

# An enduring shared mission

The contribution of school trusts to the opportunity mission

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**Confederation**  
of School Trusts

**The voice of school trusts**

## An enduring shared mission

The mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for all children is important. It is an enduring common ground shared by government and the profession.

This paper sets out some of the foundational questions that, in the school trust sector's view, would help inform the government's work to reset education in England, bringing together Labour's opportunity mission with the expertise and experience of the trust sector.

The appendices examine key policies and set out CST's suggestions on practical steps towards implementation.

## Human flourishing

Our political leaders, schools and school leaders have a foundational question in common – how do children and young people, and those who educate them in our schools, flourish?

Our definition of flourishing draws on a rich intellectual tradition. It is both the optimal continuing development of children's potential (the substance of education) and living well as a human being.

The principles of human flourishing are closely connected to the conception of 'the common good.' Early conceptions of the common good were explored in Greek philosophy, notably by Aristotle but it is also one of the most important principles in Catholic social teaching and the canonical legacy of the Church of England. This is why CST, the Catholic Education Service, and Church of England are developing a joint paper which sets out a collective vision for the education system based on human flourishing.

Education is a good in itself but can also be mobilised both to creating a more socially just society and a wider common good. There is long-standing evidence that links higher levels of education with better health, life expectancy, and economic achievement. Research conducted for CST found that investment in education is repaid more than five times over in economic benefits to society. School trusts, now responsible for more than half of schools in England, are the engines of this.

Our foundational question on how children and the adults that support them can flourish prompts a series of questions about how we do this in practice:

- How do we create school environments where human flourishing is both the optimal continuing development of children's potential and living well as a human being?
- How do we address the multiple negative impacts of the pandemic and the current economic challenges we face?
- How do we create school environments that are inclusive and built on affirmative models of disability for children with SEND?



- How do mobilise education as a force for social justice?
- How do we create schools that support the development of the common good and the good society in which all our children can flourish?

The government's opportunity mission begins to address these fundamental questions. It is an enduring common ground shared by government and the profession. And we are pleased to be able to work with government to deliver on this promise.

## Civic leadership

The solutions to the challenges that face us are beyond the reach of individual organisations. This is why CST has long advocated that trusts are civic institutions that act as civic anchors. This requires a new mental model of leadership: civic leadership. Civic leadership means that we must work together as civic actors for the wider common good. It means that we must more deeply anchor our schools in their communities. And it means that we must work ever more closely with our communities. It is only through forms of radical collaboration that we will be able to co-construct solutions with the communities we serve.

Our support for trusts comes not from advocacy of structural reform for its own sake but from the belief in the power of a group of schools working together in deep and purposeful partnership under strong, strategic governance, to pursue a clear single mission. We believe this is our 'best bet' to build strength and resilience in our school system; experts working together and able to focus on the things they do best. But we also honour the hard work and commitment of all schools in all types of structures. This is why CST membership has always been open to all schools, and we encourage member trusts to engage deeply with colleagues across education and civic society more widely.

The mission to address inequalities in education standards, especially for economically disadvantaged children, is etched into the consciousness of the trust sector.

## Rebuilding the social contract

We must provide the leadership that builds belonging with one another, with our staff, with our students and families, and with our wider communities.

If we are to rebuild the social contract with parents and the wider public, we need to shift from purely *transactional* engagement to more *relational* forms of engagement with parents and the wider public. We need, more explicitly and deliberately, to build relational trust. Relational trust is grounded in social respect – and respectful exchanges are marked by genuinely listening to people say and by taking these views into account in subsequent actions. This is as important when building relationships with parents as building relationships with other civic leaders.

Let us be clear that it is hard work to renegotiate the social contract by working with parents on the shared task of educating children, and rebuilding trust in the school as a public institution. But



being explicit and eloquent about purpose helps to link people – children, staff and parents – to the purpose organisation and the importance of education.

## Belonging as a foundation for rebuilding the social contract

At CST's conference in 2022, we invited Owen Eastwood, author of *Belonging, The ancient code of togetherness* to give a keynote. The book is a beautiful exploration of our primal need to belong. Eastwood writes: "To feel a sense of belonging is to feel accepted, to feel seen and to feel included by a group of people, believing that we fit in, trusting we will be protected by them. To not feel belonging is to experience the precarious and insecure sense of an outsider."<sup>1</sup>

There are some worrying trends in terms of our children and young people feeling like they belong to our schools. The PISA 2022 report for England found that pupils in England reported a significantly lower average level of satisfaction with their lives, and fewer reported they feel they belong at school than their peers across the OECD.<sup>2</sup> These data are supported by other reports, like the *2023 Good childhood report* which shows trends in children's wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> The Children's Society research seeks to understand how young people feel about different aspects of their lives. 10% of the children aged 10 to 17 who completed the household survey in May and June 2023 had low wellbeing, and almost a third were unhappy with at least one specific area of their lives.

The Education Endowment Foundation has published an excellent, evidence-based resource on supporting school attendance which includes building a culture of community and belonging for pupils.<sup>4</sup>

There is other research evidence that demonstrates the connection between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes<sup>5</sup> and the impact of school-based interventions for building school belonging.<sup>6</sup>

There is something hugely powerful in saying to a child who doesn't know what it means to belong anywhere or is unsure that they belong at all – I'm glad you're here. You belong here.

## Breaking down barriers together

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<sup>1</sup> Eastwood, O (2021). *Belonging: The ancient code of togetherness*. Quercus

<sup>2</sup> Ingram, J, Stiff, J, Cadwallader, S, Lee, G and Kayton, H (2023). *PISA 2022: National Report for England*. Government Social Research

<sup>3</sup> Children's Society (2023). *The Good Childhood Report*.

<sup>4</sup> Education Endowment Foundation. *Supporting school attendance*.

<sup>5</sup> Korpershoek, H, Canrinus, E, Fokkens-Bruinsma M and De Boer, H (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review, *Research Papers in Education*, 35:6, 641–680.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, KA, Jamshidi, N, Berger, E et al (2022). *Impact of school-based interventions for building school belonging in adolescence: a systematic review*. *Educational Psychology Review* (2022) 34:229–257.



We believe that government and school trusts share an enduring shared mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for all children.

This paper explores *how* a resilient and effective trust sector can work with government to deliver its commitment to provide opportunity for all children. That much of this is not 'new' work for trusts speaks to the notion that trusts are already at the vanguard of this mission.

Through a collective effort and deeper partnership we believe government and the sector can go further faster, transforming the opportunities all children and communities can enjoy.

The opportunity mission is rightly broad in its ambition and strategy: ensuring opportunity exists for all children is a socio-economic challenge that reaches beyond schools alone. As the opportunity mission sets out breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child cannot be done by the education system alone. This is why it is right the mission includes significant consideration of aspects like childcare and generational income disparities.

But the mission is also clear that schools have a central role to play. We agree. The following sets out some of the ways the partnership between government and school trusts will be central to the delivery of the opportunity mission.



# Achieving and flourishing

## 1. The best start in life

Government has pledged to tackle the ‘supply side’ of ensuring the sufficiency of places for childcare and early years. School trusts are well-placed to add capacity in many key areas. Indeed, some trusts have been pioneering this work for a while. The scale and expertise of trusts means that many are already playing a broader role in their communities than schooling alone, helping to deliver the government’s intent to break down the barrier between childcare and education.

This resonates with the work CST has led, and which many trusts have run with, on the enactment of trusts as civic institutions. The determination of trusts to paint opportunity on a bigger canvas underlines their mission-led nature, going beyond a minimum offer of schooling to make a bigger difference to the communities they serve. Our paper on community anchoring gives the example of the partnership established between Reach Feltham and Kingston University to design an Early Years Foundation degree: “the degree is taught locally and deliberately builds a strong peer network of early years professionals. Reach Academy staff benefit alongside colleagues from all other local early years settings.”

Another example of the impact that trusts are making on early years is the work of Ark Start. This initiative has seen Ark set up a network of nurseries in communities with unserved demand. Importantly, the approach at Ark Start draws on the best evidence about effective early years provision. The strapline on their website (‘So much more than childcare’) resonates strongly with the opportunity mission’s framing of ‘childcare as education’.

As the opportunity mission observes, “With falling school rolls across many parts of the country, now is the time for fresh and imaginative thinking about how we integrate early years education and childcare with the wider school experience our children have and how we set them all up for the best start to life.” With their track record of innovation and civic enterprise, it seems likely that trusts will be central to government’s delivery of this plan.

## 2. Curriculum

This part of the mission is about driving up educational performance and opportunity for all pupils, but most particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable children. This goes to the heart of the charitable purpose trusts embody: to advance education for the public benefit.

The work identified by the government includes an expert-led review of the curriculum and assessment. Importantly, it recognises the work already done to develop a strong and well-sequenced curriculum in schools. It can be seen in a range of other ways too, including the role played by trusts in curriculum-oriented CPD and on a range of subject bodies. DfE survey data shows that 58% of primary schools had seen improved curriculum resources since joining a trust.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Department for Education (2021) [\*Schools’ views: benefits and obstacles to joining academy trusts\*](#)

Trusts are keen to mobilise their expertise and capacity to work with government and the review process to explore how the curriculum can be built upon and developed further, including to ensure it contains sufficient breadth and the appropriate development of wider outcomes including oracy and pupils' digital capabilities.

### 3. World-class teaching – recruiting and retaining our teachers

The evidence is clear that effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds: over a school year, these pupils gain 1.5 years' worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with poorly performing teachers.<sup>8</sup>

But there is quite a lot of evidence that our workforce is not in as good shape as it might be. Data from Education Support's *Teacher wellbeing index* (corroborated more recently by The Working Lives of Teachers) tells us that 78% of all education staff report being stressed – and this rises to 89% of all leaders and 95% of headteachers. And 36% of teachers report experiencing burnout.<sup>9</sup>

There is good evidence about what we can do as employers and leaders to stem the tide of colleagues leaving our school system, and support our teachers to develop their expertise.

The Education Endowment Foundation's rapid evidence review finds that there are three interrelated leadership approaches that contribute to staff retention and quality:

- **Prioritising professional development:** investing in teachers' knowledge and skills is not only critical for children's outcomes, but staff are happier, more motivated, and more likely to want to stay in their roles.
- **Building relational trust:** It may seem self-evident that treating our colleagues as individuals and treating them with respect helps to make them feel valued. But this is exactly what the evidence shows. Without flourishing teachers, there will be no flourishing pupils.
- **Improving working conditions:** supportive leadership, a collegial culture, a positive climate for school discipline, a culture of intellectual stimulation and managing workload are all important factors in retaining our staff and developing the quality of teaching.

The current crisis in recruitment and retention of both teachers and support staff only serves to underline the importance of this part of the opportunity mission.

As employers, trusts are central to this aim. They set the conditions and the weather in their schools, and they hold the responsibility for developing excellence in their workforce. 82% of primary and 76% of secondary schools reported improvements in training of staff since joining a multi-academy trust.<sup>10</sup> The centrality of this work to the sector and the wider education

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<sup>8</sup> Sutton Trust (2011). *Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK*

<sup>9</sup> Education Support (2024). *Teacher wellbeing index*.

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education (2022) *The case for a fully trust-led system*

landscape is embodied in CST's recently announced work on [strengthening the role of employers in the system](#).

This is not a declaration of self-importance on behalf of the sector – it is a deeply pragmatic reflection of the nature of England's school system: most teachers are now employed by trusts, and most children are educated in trusts. Trusts can innovate and act nimbly here, even within existing strictures: examples include Lift Schools (formerly AET) programme of offering headteachers £100,000 of CPD over five years and access to sabbaticals, and Dixons Academies Trust working towards a nine-day fortnight for teachers.

The relationship between government, employer and employee is therefore critical to the delivery of the opportunity mission, through strong collaboration on the delivery of government policies such as the establishment of the new Excellence in Leadership programme.

#### 4. Special educational needs and disabilities

The mission rightly identifies the need to address particular needs for groups of pupils. CST has long been a vocal advocate of children in SEND and AP settings, and for children with SEND in mainstream schools. Our paper, *Five principles for inclusion*,<sup>11</sup> written by Ben Newmark and Tom Rees, identifies five principles for inclusion:

- **Dignity, not deficit:** Difference and disability are normal aspects of humanity – the education of children with SEND should be characterised by dignity and high expectation, not deficit and medicalisation.
- **Greater complexity merits greater expertise:** All children deserve a high-quality education – where extra support is needed, it should be expert in nature.
- **Different, but not apart:** Encountering difference builds an inclusive society – children with different learning needs should be able to grow up together.
- **Success in all its forms:** Success takes many forms – we should value and celebrate a wide range of achievements, including different ways of participating in society.
- **Action at all levels:** Change happens from the bottom-up as well as top-down – everyone has the agency and a responsibility to act.

We believe these principles point the way towards how we build a system that breaks down barriers for children with SEND. The good news is that many schools and trusts are already leading on this. Our paper illustrates this through case studies from a range of schools and trusts, including the Revel Primary School, Dixons, Frank Wise School, Our Community Multi Academy Trust and River Learning Trust.

Addressing the challenges in SEND will require action at all levels. Government will need to consider how additional resource can be targeted to support children with SEND, and how roles within the system can be made more coherent to ensure children get the right support. Schools

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<sup>11</sup> Newmark, B and Rees, T (2023). [Five Principles for Inclusion](#). CST and Ambition Institute.



and trusts will need to work together to develop the expertise in our classrooms that allows all children to flourish.

It is important to note the barriers to learning extend beyond SEND. For example, we know that youth services have eroded over the past decade or so. And the need for mental health support has grown significantly, as recognised in the opportunity mission. In these areas too we see trusts leading in their communities. For example, Oasis Hub Hadley has an extensive youth team, whose work alongside the academy both prevents and responds to serious violence. The Reach Foundation has established a preventative mental health and well-being offer for pupils that comprises school mental health leads, SENCos, pupils, parents, educational wellbeing practitioners, a local counsellor and a CAMHS specialist teacher.<sup>12</sup> Windsor Academy Trust are putting in place similar support, working in partnership with the North Staffordshire NHS Mental Health Support Team.

School trusts are also key partners in the Youth Sports Trust's Well Schools and Well Trusts initiatives, helping to ensure a breadth of experience across the curriculum and extra-curricular experience children enjoy. This extends into cultural education too. For example, the Embark Federation provides the following experiences for pupils in the trust:

- Collaborations with artists and West End stars: Sophie Isaacs and Victoria Farley from the West End recorded the Federation song with 70 children; a week-long workshop with six West End stars for 23 disadvantaged children, culminating in a performance; a jazz day with Hot House Jazz saw over 120 children forming a band; a day trip to Pineapple Dance Studios to work with cast members from The Lion King in London followed by lunch and watching them perform in the matinee.
- Workshops and events: Illustrator Lucy Truman and local artist Sophie Edwards conducted workshops to inspire creativity; partnerships with Derby Kids Camp, the Back Dane Trust, and Derbyshire Children's Holiday Home provided holidays for children; a West End World Book Week where stars, including the cast of Matilda, worked with disadvantaged children.
- Sports and outdoor activities: Annual Embark primary and secondary football events at professional grounds with top coaches and Premier League footballers; a football day with Premier League players, including Ben Osborn
- Community and cultural engagement: visits to Chatsworth House facilitated by a partnership with Lord Burlington; a project involving railway businesses to deliver a first-class train carriage to a school playground, creating a library, sensory room, and creative space; healthy living initiatives, including Travel Smart and Team Mode Shift programmes; family events hosted by schools and community hubs, focusing on literacy, inclusion, gardening, and more.

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<sup>12</sup> Cruddas, L (2024). [School trusts as civic institutions: Exemplifications of the civic mindset](#). CST.

- Funding and bursaries: partnership with the Tim Henman Foundation providing £20,000 in bursaries for talented children in music, arts, and sports; substantial fundraising efforts involving local businesses, parent teacher associations, parents, staff, and children to support various causes.

Again, it is clear that trusts will be a key partner for government in addressing this aspect of the opportunity mission.

## 5. School improvement

The opportunity mission charts a course to establish new regional improvement teams to “offer schools support, drawing on the expertise of teachers and leaders across the education system by boosting peer-to-peer learning and spreading examples of best practice throughout the system.”

We believe that trusts are the most successful school improvement vehicles.<sup>13</sup> We have proposed that one way of delivering regional improvement teams is using the existing trust structures in a localised and collaborative context to share best practice and drive improvements in specific geographies. In many areas it is trusts that hold the capacity that exists to support schools through such partnerships and informal support, especially where local authority capacity has fallen away. Research by CST has found that 72% of trusts already provide support to maintained schools, 60% support academy schools in other trusts, and 36% provide support to other trusts as a whole.<sup>14</sup> These links are not necessarily geographical: CST has helped convene a network of trusts that operate smaller schools, helping to share best practice in teaching and operations to protect the important place of primary schools in village communities. Support needs may criss-cross the country.

It is right that government considers how it can better leverage the capacity and expertise of school trusts to support school improvement through a more nuanced ‘menu’ of arrangements, including deeper and longer-term support between effective trusts and schools in need of support.

CST is leading the way on building theory and evidence about how effective trusts go about improving education at scale. [The School Improvement Hub](#) hosts a conceptual model for trust-led school improvement – the product of a year-long expert inquiry into improvement at scale. The Hub features a range of case studies, which will be supplemented through our national call for evidence, and there is a review of the evidence internationally. By building this knowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Trusts take on and transform schools that have failed to deliver a quality education. More than 7 out of 10 sponsored academies which were found to be underperforming as an LA maintained school in their previous inspection now have a good or outstanding rating. DfE. [Case for a fully trust-led system](#). 2022.

<sup>14</sup> CST (2024). *National school trust survey 2024*.

within and across trusts, the system can share effective improvement practices and make a significant contribution to an architecture of school improvement, as described in our paper.<sup>15</sup>

The government has already made initial changes towards implementing reform to accountability arrangements, including replacing the current system of Ofsted judgements with a report card, and instituting an annual review of safeguarding, attendance and off-rolling. As responsible bodies for the majority of institutions about which report cards will be constructed, trusts will be important partners in shaping these reforms. This also extends to the government's desire to implement inspection of trusts and other school groups. The expertise pertaining to trusts and therefore inspection of them, resides within the sector itself. For this reason, trusts should be important partners in the design and implementation of this policy.

## **6. Provide pathways to good prospects for all**

The opportunity mission rightly identifies that reform is needed in relation to how we prepare young people for life after school, including employment and training routes. Our paper on Civic Trusts includes examples of how trusts are building links with businesses and employers, with the outcome being improved careers education information, advice, and guidance curriculum and provision for students. One such example is the work of Windsor Academy Trust to work with NHS Allied Health Professional Health Fairs to showcase the 350 different jobs within the NHS. 50 students visited Birmingham Children's Hospital to tour the wards, meet staff, and learn about the range of job roles.

The opportunity plan and manifesto make the case for reform of skills education. As providers of education and employers trusts see the development of skills from multiple angles. This is perhaps one reason why many trusts in the Manchester area are keen to explore the potential of the Manchester Baccalaureate innovation.

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<sup>15</sup> Cruddas, L and Rollett, S (2024). [School improvement architecture: Building an intelligent, proportionate, and connected system of improvement](#). Confederation of School Trusts



## Conclusion

This paper has explored the longstanding and shared mission that both Labour governments and the trust sector have in common. Just as NHS trusts are key partners of government in delivering its plans for health care and reform, so too are school trusts partners of government in its mission to transform opportunity for children.

It's not only because most children are now educated within school trusts, but also because, as illustrated by the examples in this paper, trusts have already been at the vanguard of many of the priorities government is seeking to address. From school improvement to mental health support, from careers education to early years provision, trusts are already forging a path towards opportunity for the children and families they serve.

Government can lean into this to establish a new sense of partnership with the sector, one that brings together government, employers, the workforce and localities around a renewed civic energy and optimism.

CST and the trusts we represent look forward to playing their part in delivering opportunity to every child in every community. This is our enduring and shared mission.



# Briefing note: Curriculum review

## Labour policy

- Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to undertake an expert-led curriculum review in England. In government, Professor Becky Francis CBE has been appointed to lead a curriculum and assessment review, to report in 2025.

## CST's position

- The national curriculum is a set of high-level curriculum objectives. It is right these are reviewed periodically to reflect changes in subject fields, as well as to act on feedback from teachers and leaders about areas for improvement. Research by CST has found that, while school trusts are not currently obliged to follow the National Curriculum, 75% report that their approach is highly influenced by it, with a further 23% quite or somewhat influenced.
- While government may choose to commission this work and specify some broad parameters, curriculum is complex and contested so it is right this work is independent and expert-led, following a principle of transparency and engagement with teachers and subject communities.

## Points for government and the review to consider:

1. The curriculum review should carefully weigh how schools are placed to respond to change, allowing for appropriate resource and implementation time.
2. The curriculum review should seek to build on recent curriculum work in schools where possible. Schools and trusts have invested considerable time and resource in developing their curriculum practice in recent years, partly as a response to Ofsted's 2019 framework. Rather than approach curriculum as a pendulum to be swung in an opposing direction, a review should build on what has worked and what evidence supports. However, this does not mean there is not space for iteration and well-considered reform.
3. Education discourse is replete with dichotomies, many of which are false. Government and the experts undertaking the review should seek to overcome and resolve this where possible. It has been encouraging to see Labour's manifesto reflect the strength in schools' work to ensure knowledge is explicit in the curriculum. This is not incongruous with an increased government focus on skills, provided a relationship between knowledge and skills in the curriculum is well theorised and understood.
4. There is space for curriculum reform to build on work focused on knowledge by bringing *knowers* more into view. This speaks to at least three dimensions:
5. How policy and practice navigate contested aspects of the curriculum, especially around the selection of content. The notion of "the best that's been thought and said" is, on its own, insufficient and potentially problematic if not accompanied by a sophisticated and



disciplinary-aware understanding of how content is held to be 'the best' and by whom. Overlooking such matters risks creating silences in some subjects, with a result being that some students may experience a curriculum that does not 'speak' to them.

6. More awareness of the skills, dispositions, attitudes and world views the curriculum is intended to cultivate. While some of this might be cross-curricular or inter-disciplinary, much of this is emergent from subjects.
7. How we want children to feel about the curriculum and its associated pedagogies. This is not a call for superficial attempts to privilege entertainment over education, but rather to think carefully about how the individual subject and aggregated whole of the curriculum is experienced by children.
8. None of this is possible without a deep and sustained engagement with subjects and disciplines. This may point to associated work in other areas, such as teacher training and professional development.

# Briefing note: Regional improvement teams

## Labour policy

- Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to establish regional improvement teams.

## CST's position

- Expertise about how to improve schools resides in schools and trusts.
- We welcome thoughtful and effective work government can do to support school improvement, on the basis this work:
  - a) draws on those organisations with a track record for systematic school improvement
  - b) avoids taking capacity out of schools, trusts and classrooms
  - c) avoids unnecessary bureaucracy
  - d) works from the best available evidence
- This 'softer' (using National Audit Office terminology) intervention work is separate from, but must be seen alongside, 'hard' forms of intervention, such as the changing of governance arrangements in a school. As such there should be a coherent regulatory strategy that describes the role played by each.

## Points for government to consider

1. Securing school improvement is particularly important for the most vulnerable pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. The work of improvement teams should be located around this focus as an anchoring objective.
2. Trusts are the primary vehicle for school improvement in the system. While it is acknowledged there is variation in the system, our most successful and systemic improvement organisations have been trusts. 72% of trusts already provide support to maintained schools, and 60% to academies in trusts other than their own. Unleashing this expertise should be central to this work.
3. Improvement initiatives should pay attention to clear lines of accountability and governance. It needs to be clear who is brokering support, who is providing it, and what success looks like for children, to ensure those responsible for support are not compromised by also assessing its effectiveness
4. Every school should benefit from high challenge and high support. This may come from the school's own trust or another trust. Responsible bodies must, however, maintain responsibility and be accountable. They should be encouraged to routinely interrogate the efficacy of any arrangements. Government should develop a means of supporting schools and responsible bodies to work in this way, such as through regional improvement teams.
5. Networks are evidenced as having the *potential* to support school and system improvement. While it may not be appropriate for such networks to be 'owned' by



government (in order to avoid unhelpful centralization), the agencies of government should be able to support their work. We see some of this already in the South West region. Regional improvement teams could play a role in supporting the establishment of these networks and the ongoing knowledge creation and flow through them. These may take many forms: geographical, phase, school type, or role-based.

6. Investment should be carefully used to pump prime improvement capacity, focusing on where it will make the biggest difference to the most vulnerable pupils.





# Briefing note: Excellence in Leadership programme

## Labour policy

- Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to establish an Excellence in Leadership programme: “a mentoring framework that expands the capacity of headteachers and leaders to improve their schools.”

## CST’s position

- School leaders are essential to our ambition for children and young people.
- Studies show the effectiveness of headteachers is a key factor in shaping school quality.
- The centrality of heads to school quality is not at odds with the growth of school trusts and executive leadership – quite the opposite. School trusts are our means to grow, protect and retain the best leaders in schools. As such, trusts should be a key partner in the design and delivery of the Excellence in Leadership programme.
- Significant strides have been made in creating high quality evidence-led leadership programmes. These should be retained and built upon.

## Points for government to consider

1. The programme should build from the best available evidence about mentoring.
2. A rapid evidence review of effective mentoring should be commissioned to provide a strong foundation for the development of the Excellence in Leadership programme.
3. The programme should cohere with established leadership frameworks. While such frameworks might benefit from review and iteration where necessary, wholesale change is likely to be a capacity draw and may lead practice away from the evidence.
4. Leadership development does not require a choice between growing knowledge and growing people. There is now a growing codification of the domain knowledge that leaders need, reflected in leadership frameworks and NPQs. This is a strength of the system and should provide a useful foundation. There is scope for it to be built upon by supplementing leadership development with the cultivation of leadership dispositions, ideally those supported by evidence.
5. The work should be centred around a mission of equity. The programme should be oriented to particularly develop the leadership capacity to deliver education which breaks down barriers for the most vulnerable children, including disadvantaged children and those with SEND.
6. Care should be taken to consider how the programme can support the development of a more diverse leadership workforce.



# Briefing note: Report card

## Labour policy

- Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to replace Ofsted's single headline grade with a new report card system telling parents clearly how schools are performing. In government, the headline grade has been suspended pending a new inspection framework and reporting arrangements, expected to start in September 2025.

## CST's position

- The outcomes of inspection and accountability measures serve several purposes, including informing parents about school quality. It must also help regulators tasked with making commissioning and intervention decisions.
- Given the work needed to do this well, government and Ofsted should take the appropriate time to ensure this reform is well designed and implemented strategically.

## Points for government and Ofsted to consider

1. Given inspection and accountability outcomes inform regulatory decisions, it seems likely that some sort of indicator(s) will remain necessary to identify with clarity those schools that might need additional support or intervention. The principle of providing clear indication(s) of schools which might require support or intervention is important to retain in some way. The report card should make some provision for this.
2. Capturing with clarity the holistic attributes of a school is challenging. Consideration should be given to having a blend of 'low inference' standards/compliance indicators and 'high inference' indicators of school quality. As we explored in a 2022 paper, inspection can struggle to provide certain and absolute judgements when working with subjective or 'high inference' inspection methodologies. Things like curriculum and assessment tend to contain a lot of 'noise', making it hard to be certain about quality, and yet these are often the things that reveal more about school quality as experienced by pupils. A key task is to make sure that the weight and consequences attached to particular indicators are appropriate for the degree of certainty and consistency that can be expected from the inspection and reporting instrument.
3. While it seems plausible that some of the content of a report card would be derived from inspection activity, it would allow for other information, such as latest published data on achievement and attendance to be published alongside. Care would need to be taken to help parents and other stakeholders to understand the age and nature of such a range of reported material, recognising that some may be leading/lagging indicators of quality.
4. Aggregation should be treated with caution. While it may be tempting to attempt some sort of aggregation of a report card, for example into a numeric score, doing so risks emulating some of the disadvantages in the current system of grades. It may be more

helpful to move away entirely from the sense of an 'overall' view of a school as a valid construct in itself, favouring instead the curation of the right blend of low-inference and high-inference indicators – recognising there may be indicators that suggest support is needed without attempting to 'line up' indicators in the way current inspection practice seems to. Some variation within a school ought to be expected, with the aim not being to flatten or disguise this but rather to show it and identify where standards indicate support is necessary.

5. The report card should be located within a broader government regulatory strategy.



# Briefing note: Inspecting school groups

## Labour policy

- Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to inspect school trusts. In September, as part of the response to its Big Listen consultation Ofsted stated it intended to work with government on legislation to allow inspection of the quality of groups and chains of state-funded schools (school trusts and local authorities) and independent schools at the level of the responsible body.

## CST's position

- Given the work needed to do this well, government and Ofsted should take the appropriate time to ensure these inspections are well designed and implemented strategically.
- Expertise about trusts resides in the trust system itself. It is therefore important that government and Ofsted engage thoughtfully and constructively with the sector at all stages of this process, and that work draws on the best available evidence.

## Points for government and Ofsted to consider

1. There is already a significant piece of work required to respond to existing school level inspection priorities. Ofsted has an ambitious programme to introduce a new school inspection framework and reporting system by September 2025, in addition to numerous other changes emerging from the Big Listen exercise. These must be done well and will take up much of Ofsted's band width, limiting capacity for any expansion of inspections.
2. Inspection should be concerned with the quality of provision in schools, and trust inspection should be geared towards understanding how the trust helps its schools to improve provision. The sector holds the expertise in this area and should be central to the development of this work.
3. It is important that Ofsted does not at this stage prescribe what quality looks like in 'central' parts of trusts. There is variation in how trusts organise their central functions and there is little evidence about the most/least effective ways of doing this.
4. Ofsted does not currently have the workforce required to deliver high quality trust inspection. In its Big Listen response, Ofsted rightly acknowledged the importance of tailoring inspection activity to be relevant to the setting; to have credibility inspecting trust functions, inspectors will need to have experience of these activities. Recruiting these people into Ofsted is a challenge, in part because of HMI salary levels and because acting as an inspector would require significant time away from the trust. A credible plan to build Ofsted's trust workforce and expertise is needed.
5. School level and trust inspection outcomes, and regulatory activity, need to be properly aligned. It will be important to make sure school and trust inspections don't contradict



each other and appear coherent to parents and regulators. It may be that oversight of trusts changes some school-level inspection practices, but the co-existence of school and trust level inspection needs to be thought through carefully.

6. There needs to be a clear understanding of the purpose of trust inspection, and why it is needed. Claims that trusts are not accountable are not accurate, and these claims undermine public trust in public institutions. A rationale based on gaining insight into a trusts' capacity to improve schools is about gaining an additional view and does not have to be framed as a deficit narrative.
7. If Ofsted is to inspect school trusts, it might also be appropriate to inspect other types of school group. As detailed in Ofsted's response to the Big Listen, trusts are not the model for school groups. Current inspections of local authorities focus on statutory responsibilities rather than the aspects most closely associated with trusts: quality of schools and improvement capacity. There should be parity in inspection across all types of state-funded school.

# Briefing Note: Annual review of safeguarding, attendance and off-rolling

## Labour policy

- Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to undertake annual reviews of safeguarding, attendance and off-rolling. In September 2024, as part of its Big Listen response Ofsted said it would work with government to implement this.

## CST's position

- Safeguarding, attendance and off-rolling are vital issues. CST supports work done by government and Ofsted to secure good practice in these areas through approaches that are well-designed, proportionate and effective.
- Most schools and trusts manage these issues well. Reforms can support stronger practice but must avoid adding unnecessary regulatory burden to schools and trusts.
- There are critical considerations about resourcing, workforce and the interaction with wider accountability and regulatory systems that must be addressed carefully. While the aim of this work is principled and important, risks must be mitigated to avoid unintended consequences.

## Points for government and Ofsted to consider

1. Roles, responsibilities and resources need to be carefully considered. As outlined in the Big Listen response, Ofsted is likely the best-placed body to oversee this new reporting. However, it is unlikely that Ofsted currently has the resource to undertake the entirety of this work. Additional resource for Ofsted may be required. Given the statutory role of local authorities in relation to safeguarding, direct involvement by LAs would create a conflict with their role as responsible bodies for maintained schools. As a result, CST believes it is important that Ofsted retains any 'inspector' function and status involved in the review work.
2. Local authorities already hold some statutory responsibilities which could be better aligned with the objectives of the new checks, without framing LAs as inspectors. For example, section 14b of the Children Act 2004 already gives local authorities the power to request information from schools in order that it can perform a quality assurance function in relation to aspects of safeguarding. This typically takes the shape of an audit tool. However, the specifics of this vary across local authorities, which means there is inconsistency between areas, and additional burden for geographically-diverse trusts. It may be that a common approach to this function could be established across LAs, the product of which could be triangulated by Ofsted as part of its inspection activity in schools and local authorities.

3. The new review instrument should be located within a broader government regulatory strategy. The outputs of the Big Listen indicate that Ofsted would continue to explore the effectiveness of safeguarding during routine inspection activity, so the review must complement and not contradict this work. Intervention following reviews and/or inspection activity must be carefully considered in to avoid a return to hard-edged regulatory intervention, and should instead reflect the pilot announced through the Big Listen to give schools three months to address isolated safeguarding concerns before concluding an inspection.



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