statement for an ambitious, broad and balanced curriculum and all our schools' curricula are bespoke to the needs of their individual context and needs. (T4, Survey)

The Trust wants to capitalise on the advances in the use of technologies by staff, pupils, parents use this as a springboard to make all Trust processes more efficient and effective. The restructuring of IT across the Trust will provide an opportunity for cross-Trust working on aspects of the remote learning offer through the appointment of a digital lead technician and the establishment of working parties (primary and secondary) to enhance this further. (T5, Survey)

The mental health and welfare of students had become an integral part of curriculum planning.

Through highly effective pedagogy, with a strong moral purpose, and a great bespoke curriculum, our children will be empowered and taught to be unique individuals who thrive, achieve and succeed. Everyone in our schools will feel a sense of belonging as we ensure all nine protected characteristics are respected, valued and taught. (T4, Survey)

Review of the curriculum for delivery across all subjects and phases…Implementation of a revised pastoral curriculum across the Trust to ensure a specific and targeted focus on emerging themes arising from the pandemic. (T1, Survey)

The last year has confirmed our approach is valid. We focus on a balanced curriculum - currency, character and community. We offer a range of GCSEs but also focus on behaviour change and the need to understand the wider world in preparation for adulthood. (T9, Survey)

Our priority has been supporting wellbeing and engagement in routines, so pupils are ready to learn again. (T6, Survey)

We need to establish some basics, including friendships, learning behaviours, psychological confidence and trauma related practice in order to get to the ability to learn. Then the sequence of learning needs addressing, depending upon the baseline findings for individuals, groups and cohorts. (T11, Survey)

The learning needs of vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged students remained a priority.

Sharp focus on targeted interventions within the classroom, specifically for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND…Targeted approach to recovery intervention in line with EEF research and the deployment of Trust appointed Academic Tutors (NTP was slow to start and inflexible), specifically to vulnerable pupils accessing our Trust drive. (T1, Survey)

In addition, the importance of developing effective reading and literacy skills of our students and further embedding a knowledge-rich curriculum which supports personal and academic growth are essential; there may be an increased urgency as a consequence of Covid, but we are determined that our students and staff will be protected from any hysteria surrounding 'catch up' and rather be supported in a meaningful and manageable way to continue the progress we are making. (T8, Survey)

Academy's curriculum intend to ensure that all students have the knowledge and character to be 21st Century global citizens, the lack of enrichment and extra-curricular experiences for students is of greatest concern as we endeavour to ensure that they can access the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme this summer – an integral part of the Year 9 programme. (T5, Survey)

We have looked forward with hope and endeavoured to focus on positive relationships, SEMH, pedagogy, metacognition, curriculum, language and communication and self-regulated curriculum in the hope that we will rise stronger than we were when the first lockdown started on 23rd March 2020. (T4, Survey)

I think some of the other big hits are our early years and year one, of which you would expect, because by definition they haven't been able to be in and the

parents have engaged on the hall really well, and we're going to keep that moving forward as a platform to model storytelling to model reading box to model phonics so that we've got an ability to put in some pre teaching before we start either a topic or a subject, and also to put in some consolidation to help those parents who want to do this to become better at helping their children. (T11, Interview)

There was also an opportunity to explore more flexible patterns of working for staff:

We are using the national tutoring programme and the Covid catch up money to buy in some specialist teachers. For example, we bought in an artist in residence, we bought in a technology person so that then releases the teacher to work with individual children on their programmes that they need to whatever either accelerate or support them well, because we felt it was the teachers who know their children best. We are planning on doing more formal assessments in July, we use Pixel to do assessments and we will be then be able to benchmark across the school and across the Trust as well, bringing in specialists to release the class teacher. (T13, Interview)

We made a decision with our school secondaries to put in bespoke tutor programming intervention programmes, using our own staff subject experts who know the children, rather than bringing somebody external in. We are going to review that going forward in terms of workload for our colleagues and the value of the national tutor programme but that's how we've chosen to do it currently, almost an internal tutor programme based on need of students. (T2, Interview)

The pandemic had raised many questions around flexible working, part time working. Many staff enjoyed being able to work from home and appreciated the flexibility of working from home. It is very difficult, particularly in a primary school, to give staff this greater flexibility as staff have to be with the children, but I feel that we could lose good staff. I would be interested to see different models of addressing this. (T13, Survey)

School-to-school support increased: '*We are working to expand our network of school-to-school support by asking head teachers to also carry out QA visits at other Academies to ensure there is robust peer challenge alongside top-down challenge (T3, Survey)*'; '*We supported our schools to work across the Trust to develop the curriculum to ensure the curriculum was prioritised and knowledge organisers updated (T7, Survey)*'.

6.5. Collaborative action: combining academic rigour with robust care

During the pandemic and in this first period of the 'recovery' when schools were open to all students, CEOs were determined to maintain their upward trajectories of academy improvements. They remained optimistic, hopeful and resilient, despite concerns over present uncertainties, and continued to work closely with their Trust teams to ensure they and their schools were confident that the systems and processes were robust.

Underpinning policy is that we want to maintain the trajectory of Academy improvement as well, and there's been really important policy making around that. You know, you don't need automatically go back to safety, wanting to ensure that everybody was well supported on the right track and certainly moving forward. (T1, Interview)

Our policy making in the way we've acted over the last 12 months has been to take away the workload and the barriers for schools and that's what we've sought to do all the way through it, which means 14 or 17 schools don't have to worry about it. It saves so much time and effort, it allows them to get on with making a difference to lives of the students. I think what made them robust is that we worked together to think through what we were looking to roll out, so it wasn't just ahead on their own saying I'm going to do this. There was a collective view before we introduced something. And then the third thing, I think, which really helped us make it robust was my Trust board who were incredibly sharp, and they QA'd a lot of the documentation. So, if we wanted advice, and we did fairly frequently, they would give it another level of rigour by looking at it with that kind of strategic set of eyes. Trusts working with Trusts helped make the system robust, which I think is something we will continue to do. So, I think it was the amount of people involved in developing stuff and QA-ing it which made it robust. (T2, Interview)

One of the things we implemented was that we have an executive leadership team which is the central team. The head teachers met together and we were meeting probably once a month and as the pandemic went on, we said this needs to be weekly and that continued. We meet every Friday afternoon, and we hear straight away if there's something in our policies that isn't working. So, I think the robustness comes from that. I'm actually part of them and living with them. One of our big principles is collaboration. We always say that as a Trust we are

all about collaboration and again we've got strong schools. So, we are in that position; that makes us feel more robust. (T7, Interview)

What we did, we pulled it together and we had one person doing it for the Trust and that reduced people's anxiety. It was developing systems to develop more central approaches so that we could deal with issues that were arising. So, for example, when we did come back and we had to manage bubbles, we've got one person that manages. If a bubble goes down in any of our schools, that person manages it for the other schools. So again, teachers or head teachers weren't having to worry, you know, during the Christmas holiday or, in the last couple of days when we were still on track and trace, well, whatever bubble burst will have to go in and ring all the parents. So, I think it's the collaboration and then the systems we've developed for across the Trust in centralising some of them. (T13, Interview)

I think we've worked very closely as a leadership team, with the chair of the Trust as well, and that's meant that you've got a peer who will check that you haven't missed anything. So, we tend to work very collaboratively within the Trust. I'll make key decisions, but usually we reach those as a consensus. You may have some flexibility with, but there are some non-negotiables, so I'll set the non-negotiables. The team are very, very skilled. Everyone has a sort of specialism that they can bring to the table as well, so we work very much collaboratively on things like that, and I think that that's good for making sure you haven't missed anything. And the Trustees are there with us as well, offering help. They've got very different backgrounds in terms of business understanding, so they were reading materials that we were sending to them as well as giving us that slightly external view. T9, Interview)

We had regular governance meetings and I kept the Board of Directors updated on a daily basis initially and then at least twice a week on what was happening; and they were aware of that. So, there is a heightened governance and accountability to the people locally so that everybody feels sure that they understand where we are and have an opportunity to ask questions. (T6, Interview)

The fact that it's not just me sat in a room making up documents. I work with the heads, and so it is very much a shared approach. Everyone bought into a shared vision and SLT have also contributed, and they've also been given the freedom to personalise it through their own schools. So, for example, I drafted the initial catch up plan, and then each school personalised it. Similarly for the

risk assessments. I did the risk assessment - that one was hard work. It took me a long time. Then the heads went away and personalised it for their school and their layout and their staffing. And Trustees had oversight of the risk assessment and challenged us on aspects. (T12, Interview)

6.6. Coda: leadership matters

There is a relative dearth of empirical research which focuses on the values, qualities, skills, traits and dispositions that successful system leaders in education have, or might need to have, if they are to lead schools as complex adaptive systems well in extraordinarily challenging times and circumstances which fundamentally challenge their abilities to fulfil their central role of providing high quality opportunities for the learning, achievement and welfare of every student. Moreover, much of the existing research on 'effective' leadership focuses upon the virtues of 'adjectival' models of, for example, 'transformational', 'instructional' and other forms and practices of leadership. Whilst useful by definition, such models provide a relatively simple guide to successful leadership in challenging times and apply more to the leadership of single schools rather than several, as is the case in the leadership of multi-academy Trusts.

A detailed consideration of the anatomy of leadership of groups of schools is beyond the remit of this research. However, the data in this report clearly point to a range of values, professional knowledge, qualities, intra and interpersonal skills in the leadership of CEOs, which together rather than singly contributed significantly to the successes of the schools in their Trusts in responding to, managing and resolving the complex challenges of the pandemic. We list five of those below which apply most closely to the findings of this research project, in the hope that they will provide a stimulus for further reflection within Trusts, and lead to research that will focus more precisely on successful Trust leadership.

Values-led, agile, adaptive leadership

As outlined in each part of this report, CEOs had been quick to establish systems which enabled their Trusts to respond in a timely manner to immediate and predicted challenges to the learning and welfare needs of students, staff and families. In doing so, they had provided models of self-reflection and self-management; personal integrity and reliability; personal communication; interpersonal relationships, intensive interaction; and teamwork associated with

agile leadership in commerce and business (Bushuyeva, Bushuiev & Bushuiev, 2019).

In embracing the complex, chaotic world in which they and their colleagues had been thrust, they had been 'compelled to be highly adaptive and seek patterns, logic and order' (Gray, 2007:505).

People who lead adaptive change most successfully have a diagnostic mind-set about themselves, as well as the situation. That is, they are continually striving to understand what is going on inside, how they are changing over time, and how they as a system interact with their organisation as a system' (Heifetz et al., 2009)

The diagnostic mind-set had been founded in deep levels of personal and practical professional knowledge drawn from multiple sources, as they navigated through the uncertain, unpredictable journeys of change. In doing so, they had never lost touch with their values and purposes, duties of care, empathy and compassion, as they sustained their capacities for meaning-making.Through the timely and purposeful distribution of leadership, they and their colleagues were able to mobilise their collective educational beliefs, values, and purposes, in modifying their practices whilst ensuring that they continued to be under-pinned by broad moral purposes associated with, for example, inclusivity and attention to the personal and social education of their students (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). CEOs regularly spoke of these throughout the research, regarding themselves and their Trusts as being established for the common good, having civic responsibilities, and promoting equity and social justice (Moller, 2011).

Professional knowledge and agency

Far from being the victims of systems which privilege 'performativity' over welfare, all the data pointed to the high levels of professional knowledge and agency expressed by all participants. Agency has been defined as being exercised in particular *'when professional subjects and/or communities exert influence, make choices, and take stances on their work and/or professional identities'* (Etelapelto et al., 2013:57-8). In relation to Trust leaders in this research, it was the powerful belief that social and organisational structures and cultures, rather than simply tolerated, can be influenced by individual and collective action (Day, 2017: 36).

Sustained interactivity

Agency was frequently to be seen in the often intensive, multiple social processes in which CEOs invested. 'Sustained interactivity' is a term which has been used to characterise an approach to shorten the psychological and practical distances between researchers and practitioners. It has been described as 'jointly constructing knowledge through shared activity' (Huberman, 1999: 289). However, it applies well to the interactions between the CEO and senior leadership team of the Trust, head teachers of individual schools, the students and families that made up the school communities, the Trustees and external stakeholder agencies, all of which demanded not only time, but a high level of interpersonal and social skills from the CEOs.

Resilience

Throughout the period, CEOs demonstrated their capacities for resilience, defined, not in terms of 'bouncing back', with the implication that the original 'shape' may be regained, but in terms of dynamic transition points in space between individuals and their environments in which CEOs managed with persistence, perseverance and courage the ongoing challenges of ensuring a sense of stability, purpose, belonging and resilience among the members of the communities for which they felt responsible (Downes, 2017).

Optimism and Hope

Finally, all CEOs expressed a positive belief that they and their colleagues could make a positive difference in the education of students by emphasising academic learning and care, providing fit-for-purpose opportunities for parents and students to co-operate in the process, 'going the extra mile, and by believing in their own capacities to overcome difficulties with resilience and perseverance. Whilst the optimism expressed repeatedly was the glue that bound together their ideals, values, actions and relationships, the more powerful indicator of the strength of their commitment to their Trusts was hope, defined as 'not the conviction that something (by definition) will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out' (Havel, 1990:181).

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