

National School Trust Report

September 2024



Confederation
of School Trusts

edurio'

National School Trust Report

September 2024

AUTHORS Ernest Jenavs, Ben Haslewood, James Goffin

FOREWORD Leora Cruddas CBE

CONTRIBUTORS Sam Skerritt, Steve Rollett, Samira Sadeghi



**Confederation
of School Trusts**

membership@cstuk.org.uk
cstuk.org.uk

edurio

edurio@edurio.com
home.edurio.com

Copyright © 2024
by Edurio and Confederation of School Trusts
All rights reserved. Published 2024
contact@edurio.com
home.edurio.com
cstuk.org.uk

Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	2
Expert, Ethical Leadership	3
High Quality, Inclusive Education	12
School Improvement at Scale	20
Strategic Governance	25
Workforce Resilience and Wellbeing	32
Finance and Operations	38
Public Benefit and Civic Duty	49
Conclusion	54
About Edurio	56
About CST	57

Foreword



Leora Cruddas CBE

Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts

This year has marked a significant milestone for school trusts. For the first time, the majority of schools in England are now run by trusts, with 56% of the 8.5m children in the state education system now entrusted to our care.

We also, of course, have seen a change in government with a new party in power for the first time in over a decade. Inevitably this means new priorities and new approaches.

Now, therefore, is a good time to take stock. 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 is our third annual survey, conducted in partnership with Edurio, shining 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.

We do not expect all trusts to speak with one voice, and our diversity as organisations is one of our strengths. But it is instructive to see emergent trends, shared passions, and common concerns, and that is what this survey aims to uncover.

One trend that I have been pleased to see in recent months is an increasing agency on behalf of trusts. More than ever, we set our own agenda - putting our trusts' shared core purpose of advancing education for children at the heart of our thinking, our strategies, and our actions.

Thank you to all the chief executives who contributed to our survey. Your views will help us represent you, your people, and your pupils, to politicians and policymakers. However much things change, CST will continue to advocate, connect, and support you.

Introduction

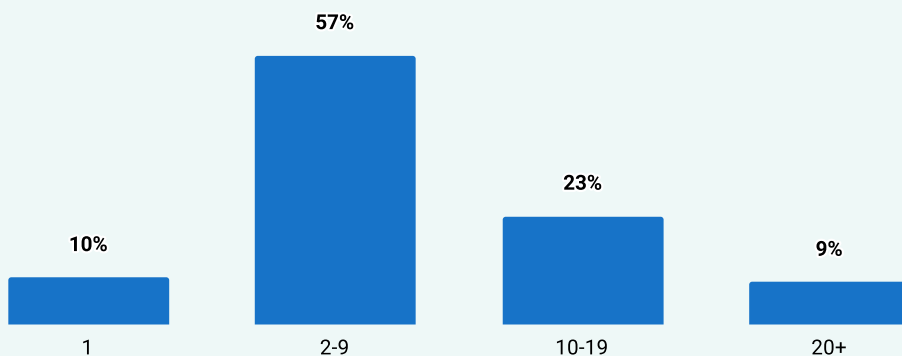
For the third year running, the Confederation of School Trusts has partnered with Edurio to conduct the National School Trust Survey. The design of the survey is informed by CST's Building Strong Trusts framework¹ and explores accounting officers' priorities and challenges across the various elements of trust leadership.

CST Strong Trust Framework



In June-July of 2024, the survey was answered by 417 trust accounting officers (the senior leader directly responsible to Parliament for their trust, usually the CEO) across England. The survey covered trusts of all sizes, from trusts with single academies to running dozens of schools, making it a representative sample of school trusts across the sector. To ensure reliability, trust accounting officers were invited to respond to the survey via a dedicated link available only to them for a single response, making this the largest validated set of trust CEO priorities and challenges.

How many schools are in your trust?



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 2024/25. The report starts with a look at overall trust leadership priorities and challenges and then proceeds to deep dive into the elements of a strong trust one by one.

¹ Building strong trusts, Confederation Of School Trusts, April 2023, <https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/guidance-and-policy/building-strong-trusts/>

Expert, Ethical Leadership

Chapter One

Expert, Ethical Leadership

Accounting officers and their executive teams work to ensure the overall leadership of their school trust, set priorities, and steer it through day-to-day challenges. They work closely with the trust's board to set and implement strategy and the framework for everything their school trust does.

This chapter explores their leadership priorities and their trust's culture, vision, and values: a prudent place to begin our exploration of the findings in this year's report.

Priorities and challenges

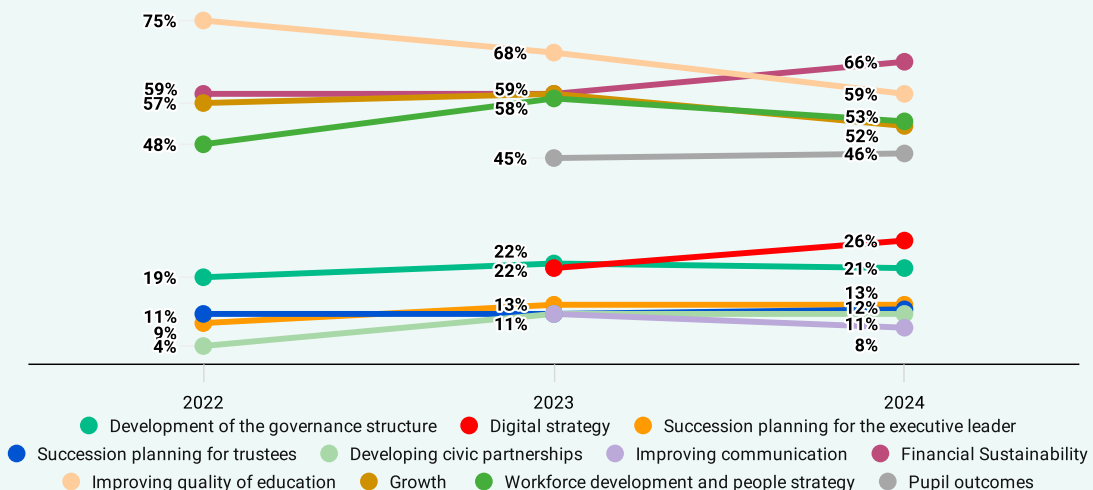
We asked trust CEOs what the top five strategic priorities were for their trust in the next academic year. For the first time since launching this survey, financial sustainability was the most frequently reported area as the top strategic priority, overtaking improving the quality of education (which also remained a high priority).

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



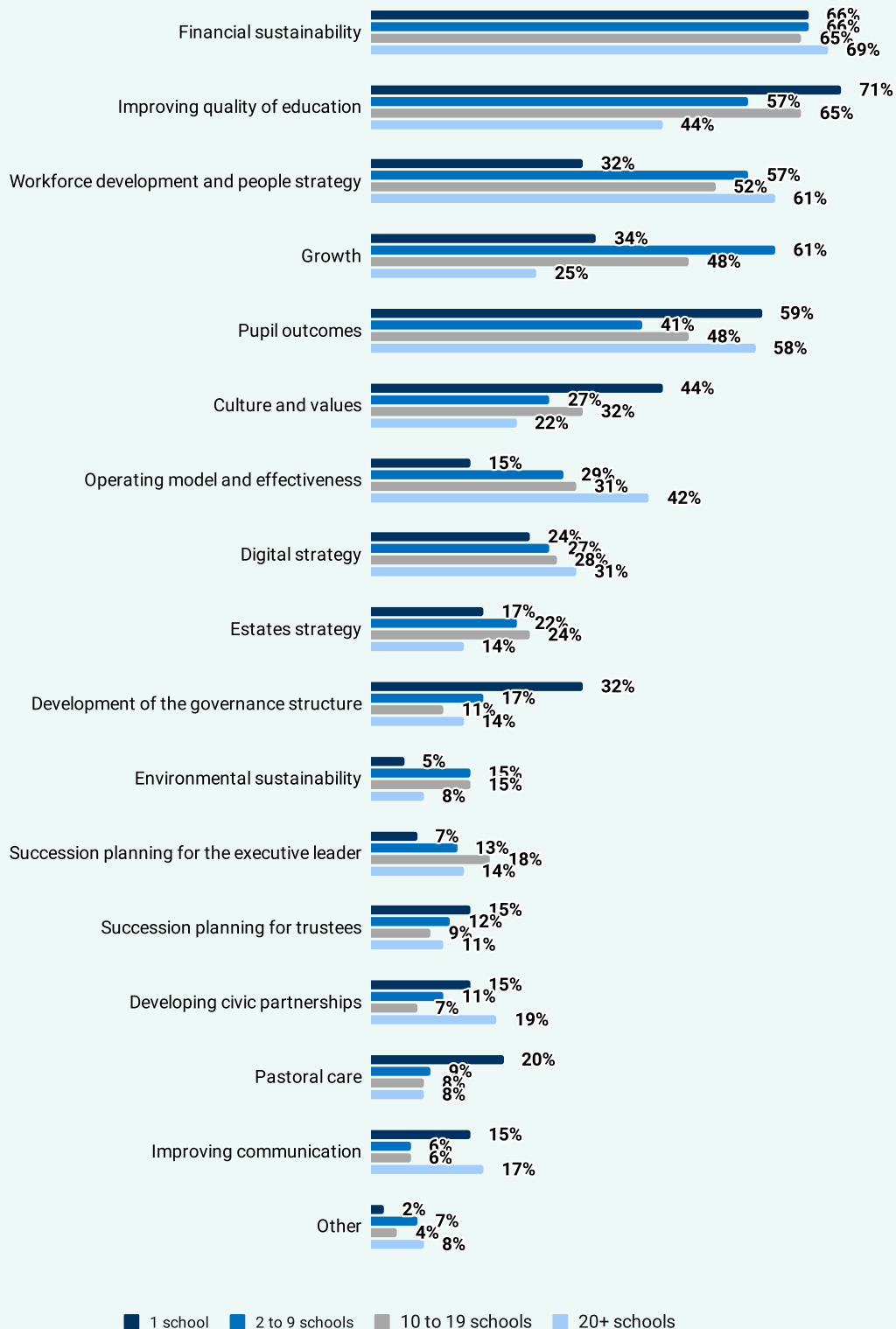
Overall across the priorities we have tracked for the last three years, the top set has remained relatively constant, while among the rest we have seen an increase in trusts prioritising digital strategy and developing civic partnerships.

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



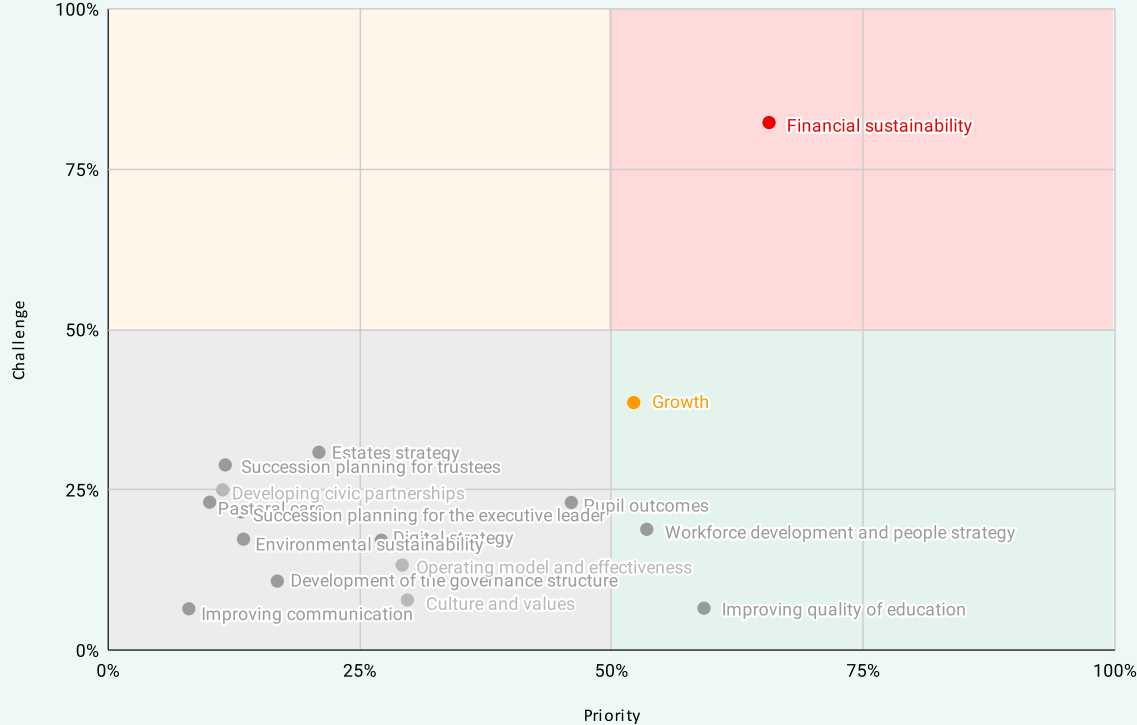
Analysing the priorities across different trust sizes, it is evident that financial sustainability is shared as a top priority across all trusts. Trusts with a single school are more likely to prioritise quality of education, culture, values and governance structure. The largest trusts are more likely than others to prioritise workforce development and people strategy, operating model and effectiveness, and developing civic partnerships. Trusts with two to nine schools were most likely to highlight growth as a top five priority for the next academic year (and were the most likely to see it as a challenge for their trust).

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



The perceived challenges with financial sustainability are highlighted when we map the priorities against how frequently trust CEOs have said those will be their biggest challenges. Out of the respondents who said they would focus on financial sustainability, over 80% said it would be their biggest challenge, higher than previous years (this will be further explored in Chapter 6.) Growth is also frequently mentioned as a challenging priority, with almost half of the respondents selecting growth as a priority and saying it will be challenging.

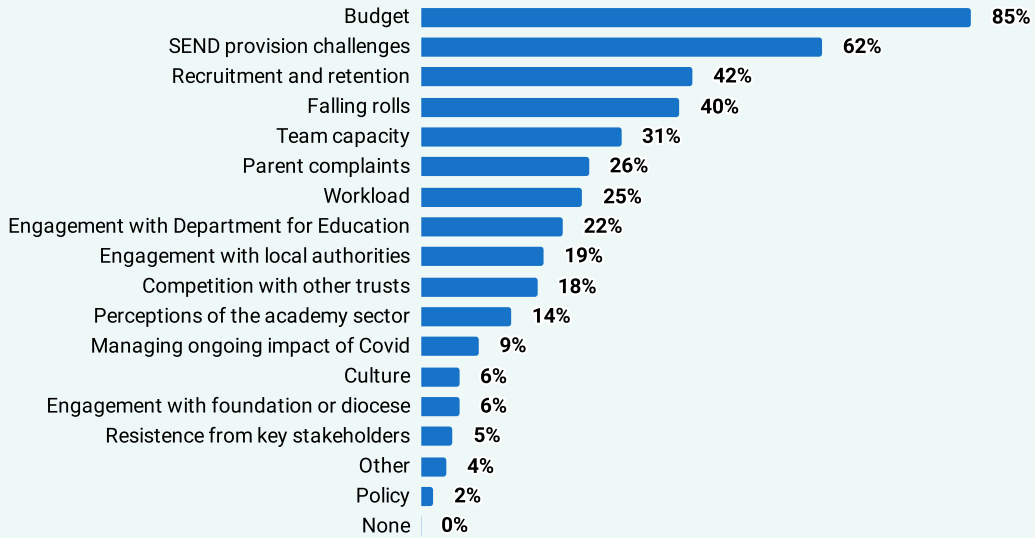
Most demanding priorities for Trust CEOs in 2024/25



Barriers

When CEOs were asked about the barriers preventing them from reaching their priorities, budget came top: 85% of CEOs reported that their budget is a barrier to delivering their priorities for the next academic year. The second most frequently mentioned was SEND provision challenges, with 62% of CEOs highlighting this area. Recruitment, retention, and falling rolls were also frequently mentioned, with four out of ten respondents highlighting those.

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

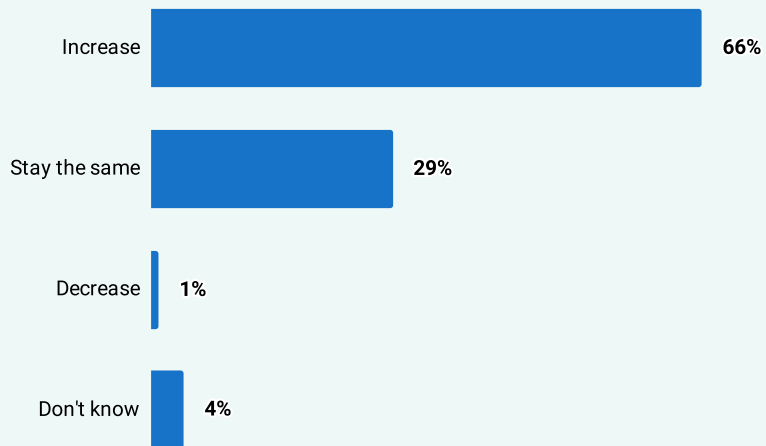


Growth

Planning the trust's forward strategy is a major part of the CEO's role, and over half of trusts mentioned growth among their top five priorities. Respondents were asked to share more insight into their trust growth plans, highlighting the likely direction of growth in the sector.

Two thirds (66%) of CEOs report that they expect the number of schools in their trust to increase over the next year.

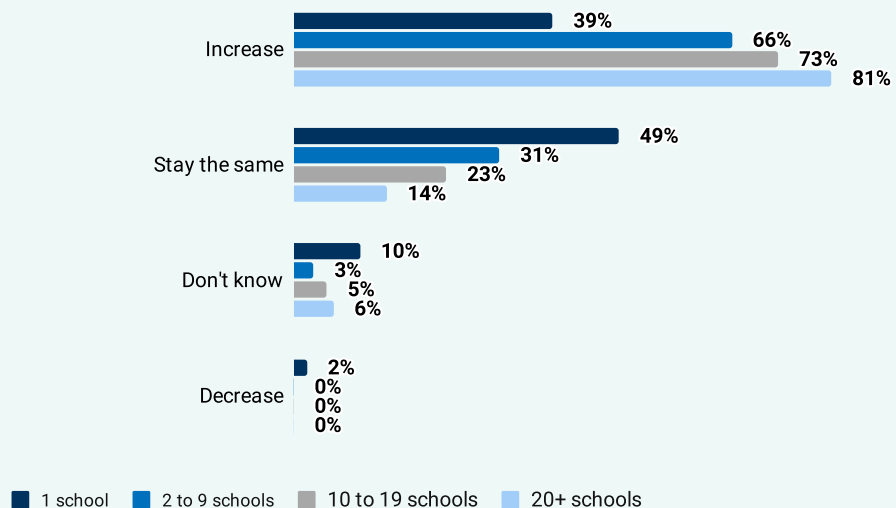
How do you expect the number of schools in your trust to change over the next year?



Interestingly, the larger the trust, the more likely it is to expect growth in the next year, perhaps indicating a continued direction towards consolidation in the sector as trusts recognise the benefits of joint working across schools.

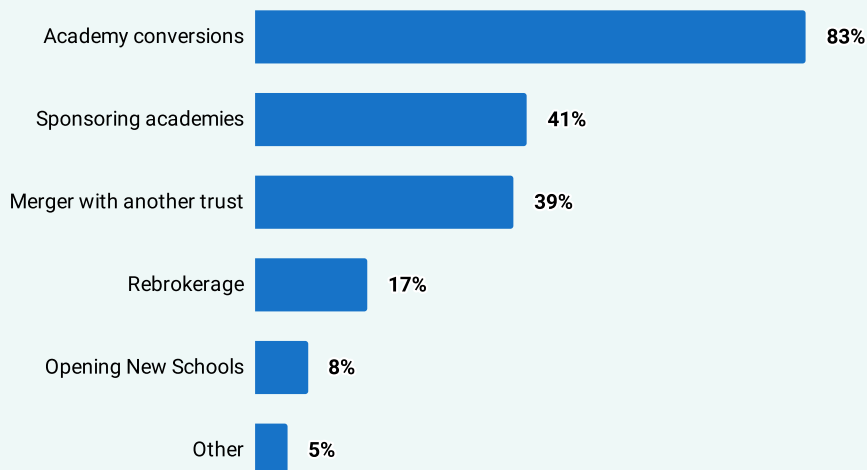
Single academy trusts were the most likely not to envisage taking on additional schools, with just under half saying they expected to remain the same size.

How do you expect the number of schools in your trust to change over the next year?

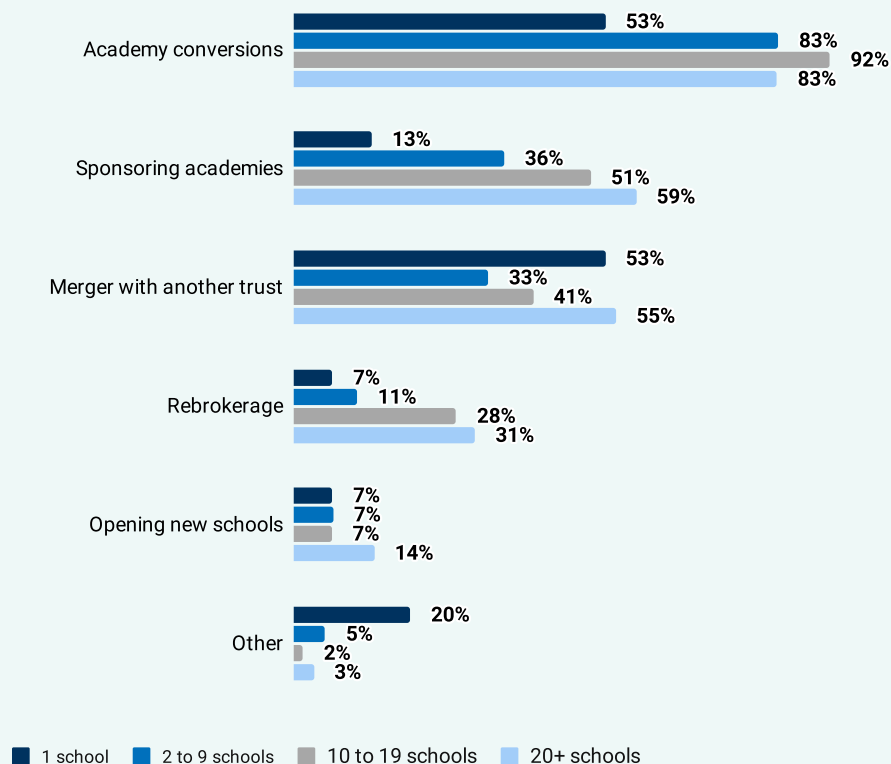


Out of the trusts expecting to grow, the majority by far are exploring academy conversions as a way to increase the size of the trust. Sponsorships are seen as likely by less than half of the trusts expecting to grow; however, the analysis by trust size shows that the larger trusts are more likely to be exploring taking on challenging schools through sponsorship or rebrokerage. More than a third of trusts perceive a merger with another trust as likely in the next year.

What options to adding schools in the next year is your trust exploring?



What options to adding schools in the next year is your trust exploring?

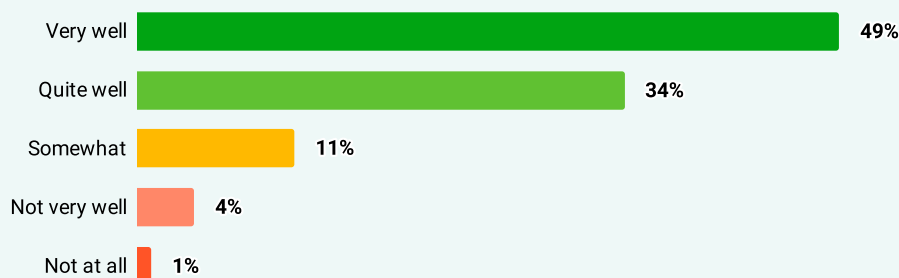


The CEO's journey

The leadership of the trust is often heavily influenced by the CEO and the strength of their relationship with the board and the executive team. Therefore this year we also sought to better understand the CEO's experience and personal plans for the year ahead.

Overall we see that the relationship between the CEO and the trust's board is strong across the sector with 83% of CEOs saying that they are very well or quite well supported by their board and only 5% saying that they don't feel supported.

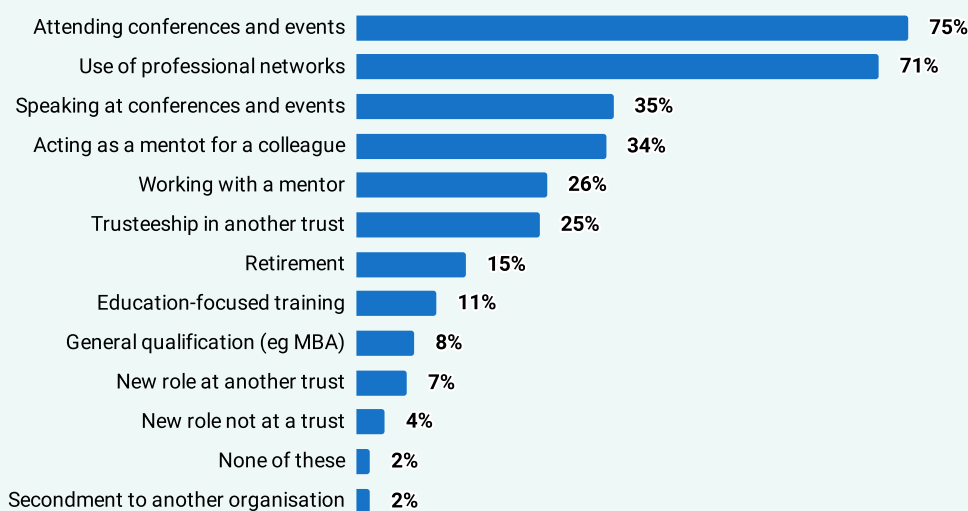
How well supported do you feel as a chief executive by your trust board?



Looking at how CEOs are planning to enrich the year ahead, we see that participation in professional networks as well as conferences and events are the most popular options, showing that the strength of the community is critical to the development of the sector. We also see over a quarter of respondents participating in mentorship as either a mentor or a mentee.

Notably, about 15% of trust CEOs are considering retirement next year; this is more prevalent with small to medium trusts, the figure is 9% for larger trusts). This is a considerable number and may influence trust mergers as well as give an opportunity for the next generation of trust leaders to step up. Fewer trust CEOs are planning to change jobs and out of those that do, the majority are intending to stay in the trust sector.

Which of the following are you personally considering for the next year?



The rest of the report will explore each of the other elements of strong trust and provide more depth into the priorities and challenges of school trusts in England.



CST Chief Executive **Leora Cruddas CBE**

Education will always be at the core of school trusts - it is fundamentally why we exist - but trust leadership is also about ensuring financial, physical, and strategic leadership so children have the space to flourish. From their outset, trusts have embraced new financial models to put more money to the frontline but recent years' stretched public spending, and external economic pressures have made balancing the books all the more challenging.

These results indicate that trust leaders increasingly see the power of a trust to bring schools together to address financial and educational challenges, with most anticipating taking on additional schools. This does not mean the future is only about large national trusts - the average trust size is still less than five schools - and we believe there is scope for a range of different sizes and structures.

High Quality, Inclusive Education

Chapter 2



High Quality, Inclusive Education

Improving the quality of education was reported by 59% of CEOs as a priority for the next academic year, making this a close second in the trust priority list after financial sustainability. It was the top priority in the past two years showing that it has been consistently seen by trust CEOs as being at the core of their work.

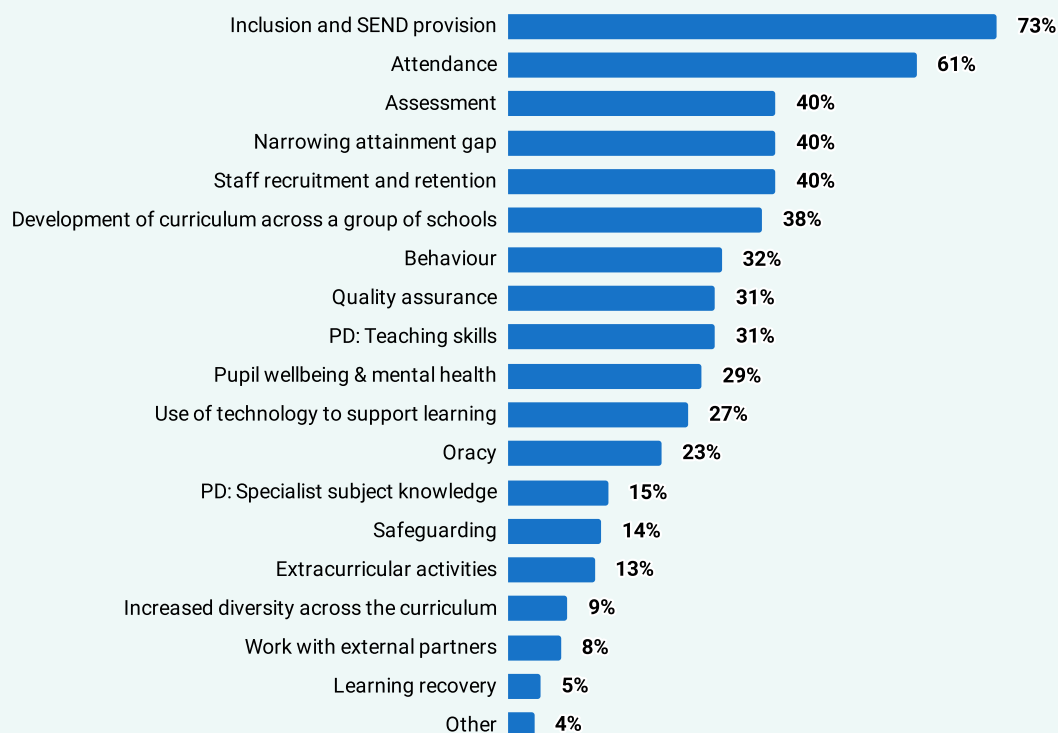
Priorities and Challenges

Trust leaders strongly highlight inclusion and SEND provision as the main area in which their trust intends to focus its efforts in the next academic year. 73% of trust leaders selected this, up from 56% last year. Attendance is also identified as crucial to the quality of education, with 61% of trusts focusing on it as a priority.

Notably, learning recovery following the pandemic is identified by only 5% of trusts, down from 15% in 2023 and 30% in 2022.

While the incoming Labour government have frequently identified oracy as a priority area in education, this was cited by only around a quarter of CEOs.

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

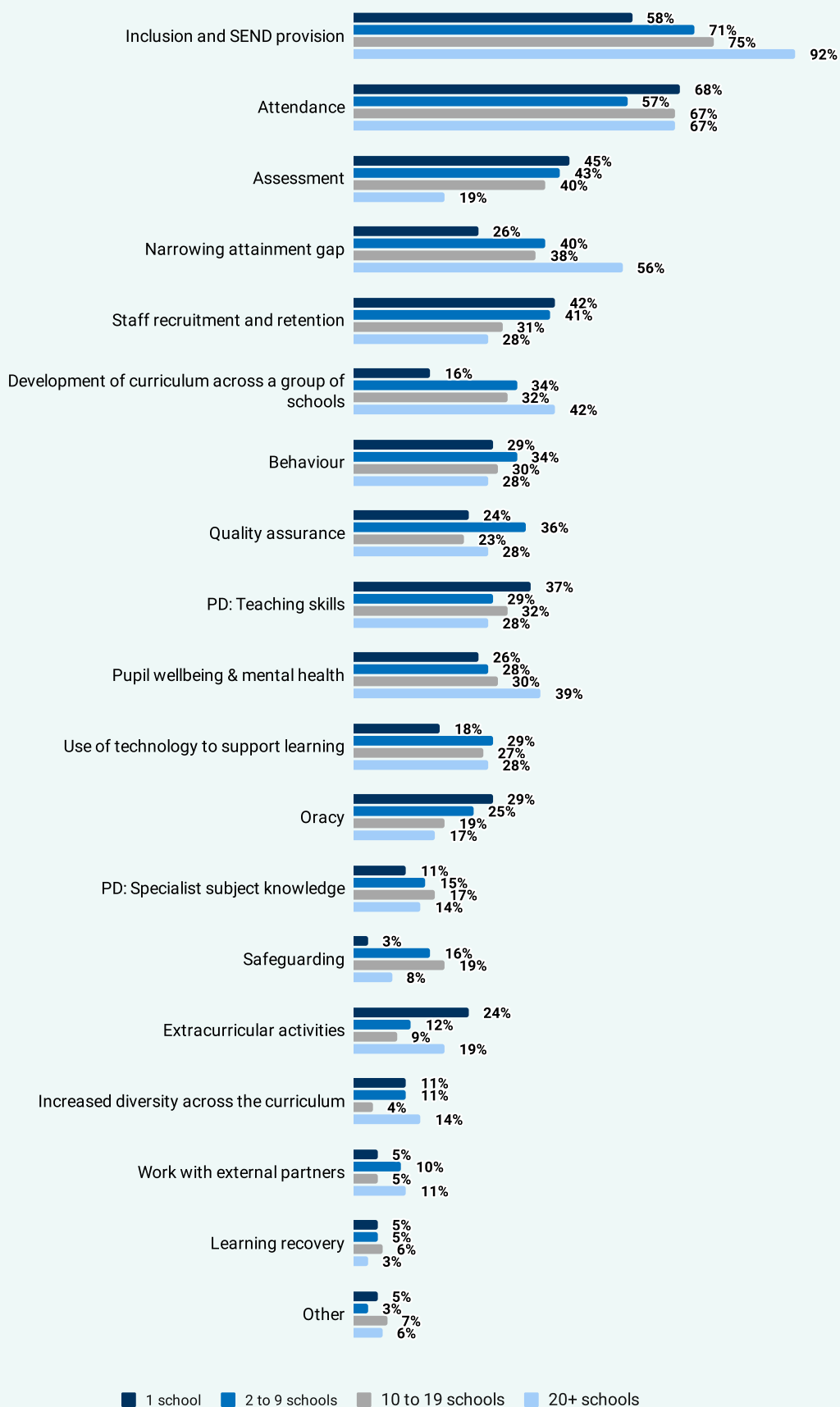


The larger trusts are more likely to focus on inclusion and SEND provision, narrowing the attainment gap and pupil wellbeing and mental health as well as developing curriculum across a group of schools.

Attendance is as much of a priority for smaller trusts as it is for larger trusts when it comes to improving the quality of education in the next academic year.

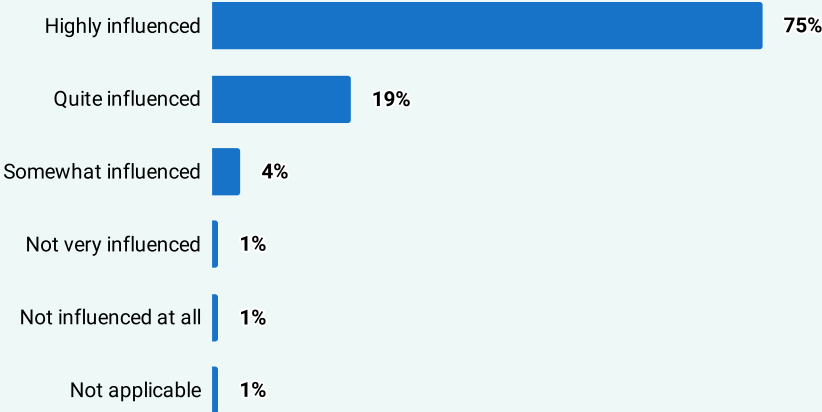
Larger trusts were considerably less likely to report that they intend to focus their efforts on assessment in the next academic year compared to smaller trusts.

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



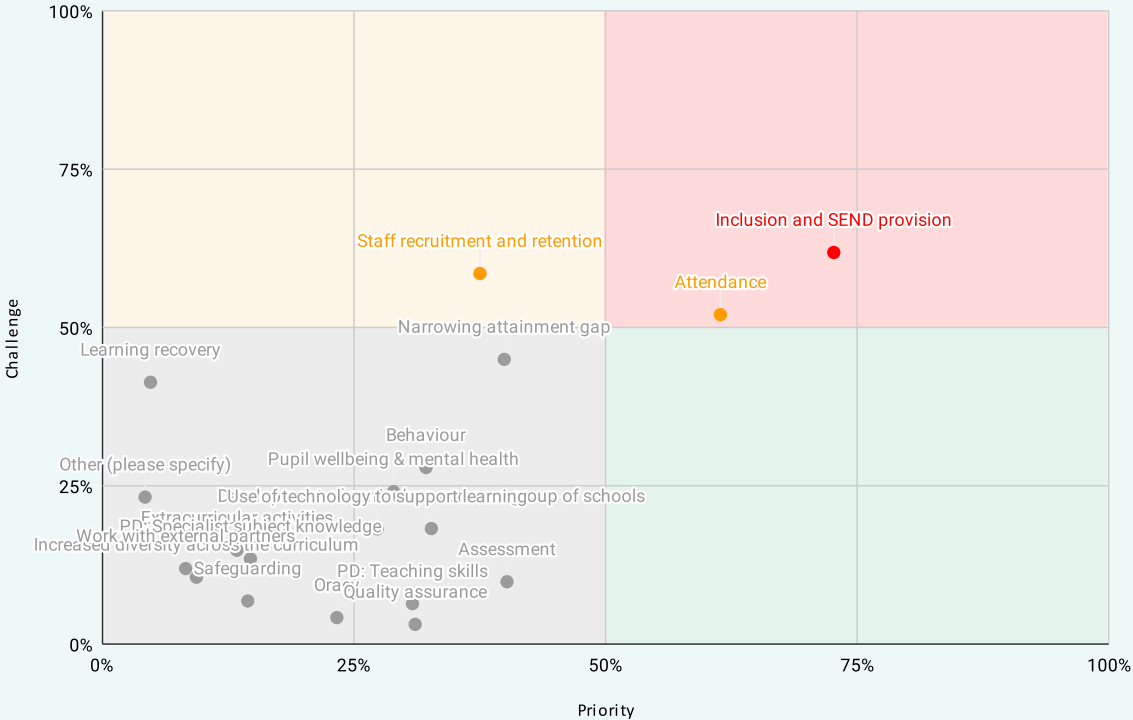
The government has indicated that academies will be required to follow a revised National Curriculum following its upcoming curriculum and assessment review. Three-quarters of trusts said their curriculum is already highly influenced by the current National Curriculum, with a further 23% saying they are quite or somewhat influenced, despite it not being a statutory requirement for academies for more than two decades.

Academies are not required to follow the National Curriculum but may choose to do so. How influenced by the National Curriculum is education in your trust?



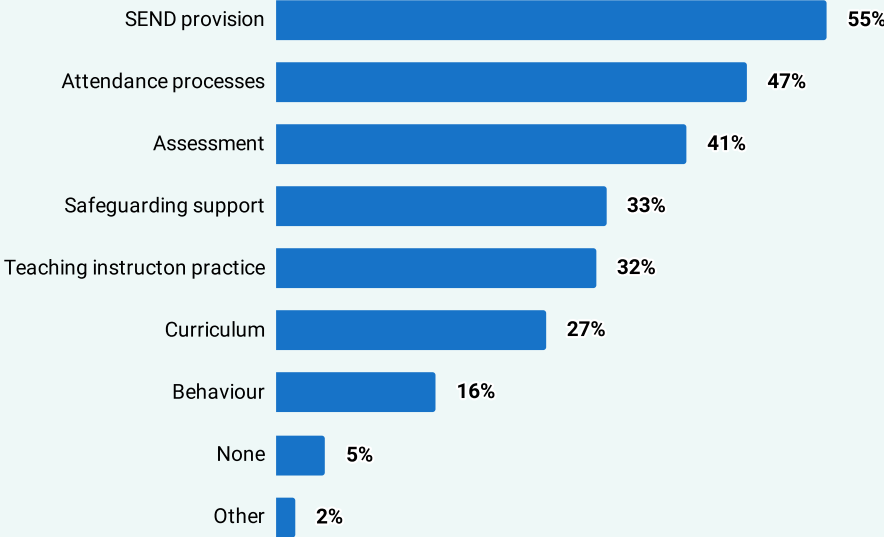
When looking at where CEOs feel their biggest challenges are, inclusion, SEND provision and attendance are highlighted as a priority that will be a major challenge. While recruitment and retention are less frequently mentioned as an education quality priority for CEOs, it is a considerable challenge for those who have selected it as a priority.

Most demanding priorities for Quality of Education in 2024/25



We also asked trusts with multiple schools where they expect to seek more trust-wide alignment over the next year. In general, this corresponds with the priority areas highlighted by the trusts, with SEND and attendance being most likely to be a focus of increased alignment.

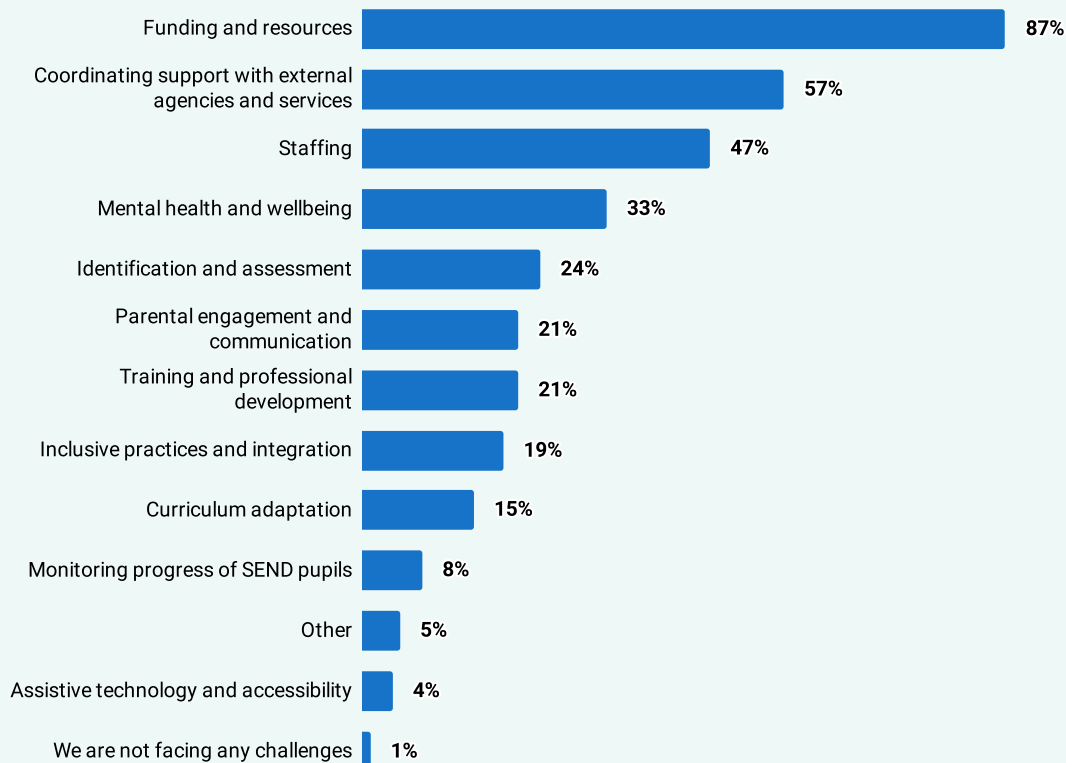
In which areas of education provision will your trust prioritise achieving more trust-wide alignment across the trust next year?



SEND Provision

When we asked trust leaders what they felt were the main challenges their trust faces in managing SEND provision, the most reported challenge was funding and resources with 87% of trust leaders identifying it as a major challenge. This was followed by coordinating support with external agencies and services as well as staffing, which were both selected by about half of the respondents.

What are the main challenges your trust faces in managing SEND provision?



COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

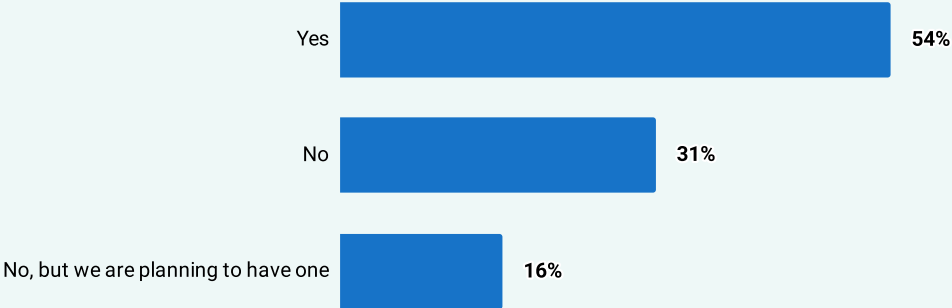
“As a special trust we are facing increasing capacity issues with directions and tribunals meaning that our schools are finding it increasingly more challenging to plan ahead for class groupings, recruitment, and increasingly the curriculum as the cohorts are changing so rapidly”

“A desperate shortfall of specialist places in the area resulting in many pupils whose EHCP names specialist being placed in our schools. Also, a huge increase in numbers of pupils with EHCPs in our schools (one of our schools is now at 12% of pupils with EHCP).”

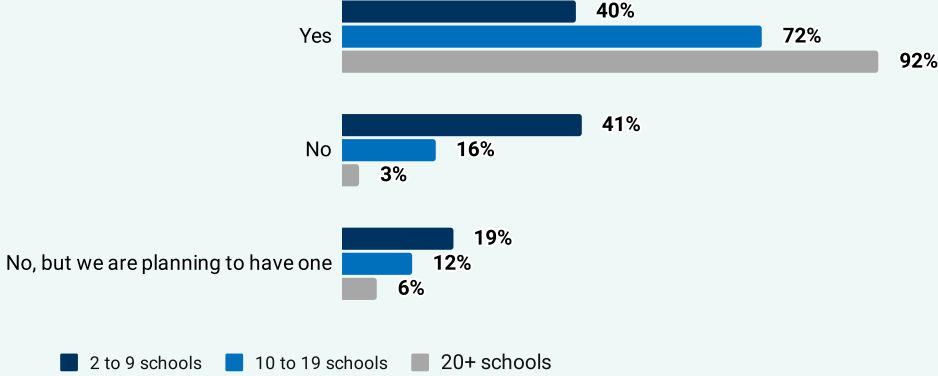
“Sheer volume. 15% of Year 7 admissions have an EHCP”

When asked about whether the trusts have a trust-wide director of SEND or equivalent, over half of the respondents said they do with a further 16% planning to introduce this role. Notably, this proportion is directly related to trust size with over 90% of the largest trusts (20 schools or more) having a SEND director vs only 40% of the trusts with fewer than nine schools.

Does your trust have a trust-wide Director of SEND or equivalent?



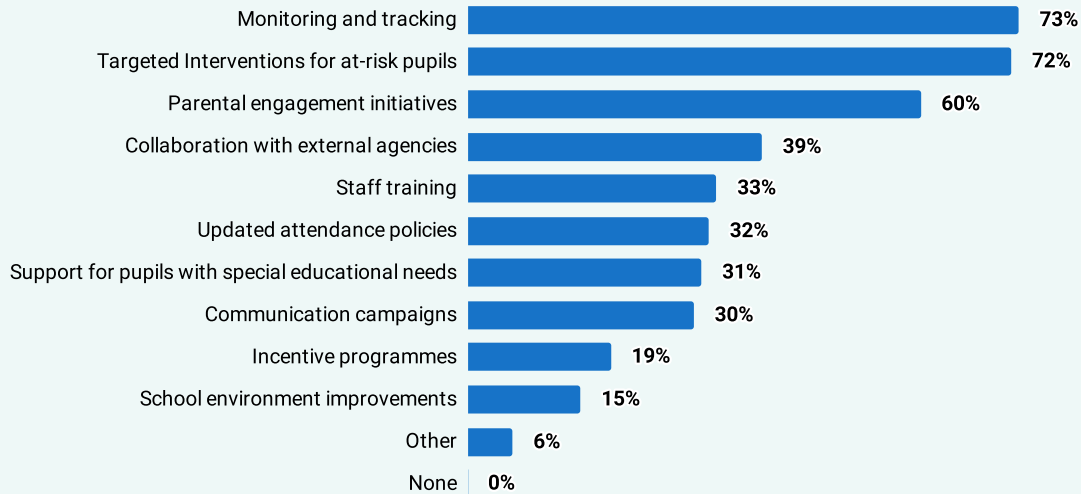
Does your trust have a trust-wide Director of SEND or equivalent?



Attendance

We asked trusts to share what activities have had a positive impact on attendance for their trust. It appears that careful monitoring combined with targeted interventions for at-risk pupils is the strategy viewed most favourably by trust CEOs. Parental engagement initiatives are also frequently mentioned as a valuable lever to improve attendance.

What activities have had a positive impact on attendance in your trust?



These findings, highlighting a sector focus on inclusion and SEND provision for the next academic year, continue to reflect the mission of school trusts to provide a high-quality education for all. While SEND and inclusion, and attendance are seen as a priority for the majority of trust leaders for the next academic year, they are also seen as one of the most challenging areas for their trust, showing a need for support.



CST Deputy Chief Executive Steve Rollett

The clear focus from trusts on inclusive education, tackling the difficult and long-term structural issues with SEND provision, is very welcome. We have a clear duty to ensure everyone benefits from a good education, and minimise the barriers to this - much depends on central and local government. Still, trusts are increasingly finding innovative ways to make a difference.

The impact of the pandemic is still felt in areas like attendance and the too-often fractured social contract between pupils, parents, and schools. CST has highlighted and shared the work many trusts are undertaking to tackle this, and it is reassuring to see trusts grasping the nettle.

School Improvement at Scale

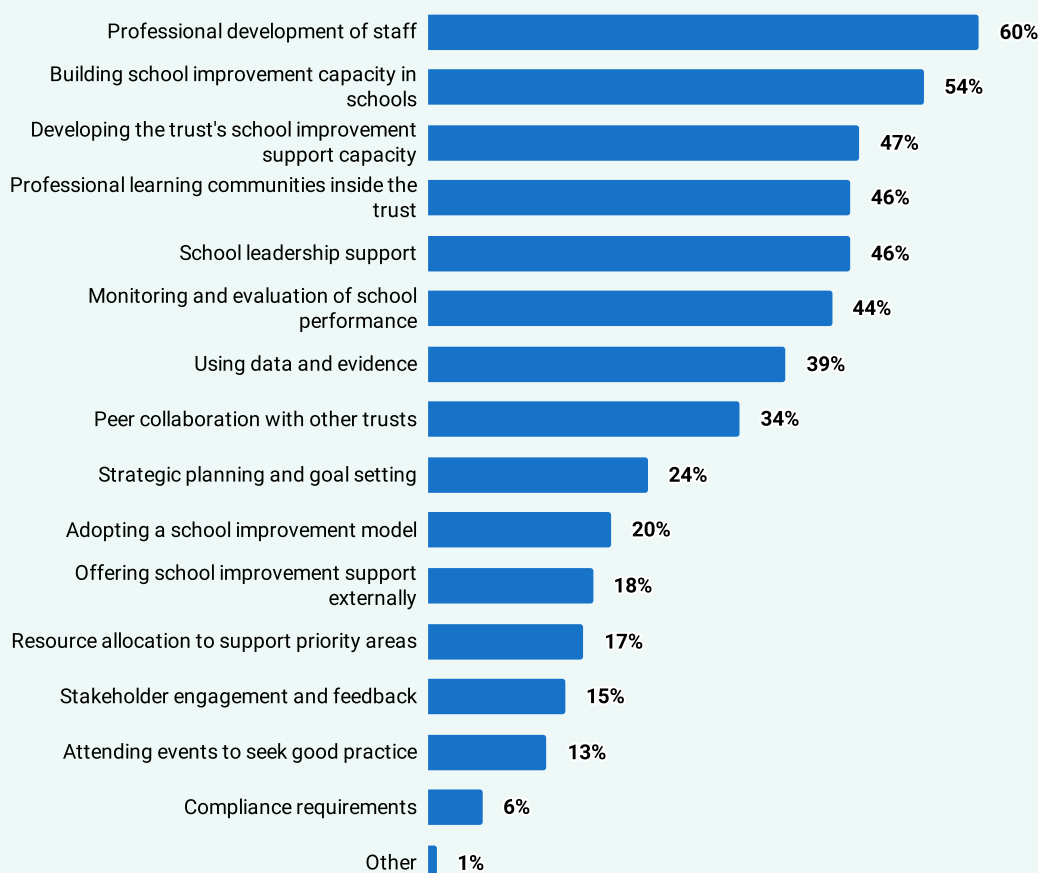
Chapter Three

School Improvement at Scale

One of the great benefits of school trusts is their ability to bring professionals together at a fundamentally deeper level than other organisational structures. That does not mean that everyone has to do the same thing, but it does mean that, when appropriate, teachers and leaders can effect change at scale, transforming the experiences of thousands of children. The potential for school improvement at scale is a prime example of this.

We asked CEOs where their trusts intend to focus their school improvement efforts in the next academic year. 60% of the CEOs highlighted professional development of staff, and 54% highlighted their desire to build school improvement capacity in schools. These are followed by a range of initiatives including the trust's support capacity, professional learning communities inside the trust, school leadership support and monitoring and evaluation. It appears that school improvement strategies encompass a wide range of focal points in school trusts.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on school improvement in the next academic year?



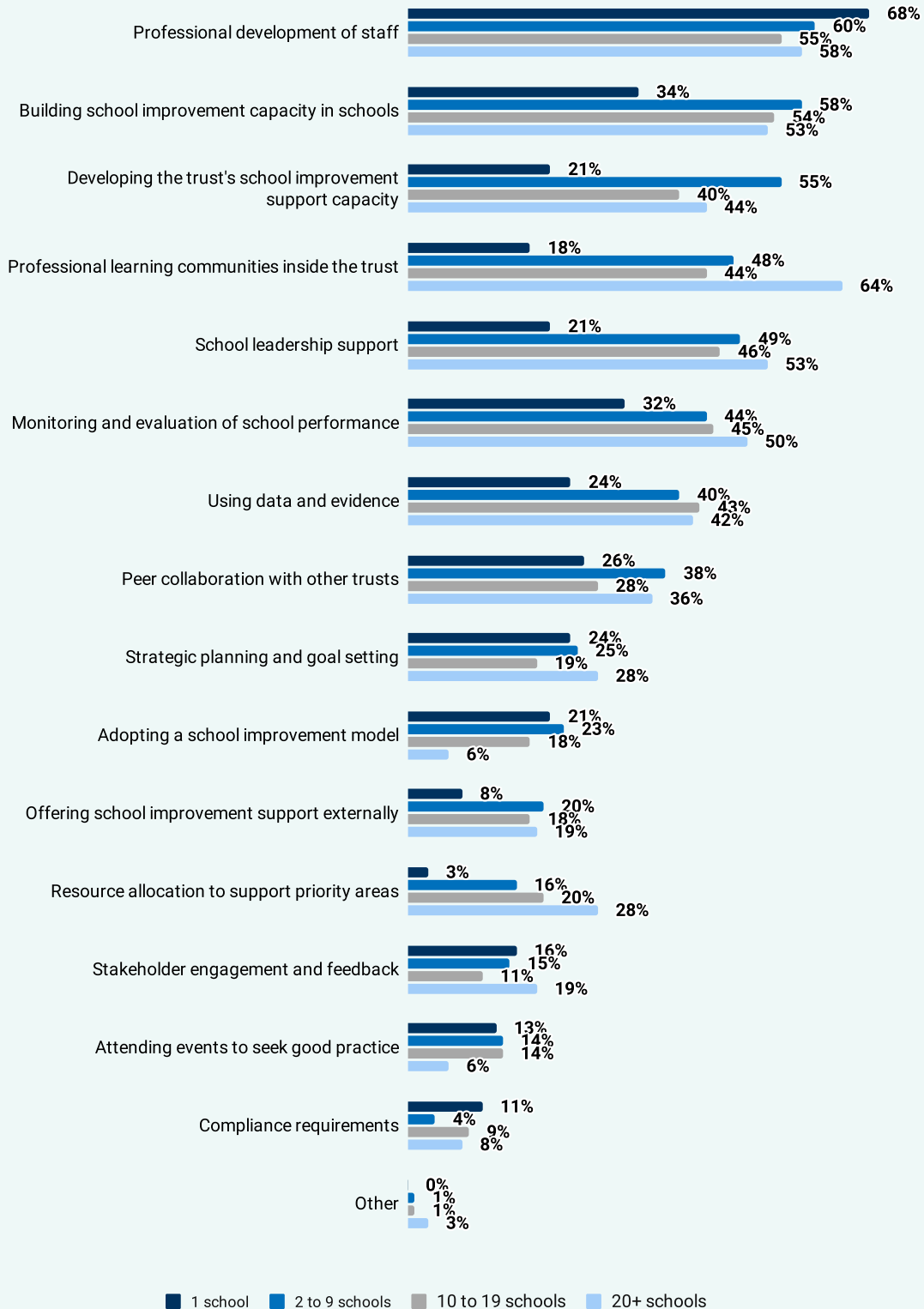
If we look at these school improvement priorities by trust size, we can see that professional development of staff is a priority across all trust sizes.

Larger trusts are considerably more likely to focus their efforts on professional learning communities inside the trust than smaller trusts.

Trusts of between two and nine schools are most likely to be investing their efforts in developing school improvement capacity, both in the schools and the trust.

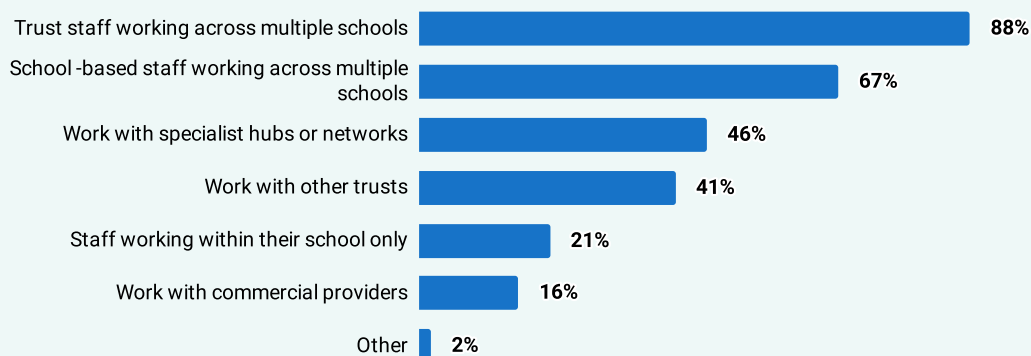
Finally, using data and evidence as well as monitoring and evaluation of school performance, are slightly more frequently mentioned in larger trusts.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on school improvement in the next academic year?



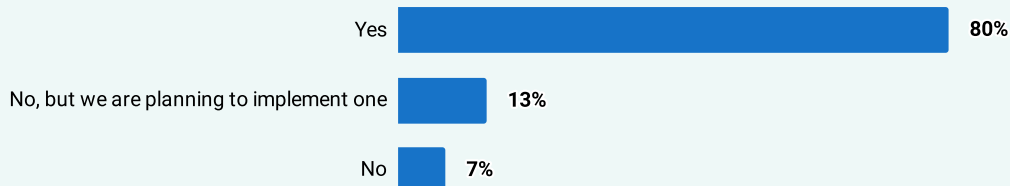
Trust CEOs report that their school improvement is most frequently organised around trust staff working across multiple schools (88%) or school-based staff working across multiple schools (67%). These models are far more popular than external collaborations with other trusts, networks or commercial providers.

How is school improvement organised in your trust?



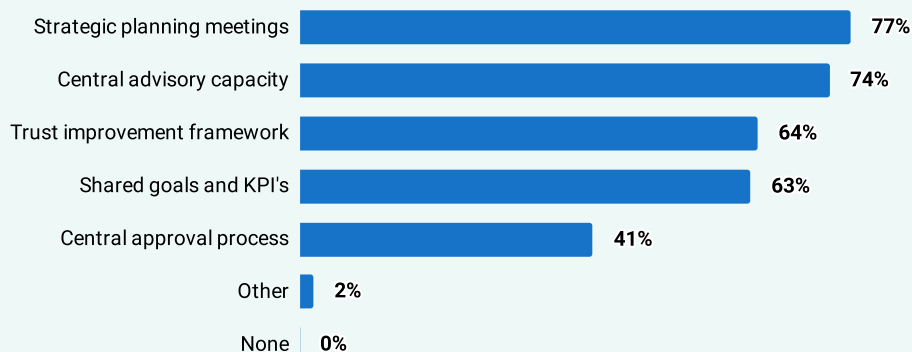
80% of CEOs report having a trust-wide model of school improvement. Only 7% of CEOs reported not having one and not planning to implement one.

Do you have a trust-wide model of school improvement?



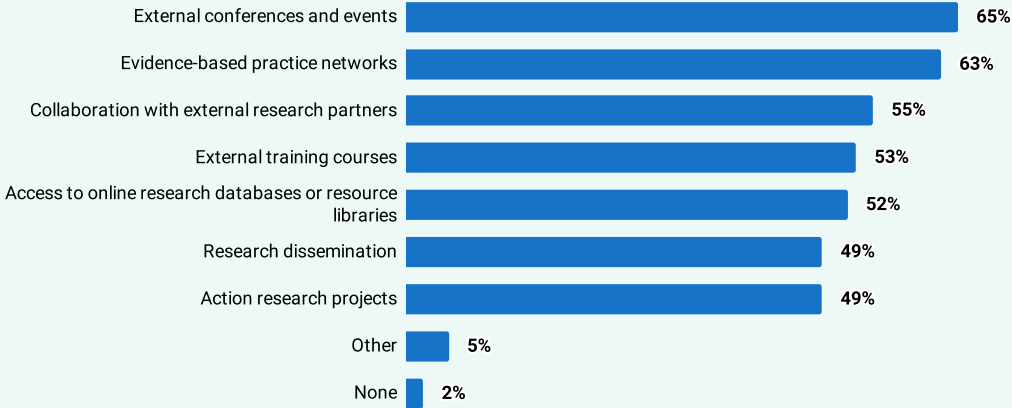
We also asked CEOs what processes their trust uses to align school improvement plans across their trust. 77% highlighted that they use strategic planning meetings, while 74% said they use central advisory capacity. A trust improvement framework and shared goals and KPIs were also selected by over 60% of respondents.

What processes does your trust use to align school improvement plans across the trust?



A large part of dynamic school improvement at scale is the use of evidence and research in decision-making at every level of the trust and school decision-making systems. The most frequent way trusts support teachers and leaders to do this is through supporting their teams to attend external conferences and events, followed by evidence-based practice networks; but a wide range of activities is carried out by most trusts.

How does the trust support teachers and leaders to make effective use of evidence & research?



**CST Deputy Chief Executive
Steve Rollett**

School improvement at scale has been a significant focus for CST in the last two years, with our inquiry into the topic and the launch of our School Improvement Hub to help identify the most effective approaches. Our findings so far reflect the survey results, with the importance of professional development and sharing evidence-based best practice between staff often at the heart of successful school improvement.

This survey focuses on what trusts are doing, but increasingly we find that what they stop doing is just as important - honing in on the things that matter helps both school improvement and workforce resilience and culture.

These findings also support what we know about the sector's fantastic capacity for sharing and working together. Our School Improvement Conference and our professional communities are full of people hungry to improve, and to share their experiences, and this coming together is immensely powerful.

Strategic Governance

Chapter Four



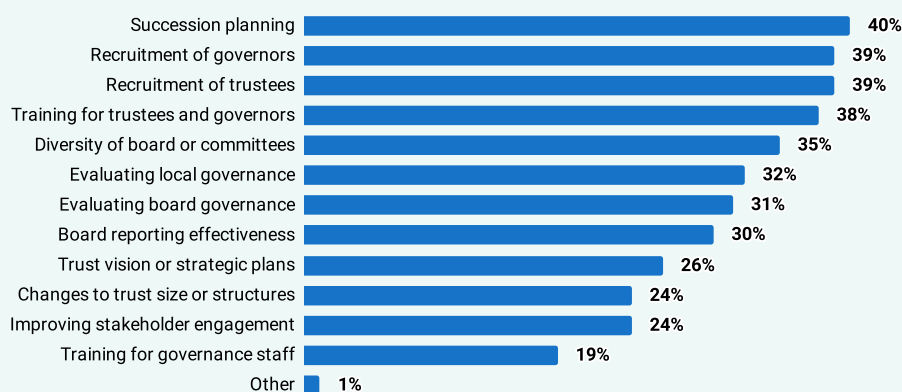
Strategic Governance

Governance in school trusts has a broad and critically important mandate and addresses strategic leadership, accountability and assurance as well as stakeholder engagement. The board has collective accountability and strategic responsibility for the trust. It has a focus on ensuring the trust delivers an excellent education to pupils while maintaining effective resource management and must ensure compliance with the trust's charitable objects, regulatory, contractual, and statutory requirements.

Priorities and Challenges

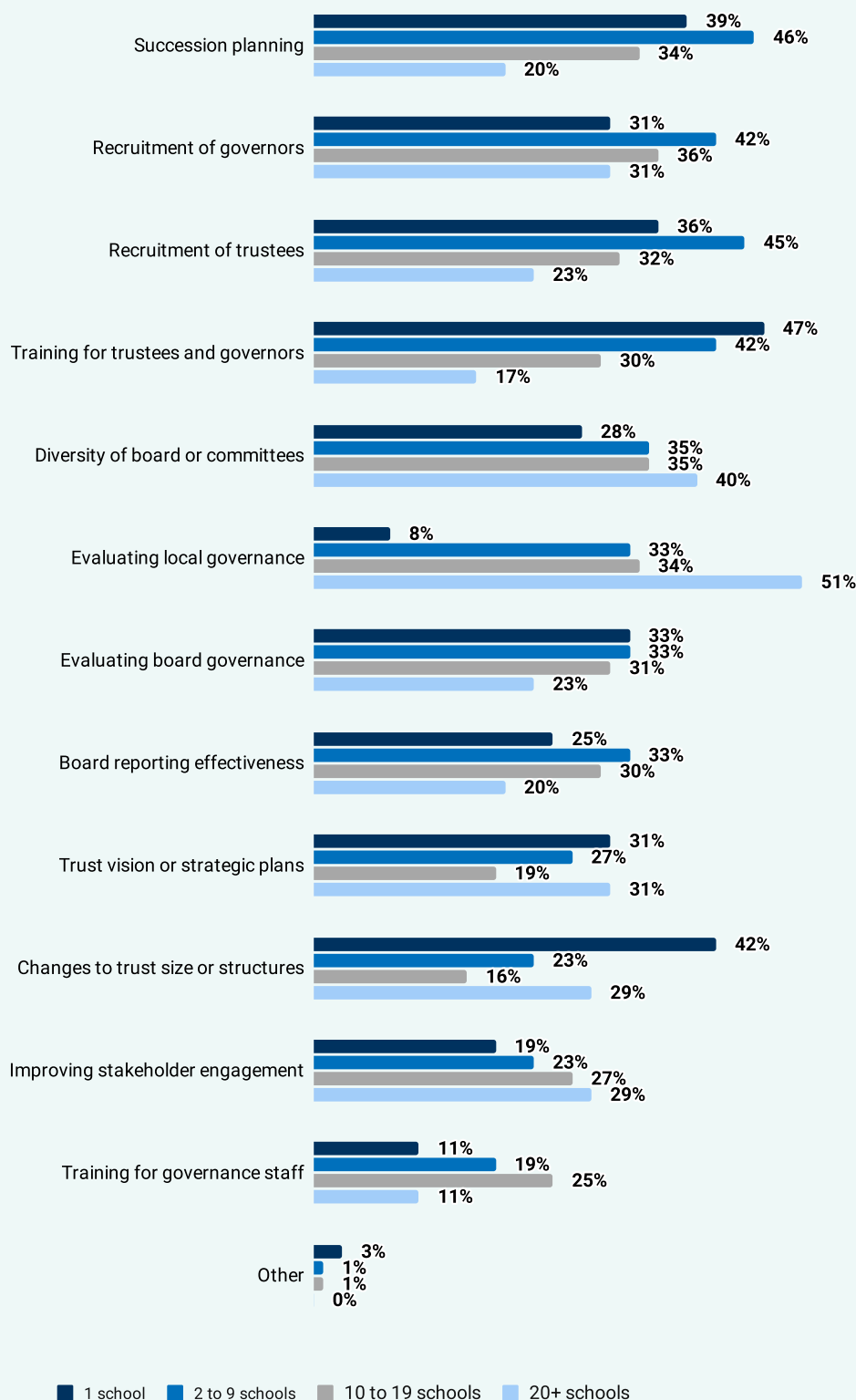
When looking at governance priorities across school trusts, there is no clear leader, but the three top selections all deal with succession planning and recruitment, indicating that many trusts are finding it challenging to recruit the next generation of governance volunteers.

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



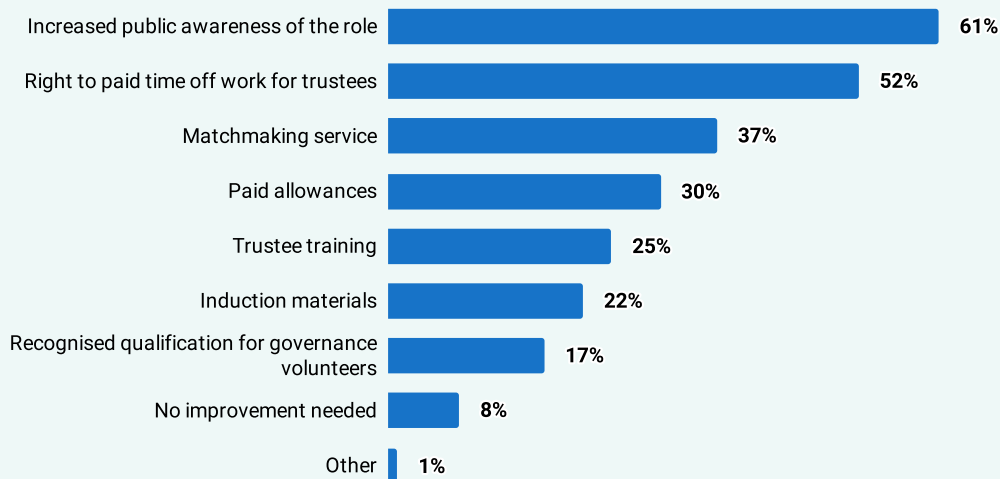
Interestingly, there is a lot of difference based on trust size - the largest trusts are far less likely to be focused on recruitment, succession planning and training and are instead able to focus on topics like board diversity to ensure a better representation and strategic planning. The most frequent area of focus for the largest trusts is evaluating local governance, which is understandable given the potentially more complex arrangements with an increased number of schools. Training for trustees is the most frequent priority area identified by single academy trusts, potentially reflecting the need to shift between maintained and academy governance mindsets.

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



The survey asked CEOs what would help with trustee recruitment, given its consistent level of priority over many years. The most popular response was increased public awareness of the role with 61% of respondents, but more than half (54%) also supported the right to paid time off work. Paid allowances, which is an increasingly discussed solution, was highlighted by 30% of the CEOs.

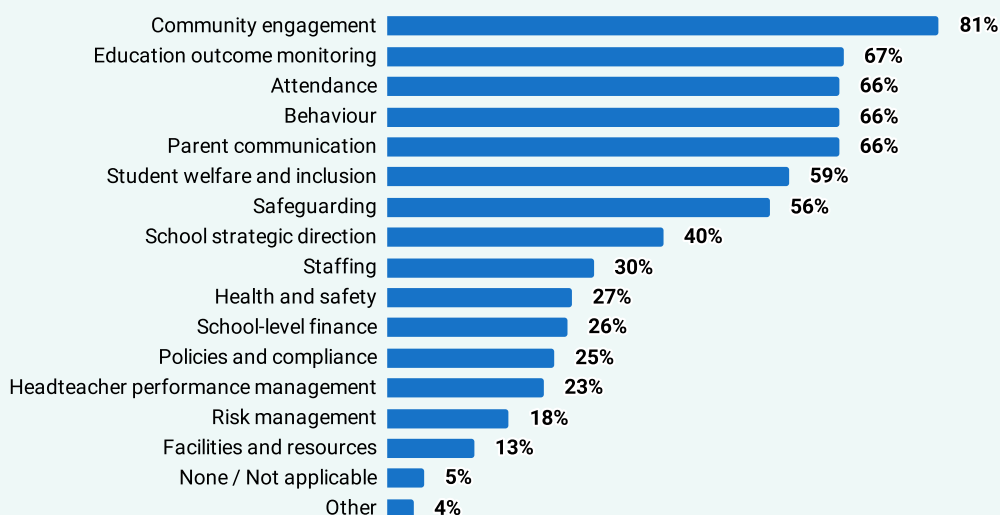
What would most help you better recruit and retain trustees?



Local Tier Governance Responsibility

Trusts appear to be delegating responsibilities to the local tier that benefit from being 'on the ground' and having local expertise and knowledge. Four fifths of trusts delegate community engagement, two thirds delegate monitoring of educational outcomes, attendance, behaviour and parental communication and over half delegate student welfare, inclusion and safeguarding. By contrast, operational and compliance functions like finance, policies, facilities and resources are the least likely to be delegated.

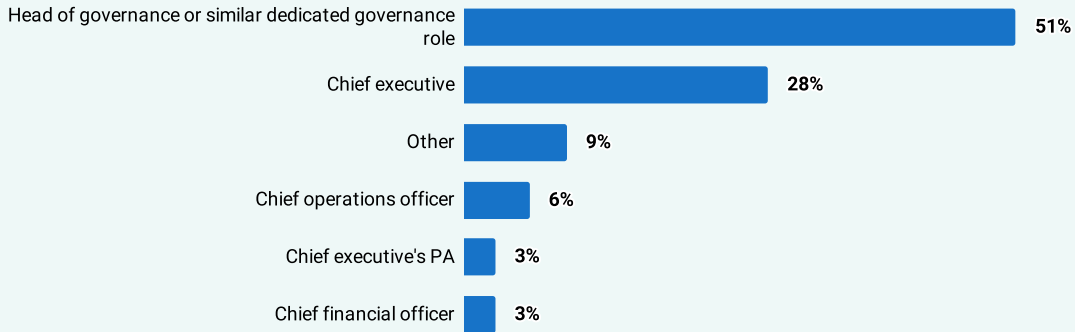
Which of these responsibilities does your local tier of governance hold?



Governance Structure and Recruitment

When asked who leads on governance within their trust, about half of the trusts (51%) reported having a head of governance or a similar dedicated governance role. 28% of CEOs report that they are the person who leads on governance within their trusts. And there was a tail of about 20% where this responsibility sits with other roles.

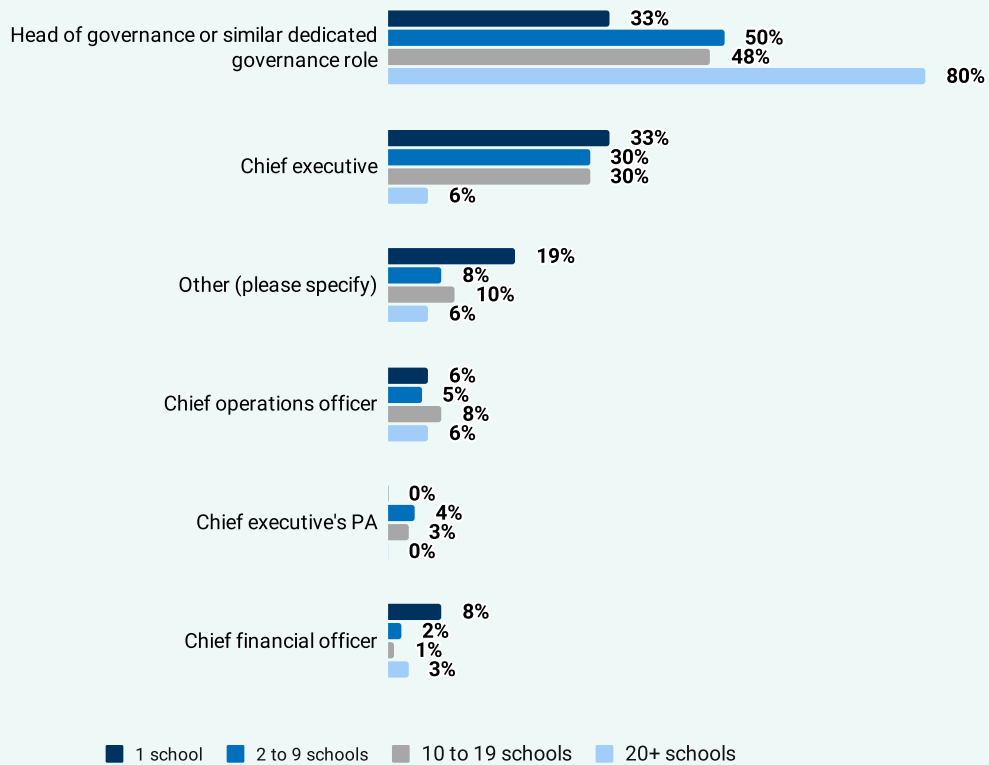
Which staff member leads on governance within your trust?



Here, we see a big difference between trusts of various sizes.

Large trusts of over 20 schools were far more likely than others to report having a head of governance or similar dedicated governance role with 4 out of 5 trusts (81%) responding they have such a role and very few having the CEO lead on governance.

Which staff member leads on governance within your trust?



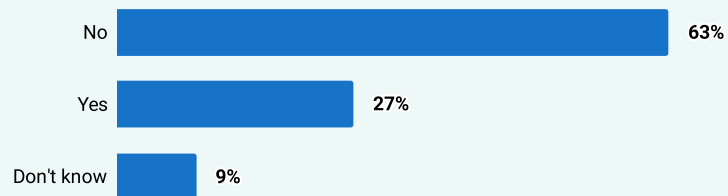
Of CEOs who said that they have a head of governance or a similar dedicated governance role, almost half (45%) report that their governance lead is part of the trust's executive leadership team.

Is your governance lead part of the trust's executive leadership team?



If CEOs reported that they do not have a head of governance or equivalent, we asked them if they plan to create a dedicated staff role to lead on governance in the next academic year. About a quarter of the trusts (27%) said they intend to create a new role for this but 63% said they did not.

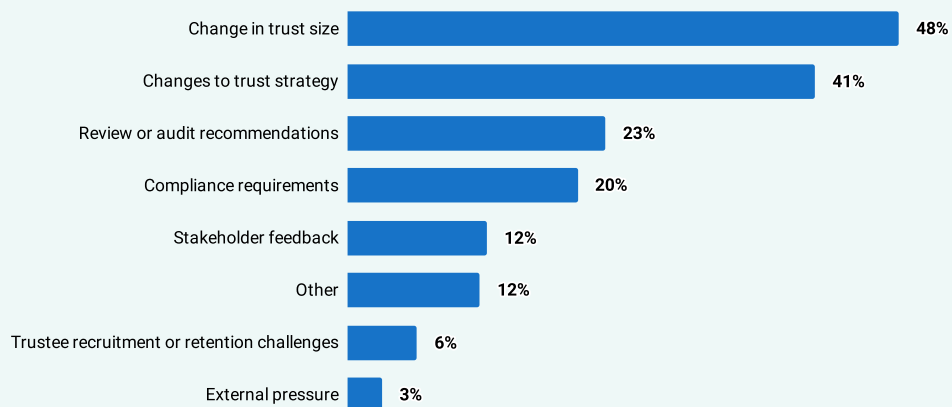
Do you plan to create a dedicated staff role to lead on governance in the next academic year?



Scheme of Delegation

Around half of CEOs (47%) report that they plan to change their scheme of delegation in the next academic year. Of those that report planning to change their scheme of delegation in the next academic year, they cite change in trust size and changes to trust strategy as their main reasons for doing so.

What factors have contributed to your plan to change the scheme of delegation?





CST Director of Trust Governance **Samira Sadeghi**

Strong, effective and strategic governance starts with a trust board and governance processes that are independent of the executive and supported by the expert advice of a governance professional, a role now required in trusts. It is, therefore, concerning that in many trusts the chief executive – whose performance trustees scrutinise and hold to account – is also the lead on governance.

On a more positive note, we have seen significant interest from trusts in the sector-led Academy Trust Governance Code, which sets out the highest governance standards. This is a recognition that good governance leads to better outcomes for everyone.

As a sector we are blessed that thousands of people are willing to volunteer their time to support schools at trust board and local levels, but we also know that recruiting to these roles is a perennial problem for many. It is interesting that more than half of CEOs support a right to paid time off work for trustees, and just under a third support paid allowances. These measures would help address some barriers to recruiting and diversifying governance volunteers, but they would also represent quite a shift from current practice.

Workforce Resilience and Wellbeing

Chapter Five



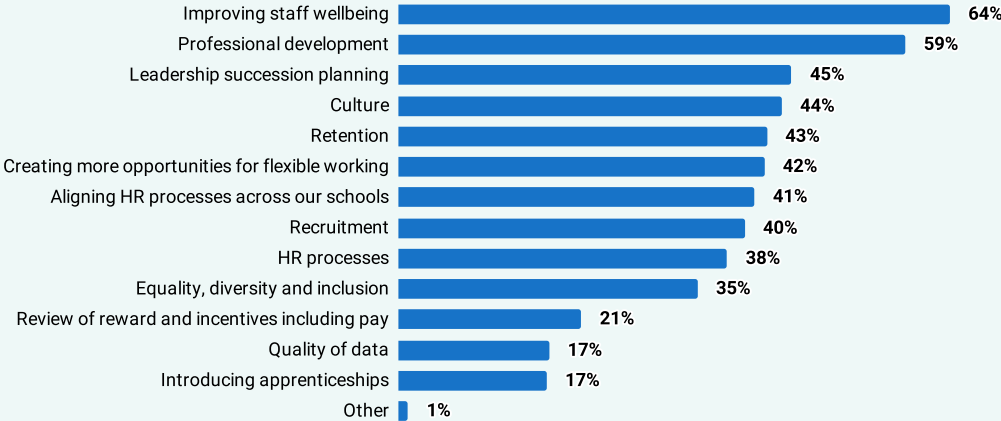
Workforce Resilience and Wellbeing

School trust staff - in and out of the classroom - are fundamental to a high-quality education. For children to flourish, the adults that support them must flourish too - but Edurio's wider research, based on staff feedback from over a hundred trusts, highlights a continued wave of staff retention and wellbeing challenges across England.

Priorities and Challenges

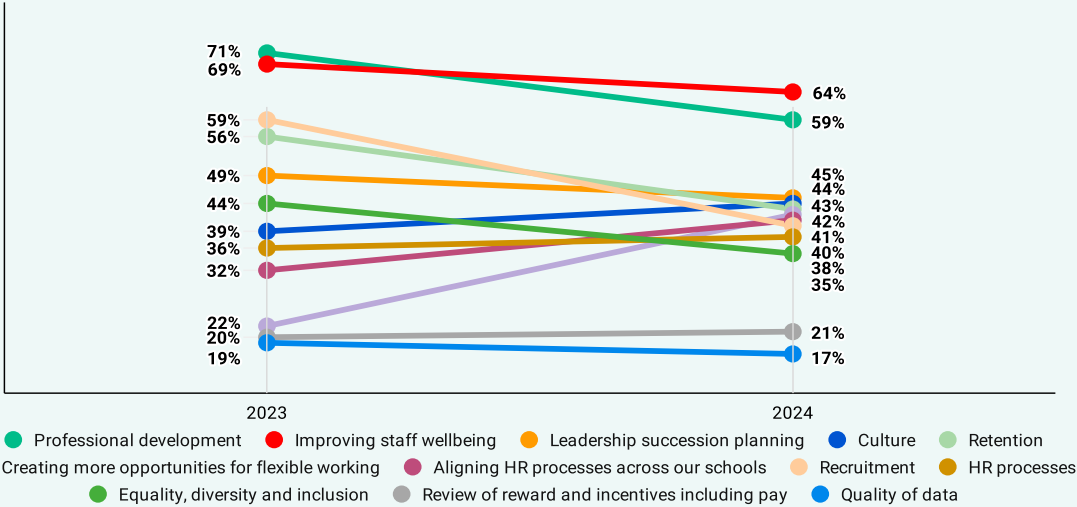
Within this survey's questions on workforce resilience and wellbeing, trust leaders were most likely to report that their trust is focussing its efforts on improving staff wellbeing, with 64% of trust leaders highlighting this as their trust's priority. Professional development is a close second, mentioned by 59% of trust leaders.

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



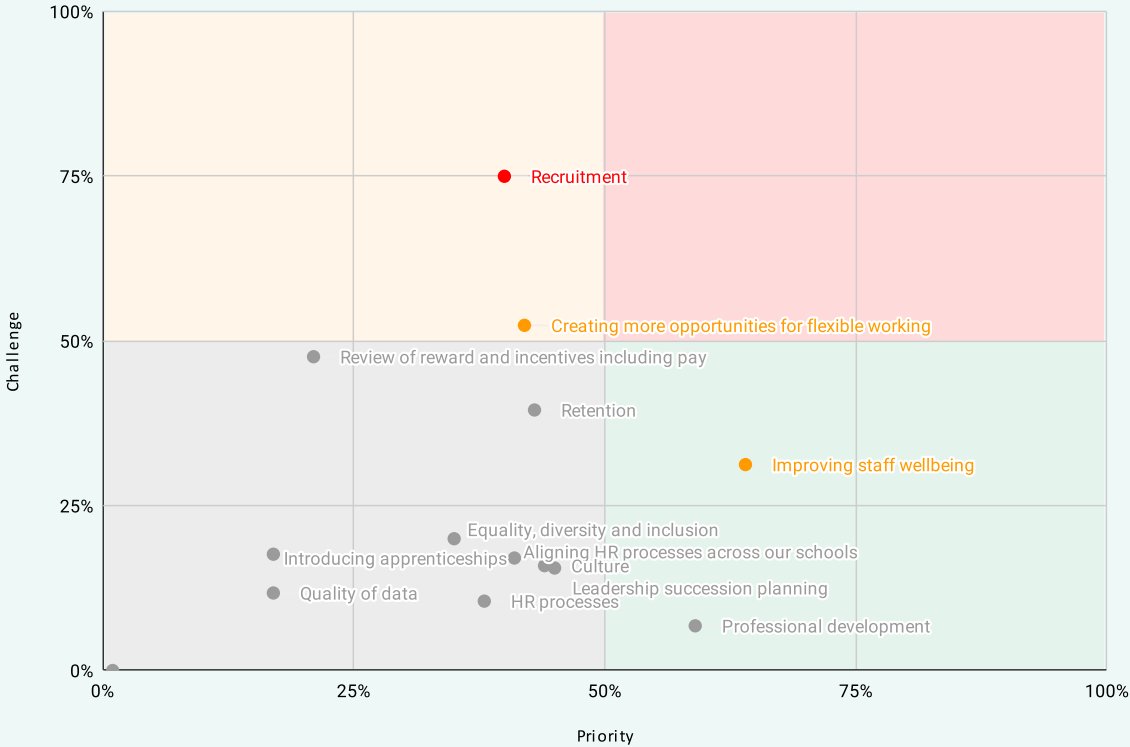
Compared to last year's survey, workforce-related priorities have shifted considerably. Staff wellbeing has replaced professional development as the top priority and for the first time retention is valued to be more of a priority than recruitment. There has been a notable increase this year in prioritising flexible working as well as culture. HR processes and their alignment across schools have also seen an increase in the trust priorities.

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



Recruitment is still seen as the most challenging issue by the trusts that selected it as a priority with three quarters listing it as a major challenge. Creating opportunities for flexible working has also been listed as a challenge by trust CEOs.

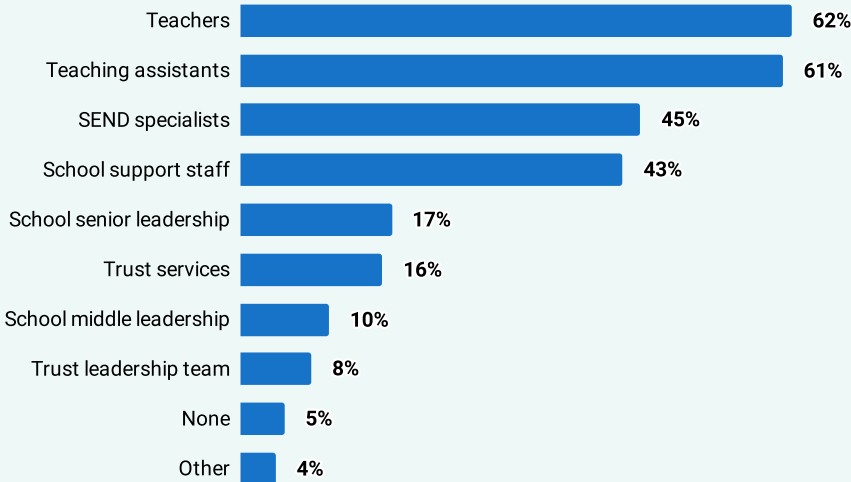
Most demanding priorities for workforce resilience and wellbeing in 2024/25



Recruitment

When we asked CEOs which roles their trust has struggled to fill vacancies in this academic year, 62% said teachers and 61% said teaching assistants. SEND specialists and support staff were also listed as one of the roles trusts struggled to fill vacancies for with 45% and 43% of respondents citing the roles.

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



People Strategy

Despite recruitment and retention being seen as priorities, around four in 10 trusts do not have a formal people strategy. This is a slight improvement on last year's results, where around half of trusts had one in place. However, the shift is lower than the share of trusts that had planned to implement a new strategy in 2023/4, suggesting the process is more challenging than envisaged.

Does your Trust have a formal people strategy?



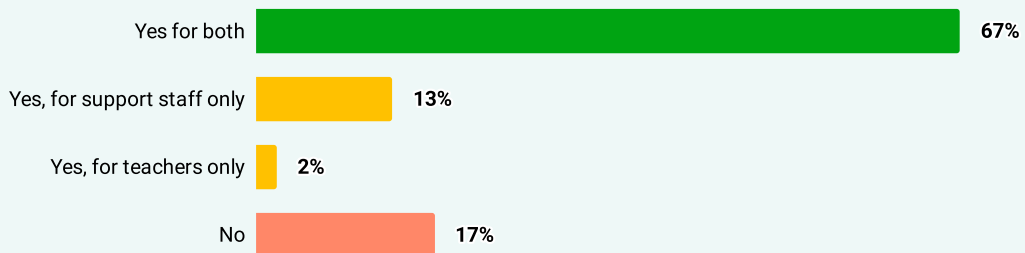
Having a clear policy and long-term strategy for staffing, including how staff might work across the trust, staff training, development, promotion, and succession, is an essential part of a strong trust.

It is evident from this year's data that improving staff wellbeing is a major priority for CEOs. Recruitment and retention continues to be a challenge with CEOs struggling to fill vacancies for teachers and teaching assistants in particular over the last year.

Flexible Working and Staff Wellbeing

The majority of CEOs (67%) report their trust is offering flexible working options for teachers and support staff. 17% of CEOs report their trust not having any options for flexible working for teachers or support staff such as remote working, term-time leave, flexible hours, or similar.

Does your trust offer flexible working options for teachers or support staff, such as remote working, term-time leave, flexible hours, or similar?



COMMENTS FROM TRUSTS

“Staff can request flexible working through our policy and most requests are granted. Often staff request for one year, protecting their substantive contract if they want to return to this. Working from home is possible for some staff but many roles are child facing and so this wouldn't be suitable for them. Some staff work flexible hours to suit changing situations in their family life.”

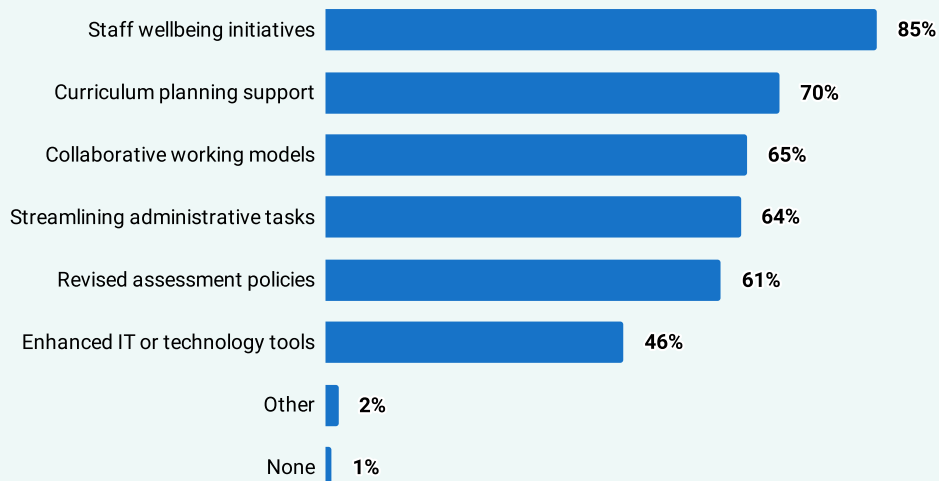
“We are rolling out more flexibility over the next year as fast as our school leaders will let us. Considering a trust wide agreement on PPA from home and well being days in term time. Already have our first job share Principal(s)”

“We offer all of the above as well as a programme of no questions asked 'personal days' linked to length of service in the trust - the longer staff have been in the trust, the more days they are entitled to.”

“Working from home is available and adopted by staff not pupil facing, flexible working is encouraged, as appropriate paid leave is provided to staff.”

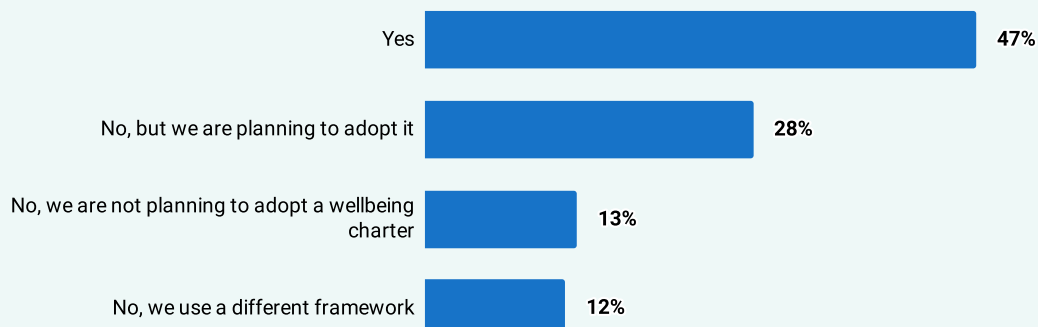
There has been renewed focus on school staff wellbeing in recent months. The survey found that 85% of trusts have implemented staff wellbeing initiatives to reduce teacher workload. 70% have implemented curriculum planning support to support teacher workload.

What initiatives has your trust implemented to reduce teacher workload?



Just under half of CEOs report that their trust has adopted the DfE's education staff wellbeing charter, and a further 28% of CEOs report that they are planning to adopt it. This highlights a desire amongst CEOs for guidance and unified policy on how best to support their staff with their wellbeing. This is reflected in the implementation of staff wellbeing initiatives as previously discussed.

Has your trust adopted the DfE's education staff wellbeing charter?





CST Director of Public Affairs and Policy **Sam Skerritt**

The pandemic shifted the nature of many jobs overnight, and many people's attitudes to their work life priorities. For what is often still a very traditional workplace this is a challenge for schools. However, the role of school trusts as employers is a key difference between academy and maintained schools, and trusts are increasingly looking at ways they can take the initiative and think creatively about how they work, with more than two thirds offering forms of flexible working.

There is more we need to do - around pay, diversity, and opportunity - to make working in education more attractive, but trusts are rising to the challenge.

Finance and Operations

Chapter Six



Finance and Operations

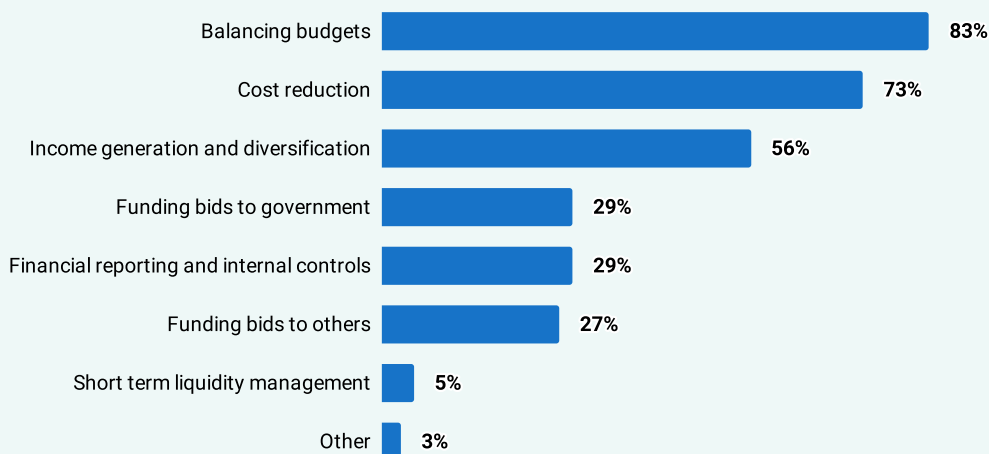
Trusts are often responsible for considerable sums of public funding, so efficient financial management and operations have always been an important consideration. This has been brought into even sharper focus in recent years by economic shocks like rapid inflation and pressure on pay. This is clearly seen in the survey results with CEOs identifying financial sustainability as their top priority for the first time in this survey's history.

This chapter explores financial and operational priorities for trusts, looking at areas of focus for the next academic year, trust reserves and their budget plans, and CEOs' priorities and concerns regarding the operational management of their trusts. It is divided into two parts, starting with a review of financial priorities and then looking at trust operations.

Finances: Priorities and challenges

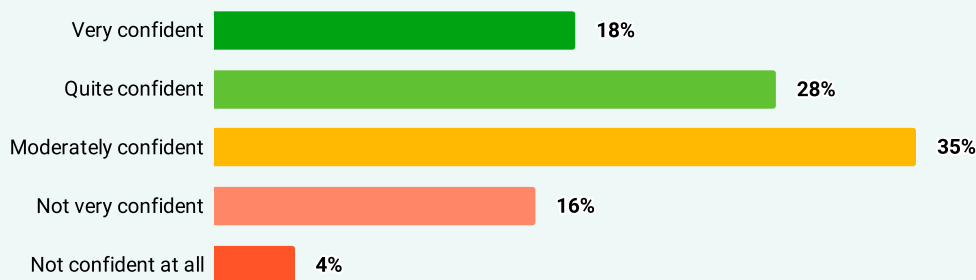
Unsurprisingly with financial pressures, 83% of CEOs reported balancing their budgets is a priority for their trust. 73% highlighted that their focus for the next academic year would also include cost reduction, and 56% suggested that they would be focusing on income generation and diversification. The top priorities are similar for trusts of all sizes.

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

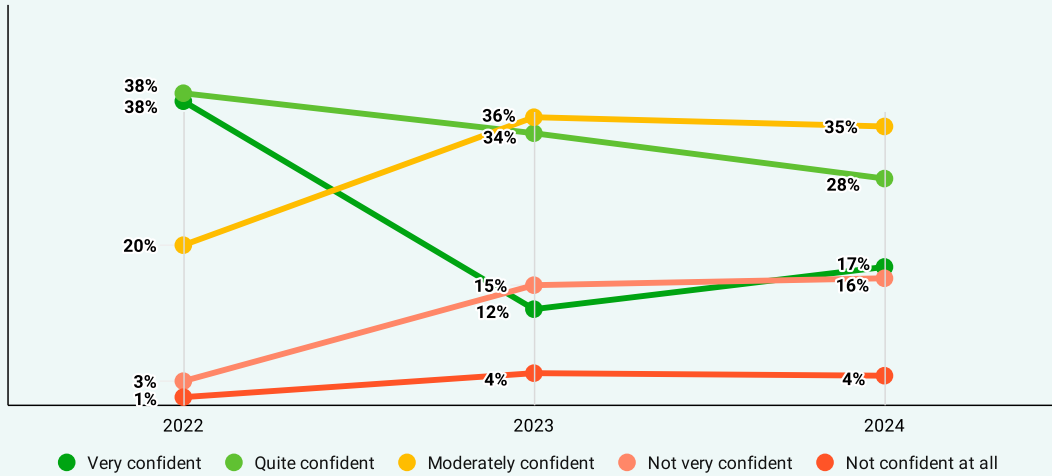


Less than half of trust CEOs surveyed feel confident about the financial sustainability of their trust. While the headline result is similar to last year's survey, CEOs' degree of confidence has slightly increased with more reporting being very confident rather than quite confident. This perhaps reflects more stability on issues like inflation rather than a relaxation of pressures - CEO comments on this question indicate that even those trusts that are confident are facing major financial challenges that will have an impact in the long run. Similar to last year, there are no major differences between trusts of various sizes.

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



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



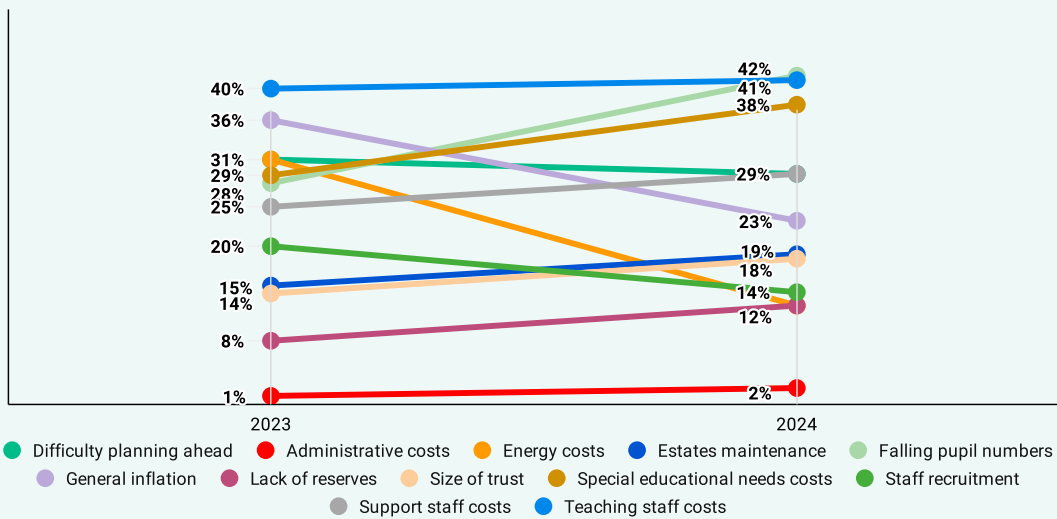
CEO COMMENTS

"We have a strong reserves position and robust financial management systems, but our schools are finding it increasingly difficult to set balanced budgets. Schools have cut to the bone, but many are still having to set deficit budgets"

"Confident in the next two years if nothing changes but huge problems by year three"

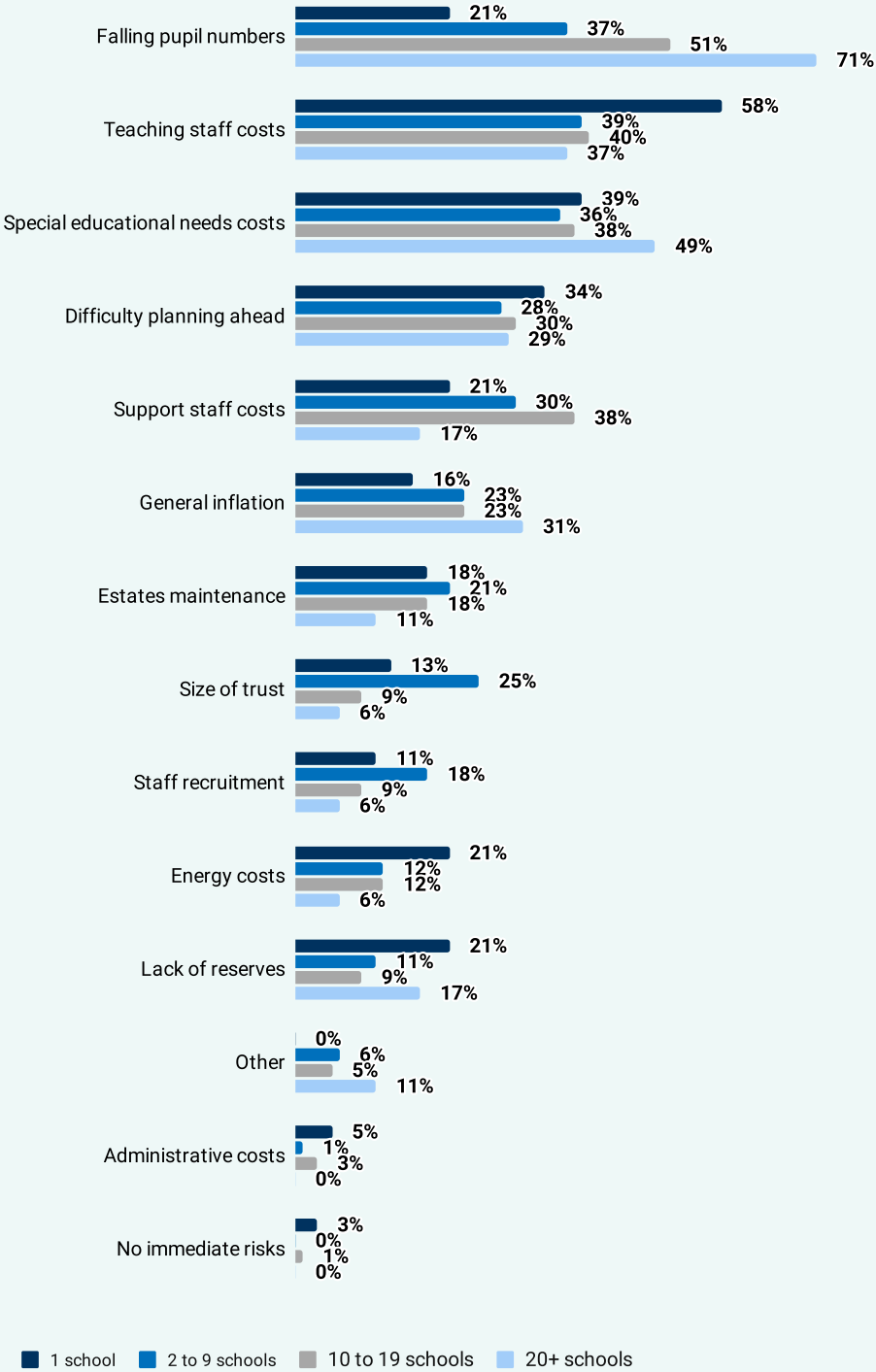
Looking at the changes in the risks to trust financial sustainability bears this out. While teaching staff costs are one of the top risks both this year and last year, this year there is less mention of risks caused by general inflation and energy costs, whereas SEND costs and falling pupil numbers are mentioned a lot more frequently by trust CEOs. Lack of reserves, despite being a relatively rare risk, were also mentioned much more frequently than last year.

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



Large trusts are particularly likely to see falling rolls as a major risk to their financial sustainability. In contrast, single academy trusts are far more likely to feel impacted by teaching staff costs. Interestingly, schools of between two and nine schools are more than twice as likely as others to see trust size as a risk factor, which may be linked with their bigger focus on growth as an overall priority.

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



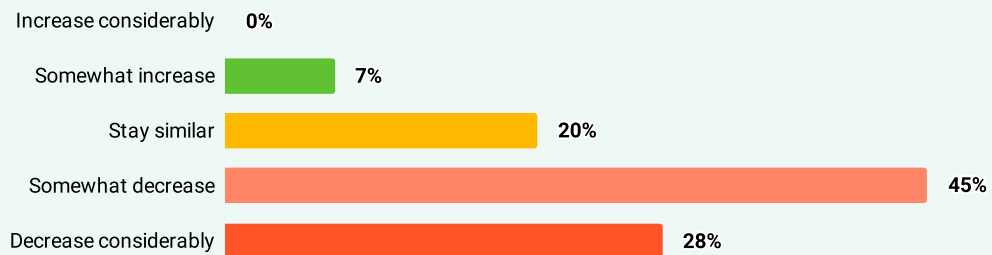
Budget and reserves

The majority of trusts say they currently have sufficient reserves. However, three-quarters of the trusts (73%) expect their reserves to reduce next year, and only 7% expect them to increase. This is consistent with several comments from respondents that their trust is financially sustainable right now but, if nothing changes, may not be in two to three years.

Does your trust have sufficient reserves in line with your reserves policy and financial risk assessments?



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



An important element of budget planning is understanding the external factors influencing the trust's budget. As trusts were working on their budgets for the next year during the completion of the survey, we asked them whether they had access to the information needed to set an accurate budget. Only one in five trusts (21%) said they had all the information needed, with half of trust CEOs saying they lack important information to set an accurate budget. Uncertainty has a major impact on the trusts' ability to lead their schools and set clear expectations so this is a major challenge for the sector.

Out of the respondents, who said they lack important information to set an accurate budget, 92% mentioned pay awards for teachers and support staff as important information they lacked to set an accurate budget.

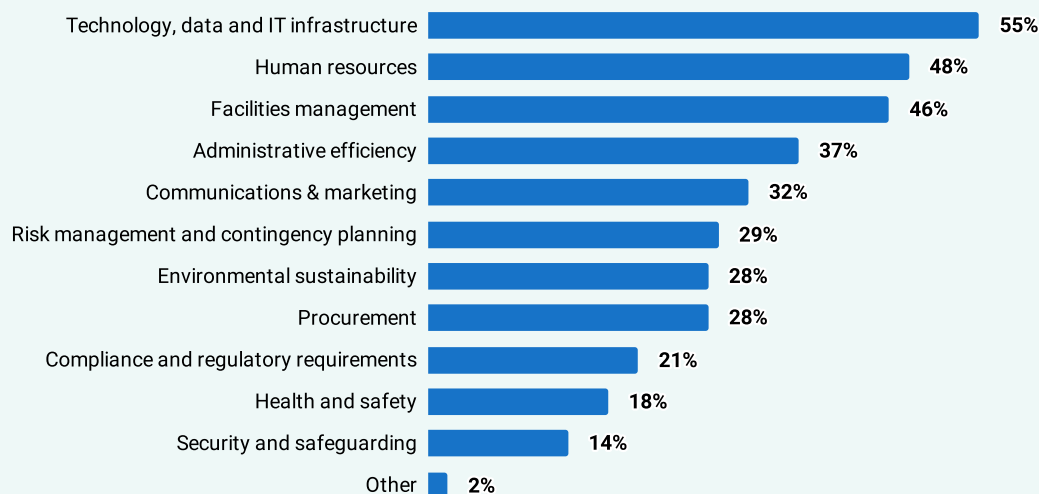
Have you had access to information needed to set an accurate budget for the next year?



Operations: Priorities and Challenges

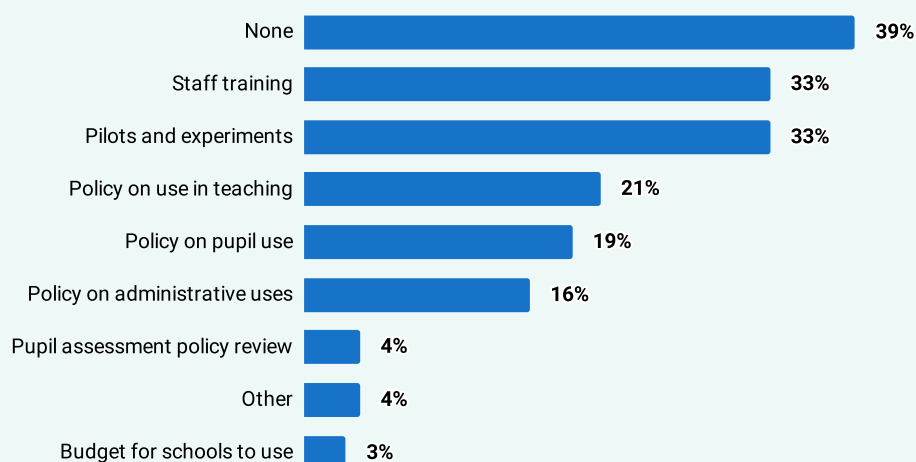
Looking at operational priorities in this year's survey, about half of trusts intend to focus their efforts on technology, data and IT infrastructure (58%), human resources (48%) and facilities management (46%). The top priorities are similar for trusts of all sizes.

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



With 55% of CEOs highlighting that they intend to focus on technology, data and IT infrastructure, it is interesting to explore how trusts have reacted to the recent developments in AI technology. About four out of 10 trusts (39%) haven't taken any action, while a third (33%) has run staff training and another third (33%) has run pilots and experiments. Trusts have also invested time in developing policies. Very few trusts have gone as far as to allocate budgets for schools to use or review pupil assessment policies.

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

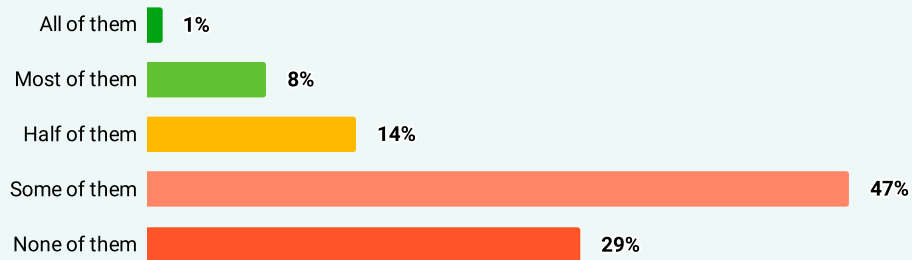


Buildings

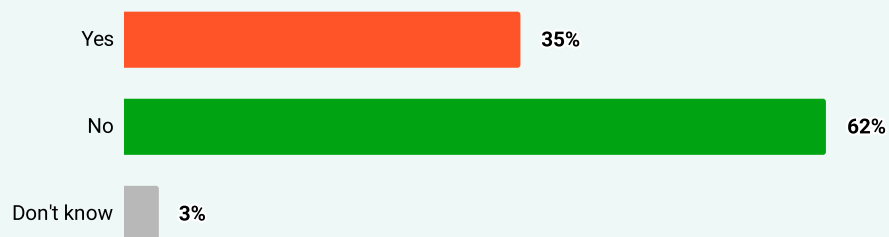
Issues with so-called "crumbly concrete" threw an intense focus on school buildings at the start of last academic year, but building maintenance issues go well beyond RAAC. Trust CEOs were asked to report whether they have buildings that have a "poor or bad condition". These terms reflect the DfE condition survey methodology.²

Only 29% of multi-academy trust CEOs reported that none of their schools have buildings that could be described as poor whereas 27% said that half or more of their schools have buildings that could be described as poor. 35% of CEOs of single school trusts also stated that their school buildings could be described as poor.

How many of your schools have buildings that could be described as poor (exhibiting major defects and/or not operating as intended)? - Asked to Trusts with multiple schools



Does your school have any buildings that could be described as poor (exhibiting major defects and/or not operating as intended)? - Asked to single school Trusts



In addition to this, 41% of CEOs reported that at least one of their school buildings could be described to be in a bad condition (life expired or at imminent risk of failure).

Could any of your school buildings be described to be in bad condition (life expired or at imminent risk of failure)?



² DfE Condition survey methodology was used with a focus on grades C (poor, exhibiting major defects and/or not operating as intended) and D (bad, life expired and/or serious risk of failure). <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/good-estate-management-for-schools/understanding-land-and-buildings#assessing-the-condition-of-your-estate>

Operating models

Trusts come in all shapes and sizes. Their approaches to delivering a high-quality education and ensuring staff wellbeing are also diverse across the system. While there are important elements of a strong trust that all trusts should aspire to meet, there are many different paths to get there and this diversity in approaches and cultures is a key element of our school system.

There are, however, trends we can observe across the sector and those can help us understand how the system is likely to develop in the future.

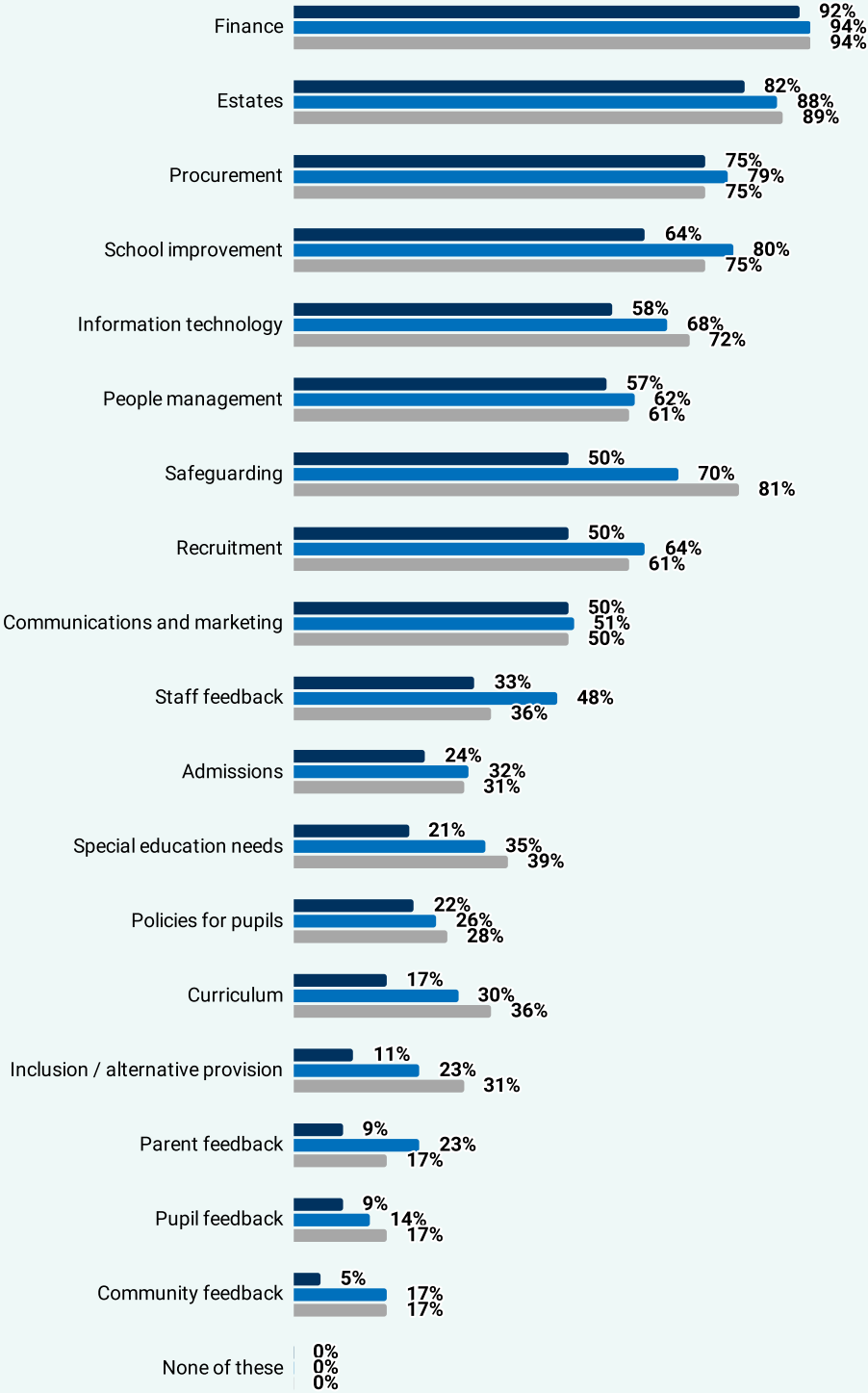
When looking at what areas trusts with multiple schools tend to direct centrally, we see that the operational elements dominate with finance, estates and procurement all managed centrally by above three quarters of trusts. About half of trusts primarily manage staffing and recruitment centrally. A minority of trusts take a central approach to pupil and community matters like curriculum, feedback, SEND and inclusion.

Which of the following areas does your trust primarily direct centrally?



Interestingly, when we look at trusts of different sizes, there isn't a major difference in how the operational elements of running a trust are managed. However, larger trusts are considerably more likely to take an interest in pupil matters centrally, including safeguarding, SEND, curriculum and inclusion and alternative provision.

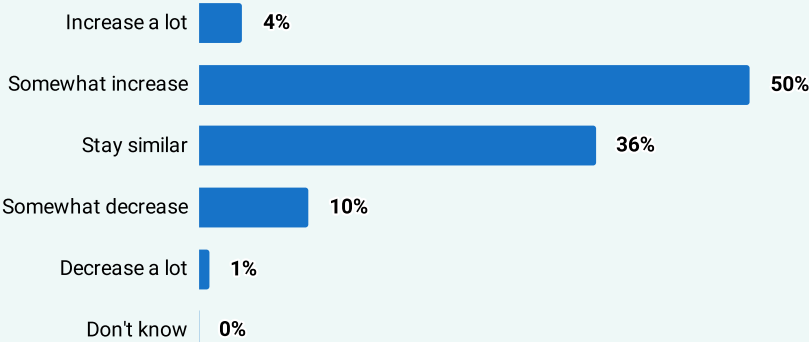
Which of the following areas does your trust primarily direct centrally?



■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

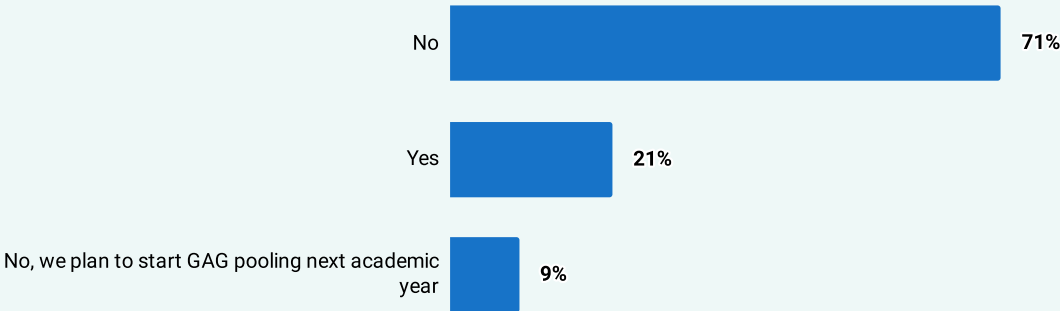
Trusts take a diverse approach to the composition of their central and shared teams. It is interesting to see that there is a general expectation most trusts have to grow their shared and central team. Over half of trusts (54%) are expecting the number of staff working across multiple schools to increase next year, with only 11% expecting it to decrease.

How do you expect the number of staff working across multiple schools to change over the next year?

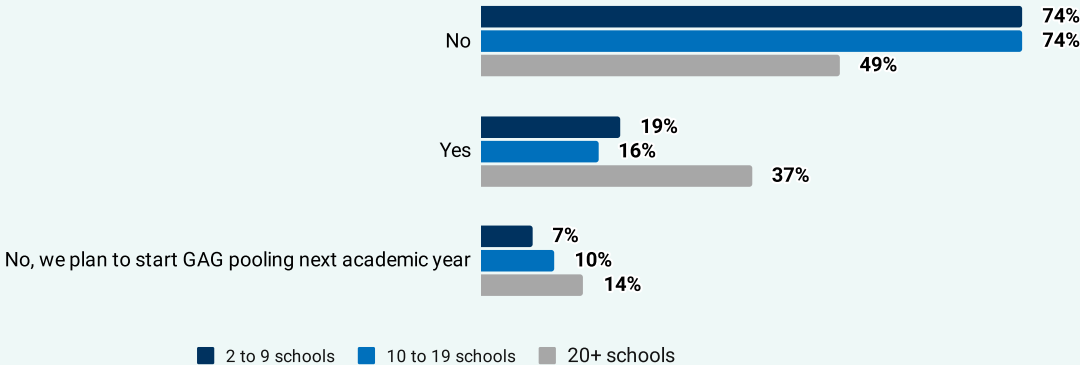


Finally, trust CEOs were asked if they were pooling their GAG. The picture is very similar to last year, with two out of 10 trusts (21%) pooling their GAG. Even though last year, 9% of trusts indicated they intend to start GAG pooling in the following year, that increase has not materialised this year. Large trusts (20+ schools) are more than twice as likely as small and medium trusts to pool their GAG, with 37% saying they already do it.

Does your trust pool its General Annual Grant (GAG) funding?



Does your trust pool its General Annual Grant (GAG) funding?





CST Director of Public Affairs and Policy **Sam Skerritt**

Schools trusts have become adept at finding new ways to become efficient, but it seems that has now been pushed to breaking point. While the economic waters have settled enough for trusts not to worry about an immediate capsize, relying on reserves to plug shortfalls is akin to a slow leak.

CST has called for a new approach to funding that looks at schools' real costs, provides multi-year settlements that allows trusts to plan ahead, and ends an addiction to competitive funding pots that waste effort and create perverse incentives. Nowhere is this failure more evident than in the approach to school buildings: many trusts face bidding for massively-oversubscribed funding pots for new boilers and roofs, and paying for short-term fixes when they really need long-term investment and improvement.

Public Benefit and Civic Duty

Chapter Seven



Public Benefit and Civic Duty

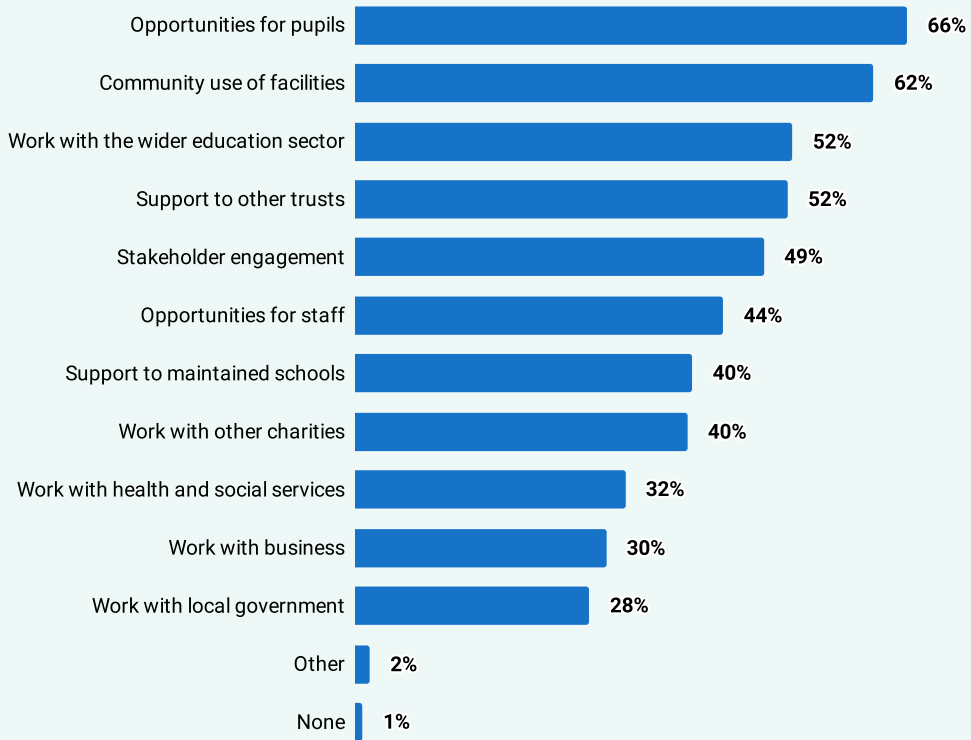
Schools and students thrive when their communities do too. For many trusts, their strategies feature civic leadership as an integral part of their long-term planning. This is an area of trust strategy that is growing in importance as the sector matures.

There are many examples within the sector of trusts harnessing the power of collaborative partnerships to maximise public benefit and civic duty. In this chapter we explore the perspectives of CEOs in relation to public benefit and civic duty and delve into trust priorities and challenges over the next academic year in this area specifically.

We asked CEOs which areas their trusts intend to focus their efforts regarding public benefit and civic duty in the next academic year. 66% of CEOs plan to focus their trust efforts on providing opportunities for pupils, with 62% of CEOs saying they plan to focus their efforts on improving community use of facilities.

Following these two areas, trusts' responses demonstrate a commitment to the wider sector, with more than half of CEOs stating that their trust is focusing efforts on working with the wider education sector and other trusts.

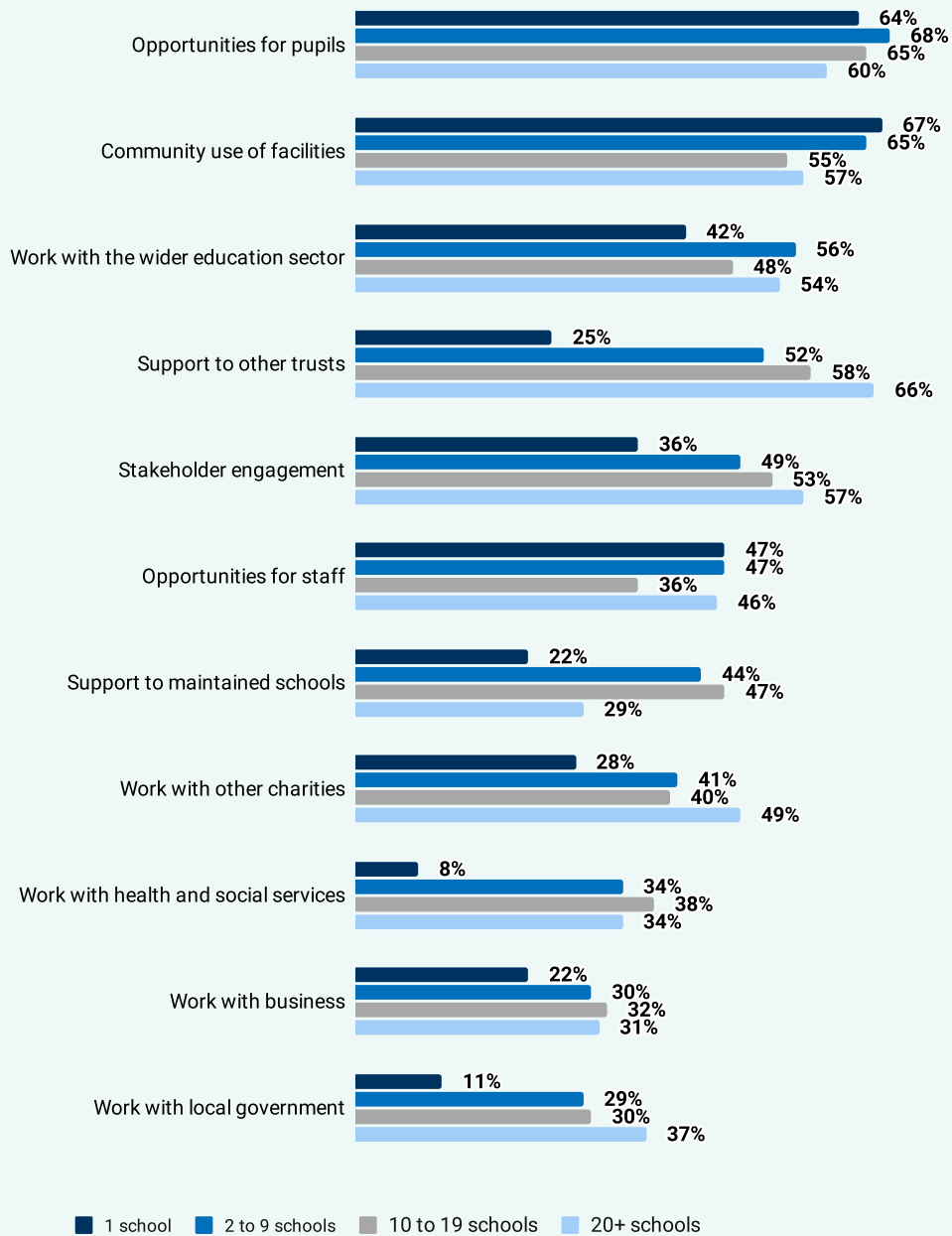
In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding public benefit and civic duty in the next academic year?



There is a slight difference in how civic impact tends to be viewed depending on trust size.

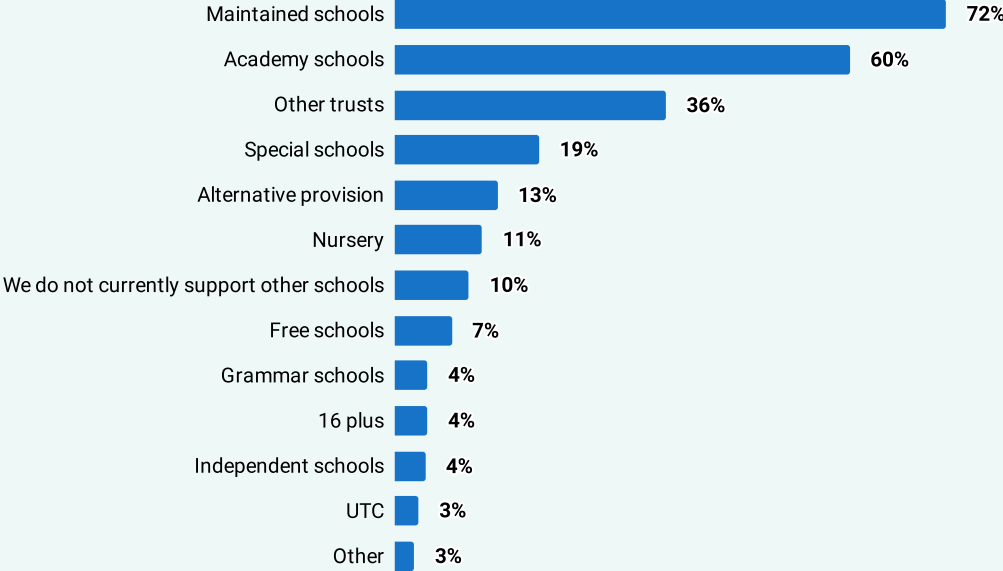
Larger trusts are able to spend more of their effort on providing external support to other trusts as well as work with other charities, local government and businesses. Smaller trusts are slightly more likely to focus on internally directed priorities like opportunities for pupils and staff and use of facilities. Stakeholder engagement is also an area where the ability to focus on it increases with the growing trust size and operational capacity.

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



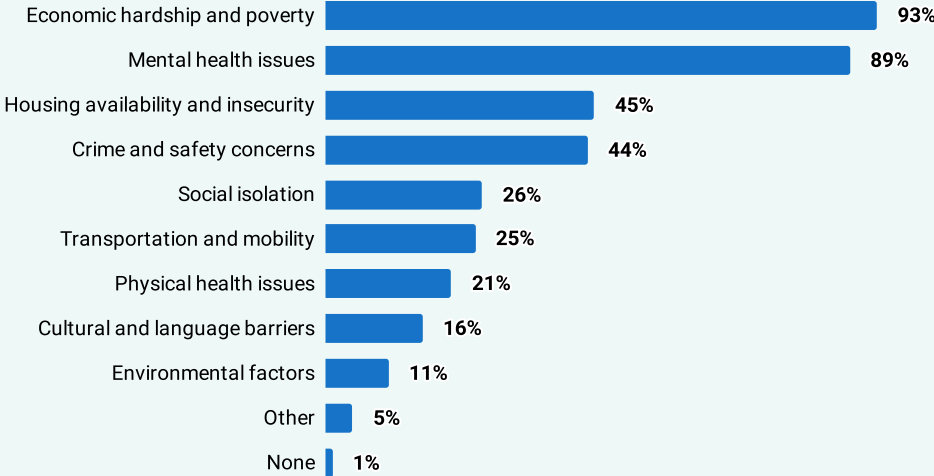
The survey results suggest that trusts are enthusiastic supporters of their wider education sector. 72% of CEOs highlighted that they support maintained schools, 60% said they support academy schools outside of their trust, and 36% support other trusts. These answers show a considerable increase in support to other organisations compared to 2023, with a particular increase in trusts supporting other trusts.

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



Trusts are frequently the cornerstone of their communities, and over the last years, we have heard many examples of schools and trusts taking up a broader social role beyond providing a good education. This work exists in the context of community needs and the pressures they face; schools and trusts cannot act alone. Nearly all CEOs say that their communities are influenced by economic hardship and poverty, as well as mental health issues. Additionally, about half of trust CEOs report housing issues and crime as important factors.

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



The outlook for the 2024/2025 academic year offers considerable challenges for the children, families and wider communities. Trusts find themselves at the centre of these communities and as public sector bodies, have a pivotal role to play in supporting their stakeholders and their wider communities.



CST Chief Executive **Leora Cruddas CBE**

School trusts are sometimes the last public institution left standing in their community, and pupils and parents look to us to support them in many ways. No one wants to walk away from a child in need, but to be truly effective we need to work in partnership with central and local government, with charities, and with business to support families. There are many models for this, and it is great to see trusts innovating and improving their communities.

This year saw school trusts become the operators of the majority of schools in England for the first time. This is in no small part to the enthusiasm with which trusts reach outside of their own organisations to support maintained schools and fellow trusts. There is a real feeling of solidarity within the sector - which should not be surprising given that coming together is at the heart of what being a trust is all about - but it is at odds with the way trusts are often portrayed by their detractors. Trust leaders should be proud of their professional generosity and their passion for helping children - all our children - succeed.

Conclusion

Reflections from Ernest Jenavs, CEO of Edurio

Conclusion



Ernest Jenavs

Chief Executive Officer, Edurio

With the school trust system now responsible for the majority of schools in England this report reflects the significant changes the sector has experienced over the past three years. The National School Trust Survey has quickly become a leading source of insights into the priorities and challenges faced by school trusts. This year's report not only provides valuable context for policy discussions and strategic planning but also offers a deeper exploration of how trusts operate than ever before.

Two major themes emerged from the analysis of this year's survey. First, the evolution of financial pressures on trusts stands out. While trust CEOs feel their trusts have generally managed to deal with the immediate financial pressures, this has often come at the expense of depleting trust reserves. This has resulted in a sharp decline in CEO confidence regarding the long-term financial sustainability of their trusts. We noticed the drop last year and it has not materially recovered this year. Furthermore, CEOs report that reserves are expected to continue shrinking next year. Trusts expect to grow in size, which may yield some financial efficiencies, but addressing these pressures is essential for the long-term viability of the system. It is worth noting that the survey was conducted before the Government's announcement of fully funding a significant teacher pay increase, a welcome relief for the sector. However, challenges remain, including falling rolls, ageing infrastructure, and the expanding scope of societal issues that trusts are now expected to address.

The second key observation concerns the growing prominence of SEND issues. In recent years, SEND has surged to the forefront of CEOs' concerns, becoming the top priority within delivering high-quality education. This is a highly complex area that involves considerations such as accurate diagnosis, the costs of individual support, place management, and collaboration with local authorities and other external organisations. Most trusts have either already established or are planning to introduce a trust-wide role dedicated to SEND responsibilities. Sector organisations, including the CST, are also prioritising SEND initiatives, such as the CST's SEND Professional Community, but more support is urgently needed.

Through it all, trust CEOs have demonstrated remarkable resilience and dedication to the sector. We are inspired by their constructive comments and examples of leading through the external challenges. Although this report is our most comprehensive to date, there is much more to learn from the insights shared by trust CEOs. Edurio and CST remain committed to bringing further insights to light throughout the year and continuing to advocate for the sector's needs as well as highlighting good practice.

We extend our gratitude to everyone who contributed their experiences to this report. As always, we welcome your feedback on any aspect of the report or anything that we should have covered but didn't. You can reach the authors at insights@edurio.com

About Edurio

Edurio is a leading provider of staff, pupil and parent feedback surveys for schools and multi-academy trusts. Currently serving over 150 trusts and 2,500 schools, Edurio empowers education leaders with the insights needed to improve educational outcomes and strengthen stakeholder engagement.

Through its platform, Edurio enables trusts to benchmark performance on critical areas such as staff wellbeing, work satisfaction, parental engagement and pupil experience. By clarifying these often overlooked aspects of school life, Edurio helps leaders implement data-informed strategies that positively impact their communities.

Surveys can be run as frequently as needed and are backed by an advanced management and data visualisation platform, allowing trusts and schools to gather and act on key insights with minimal effort.

With the Strategic Feedback Survey Cycle, Edurio guides integrating feedback into the school improvement journey, helping schools and trusts to:

- ✓ Strengthen relationships between leadership, staff and parents
- ✓ Simplify data analysis and boost response rates
- ✓ Identify areas for professional development and growth
- ✓ Celebrate achievements and highlight best practices
- ✓ Improve staff wellbeing and pupil outcomes

As a leader in education research, Edurio leverages one of the largest datasets in England to produce national insights and analysis, shaping key discussions in education policy. These insights can be explored here: [Edurio Resources](#).

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

About CST

The Confederation of School Trusts is the sector body and national membership organisation for school trusts in England, which now educate more than half of the nation's children.

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**