

# National School Trust Report

October 2023



Confederation  
of School Trusts

edurio'

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# Foreword

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As the sector body, one of the key responsibilities of the Confederation of School Trusts is to act as the voice for school trusts. This now annual survey, conducted in partnership with Edurio, is an important part of that. It shines a light onto the priorities and concerns of hundreds of trust accounting officers - the people responsible to Parliament for educating our children, and discharging public funds to do so.

Our sector is incredibly diverse, and one of the joys of leading CST is regularly hearing the passion from all types and sizes of trusts for what they do. They are united in their desire to do the best for children, to advance education as a public good and ensure they get the best quality education possible.

That, too, is the message that comes loud and clear from the results of this survey. To borrow a phrase, trust leaders' priority is education, education, education.

This year, however, has seen a rapid shift in trust leaders' perspective on the 'business' side of education. No one in public services ever feels they have enough money to do all they could, but the long-term impacts of the pandemic, the shock of high inflation on energy and wage costs, and concerns about the school estate means too many are now worrying about the basics.

School trusts are stepping in to fill the gaps left by over-stretched council and NHS services, even as they find their own budgets under intense pressure. Less than half told us they now feel very or quite confident about their trust's financial sustainability, down from 77% in last year's survey.

Many trusts are looking to growth as a way of addressing these concerns, but they tell us their desire to grow doesn't always match with the priorities of the Department for Education or the enthusiasm of maintained schools or councils to move towards a system where all schools are part of a group of schools working together in a single legal entity.

There are some glimmers: the recent academy regulatory and commissioning review, heavily influenced by CST, means trusts now have more clarity on how they can evolve and grow. Pilot work on improving support for children with special needs is moving ahead, albeit slowly.

Trusts, too, are making their own weather. They are pressing ahead with professional development to help their staff do better, and as this report shows regularly reaching out beyond their organisations to work with the wider sector and the community. There is still a joyous and wonderful spirit in our schools and trusts.

This report is part of our sharing the voice of school trusts. We will ensure it is heard by the government, policy makers, and beyond. But it is not the end of the conversation, only one part of it, and we look forward to continuing the conversation with you.

**Leora Cruddas CBE**

*Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts*

# Introduction

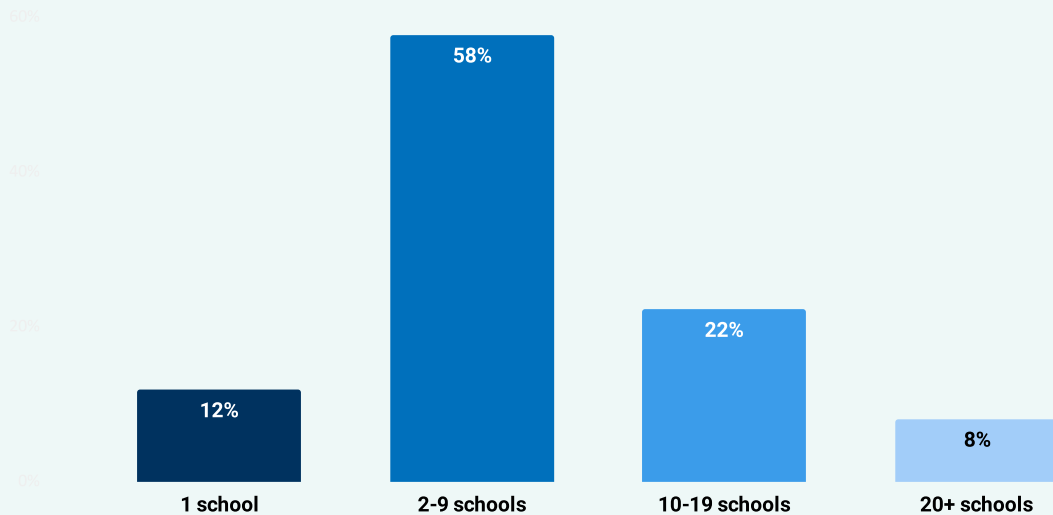
For the second year running, the Confederation of School Trusts has partnered with Edurio to conduct the National School Trust Survey. The survey is designed to uncover the main priorities and challenges for the sector for the upcoming academic year, as well as to provide some detail on specific approaches. The survey is informed by CST's guidance on strong trusts, with a particular focus on the elements that make up the core responsibilities of a trust's chief executive, as outlined in the position paper "[Building Strong Trusts](#)", released in April 2023.<sup>1</sup>

In June of this year, the survey was answered by 395 trust accounting officers across England – the senior leader directly responsible to Parliament for their trust. The survey covered trusts of all sizes, from trusts with single academies to running dozens of schools.

The following is a summary report highlighting responses to key questions in the survey based on priorities highlighted by trust leaders as we begin the academic year 2023/24.

## Proportion of trusts of different sizes covered by the survey

by school count



<sup>1</sup> Confederation of School Trusts. (2023, April). *Building Strong Trusts*. <https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/discussion-and-policy-papers/building-strong-trusts/>

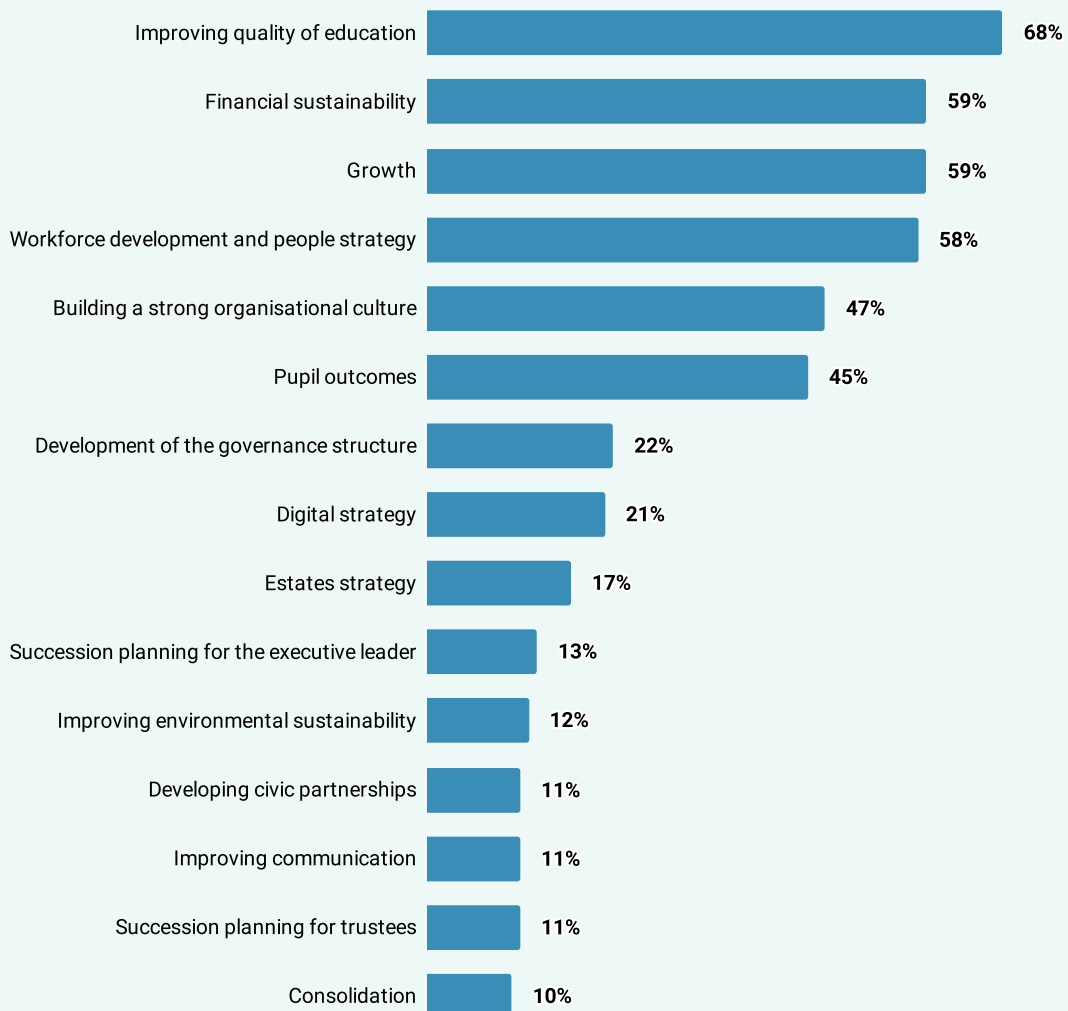
# Overall priorities and challenges

Trusts exist to educate the next generation, so it is no surprise that quality of education again tops the list of trust leaders' priorities. However, this year's survey has seen a noticeable shift in chief executives' focus, with financial sustainability becoming an increasing concern and overtaking workforce development and growth as key priorities.

In turn, this means that trusts are finding it difficult to look beyond the medium term. We live in uncertain times, both locally and internationally, and the survey suggests that 'cathedral thinking' - where decisions are made for the long term - is rare in the sector.

The most pressing priority for trust leaders is improving the quality of education, as indicated by 68% of respondents. Closely following this, both growth and financial sustainability were highlighted by 59% of the participants. Additionally, workforce development and people strategy will be a significant focus, highlighted by 58%. These findings reveal a concentrated effort by trust leaders to enhance educational standards while ensuring a robust organisational and financial foundation.

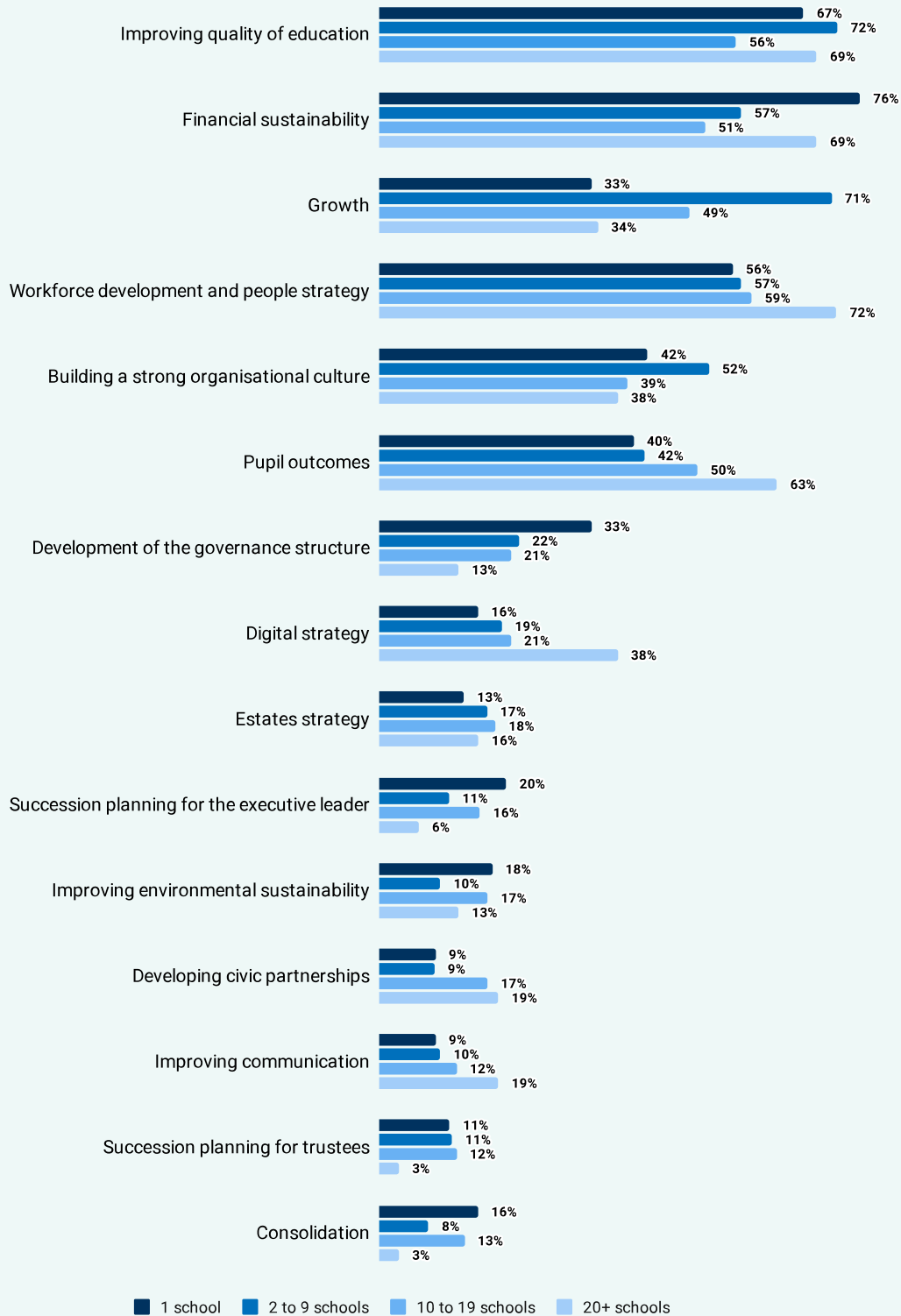
## What are the top five strategic priorities for your trust in the next academic year?



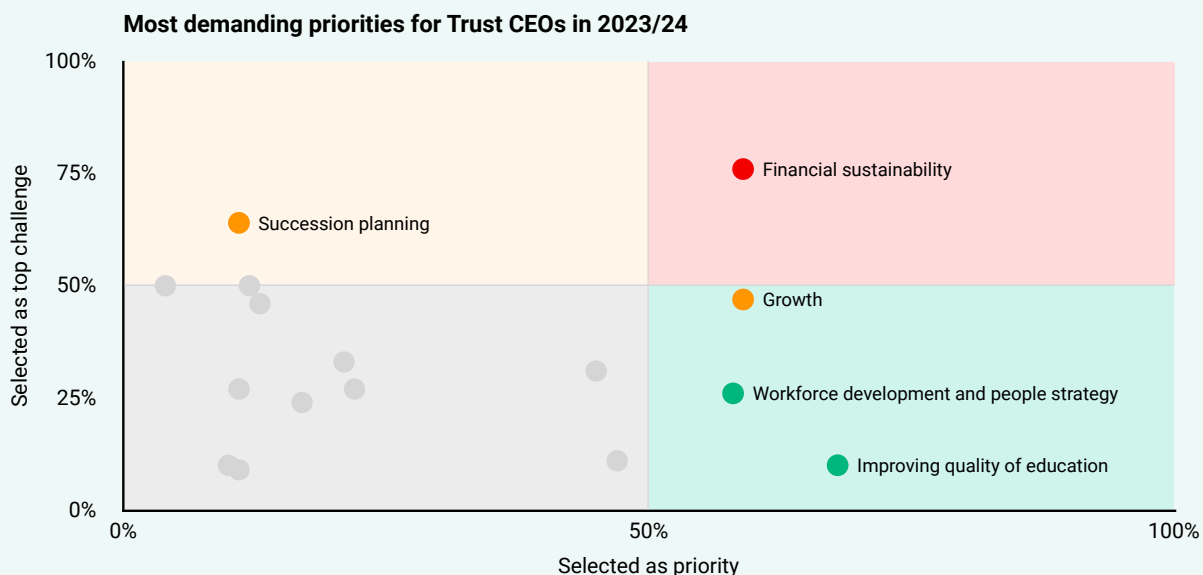
Priorities are relatively similar for trusts of different sizes, though there are exceptions. Digital strategy is a higher priority for larger trusts (20 or more schools) than for smaller trusts. Growth is a larger focus at trusts with two to 19 schools. Interestingly, in last year's survey financial sustainability was a bigger problem for smaller trusts than larger trusts; this year, that relationship no longer exists with trusts of all sizes considering financial sustainability a key priority.

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

by school count

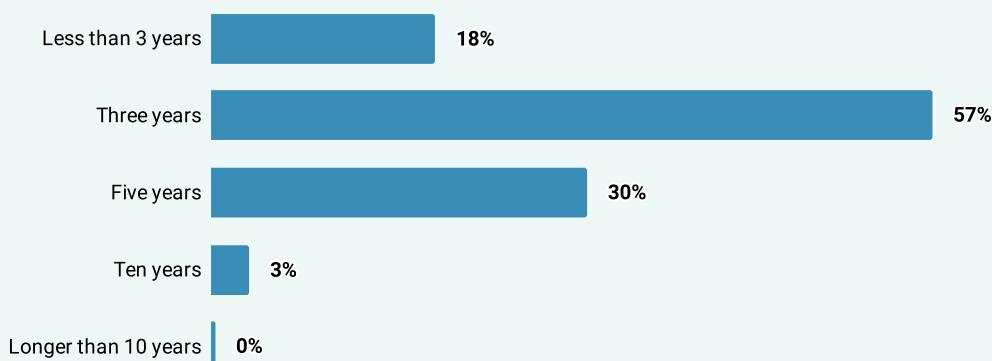


Evaluating the priorities alongside the top challenges highlights which areas CEOs expect to find most demanding in the upcoming year. Of the key priorities, financial sustainability is now expected to be the most challenging, with 76% of those who selected it as a priority also selecting it as one of their key challenges. Growth, the biggest expected challenge last year, is still a paramount issue, as it is both a high priority and a reasonably high expected challenge. Improving the quality of education, along with workforce development and people strategy, are not expected to pose as much of a challenge as other areas despite being high priorities for the sector. In addition, whilst a relatively low proportion of respondents stated that succession planning will be a priority, a significant proportion of those who did, expect it to be a challenge.



Whilst the survey focuses predominantly on chief executives' plans for the upcoming academic year, we also asked them to reflect on the coverage of their overall strategic plans. The majority of CEOs (87%) responded that their plan extends for between 3 and 5 years, whilst none reported that they have a strategic plan that goes beyond 10 years. Around one in five (18%) reported that their plan extends to less than three years.

**How far into the future does your trust's strategic plan extend?**



For the remainder of this report, we will look into six key areas for the sector. We begin with financial sustainability and growth, as these are the two areas where CEOs expect to face the biggest challenges. Following that, we review quality of education, and workforce development and people strategy, as high priority areas. Finally, we take a closer look at two areas of long-term importance for the sector: civic responsibility and governance.



# The sector's current challenges

Financial sustainability and trust growth

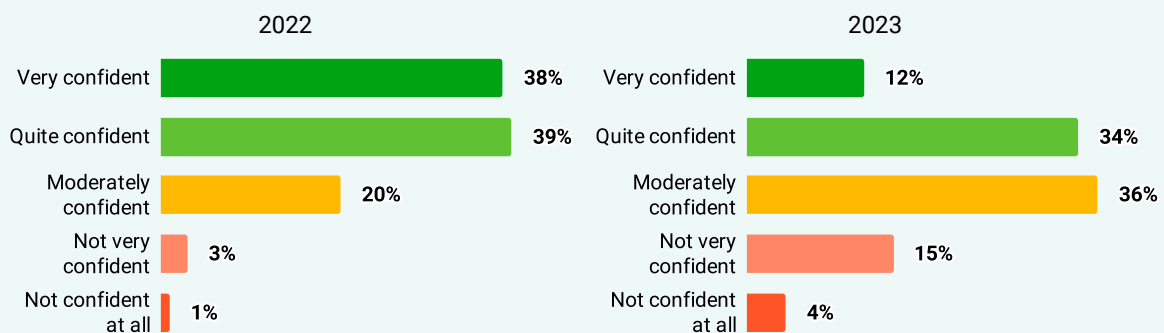


## Financial sustainability

The whole economy has faced financial shocks over the last 18 months, with the war in Ukraine driving spiralling energy costs, food inflation, and resultant wider cost pressures. Most school trusts have also been faced with unbudgeted wage rises for teaching and support staff, as well as the disruption of strikes. The sector's focus will always be primarily on education, but finance is a necessary consideration - and an increasingly fraught one.

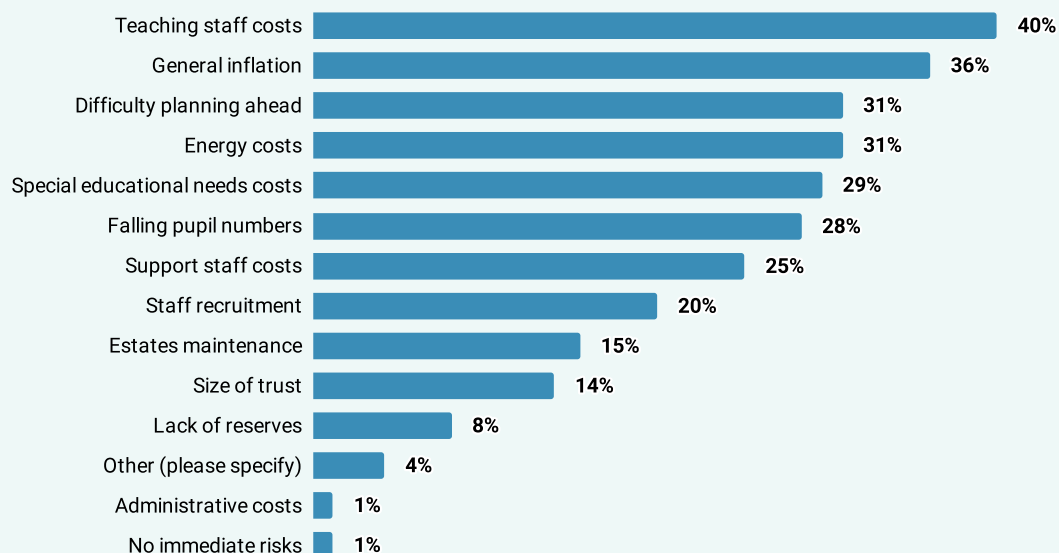
Last year 77% of CEOs surveyed were very or quite confident about the financial sustainability of their trust, whilst this year less than half - only 46% - said the same. Only 12% said they were very confident about their trust's financial stability this year, and 34% reported feeling quite confident. The number of CEOs saying they are not very confident about their financial future has risen from 3% last year to 15%; and 4% were not confident at all this year. This spread of responses underscores a significant reduction in financial confidence for the sector.

### How confident are you in the financial sustainability of your trust?



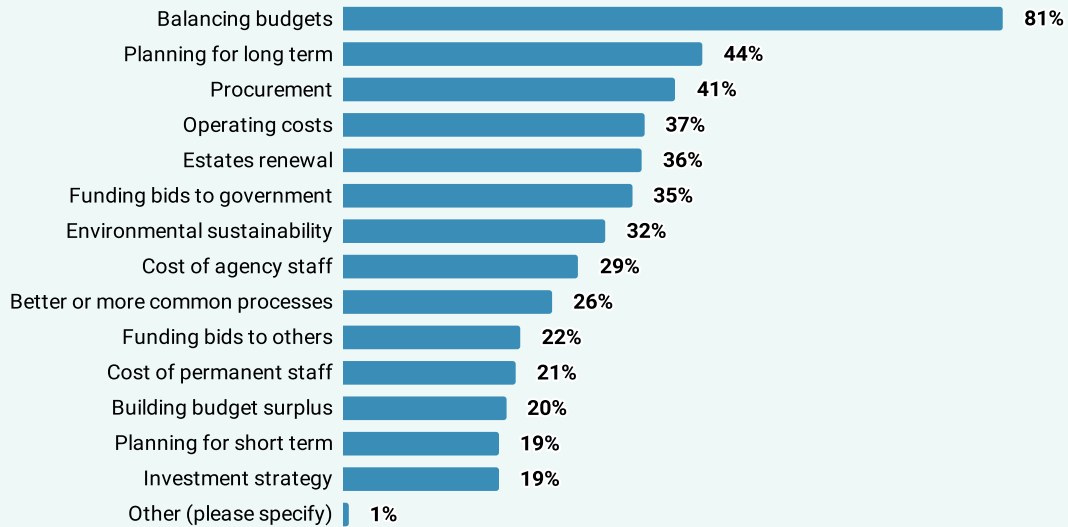
The biggest risks to financial stability were identified as teaching staff costs (cited by 40%), general inflation (36%), difficulty planning ahead (31%), energy costs (31%), and SEN costs (29%).

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



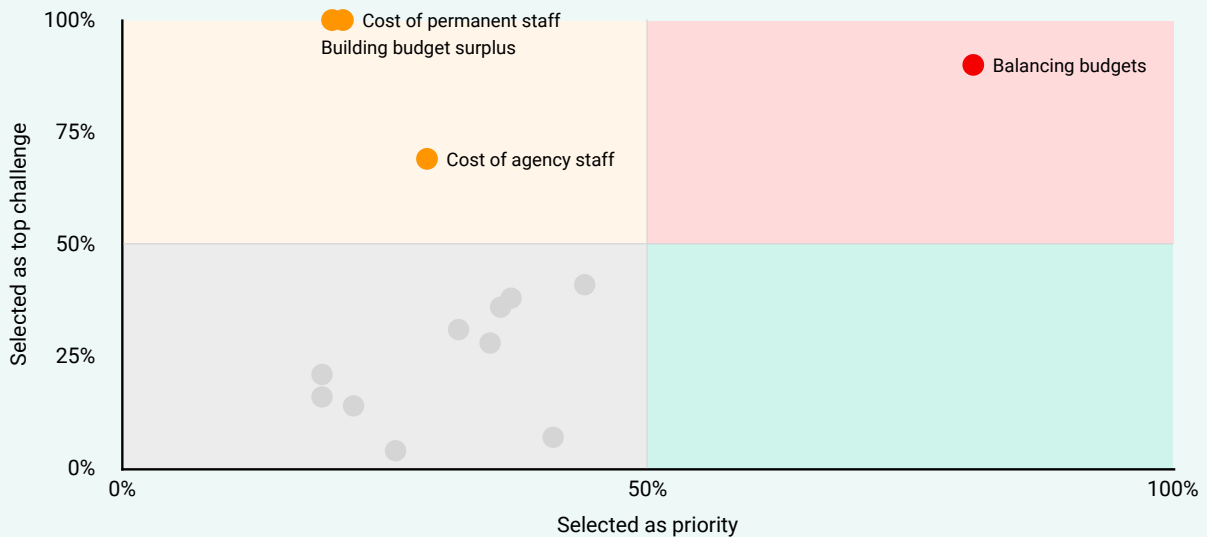
The main focus for next year when considering financial sustainability is balancing budgets, selected by a striking 81% of respondents. This is by far the biggest area of focus in the upcoming academic year, with the second priority being planning for the long term: 44% expect to make this a focus.

**In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding finance, sustainability and compliance in the next academic year?**



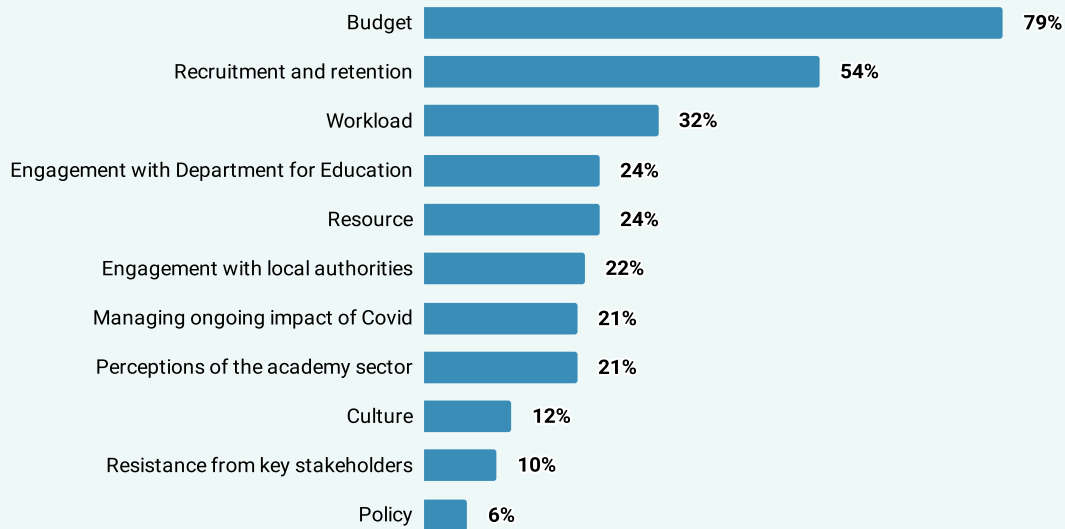
Balancing budgets is also the area where trusts expect to have the highest challenge in the upcoming year. The costs of permanent staff, as well as building a budget surplus, are expected to be a high challenge for the relatively small proportion who expect these to be a priority. The cost of agency staff is also expected to prove challenging.

**Most demanding financial priorities in 2023/24**



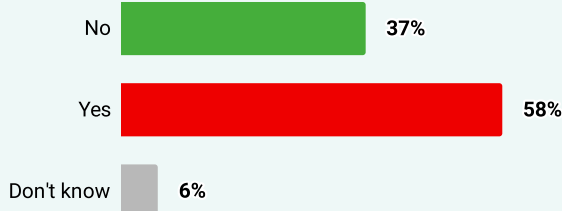
In addition to this, CEOs cited budgetary constraints as the main barrier they will need to address in order to deliver their overall organisational priorities, with 79% of respondents highlighting this as an area that needs addressing. Recruitment and retention was identified by 54% of respondents, and workload issues by 32%. Engagement with the Department for Education is also of some concern, with 24% mentioning this.

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

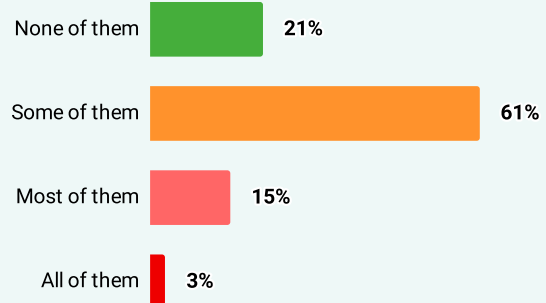


The state of school buildings is also a growing concern. The survey was conducted prior to the most recent changes to the handling of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). Even before this 36% of trust leaders expected to focus on estates management in the year ahead, and more than half of trusts reported that they have one or more of their school buildings past their economic life or at risk of failure. 79% of multi academy trusts said they had at least some buildings with serious defects or that are not operating adequately.

### Are any of your school buildings currently past their economic life or at risk of failure?



### How many of your schools have buildings that you would describe as showing major defects and/or not operating adequately? (MATs)



Economic events have placed a new level of pressure on budgets, causing financial sustainability to overtake growth as the most pressing demand. Eight out of 10 CEOs now see budgets as a barrier to achieving their priorities, far outstripping the next highest priority of recruitment and retention. While many trusts have embraced efficiency measures, often working with DfE advisors to find cost savings, some are now struggling to balance budgets. The levels of confidence in their financial futures are deeply concerning. A lack of long-term investment in buildings is also being felt, with more than half of trusts reporting one or more school buildings past their economic life or at risk of failure - even before the recent heightened concerns over RAAC. With increasing energy costs and a backlog in building work, estimated by the DfE and the National Audit Office as costing billions to address, finance - rather than pupil outcomes - may be what keeps most CEOs up at night.

## Growth: Developing school trusts

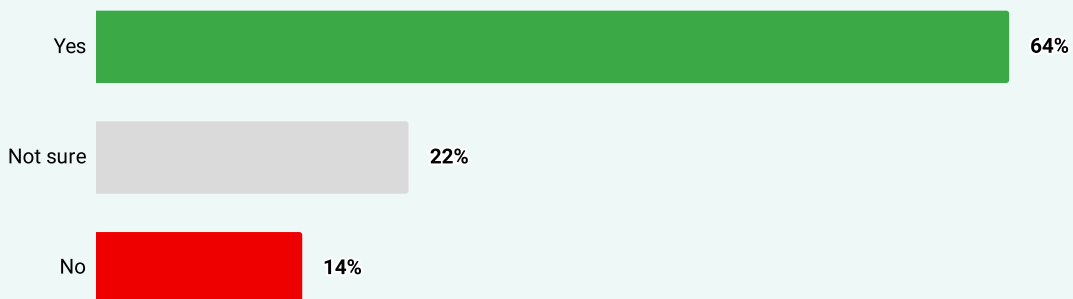
The school trust model has evolved significantly since the early days of single academies, sponsored by a local business or university. Today we still have many single academy trusts, but we also have national trusts with more than 40 schools, and trusts that mix schools of all phases and types.

Where schools once had to set up their own trust, now new academies are more likely to join an existing one, but not every area has trusts ready to take on new schools. Trusts themselves are increasingly coming together through mergers.

The government has advocated various ideal sizes of trust in recent years, currently advocating for larger trusts of over 10 schools or 7,500 pupils - but what does the sector feel works best?

Growth is certainly on the minds of trust CEOs, with around two-thirds saying they expected to add new schools to their trust over the next academic year through sponsoring or opening new academies, merging with other trusts, or rebrokerage. 22% said they were unsure about their trust's growth this year.

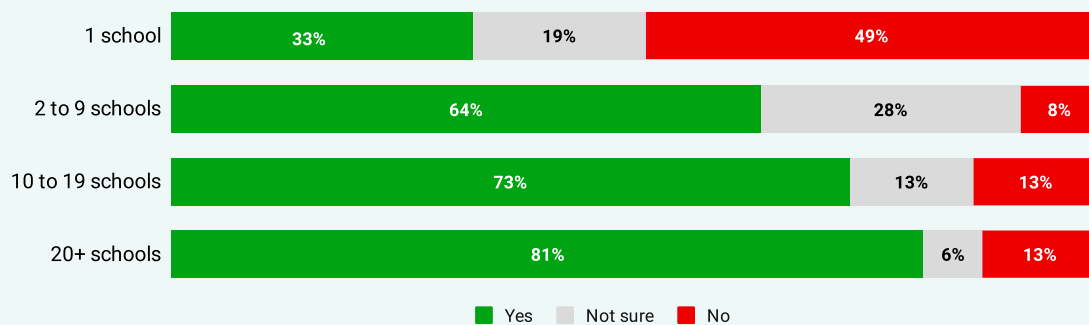
### Do you expect your trust to add additional schools in the next academic year?



There are notable differences by trust size - larger trusts are much more likely to be thinking about growth, whilst single academy trusts are much more likely to expect to stay the same size.

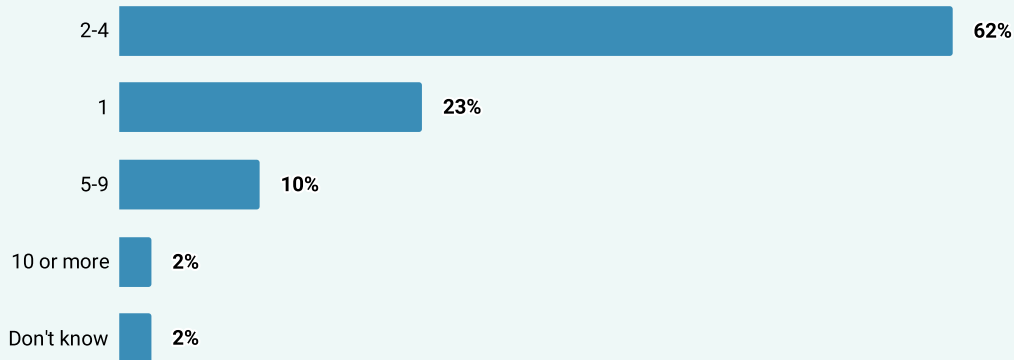
### Do you expect your trust to add additional schools in the next academic year?

by school count



Most CEOs who expect their trust to grow in size in the coming year, expect that growth to be by fewer than five schools. A significant 62% of respondents anticipate between two to four schools joining their trust while 23% expect one additional school to join them. On the larger scale of expansion, 10% of CEOs expect between five and nine schools to be integrated, whereas only a minority of 2% predicted an addition of 10 or more schools.

#### How many additional schools do you anticipate joining your trust in the next academic year?



For some single academy trusts, not growing is a deliberate choice driven by the belief that it offers the best model, despite the encouragement from government to grow. For other trusts, despite being keen on growth, their leaders reported various barriers to making it happen.

Some felt they did not meet - or did not understand - the criteria required by their Department for Education regional director, even when they had schools willing to join. Others cited perceived changes in the political landscape: "We are seeking growth through [local authority] schools, but the lack of political drive towards academisation has slowed down this pipeline." Finance and legal issues can also be a barrier, as well as a continued lack of understanding of the benefits of joining a trust, as one CEO noted: "Schools are interested in joining but there are still plenty of myths to bust, plus the £25,000 conversion grant no longer seems to cover the cost of conversion, especially of church schools."

While some larger single academy trusts continue to enjoy robust health, for many smaller trusts financial and operational headwinds mean growth is essential. This year's academy regulation and commissioning review has resulted in a public set of quality descriptors and exemplar evidence for DfE regional directors to use in making decisions in the establishment, growth, and merger of trusts - which hopefully will make it easier for trusts that want to grow to plan with more certainty. CST will continue to make the case for the benefits of the school trust approach, through publications like last year's *Starting with Why* pamphlet and through engagement across the political spectrum.

# Looking to the future

High quality education and workforce development  
and people strategy

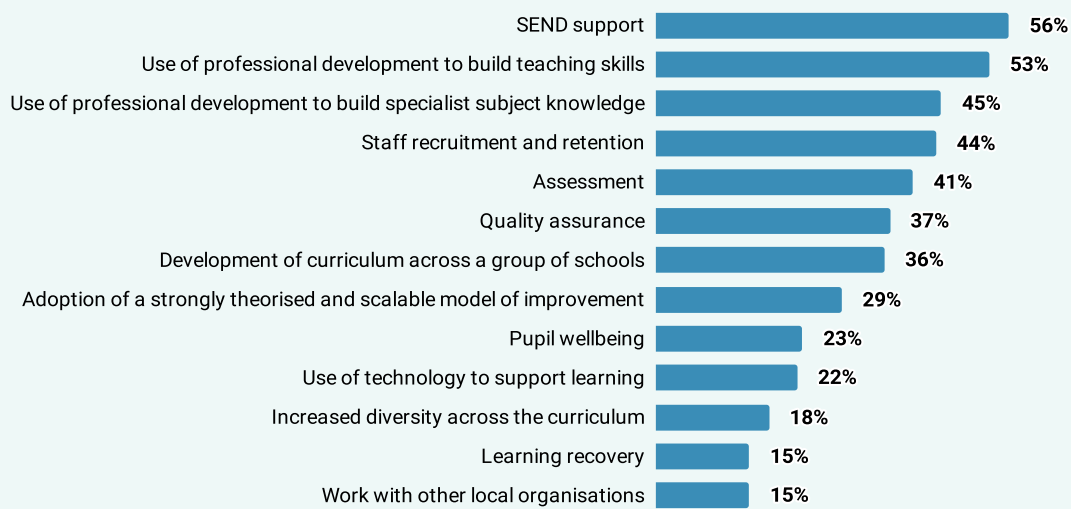


## Improving quality of education

Schools exist to teach pupils, so quality of education will always be a priority for trusts. Recent years have seen a renewed focus on professional development for staff, especially subject-specific knowledge, with larger trusts developing their own training programmes for their own staff and nearby trusts. In 2023 CST launched an inquiry into trust-led school improvement to support trusts in this important area, exploring common goals, best practice approaches, and the implications for building capacity and capability in the sector.

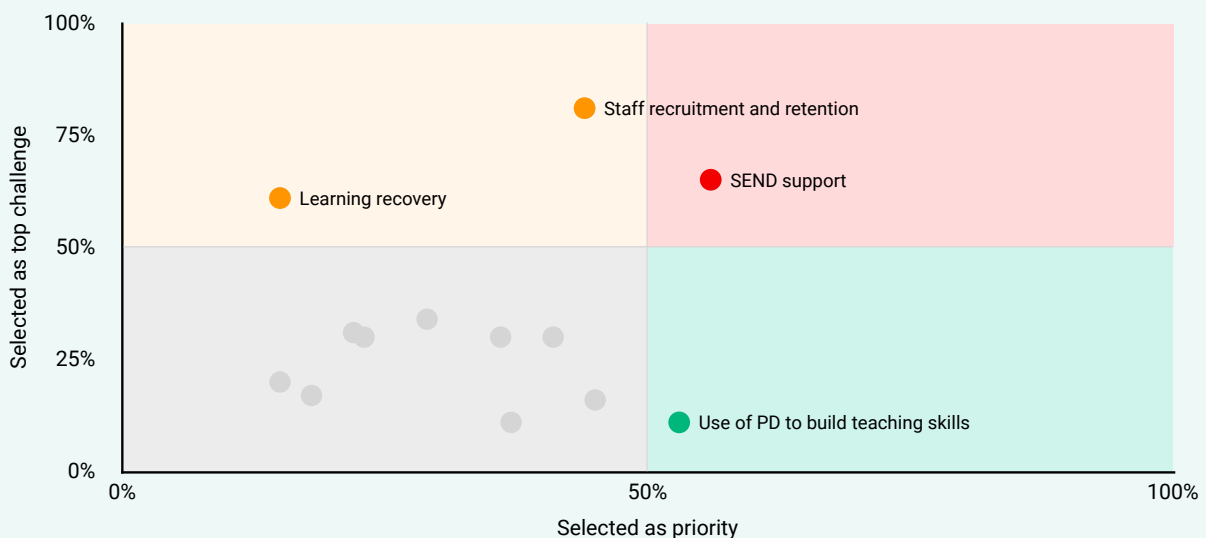
Turning to quality of education, trust leaders identify supporting students with special needs as the main focus for the coming year, with 56% mentioning special educational needs and disability (SEND) support. More than half, 53%, want to focus on improving their teachers' skills through professional development, and 45% on enhancing teachers' subject-specific knowledge. Hiring and keeping staff is a priority for 44% of CEOs.

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



SEND support is the biggest priority within quality of education, and it is expected to be a significant challenge. Whilst professional development was selected as a priority, trusts are more confident in delivering it. The most commonly identified challenge was staff recruitment and retention. Learning recovery, whilst not selected frequently as a priority, is also expected to be a challenge for over half of those who selected it as a priority.

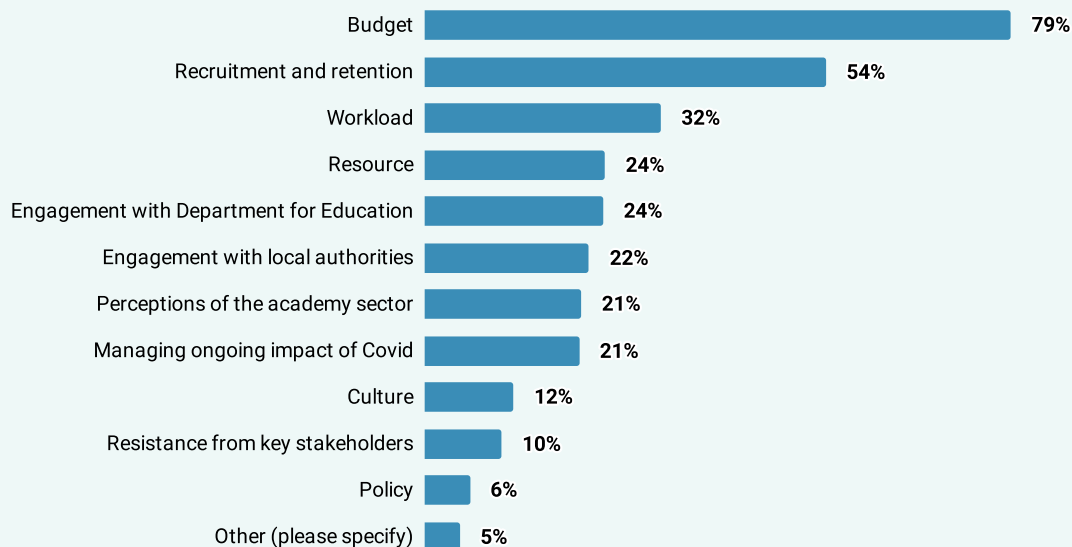
### Most demanding priorities for quality of education in 2023/24





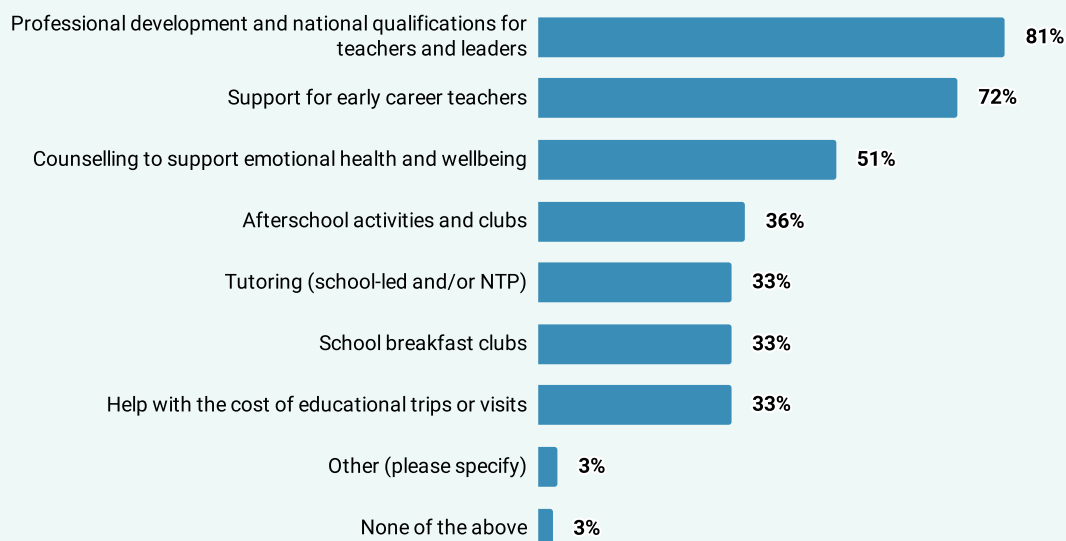
As last year, the main barrier that trust leaders say they face in delivering a high quality of education is budget. The extent of the issue has increased, from 60% in 2022 to 79% in 2023. Workload and resources are the next largest expected barriers. Since last year, the ongoing impact of Covid-19 has become less of a barrier; whilst 44% of CEOs in last year's survey believed this would be a barrier to achieving a high quality of education, this year that number has reduced to 21%.

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



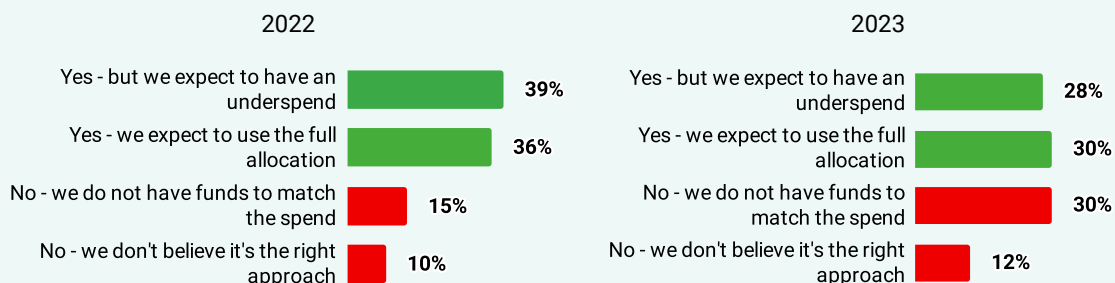
In addition to reviewing priorities and barriers, school leaders shared the methods they found most effective in their schools. Providing special training and qualifications for both teachers and school leaders was the area that most found impactful, with 81% of respondents saying this approach has made a difference. Supporting teachers early in their careers also seems to have a major impact: 72% of leaders noted its significance. Counselling services were highlighted by over half of the leaders.

### Which evidence-informed approaches that you have used in your school(s) have been most impactful?



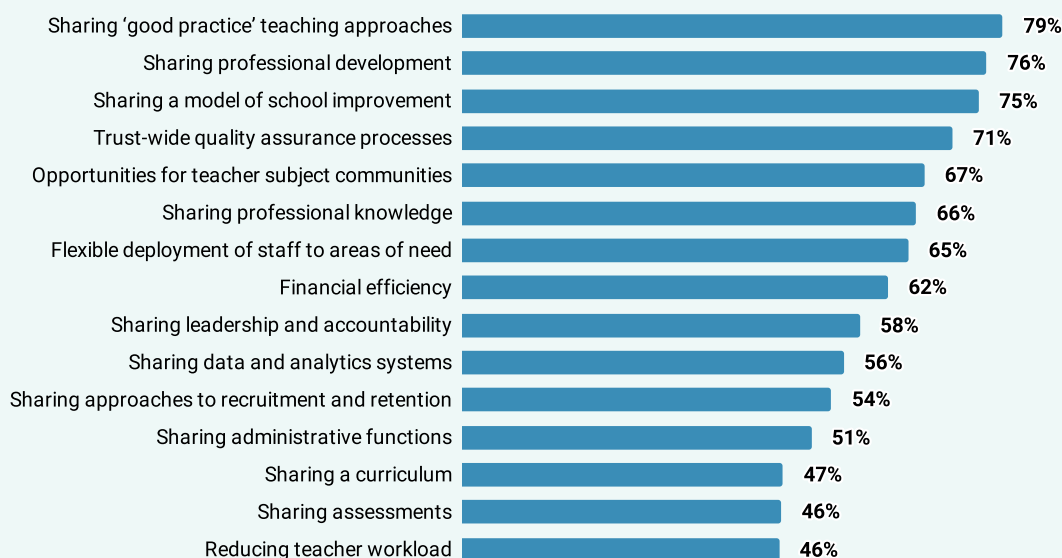
In the previous section, we highlighted that overall feelings of financial security have worsened since last year. Here we see how this may be impacting quality of education: for example, there is a reduction in the proportion of trusts expecting to use the National Tutoring Programme's funding next year compared to last. Whilst 75% of trusts used some or all of the provision in 2022/23, only 58% are planning to in this upcoming year. The main difference is that now trusts do not expect to be able to match the funding, with rule changes meaning trusts are now expected to fund a larger proportion of costs themselves.

### Trust responses on whether they expect any of their schools to use the National Tutoring Programme funding



Many CEOs reported a “trust dividend” for the quality of education from being part of a school trust. Easier sharing of good practice, professional development, and school improvement models were reported by more than three-quarters of respondents. Trust leaders also identified quality assurance (71%), teacher subject communities (67%), and knowledge sharing (66%) as being more effective within a school trust than outside one.

### Which of these, if any, make school improvement more effective within a trust than outside of a trust?



The focus on support for children with SEND reflects the mission of school trusts to provide a good education for all. That SEND is also seen as an area of significant challenge, perhaps, reflects the challenge of diagnosing and accessing funding for appropriate support. This funding is channelled through local authorities, some of which have sought financial support from the government for deficits in their SEND budgets or are finding it difficult to cope with the number of requests for Education Health and Care Plan reviews. The government has announced ambitious plans to reform this area but the delivery timescales - and the attendant funding - mean any benefits are unlikely to be felt this academic year. Many trusts see the value of tutoring to support some pupils, but are sceptical about the bureaucracy surrounding the National Tutoring Programme. CST suspects most trusts would rather have increased core budgets, and the freedom to target spending where it can best reflect local needs. Trusts recognising the educational benefits of being part of a school trust is reassuring. CST's inquiry into models for school improvement will look at this issue in more detail in the coming months.

## Workforce development and people strategy

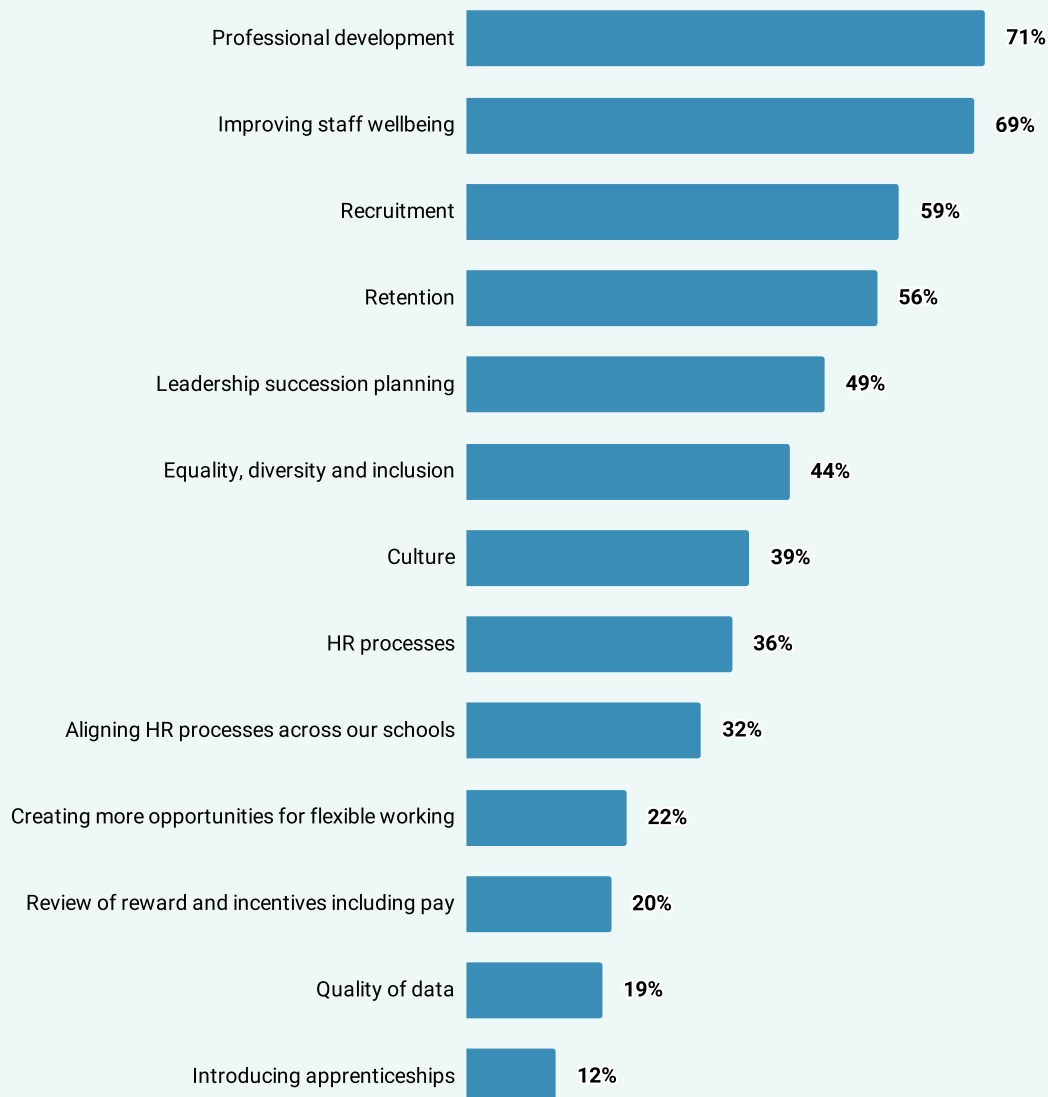
Staff are crucial to the success of any organisation, and school trusts are no different - our colleagues are the ones who form strategies and plans and put them into action. Staffing costs are also the biggest element in trust budgets.

The last year has seen industrial action over pay for teachers, and, at the time of publication, there is an ongoing dispute over support staff pay. Trusts must carefully navigate these issues.

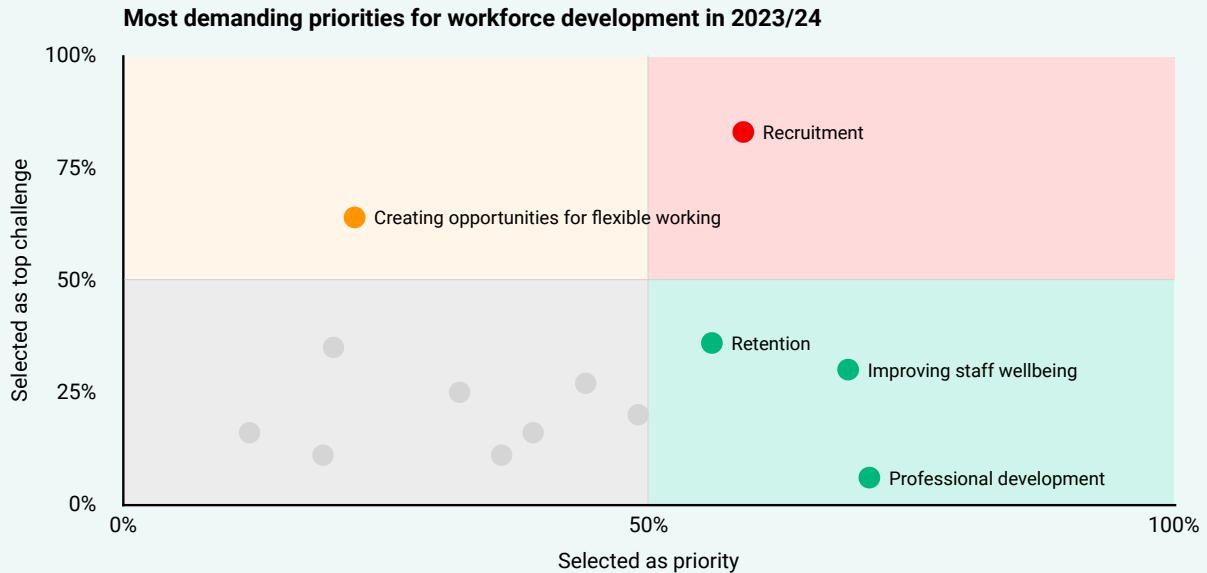
The pandemic also saw a shift in working patterns for millions of people - including remote learning in schools. While schools have overwhelmingly returned to in-person operations, many professions haven't, with a rise in homeworking with more flexibility and no commute - it is too early to tell whether this will affect the attractiveness of schools as a place to work, but one that trusts will want to consider as they think about recruitment and retention of staff.

School trust CEOs highlighted various focal areas for the upcoming academic year concerning workforce development within their trusts. The topmost priority, as indicated by 71% of respondents, is professional development for their staff. Closely following this was an emphasis on improving staff wellbeing, with 69% of CEOs noting it as a priority. Recruitment and retention strategies also drew considerable attention, with 59% and 56% of respondents indicating these as focus areas, respectively.

### In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding workforce development?

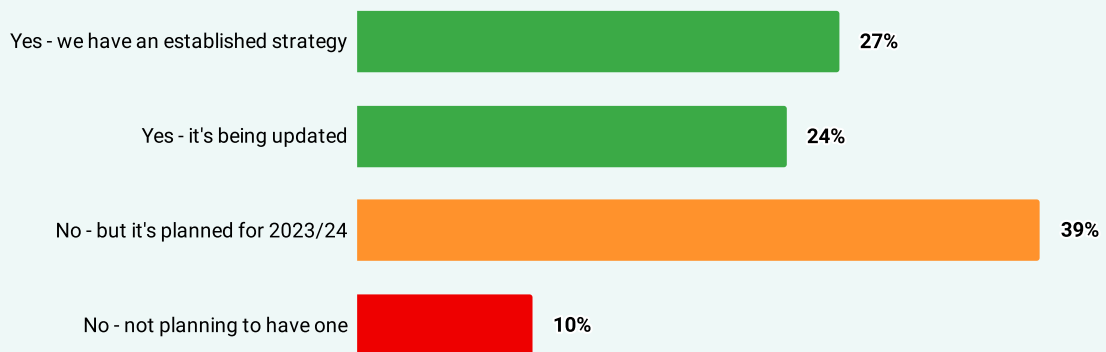


When trust CEOs were questioned about which areas they anticipated would pose the most challenges for their trusts, recruitment emerged as the foremost concern, with over three-quarters saying they expect it to be challenging. Leaders were more confident in their ability to retain staff and improve staff wellbeing, highlighted as a priority by the majority of trusts. Professional development is now seen as firmly embedded in most trusts - a high priority, but one leaders feel they have a strong handle on. Whilst a relatively low proportion of CEOs selected opportunities for flexible working as a priority, of those who did, a relatively high proportion expect it to be a challenge.



Just under half of CEOs (49%) reported that they do not currently have a people strategy for their trust. However, the vast majority of those intend to develop one. A quarter of CEOs reported that they are currently updating their strategy.

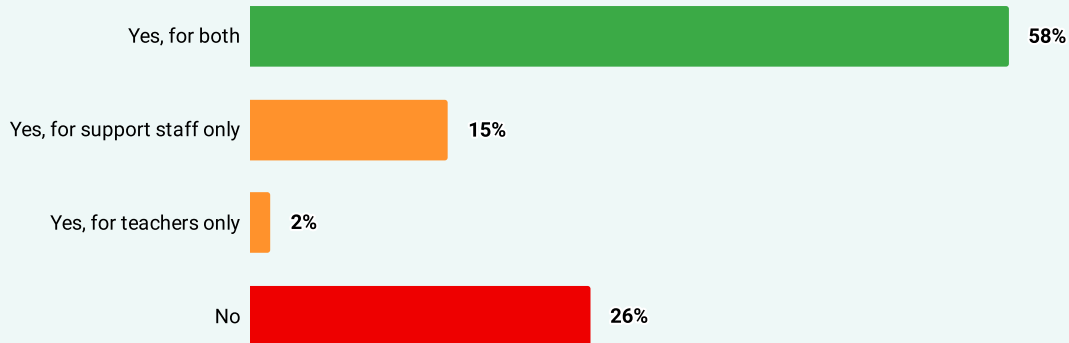
**Does your trust have a formal people strategy?**



In relation to the provision of flexible working options, a notable 58% of school trust CEOs indicated that their trusts offer these benefits for both teachers and support staff. 15% of respondents shared that their trusts provide flexible working arrangements solely for support staff. The forms that flexible working takes differs between trusts - examples given include term time holidays and home working for support staff, increased numbers of part-time contracts, and generous leave of absence policies. Trusts reported the need to be in school for children as a challenge to allow for more flexibility for teachers, but some offer the chance for meetings and training to be attended remotely.

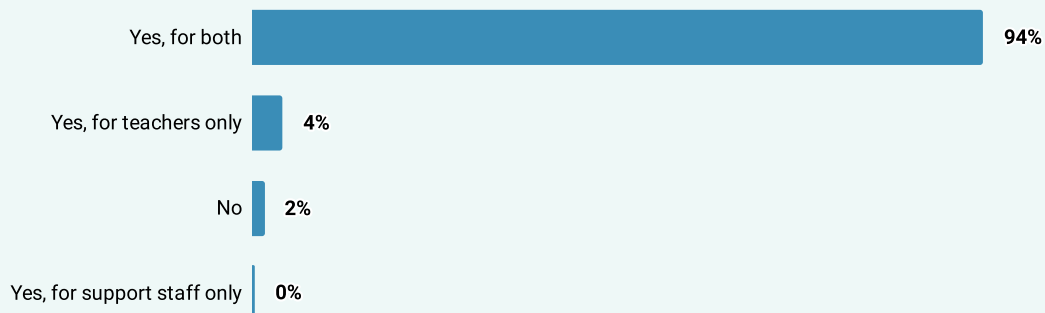
Over a quarter of the respondents (26%), said that their trusts do not offer any form of flexible working options, whether for teachers or support staff. As outlined above, 22% of CEOs stated their intention to focus on this next year.

#### Does your trust offer flexible working options for teachers or support staff?



Despite the long-standing freedom to offer their own arrangements, the vast majority of trust leaders surveyed reported that they follow the national pay and condition arrangements for both teachers and support staff. Just 2% reported that they do not follow the national arrangements for either type of staff.

#### Does your trust follow the national pay and condition arrangements for teachers (STPC) or support staff (NJC Green Book)?



Trusts recognise the vital importance of their staff, but relatively few have formalised this into a people strategy that can provide a strategic approach. CST's view is that having a clear policy and long-term strategy for staffing, including how staff might work across the trust, staff training, development, promotion, and succession, is an essential part of strong trust governance. With almost all trusts following national pay and conditions, recruitment and retention must instead focus on what makes a trust an attractive place to work - with the pervading culture, staff wellbeing, and development at the heart of this.

Making sure we get all the best talent is also crucial - which is why the 44% of trusts who say they are prioritising equality, diversity, and inclusion is a good start, but not enough. Trusts need to reflect their communities and ensure everyone - staff and students - can be their best no matter what their background.

# Ensuring strong and resilient trusts

Governance and accountability, system leadership,  
and civic responsibility



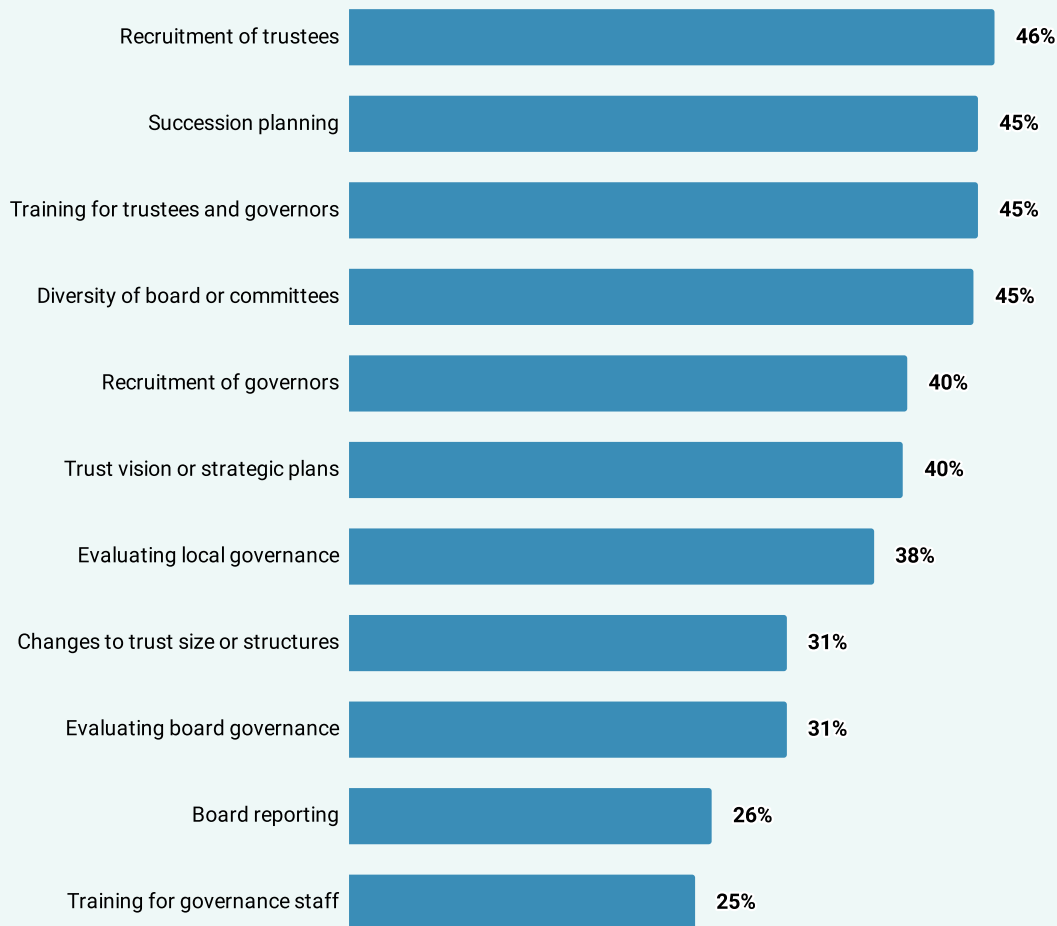
## Governance and accountability

When a trust underperforms, it is often due to a failure of governance. Good governance serves as a foundation and underpins the very qualities that make trusts the best vehicle for school improvement – a group of schools working as one entity to improve and maintain high standards; encouraging deep and purposeful collaboration; and providing a strong and resilient structure that supports a cohesive culture, leverages capacity for professional development, and supports the organisation to act as an anchor institution in its communities.

Of the topics covered in this survey, governance and accountability was the area with the least consensus amongst respondents and a wide spread of high priorities, perhaps reflecting the variety of governance models in the sector and the divergent needs of trust of different sizes.

Recruitment of trustees, succession planning, training for trustees and governors, and diversity of board or committees were all selected by 45-46% of respondents. All of the suggested areas of potential focus were selected by over a quarter of respondents.

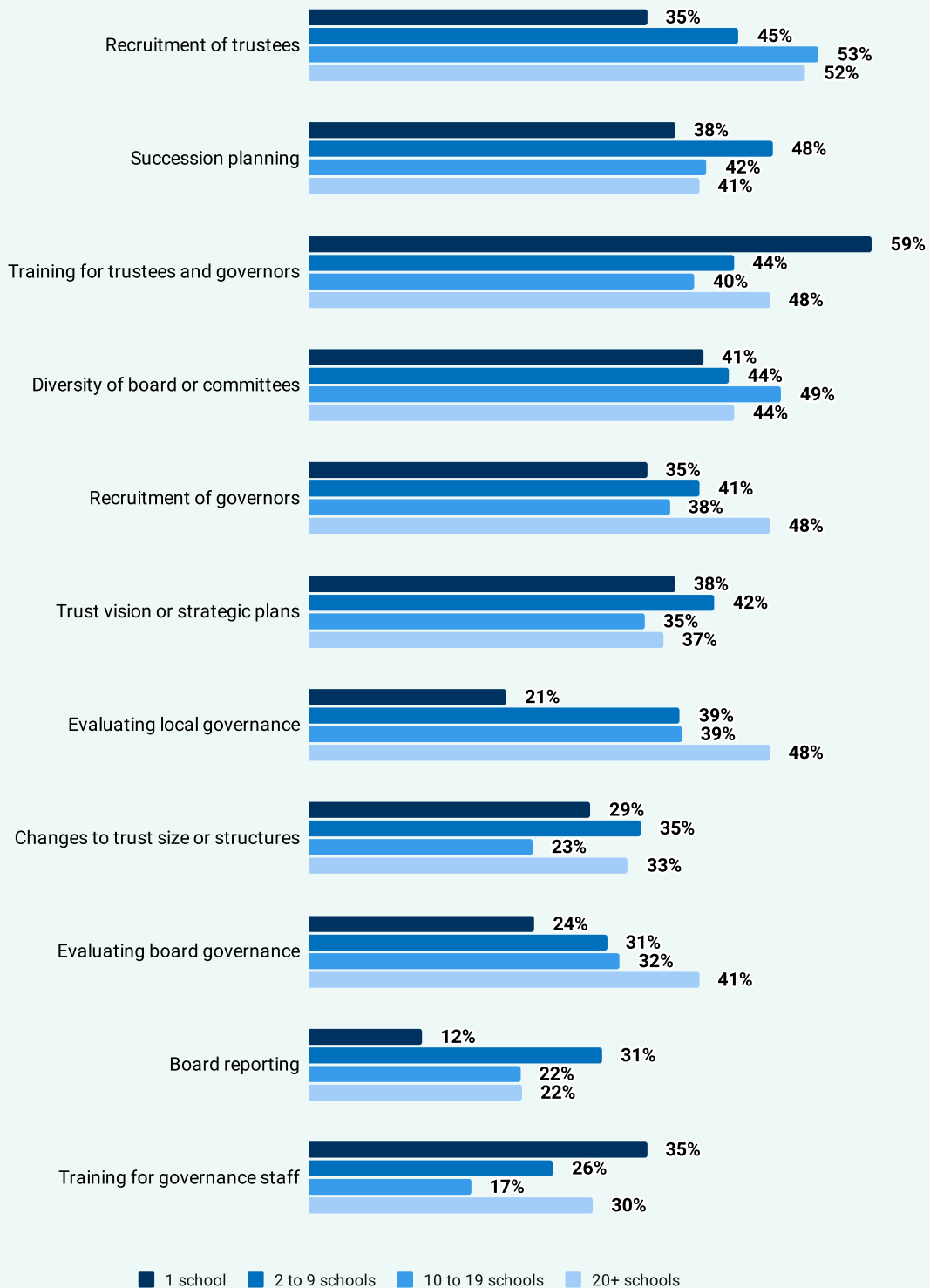
### In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding governance and accountability in the next academic year?



There were clear differences when results were analysed by the number of schools in the trust. Training was the top priority in single academy trusts, succession planning for trusts with two to 10 schools, recruitment of trustees in trusts of up to 19 schools, with the very largest trusts more focused on evaluating local governance.

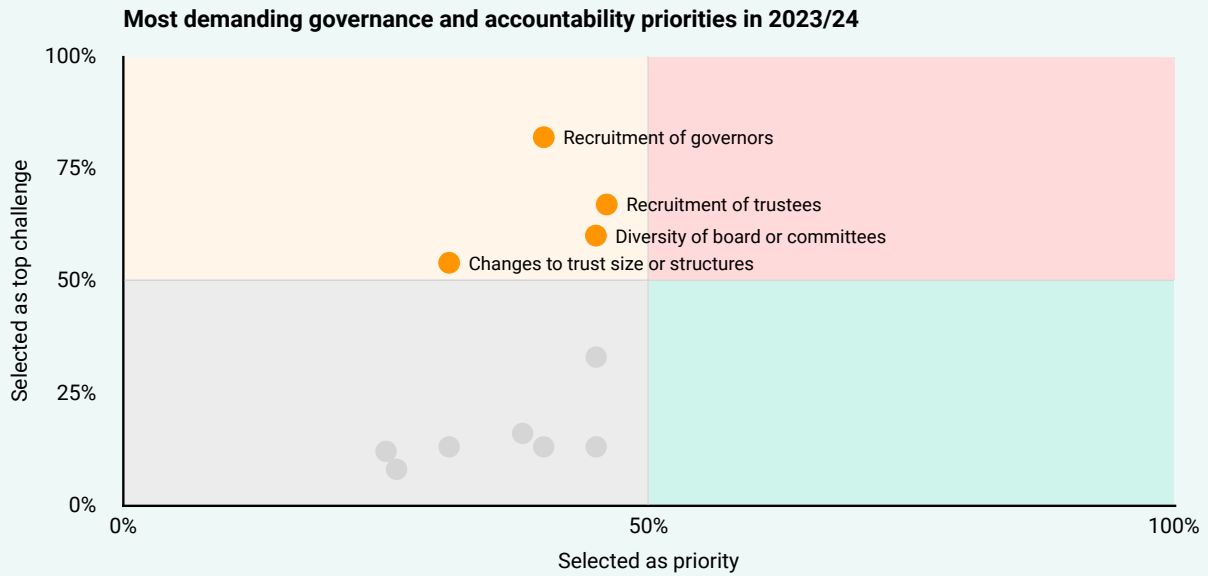
### In what areas does your trust intend to focus its attention on governance and accountability?

by school count



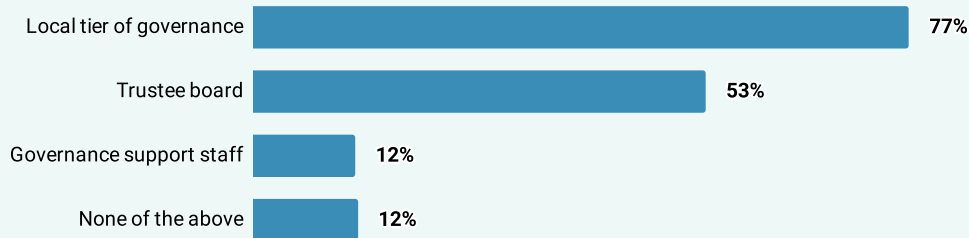


Whilst there was not a majority view on priorities across the sector, recruitment of governors and trustees are expected to be the most challenging priorities to achieve. Diversity of board or committees, and changes to trust size or structures ranked as the next highest areas of challenge.



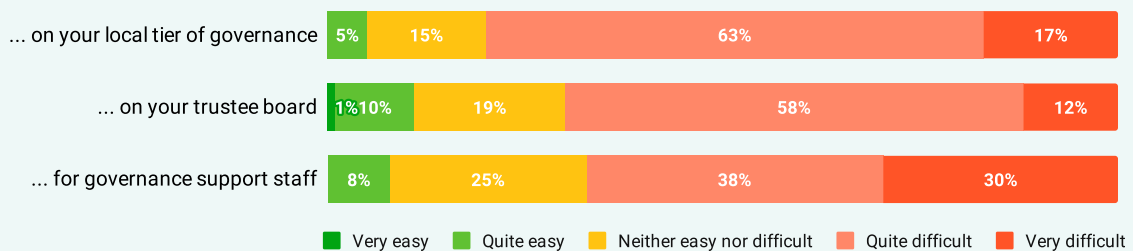
The scale of the challenge is evident as 77% of CEOs had open vacancies for their local tier of governance at the time of surveying. This is 24 percentage points more than those with vacancies on their trustee board.

#### Which of the following do you currently have vacancies for?



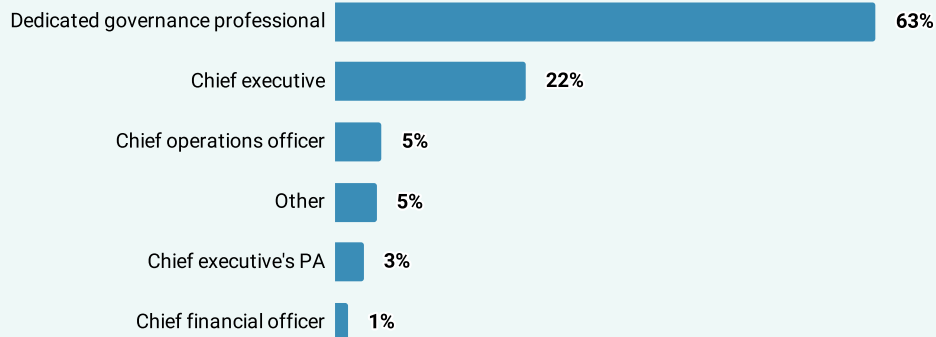
In addition to this, it is clear that CEOs continue to expect to struggle to recruit to most governance roles: only 5% of CEOs think it will be “quite easy” to find people to serve on their local tier of governance, whilst 80% think it will be quite or very difficult. This is a worsening picture compared to last year. Slightly more think it will be easy to find new members for their trustee board (11%) or hire governance support staff (8%).

#### How easy or difficult do you expect it to be to fill roles...



Despite the importance of good governance to a trust's success, four in 10 trusts do not have a dedicated governance professional. This may be expected in smaller trusts, where cost pressures mean the lead may combine it with other duties. However, even some of the largest trusts report that they do not have a dedicated staff member for this role. Just over a fifth of trusts reported that the chief executive is the lead on governance.

### Who leads on governance within your trust?



Around 60% of governance leads have either a governance-specific qualification or a related qualification such as a law or finance degree.

### What, if any, relevant qualification does your governance professional hold?



No two trusts are the same and the survey reflects that governance needs and approaches are wide-ranging and evolving. What is universal, however, is the need for a diverse, knowledgeable and dedicated set of individuals to carry out the work.

The number of CEOs serving as governance leads raises some concerns: to be effective, governance requires a strong degree of independence and separation between the executive and non-executive. To do otherwise compromises true accountability in governance. Trusts should also check their articles of association, as most explicitly prohibit the CEO from also serving as the governance professional.

CST understands the primary importance of improving governance across the sector, through advocacy for appropriate statutory and regulatory approaches; training programmes and bespoke consultancy services for trusts; and by connecting trustees and governance leaders through our professional community.

## System leadership and civic responsibility

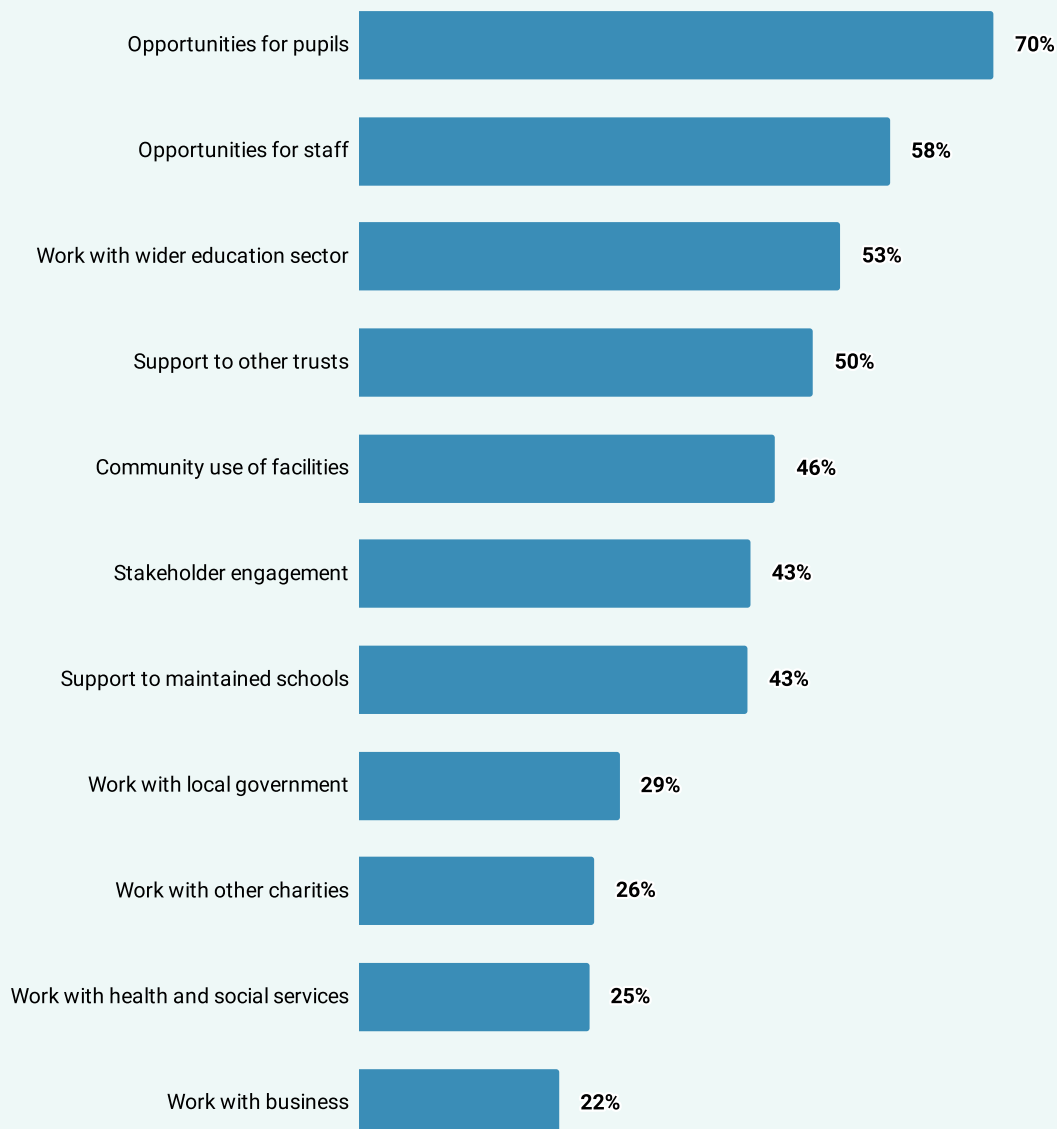
School trusts exist to “advance education for public benefit” – not only through their own classrooms and schools, but through a civic and moral duty to advance education for all children.

As the sector has matured, so has the deliberate activity to ensure schools are anchored in the communities they serve. Through building relationships across sectors, working strategically with local government, charities, businesses and health services, trusts can work with a raft of stakeholders that can provide the community with the joined-up provision it needs.

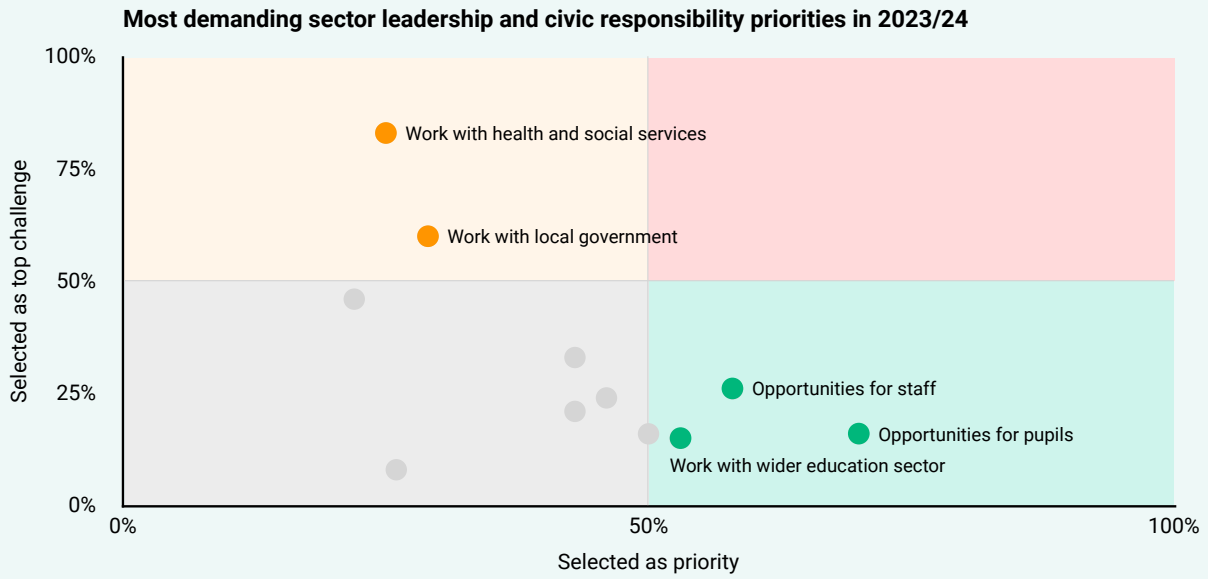
It also means improving outcomes for the entire education sector, whether that be working with local schools or with other trusts (or both). The growing range of support offered by trusts to their peers, and the variety of activity reported in the survey responses, shows the golden thread of civic duty is strong and continues to strengthen.

At first glance, the top two priorities within system leadership and civic responsibility keep the focus within the trust: 70% of respondents selected opportunities for pupils as a priority, whilst 58% selected opportunities for staff. However, more than half of trusts say they work with the wider education sector, including support to other trusts and maintained schools.

### In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding system leadership and civic responsibility in the next academic year?

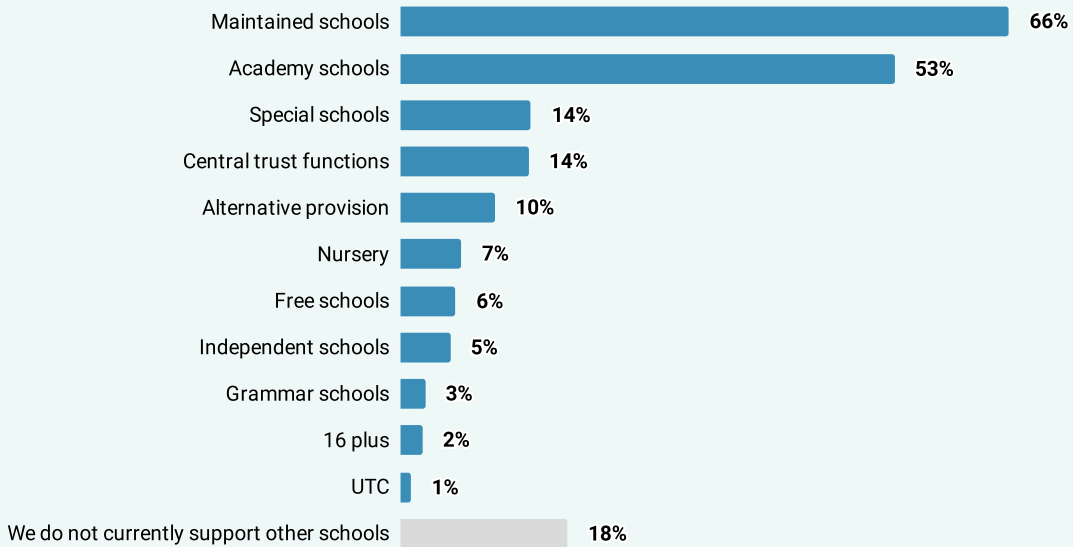


Of the areas selected as high priority, none are expected to present a high level of challenge. Work with health and social services, and work with local government, whilst only selected as priority by a minority of respondents, pose a relatively high challenge for those that rate them as high priority.



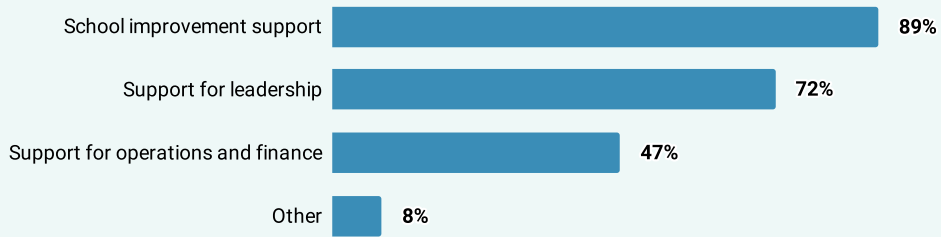
Where trusts support other schools, 66% support maintained schools and 53% support academies in other trusts. 14% of CEOs reported providing help with special schools and central trust functions. A small number of trusts reported working with independent and grammar schools.

### What schools outside of your trust do you currently support?



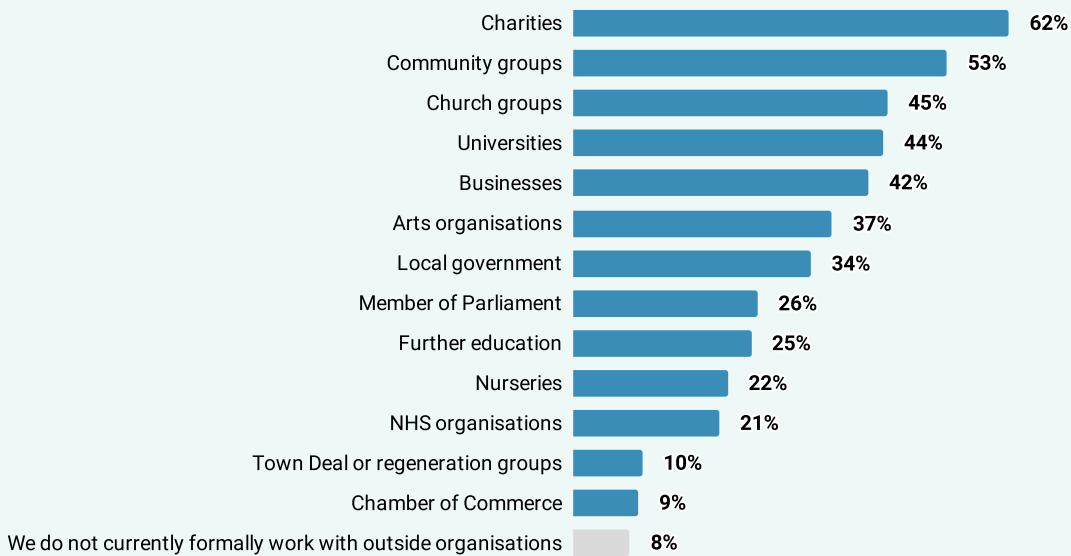
Of those who support other schools, the majority (89%) offer school improvement support. Around three-quarters (72%) offer support for leadership. Just under half offer support for operations and finance, and 8% offer another kind of support, such as SEND support, collaborative projects, governance support and general advice and mentorship.

#### What type of support do you offer?



Beyond the school system, trusts have significant opportunities to act as civic anchors within their communities. The survey results highlight the wide range of organisations that trusts are collaborating with beyond education. 62% of trusts collaborate with other charities, whilst 53% collaborate with community groups and 45% with church groups. Just 8% of CEOs surveyed reported that their trust does not currently formally work with any outside organisations.

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



This work takes many forms, with the most frequently reported activities being attending meetings (72%), joint activities and events (60%), sharing information with parents and pupils (54%), and intelligence sharing (51%). Other cooperation included the use of trust facilities, fundraising, and volunteering by pupils, parents, and staff.

Trusts described a rich variety of activities that reach into their local communities, offering new experiences to their pupils and benefiting wider society. Chief executives volunteered more than 250 examples; some include:

- A children's parliament in conjunction with the local council, other schools, and the local MP
- Curriculum projects with national organisations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, Northern Ballet, and the National Gallery
- "Community larders" and food banks run with local charities
- Work with probation services
- Partnerships with universities and businesses
- Community football and vocational qualifications in partnership with local clubs
- Events and curriculum work with a local historical trust
- Regular forum for a network of over 100 local organisations that work with young people and families
- Fundraising for local, national, and international charities

This year, 92% of trust leaders reported a formal working arrangement with an outside organisation, while last year 56% reported a partnership. Anecdotal evidence from CST chimes with this; more trusts are actively formalising partnerships with others within and beyond education, and a growing number are exploring ways to quantify and measure their civic impact.

As relatively new civic structures, independent of local government like universities and NHS trusts, there is more that can and will be done in this space – and a growing understanding of what it means to be anchored in a community beyond the necessary but insufficient need to improve education quality. It is clear from this survey our shared understanding of, and commitment to, realising this is continuing to flourish.

# Conclusion

Reflections from Ernest Jenavs, CEO of Edurio



# Conclusion

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With the national trust report being in its second year, this has rapidly become the largest annual review of the trust sector priorities and challenges. We have received positive feedback from trust leaders, sector experts, and policymakers.

While the key priorities have remained unchanged, each of the last years has presented the sector with different challenges that trust leaders have navigated with courage, grace and devotion to their pupils and staff.

External pressures of cost of living increases, school building lifespan and labour market shifts have meant that school trusts have had to focus on the operational challenges of budget planning, recruitment and risk assessments to ensure that teaching and learning can happen. This naturally means there is less capacity to focus on strategic school improvement and civic impact.

But there are plenty of demanding strategic challenges facing trusts. The wider [Edurio research](#) with hundreds of thousands of pupils, parents, and staff across England shows that staff risk of resigning is at its highest point historically, pupils report a learning drop in Key Stages 3-4, behaviour challenges are affecting both staff and pupils, and all stakeholder groups desire more communication and involvement in the schools' decision making.<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore encouraging that education quality, workforce development and organisational culture remain key priorities for trust leaders. The sector is committed to rising above the operational challenges and driving school improvement in their schools and beyond. The strongest trusts will be able to retain the momentum and crucially bring along their staff, parents, and pupils by involving them in the decision-making.

We are immensely grateful to trust leaders for sharing their priorities and challenges. This report reflects the stories of hundreds of trusts and aims to help the CST, sector bodies, regulators and trusts better understand where to direct their efforts. We will continue reporting on trust priorities and hope that the growth in participation in the review will continue across the sector. We will also be happy to hear any feedback or topics of particular interest (email the research team at [insights@edurio.com](mailto:insights@edurio.com)) - we learn the most by working in collaboration!

**Ernest Jenavs**

*Chief Executive Officer, Edurio*

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<sup>2</sup> Meiksane, E., & Willetts, B. (2023). *Improving School Trusts: Bringing CST and DfE guidance to life with feedback from 175,000 stakeholders*. Edurio. <https://home.edurio.com/insights/improving-school-trusts>



# About Edurio

Edurio is England's leading provider of staff, pupil, and parent feedback surveys for schools and multi-academy trusts, working with over 150 trusts and 2000 schools across England and internationally.

Edurio's platform and nationwide dataset allow trust and school leaders to benchmark their performance against national averages on topics like staff wellbeing, parental engagement, pupil wellbeing and others.

By measuring the often difficult-to-track elements of education quality, Edurio can help school leaders make informed decisions, develop engaging relationships with staff and communicate their values to their community.

Featuring surveys designed in partnership with academic experts, Edurio has developed an advanced survey management and data visualisation platform for schools and school trusts to easily access these important insights.

Edurio has developed guidance for conducting school stakeholder feedback surveys. Follow the steps of the [Strategic Feedback Survey Cycle](#) to bring feedback into your school improvement journey.

By using Edurio to centrally manage your stakeholder feedback across the trust, you can:

- ✓ Reduce effort to analyse data and ensure high response rates due to the use of a trusted partner
- ✓ Strengthen relationships between school leadership and the staff and parent community
- ✓ Provide an understanding of where your resources and support are needed
- ✓ Identify areas for professional learning and growth opportunities
- ✓ Find areas of good practice and celebrate strengths
- ✓ Improve staff wellbeing and student achievement

If you're interested in learning how Edurio can help your school or trust achieve its goals, email [contact@edurio.com](mailto:contact@edurio.com) or visit our homepage [home.edurio.com](https://www.edurio.com).

# About CST

The Confederation of School Trusts is the sector body and national membership organisation for school trusts, with almost three million children educated in our member schools and academy trusts.

CST helps shape the education policy agenda by speaking on their behalf, bringing together frontline education experts from across the country.

CST works to drive real, strategic change for education on the big issues that matter most.

Our unique focus on school trusts allows us to meet the needs of the sector through advice and guidance, events and conferences, professional development, and consultancy.



**Confederation  
of School Trusts**