National CST School Trust Report

June 2022

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Foreword

I am delighted to welcome this first survey of the strategic priorities of School Trusts in England. This survey report comes in the wake of the Schools White Paper which makes clear that the direction of travel is for all schools to be part of a family of schools working together in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single legal entity.

The report is framed around the Confederation of School Trust's definition of a strong trust. Of course, the charitable purpose of trusts is to advance education for public benefit, and I am therefore particularly pleased to see so many trusts say that their top priority is improving the quality of education.

The group of schools working together creates educational value but also makes good financial sense. As we face an uncertain fiscal future with unprecedented pressures on the public purse from global events, it was never more important that we have robust institutions that can withstand further perturbations. Strong institutions are a hallmark of public life and central to CST's view that School Trusts are a new form of civic structure.

I am also gratified to see the focus on strong governance and an acknowledgement of the crucial role of the governance professional. CST has long advocated for the fundamental importance of governance professional to expert governance.

My thanks to our wonderful colleagues at Edurio, CST's Platinum Partner, for their expert work at constructing this survey, analysing the data and supporting the commentary.

The Confederation of School Trusts as the sector body and national organisation representing trusts of all sizes and across all geographical regions in England commends this first survey report to you. It makes fascinating reading. It is our intention that this survey of the work of trusts will become a key feature of the educational landscape moving forward.

Warmest wishes!

Leora Cruddas CBE
Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts

Introduction

School trusts have an important and growing role in education across England. The Department for Education White Paper, published in March 2022, confirms the strategic importance of the trust model and the need to build upon the successes of strong trusts, with the Government committed to all schools being in a trust by 2030, and all trusts to be serving 7,500 pupils or running at least 10 schools.

CST and Edurio have been working together to gather reliable insights into where trusts are in their development and what their priorities and challenges are for the academic year 2022/23 and beyond. This has resulted in the first National Survey of School Trusts Report, co-authored by CST, Edurio and Professor Daniel Muijs, Dean of the Faculty of Education and Society at Academica University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam.

Survey and report framework

The report is based on a survey completed by accounting officers on behalf of their trusts. Questions explored overall strategic priorities of trusts in England, and assessed each of five key areas that contribute to a strong trust, as defined in CST's discussion paper, What is a Strong Trust? (January 2022). The questions were created by Edurio survey experts and the CST team. The survey was carried out in March 2022. Our report follows the same structure, assessing priorities in each of the five areas, as well as expected challenges in meeting those priorities.

Research participants

The accounting officers of 328 trusts participated in the research. Accounting officers are the senior executive leaders within a school trust. They are personally responsible to Parliament and the ESFA for their trust's financial resources and are the key individuals who link the trust's accountability and governance structures. The survey was created for accounting officers because they speak authoritatively on behalf of both the trust board and executive leadership to provide a holistic view of their organisation's strategy and operations. This unique perspective means that the National Survey of School Trusts Report reflects organisations rather than individuals to give a bellwether view of the sector in the run up to the publication of the White Paper.

The participating trusts are a representative sample of the trust sector, including a range of sizes and phases.
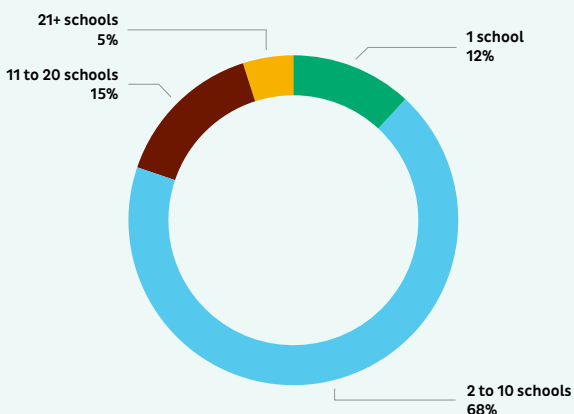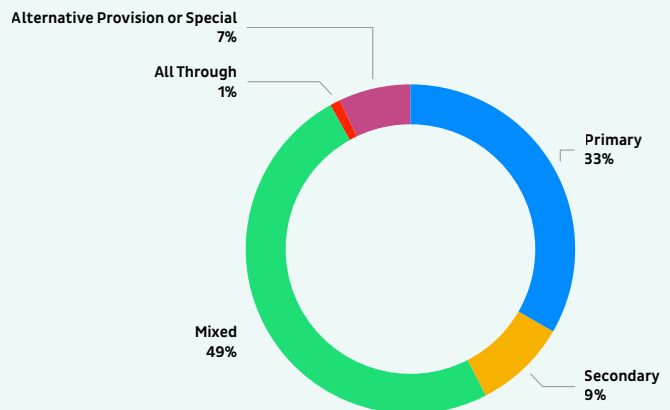
FIGURE 1: **SCHOOL COUNT IN TRUST**

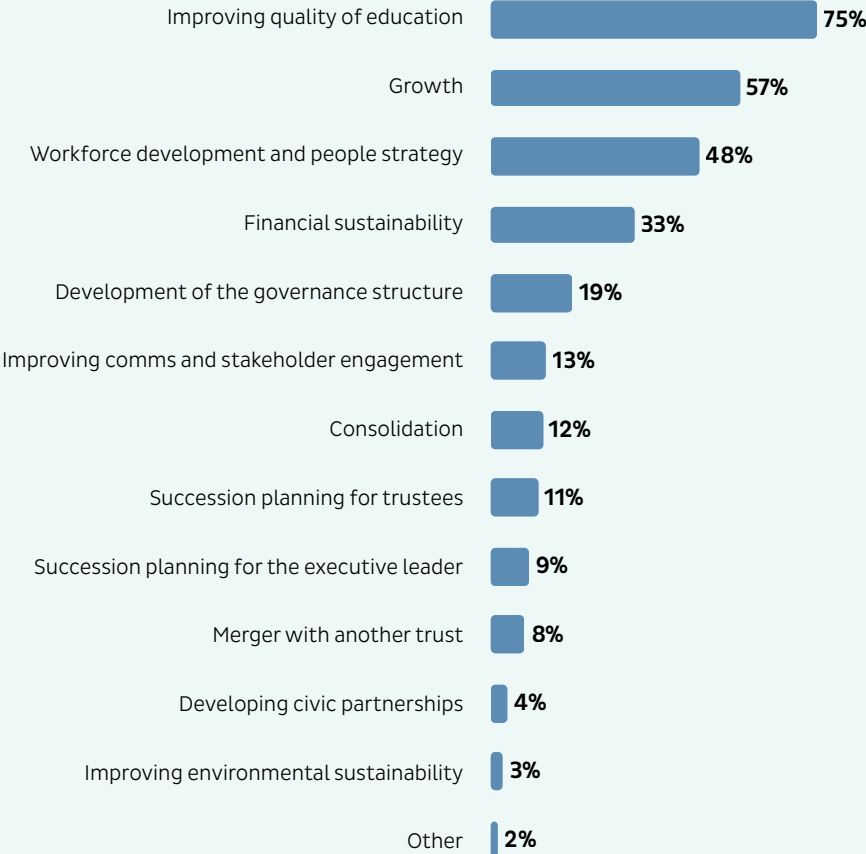FIGURE 2: **SCHOOL COUNT BY EDUCATION PHASE**

Section 1
Strategic priorities

Strategic priorities

Within the context of ongoing operational challenges this year it is important to reflect on trusts' strategic priorities which will shape the sector for the years to come. All participating trusts were asked to report the top three strategic priorities for their board in 2022/23 and evaluate which of those priorities are expected to be the most challenging.
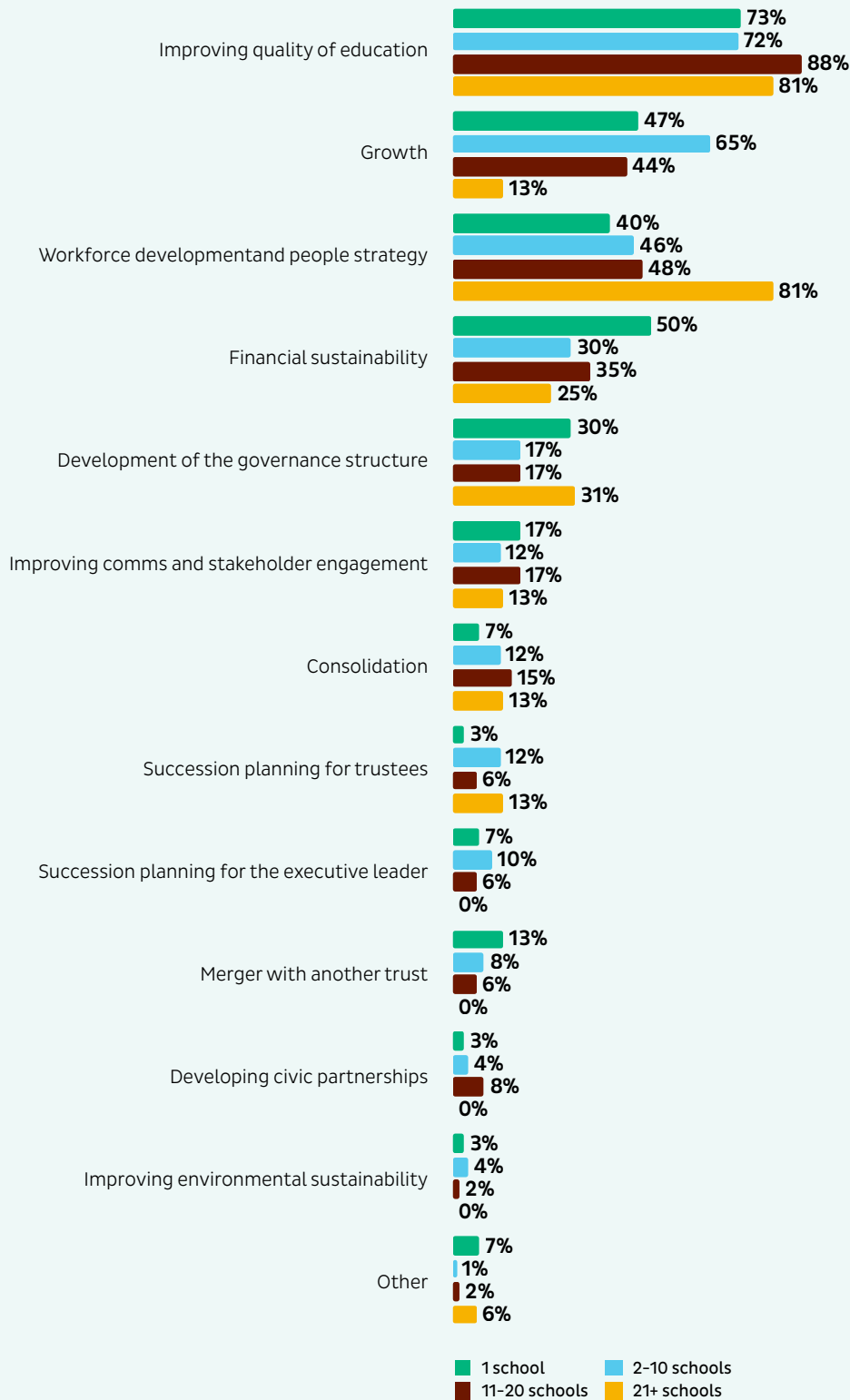
Three quarters of participating trusts see education quality improvement as a strategic priority. This is followed with growth (57%) and workforce development and people strategy (48%). While a wide range of other priorities are mentioned, this shows that trusts are focusing on their core work with pupils and staff as well as operational efficiencies this year. A large number of trusts report working on civic and environmental projects as is described in future chapters, but few report them as top strategic priorities.

FIGURE 3: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT ARE THE TOP 3 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR YOUR BOARD IN 2022/23?"**

Priority	%
Improving quality of education	75%
Growth	57%
Workforce development and people strategy	48%
Financial sustainability	33%
Development of the governance structure	19%
Improving comms and stakeholder engagement	13%
Consolidation	12%
Succession planning for trustees	11%
Succession planning for the executive leader	9%
Merger with another trust	8%
Developing civic partnerships	4%
Improving environmental sustainability	3%
Other	2%

Improving the quality of education is the top priority across all trust size groups indicating that the concept of school trusts as school improvement structures strongly aligns with how trusts see their role. Beyond that, trust size has an impact on priorities and there are some notable differences. Single school trusts report financial sustainability as their second most frequent priority with half of the trusts highlighting it. For trusts between 2-10 schools, growth is a key priority with two thirds listing it among their top priorities. Trusts between 11-20 schools are the most likely to highlight quality of education with growth and people strategy following. For large trusts (above 20 schools), workforce development and people strategy takes the top spot alongside education quality, with 4 out of 5 trusts reporting it as a priority.

FIGURE 4: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT ARE THE TOP 3 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR YOUR BOARD IN 2022/23?" BY TRUST SIZE**

Improving quality of education
- 1 school: 73%
- 2–10 schools: 72%
- 11–20 schools: 88%
- 21+ schools: 81%

Growth
- 1 school: 47%
- 2–10 schools: 65%
- 11–20 schools: 44%
- 21+ schools: 13%

Workforce development and people strategy
- 1 school: 40%
- 2–10 schools: 46%
- 11–20 schools: 48%
- 21+ schools: 81%

Financial sustainability
- 1 school: 50%
- 2–10 schools: 30%
- 11–20 schools: 35%
- 21+ schools: 25%

Development of the governance structure
- 1 school: 30%
- 2–10 schools: 17%
- 11–20 schools: 17%
- 21+ schools: 31%

Improving comms and stakeholder engagement
- 1 school: 17%
- 2–10 schools: 12%
- 11–20 schools: 17%
- 21+ schools: 13%

Consolidation
- 1 school: 7%
- 2–10 schools: 12%
- 11–20 schools: 15%
- 21+ schools: 13%

Succession planning for trustees
- 1 school: 3%
- 2–10 schools: 12%
- 11–20 schools: 6%
- 21+ schools: 13%

Succession planning for the executive leader
- 1 school: 7%
- 2–10 schools: 10%
- 11–20 schools: 6%
- 21+ schools: 0%

Merger with another trust
- 1 school: 13%
- 2–10 schools: 8%
- 11–20 schools: 6%
- 21+ schools: 0%

Developing civic partnerships
- 1 school: 3%
- 2–10 schools: 4%
- 11–20 schools: 8%
- 21+ schools: 0%

Improving environmental sustainability
- 1 school: 3%
- 2–10 schools: 4%
- 11–20 schools: 2%
- 21+ schools: 0%

Other
- 1 school: 7%
- 2–10 schools: 1%
- 11–20 schools: 2%
- 21+ schools: 6%

Legend:
- 1 school
- 2–10 schools
- 11–20 schools
- 21+ schools

Challenges expected

FIGURE 5: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "OUT OF THE AREAS YOU HIGHLIGHTED, WHICH DO YOU THINK WILL BE MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOUR TRUST?"**

Growth	42%
Financial sustainability	13%
Improving quality of education	13%
Workforce development and people strategy	12%
Merger with another trust	6%
Development of the governance structure	6%
Improving comms and stakeholder engagement	5%
Succession planning for trustees	5%
Succession planning for the executive leader	5%
Improving environmental sustainability	3%
Developing civic partnerships	3%
Consolidation	1%
Other	1%

Trusts were asked to report which of their top 3 priorities are expected to be most challenging. Growth here takes the top spot with over 40% of all participating trusts expecting it to be their biggest challenge.

COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

"As a faith trust, the speed of growth and ensuring that we remain healthy is our challenge rather than attracting growth."

"It is the right kind of growth – i.e. of secondary – that is the challenge for us. We continue to be very popular, though increasing primary conversions without secondary could prove counter-productive."

"We have the capacity [but] marketing the trust in our area is a challenge as the perception of trusts needs to be more positive."

"To determine our MAT approach given we feel 'pushed' into a structure reflecting national priorities not local need."

Evaluating the priorities alongside the top challenges is illuminating. Growth is the only area that is likely to be selected as both a top 3 priority for the trust board and as its top challenge. For the few trusts that have identified environmental sustainability, mergers or civic partnerships as a top 3 priority, they are highly likely to also select it as their top challenge. Quality of education is frequently marked as a priority but fewer trusts see it as their major challenge.

FIGURE 6: **TOPICS SELECTED AS A PRIORITY VS TOP CHALLENGE**
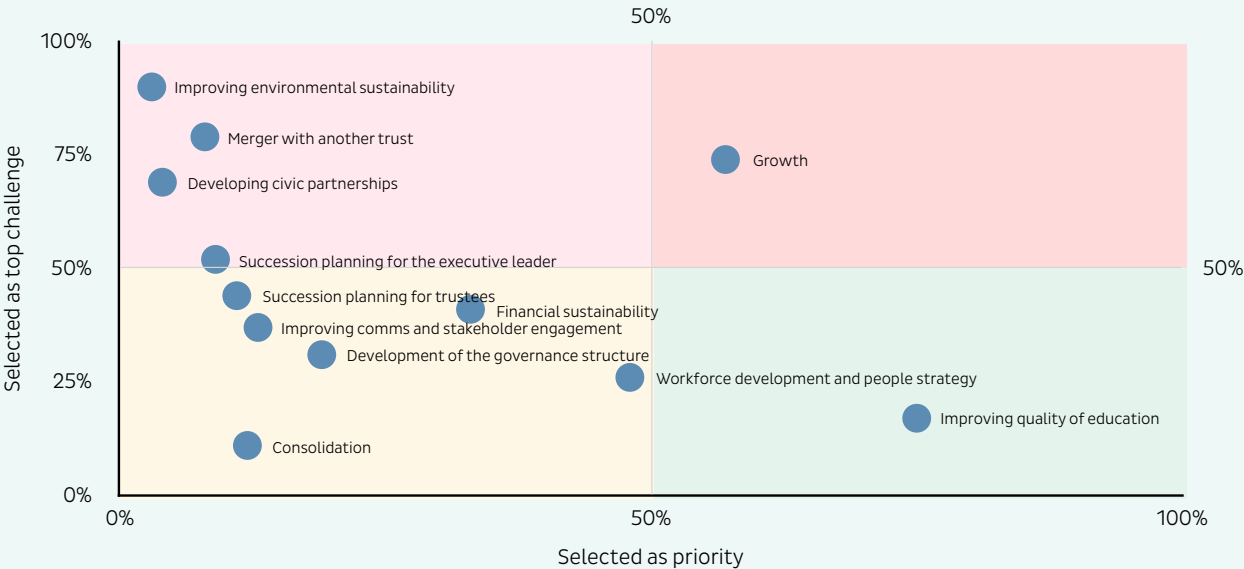
Setting strategic direction is a key leadership task within any organisation, though earlier research showed some confusion around what this means at the trust level (Baxter, 2017). This survey, however, suggests far greater clarity of strategic thinking has emerged since.

That improving quality of education is the main priority reflects the goal and purpose of trusts. At the same time, the emphasis on growth, workforce and financial sustainability represent attention to the conditions that need to be fulfilled, in order for trusts to be able to effectively fulfil their role in improving and sustaining educational quality.

Within that, growth is seen as the greatest challenge. In some ways, this too is positive, as it shows a realisation of the fact that achieving growth without sacrificing educational quality requires careful thought and leadership. Among some of the earlier trusts there have been examples of overly rapid growth leading to too much strain on systems, and in turn to negative consequences for educational quality. This is to be avoided as we seek the benefits of growth for improvement capacity and (financial) sustainability.

Section 2

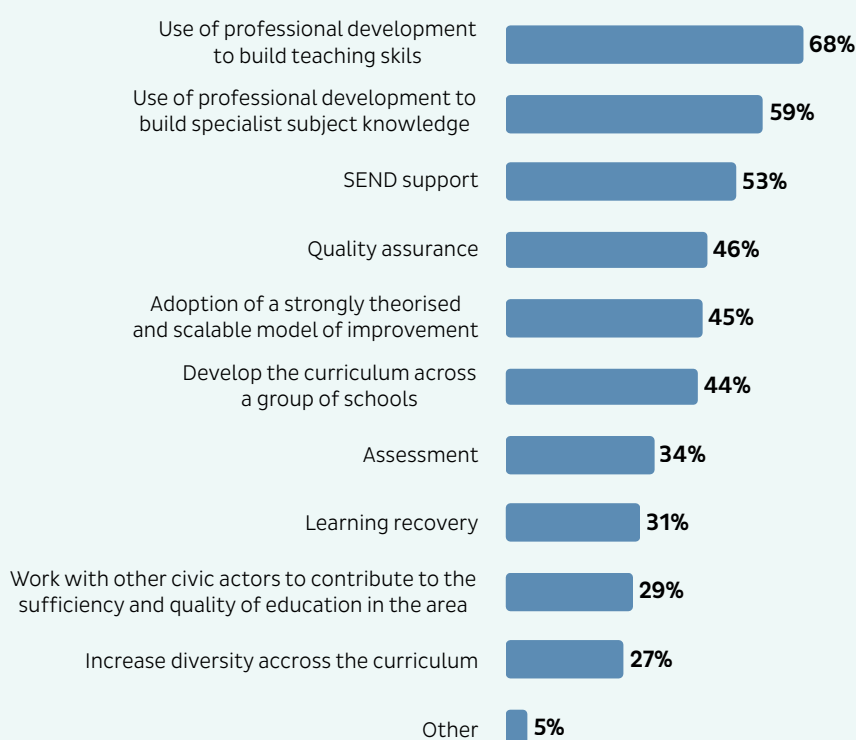# The five areas that characterise strong trusts

Key area 1: Quality of education

The best trusts put quality of education at the core of their mission. They have strongly theorised models of improvement alongside high-quality implementation and delivery. They are able to deliver high standards of education systematically because they scale improvement by knowledge-building, evidence-informed professional development and creating communities of improvement. They are specialist organisations that exist to do just one thing - to run and improve schools to advance education for public benefit.

This chapter seeks to understand what participants see as the top priorities for improving the quality of education in their trusts, the activities through which this will be achieved in the coming school year, and the potential barriers for trust leaders to overcome.
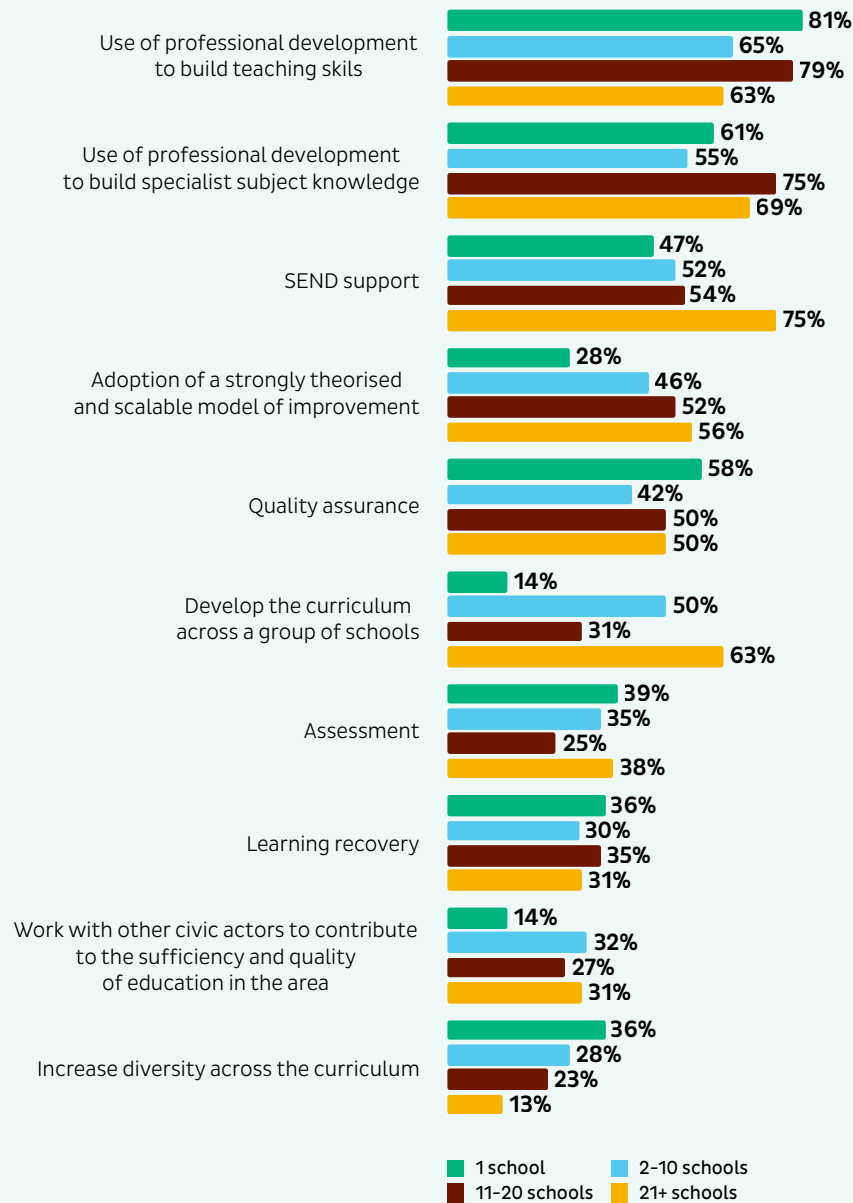
Strategy in action

FIGURE 7: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS, WHERE SPECIFICALLY DO YOU INTEND TO FOCUS YOUR EFFORTS IN 2022/23?"**

Area	Percentage
Use of professional development to build teaching skils	68%
Use of professional development to build specialist subject knowledge	59%
SEND support	53%
Quality assurance	46%
Adoption of a strongly theorised and scalable model of improvement	45%
Develop the curriculum across a group of schools	44%
Assessment	34%
Learning recovery	31%
Work with other civic actors to contribute to the sufficiency and quality of education in the area	29%
Increase diversity accross the curriculum	27%
Other	5%

Professional development of staff, both in terms of teaching skills and building specialist subject knowledge, are key priorities for trust leaders, and SEND support is the next highest priority: over half of trusts are planning to focus on these areas in the next academic year.
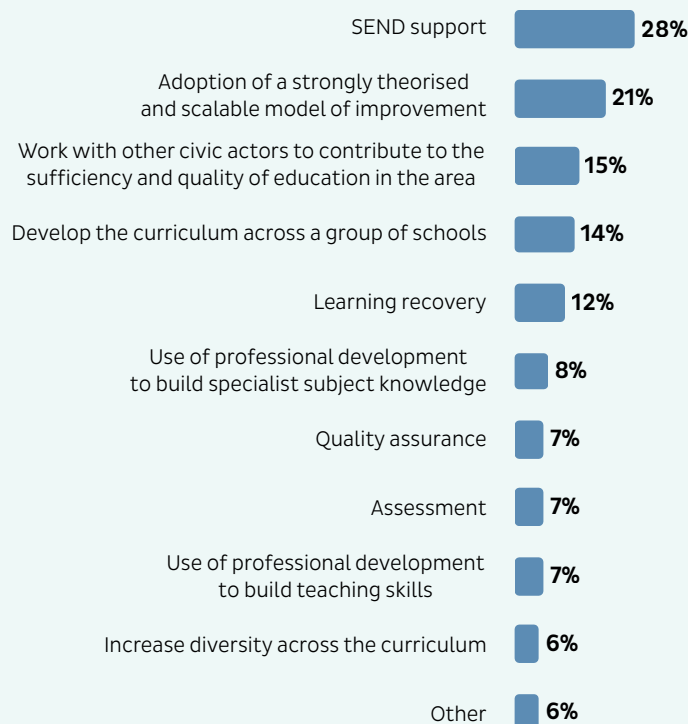
FIGURE 8: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS, WHERE SPECIFICALLY DO YOU INTEND TO FOCUS YOUR EFFORTS IN 2022/23?" BY TRUST SIZE**

Focus area	1 school	2-10 schools	11-20 schools	21+ schools
Use of professional development to build teaching skills	81%	65%	79%	63%
Use of professional development to build specialist subject knowledge	61%	55%	75%	69%
SEND support	47%	52%	54%	75%
Adoption of a strongly theorised and scalable model of improvement	28%	46%	52%	56%
Quality assurance	58%	42%	50%	50%
Develop the curriculum across a group of schools	14%	50%	31%	63%
Assessment	39%	35%	25%	38%
Learning recovery	36%	30%	35%	31%
Work with other civic actors to contribute to the sufficiency and quality of education in the area	14%	32%	27%	31%
Increase diversity across the curriculum	36%	28%	23%	13%

Legend:
- 1 school
- 2-10 schools
- 11-20 schools
- 21+ schools

Priorities are similar by trust size, with professional development and SEND support among the top priority areas for all trusts. Some notable differences include an increased focus for large trusts on developing the curriculum across the school group, and a lower priority among single-academy trusts in adopting a strongly theorised and scalable model of improvement. A number of respondents cited that their priorities were not new but were to embed and further develop models, practices and structures that had recently been introduced.

Potential barriers

Area	Percentage
SEND support	28%
Adoption of a strongly theorised and scalable model of improvement	21%
Work with other civic actors to contribute to the sufficiency and quality of education in the area	15%
Develop the curriculum across a group of schools	14%
Learning recovery	12%
Use of professional development to build specialist subject knowledge	8%
Quality assurance	7%
Assessment	7%
Use of professional development to build teaching skills	7%
Increase diversity across the curriculum	6%
Other	6%

SEND support is the area trusts expect to see the highest level of challenge when it comes to quality of education next year. It's important to note that this is the 3rd highest priority, with 53% of trusts planning to focus here.

COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

"Huge energy will be taken up responding to LA cuts to SEND top up funding of 14%. This will detract from capacity to focus on school improvement as it will necessitate remodelling work. We are a MAT of special schools. This level of funding cut is catastrophic."

"As a group of schools for pupils with complex needs and no specific teacher training route to teach the multi-disciplinary practice required of teaching staff who support our pupils, a bespoke Induction/CPD package and comprehensive curriculum framework/staff handbook is essential to support recruitment/ retainment in the most challenging settings. With the arrival of the Rochford Review but limited training/open-ended guidance, trying to determine a suitable assessment and monitoring/school improvement model across the trust to support the curriculum delivery has meant a big shift has been required in this area of leadership."
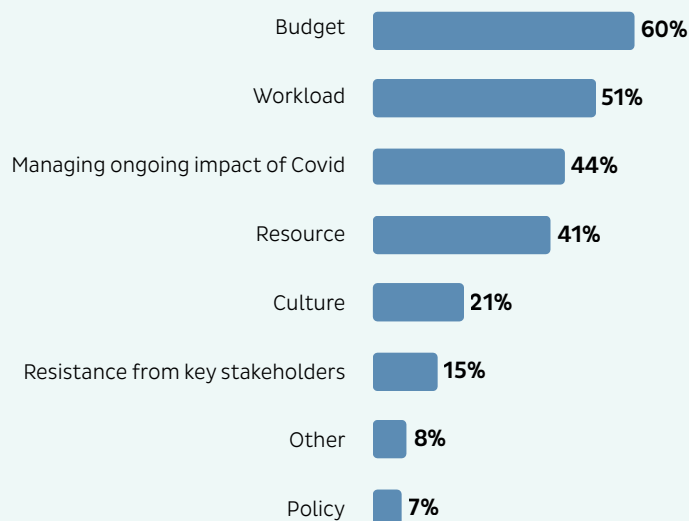
Just 8% of trusts see building specialist knowledge through professional development as a challenge, and 7% see building teaching skills through professional development as a challenge, so, whilst these are key priorities for the sector, these areas are of less concern.

FIGURE 10: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "OUT OF THE AREAS YOU HIGHLIGHTED, WHICH DO YOU THINK WILL BE MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOUR TRUST?" BY TRUST SIZE**

SEND support
16%
27%
38%
35%

Adoption of a strongly theorised and scalable model of improvement
24%
19%
27%
29%

Work with other civic actors to contribute to the sufficiency and quality of education in the area
11%
15%
15%
18%

Develop the curriculum across a group of schools
3%
16%
8%
24%

Learning recovery
22%
12%
6%
6%

Use of professional development to build specialist subject knowledge
19%
8%
6%
0%

Quality assurance
11%
7%
8%
0%

Assessment
11%
6%
8%
6%

Use of professional development to build teaching skills
5%
7%
8%
6%

Increase diversity across the curriculum
5%
7%
2%
6%

- 1 school
- 2-10 schools
- 11-20 schools
- 21+ schools

SEND support is expected to be challenging across all trust sizes, particularly for larger trusts (11-20 schools, or 21+ schools). Whilst, overall, a smaller proportion of trusts expect professional development to be a challenge, the exception is in single-academy trusts, where the challenge in building specialist subject knowledge is expected to be greater.

FIGURE 11: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT BARRIERS DO YOU NEED TO ADDRESS TO DELIVER YOUR PRIORITIES FOR EDUCATION QUALITY FOR THE UPCOMING ACADEMIC YEAR (2022/23)?"**

Barrier	Percentage
Budget	60%
Workload	51%
Managing ongoing impact of Covid	44%
Resource	41%
Culture	21%
Resistance from key stakeholders	15%
Other	8%
Policy	7%

Budget and workload are the main barriers that trusts see to achieving their goals surrounding the quality of education next school year, with over half of trusts expecting these to be an issue. Comments highlight workload as a particular worry, as well as hiring the right staff members to meet the challenge. SEND again came up as a concern in multiple comments.

COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

"Conflicting pressures driven by the need for immediate return to Ofsted framework, whilst better for the children, would be a focus on recovery of core knowledge and skills."

"Reduction in the number of quality staff available at ALL levels, teachers, TAs, premises staff office staff. We can't cope with rising wage demands and other job opportunities [outside education]."

"Appropriate subject specialist training with SEND. Workforce resilience."

Current practice

FIGURE 12: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHICH EVIDENCE-INFORMED APPROACHES THAT YOU HAVE USED IN YOUR SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN MOST IMPACTFUL?"**

Approach	%
Professional development and national qualifications for teachers and leaders	78%
Support for early career teachers	64%
Counselling to support emotional health and wellbeing	62%
Tutoring (school-led and/or NTP)	43%
Afterschool activities and clubs	34%
School breakfast clubs	26%
Help with the cost of educational trips or visits	22%
Other	5%
None of the above	2%

Staff-centric approaches to improving quality of education have been the most impactful. Professional development and national qualifications for teachers and leaders was highlighted as the most impactful approach, with four in five trusts rating this as impactful. Support for early career teachers, and counselling support, were also rated as impactful, with over three in five trusts selecting these options.

FIGURE 13: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DOES YOUR TRUST HAVE AN EDUCATION RECOVERY STRATEGY?"**

	%
Yes	65%
No	35%
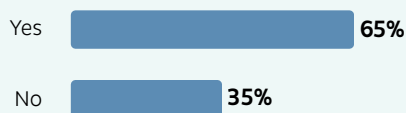
FIGURE 14: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "IS YOUR EDUCATION RECOVERY STRATEGY BASED ON THE EEF'S TIERED APPROACH?"**

	%
Yes	79%
No	21%
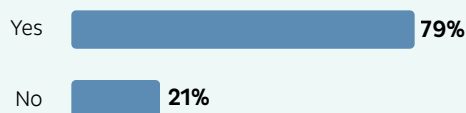
Two thirds of trusts have an education recovery strategy, among which four in five are based on the EEF's Tiered Approach, which is strongly advocated by CST.

FIGURE 15: RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS INCLUDED IN YOUR TRUST'S EDUCATION RECOVERY STRATEGY?"

Recovery Premium	**49%**
School-led Tutoring Grant	**32%**
Pupil Premium	**16%**
None of the above	**3%**
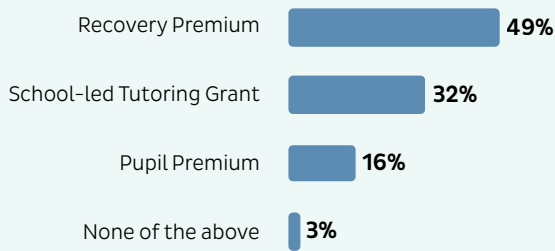
FIGURE 16: RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "ARE YOU POOLING THE PREMIA AT TRUST LEVEL OR DEVOLVING GRANTS DIRECTLY TO SCHOOLS?"

Devolving grants directly to schools	**86%**
Pooling Premia at trust level	**14%**
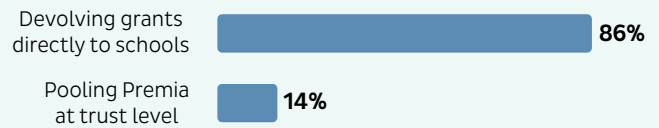
Almost all (97%) of education recovery strategies include at least one of recovery premium, the school-led tutoring grant or pupil premium, and most grants are managed by individual schools rather than pooled at the trust level, with 86% of grants devolved to schools compared to 14% centrally managed.

Quality of education (QoE) of course lies at the heart of what trusts do. And as these findings show, trusts are using evidence-based approaches to address QoE with a particular focus on teaching, curriculum and SEND provision. The approach taken in the majority of trusts is built on professional development, from early career teachers to leaders.

This focus on the quality of education, and teaching in particular, is one that previous research has shown to be characteristic of high performing trusts (Muijs, forthcoming, Ofsted, 2020). It is positive to see that the trusts in this survey are also focussing on curriculum, which is an under-reported factor in international research, but crucial to the quality of education, not least for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. Hirsch, 2016).

The prominence of SEND support in responses is not surprising, and this remains a challenge to all in the education and care sector. However, providing SEND support, effective professional development and curriculum development also illustrate the advantages of trusts, where expertise and resources can be shared and action undertaken collectively and collaboratively (Muijs et al, 2011). It is important to note that this survey was undertaken before the publication of the SEND and AP green papers, so does not reflect the proposals therein. It can be hoped that the proposed reforms reduce pressure in this area, though this remains an empirical question at present.

There are also clear challenges around these areas, with budget, workload and Covid-19 all potential brakes on progress. Here there is a message for both the Government in terms of the need for ongoing support in these areas, and for trust leadership, in developing creative solutions that can help address workload and utilise resources efficiently and effectively. While always challenging, there is evidence that trusts can play a positive role in helping to mitigate these challenges (Ofsted, 2019).

Key area 2: People Strategy: Workforce resilience and wellbeing

People matter, if trusts are to build sustainable infrastructures to lead change, improve schools and respond to the legacies of the pandemic. The strongest trusts understand their responsibilities, duties and are good employers. They recruit, develop, deploy and retain great teachers, support staff and leaders throughout their careers, supporting their professional development by using evidence-informed professional development and ensuring a manageable work-life balance, paying close attention to wellbeing.

This chapter explores participants' approaches to workforce development and identifies the areas of people risk that trusts will be working to mitigate in the coming school year.

Strategy in action

FIGURE 17: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT KEY AREAS OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ARE YOU PLANNING FOR 2022/23?"**

Building talent pipeline and progression routes	76%
Improving staff wellbeing	74%
Professional development	59%
Leadership succession planning	57%
Reviewing your approach to appraisal and development	39%
Increasing equality, diversity and inclusion across our trust team	39%
Aligning HR processes across our schools	36%
Creating more opportunities for flexible working	23%
Review of reward and incentives	17%
Introducing apprenticeships	13%
Other	1%

The key people strategy priorities for trusts next year are building talent pipelines and progression routes, and improving staff wellbeing: three quarters of trusts selected these two topics as priorities. Lower priority areas include creating more opportunities for flexible working (23%), a review of reward and incentives (17%) and introducing apprenticeships (13%).

FIGURE 18: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT KEY AREAS OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ARE YOU PLANNING FOR 2022/23?" BY TRUST SIZE**
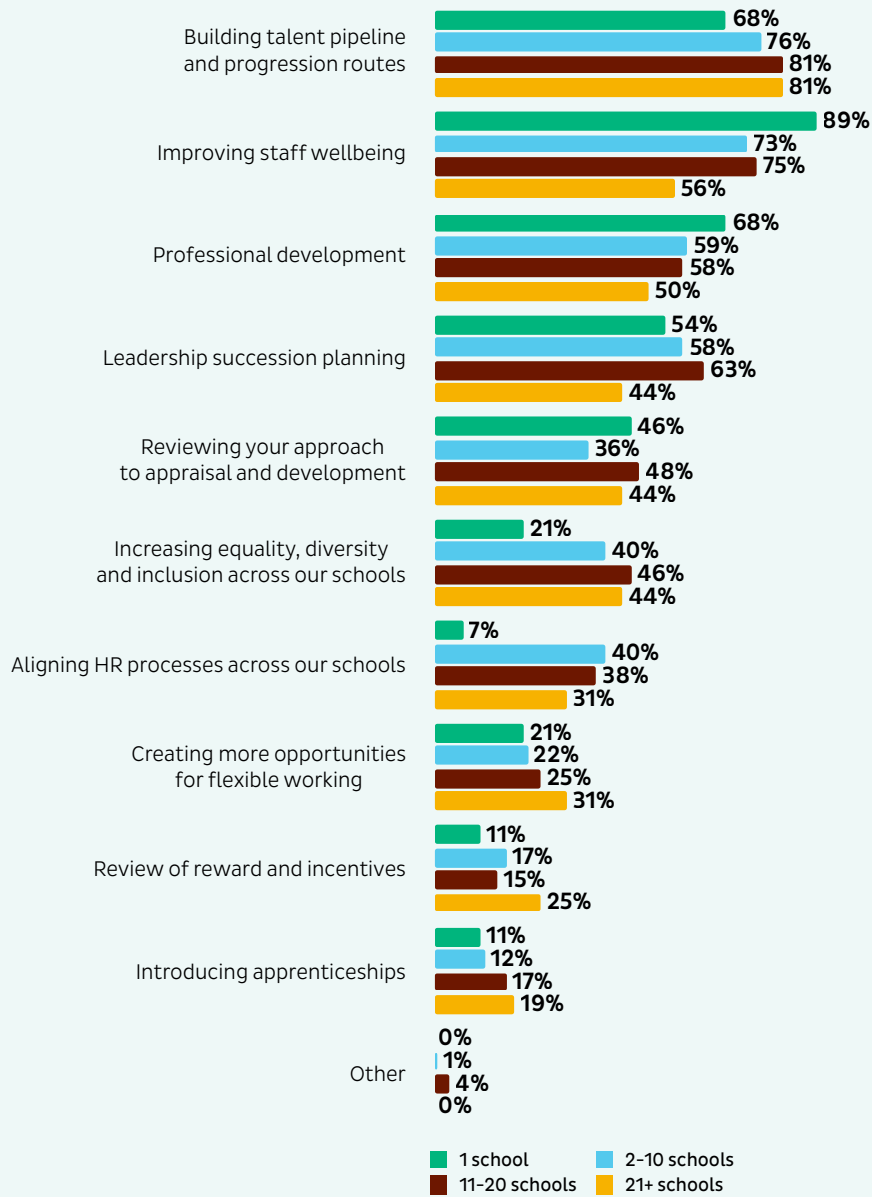
Priorities are similar between different school sizes, though improving staff wellbeing was selected by a smaller proportion of large trusts, and increasing equality, diversity and inclusion across the team was selected by a smaller proportion of single school trusts.
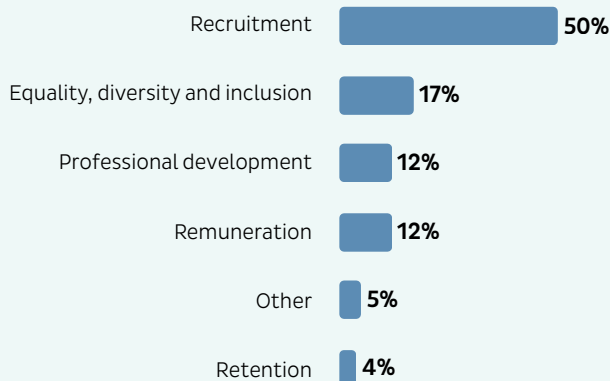
COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

"Our priority is improving staff resilience as well-being has been impacted by stresses from outside work over the last couple of years. Many more staff are looking for part-time work."

"Time/flexible work as their priorities have changed. Middle leadership gaps are evident across the vast majority of other special schools we speak to."

Potential challenges

FIGURE 19: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT IS YOUR TRUST'S BIGGEST AREA OF WORKFORCE CHALLENGES?"**

Recruitment	50%
Equality, diversity and inclusion	17%
Professional development	12%
Remuneration	12%
Other	5%
Retention	4%

Recruitment is expected to be the biggest challenge for trusts, by a long distance. Retention is not considered to be a challenge: only 4% of trusts selected this as their biggest area of workforce challenge.

COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

"Generally we are OK for recruitment but in certain shortage subjects this is a challenge. It can also be a challenge in specialist support staff roles such as IT Network manager."

"Recruitment of support staff – HR, finance, Teaching Assistants."

"Our staff ethnicity profile does not match that of our students."

"As a Catholic Trust, there are specific challenges around recruiting future Catholic leaders."

A note on retention

In Edurio's recent report, *Staff Retention in Academies*, they looked at responses from over 75,000 staff members, collected across each of the past four academic years. This review included staff responses to the question "How often have you considered resigning in the past three months?", and assessed how that changed over the course of the pandemic.

FIGURE 20: **PERCENTAGE OF STAFF AT RISK**
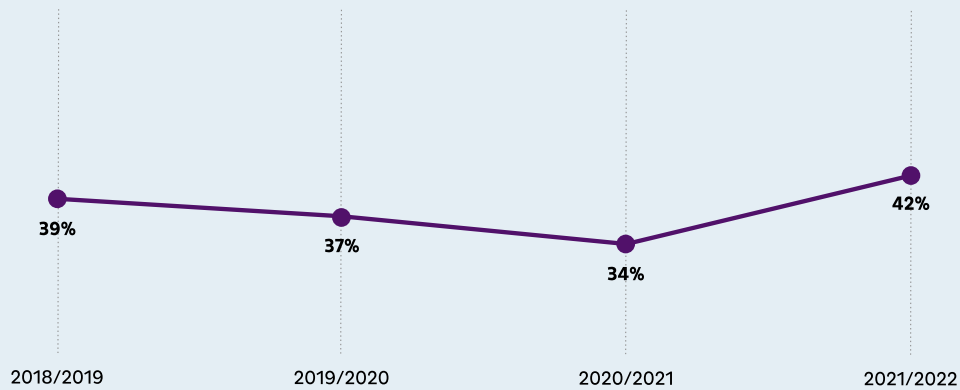
There was a decrease in risk of resigning as the pandemic hit, but this has now increased to a level higher than before the pandemic. Whilst trusts reported not currently facing retention challenges, the responses from individual staff members highlight that this may change as Covid-19 recovery continues and the workforce enters a period of reset.

Current practice

FIGURE 21: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DOES YOUR TRUST HAVE A PEOPLE STRATEGY?"**

Around three in five trusts have some form of people strategy, though only one in five has an established strategy. Three in ten are developing their strategy currently, and a further one in ten are updating their existing one.

FIGURE 22: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU HAVE AN HR DIRECTOR ROLE OR EQUIVALENT?"**

Yes	**64%**
No	**26%**
Role is planned in 2022/23	**6%**
We are recruiting	**4%**
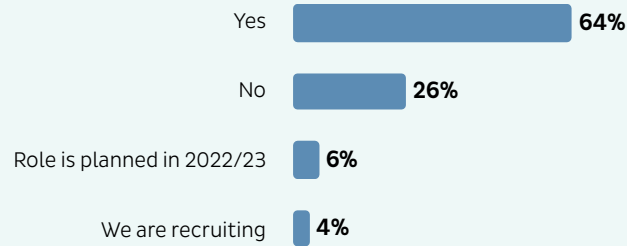
Around two thirds of trusts have an HR Director role or equivalent, and a further 10% are planning to introduce the role soon. A quarter of trusts do not have one, nor do they plan to introduce the role in the next academic year.

The ongoing issue of recruitment unsurprisingly looms large in the concerns of trusts. While the pandemic temporarily both reduced numbers leaving the profession and increased recruitment in teacher education, both have now gone back into reverse. It is therefore important that trusts develop strategies that ensure they are attractive places to work. The survey shows clear evidence that trusts are working on this, especially in relation to developing talent pipelines and staff wellbeing.

One of the most powerful ways of making trusts attractive places to work is providing opportunities for professional development (Ofsted, 2019; Greany, 2018; Muijs, forthcoming). Around 60% of trusts are focussing on this presently.

There is established evidence that having an effective HR or people strategy positively impacts organisational performance (Hailey et al, 2005). This would appear to be an area which is developing in many trusts, and it would be sensible to take on board the lessons from the extensive body of research on organisational HR in developing these strategies.

Key area 3: Efficiency and effectiveness: Finance, sustainability and compliance

The guidance, Building Strong Academy Trusts, states that 'trusts can make the most effective use of centralised processes and back-office functions to empower schools to focus on teaching and knowledge-building'. Trust effectiveness (obtaining the best educational outcomes) is made possible through efficiency (which may be defined as obtaining the best possible outcome for the resources available).

This chapter explores participants' approaches to efficiency and effectiveness by identifying confidence levels around financial sustainability, intentions to assess performance and methods used, and plans to further develop operating models.

Strategy in action

FIGURE 23: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU PLAN TO UNDERTAKE IN 2022/23?"**

Peer review of trust effectiveness	**50%**
External review of executive performance	**31%**
External review of operating structures	**27%**
360 feedback on central team	**27%**
Other consultancy	**22%**
None of the above	**14%**
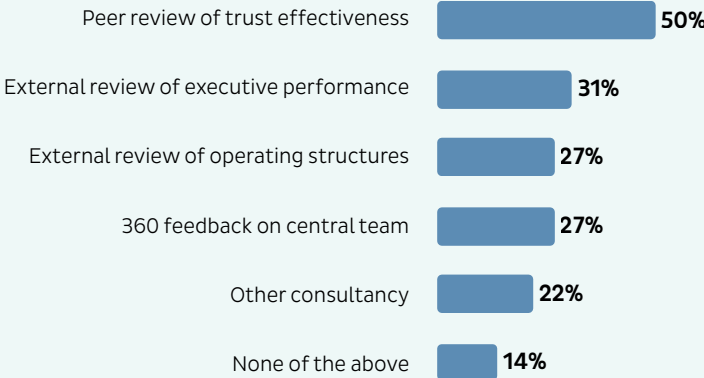
Half of trusts are planning a review of trust effectiveness next year, and most (86%) are planning at least one type of review or consultancy, internal or external, within the trust. This is consistent across trusts of different sizes, though 360 feedback is more likely at larger trusts than smaller trusts.

FIGURE 24: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU PLAN TO UNDERTAKE IN 2022/23?" BY TRUST SIZE**
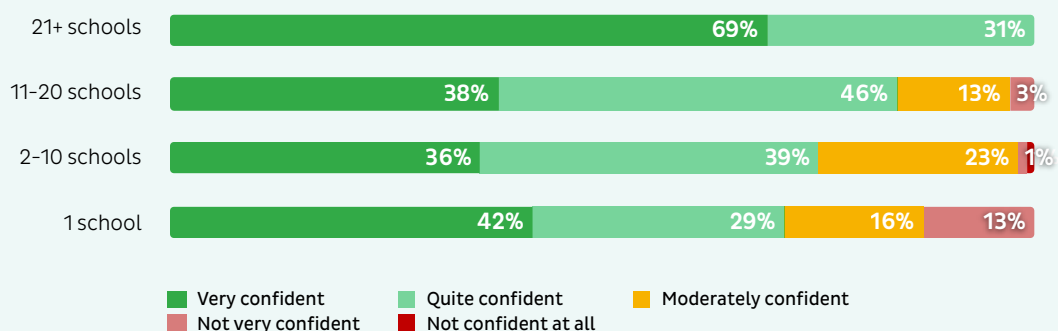
Peer review of trust effectiveness
- 1 school: 50%
- 2-10 schools: 51%
- 11-20 schools: 48%
- 21+ schools: 56%

External review of executive performance
- 1 school: 30%
- 2-10 schools: 30%
- 11-20 schools: 33%
- 21+ schools: 31%

External review of operating structures
- 1 school: 13%
- 2-10 schools: 28%
- 11-20 schools: 27%
- 21+ schools: 44%

360 feedback on central team
- 1 school: 17%
- 2-10 schools: 24%
- 11-20 schools: 38%
- 21+ schools: 50%

Other consultancy
- 1 school: 30%
- 2-10 schools: 20%
- 11-20 schools: 23%
- 21+ schools: 25%

None of the above
- 1 school: 17%
- 2-10 schools: 13%
- 11-20 schools: 17%
- 21+ schools: 6%

Legend:
- 1 school
- 2-10 schools
- 11-20 schools
- 21+ schools

Potential challenges

FIGURE 25: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ABOUT THE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF YOUR TRUST?"**

- Very confident: 38%
- Quite confident: 39%
- Moderately confident: 20%
- Not very confident: 3%
- Not confident at all: 1%
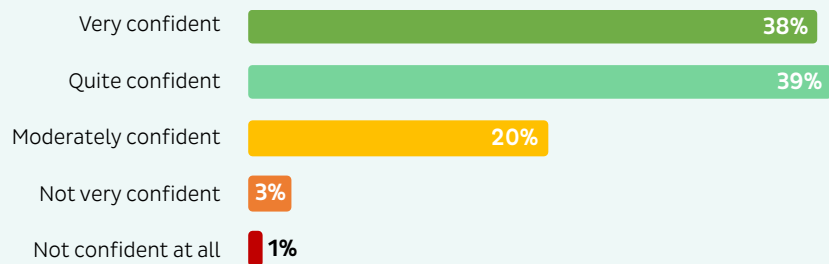
Most trusts are confident about their financial sustainability, with 77% responding that they are very or quite confident, and only 4% responding that they are not very, or not not at all confident.

Trust size	Very confident	Quite confident	Moderately confident	Not very confident	Not confident at all
21+ schools	69%	31%			
11-20 schools	38%	46%	13%	3%	
2-10 schools	36%	39%	23%	1%	
1 school	42%	29%	16%	13%	

- ■ Very confident
- ■ Quite confident
- ■ Moderately confident
- ■ Not very confident
- ■ Not confident at all

Comparing results by trust size, there is a clear trend. 100% of larger trusts (21+ schools) were confident about their financial sustainability, compared to 71% of single school trusts.

COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS THAT EXPRESSED HIGHER CONFIDENCE

"We are very financially prudent and project growing resource levels over the coming three to five years, including through non-ESFA funded activities such as catering, lettings, higher education provision (franchised). 10% of our income is non-ESFA."

"We are generally confident about our financial sustainability but the challenge we have is that we have front loaded our central team to support our growth plans. This is costing more than we bring in from central contributions. Growth will resolve this. If we do not grow, we will need to consider cutting back our central services. We believe that trusts should receive central funding as well as funding per school. This would help fund central services and recognise that trusts should be providing a strong central function."

COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS THAT EXPRESSED LOWER CONFIDENCE

"The trust is in a position of stability [but] we are concerned that budget constraints and rising costs will adversely impact our ability to operate our current model. We are also impacted by issues with student numbers in some of our sponsored academies."

"In real-terms since 2012, this school has experienced a £1m reduction in annual revenue. The NFF fails to address the needs of the least well-funded schools through adopting, without research or analysis, arbitrary figures for the per pupil funding rate. The ESFA/DfE routinely cite system-level balances as evidence of adequate funding without exploring the reality for those highly efficient trusts that are nonetheless close to insolvency."

Current practice

FIGURE 27: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHAT OPERATING MODEL IS YOUR TRUST USING NOW?"**

Model	%
Centralised	64%
Spoke and hub	18%
Other	9%
Decentralised	9%
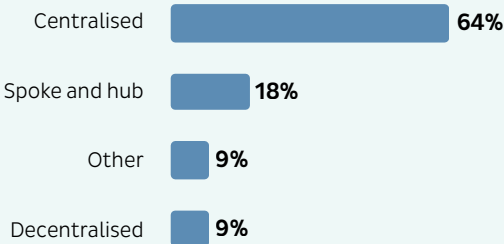
FIGURE 28: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU HAVE PLANS TO CHANGE YOUR OPERATING MODEL IN 2022/23?"**

Response	%
No	76%
We are currently in the process of changing our operating model	14%
Yes	10%
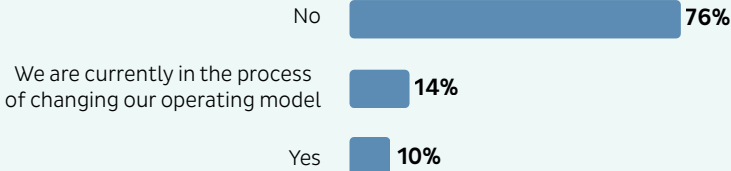
FIGURE 29: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU HAVE PLANS TO CHANGE YOUR OPERATING MODEL IN 2022/23?" BY TRUST SIZE**

Trust size	Yes	We are currently in the process of changing our operating model	No
1 school	9%	9%	82%
2-10 schools	8%	16%	76%
11-20 schools	13%	6%	81%
+21 schools	25%	25%	50%
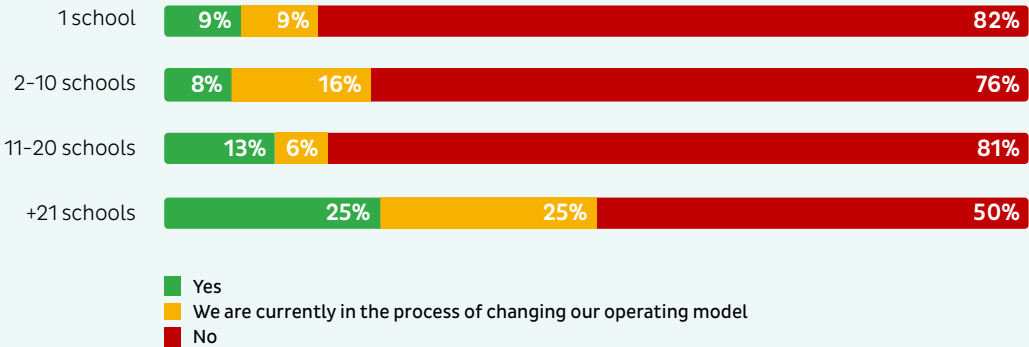
Most trusts (64%) use a centralised operating model, and three quarters (76%) plan to keep the same operating model next year. Large trusts (21+ schools) are more likely to be considering changing their operating model, with 25% planning to change and a further 25% already in the process of changing.

FIGURE 30: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DOES YOUR TRUST HAVE AN ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGY TO HELP YOU TO WORK TOWARDS BECOMING CARBON NEUTRAL?"**

We are currently in the process
of developing our environmental strategy ████████████ **53%**

No ████ **29%**

Yes ██ **18%**
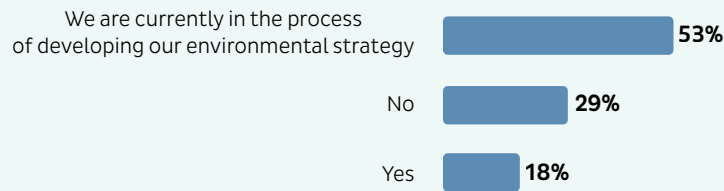
Environmental sustainability has recently become a prominent part of the trust agenda. While only a few trusts named environment and sustainability among their top 3 current priorities, over half of the sector are currently developing an environmental strategy. Less than a third of trusts do not have a strategy and are not working on one.

In light of the importance of efficiency and financial sustainability it is noteworthy that this aspect has received little attention in research on trusts (Muijs, forthcoming). The findings reported in the survey are largely positive, however, with the majority of trusts being confident both in their financial stability and their current working models, with few proposing changes to the latter.

In light of ongoing discussions on the ideal size of trusts it is interesting to note that the proportion of trusts that are confident in their financial sustainability increases with size.

The ongoing quest for environmental sustainability is clearly gathering momentum in trusts, with currently just under 20% already having a strategy to become carbon neutral, but a further 53% developing their environmental strategy. This is a promising development, especially in light of the challenges of, in many cases, an older estate and sometimes poor public transport links. A growing number of tools are becoming available to support this, and this should remain a priority in coming years (AlShamrani et al, 2014; Saraiva et al, 2018).

Key area 4 : System leadership and civic responsibility

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

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

This chapter explores what system leadership and civic responsibility means to participants, highlighting the many different ways in which this is delivered across the country and the extent to which trusts are contributing to school improvement in particular across the system.

Strategy in action

FIGURE 31: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DOES YOUR TRUST PARTNER WITH OTHER CIVIC ACTORS TO ADVANCE EDUCATION IN YOUR COMMUNITIES?"**

Yes **56%**
No **44%**

FIGURE 32: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU PLAN TO DEVELOP CIVIC PARTNERSHIPS TO ADVANCE EDUCATION IN YOUR COMMUNITIES IN 2022/23?"**

Yes **57%**
No **43%**

Over half of trusts currently partner with other civic actors, to advance education within the community. Of those who don't currently, over half of trusts (57%) plan to develop civic partnerships to advance education in their communities next year. Comments suggest that this support comes in a range of forms, whether this is for the betterment of pupil outcomes as they enter into adulthood, or supporting other adults in the community for example through food banks and charities.

"Our CEO is currently leading a group with LA, RSC, Diocese, MAT, Maintained and Special School leaders to plot the future educational landscape of our county. We are also working with FE and University to consider an education ecosystem within the city that could be modelled across the country."

"We have set up a TAS (Team around the school) group that meets half termly. It has a pre-agreed focus and then invites all those involved in supporting children from 'pre-birth to employment'. In our last meeting over 40 local schools, charities and services were represented."

"We work closely with the LA as a 'lead' to deliver school improvement and also the wider community e.g. links with residential care homes for elderly, police regarding crime prevention and local food banks."

"We have worked with other organisations such as the FA and LTA and local sports organisations and leaders. We have examples of strong engagement with business."

"We have a unique range of partnerships with creative industries who are committed to improving representation and diversifying their workforces."

FIGURE 33: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DOES YOUR TRUST SUPPORT OTHER SCHOOLS IN THE SYSTEM, OUTSIDE OF YOUR TRUST?"**

Yes	79%
No	15%
We plan to in 2022/23	7%
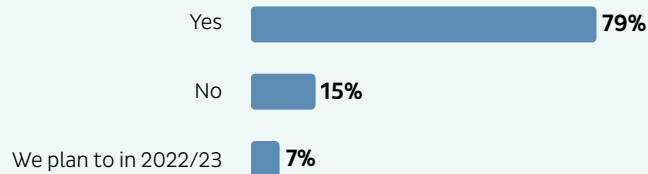
FIGURE 34: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DOES YOUR TRUST SUPPORT OTHER SCHOOLS IN THE SYSTEM, OUTSIDE OF YOUR TRUST?" BY TRUST SIZE**

	Yes	We plan to in 2022/23	No
1 school	72%	7%	21%
2-10 schools	76%	8%	16%
11-20 schools	92%	2%	6%
+21 schools	94%		6%
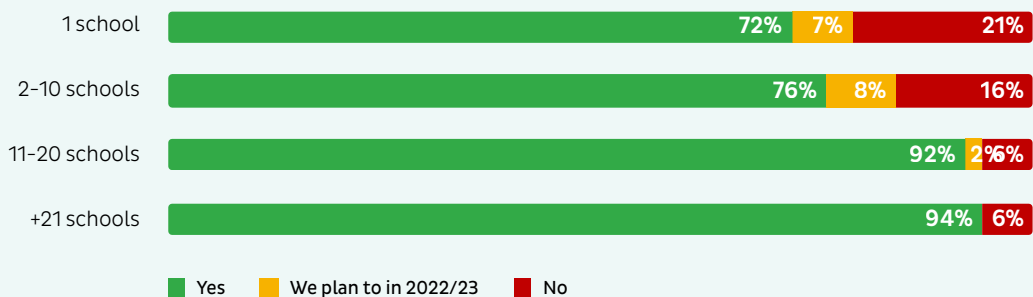
Four in five trusts currently provide support to other schools outside of their trust. Among the larger trusts (11-20, or 21+ schools) over 9 in 10 trusts are currently providing support. Even amongst single school trusts, 7 in 10 are currently providing support to others.

Maintained schools	87%
Academy schools	75%
Free schools	16%
Grammar schools	5%
Independent schools	5%
Other	3%

School improvement support	92%
Support for leadership	80%
Support for operations and finance	51%
Other	9%
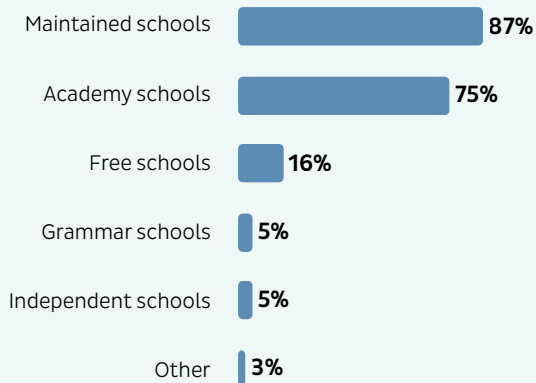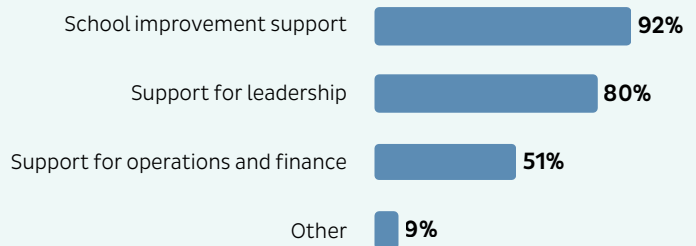
Trusts provide support to maintained and academy schools; almost 9 in 10 trusts who provide support do so to maintained schools, and three quarters provide support to academy schools. The main type of support offered is in school improvement (92%) and support for leadership (80%). The trend is consistent across school sizes.

Trusts are civic organisations which have the duty and opportunity to play a central role in the development of quality education in their community (Muijs, forthcoming). A lack of moral purpose is one element that distinguishes more from less effective trusts (Evans, 2020).

It is clear from these findings that trusts are indeed fulfilling their civic role, with the vast majority suporting schools outside their trust. Trusts are thus clearly providing system leadership. Larger trusts are a bit more likely to be providing this support, as one would expect given greater capacity to do so, but smaller trusts are more likely to state that they are planning to further develop civic partnerships.

Trusts also play an important role in their wider community. The data show that more than half of trusts are planning to develop civic partnerships next year, with smaller trusts being more likely to do so. This is, however, almost certainly an underestimate of the level of engagement of trusts with civic partners, as many will already have established relationships.

Key area 5: Governance and accountability

The guidance [Building Strong Academy Trusts]() states that 'Strategic governance is one of the defining characteristics of academy trusts'. By operating under a single governance structure, a strong board of academy trustees can effectively oversee the strategic direction of the academy trust and hold executive leaders to account for the outcomes of all pupils within the trust.

Strong governance of the legal entity of the trust hardwires collaboration and shared accountability in a way that no other school structure does. Trust boards carry both the accountability, along with powers of intervention where necessary, at a governance level of its schools.

With trusts growing and maturing, we see approaches to governance developing across the sector. This chapter explores governance review and resourcing models in school trusts and expectations for change. Overall board priorities have been discussed in the previous chapters so will not be addressed here.

Governance in review

Trust responses clearly show that governance structures are not static, but the result of an ongoing process that aims to reflect the changing needs of the trust.

FIGURE 37: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU PLAN TO REVIEW YOUR SCHEME OF DELEGATION IN THE NEXT 18 MONTHS?"**

Yes	60%
No	20%
We are in the process of reviewing our SOD	20%
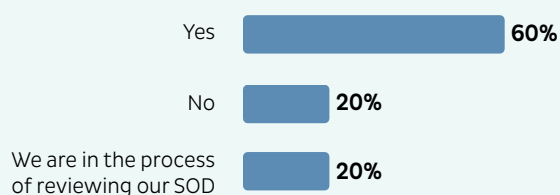
4 out of 5 trusts are either currently reviewing their scheme of delegation (SoD) or intending to do so before the end of the next academic year. Many have commented that SoD review is an annual process.

Additionally, trusts are engaging external partners to complement their internal work and the frequency of external reviews is expected to grow. Two thirds report having undertaken an external review of governance in the last three years and similarly two thirds are either reviewing or intending to review governance in the coming academic year.

FIGURE 38: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHEN DID YOU LAST UNDERTAKE AN EXTERNAL REVIEW OF GOVERNANCE?"**
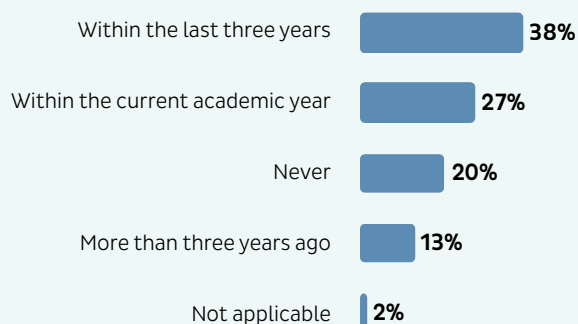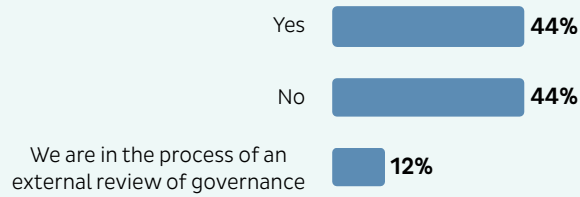
Within the last three years	38%
Within the current academic year	27%
Never	20%
More than three years ago	13%
Not applicable	2%

FIGURE 39: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU PLAN TO UNDERTAKE AN EXTERNAL REVIEW OF GOVERNANCE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEAR?"**

Yes **44%**

No **44%**

We are in the process of an external review of governance **12%**

This reflects the expected continuous changes in the sector.

People in governance

Strong governance in trusts is ensured by both the dedicated volunteers on trust boards and the capacity within the trust team to support governance. More trusts are seeking to invest in their governance teams and improving their trustee capacity.

FIGURE 40: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU HAVE A GOVERNANCE PROFESSIONAL LEADING GOVERNANCE WITHIN YOUR TRUST?"**

Yes **74%**

No **26%**
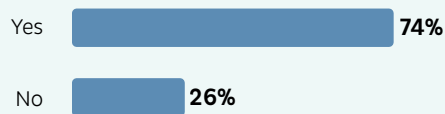
FIGURE 41: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU HAVE A GOVERNANCE PROFESSIONAL LEADING GOVERNANCE WITHIN YOUR TRUST?" BY TRUST SIZE**

1 school **57%** **43%**

2-10 schools **75%** **25%**

11-20 schools **75%** **25%**

+21 schools **94%** **6%**

■ Yes ■ No
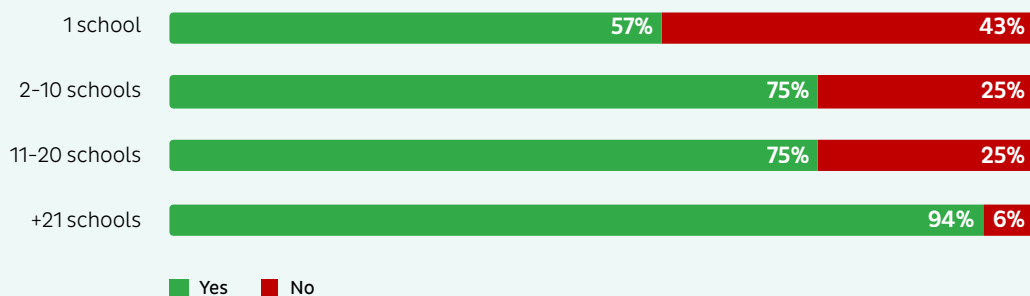
Three quarters of respondents have a dedicated governance professional. Not surprisingly this includes nearly all large trusts. However, over half of single school trusts have a governance lead demonstrating the growing importance of this specialist function.
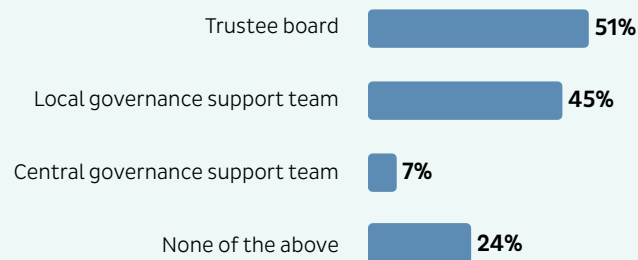
FIGURE 42: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "DO YOU PLAN TO APPOINT A GOVERNANCE PROFESSIONAL IN 2022/23?"**

Yes ████████ 42%

No ██████████ 58%

For those who do not have a governance professional in place, 40% are planning to appoint one next year. This means that only 15% of trusts do not plan to set up the role in the near future, most of which are small trusts.
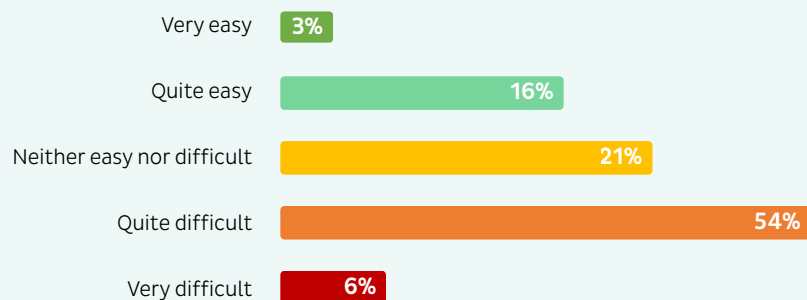
Recruiting to board roles at trustee and local committee level is a key concern across the trust sector. Over half of the trusts have vacancies on their trustee board and many trusts report looking for team members in their governance support functions. Only a quarter of trusts currently do not have any governance vacancies.

FIGURE 43: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU CURRENTLY HAVE VACANCIES ON?**

Trustee board ████████ 51%

Local governance support team ███████ 45%

Central governance support team █ 7%

None of the above ███ 24%

In addition, trust leaders are concerned about their ability to fill those roles. Only 1 in 5 trusts anticipate their trustee board positions to be easily filled with 3 out of 5 expecting it to be difficult.

FIGURE 44: **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION "HOW EASY OR DIFFICULT DO YOU ANTICIPATE IT WILL BE TO FILL THE ROLES ON YOUR TRUSTEE BOARD?"**

Very easy ██ 3%

Quite easy ████ 16%

Neither easy nor difficult ██████ 21%

Quite difficult ███████████████ 54%

Very difficult ███ 6%

Quality of governance is one of the most consistent factors to emerge from research on high performing trusts (Finch et al, 2016). Having trustees with the right set of knowledge and skills is key to trust performance.

In that respect there are a number of positive findings here. Two thirds of trusts have undertaken external reviews of governance in the past three years, and 60% plan to review their schemes of delegation. Three quarters of trusts have a governance professional in place, and 40% of those that don't are planning to appoint one. This points to the emphasis that trusts are increasingly placing on high quality governance.

As with staffing more generally, however, trusts see challenges in recruiting. This both in terms of volunteers to sit on trusts and school boards, and in recruiting professionals to support them.

Section 3
Conclusion

Conclusion

This is a fascinating report produced at a time of significant challenge and change for school Trusts. What it reveals is that amidst the context of system level reform, rising cost pressures and ongoing issues emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic, trusts are continuing to focus on their core business: educating children.

We can see this in the three quarters of trusts who say that improving the quality of education is among their top three strategic aims. But it is also fair to say that trusts are having to do this while also planning for what may be a vital period of organisational change precipitated by the government's ambition for all schools to be in a Trust by 2030: more than half of trusts say that growth is one of their strategic priorities in 2022/23.

On the ground, and in the boardroom, these strategic challenges do not sit in isolation from one another. For example, the trusts that are likely to be most favourably placed for growth are likely to be those with the financial capacity, workforce and model to support school improvement. The challenge here for trusts is to manage this complexity while retaining a relentless focus on the 'why' of their work, and the maintenance of a long term strategic picture.

The data in this report suggest that many trusts are managing to do exactly this. The clear emphasis on professional development and talent pipelines speaks to long term capacity-building in order to improve educational quality. This is also reflected in the growing recognition of the need for a people strategy: while a minority of trusts already have one set up, the majority are either working on it currently or plan to do so next year. Given the context, and what appears to be a more challenging ITT recruitment picture, this seems likely to be a very important piece of work for trusts to be undertaking. It is also clear that trusts see both the necessity and the challenge involved in improving their support for pupils with SEND. This is particularly important and encouraging to see given the wider context of the SEND and AP Green Paper. While some might be surprised to see learning recovery appear to be a lesser priority, this is likely more about Trusts recognising the long term nature of the problem, and viewing its solution as residing in high quality teaching over a long period rather than adopting a short term bolt-on approach.

There is a clear message in the data that trust recruitment is not only concerned with staff – there are also concerns among trusts about recruiting trustees, local governing boards and governance professionals. As the trust sector changes and grows towards 2030 it will be important for trusts to make sure they consider not only the recruitment of trustees but also their ongoing development. Given the fundamental differences involved, it's likely that those moving from roles as governors in the maintained sector will need to acquire the specialist knowledge and understanding necessary to discharge their responsibilities as trustees.

Another potential surprise might be that relatively few trusts said environmental sustainability is one of their top 3 priorities for 2022/23. However, the picture beneath is a little more complex and it is clear trusts are active in this area: more than half are currently developing an environmental sustainability strategy and a further 18% already have this in place. Indeed, it may well be that the current work going on in this area explains why it doesn't feature higher up the list of trust priorities.

It is evident that there's a desire to maintain some continuity in this time of significant change, with trusts making judicious choices about where change is needed and where continuity is preferable. For example, only 7% of trusts which do not currently pool GAG funding are planning to do so in 2022/23, and all but the largest trusts have a clear preference for maintaining their existing operating model. Such decisions are vital because implementing organisational change almost always results in a draw on capacity.

Finally, it is worth noting that just over half of trusts plan to develop civic partnerships in their communities in 2022/23. Indeed, almost 80% of them already support other schools outside of their own trust, which is significant in a sector that is composed of legally autonomous institutions. It speaks to the wider public benefit at the heart of the trusts system and a growing understanding in the trust's responsibility not only to the pupils in its own schools but also beyond the school gate.

This sense of a wider civic duty is greatly encouraging as we look ahead to 2030 and the government's ambition for all schools to be in a trust. This journey towards 2030 does not appear to be a destiny of system-wide isolation and fragmentation. Rather, it looks like a future of deepening collaboration and cooperation, with trusts working alongside each other and with other partners to deliver for their communities. As we look to 2022/23 and beyond, this is something that should give government, trusts and schools confidence.

Steve Rollett
Deputy Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts

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Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school Trusts in England.

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of School Trusts

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

- Provide an understanding of where your resources and support are needed

- Find areas of good practice and celebrate strengths

- Identify areas for professional learning and growth opportunities

- Strengthen relationships between school leadership and the staff and parent community

- Improve staff wellbeing and student achievement

- Reduce effort to analyse data and ensure high response rates due to the use of a trusted external partner

If you're interested in learning how Edurio can help your school or trust achieve its goals, email contact@edurio.com.

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