National School Trust Report

September 2026

Confederation of School Trusts

edurio

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Foreword

Leora Cruddas CBE
Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts

This year's survey comes at an important time for schools in England. We stand on the edge of many big changes, with a renewed government that is seeking to understand the views of the sector on a wide range of issues.

CST's work to advocate for, connect, and support school trusts is deeply informed by talking to our member trusts, and this survey is a major part of that. School trusts are busy organisations and I do not underestimate the time it takes to sit down and think hard about some of the questions we pose. I thank all those CEOs who have helped us by responding. This is your report.

Now in our fifth year of analysis, we have a unique perspective on the evolution of the sector. With anticipated changes to curriculum and to provision for children with special educational needs at the forefront of so many minds as we start the academic year, this year we see education back as the most-named priority for trust leaders after two years in which finance led. This is not to say school funding is suddenly perfect: intense pressures remain, but boards and leaders now feel more confident in what they and their organisations need to do to reflect them.

We are also seeing big changes in how we operate, with a startling growth in the use of artificial intelligence tools in classrooms and in trust administration. When we first asked about this in 2024 trusts were experimenting. Today, just 6% of trusts say they don't have formal use of AI, with activity touching every area of what we do. Together with changes to pupil numbers, and shifts to attitudes to work, not just what we do but how we do it looks set to change dramatically.

Trust leaders expect to see considerable consolidation in the sector, with a fifth of CEOs expecting their trusts to merge with another, as well as continued progress on schools becoming academies. 64% of pupils at state-funded schools now attend academies; for secondary-age pupils, it is 84%. As well as consolidation, leaders say they expect that proportion will continue to rise as new schools join too.

Academies and trusts are built on change and innovation, and that shows no sign of letting up in the year ahead. The survey shows we have leaders planning for the challenges to come, so that we can collectively continue to advance education for England's children.

Introduction

For the fifth year, the Confederation of School Trusts and Edurio have partnered to conduct the National School Trust Survey. The design of the survey is informed by CST's Building Strong Trusts framework and explores school trust priorities and challenges across the various elements of trust leadership.

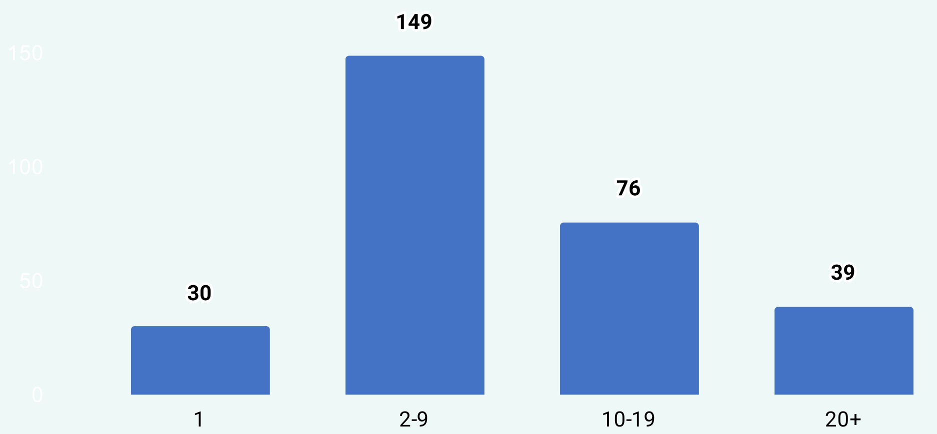
CST Strong Trust Framework

In June and July 2026, trust accounting officers across England participated in the survey; these are the senior leaders directly responsible to Parliament for their trusts, typically the trust chief executive. The survey covered trusts of all sizes, ranging from trusts with a single academy to those managing dozens of schools, making it a representative sample of school trusts across the sector. To ensure reliability, trust accounting officers were invited to respond to the survey via a dedicated link available only to them, allowing for a single response per trust, making this the most extensive and validated set of trust CEO priorities and challenges.

[1] Building Strong Trusts, Confederation of School Trusts, April 2023, https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/guidance-and-policy/building-strong-trusts/

Of the CEOs that responded to this year's survey 149 (51%) were CEOs of trusts with between two and nine schools. 39 of the CEOs we surveyed were leading trusts with 20 or more schools.

How many schools are in your trust



This summary report highlights responses to key questions in the survey based on priorities highlighted by trust leaders as we begin the academic year 2026/27.

We start with a look at overall trust leadership priorities and challenges, before reviewing some of the bigger changes for the year ahead. We finish with a look at the solid foundations, the elements of trust leadership where efforts remain consistent into the new year.

Sector Priorities

The big picture for the sector as we head into the new year

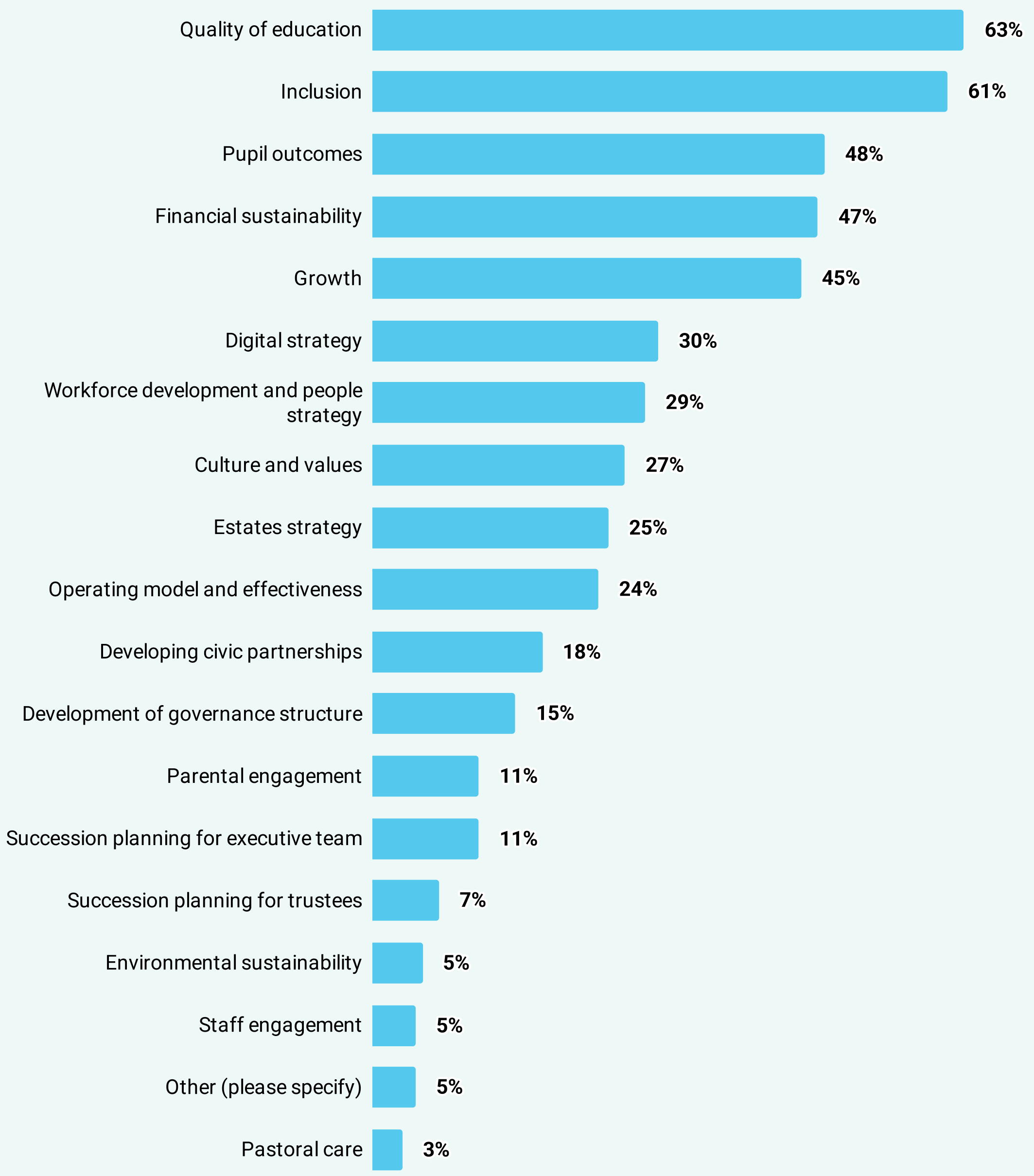
Sector Priorities

Trust leaders enter the new academic year with a markedly different set of priorities than in recent years. For the first time since 2023, financial sustainability does not top the agenda, with quality of education and inclusion ranking higher. This shift doesn't mean the financial pressure has eased, however: CEOs who still rank financial sustainability as a priority are far more likely than any other group to also flag it as a significant challenge, underlining a sector still managing tight margins even as its attention turns outward to standards and pupil experience.

This chapter examines trust and CEO strategic priorities across key areas that make up the oversight of a school trust. This serves as a vital starting point for our exploration of the findings in this year's report.

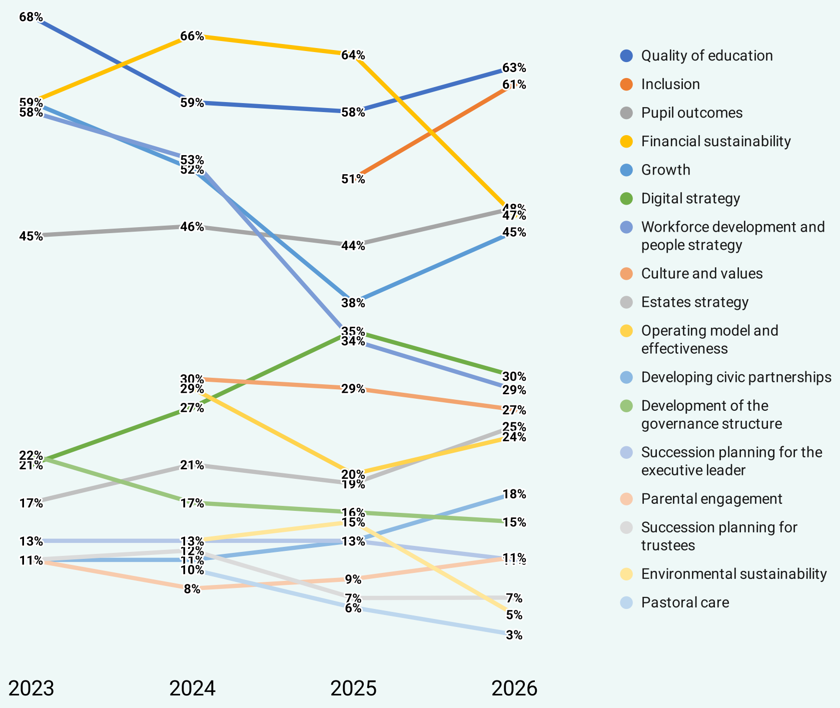
Overall priorities

What are the top five strategic priorities for your trust in the next academic year?



For the first time since 2023, financial sustainability is not the number one priority for trust CEOs next year - though, as we report later, it remains a major concern. Quality of education is the top priority, with 63% of CEOs selecting it, up from 58% last year. Inclusion was selected by 61% (up from 51%), and pupil outcomes is third, with 48% (up slightly from 44%). Financial sustainability and growth are the fourth and fifth highest priorities, selected by 47% and 45% of CEOs, respectively. Financial sustainability has seen the biggest reduction in perceived priority, down from 64% last year.

What are the top five strategic priorities for your trust in the next academic year?

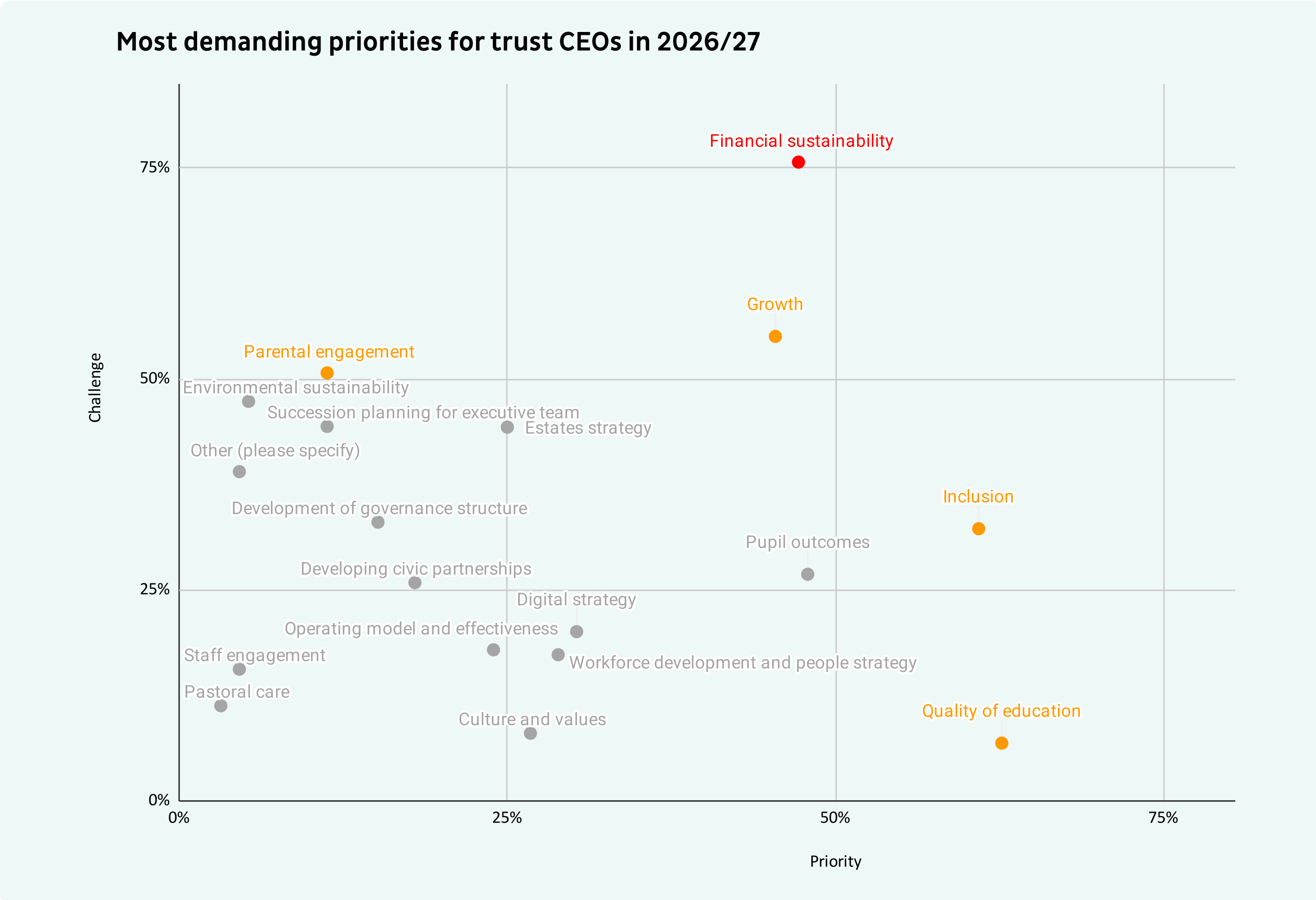


Challenges

When exploring the challenges facing trusts, we look at them in the context of the priorities they have also reported. This chart shows the proportion of CEOs who selected each priority vs the share of CEOs who also said this priority is a key challenge for their trust.

Whilst financial sustainability is seen as less of a priority than last year, for those prioritising it, it is still expected to be a big challenge: 76% of CEOs who expect to prioritise financial sustainability think it will be a challenge. Quality of education was the biggest area of priority for trust CEOs, but it was not as likely to be reported as challenging, with less than 10% of CEOs categorising it as a significant challenge.

Growth was also identified as both a priority and a challenge. Succession planning for trustees was rated as a significant challenge, but not an area that many trusts are currently prioritising.



Barriers

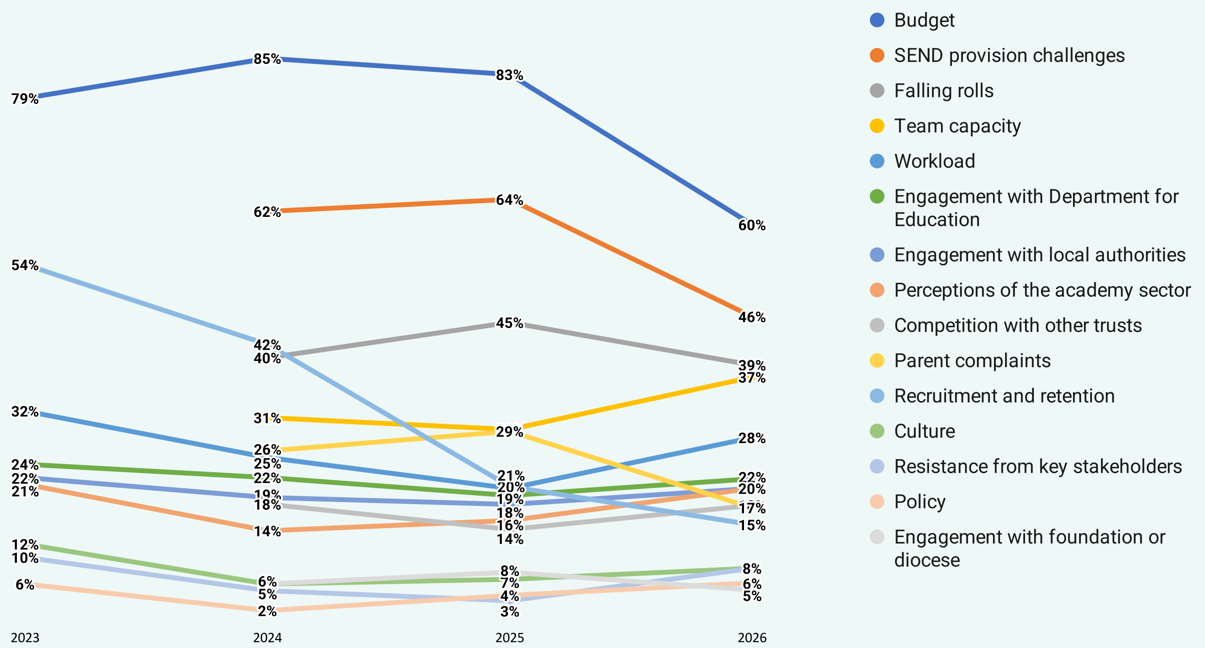
CEOs also shared the barriers they expect to face next year. 60% of CEOs reported budget as a core barrier to achieving their goals: whilst this is the biggest challenge identified, it is noteworthy that this is down from 83% last year. In both this and last year's survey, we report on the significant changes to staffing and spending trusts are anticipating to reflect available funds.

SEND provision challenges were the second most-reported barrier, highlighted by 46% of CEOs, followed by falling rolls with 39%. Each of the top three barriers appears to be less widespread in perceptions than last year.

Team capacity has increased as a perceived barrier: 37% of CEOs highlighted this in 2026, up from 29% in 2025. Perceptions of the academy sector is perceived to be a slightly bigger challenge this year than last: 20% highlighted it in 2026 compared to 16% in 2025.

The perception of recruitment and retention as a barrier continues to decline: just 15% of CEOs selected this in 2026, down from 54% in 2023, 42% in 2024, and 20% in 2025. In addition, the perception of parental complaints as a barrier is down from 29% in 2025 to 17% this year.

What barriers do you need to address to deliver your priorities for the next academic year?



Areas of improvement for the sector

We asked CEOs an open question on what they would like their trust to get better at next year. The themes mentioned broadly align with the trust priorities covered in this section, but reveal some interesting details. The following shows the main themes, as well as a selection of comments to illustrate.

1. Pupil outcomes and attainment

The most frequently cited ambition: raising standards, attainment, and outcomes, often with a specific focus on disadvantaged pupils or a particular key stage.

"Driving up standards to achieve strong and exceptional outcomes in Ofsted. We have delivered significant improvement in schools in categories judged really positively under the new framework, but I want to see this continuing to drive standards over time."

"Greater consistency across all academies, particularly in attendance, educational outcomes, and staff wellbeing, so that every pupil and member of staff experiences the very best of what our trust can offer."

"Raising attainment through strong school leadership, improving the quality of teaching."

2. Financial sustainability and efficiency

Concerns and ambitions centred on financial resilience, efficient use of resources, and doing more with tightening budgets.

"Organisational confidence and trust through effective communication. The education sector continues to face significant financial pressures and our colleagues are understandably aware of the wider narrative around funding, restructuring and difficult decisions being made across the North East."

"We have to improve our financial sustainability to remain an ongoing concern over a three-year period."

"Financial systems and procedures that are fit for purpose and able to flex as budgets change."

3. Inclusion and SEND provision

A recurring priority area, frequently linked to the SEND reforms and White Paper, and to meeting an increasingly broad range of pupil needs.

"While attendance is our most critical focus this year, we know it is ultimately a symptom of wider barriers across inclusion, belonging, curriculum engagement, and family circumstances."

"Inclusion - already a relative area of strength but we need to use the Inclusive Mainstream Fund to ensure we are in a good place for the SEND reforms"

"Meeting the needs of an increasingly broad range of additional needs in mainstream"

4. Growth: attracting and merging schools

Ambitions to expand trusts, including attracting new schools, managing recent mergers, and operating at greater scale.

"Marketing the trust itself to attract more local schools. We have had success with our existing schools and have completed some initial outreach, however schools seem to have lost the 'drive' to join a trust, including stand-alone trusts joining a slightly larger trust."

"Working at scale, we have recently merged an 11-school and six-school trust, to make 17, which is very different."

"Networking with potential schools who could join our trust."

5. Operational systems, central services & digital

Ambitions around building stronger central capacity: systems, IT and digital infrastructure, governance risk, and shared services.

"Managing compliance for the board and digital risk across the trust. Moving IT provision and security to trust level - all schools under the same umbrella. Developing our Inclusion strategy."

"Local governance to become more strategic and cohesive within the scheme of governance. More centralisation and efficiency in central operations and services."

"Systemic approaches to supporting our back office operation."

The Year Ahead

Big shifts and themes for the year ahead

The year ahead

This chapter takes a closer look at some of the key areas underpinning trust strategy this year: these have been selected as focus areas for this chapter either because they represent big shifts in policy or priority this year, or - in the case of financial sustainability and SEND provision - they appear in multiple places across our review of what it means to run a trust in 2026.

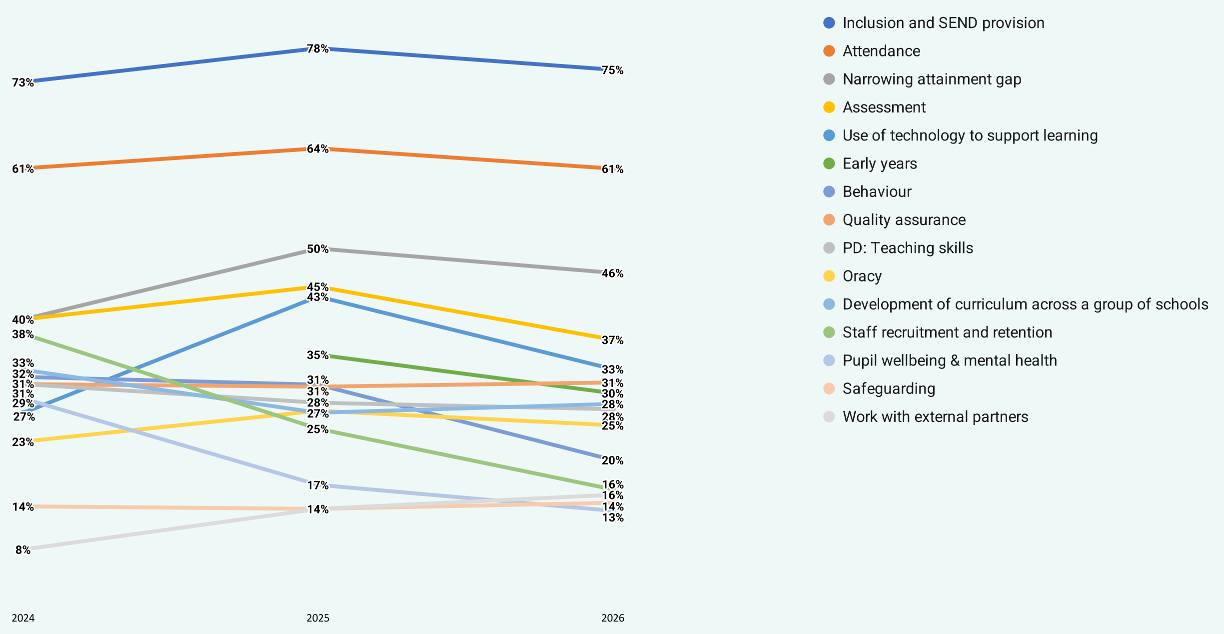
High-quality, inclusive education

Improving the quality of education was reported by 63% of CEOs as a priority for the next academic year, the most-reported priority for the sector this year.

Priorities and challenges

The most frequently reported area of focus in quality of education for the next academic year is inclusion and SEND provision. 75% of CEOs highlight this, followed by attendance (61%). Both of these have been the top priorities for the past three years.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on quality of education in the next academic year?



When comparing these areas of focus with the most prominent challenges CEOs face within their work, inclusion and SEND provision, as well as attendance, remain areas of high priority, and high expected challenge. Narrowing the attainment gap is expected to be a challenge by half of CEOs for whom it is a priority.

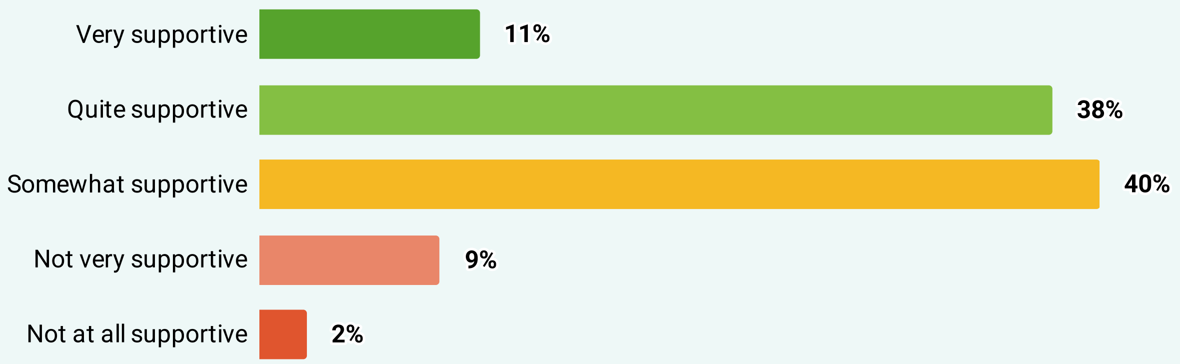
Demanding priorities in quality of education for trust CEOs in 2026/27

Special educational needs and disabilities

SEND Provision

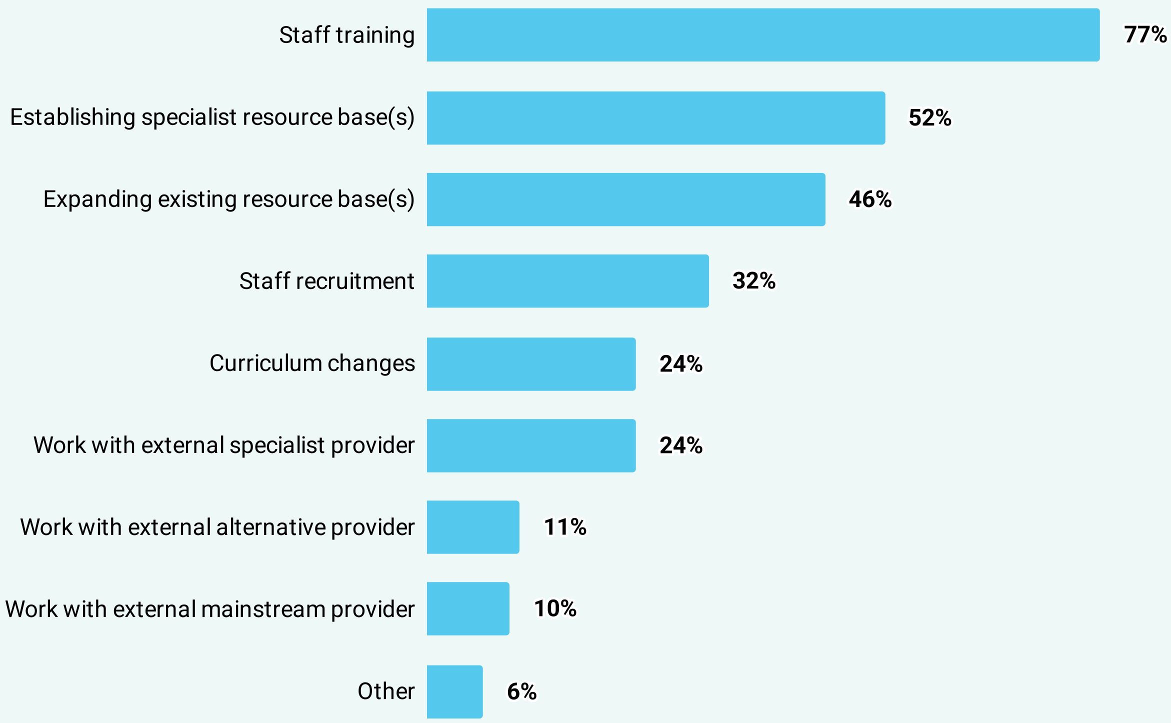
Inclusion and provision for children with special educational needs and disability have grown in focus within the sector in recent years, with many CEOs highlighting them as significant areas of concern in our survey. There is reform expected in the approach to SEND in England, and CEOs were asked how supportive they feel of changes announced so far. There is broad support for SEND reforms but, in their detailed responses, CEOs highlighted practical concerns around the availability of funding and expertise to make the proposals a reality. One CEO commented: “The principles are sound as long as the phasing of it, and the funding to support it, is sufficient. I do worry about the direction of travel being a little like a runaway train without the ability to control the speed or direction.”

The government has set out proposals for reform of SEND provision, some of which will require legislation. Overall, how supportive are you of the proposals?



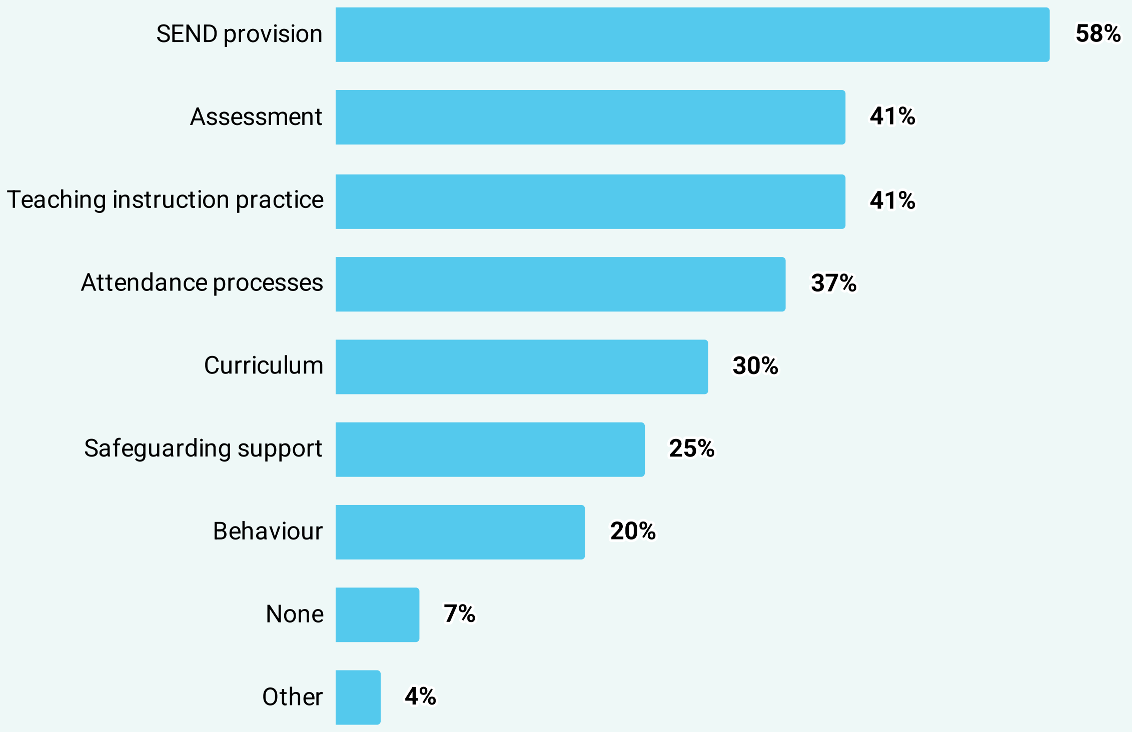
Trusts are planning a wide range of work to prepare for SEND reform. Over three quarters of trusts are considering staff training on SEND, with around a third considering recruiting new staff. Around half of trusts are looking to establish new specialist resource bases (52%) or expand their existing ones (46%) – 25% of CEOs are considering both. Around a quarter of trusts are considering curriculum changes as part of their response to SEND reforms.

Which of the following, if any, is your trust considering over the next academic year to prepare for SEND reform?



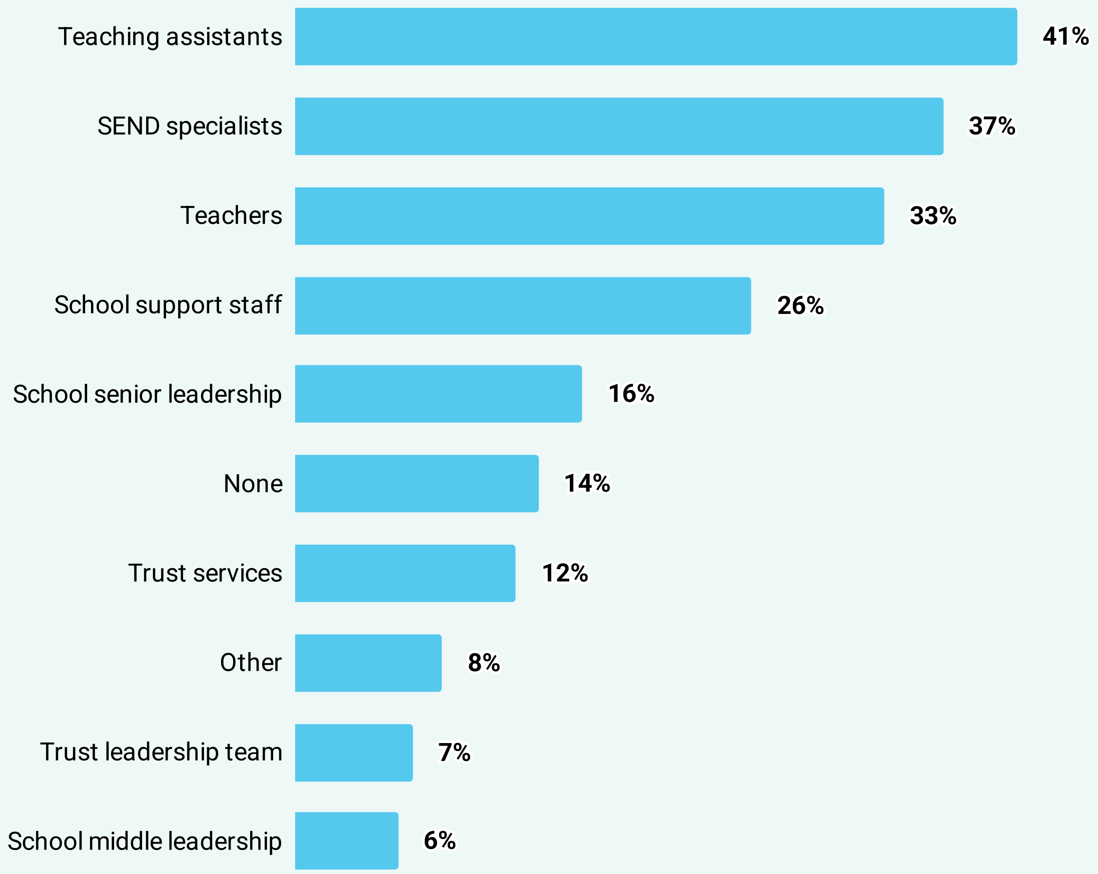
In addition to this, SEND is the number one area where CEOs are expecting to push for more trust-wide alignment over the coming year. 58% of CEOs are planning to prioritise this, a materially higher proportion than for any other area measured. Other areas for alignment include assessment (41%), teaching instruction practice (41%), attendance (37%), and curriculum (30%).

In which areas of education provision will your trust prioritise achieving more trust-wide alignment across the trust next year?



37% of trusts have struggled to fill vacancies for SEND roles in the last academic year, second only to teaching assistants. While our data does not allow us to conclude on the causes of the recruitment problems, it does highlight a central challenge to both trusts and the wider sector when it comes to delivering SEND and inclusion reform.

Which roles, if any, has your trust struggled to fill vacancies in this year?



Our analysis
Leora Cruddas CBE
Chief Executive at CST

Promoting inclusion in its widest sense has long been at the heart of many academy trusts' missions, with tackling educational attainment in areas of high deprivation a key aim. Today, the term is often used more closely with special educational needs and disability.

For many years CST has called for reform of SEND support so that the child - rather than their perceived 'problem' - is front and centre, and an approach to support that doesn't force parents, schools, and councils through administrative hoops to access funding. That call has been heard.

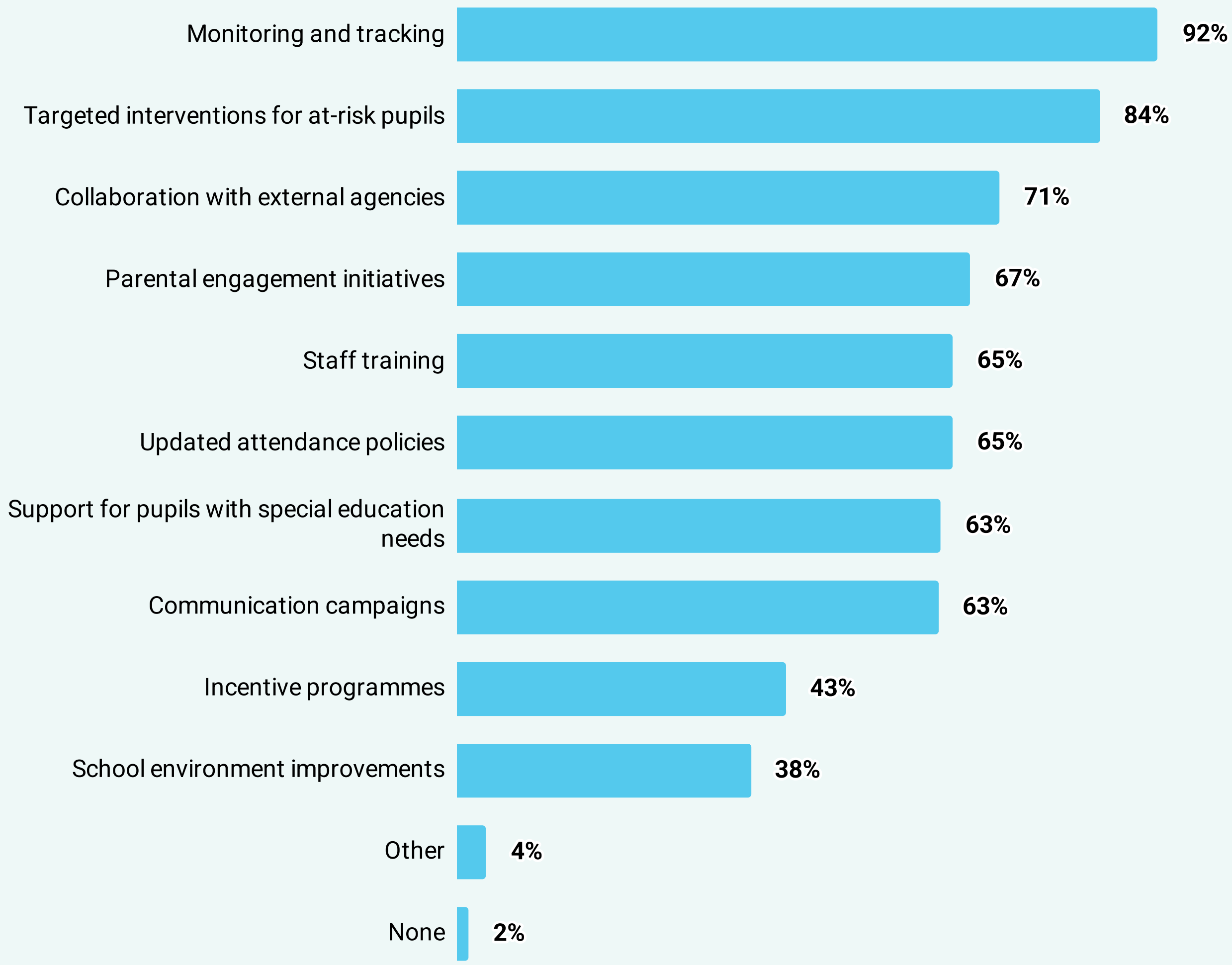
The government has set out ambitious proposals to bring in more flexible support, delivered closer to pupils wherever possible. Trust leaders support these aims, but are acutely aware of the practical challenges of funding, expert staffing, and rebuilding the confidence of parents in a SEND system that has often ended up being more obstructive than empowering. There is no lack of goodwill to improve things, but we need to ensure the changes are thoughtful, evidence-based, and well-implemented.

Attendance

After inclusion and SEND, the highest education priority for trusts is attendance. This has also been a key priority for government and for Ofsted.

Trusts reported significant activity to address attendance, with the top approaches being monitoring and tracking (92%), targeted interventions (84%), collaboration with external agencies (71%), parental engagement (67%), as well as staff training and updated attendance policies (both 65%).

What activities has your trust undertaken last year to improve pupil attendance?



We also asked trusts what additional support they thought might help pupil attendance.

Ideas included:

- Consistent national and local messaging: a high-profile national campaign emphasising the importance of school attendance, targeting parents and carers, with positive and supportive messaging; consistency and clarity from government and local authorities on attendance expectations and enforcement.

- Parental engagement and accountability: parental attitudes and responsibilities are seen as central to attendance issues; concerns were raised over approaches to mental health claims and tendencies to take holidays during term time.

- Multi-agency collaboration: stronger collaboration between schools, local authorities, health professionals, social care, and police is recommended.

- Support for vulnerable and diverse groups: recognition that context matters, especially from regulators and during inspections. Pupils with SEND, mental health concerns, or from disadvantaged backgrounds face unique barriers, as do alternative provision settings.

- Resource and capacity challenges: trusts face funding barriers to employing attendance officers, family support workers, and pastoral staff.

- Policy and system improvements: recognition that schools alone cannot solve attendance issues - broader societal and policy changes are needed.

RISE school support

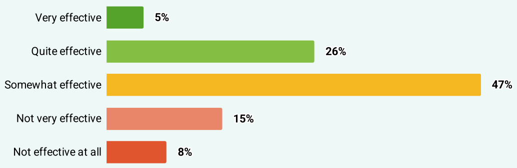
The DfE has increasingly focused its efforts around support for schools through its Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence programme, known as RISE. This currently includes a universal offer - open to all schools - and separate targeted help following Ofsted inspections. In this year's survey, CEOs were asked to reflect on their usage of, and attitudes towards, the RISE support available to them.

Of the four topics where universal support has been offered, attendance is the most accessed area: two-thirds of CEOs were able to provide feedback on their view of the support on attendance, whilst under half were able to for the remaining three (attainment, mainstream inclusivity and SEND, and reception and early language development). For those who've accessed the RISE universal support, views are not entirely positive: 31% found the attendance support effective, 25% for attainment, 20% for mainstream inclusivity / SEND. Reception and early language development received the most positive feedback from those who have accessed it: 36% reported that it was very or quite effective.

Attendance

32%

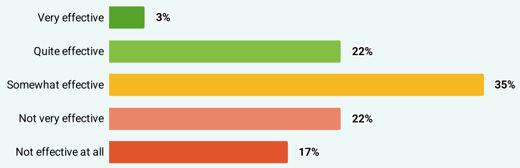
Have not accessed support



Attainment

53%

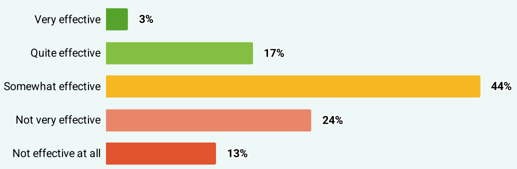
Have not accessed support



Mainstream inclusivity/SEND

54%

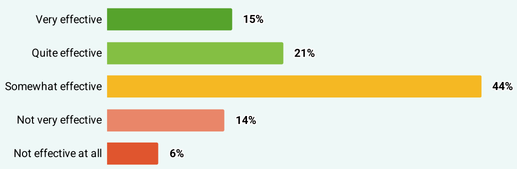
Have not accessed support



Reception and Early Language Development

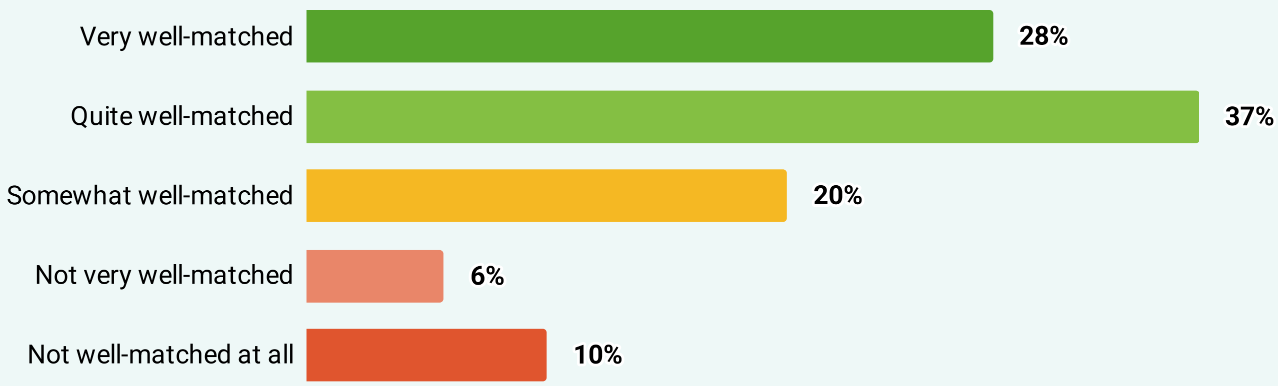
54%

Have not accessed support



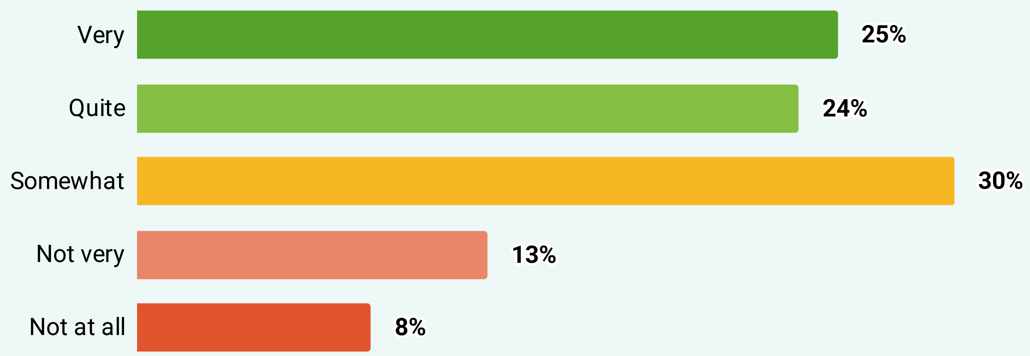
In addition to the universal support, some schools have also been offered RISE targeted support, based on prior Ofsted reviews and other criteria. 28% of the CEOs said they have been offered this support in one or more of their schools. Of those who have been offered targeted RISE support, the majority - 65% - feel that the advisers appointed to them were quite or very well-matched, compared to 16% who felt that they were not.

In your experience, how well-matched was your appointed RISE adviser(s) to the school receiving support?



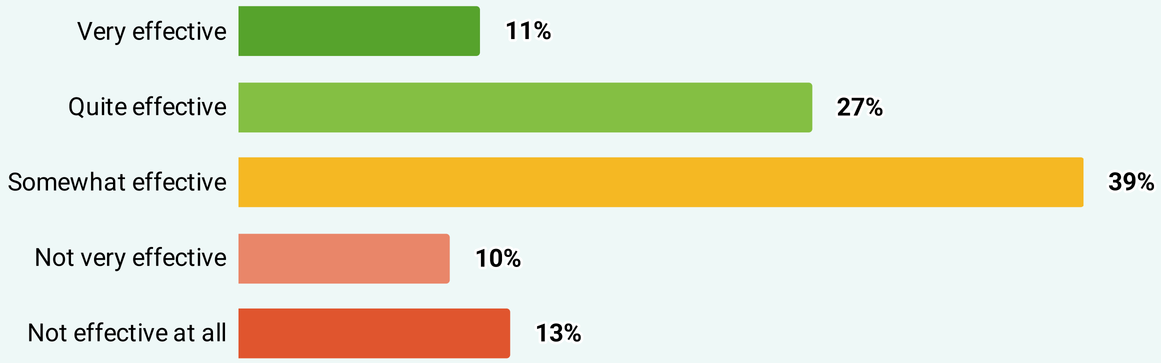
Around half (49%) of CEOs felt that the time available to work with the advisers was very or quite appropriate.

How appropriate was the amount of time available to work with the RISE adviser(s)?



Around two in five (38%) believe that the support they have received from their RISE advisers was very or quite effective at enabling lasting improvements in the areas that were targeted for support.

How effective do you think the RISE support was in enabling lasting improvement in the targeted area(s)?



We asked CEOs to share their views on the RISE programme, in their own words. Opinions are quite mixed, with some positive impressions and a range of challenges identified. The following shows the main themes, as well as a selection of comments to illustrate.

1. No experience / not yet engaged with RISE
The most frequently occurring theme. Many trusts report no contact, no involvement, or insufficient experience to comment. This includes trusts that had expected to be included as eligible schools or supporting organisations.

"We do not currently access any RISE support. As a group of special schools, we feel quite isolated from this initiative."

"I am unable to comment. We were identified as a potential RISE school who would support others but were not selected."

"I think they completely ignore the special sector! There are definitely schools in my trust who would be eligible and we've never had any contact at all."

2. Collaboration, partnership & shared practice
A substantial positive theme, centred on the value of peer networks, collaboration across trusts, and shared practice as the core strength of the programme.

"Overall, I view the RISE programme positively. The balance between universal and targeted support provides both capacity-building and tailored intervention, helping schools to improve while fostering collaboration across the system."

"It is helpful to be able to link with colleagues and benefit from the collaboration with a network of peers."

"We are a supporting organisation and are seeing impact from our work in school... It is a useful way to collaborate and we have gained some useful ideas."

3. Funding, cost, and value for money
Concerns focus on where funding goes (supporting organisation vs. the school in need), cost-effectiveness, and perceived waste.

"It is helpful in theory, but it would be good for schools that are struggling to access additional funding directly rather than via a supporting organisation."

"We would have benefited more by being given the money to support our vulnerable schools than giving a large proportion to the supporting organisation. We know what needs doing in our own schools."

"It's expensive and lacks pace."

4. Matching and transparency of allocation
Respondents question how supporting organisations and schools are matched, perceiving a lack of transparency and a bias towards favoured supporting organisations. Expertise in smaller trusts may be being missed.

"Matching of the supporting organisation was unsatisfactory - a range of trusts offered, some highly inappropriate, then no capacity. A very small number of favoured trusts with little rationale as to why."

"I don't have great experience but it appears that large trusts secure the most RISE work."

"There is also a distinct lack of transparency in who supports and feels very 'jobs for the boys' and most often the larger trusts."

5. Lack of clarity and communication
A recurring complaint that the programme's purpose, structure, and internal communication are unclear. As the 'responsible bodies' trusts are held accountable for progress, but don't always feel engaged.

"There is a real and genuine risk of 'mission creep', which we have experienced. This can create confusion within an organisation and lead to blurred lines; clarity is vital in achieving sustainable improvement, and we are not sure the RISE programme has clarity."

"The lack of communication between RISE and the central element of the trust has meant that the trust was not always fully aware and couldn't support effectively."

"Confused. Rushed. Previous TSI program...just needed a tweak. Waste of tax payers money"

6. Context-sensitivity: SEND, specialist, and small/rural settings

Smaller in volume than the themes above, but distinct in tone: respondents from special/SEND/SEMH and rural settings feel the programme's model was not designed with their context in mind.

"I have found the approach at times to be overly compliance-driven and insufficiently responsive to the unique context and complexity of specialist SEND provision... Schools such as SEMH special schools operate within highly complex contexts, including workforce challenges, local sufficiency pressures, changing pupil profiles and the demands associated with SEMH provision. These factors require nuanced, relational and context-sensitive support rather than a predominantly accountability-focused approach."

"We haven't used it, I doubt they have experts in SEND suitable for SEND schools"

"Ok for those who need it, but not that relevant to a group of all special schools who are doing well and often 'better'"

"The events are not accessible for those trusts in more rural counties."

Our analysis
Steve Rollett
Deputy Chief Executive at CST

School attendance has been a stubborn problem for many years. Absence rates peaked after the pandemic and while they have since improved, they remain above pre-Covid levels. Our previous surveys have shown the scale and range of activity schools and trusts are trying to shift the needle.

Over the last year, we have also seen a renewed focus from the government. One, the DfE has begun collecting and analysing near-live data on absence, rather than previously termly statistics. Two, attendance is one of four headline areas for the government's universal RISE advice service, backed by online resources and local summits. Of those four areas, attendance has been the one most trusts have engaged with RISE on.

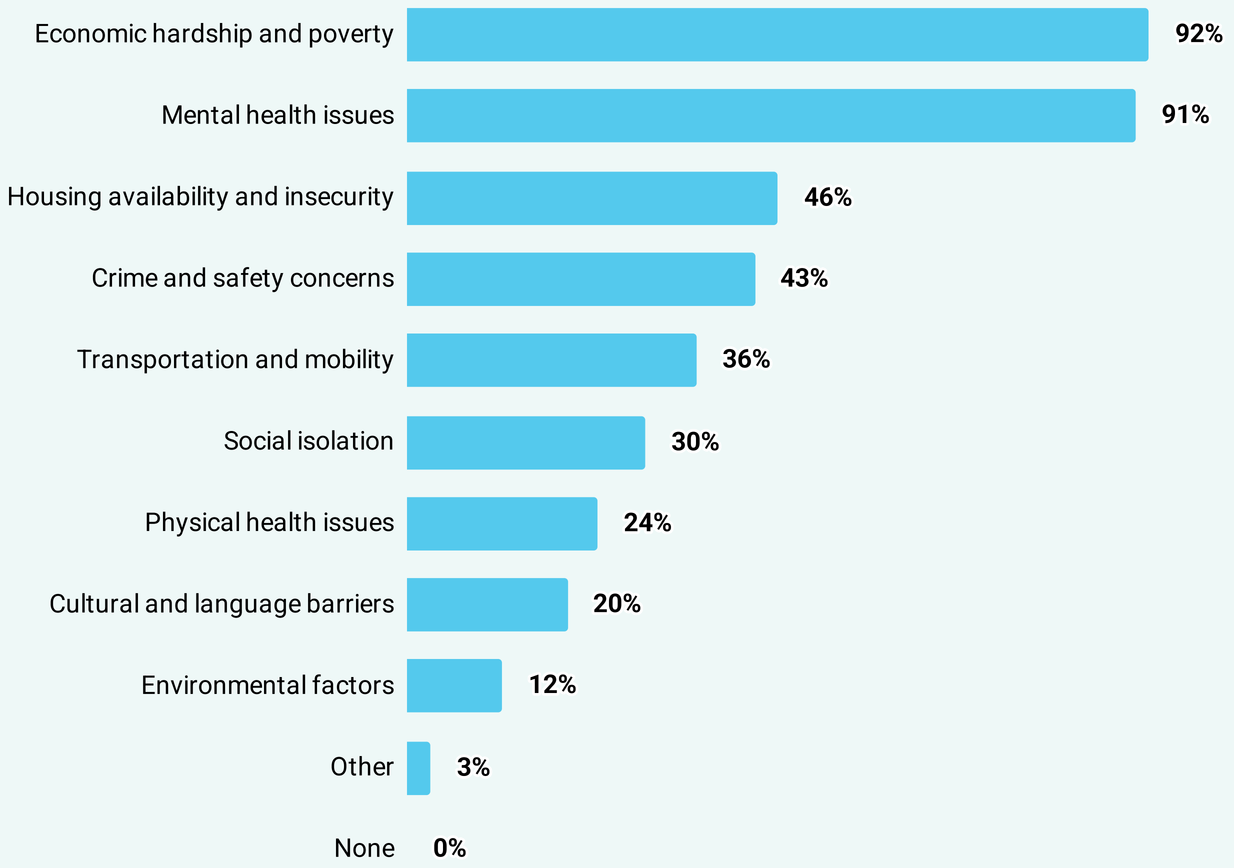
It is too early to know the impact of this, and RISE itself is an evolving offer. Early feedback - much of which is reflected in our survey - was sceptical. For the targeted RISE service, trusts have often felt the matching between advisers and recipients could be better. The DfE has listened and we have seen changes to how it operates that seem to be bearing better fruit - but it is an area CST will keep carefully monitoring and talking to the DfE about.

Working with parents and families

Schools and trusts are increasingly being asked to tackle issues like attendance and parent and pupil engagement where contributing factors sit beyond the school gate. Every CEO surveyed was able to cite factors contributing to the strain. Significant perceived sources of this pressure include economic hardship and poverty (92%), mental health issues (91%), housing availability and insecurity (46%) and crime and safety concerns (43%).

These issues go well beyond the school gates, encouraging schools and trusts to work in partnership with other local organisations.

What are the main external factors putting pressure on your children, families and communities?



Listening to and engaging with parents has always been a major part of what schools and trusts do. With rapid changes in public attitudes to authority - seen not just in schools but across public services - it is something trusts are not taking for granted. The following shows the main themes, as well as a selection of comments to illustrate the answers to the question “What is the single most effective thing your trust has done to improve its relationship with parents and families?”.

1. Communication: frequency, clarity, and methods

The most frequently cited approach: regular, clear, honest communication through varied channels (apps like ClassDojo, newsletters, translated materials, and direct email access to trust leaders).

"To communicate frequently, in clear concise ways using a variety of methods: community centre meetings, school outreach support for pastoral and academic, translations of documents into other languages or spoken word on websites, cultural recipe books, meetings in schools, newsletters and an email address they can use to reach someone at trust level."

"Being honest and transparent in all communications. Inviting parents into schools for workshops and to see teaching being delivered to their children and young people."

"Introduction of parent forums. Introduction of easy home school communication platforms e.g. Dojo."

2. Events and community engagement activities

In-person events designed to bring families into school life: coffee mornings, workshops, open days, and cultural or celebratory events.

"Supporting food bank and social supermarket access. Visiting families in the holidays to maintain connection. Family events involving food provision such as our summer BBQs"

"We have set up parent cafes in a number of our schools offering a range of parent workshops, food banks and clothing banks."

"Offering adult education courses and engaging parents through our International events and Preview days."

3. Face-to-face visibility and relational approaches

An emphasis on being visibly present and building genuine relationships, often framed explicitly as 'relational not transactional'.

"The single most effective thing the trust has done is to place relationships at the centre of our work with families. Rather than expecting families to fit around systems, we have worked to make our support more responsive, accessible and personalised."

"Listened. Adopted a relational approach. 'Do as you would be done by' mantra. First-name basis open-door policy. All staff approachable. Speaking face to face or via phone to resolve any issues - nipping things in the bud."

"Be human and visible. We are in schools in mornings and after school and interact with children - learn their names. Lots of praise. Clarity and kindness."

4. Listening and parent voice

Structured mechanisms for hearing from parents and families, and evidence that trusts are actively acting on what they hear.

"Our greatest impact has come from strengthening relationships with families through our community ambassador model. By focusing on early intervention, listening to families and working with them to address barriers to attendance, wellbeing and learning, we have developed stronger partnerships that benefit both pupils and schools."

"Trust listening sessions. This is still a huge challenge, though, probably the biggest. Staff and pupils are happier across our trust, but not parents!"

"Meaningful consultation when considering changes to the school day and school-based policies."

5. Dedicated family support roles and wraparound services

Concrete investment in people and services addressing practical family needs: family support workers, food banks, uniform swaps, and housing support.

"We employ a parental ambassador who works with families. We have an on-site food bank; we have an on-site uniform shop. We support a lot with housing - for example, writing to the council"

"Embedded a dedicated family service provision, with a Director of Family Services sitting at executive level and a family lead on school SLTs"

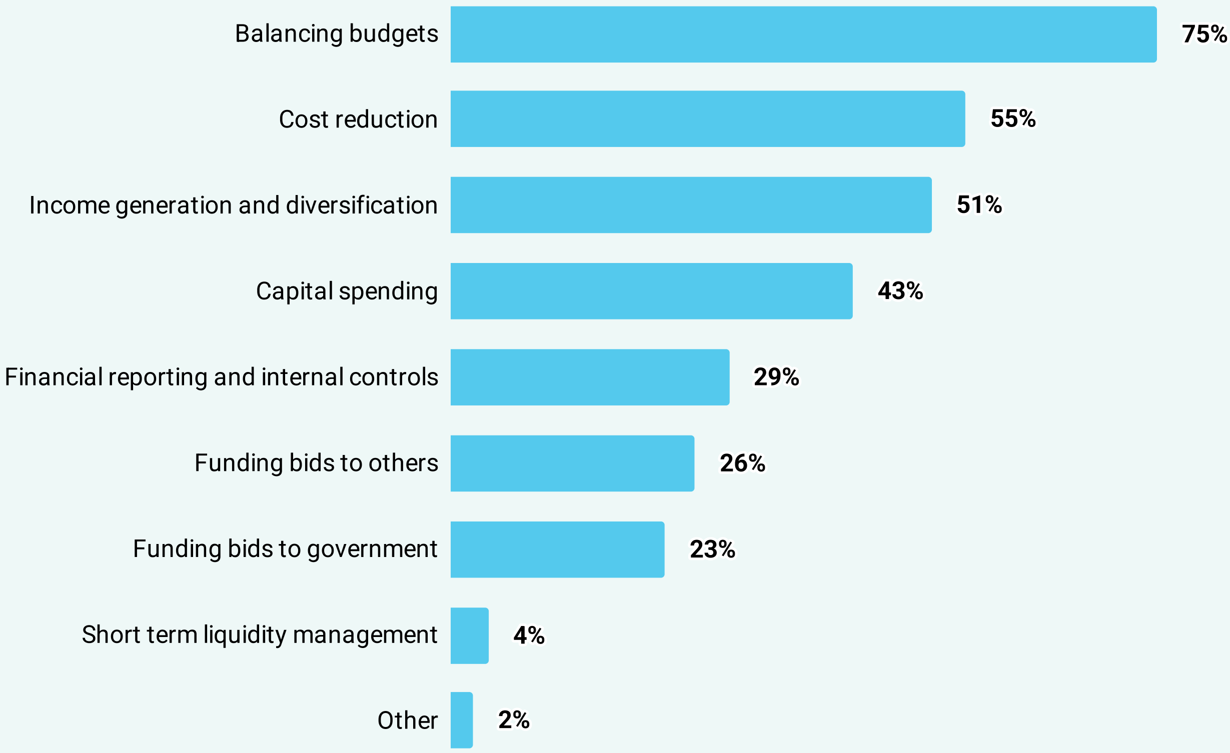
"Talk to them and be there for them consistently - every school has a dedicated family support worker"

Financial confidence

Priorities and challenges

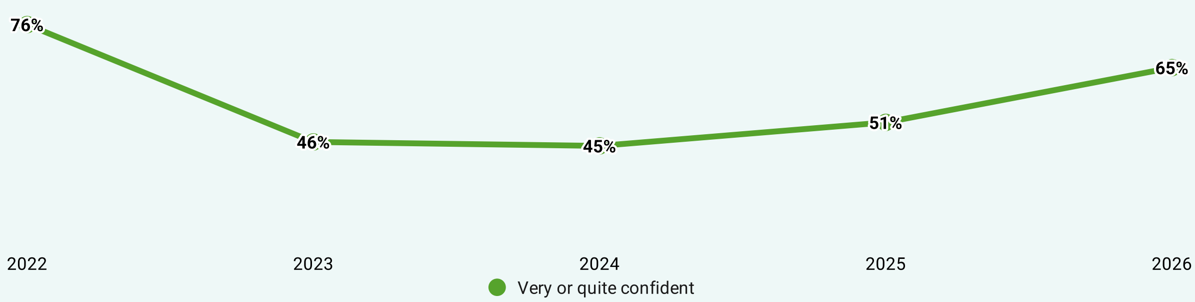
Financial priorities for 2026/27 are similar to last academic year's. Balancing budgets was the most reported financial area of focus, with 75% of CEOs reporting this; it's down from 84% last year. 55% of trusts report needing to focus their efforts on cost reduction, down from 69% last year. More than half of trusts are also looking to find new ways to generate income.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding finance in the next academic year?



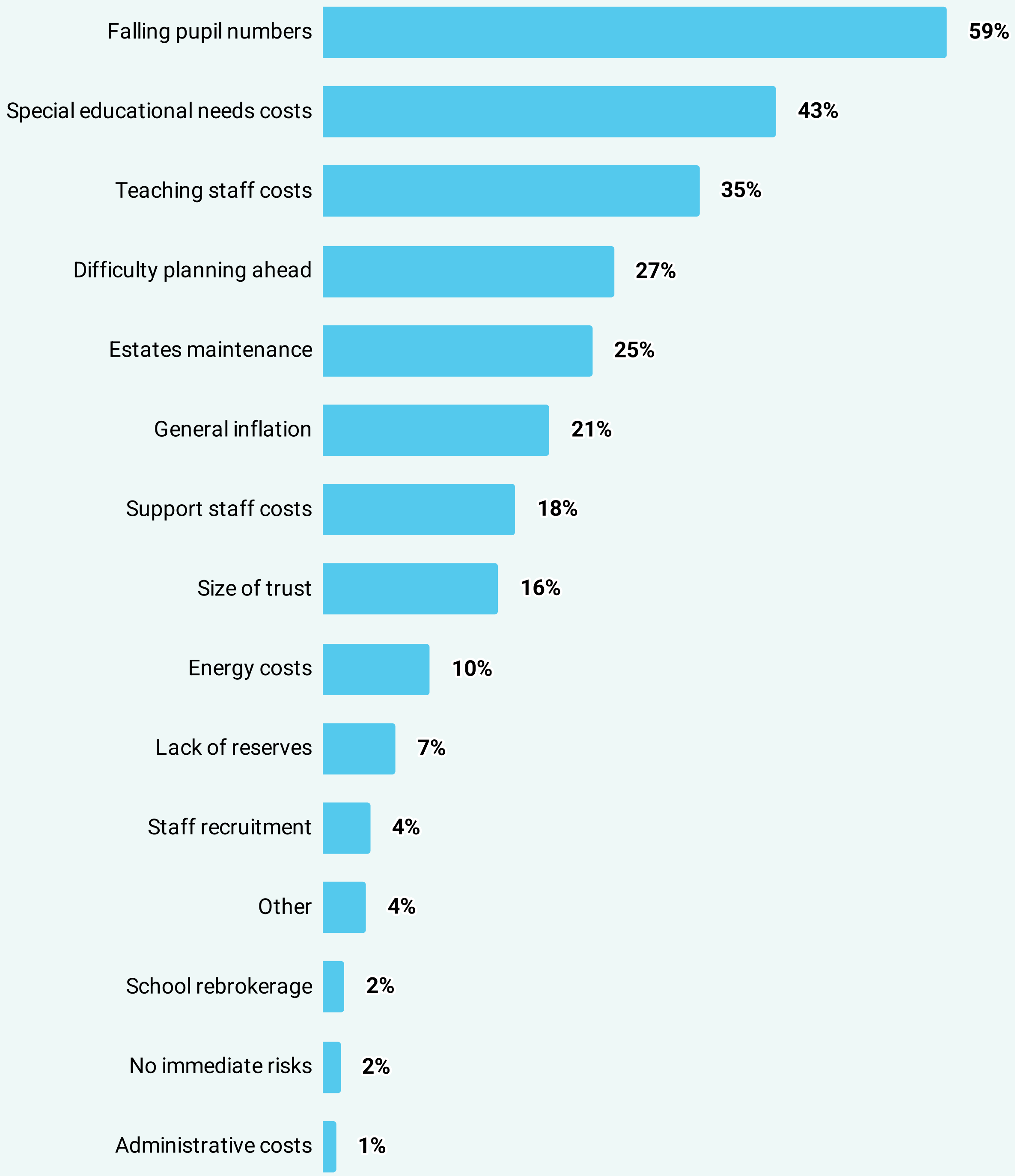
CEOs report the highest level of confidence in their trust's financial sustainability since 2022: this year, 65% report feeling very confident or quite confident. Just 11% report feeling not very confident, or not confident at all, down from 18% last year.

How confident are you about the financial sustainability of your trust?



The top three reported immediate risks to the trust's financial sustainability were: falling pupil numbers (59%), special educational needs costs (43%), and teaching staff costs (35%).

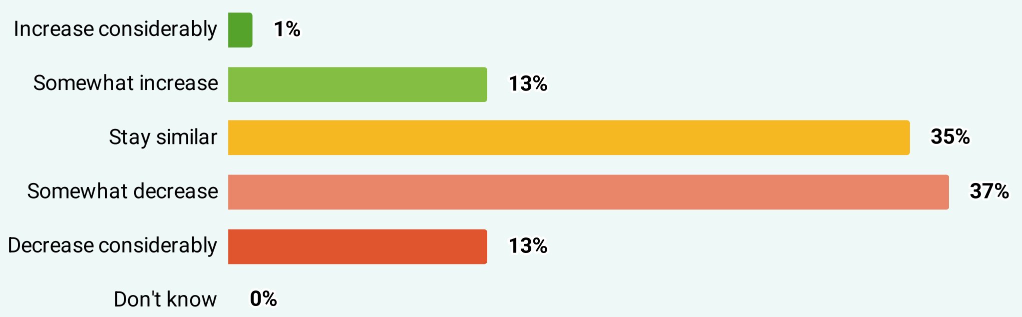
What are the top three most immediate risks to your trust's financial sustainability?



Budget and reserves

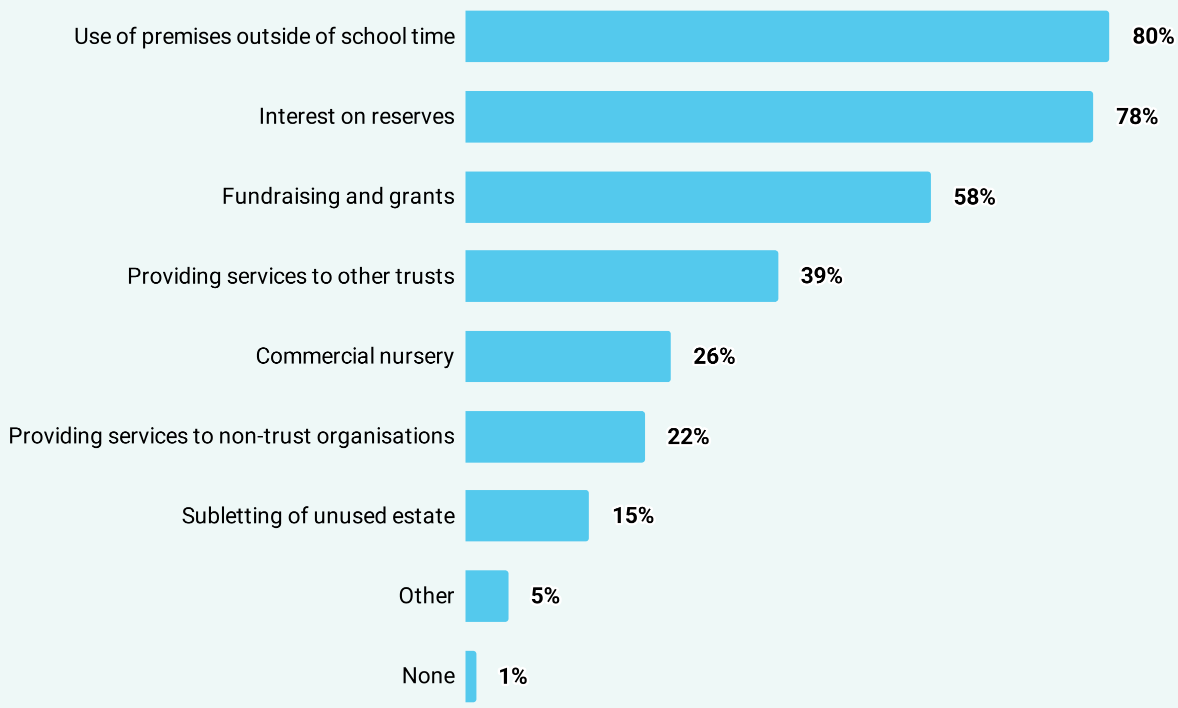
90% of trusts say they currently have sufficient reserves in line with their reserves policy and financial risk assessments. This is a slight increase from last year (84%). However, a larger proportion of CEOs expect their reserves to decrease this year than increase, with 13% predicting them to decrease considerably and 37% expecting them to decrease somewhat. The picture is mixed, however: 14% of trusts say they expect to increase reserves in the next 12 months.

How do you expect your reserves to change in the next year?



This year, we asked CEOs whether they actively pursue any additional income. 80% said they use the school premises outside of school time. 78% reported benefiting from interest on reserves, and 58% pursue fundraising and grants. More than a third of trusts provide services to other trusts.

What sources of additional income, if any, does your trust actively pursue?



In this year's survey, over a third of CEOs (36%) reported that they have lacked important information to set an accurate budget, with a further third saying some information was missing. In their comments, CEOs were particularly critical of late and incomplete announcements from government on staff pay awards and the PE & Sport Premium for primary schools. Where trusts did have information it was often scattered, difficult to find, and difficult to apply to individual trust circumstances.

Have you had access to information needed to set an accurate budget for the next year?

Comments included:

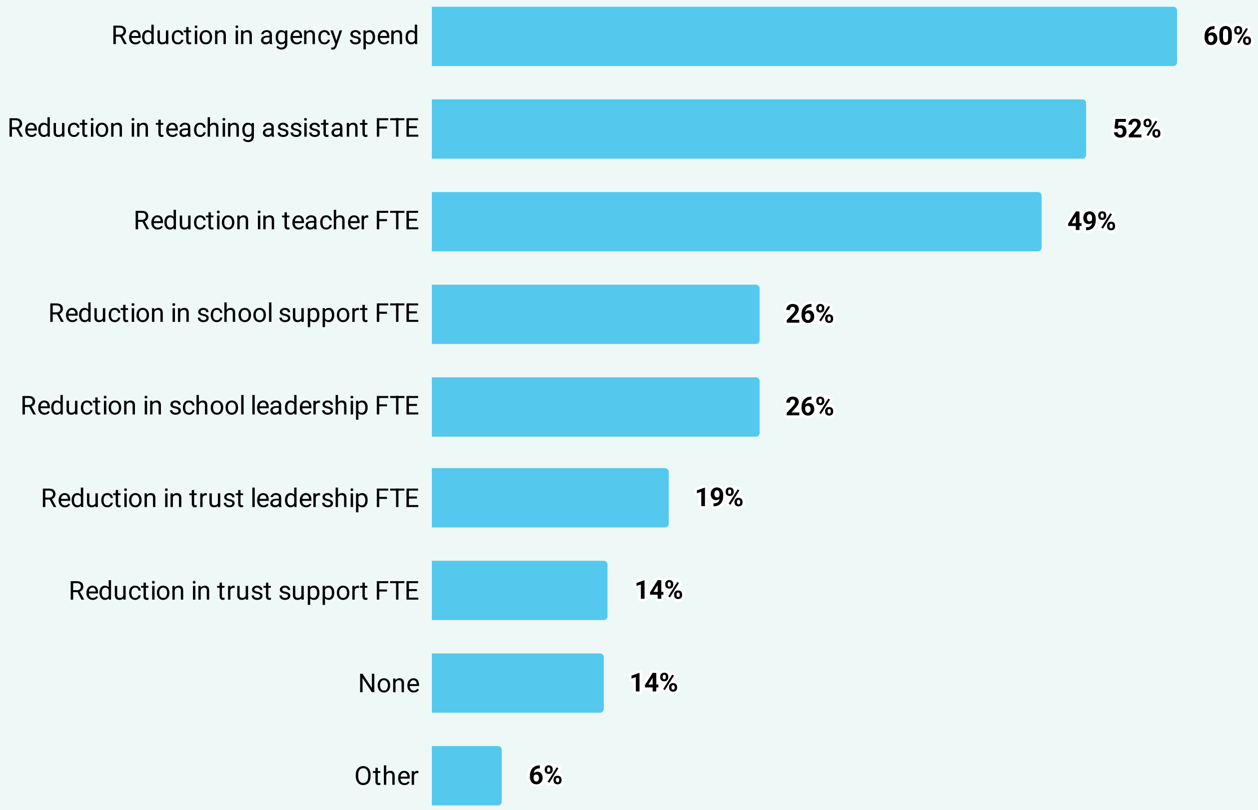
"Lack of pay decision is a key missing cost driver. Last minute changes to sports premium and the communication around this does not help."

"Information has been received far too late. We set budgets, having to strip out many essential elements of provision due to rising costs, insufficient funding, and falling pupil numbers. Then we reset budgets (causing a large additional workload) in line with the announcements about staff pay costs and pension contributions - which created a more positive budget position, meaning that we could reinstate some of the essential provision previously removed. Then we had to reset budgets again following the announcement about GAG clawback, creating a huge workload again and dissatisfaction amongst headteachers who yet again have to remove essential provision in order to balance budgets. I feel highly uncomfortable submitting the Budget Forecast Return when we are not having the GAG clawback values announced for future years until the Autumn term."

"We didn't set our final budget until after the pay award was announced. However, the failure to announce this until so late, the still unpublished Schools Budget Support Grants and the delays in publication of the Academy Trust Handbook have all led to unnecessary pressures to write last-minute budgets."

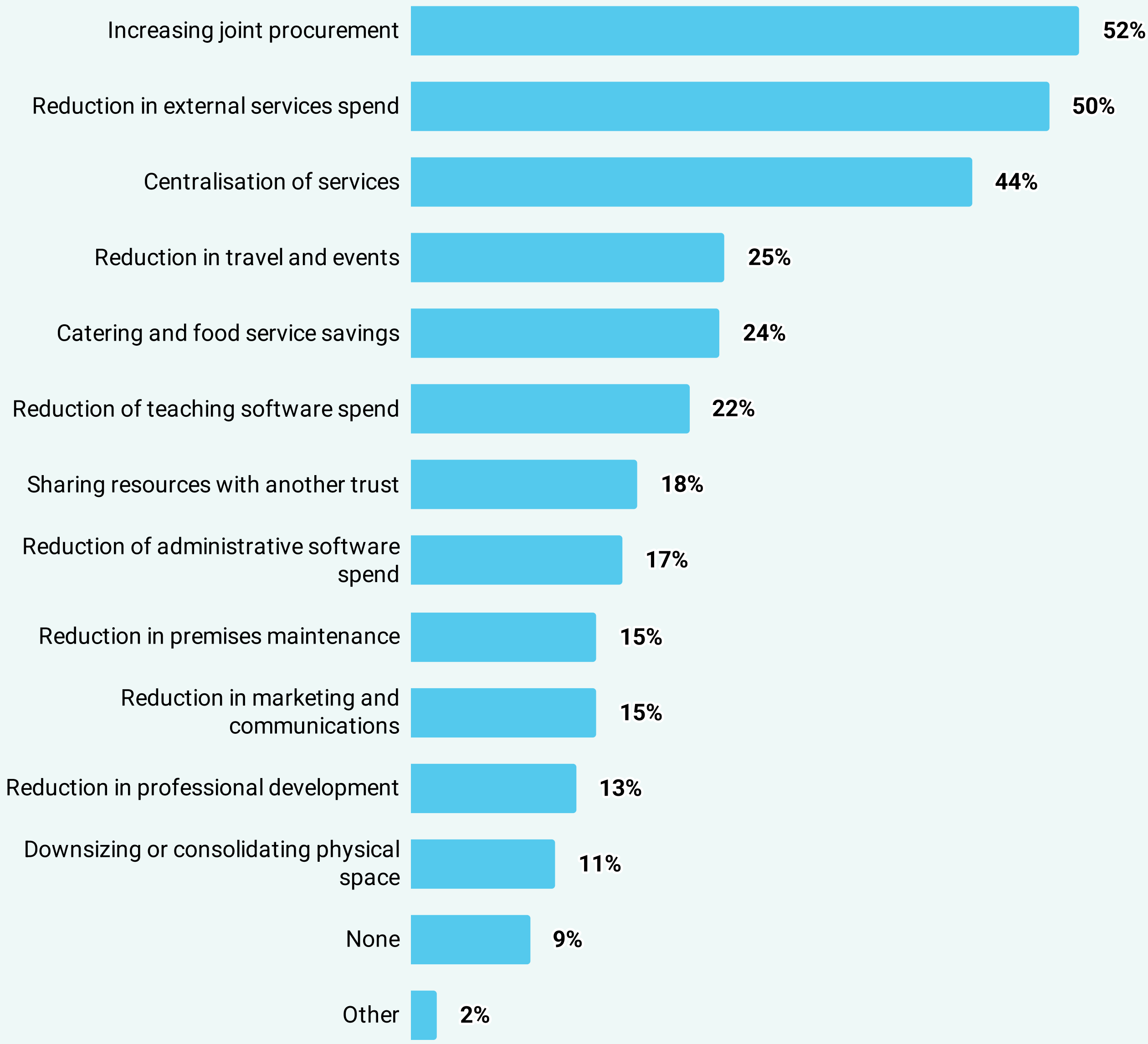
Despite financial sustainability retreating as a headline priority, trusts are still intending to make significant changes to save money, with substantial numbers of trusts looking to reduce staffing for the second year running. The majority of trusts say they expect to cut classroom staff: 60% say they intend to cut agency spend next year, 52% are planning to cut teaching assistant FTE, and 49% are planning to cut teacher FTE. A smaller proportion expect to cut leadership roles.

What staffing changes, if any, are you planning to mitigate financial pressures next year?



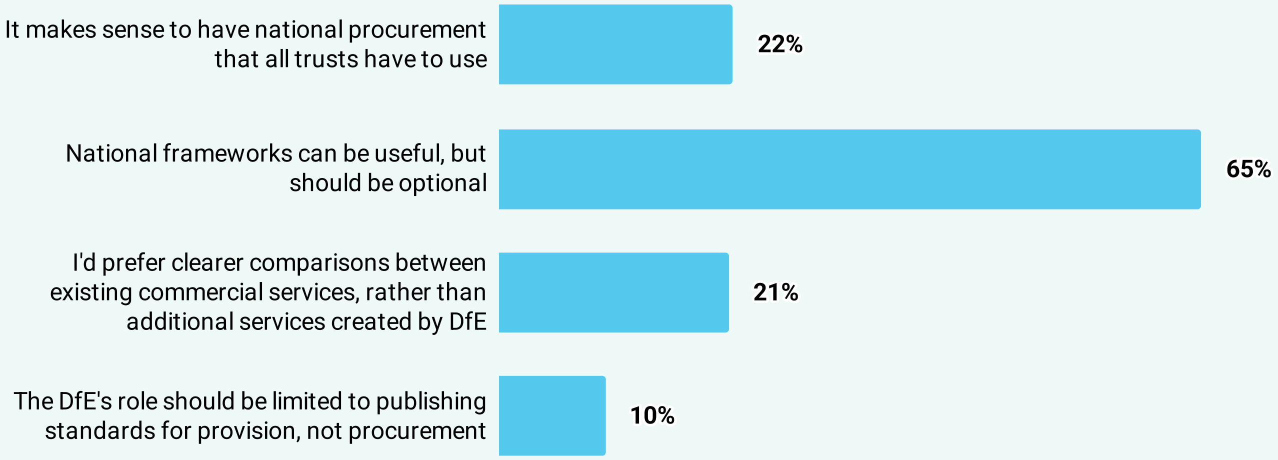
Trusts are not only looking at staff costs. When it comes to non-staffing spend reductions, the top three planned activities to mitigate financial pressures next year were increasing joint procurement (52%), reducing external services spend (50%), and centralising services (44%).

What non-staffing spend reductions, if any, are you planning to mitigate financial pressures next year?



While trusts said they wanted to prioritise joint procurement, they were more sceptical about the Department for Education's moves to introduce national procurement - such as measures in the Academy Trust Handbook on supply staff, energy, and MIS systems. Around two-thirds of trusts said national frameworks should be optional. Only a fifth of CEOs agree that trusts should have to follow national frameworks, with a similar number instead advocating for clearer comparisons between existing commercial services instead of DfE intervention.

The DfE currently offers various services and tools linked to procurement, such as a supply staff framework, access to the DfE's energy contract, and a banking comparison tool. Which of these statements best reflects your view of the DfE's role in trust procurement?



Our analysis
Samuel Skerritt
Director of Public Affairs and Policy at CST

Despite an apparent fallback in financial sustainability as a priority for CEOs, the cost pressures on trusts have not relented. Our survey finds that the majority of trusts are planning reductions in staffing and external spend, and in parallel exploring ways to generate income separate from government grants.

Falling pupil numbers is emerging as a key risk factor for the future. The DfE has increasingly focused on efficiency in trusts but CEOs are sceptical about some of the approaches - particularly a tightening up of procurement rules, requiring trusts to follow national schemes.

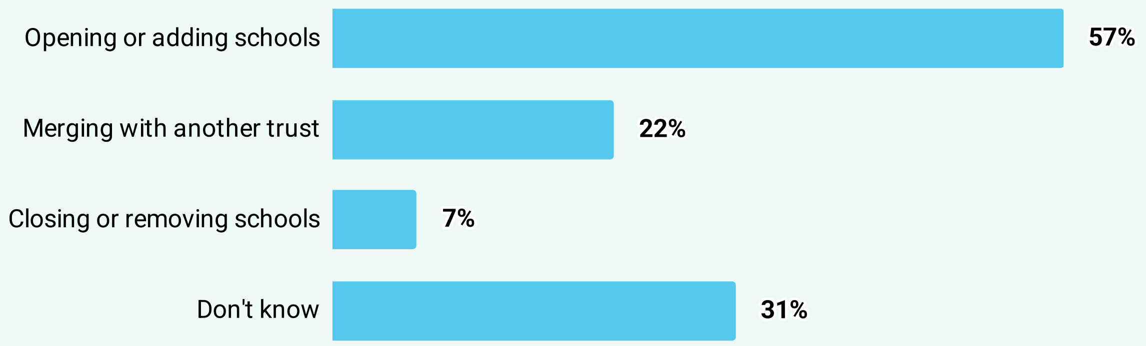
There is clear frustration from many trusts about late or missing information from government hampering their ability to plan for the future. While the DfE has set out more long-term pay plans than previously, changes in expectations for what schools and trusts must deliver and the complexity of many grants still make it challenging to plan ahead with certainty.

Trust growth: the changing shape of trusts

For many years, growth has been a major priority for trust CEOs. Respondents were asked to share more insight into how they expect their trust to change over the next year.

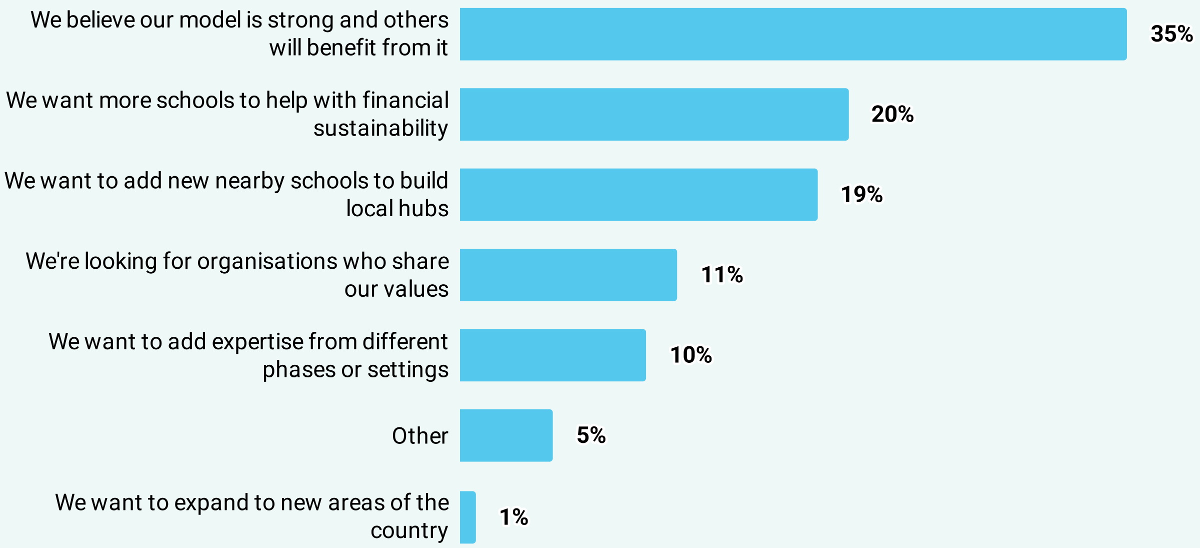
57% of CEOs report that they expect to open or add schools to their trust in the next year. More than a fifth say they are considering merging with another trust in the next 12 months. Almost a third are not sure what changes they expect.

What changes do you expect to the number of schools in your trust over the next year?



35% of CEOs who are expecting to grow, reported that they would like to do so because they believe others would benefit from their model. 20% said the main reason is for financial sustainability, and 19% said they're looking to build local hubs. 11% are looking for organisations who share their values. Just 1% of CEOs who are expecting to grow, reported that the main reason is to expand to new areas of the country.

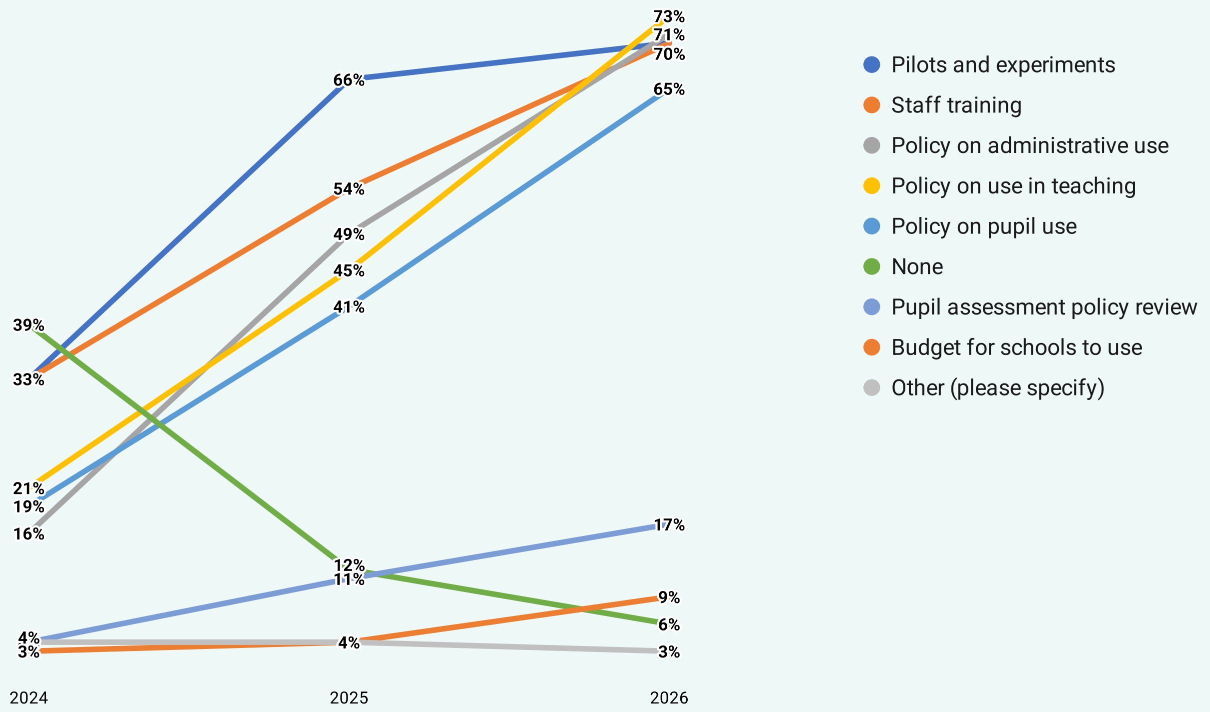
You mentioned that growth is a priority for your trust next year. Which of the following is your main reason for this?



Artificial intelligence

The capabilities of artificial intelligence continue to advance, with more people looking to use it to reduce workload. We asked CEOs about their approach to using AI: it is noteworthy that the percentage of CEOs reporting that their trusts implemented the activities has increased for nearly all activities compared to last year, and this year just 6% of CEOs reported having implemented nothing around AI. Staff policies and training in AI have become much more widespread, with significant increases in each of the last two years. It is interesting to note that whilst activity around AI has increased so drastically, budget has increased more modestly: this year, 9% of CEOs reported allocating budget to schools for AI.

Which of the following activities has your trust implemented in response to developments in Artificial Intelligence technology?



Trusts were asked to provide additional detail on their use of AI to date. Adoption has been broad, with a range of uses identified. The following shows the main themes, as well as a selection of comments to illustrate.

1. Administrative efficiency and workload reduction
The most common use case reported: automating routine admin, cutting workload, and freeing up staff time for higher-value work.

"We have created automated systems to enable regular administrative tasks to be completed automatically on a cycle. In addition, we are using AI to help with coding and formulae creation for management spreadsheets and to build internal systems."

"We have worked as a trailblazer partner over the last two years for Google Gemini, using it to reduce workload for teachers, leaders and central admin."

"This year we have been focussing on AI for workload reduction and administrative efficiencies"

2. Staff training and capacity building
A strong emphasis on structured rollout: training programmes, digital champions, steering groups, and shared networks to build confidence and consistent practice across the trust.

"We have developed prompt guides to support colleagues in effective use of generative AI. We are piloting the use of Copilot Teach across our primary academies; we have issued clear guidance to ensure it is used appropriately and we are quality assuring output."

"We have had a digital steering group leading on AI. Our subject networks have focused on AI throughout the year."

"We just completed some training delivered by a Microsoft third-party on how to use Copilot - it was great. We are "getting it right" for staff first, and then looking to roll out to pupils next year."

3. Assessment, marking, and feedback
AI is being applied to marking, assessment moderation, and generating feedback, often alongside human quality assurance.

"We have designed agents to assist with writing assessment and pupil coaching on outcomes. We have created meeting notes recordings for ease and accuracy. We have used AI to assist us in SEF writing and in data analysis."

"Teachers have used it to generate assessment questions."

"To support the development of a self-assessment tool for the ELP Leadership Framework. To provide a coach for staff and role play opportunities with feedback."

4. Policy development and compliance
Trusts are using AI to draft, review, and quality-assure policies, and to support compliance-related tasks such as website checks.

"Developed a policy, developed a collaborative network, delivered staff training which is regularly revisited as the technology changes, constant use and review, written and shared policy for use by all key stakeholders."

"To help with clerking - a minute taking device. For checking school websites for compliance - an AI screening tool. Copilot licences for key staff."

5. Teaching, learning and curriculum resources
Applications supporting classroom practice directly: lesson planning, curriculum development, and resource creation.

"We use Gemini as part of our Google package. Staff use this for teaching resources, leaders use it to support the work they do and admin use it for their tasks."

"Curriculum agents to support planning. Big data analysis to identify PP pupils not registered. Policy Bots to answer staff questions on policies."

"SENCO and colleague work efficiency and effectiveness, data patterns use, curriculum use. It’s so embedded across the trust it’s used daily by everyone"

Our analysis
Steve Rollett
Deputy Chief Executive at CST

The rapid adoption of AI in school trusts over recent years has been remarkable. We see it being used in all areas, to help teachers prepare and assess, to organise staff, finances, and resources, and to support governance. This is both exciting and concerning.

AI tools are creeping into everyday software, often without the knowledge of users, and certainly without full understanding of how and where all data is being used.

The tide is unstoppable, and our results show many trusts are happily doing more than dipping a toe in the water. Understanding the power and the risks, and where human intervention is necessary, is key to ensuring we ride the waves safely and don't get caught in the undercurrents.

Foundations

The steady forces behind thriving school trusts

School trusts are busy and complex organisations. This final chapter takes a look at some core elements of trusts where CEOs reported less change, but a continued steady focus. These are no less important than topics covered in earlier chapters, but represent areas where the sector has more established approaches, or where new ideas are just beginning to take off.

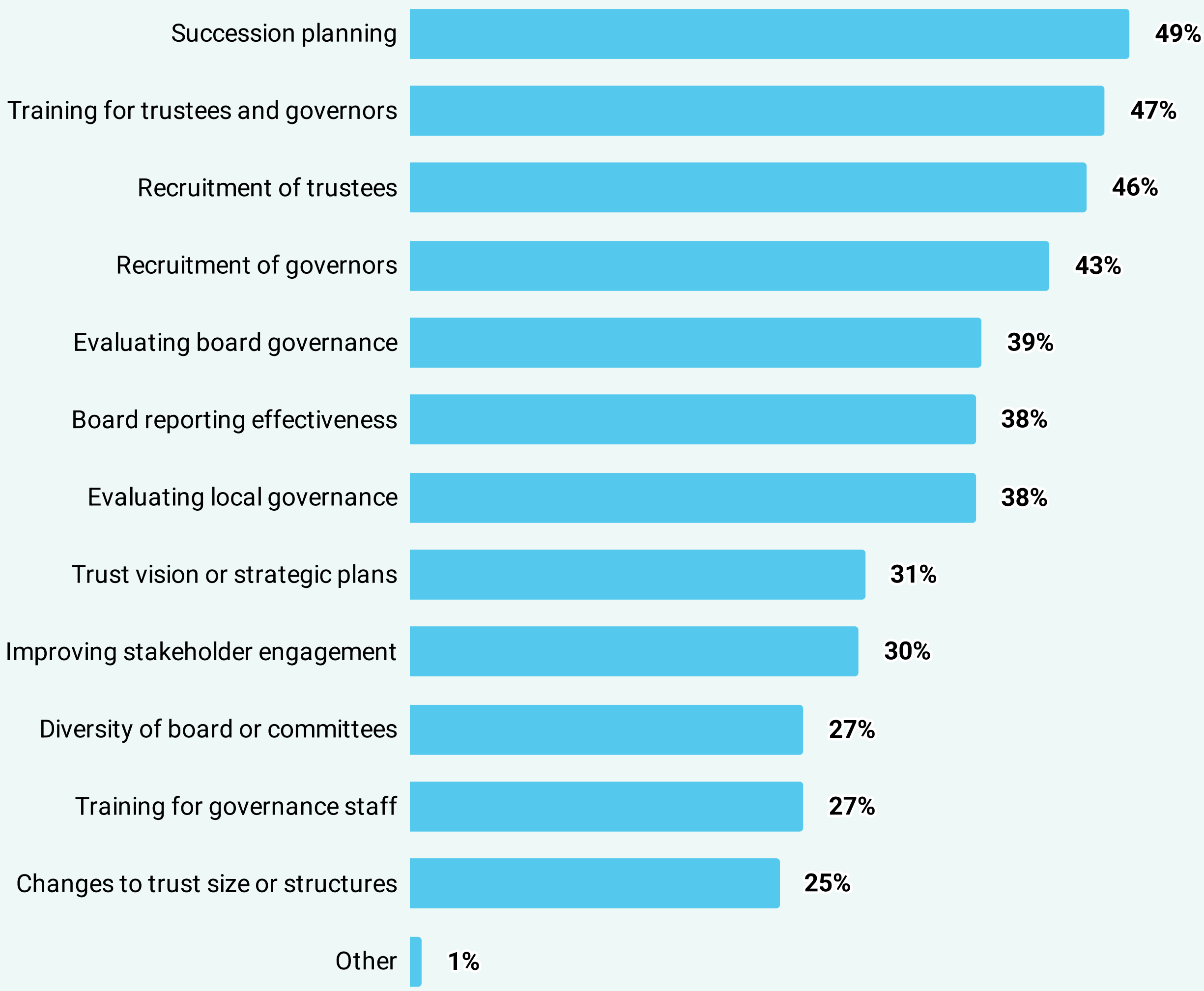
Governance

Governance encompasses everything surrounding trust and school management and is a fundamental pillar of trust structure and improvement.

The board has collective accountability and strategic responsibility for the trust. It has a focus on ensuring the trust delivers an excellent education to pupils while maintaining effective resource management and ensuring compliance with the trust's charitable objects, regulatory, contractual, and statutory requirements.

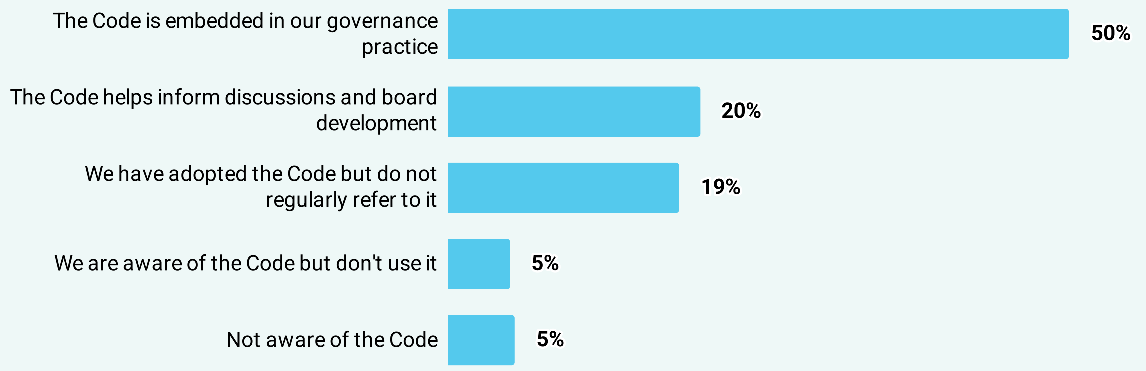
Similar to in previous years, the priorities for CEOs regarding governance are varied: from succession planning and recruitment, to training, to evaluation and reviewing structures. There is no single priority area, rather a range of priorities are being considered across the sector, though succession planning was the most-selected response (49%).

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding governance in the next academic year?



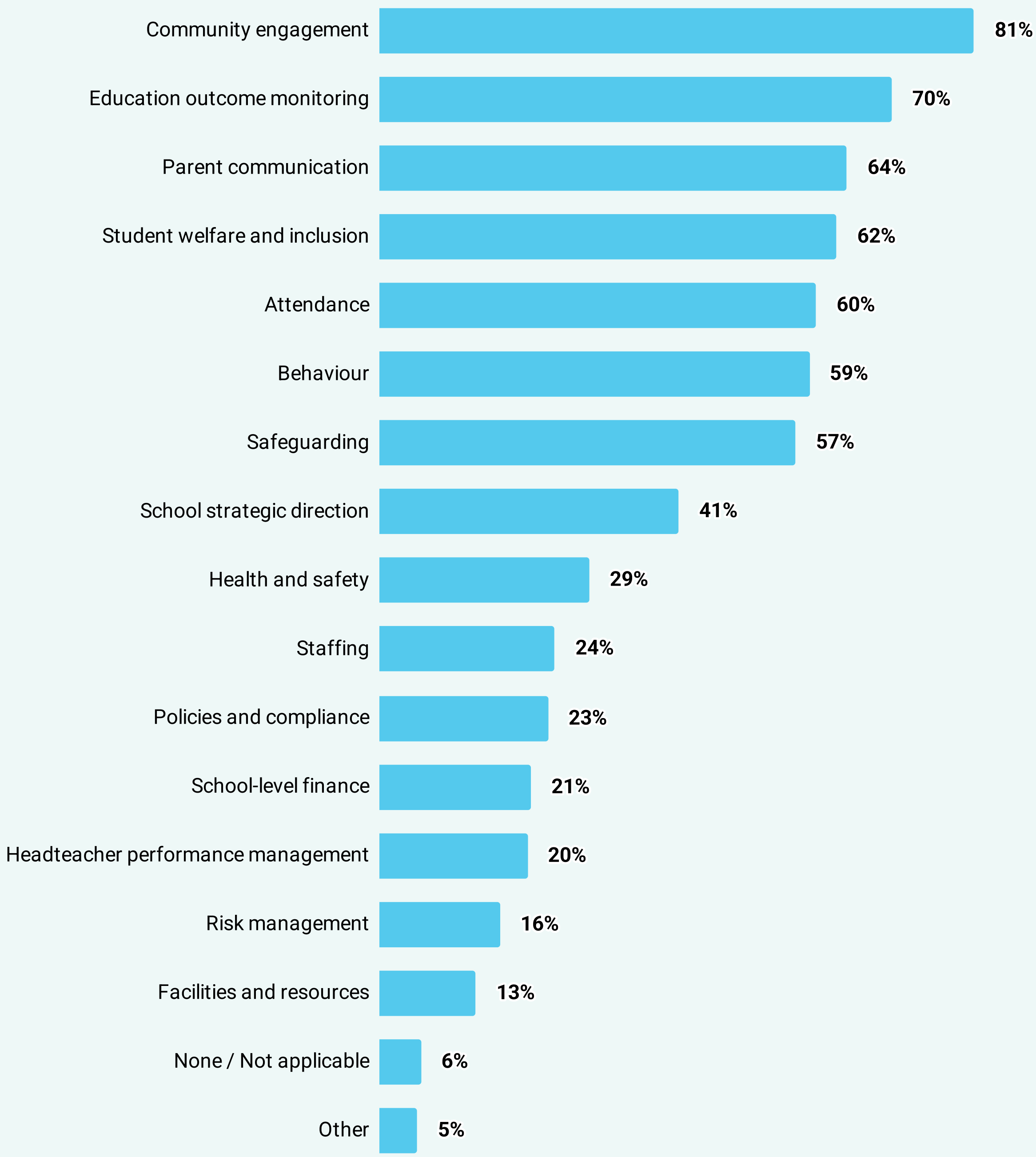
The Academy Trust Governance Code is clearly a core resource for the sector: just 5% of CEOs responded that they're aware of the Code but don't use it. Half of trusts say the Code is embedded in their governance practice, with a further two-fifths using the Code to some degree.

Which of the following best reflects your trust's use of the Academy Trust Governance Code?



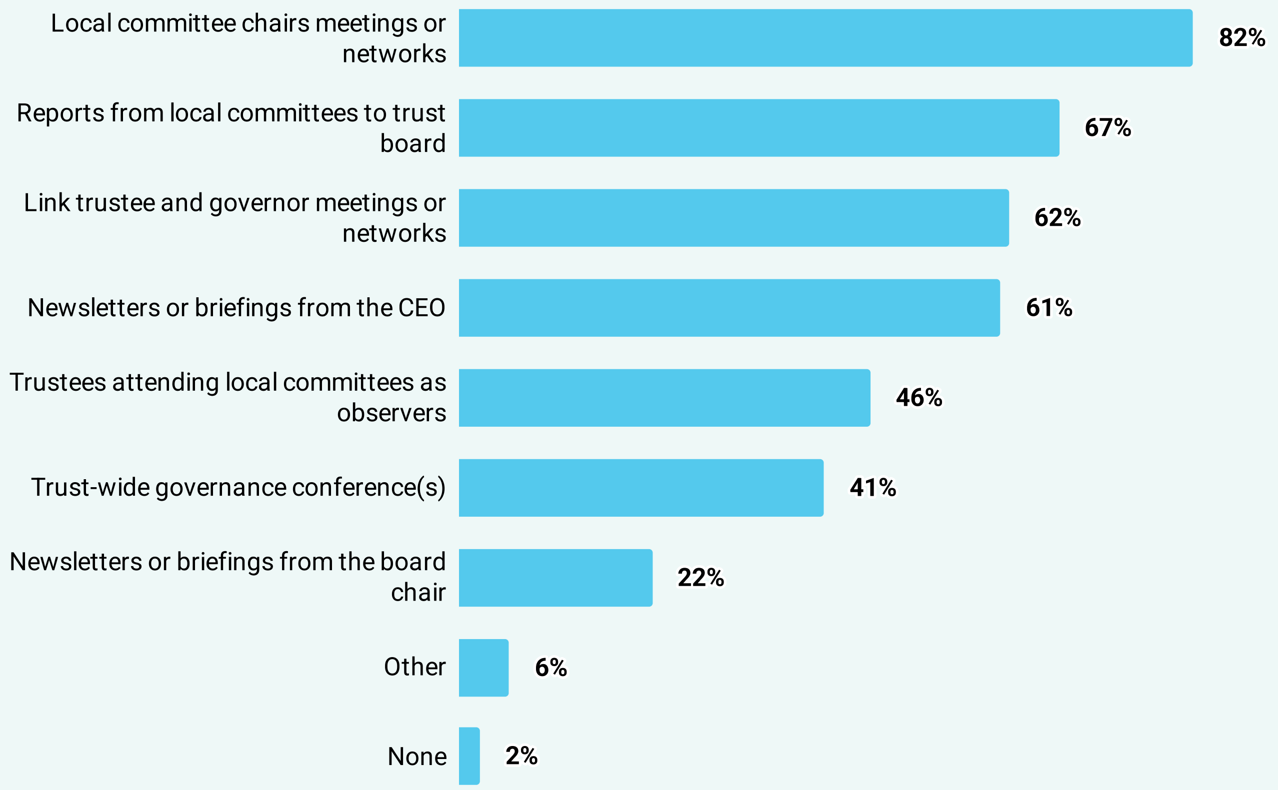
Trusts take a wide range of approaches to delegation of governance across the trust. The majority (81%) delegate responsibility for community engagement to their local tier of governance. 70% delegate the monitoring of education outcomes, and 64% delegate parent communications. At the other end, just 20% of CEOs reported that headteacher performance is reviewed at the local level, 16% look at risk management, and 13% at facilities and resources.

Which of these responsibilities does your local tier of governance hold?



Passing information back and forth between governance tiers is crucial for good assurance and accountability. Trusts use many different methods for this. Four in five trusts hold meetings or networks for their local committee chairs, and two-thirds share reports from the local tier with the trust board. 62% of CEOs hold meetings or networks between their link trustees and governors, and 61% share newsletters or briefings from the CEO.

What methods do you use to promote links across your governance community?



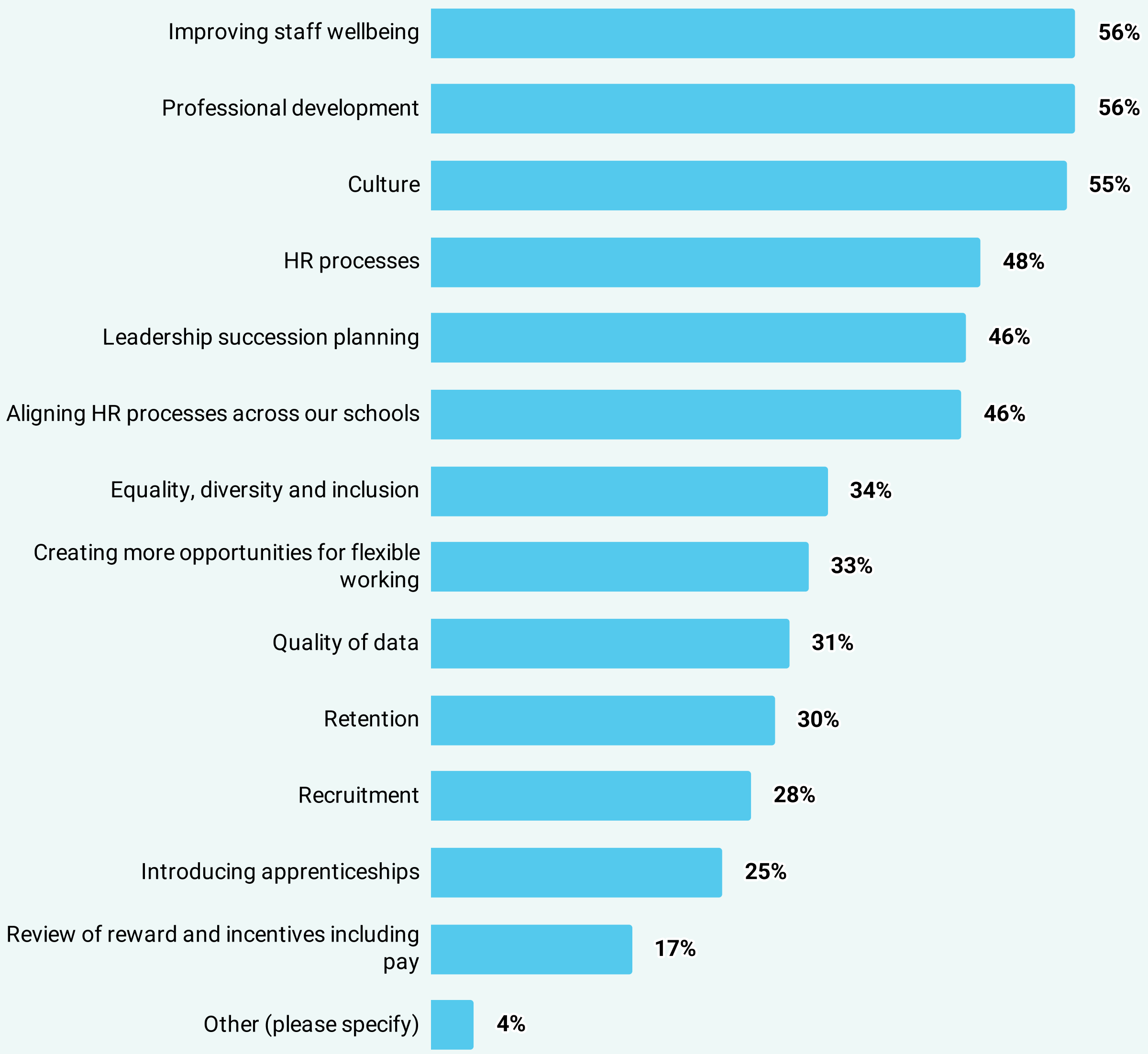
Workforce

School life is about children, but for those children to flourish and leave school prepared for life, the adults who support them must also flourish.

Much has been reported in sector research in recent years - including from Edurio - about continued challenges to staff retention, recruitment, and wellbeing across England. In last year's CEO survey, and the Edurio Staff Experience survey, we began to see a shift towards a steadier state. This year we see that shift beginning to bed in.

Wellbeing, professional development and culture are the top workforce priorities for CEOs as we look to the next year, each selected by over half of CEOs in the survey. This is a marked difference from previous years, where recruitment and retention were top priorities. This year, 30% of CEOs reported retention as a priority, and 28% reported that they're prioritising recruitment. A third of CEOs are looking to create more opportunities for flexible working.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding workforce resilience and wellbeing?

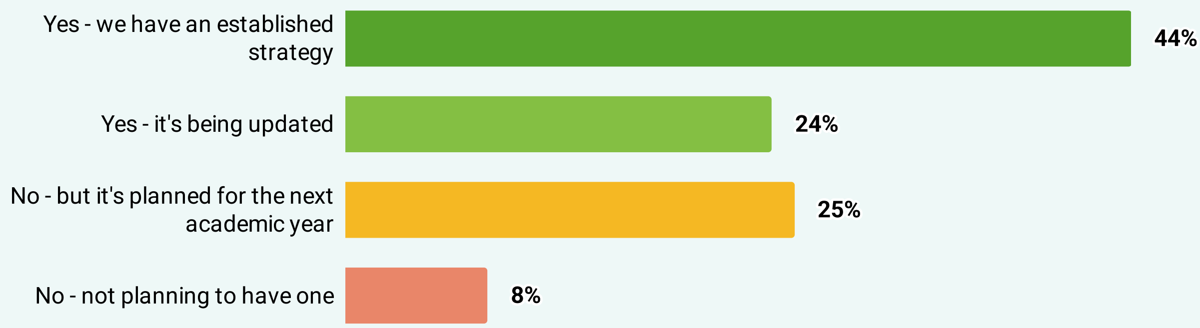


Whilst flexible working was selected as a priority by a third of trusts, this is also the area CEOs are expecting the most challenge: most CEOs who selected this as a priority, also expect this to be a challenge. At the same time, of the top three priorities, improving staff wellbeing is expected to be somewhat challenging, whilst professional development and culture are less of a concern.

Demanding priorities in workforce resilience and wellbeing for trust CEOs in 2026/27

44% of CEOs report that they now have an established people strategy, and a further 24% report that theirs is being updated: 68% of all CEOs therefore have a form of strategy in place. This is a material increase on previous years: just two years ago, in 2024, 27% had a formal strategy and 30% were updating theirs (57% in total).

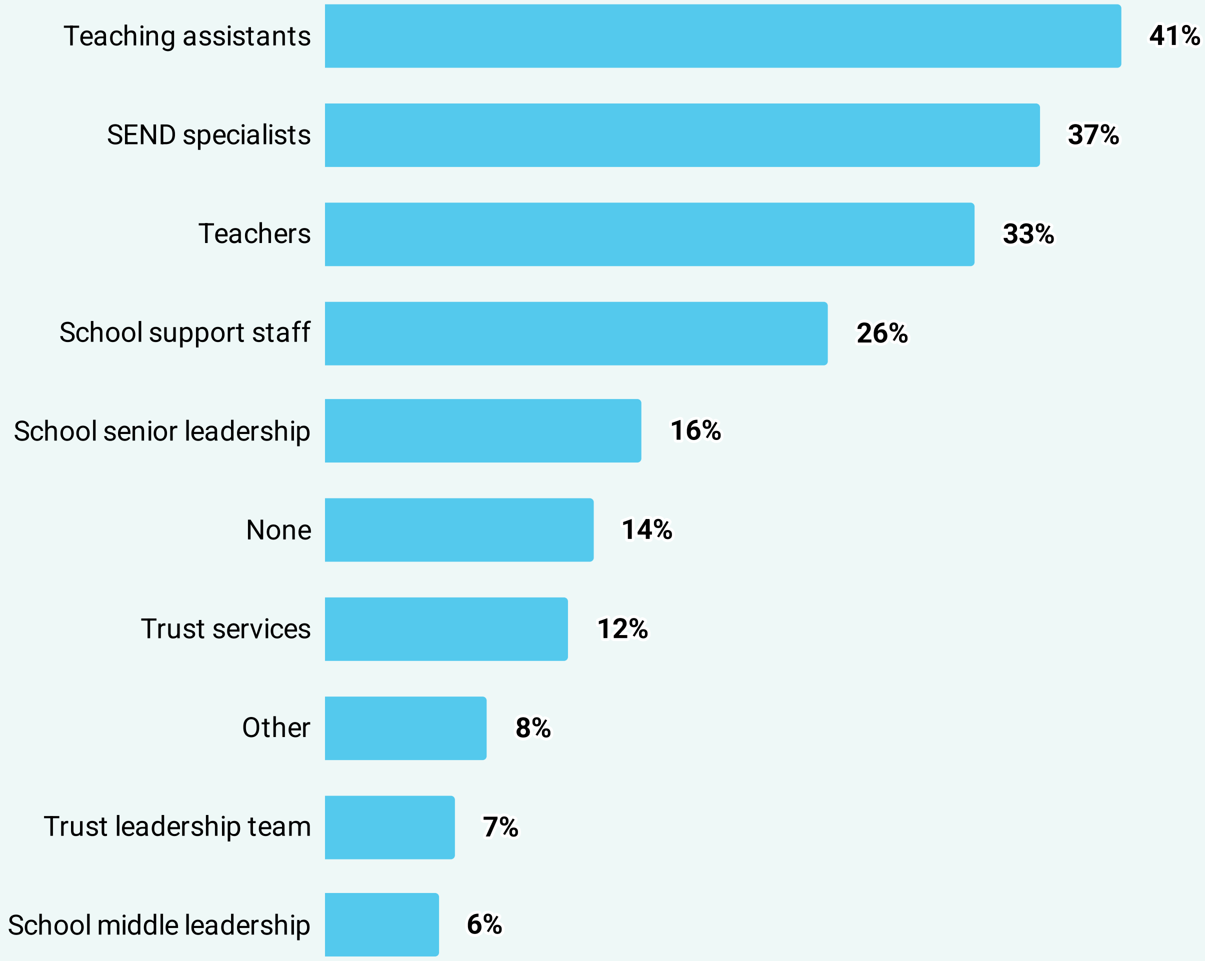
Does your trust have a formal people strategy?



Teaching assistants have been the hardest role to fill this year, with 41% of trusts reporting that they struggled to fill roles in this area. SEND specialists were the next most challenging, with 37% reporting that they had struggled - with increased focus on SEND through government reforms (explored in detail earlier in the report), this is an area that may tighten further in the future.

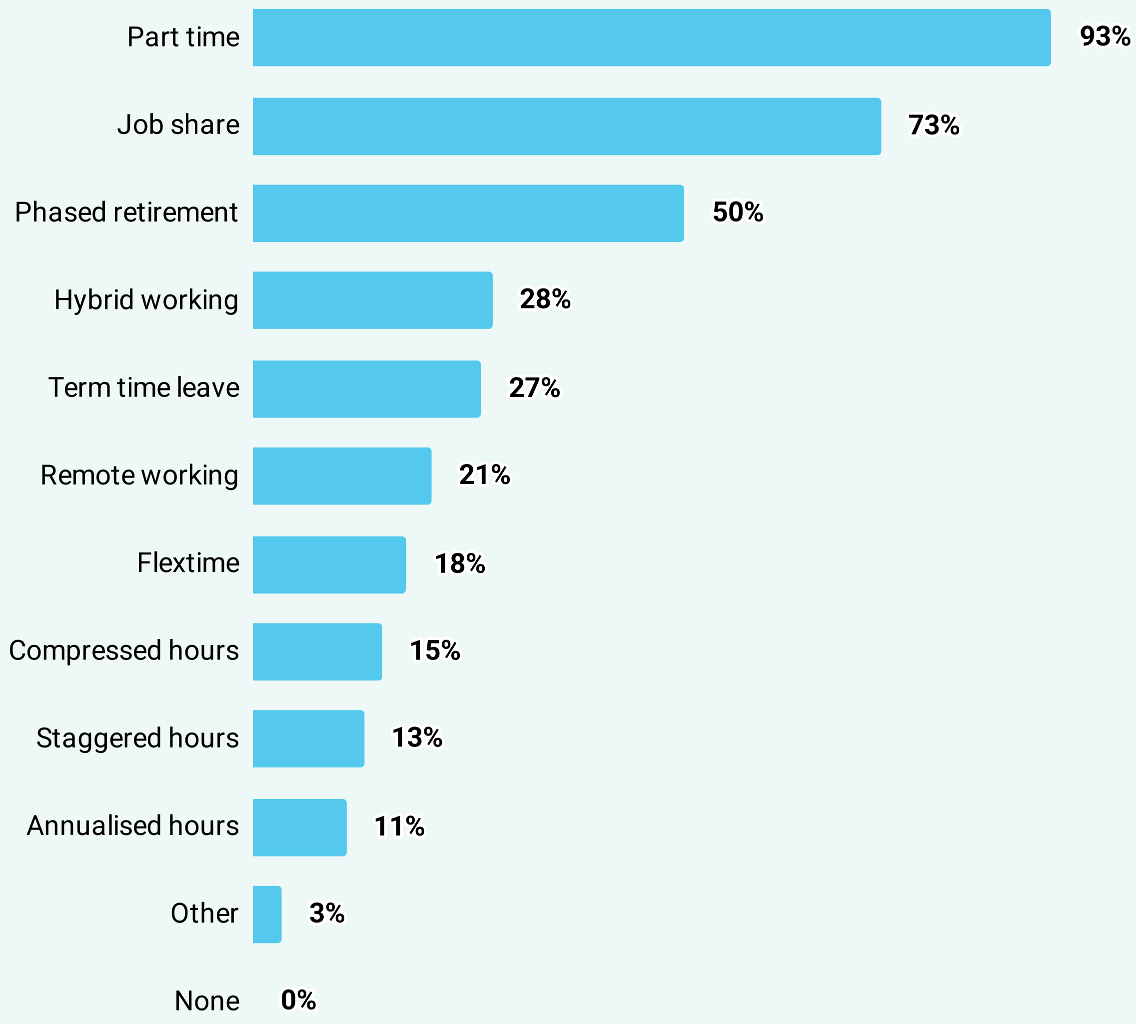
Middle leadership and trust leadership were reported as challenges by 6% and 7% of CEOs respectively: this may be due to the roles being easier to fill, or a reflection of lower demand for new hires in these roles.

Which roles, if any, has your trust struggled to fill vacancies in this year?



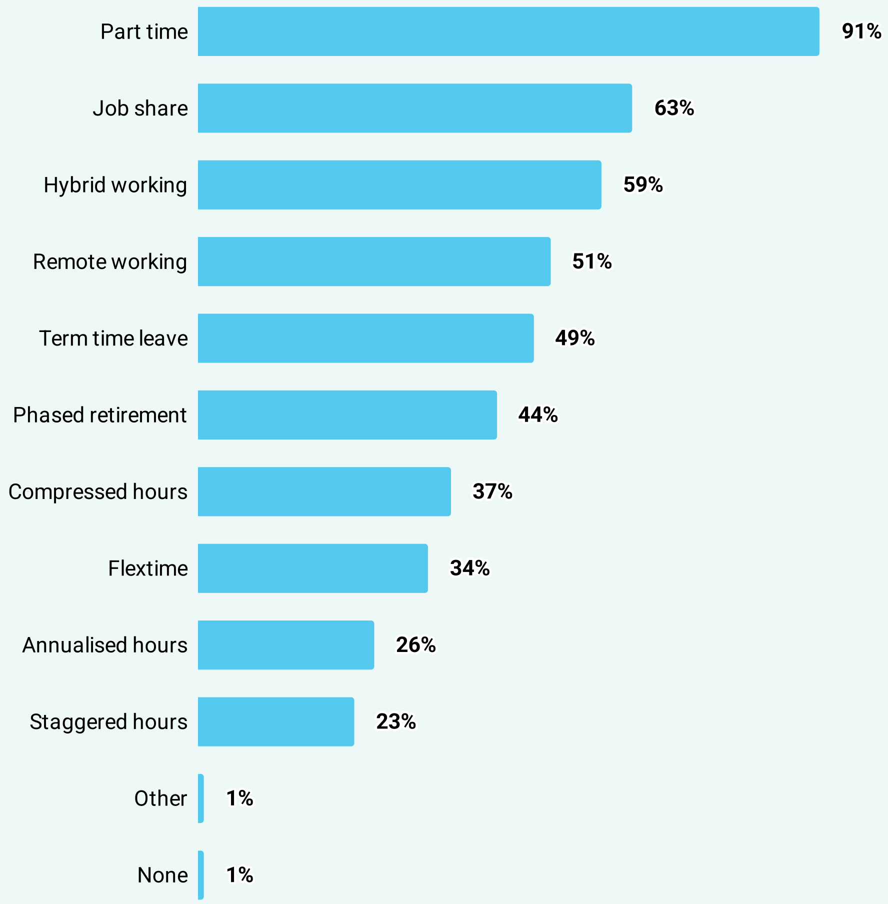
All CEOs offer at least some forms of flexible working. The vast majority (93%) of CEOs offer part-time work to classroom and associated staff; a further 73% offer job-sharing opportunities. A quarter offer term-time leave for classroom-facing roles.

What flexible working options do you offer to classroom and associated staff?



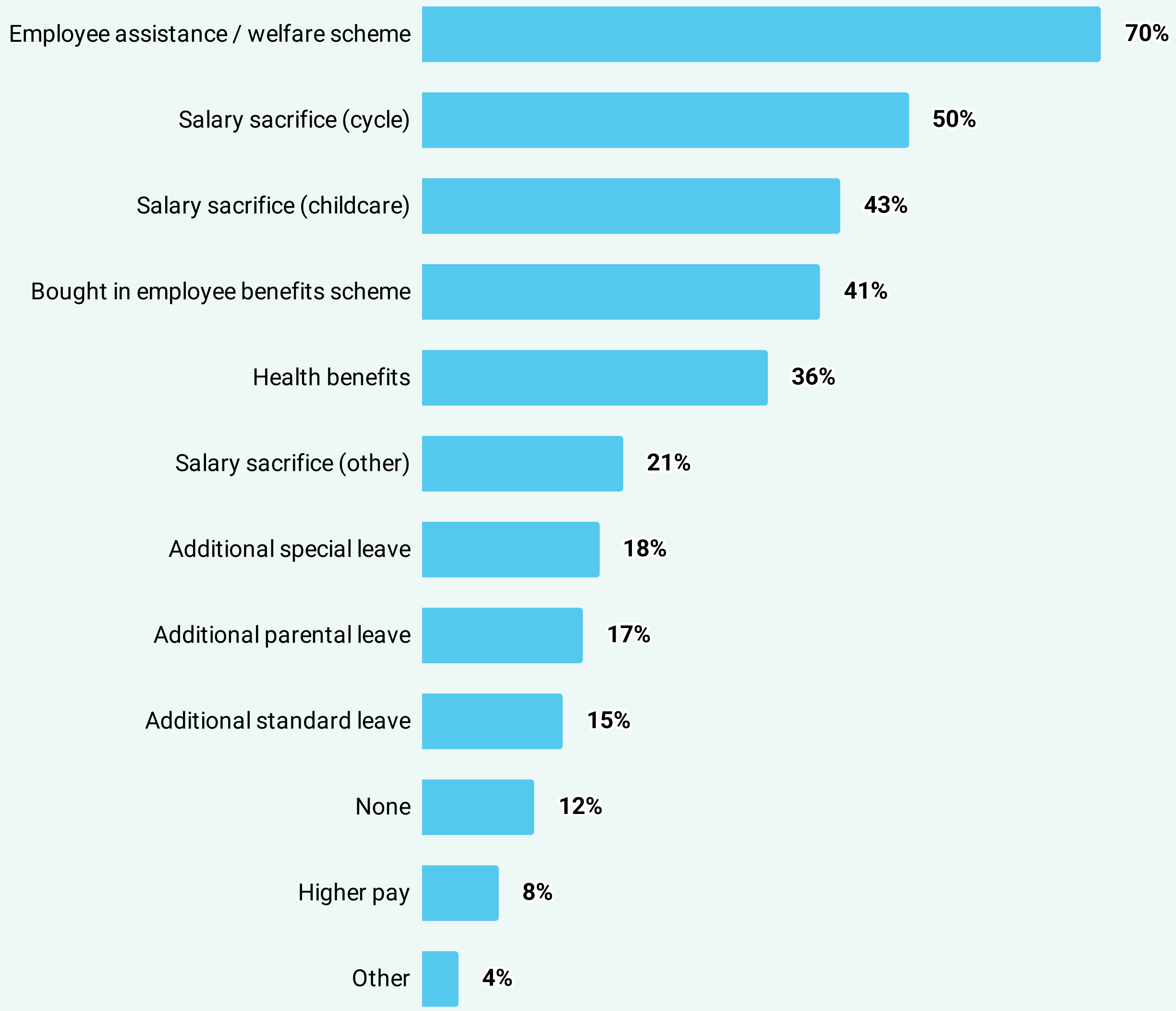
For staff outside of the classroom, the offer of hybrid and remote working is much higher: 59% offer hybrid working, and 51% offer remote working, compared to 28% and 21% respectively for classroom-facing roles.

What flexible working options do you offer to support and office staff?



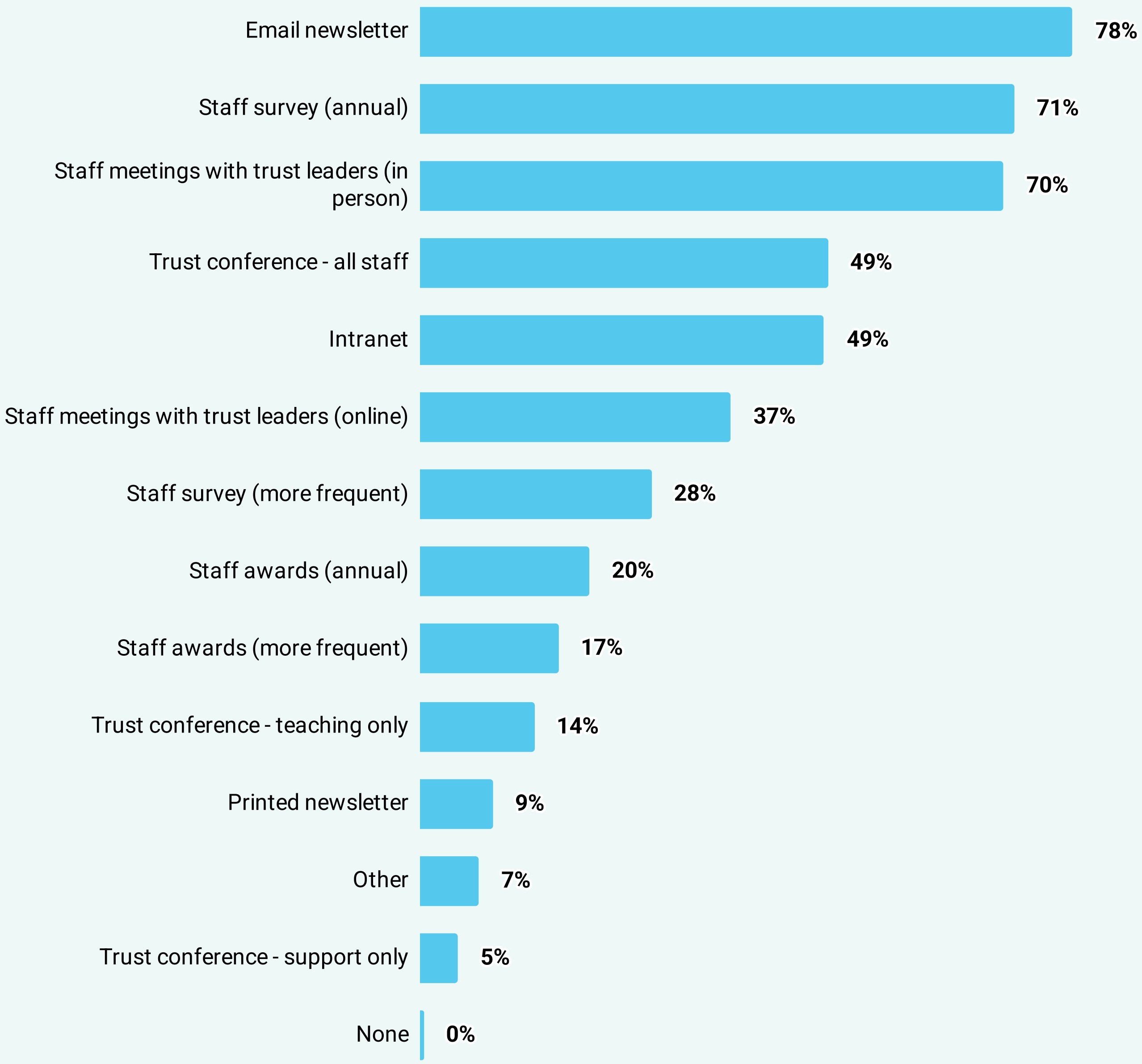
With legislation now in place for school trusts to take part in national frameworks for teacher and support staff pay, the sector continues to offer benefits beyond those found in the formal arrangements for maintained schools: The majority (88%) of trusts say they offer incentives and benefits beyond STPCD for teachers or NJC terms for support staff. 70% offer an employee assistance or welfare scheme. Other popular options include salary sacrifice via cycle-to-work options, childcare options, bought in employee benefits options, or other health benefits.

What incentives or benefits, beyond STPCD for teachers or NJC for support staff, do you offer within your trust?



Staff communication is a crucial part of improving an organisation and building a shared culture. CEOs use a range of methods to engage staff across their trust. 78% use an email newsletter, 71% run an annual staff survey, and 70% run in-person staff meetings. Around half run an annual conference for all staff, and use the intranet as a means of engaging with their staff.

What methods do you use to engage with staff in your trust?

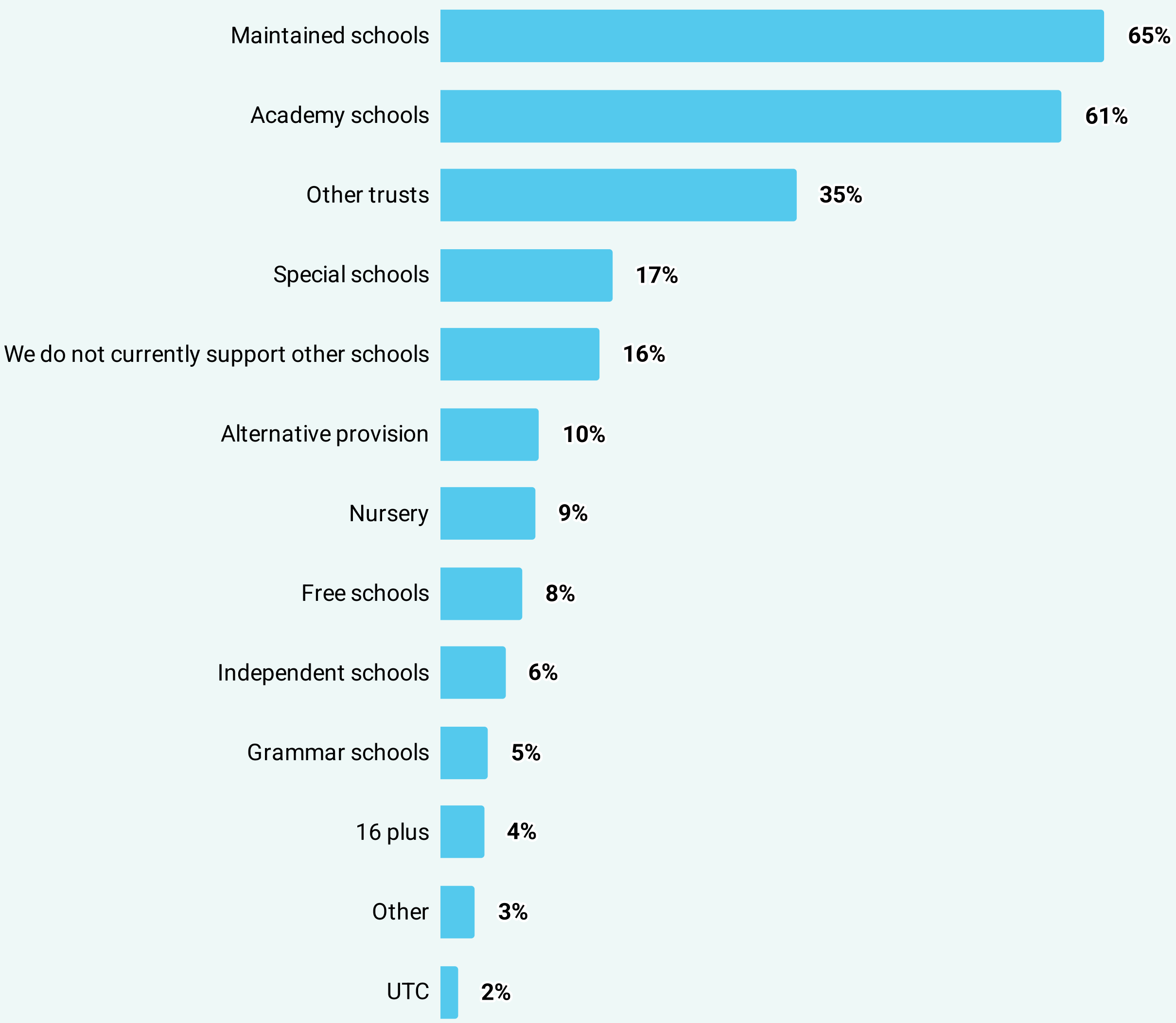


Public benefit and civic duty

Schools have always played a part in their communities, but being part of trusts offers the chance to engage at a greater scale and in more strategic ways than in the past. For trustees and CEOs, this brings both responsibility and opportunity. It demands outward-facing leadership that builds strong relationships with local partners to support the wider ecosystem around pupils and families. When these partnerships thrive, so do communities, creating a lasting, positive impact beyond the school gates.

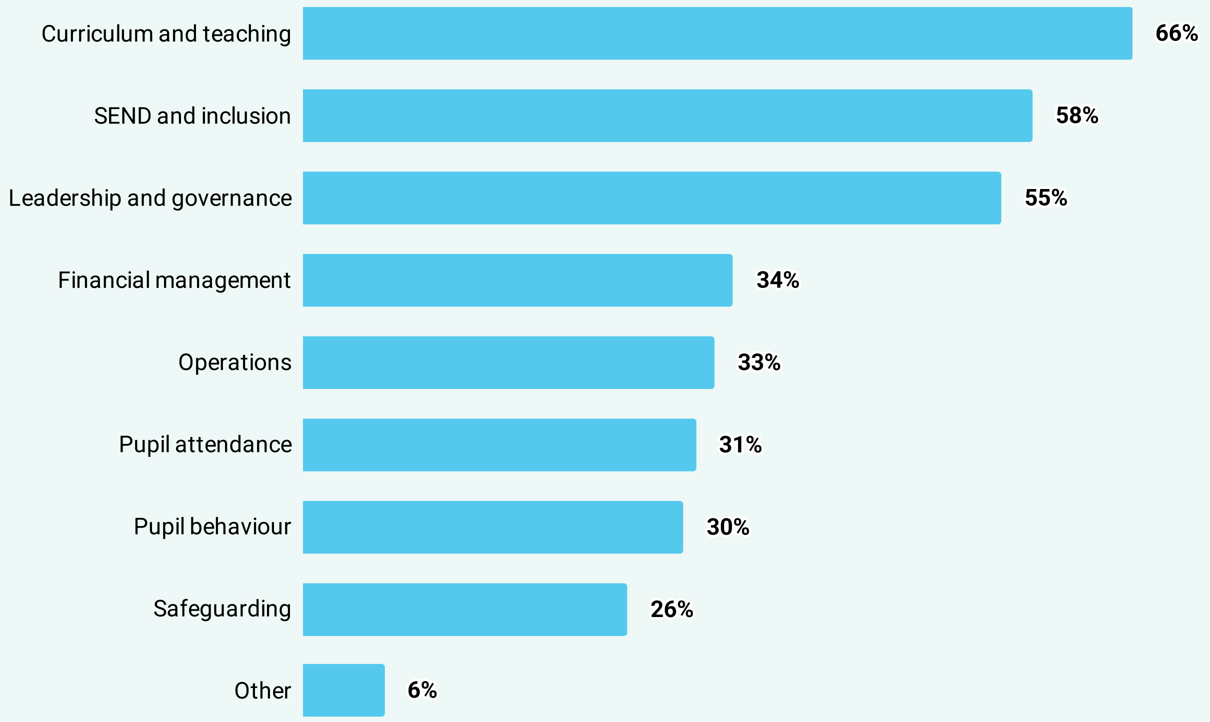
A clear majority of trusts - 84% - provide support to education organisations outside their own trust, including 65% working with maintained schools, 61% with other individual academies, and 35% with other trusts.

What education organisations outside of your trust do you currently support?



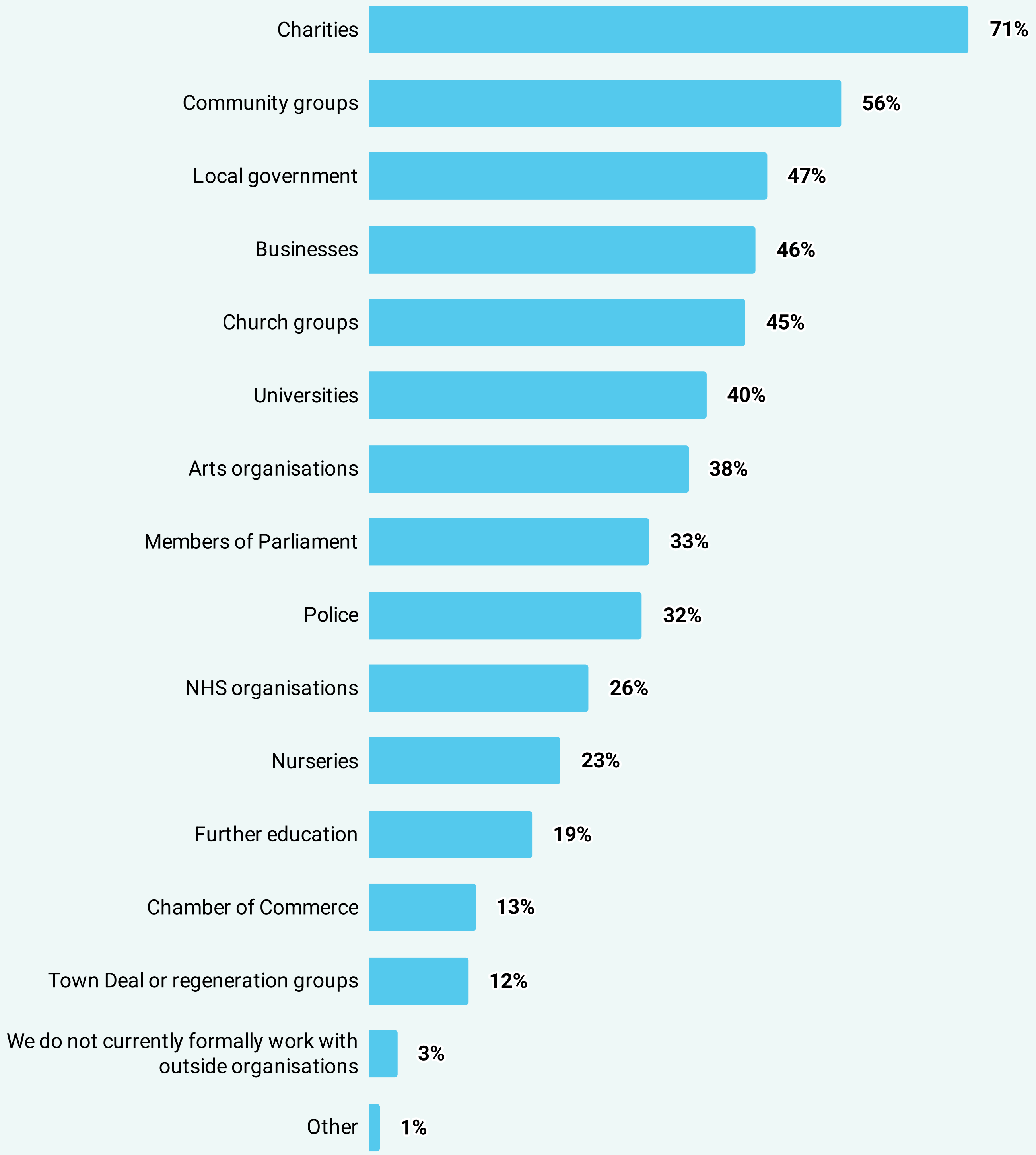
Support to other organisations centres on curriculum and teaching, SEND and inclusion, and leadership and governance: over half of CEOs report that their trust offers support in one of these areas.

What topics does your trust's support to other education organisations cover?



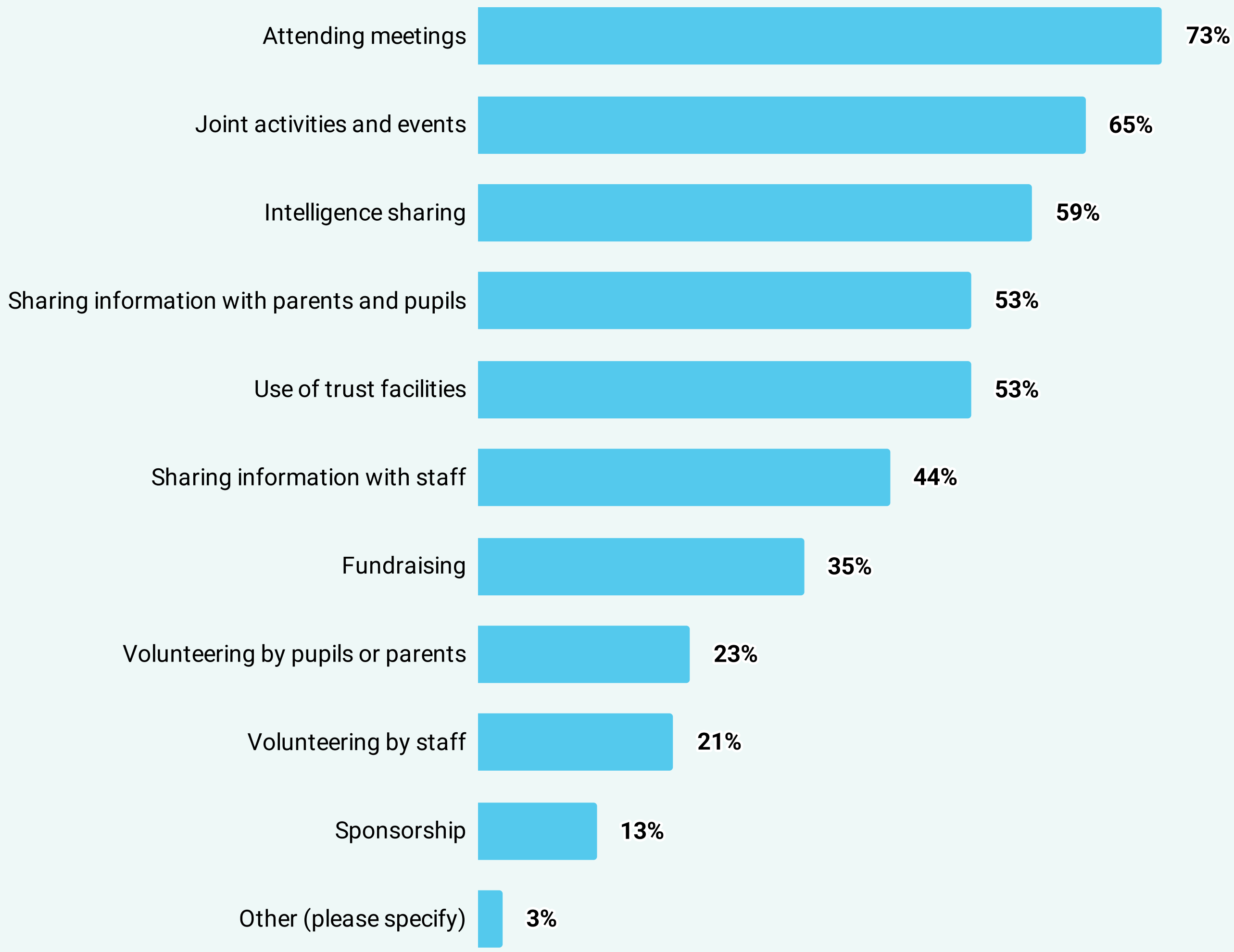
Beyond other schools, trusts work with a diverse range of organisations. 71% have some collaboration with charities; 56% work with community groups. Just 3% of respondents said they do not currently work with outside organisations for civic impact.

What types of external organisations do you work with for civic impact?



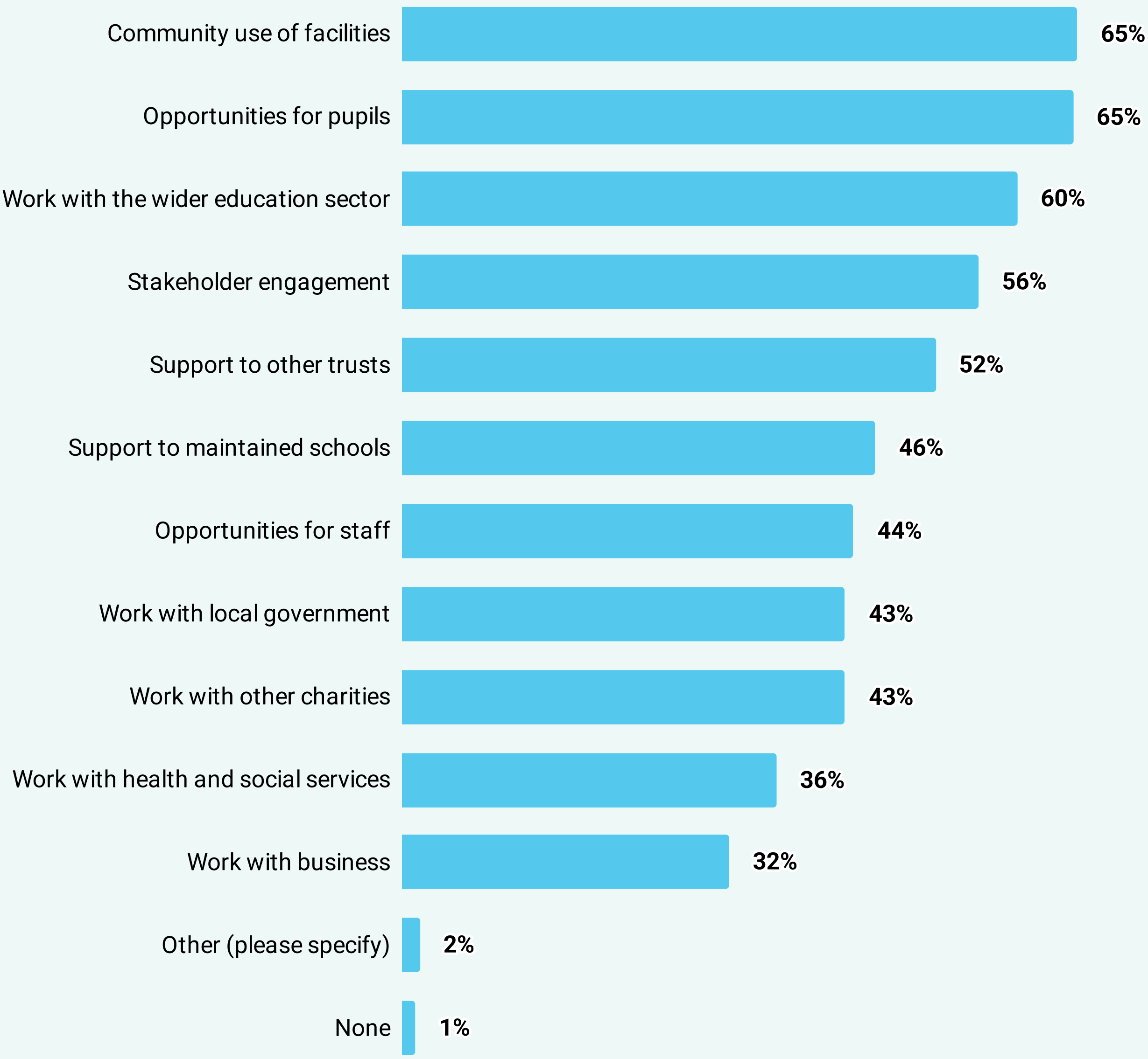
The most frequent engagement with external organisations is attending meetings (73%). Beyond that, shared activities and information, and use of the trust facilities are the main ways of collaborating outside of the education sector.

What types of work do you do with these external organisations?



In the upcoming year, CEOs are expecting to deliver public benefit in a range of ways: 99% expect to engage in some way. Two-thirds of CEOs are planning to enable community use of their facilities, and the same proportion are planning to look for wider opportunities for their pupils. Three-fifths plan to work with the wider sector. Beyond this, CEOs are considering their approach to stakeholder engagement, offering support to other trusts and maintained schools, and considering opportunities for staff. A smaller, but not small, proportion of CEOs are considering working with local governments, charities, health and social services, and business.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding public benefit and civic duty in the next academic year?



Our analysis
Leora Cruddas CBE
Chief Executive at CST

We have long championed the concept of school trusts as civic institutions, reflecting the importance of schools in their communities at neighbourhood level and the ability of trusts, as groups of schools, to partner at a local, regional, and sometimes national level.

Trusts continue to develop this role, and also continue to be by their nature collaborative: colleagues work between the schools in their trust, but often give so generously of their time and expertise to maintained schools and other school trusts.

We are seeing in government the emergence of new forms of devolution, and new roles for regional mayors and strategic authorities. Trusts are well-placed to learn from this and help shape the outcomes as natural convenors.

About Edurio

200+ trusts, 2,500+ schools, one of the largest school feedback datasets in England

Edurio helps trust and school leaders see what's really going on: through staff, pupil and parent feedback, benchmarked nationally so you know where you stand, not just what you've measured.

Michael Cowland, CEO
The Diocese of Coventry Multi Academy Trust

"In terms of the financial value of Edurio, I think it's a no-brainer.

If one survey's data gives you enough information to change something, which enables even just one staff member to stay, Edurio's service pays for itself."

Alongside our Surveys platform, Edurio Evaluate supports trusts with self-evaluation, giving leaders a clearer, evidence-backed view to support governance and assurance conversations.

As a leader in education research, Edurio's national datasets shape key discussions in education policy. Explore our latest insights, including our National Experience Reports for staff, pupils and parents here: **Edurio Resources**.

To learn more about how Edurio can support your trust or school, visit our homepage **home.edurio.com** or contact us at **hello@edurio.com**.

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About the Confederation of School Trusts

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for academy trusts.

Our members educate more than four million children through the dedicated work of their 600,000 staff.

We believe school trusts offer the best model for improving education because they uniquely unite schools in organisations with a strong, single purpose: education. This encourages the sharing of expertise, ideas, and resources to give pupils a better start in life.

We advocate for trusts by helping politicians, policy makers, and the wider public better understand their power to help children. We support trusts through practical advice, strategic guidance, and consultancy. We connect them with each other, and with expert thinking and research.

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