



Confederation
of School Trusts

What is a strong trust? A CST Discussion Paper



About CST - The voice of School Trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is "the advancement of education for public benefit."

We are governed by a Board of Trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.

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Our values:

Selflessness	Openness
Integrity	Honesty
Objectivity	Leadership
Accountability	

If we are going to build a school system in which schools are part of a group in a single governance and accountability structure, we need to be explicit and eloquent about what constitutes a strong trust. We offer this narrative paper for discussion and debate. This paper should be read alongside our literature review (forthcoming) which will help us to locate these claims in research and evidence and to identify where further research and evidence is required.

Baroness Barran, the Minister for the School System, has posed a question: What is the best operating model which drives the best outcomes for our children? We think our 'best bet' is the School Trust because:

1. **Shared accountability and collaboration are an integral element of trust structures and governance** – trusts are able to deploy the expertise of their teachers and leaders to address the greatest challenges and tackle educational disadvantage. [NfER analysis](#) (2017) shows that staff moves to different schools within the same trust are relatively high and more likely to be to schools with more disadvantaged intakes. According to [DfE research](#) (2021), most schools (60% of primary and 73% of secondary schools) said that increasing collaboration was a key reason for having joined a trust and approaching nine in ten described this as a key or important reason.



2. The best trusts put the **quality of education** at the core of their mission. They have strongly theorised models of improvement alongside high-quality implementation and delivery. They are able to deliver high standards of education systematically because they scale improvement by knowledge building, evidence-informed professional development and creating communities of improvement. They are specialist organisations that exist to do just one thing – to run and improve schools, to advance education for public benefit. They don't have lots of other functions and duties. The trust has been the vehicle for intervening in cases of educational failure in some of the most challenging parts of the school system.
3. The best trusts are good employers, with a focus on **workforce resilience and wellbeing**.
4. The best trusts are **efficient and effective** at reinvesting funding to improve the quality of education (they do this in different ways).
5. They **work with other civic actors** to ensure coherent public services, and that the actions of all civic actors contribute to the sufficiency and quality of education in the area.

Over recent years, there has been a focus at policy level on financial efficiencies and shared services within the narrative of school trusts which has enabled trusts to create strong platforms for educational delivery. More recently we have seen a welcome recalibration in the policy discourse towards a focus on the quality of education. This means the next narrative and policy discourse for school trusts should be focused on **trusts as the vehicle of school improvement at scale**.

Of course, efficiency and effectiveness are absolutely necessary – not just because this is public money and we must show value to the public and parliament, but because of the capacity of trusts to realise efficiencies and reinvest in the activity which makes the biggest extra difference to education outcomes.

It is perhaps important to state at the outset that we are definitely not suggesting that there is one model – our strongest trusts have different operating models, and indeed a strong trust will have its own distinctive model which it can successfully deliver.

Our strongest trusts provide a proof of concept. They offer a blueprint for scaling improvement across the system.



Codifying the features of strong trusts

Drawing on the above, we propose that there may be five domains of effective trusts:





In all five of these areas, it may be possible to identify quantitative indicators but quantitative indicators themselves will not enable the system to pivot towards excellence. The codification of effectiveness is important because it gives us a blueprint to build strong trusts in every part of the country.

We think there is merit in considering wider regulatory theory here, for example balancing the prevention of harms with promotion of goods.

Regulatory theory provides a way of thinking about the role of baseline metrics (and/or standards) to prevent harms, otherwise it becomes very hard to regulate. However, to promote goods we need more aspirational framing, which is more than a minimum to be met and more an ideal to strive towards. In this regard, this paper on strong trusts needs to be read in the context of CST's proposal on intelligent regulation.


1. Expert Governance

The guidance, [Building Strong Academy Trusts](#)  states that: “Strategic governance is one of the defining characteristics of academy trusts. By operating under a single governance structure, a strong board of academy trustees can effectively oversee the strategic direction of the academy trust and hold executive leaders to account for the outcomes of all pupils within the academy trust. This structure goes much further in promoting shared practice than other collaborative structures, such as federations or alliances.

Governance in our sector is weakly theorised. The conflation of the proposition of maintained government with trust governance is dangerous. CST has attempted to theorise the proposition of trust governance in our recent published [Governing a School Trust](#) .

Strong governance of the legal entity of the Trust hardwires collaboration and shared accountability in a way that no other school structures does. Trust boards carry both the accountability, along with the powers of intervention where necessary at a governance level of its schools. This is one of the reasons why the trust is the most appropriate vehicle to drive school improvement.


2. Quality of education

As the recent guidance on [Building Strong Academy Trusts](#)  states: “This purpose [advancing education] is cemented in the academy trust’s Articles of Association, and the activity to advance education for the public good is contracted through funding agreements between academy trusts, and DfE and ESFA. Academy trusts are established as charitable companies, regulated by DfE, inspected by Ofsted and subject to independent financial audit.”

The best trusts are focused on the quality of education – they have strongly theorised; coherent models of improvement and they can scale improvement by knowledge-building through evidence-informed professional development and creating communities of improvement. 72% primary schools and 85% secondary schools cited providing more opportunities to staff for professional development as a reason for joining a trust.¹



1 DfE Research Report (November 2021) [Schools’ views on the perceived benefits and obstacles to joining a multiacademy trust](#)


In our paper on [Knowledge-building: School Improvement at Scale](#)  we offer four propositions on school improvement, which act as a theory of change:

1. The goal is for every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in what they teach (the curriculum) and how they teach (pedagogy).
2. For this to happen, we need to mobilise for every teacher the best evidence from research.
3. There is no improvement for pupils without improvement in teaching, and no improvement in teaching without the best professional development for teachers.
4. Strong structures (in groups of schools) can facilitate better professional development and thus better teaching and improvement for pupils.

This is not to dismiss the procedural processes of building capacity, undertaking a forensic analysis of need, supporting and deploying leadership, providing access to effective practice and monitoring improvements in the quality of provision. Indeed, these are essential. But without the intentional practice of knowledge building, improvement is not sustainable. It may not result in an enduring change in practice and therefore in the quality of teaching.

Our paper on [Communities of Improvement: School Trusts](#)  as Fields of Practice takes these ideas further and considers school improvement as a field of practice rather than a series of disconnected activities.

Essentially, we are trying to codify how some of our best trusts do school improvement at scale – how they put improvement front and centre of all that they do; how they develop strong theorised models of improvement and then are able to implement/deliver these effectively across their schools. It is important to note that there is not a consensus around the model of improvement and there are different models of improvement which appear to be effective in different trusts and different contexts.

The guidance, [Building Strong Academy Trusts](#)  states that a strong trust will have “an evidenced-based approach to curriculum, behaviour and teaching, underpinned by sound governance and financial management. Any school can achieve this, but groups of schools working together in a single governance and accountability structure are hardwired to do this. Academy trusts are set up to do just one thing: advance education in their group of schools. Strong academy trusts support school leaders to share and implement the best evidence-based practice by directing resources through a shared structure. Strong structures (groups of



schools) can facilitate better professional development and thus better teaching and improvement for pupil.”

The strongest trusts have:

- Evidence-informed models of improvement which they deliver at scale through effective implementation.
- A well-sequenced, balanced and broad curriculum, ensuring pupils have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life.
- A culture where good behaviour and attendance is the norm.
- Strong cultures and practices supporting equity and inclusion - for academy trusts running more than one school ([measured in 2018](#)), disadvantaged pupils made significantly more progress in writing and maths by the end of primary school than the national average for disadvantaged pupils.
- The best professional development, including evidence-based initial training.
- The conditions to enable teachers and staff to be deployed more flexibly.

The trust has been the vehicle for intervening in cases of educational failure in some of the most challenging parts of the school system. Strong trusts work quickly to improve schools where the quality of education is not yet good enough. In this way they add value to the education system.

3. Workforce resilience and wellbeing

People matter. If trusts are to build sustainable infrastructures to lead change, improve schools and respond to the legacies of the pandemic. The strongest trusts understand their responsibilities and duties as employers – they are good employers. They recruit, develop, deploy and retain great teachers, support staff and leaders throughout their careers, supporting their development by using evidence-informed professional

development and ensuring a manageable work-life balance, paying close attention to wellbeing.

CST’s paper on [The Role of Trusts as Talent Architects](#) sets the vital role of trusts as employers and how to build sustainable people strategies to deliver education for the public benefit. The paper argues firmly that Trusts themselves are the key enablers of quality people management in our sector and will play a vital role in building a sustainable education workforce.

4. Efficiency and effectiveness of operational structures

The guidance, [Building Strong Academy Trusts](#) states that “trusts can make the most effective use of centralised processes and back-office functions to empower schools to focus on teaching and knowledge building. Strong academy trusts ensure all staff and functions are focused on improvement, so that central functions empower teachers and leaders to focus on advancing education. The academy trust structure allows administrative functions, policies and financial management to be delivered centrally, allowing school leaders to prioritise education.”

Because School Trusts are public organisations, funded by government with a funding agreement that requires trusts to spend their money in the way that parliament intends, it is essential that the efficient use of public money is part of our narrative about strong trusts.

Efficiency, while fundamentally important to deliver value to the public, is necessary but not in itself sufficient. Effectiveness (obtaining the best educational outcomes) is made possible through efficiency (which may be defined as obtaining the best possible outcome for the resources input).

This is important because the most efficient trusts can release resources to re-invest in the pursuit of educational quality. The best trusts do this in different ways, for example in investing in:

- The school improvement resource – which can be enhanced staffing;
- Evidence-informed professional development to improve the quality of teaching;
- Curriculum design and implementation;
- Assessment and other technologies;
- Evidence-informed interventions for SEND and disadvantaged pupils;
- Lengthening the school day and focusing on the wider purposes of education; and
- Capital investment in the school estate – providing the best quality educational environments.

These investments are not always visible from published financial data – but we do need to understand better how methodologies like curriculum-led financial planning enable investments into the quality of education and therefore can be seen as mechanisms of improvement within a school trust.

5. Public benefit and civic duty

The primary focus on education quality as the quality of teaching is absolutely necessary but not sufficient. Education has wider purposes in intellectual, social, and cultural development; the formation of character; and helping pupils to understand and play a role in society and contribute to the wider common good. Many of the strongest trusts are explicit in their commitment to creating the conditions for human flourishing.

The trust is a new form of civic structure. As a legal entity which is independent from local government, School Trusts (like universities and NHS Trusts), have a wider civic responsibility to advance education for the public good in the communities they serve.

Our strongest trusts support the weakest schools in the system in fulfilling their civic duty to advance education for all. They also mentor and support other trusts. In this sense, the trust itself acts as a national leader of education.

CST has published guidance for trusts on the articulation of **public benefit**.



Postscript

As we said in the introduction, we offer this narrative paper for discussion and debate. We are at an exciting point in the history of education in England where, with care and attention, we could become the best system at getting better. If this is to become a reality, we must ask difficult questions, interrogate the evidence, commission more research and put the mission to advance education for public benefit at the heart of all that we do.

We welcome your engagement with the ideas in this paper.

