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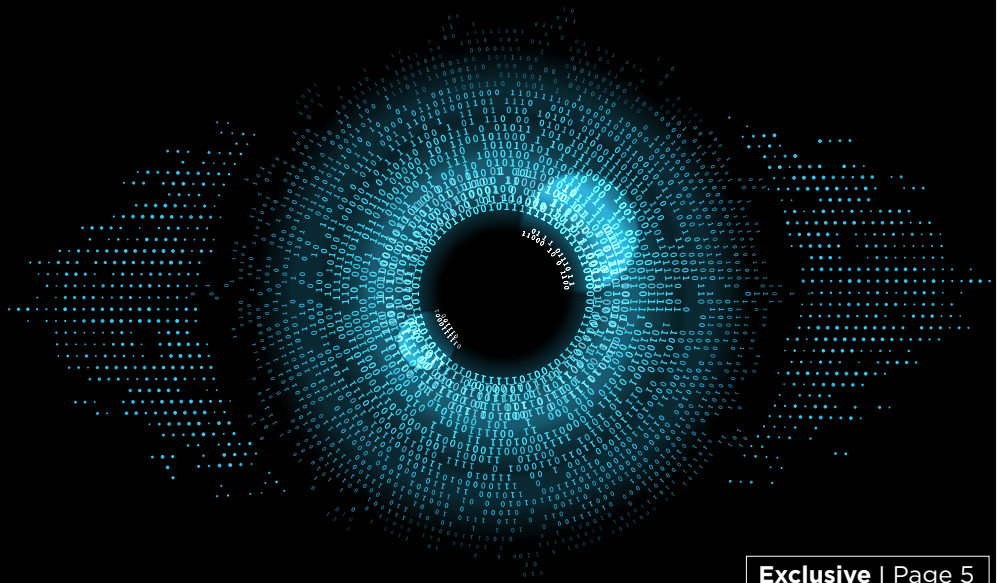
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- Cash-strapped schools say they 'cannot afford' proposals
- Comes as party that promised savings eyes council tax hike

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

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OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE,
SALARY DEPENDENT ON ROLE**

Reform UK's local election success has provided the populist party with a healthy reality check.

The party made bold promises on slashing "wasteful" spend – aping Elon Musk's 'DOGE' cost-cutting unit in the US.

But, now in charge of running 10 councils, the party has got to see just how starved local authorities are of cash, and that any substantial savings were made years ago.

These money-saving pledges appear to have evaporated into wishful thinking, with national newspapers reporting that Kent council is likely to raise council tax by five per cent – the maximum permitted – after admitting they are "down to the bare bones".

Our exclusive this week now reveals the council is also eyeing raids on school budgets to help fund services (see page 4).

As Kent council leader Linden Kemkaran said, the area is a "shop

window through which everybody is going to see what a Reform government might look like".

So holding them to account for their national promises at a local level is important.

Elsewhere this week, we cover a fascinating development in how schools are utilising AI – with one trust hoping to make good use of 'deepfake' technology to tackle workload (see page 5).

Meanwhile, primary school pupils handing out campaigning leaflets at the Labour party conference sent national newspapers into a spin last week – so what does the law say? We take a look on page 8.

And have a super long-read into SEND cluster funding – which many leaders see as a potential solution to fix the special needs system (pages 21 to 23). It's a must-read as the government gets closer to unveiling its much-anticipated SEND reforms.

Most read online this week:

- 1 Academy trust broke rules over payments to CEO's mum**
- 2 Breakfast clubs 'not financially viable', say heads as scheme expands**
- 3 DfE swings axe on teacher training bursaries after recruitment pick-up**
- 4 How morphology can help students avoid 'the Year 7 dip'**
- 5 'No real subject inspection left': Spielman slams Ofsted reforms**

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SCHOOLS WEEK | School leaders' most-read: Teacher Tapp survey in June of 607 headteachers on education media read in past month

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NEWS: FUNDING

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Reform-run Kent council plans £2m school budget raid

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Reform UK-run Kent council plans to raid £2 million from schools' already-squeezed budgets to pay for vital services it can no longer afford, sparking fears of more classroom cuts.

Leaders say the proposals fly in the face of Reform's pre-election pledges to identify efficiencies and savings through a pilot of its own Elon Musk-style DOGE unit.

The party also admitted this week it's likely to hike council tax charges for its residents.

National Education Union general secretary Daniel Kebede said: "They promised that they would reduce waste to make the council more efficient.

"Having failed to identify actual waste, they have resorted to charging schools for council services. This result will be more cuts to Kent's schools. The NEU doubts this is what voters expected of them".

Kent, England's biggest council, has long used council tax cash to cover several services available to its authority-maintained schools.

But documents published by the authority show it decided to launch a review of funding to ensure it "was not now inadvertently advantaging maintained schools over academies".

County hall officials noted it was "not providing this subsidy" to trust-run primaries and secondaries, which account for around half of its schools and teach two-thirds of its pupils.

The council is now proposing to increase the top slice it takes from its maintained schools by just over £2.2 million to pay for services which are currently subsidised.

These include statutory compliance testing, which includes asbestos management and fire and electrical safety, and health and safety advice.

Kent also wants to scrap in-house occupational health services, saving almost £345,000, with schools expected to buy in the support themselves.

But Kebede said Kent schools "have been hard hit by the last 15 years of austerity" and added NEU analysis shows four-fifths of its schools have the equivalent of £126 million less spending power now than in 2010.

Council papers show almost 60 per cent of



schools opposed the proposals to top slice budgets for statutory compliance testing and surveys.

Budgetary concerns and the view that "schools should commission" the services themselves were among the reasons critics gave.

Forty-eight per cent of schools supported the plan to buy in occupational health advice and support when they needed it, while 41 per cent opposed it. There was a higher proportion of schools that "disagreed or strongly disagreed" with the rest of the proposals.

Kent said opponents tended to fall into one of two camps.

Some argued leaders should be allowed to "buy what they need, rather than have a service imposed upon them", while others thought the authority must pay for the support itself as schools "cannot afford this top-slicing".

The council said many "do not have the budget, skills, or staff to self-manage these critical areas of service, particularly in the primary sector". An opt-in system, meanwhile, also "increases, rather than decreases, costs" for schools.

Academy consultant Lucia Glynn noted Kent's "difficulties are mirrored right across the country, [with] almost every local authority having to reduce services to schools".

But "while academies have freedom to go and choose from the marketplace, maintained schools don't have that. Some services provided by local authorities aren't of a good quality".

The proposals will have to be signed off by the county's schools forum next month, before its planned implementation in April. If members snub the plans the authority could

refer the matter to the education secretary.

Kent admitted last year that it could not afford to provide school improvement support. Instead, schools in the county must now pay for help – with specific support for struggling schools pulled altogether.

A Local Government Association spokesperson said the "financial challenges" faced by councils have forced some to cut services, while "understanding that schools also have significant budgetary pressures".

"This highlights why it is vital councils are adequately funded in the autumn budget so they can adequately meet their statutory duties for education."

Reform declined to comment.

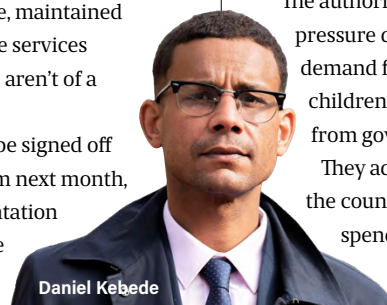
The party previously claimed its DOGE team, led by the party's policy chief Zia Yusuf, had identified over £24,000 had been spent on trampolining, bowling and cinema trips for asylum seekers.

Yusuf said at the time: "Reform will fight for taxpayers."

A Kent spokesperson said the changes "are not new" and reflect national policy changes that have "seen a progressive reduction in [council] budgets to provide services for schools ... mirroring academy sector practice".

The authority is "under significant financial pressure due to rising costs, increasing demand for services like adult and children's social care, and limited funding from government and local taxes".

They added: "To set a balanced budget, the council must make savings and focus spending on its top priorities."



Daniel Kebede

NEW: AI

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Teachers faking it with avatar catch-up lessons

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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EXCLUSIVE

Teachers will use “deepfake” technology to create AI avatars of themselves to deliver catch-up lessons for pupils who have missed school.

Staff at the Great Schools Trust will create the avatars – which look and sound just like them – using an AI video generator.

They will be used to set out content children have missed, for instance after being absent or suspended.

The videos will point children to catch-up resources on Google Classroom. Children can access the videos through their Chromebooks, which are handed out in year 7.

The academy trust insists the work will never replace teachers, but should cut workload around having to deliver catch-up interventions.

Teachers are “passionate about changing our communities for the better and leaving the world in a better place than we found it. Otherwise, what’s the point?” CEO Shane Ierston told Schools Week.

“We think the technology gives our staff agency and capability to do those things. It takes away the reasons why people leave.”

The trust, which runs eight schools in the north west, expects to roll the avatars out fully in the next 12 months, and intends to seek government or philanthropic funding to make the system available to other schools. But teachers won’t be forced to create one.

They also won’t be used for regular lessons, but will serve as a familiar video introduction to resources for children who have fallen behind.



An avatar created by King's Wavertree principal Benjamin Barker (see the story online [here](#) to watch the video)

Ierston described the avatar scheme as a “direction of travel, not to remove teachers, because I know that’s what unions will be worried about, but to augment and act as an adjunct in the classroom.

“To put time into the system that we wouldn’t have had otherwise, and to get rid of all this crazy practice of hours of intervention.”

Video-generating, or “deepfake” AI is controversial because of its ability to create likenesses of real people. School leaders have warned it is increasingly used to make malicious images of staff.

But Ierston said the trust had “taken software that’s got a bad reputation, and we’ve used it for the betterment of education and society”.

He said the “most pressure” when pupils returned from periods away from school was on the teacher having to bring them up to speed.

Staff may “try and do intervention after school. And that’s all bonkers, because it’s just more weight on the teacher. All this intervention time is draining.”

Absent pupils “miss their friends and they miss their favourite teachers. I think what it does is it creates a bridge. It creates a stepping stone to bring a child back into the teaching environment”.

Pupils will be able to submit questions in writing to the avatar, which can respond with pre-programmed answers.

But Katie Sharp, the trust’s director of education, said despite some parents post-Covid wanting more online lessons – this is not the plan.

“Students need to be mixing together and having that wider opportunity,” she said. “We’re not here to become an online school. That’s the opposite of what we do.”

... and trust plans AI for ALL marking

Great Schools Trust is also seeking to cut teacher workload by gradually replacing human marking of mock exams with AI, which it says is much faster and more accurate.

A trial will use AI to mark GCSE mocks, which the trust estimates could save some teachers up to 80 hours over the course of three sets of tests when fully rolled out.

Teachers have marked papers alongside the AI for the past three years so the trust can identify issues with the system.

From Christmas, however, some subjects in some of its schools will switch to 100 per cent AI

marking.

Papers are scanned in and converted to PDFs and uploaded to the trust’s own interface, “CredimusAI”.

Each page has a barcode unique to a pupil, whose name is removed by the trust. The papers are then fed into external AI assistant “Claude”.

AI can mark hundreds of papers simultaneously, taking around four minutes for the longest scripts. The AI can then generate lesson plan suggestions, gap reports and further exam questions.

The trust said the AI’s marking is more accurate. Benjamin Barker, principal of King’s Leadership

Academy, Wavertree, which is run by GST, said an initial trial in biology found the “AI was harshly marking the pupils by 15 per cent”.

But “when you went into all those questions where a teacher disagreed with the AI, the AI was right on about 13 out of 15 of those marks”.

“It was only when we went back and we realised that there was a bias,” Ierston added. “The staff were marking the children overly positively.”

He added AI was “not a gimmick – it’s a catalyst for our mission. Great schools are built by great people. AI gives them back time and energy to do what they do best: inspire, teach and lead”.

NEWS

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Disadvantaged pupils see drop in phonics results

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils meeting the “expected standard” in year 1 phonics screening tests fell this year, as overall progress since the pandemic flatlines.

Government data published on Thursday shows 67 per cent of disadvantaged pupils taking the test for the first time met the standard, compared with 68 per cent last year.

Overall, 80 per cent of pupils passed the test in year 1, the same as last year.

Achievement rates remain below pre-pandemic levels.

Phonics tests are taken in year 1, and those who fall short repeat the test in year 2.

The year 1 achievement rate was 82 per cent in 2018-19, falling to 75 per cent in 2021-22. This crept up to 79 per cent in 2022-23, then 80 per cent in 2023-24.



Gaps widen

Meanwhile, the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils has widened.

For years 1 and 2 combined, disadvantaged pupils are now 17 percentage points behind their better-off peers, up from 16 percentage points last year.

There was also a slight drop in the proportion of boys reaching the expected standard in year 1 (77 per cent to 76 per cent), while girls achieved 84 per cent.

The gap between London, which remains the

highest performing region, and the north east and north west, the lowest performing regions, widened by four percentage points.

Eighty-two per cent of London pupils met the expected standard this year, compared to 78 per cent in the north east and north west.

SEN pupils have also suffered a reduction in achievement rates, from 44 per cent last year to 43 per cent this year.

Summer-born pupils remain less likely to meet the government's benchmark. Seventy-three per cent of pupils born in August met the standard this year, compared to 86 per cent of those born in September.

Under its “school ready” pledge, Labour has promised to boost the proportion of reception pupils achieving a ‘good’ level of development to 75 per cent by 2028.

Last year, 67.7 per cent of children were judged to have a ‘good’ level of development across areas such as language, personal development, maths and literacy.

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EXPLAINER: POLITICS

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Kids' school dinner protest leaves a bad taste

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

A National Education Union stunt where primary school pupils handed out leaflets at the Labour Party conference drew criticism last week – but what does the law say? Schools Week investigates...

What happened?

Around 100 children from Liverpool primary schools gave out leaflets calling for free school meals to be expanded to all pupils at Labour's conference in the city.

The youngsters then handed a petition signed by more than 20,000 people to prime minister Sir Keir Starmer.

Right-leaning news outlets criticised the campaign, which was organised by the National Education Union.

GB News published a piece under the headline: "Trade union protest at Labour conference sparks outrage as CHILDREN from six schools brought along to campaign".

Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch said it was wrong for primary school children to "be used as a political football".

What do the rules say?

According to the Department for Education's *Working Together To Improve School Attendance* statutory guidance, schools should not allow an absence "for a pupil to take part in protest activity during school hours".

Political impartiality rules also state it would "not be appropriate for a teacher to suggest pupils join a certain campaigning group or engage in specific political activity, for example, an upcoming protest".

The NEU has argued the children were not protesting. But coverage of the event shows children shouting 'free school meals for all' and handing out leaflets to delegates.

A union spokesperson added the "leafleting event was an opportunity for the children to engage with the democratic system and meet with MPs as part of their learning". It "occupied a small fraction of the school day", they added.

The NEU also confirmed parental permission was granted for every pupil to attend, with the



schools "satisfied this trip was not a breach of protocol".

However, the schools involved, including Monksdown, Fazakerley, Liverpool Bank View and Holy Name primary schools, declined to comment when approached by Schools Week.

The DfE said that "guidance is clear, children should not be granted leave to attend protests during the school day", adding: "Protest attendance would normally count as unauthorised absence and would undermine the vital importance of attendance in raising standards for all pupils."

The department did not respond to questions about whether action had been taken against the schools involved.

What do lawyers say?

Legal experts agree the incident broke rules.

According to attendance guidance, absences can be granted in "exceptional circumstances" for educational activity. Examples of this given by the government include attending transition days at other schools or courses at a college.

But John Walker, a partner at PHP Law, said: "When you look through the [attendance] code, what else could it be, apart from unauthorised attendance?"

He added schools risked "not knowing where to draw the line" on what could be an educational activity if they argued attending a party-political conference was acceptable.

"That becomes really, really, difficult for any school to be able to assess that. Because then if there was a suggestion of some kind of Tommy Robinson weekday event, and a parent says, 'well actually, if going to the Labour Party conference is an education event, would that also be an education event?'"

Melissa Haskell, partner at Knights, said teachers were "well aware of what the requirements are" around not promoting partisan political views. She added: "By encouraging this, lines potentially get crossed."

Haskell said by attending a party conference – rather than a meeting with politicians from different parties – schools were allowing the children to be "inundated with all the information that the Labour Party Conference has to disseminate".

"Is it impartial? Is it balanced? I think the answer has to be no," she added.

The NEU claimed 37,938 children in Liverpool are growing up in poverty – six per cent above the national average.

A DfE spokesperson said: "Schools should teach children about national and global events and their impact, and children should be involved in civic and democratic engagement, but this must not compromise political impartiality or disrupt a child's education, as set out in our guidance."

Melissa Haskell

Cash for teacher trainees cut as recruitment picks up

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS
@LYDIACHSW

The government has swung the axe on teacher training incentives – and reduced funding for shortage subjects including maths and foreign languages.

Of the 13 subjects with bursaries available for trainees this year, four have been chopped completely while another five have had funding reduced.

Meanwhile, a £31,000 scholarship for top graduates to train in maths has been ditched altogether.

The cost cuts come despite the government's election pledge of boosting teacher numbers by 6,500 – and while recruitment has picked up this year, forecasts suggest the secondary recruitment target will still be missed.

The National Foundation for Educational Research estimated the cuts could result in trainee numbers dropping by 2,400 next year, which workforce lead Jack Worth described as “counterproductive”.

The music stops

Bursaries for those training to teach English, music, art and design, and religious education next year have been ditched.

For teachers training this academic year, each subject came with bursaries worth £10,000, except English which attracted £5,000.

English is one of just five subjects that over-recruited in 2024-25.

Elsewhere, bursaries of £26,000 for postgraduates training to teach biology and geography this academic year will be slashed to just £5,000 for 2026-27.

Biology overrecruited last year, while geography hit 92 per cent of its target.

Bursaries for those training to teach languages, both modern and ancient, and design technology are also being trimmed, from £26,000 to £20,000.

Recruitment for modern foreign languages achieved just 43 per cent of its recruitment target in 2024-25.

Chemistry, computing, maths and physics bursaries will remain at £29,000.

Maths scholarship cut

This academic year, £31,000 scholarships were also available for graduates with a 2:2 or higher, training in the shortage subjects of maths, chemistry, computing or physics.

DfE swings teacher training bursary axe

Subject	Bursary 2025-26 (£)	Bursary 2026-27 (£)	% change
Chemistry	29,000	29,000	0
Computing	29,000	29,000	0
Mathematics	29,000	29,000	0
Physics	29,000	29,000	0
Languages (French, German and Spanish)	26,000	20,000	23
Languages (all other, including ancient languages)	26,000	20,000	23
Biology	26,000	5,000	80
DT (including engineering and food tech)	26,000	20,000	23
Geography	26,000	5,000	80
Art and design	10,000	0	CUT
Music	10,000	0	CUT
RE	10,000	0	CUT
English	5,000	0	CUT

Source: Department for Education bursary and scholarship data

SCHOOLS WEEK

The Department of Education has now axed the maths scholarship after recording a 24 per cent annual increase in trainees in 2024-25 – but it still under-recruited, hitting just 73 per cent of its target.

Chemistry, computing and physics scholarships will remain at £31,000.

Scholarships of £28,000 previously available for those training to teach French, German and Spanish are being cut to £22,000.

Overall, the government achieved just 62 per cent of its postgraduate recruitment target for secondary subjects in 2024-25.

While this marked an improvement on the previous year, and data shows recruitment this year has picked up, a figure of around 85 per cent of the required secondary recruitment target is expected this year.

The DfE has also cut its targets for the 2026 academic year by almost 20 per cent amid “more favourable forecasts” for teacher retention.

Full recruitment data is due to be published in December.

‘Time to think in moral terms’

The DfE said the amount of money it provides for teacher training incentives “correlates with our teacher recruitment and retention pipeline. As there were an additional 2,300 in schools this year compared to last year, the incentives package reflects that”.

But Emma Hollis, chief executive of the National Association of School-based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT), said: “It is time for government to stop thinking purely in economic, transactional terms and start thinking in moral and ethical ones.

“We need a stronger message about the importance of teaching and its impact on the development of young people, as well as on society and growth.”

The DfE did point to grants of £29,000 for postgraduate teaching apprentices remaining in place for chemistry, computing, maths and physics. But biology and geography grants have been reduced from £17,000 to £5,000.

Reductions have also been made to grants for teaching apprenticeships in other subjects, such as languages.

Worth said it was “disappointing and confusing” to see training incentives cut, but he added falling secondary pupil numbers “on the horizon may be a factor”, as could “jobs market slowdown” which boosted trainee numbers this year.

But he added “that’s modest so far and could be short lived”.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said the government “is determined that we have more brilliant teachers, in more schools, improving the life chances of more young people”.

She added it had “already begun to move the dial, with more teachers in our schools this year than last, and big increases in people accepting teaching training places in subjects including chemistry, physics, and maths”.

“But there is more to do, and we need talented people with the passion and drive to inspire the next generation – working their magic, making school a place pupils want to be, boosting outcomes and transforming the lives of our young people.”



Emma Hollis

NEWS: OFSTED

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Outdated Ofsted rule 'inadequate' for looked-after children

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

Clarity is "urgently needed" over how councils should select schools for children in care, with government guidance still referring to headline Ofsted grades more than a year after they were scrapped.

Current statutory guidance for councils states "schools judged by Ofsted to be 'good' or 'outstanding' should be prioritised when seeking a place for looked-after children in need of a new school".

And "unless there are exceptional evidence-based reasons, looked-after children should never be placed in a school judged by Ofsted to be 'inadequate'".

However, headline Ofsted grades were scrapped by the government last September.

Since then, inspection reports detail grades only for the up to six sub-judgment categories.

But government guidance has not been updated to reflect the change.

Lynn Perry, chief executive of Barnardo's, said it was "important that, following reforms to Ofsted's grading system, virtual school heads are able to continue identifying high-quality local providers who can provide children in care with the high-quality education that they need and deserve. Clarity is urgently needed".

Liberal Democrat education spokesperson Munira Wilson said it was "unacceptable" the "crucial" guidance was out of date, accusing the government of "failing to keep up with its own policy changes".

She urged the schools minister to "give urgent clarity" so children "aren't hamstrung by bureaucratic failures".

Guidance states that virtual school heads, the council officials responsible for promoting the educational achievements of looked-after children, are "responsible for supporting social workers to ensure timely provision of a suitable education placement for looked-after children".

A spokesperson for the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) said: "In practice, local authorities and virtual school heads continue to make placement decisions based on



the spirit of the guidance – ensuring that every child in care attends a school that can best meet their needs."

While Ofsted judgements "have always been an important factor, placement decisions have never been based solely on the overall grade".

The association said it continued to "work closely" with the Department for Education to "shape future guidance".

But councils also called for clarity. Some said they were relying on historic headline grades, while others are adapting their approaches and using their judgment.

Hampshire said it had adapted by "reviewing full Ofsted inspection reports, focusing on subcategory ratings and narrative detail to assess school suitability".

It also avoided "placements in schools with serious concerns, even if no overall 'inadequate' grade is issued".

Kent said the "core principle" that looked-after children should not be placed in failing schools "remains unchanged".

"Where schools have been inspected under the new framework, KCC professionals will interrogate the full Ofsted reports to identify schools that are less likely to provide a high-quality education for looked-after children," it said.

To complicate matters further, from November schools are due to be judged across up to eight inspection areas under new report card reforms.

Norfolk said that under the new framework, where judgments indicate something 'needs

attention' or 'urgent improvement', "we will apply further scrutiny to ensure the setting can meet the child's needs".

Lancashire said it already used an "all-encompassing, holistic approach to placing looked-after children in schools.

"This includes consideration to Ofsted reports, a school's capacity, the views of the learner and carers where appropriate, as well as availability of SEND places and feedback from consultations."

Staffordshire said its policy was "currently under review".

Ofsted recently confirmed the reformed inspection framework that will come into effect next month. New inspection areas include inclusion, achievement and attendance and behaviour.

NAVSH said it welcomed "improvements Ofsted has made to its inspection framework, particularly the greater emphasis on inclusion and the experiences of all learners".

They were "especially pleased that the new framework explicitly references a school's support for looked-after children and children with a social worker".

It added: "NAVSH has long advocated for this change, as regulatory acknowledgement of these cohorts can positively influence practice and refocus school priorities on the children and young people we are tasked to support.

"Our shared priority remains ensuring that children in care access the highest quality education and stability in their schooling."

The DfE did not respond to a request for comment.



Lynn Perry

Academies pay fair by tackling CEO gender gap

JACK DYSON
@JACKYDYS

The academy trust CEO gender pay gap has more than halved after closing for the third year in a row, a study has found.

A Confederation of School Trusts (CST) report, released today, revealed chief executives take home an average of just under £150,000, with those at the top of the biggest MATs paid most.

The research – which analysed 126 academy chains – found CEO salaries had risen by 4 per cent – which outstripped increases handed to all other senior staff.

This comes after Schools Week’s annual CEO pay investigation revealed the wage gap between those running academy chains and their next-in-command had widened by up to £65,000. Our audit included 1,800 trusts, making it the largest-ever analysis.

CST boss Leora Cruddas said: “The evidence

is that trusts and their boards are taking their responsibilities seriously.”

CST’s report shows the “median basic salary for CEOs [has] increased by 4 per cent” to £149,790. Cruddas noted this was “in line” with the settlement for most teaching staff.

But she added their earnings are “below the top of the statutory pay range for maintained school leadership, which goes up to £153,490” in inner London.

This is “despite the wider responsibilities that frequently go with the [chief executive] role compared to that of a headteacher”.

On average, other senior trust staff were given rises of 3.4 per cent.

The median salaries of CEOs in the smallest trusts – those with up to five schools – is £137,352. Those in the largest MATs are paid £173,532.

The report also said women chief executives earned, on average, £5,087 less than men, down from £8,634 last year. The gap has fallen each year



since 2023, more than halving over the period to 3.4 per cent.

Unsurprisingly, London CEOs are paid the most (£164,851). Their earnings are “14.9 per cent higher than the median salary for the rest of the UK”.

Similar roles in the private sector are paid around £376,000. Meanwhile, CEOs of other public services and charities receive, on average, £161,865 and £147,621 respectively.

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Officials kept mum about probe as merger decided

A probe into the academy trust that paid nearly £5,000 in “consultancy services” to its CEO’s mum was kept under wraps while officials ruled on its merger.

The revelation has reopened the debate around the transparency of important academy decisions. These are made in behind-closed-doors regional advisory board meetings, attended only by senior government officials and school leaders.

The Department for Education stressed information about its “live investigations are confidential”, but education adviser and former trust CEO Frank Norris argued the decision to withhold the information about Heart Education Trust was a “mistake”.

He said: “I understand the desire to resolve these matters quickly, but just allowing time for the investigation to be completed would have allowed the regional board [to have] the full range of evidence.

“That would have meant the decision that was ultimately made in the longer term is more likely to be a securer decision.”

An investigation ‘outcome’ report, published earlier this month, revealed 29 breaches of academy rules had been uncovered at the Heart Education Trust last year.

The four-school MAT “entered into four related-party transactions totalling £4,747 with a former senior staff member without proper policies, contracts or adequate value for money assessments”.

The report said these weren’t disclosed in annual accounts or to the Education and Skills Funding Agency, as required.

Heart’s most recent accounts – for 2023-24 – show rules covering “related-party transactions were not adhered to in relation to transactions totalling £1,790”. The payments were made to the trust’s founding chief executive Christina Kenna for “consultancy services and other support”.

She is the mother of Hazel Cubbage, who succeeded her as Heart CEO in 2022. Cubbage did not provide a comment in relation to the government findings.

The report said that, alongside the

investigation, DfE’s “regions group led its own intervention with the trust”, which resulted in Heart’s schools transferring to the Unity Schools Partnership in September 2024.

The department’s advisory board for the east of England met in April the same year to discuss the move. DfE guidance states members, who are usually trust leaders, “help inform” government judgements but “are not decision makers”.

Notes from the meeting make no mention of the probe. Norris said it “looks as though some of this information has been withheld because of a desire to move things on quickly”.

The DfE said its “live investigations are confidential”. This is to “protect” the probe’s “integrity”, ensure “a fair and due process is followed and to protect individuals involved”.

It added: “Confidential matters would not be discussed in an open forum and would not be reported in notes publicly available. [Advisory board] notes are not intended to be minutes of the meeting.”



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Knives and assault should mean exclusion, says Trott

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

A legal “presumption” that pupils who bring knives to school or assault classmates or staff are permanently excluded would be introduced by the Tories, the shadow education secretary has said.

Laura Trott also outlined plans to make alternative provision “independent” of councils, enforce that all AP must be registered, and impose automatic absence fines for pupils who don’t show up to placements.

Trott told the Conservative Party conference in Manchester that the party’s “blueprint to improve discipline” would build on the “work of the last Conservative government”.

Speaking on Tuesday, she said it “starts with being honest about the need for permanent exclusions. We can’t shy away from setting clear boundaries for excluding pupils when they’ve been extremely violent or are carrying a knife.

“This is not about giving up on those children. It’s actually the opposite. Children must learn that actions have consequences. That’s just how the world works.”

Under a Conservative government, she said “our policy is simple, one knife and you are out. If you assault a teacher, then you are out. If you sexually assault someone, then you are out.

“If you’ve been expelled from not just one but two mainstream schools, then it’s clear that mainstream classrooms just aren’t for you.

“If children bring knives into the classroom, they shouldn’t be there. If they are violent,



then they shouldn’t be there. And under the Conservatives, they won’t be there.”

Current statutory guidance on exclusions states that the government “trusts headteachers to use their professional judgment based on the individual circumstances of the case when considering whether to exclude a pupil”.

However, the guidance includes examples of circumstances that “may warrant” exclusion, including assaults on staff and pupils or the use of weapons.

Trott said the policy would be “a presumption in favour of” permanent exclusion in those circumstances, which she said was aimed at “strengthening headteachers’ hands”.

She added she had heard “time and time again” about heads coming under “pressure not to exclude”, for example from local authorities.

The Conservatives have tabled an amendment to the government’s schools bill to attempt to introduce such a presumption.

The amendment would require pupils excluded for the reasons above to be “relocated to an environment that is more suitable to their challenging behaviour, such as a [pupil] referral unit or alternative provision or similar”.

During her speech, Trott heaped praise on “specialist alternative provision”. When done well, she added, “it’s a quality of education that can be tailored to their needs”.

She pledged to create “more high-quality places” to “reduce disruption for the many who suffer from it, and delivering specialist support for the few who need it”.

Every area should have such provision and girls should be educated separately to “violent young men”, she said. All AP would also be “independent of local authorities”.

It is not clear if she meant that the party would force council-run pupil referral units to become academies. As of January, there were 159 PRUs in England, compared to 121 AP academies.

Trott also added “we should make sure that every provider is registered so that every setting is inspected by Ofsted, so there is proper accountability and rigour, especially in those settings for some of the most disadvantaged and challenged children”.

A report by the children’s commissioner for England Dame Rachel de Souza found there were 24,325 children in unregistered AP in 2023.

The shadow education secretary also called for absence fines to be “issued automatically” for children who do not turn up to alternative provision to ensure “they’re not slipping out of sight and into criminality”.

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

Spielman: Ofsted has given up on curriculum

Ofsted reforms will “strip down inspection” and “take out everything that amounts to a serious review of what’s taught and how it’s taught”, a former chief inspector has warned.

Baroness Spielman told a fringe event at the Conservative Party conference that “there will no longer be any real subject inspection, which is a worrying place for us to be”.

Ofsted’s report card reforms will reduce the emphasis on curriculum that was ramped up during Spielman’s tenure between 2017 and 2024.

Subject-level deep dives have been scrapped,

and the inspectorate has also pared back its curriculum teams.

But Spielman, now a Tory peer, said “if the government is serious about curriculum” in key stage 2 and 3, “it would not be doing what it’s doing, to strip down inspection and take out everything that amounts to a serious review of what’s taught and how it’s taught”.

She added: “The residual bit of subject inspection is going to be essentially one quick look at the timetable and chat to the

senior team. It’s not real. There will no longer be any real subject inspection.”

Spielman seemed to support government plans to introduce a reading check for year 8 pupils, amid concerns poorer pupils fall behind in early secondary.

She also said an “obvious” way to cut down the volume of GCSE exams was to reintroduce the “school certificate” – awarded to pupils who achieved a pass in a certain group of subjects, including English and maths.



Baroness Spielman

Turing trips turned down for two thirds of schools

JACK DYSON
@JACKDYDS **EXCLUSIVE**

Two thirds of schools bidding for cash to send children on life-changing Turing Scheme trips overseas have been snubbed, data reveals.

In response, the Association of School and College Leaders union urged ministers to give schools a better deal and support them in “in closing the disadvantage gap” for poorer pupils.

But despite the programme receiving a record number of school applications, some school leaders admit they now avoid Turing due to its burdensome application process and the risk of receiving funding awards that mean some children miss out.

‘Appetite from schools’

Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di’Iasio said: “There is appetite from schools and sixth forms to engage in the programme, but not the commitment from government to support them.

“At a time when language entries are under threat, the opportunity to study abroad from an early age should be celebrated and encouraged. This data suggests it isn’t so.”

The flagship post-Brexit scheme, named after scientist Alan Turing, was launched five years ago to replace the EU’s Erasmus+ programme, with a new focus on social mobility.

The then education secretary Gavin Williamson allowed trips backed by the programme to be made outside the EU.

This year it was scaled back by almost £30 million, with the £64 million total funding pot representing a four-year low.

Department for Education data shows just 32 per cent (140) of school applications to the Turing Scheme this year were successful, down from 90 per cent 12 months ago.

This compares to 99 per cent (115) for universities and 51 per cent (140) for further education institutions.

‘Alarming’ drop

Schools also sent the fewest youngsters on Turing placements (5,071) and received the least funding through the programme (£7 million). Despite this, they handed the highest proportion of placements to disadvantaged



children (82 per cent).

Di’Iasio added that “in comparison to Erasmus+, the schools sector now appears to be receiving comparatively lower funding”. ASCL “would like this to change, and for the government to offer greater support for schools in closing the disadvantage gap”.

Ian Birbeck, of Projects Abroad, which advises leaders on applications, branded the drop in schools’ success rates “alarming”. He warned this could leave leaders lacking “the confidence to dedicate resources to the application process”.

Bosses of the Bellevue Place Education Trust in London decided against re-applying for Turing following a successful bid in 2023-24.

CEO Mark Greatrex said it was agreed they “couldn’t go through that all of the time”. One of the MAT’s heads spent his Easter break drawing up the bid and other members of staff had to help secure pupil passports.

Record applications

Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust CEO Paul Rickeard stated his 21-school chain had “never engaged with Turing because of the fear of not being able to involve all children”.

His “primary concern is the unintended consequence of a dual offer”.

Birbeck added there was “a perceived lack of transparency around why projects are rejected”, and said that this, along with a “low overall awareness of the scheme, must be urgently addressed”.

The DfE said it now wants to ensure “providers have the funding they need to deliver the placements they applied for”.

It explained this means for this year, “we decided to fund successful school and FE applications in full”, up to a limit of £300,000 for a group of schools.

Previously the department stretched the cash “across many providers”, which risked “not being able to deliver their intended placements”.

It also said a “record number of applications from schools” were received this time.

Turing’s future

Greatrex noted his 11-school trust originally wanted to send all its year 6 pupils on a cultural enrichment trip to Florence in Italy. But when it only won some of the money applied for it scaled the plan back to cover its four schools in the most deprived areas based on free school meals numbers.

“Ironically, the person who wrote the application, his school wasn’t selected. It was a shame,” Greatrex said.

No funding has been announced to continue the Turing Scheme next year. In May, skills minister Jacqui Smith said the government had begun negotiating to “work towards” rejoining Erasmus+.

The DfE said this would be “on much better financial terms for the UK” and details would be shared “in due course”.

More schools miss out on Turing cash

	2025-26 applications		2024-25 applications	
	Applications	Success rate	Applications	Success rate
Schools	431	32%	297	90%
Further education	277	51%	248	74%
Universities	116	99%	109	93%
Overall	824	48%	654	84%

Source: Department for Education

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NEWS: RECRUITMENT

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Trust offers degree pathway to create 'children's workforce'

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

An academy trust is to launch a "one of its kind" higher education institute for non-graduates working with children to train as teachers, social workers, counsellors and SEND specialists.

The Reach Foundation, the parent charity of Reach Schools, is launching the Centre for the Children's Workforce next September to provide "structural solutions" to workforce recruitment and retention issues.

Last year, the Reach Foundation said it wanted to upskill teaching assistants by giving them a route to becoming qualified teachers. It outlined plans for an accountancy-style training route.

But now the idea has taken on a "broader ambition" and it will offer training routes to roles including early years staff, pastoral workers, social workers, counsellors and SEND specialists.

These would be open to anybody already working with children, without a university degree.

Training will be delivered in partnership with multi-academy trusts across England, and Reach is in talks with the University of East London to be the degree validating partner.

'A whole workforce hiding in plain sight'

Sam Fitzpatrick from the Reach Foundation told *Schools Week*: "There is a whole workforce that is just hiding in plain sight. These people are already working with kids, they love kids, but their development is stymied, so this is about unleashing those people.

Ned Younger, managing director of the centre, added: "It's become more about the wider children's workforce.

"It's more about the potential value in people being able to work in different roles and different settings across the workforce. It's not going to be a failure if a teaching assistant starts this and then realises, they're better suited for social care or youth work".

In its announcement, the trust said the expansion represents a "generational bet on workforce reform" and "moves the conversation from retention gimmicks and funding tweaks to structural solutions".



The latest government data suggests retention and recruitment pressures may have eased slightly. Last year, vacancies fell by over 20 per cent, according to the Department for Education.

But the changes to Reach's programme do not reflect reduced concerns.

Younger said: "It's seeing the teacher recruitment and retention landscape as part of a wider workforce and wider issue. I think this will hopefully lead to more teachers, but it's more about the health of the whole, rather than focusing on one discipline."

How will it work?

Reach plans to take its first cohort in September 2026, with applications opening early next year.

It will be open to any non-graduate already in the workforce. Younger said this was important for these individuals' development, as it "opens up all these opportunities without leaving their job or leaving their communities".

Participants will complete a modular, two-year foundation degree alongside their jobs, with ongoing, practice-based assessments.

At the end of the 2 years, they will then be able to do a 'top-up' in their chosen specialism for a full BA, which could lead into a teaching qualification, or take them into another field.

Younger said it would be appealing "particularly for people who are early on in their



career and want to work with children, but don't know exactly what they want to do.

"[They] probably don't know what roles are available to work with children, what kind of qualifications are necessary".

Training will be hosted at a regional level by multi-academy trusts. Reach is in conversation with multiple trusts.

Next year's cohort will have a "national footprint, but not at scale," Younger said. Last year, Reach indicated it would have to take on 400 TAs to make the scheme financially viable. Now, the foundation says it wants to build up to that number in the next five years.

The Brigshaw Learning Partnership is the first trust announced to take part in the scheme.

CEO Aidan Sadgrove said it will provide an "opportunity not only to develop our own staff, but to contribute to the strength of services across our communities".

Reach is still exploring how the new non-graduate teaching apprenticeship might fit into the plans, as reported last year.

NEWS: OFSTED

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ASCL joins Ofsted preparation 'cottage industry' it once criticised

JOHN DICKENS

@JOHNDICKENSSW

EXCLUSIVE

A union which criticised an “unhelpful cottage industry around preparing for inspections” is running its own webinars to help leaders prepare for report card visits – at nearly £150 a school.

In a policy paper published in 2023, the Association of School and College Leaders called on Ofsted to publish inspector training materials to “dispel myths about what Ofsted wants and reduce the unhelpful cottage industry which has grown up”.

The watchdog now publishes training materials on its Ofsted Academy website, and is running free webinars for the sector on its new report cards, due to be introduced next month.

But ASCL said schools are still clamouring for more information on how report cards will work, caused by the short timeline between final plans being revealed last month and the restart of inspections in November.

The union is now advertising its own webinars with “analysis, recommendations and support” on the inspections.

One session will cover “the type of evidence that inspectors will look for to make judgements and will suggest a possible self-evaluation method to aid leaders in their preparation”.

The cost for five sessions is £120 plus VAT per school or organisation.

When asked about the ASCL webinar, an Ofsted spokesperson said: “We strongly discourage schools spending their limited resources on training materials that purport to prepare them for inspection.

“Ofsted recently hosted a series of free webinars for every different kind of education provider, where we explained first-hand what they can expect from the new approach to inspection.

“Many thousands of education professionals attended, and we are uploading all of the recordings onto our YouTube channel, where they can be watched back any time – for free.”

But Pepe Di'Iasio, ASCL's general secretary, said Ofsted's “determination to rush through



Pepe Di'Iasio

the implementation of a significantly changed inspection system has given schools and colleges little time to prepare for a new set of high-stakes hurdles”.

He added: “We have already endeavoured to meet this need by providing information and answering questions about the new framework through our regular communication channels. This is, of course, provided without charge as part of our normal service to our members.

“It is clear that some schools and colleges are seeking a more extensive programme of practical support and as a trusted source of high-quality professional development provision we felt that it was right for us to make that available through our Ofsted webinar series.”

The union charges annual membership fees from £258 for business managers up to £486 for executive heads or CEOs.

Di'Iasio said the “substantial programme” works out at £24 per session and is recorded so it can be shared. “We think this delivers good value and provides a cost-effective option,” he added.

Ofsted has long complained about consultants selling

schools training on inspections.

In a 2018 blog titled ‘The myth of Ofsted consultants: do not buy the snake oil’, former national director for education Sean Harford said the “lucrative industry that sells schools consultation into ‘what Ofsted wants’ and ‘preparation for Ofsted’ seems to thrive”.

“Please, do not hand your silver to these Mystic Megs,” he added.

Under reforms following the death of headteacher Ruth Perry, the Ofsted Academy was set up to publish materials relating to inspector training.

The watchdog said this would “open up Ofsted to those we inspect, and pass on what we know”.

“We will become increasingly transparent about what we do by sharing our training in context and making our processes visible,” Ofsted stated on its website.

Despite this, schools were still contacted by consultants looking to sell training around new report card inspections earlier this year – even before final plans were published.

Speaking to TES about the issue in March, Di'Iasio said this practice was “a sign of just how high-stakes the inspection system is”.

The union said it continued to “call on Ofsted and the government to rethink the five-point grading scale and timetable for implementation as we are deeply concerned about the pressure this places on leaders and their staff with detrimental consequences for their wellbeing”.



Sean Harford



Actual Mystic Meg

NEWS: COVID

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'Too late to stop Covid algorithm grades', inquiry told

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

Gavin Williamson said it was "too late to do anything" after a trust CEO raised grave concerns over plans to award algorithm-based grades during the first year of Covid.

Sir Jon Coles, CEO of United Learning and former Department for Education director of education, also told the Covid inquiry he feared advice from school leaders to the then education secretary Williamson's team was "going into a black hole".

He criticised government departments for an "extraordinary story of buck passing", and wrote to officials in May 2020 to warn: "I think the department is in danger of losing friends".

Also giving evidence this week was Matthew Coffey, from Ofsted, who said the inspectorate had no advance notice of the first school closures and was not called upon for advice in the early stages of the pandemic, despite "having a huge amount of experience at my disposal".

'Slow-motion car crash'

Coles, who oversaw United Learning's 87 schools during the pandemic, described the government's use of an algorithm on past school performance to moderate teacher-awarded grades as a "slow-motion car crash".

He said: "I feel strongly that there wasn't sufficient thought given to the starting point of, what is the fairest thing we can do for young people? How do we avoid, in this very difficult situation – not of their making – detriment to our young people?"

"That wasn't the starting point. The starting point was, how do we avoid grade inflation?"

Coles met with various figures at Ofqual and the DfE between March and July 2020, where he consistently raised concerns, he told the inquiry.

During a meeting with Williamson in July, Coles said Williamson "appeared to recognise what I was saying was correct".

But an internal email from a special advisor summarising the meeting said Williamson concluded "there wasn't an immediately obvious and logical route



Sir Jon Coles



Gavin Williamson

that avoids all the problems here – that there likely would be winners and losers, and that what he wants is to have a system that is as fair as possible, arising from a less-than-perfect situation".

Coles said he disagreed with this assessment, and that Williamson said "I think you might be right, Jon, but it's too late to do anything about it".

Williamson will be questioned by the inquiry at a later date.

'Extraordinary buck passing'

Coles made further criticism of the DfE's interaction with a Covid recovery board of trust and school leaders.

He said while the board met frequently to draft advice on potential government policies – including preparations to reopen schools in July 2020 – it was "thrown away" due to "presumably some changed scientific advice".

This led Coles to write to the DfE in May, where he said: "I've never heard the leaders of the large trusts so concerned and so negative as they were at the meeting earlier this week. I think the department is in danger of losing friends and needs to take some care of the communication at this."

He told the inquiry it was

"frustrating to be on something called an advisory group and for

it to feel as though your advice is going into a black hole, and influencing nothing, and poor decisions are being made".

Coles said civil servants, Ofqual leaders and ministers had a "real lack of leadership", adding: "There was not a sense of 'we are going to get this right, for young people, come what may'".

"Even in the statements that I've read on behalf of the department, on behalf of politicians, on behalf of the chief regulator – it's an extraordinary story of buck passing."

Ofsted not alerted to school closures

Coffey, chief operating officer of Ofsted, said the watchdog was not briefed about schools being closed in advance to the news being made public.

He claimed that although he had "a huge amount of experience at my disposal", the DfE did not seek advice from Ofsted in the early decision-making stages.

The inquiry heard last week the DfE only had one day to prepare for school closures.

Coffey also said the government considered using the army to distribute laptops for pupils learning at home, but decided against it.

And he also reflected similar concerns to Baroness Anne Longfield about poor communication of the government's vulnerable children policy.

Inspectors reported "conflicting messages" from schools, government and public health England which led to families "taking the line of least resistance, which was not to attend".

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

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Movers & Shakers

Your fortnightly guide to who's new and who's leaving



Mark Cocker

CEO at Education Partnership Trust (EPT)

Start date: September

Former role: Deputy CEO, EPT

Interesting fact: Mark competed in Olympic wrestling for Great Britain at the European and world championships, and the Commonwealth Games in 2010.



Rachel Hames

Education outreach manager at the Chartered Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors (CICES)

Start date: September

Former role: Teacher, Craggside Church of England Primary School, Northumberland

Interesting fact: During the Covid pandemic, Rachel acquired a love of Lego and has built a sizeable collection. She now runs a small Lego business, sharing her passion with other likeminded enthusiasts.



Ben Dunne

Director of early years, education and skills at Bury Council

Start date: September

Former role: Assistant director of school improvement and pupil progression at Islington Council

Interesting fact: Ben worked as a tree logger when travelling in Australia a lifetime ago. The hardest challenge was disguising his arachnophobia to unforgiving workmates every time a hand-sized Huntsman spider crawled up his arm.

Matt Hood to lead new health reforms 'delivery unit'

FEATURED

The founder of Oak National Academy will lead a new "delivery unit" for the Department of Health and Social Care tasked with cutting hospital wait times and improving access to GPs.

Matt Hood has been appointed as senior adviser to health secretary Wes Streeting, *Schools Week* revealed this week.

He will lead a new 'delivery unit' at the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), tasked with "tracking and challenging" delivery of key NHS targets such as bringing down hospital waiting times and improving access to GPs.

A previous job advert for a director role of the delivery unit described it as bringing a "laser-like focus on delivering the reform needed to drive improvement generally across health and care and specifically on the three things that surveys show matter most to the public".

It said the small team would include a mix of internal and external recruits, including

those with knowledge of the health system but also "expertise on delivering strategic and cultural change and policy development and delivery".

Hood has been appointed as a direct ministerial appointment – meaning his role will sit within the secretary of state's office. He started the role, which is paid, last month.

DHSC said Streeting had "made clear his plan for delivery during a period of reform and transformation of the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England".

It added: "Matt will work with the department's delivery unit to help ensure the Government and department deliver on its commitments, coordinate across the health and care system and provide advice on emerging challenges."

Hood, whose background is working in education,

was approached for comment. The DHSC said he had held "senior roles in public service delivery and brings direct experience of leading organisations during periods of significant change".

Hood stood down from Oak, a government curriculum quango, earlier this year.

It is understood he has stepped away from other education positions too, including Ofsted's curriculum reference group.

Hood's husband, Josh MacAlister, was appointed children's minister in September.

Since leaving Oak and prior to his new job, Hood worked with a charity to implement academy reforms in Australia.

Prior to Oak, he was chief education officer at teacher training provider Ambition Institute and was an assistant headteacher in Morecambe, after training with Teach First.

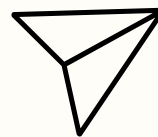
Hood was awarded an OBE for services to education in 2020.



Please let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing news@schoolsweek.co.uk

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OUR READERS' RESPONSES TO THE WEEK'S NEWS AND VIEWS



Letter of the week



June Stevenson's article was a useful reminder that schools and parents are not as divided as sensationalised headlines about 'dreadful parents' make out. (['Dreadful parents': What do teachers really think?](#), 30 September)

Such headlines do highlight a problem though: our false association of 'bad parents' with 'bad people'.

Modern economic realities mean that few people have the knowledge and time required to do the vital job of raising children.

And like anyone doing their job under too much pressure, parents are less likely to acknowledge they need support and more likely to become defensive at the idea that they do.

But the truth is that no one has parenting skills magically bestowed upon them. As a society, we assume they will be passed on from generation to generation, and we are constantly surprised when they aren't.

In the meantime, the problem grows and schools are increasingly picking up the pieces. Success is patchy, because children's

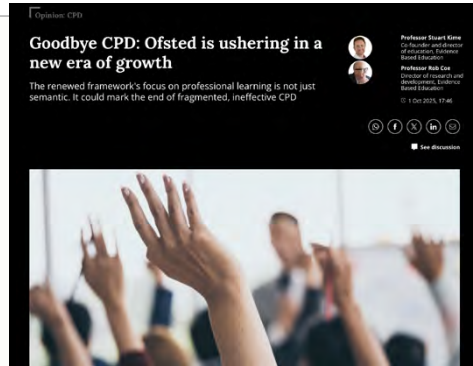


personalities have largely been formed by the time they start.

The government is right to focus on the early years, but its success will also be patchy if it's not willing to have a difficult conversation with and about parents.

Providing support for them won't be enough. We also have to ensure they are open to receiving it.

Karl Janos,
Headteacher, West Midlands



Professors Coe and Kime are right: the new Ofsted toolkit offers a welcome shift in language around CPD. But language alone won't deliver the change our profession deserves. ([Goodbye CPD: Ofsted is ushering in a new era of growth](#), 1 October)

Talk of "professional growth and expertise" does signal a move away from a tick-box CPD culture we've long outgrown. But fear, compliance and inspection pressure are not the conditions in which growth flourishes.

Across our trust-wide CPD Leaders Forum, we've explored what it takes to build genuine professional learning rooted in context-specific, strategic implementation.

What we've learned is that professional learning thrives when schools learn with and from one another. Growth comes from sustained, locally-owned improvement, not uniform programmes or quick fixes.

The new framework could become a catalyst for such cultures, but only if it shifts accountability towards capacity-building: leaders showing how they create time and trust for staff to think together, inquire and improve - not simply how they evidence that "CPD is in place".

Growth can't be 'inspected in'. It has to be cultivated, actively, collectively, day by day, through trust, curiosity and generosity. That's the real era of growth our system needs.

Sam Gibbs, Deputy chair of the Trust Wide CPD Leaders Forum, and Director of education, Greater Manchester Education Trust

Recent reporting in *Schools Week* has raised concerns about the transparency and integrity of advisory work within the government's RISE programme. ([RISE advisers call on their own to support schools](#), 3 October)

It's not for me to pass judgment; the most important feedback will come from schools and leaders who experience the support firsthand. Their voices will ultimately reveal whether RISE advice is credible, fair and genuinely focused on improvement.

What I can say for certain is that trust is not an optional extra in school improvement. It is the invisible infrastructure that allows them to open themselves to scrutiny, challenge and learning.

Advisory work thrives only when grounded in integrity and ethical conduct. Ethical advisers act as exemplars, shaping a culture of

professionalism that strengthens schools and the wider system.

Key principles include: consistency and credibility through evidence-informed guidance; professional confidence via confidentiality, impartiality and transparency; reflective practice for sustainable impact; collaboration and shared learning; and building capacity for self-improvement.

Frameworks such as the International Quality Standard for Education Advisers (IQSEA) provide guidance to ensure ethical consistency and professional credibility for advisory work.

Perhaps ministers should recommend them to their improvement teams.

Les Walton, Chair,
Association of Education Advisers

Send your letters here:

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Clustering around a SEND solution

As local authorities grapple with rising SEND demand and mounting deficits – could locality clusters alleviate some of the pressure?

The funding model is being considered as part of government reforms to the special needs system, but what is it, and what are the benefits and risks?

Schools Week investigates...

What is cluster funding?

Around 15 local authorities have adopted the “locality cluster” model of SEND funding, experts estimate. Other names for it include community funding or mainstream inclusion partnership.

Nottinghamshire has used a version since the 1980s while others, such as Kent, adopted the approach as recently as last month. And interest appears to be growing.

The model shifts high-needs funding from a ‘pupil-led’ approach – where access to cash mostly depends on a child securing an education, health and care plan – to a ‘school-led’ system.

Schools are grouped together and given a

shared funding pot from their local authority’s high-needs budget, with leaders deciding how the cash is spent.

While practice varies, clusters are typically cross-phase groups of eight to 10 schools.

In Nottinghamshire, clusters control 18 per cent of the high-needs block, while in Hounslow, which launched clusters in 2023, they manage around 1 per cent.

Funding levels usually reflect metrics such as pupil numbers and deprivation levels, and SENCos, with parental consent, can apply for funding through their cluster.

Those SENCos then meet regularly – typically at least termly – to decide how to allocate money.

Faster, more flexible funding?

SEND policy consultant Dr Peter Gray, who has helped local authorities introduce the model, said it is “much more dynamic and flexible” and helps children access SEND support quicker than

the EHCP route.

Although EHCP decisions should take no more than 20 weeks, last year 46 per cent took between 20-52 weeks, and seven per cent took over a year.

Pupils do not need an EHCP to access funding through clusters.

SENCos need only wait until the next meeting to make an application, rather than going through lengthy statutory processes.

Meanwhile, it can also help reduce EHCP cost pressures, Dr Gray added. If a child receives an EHCP at a young age, “it’s in the school’s interest to hang on to the resource once they’ve got it”.

But the cluster model helps gain access to shorter-term funding “to get you over a hurdle”, he said.

Jo-Anne Sanders, service director for learning and early support at Kirklees Council, added their cluster meetings also help primaries and secondaries “learn things from each other”.

Daniel Beck, strategic lead for SEND at Southampton Council, told us of a secondary that secured funding for Lexilenses reading



Dr Peter Gray

Feature: Cluster funding

aids – which help dyslexic children to read – for both for itself and all its feeder primaries.

This meant children arriving at the secondary had already “become used to using [them]”.

A way to reduce EHCPs?

One in 20 children in England have an EHCP, and one in five have special needs. Rising demand has led to huge deficits at councils.

South Gloucestershire Council introduced a cluster model in 2020-21. At the time, 3.5 per cent of pupils had EHCPs compared to 3.1 per cent nationally. Meanwhile SEN support rates were below-average.

A recent council report said local SEND leaders feel the clusters “have encouraged greater understanding, improved identification and collective responsibility for children with SEND”.

Its EHCP numbers have continued to grow, though more slowly than regionally or nationally – especially in primary schools where clusters are “more firmly established”. SEN support numbers have risen, narrowing the gap with the national rate.

Hounslow Council launched its mainstream inclusion partnership (MIP) in April 2023 to help reduce its SEND deficit under a safety valve agreement.

Head of service for standards, practice and partnerships Lyn Gray said the council is “constantly looking at whether we can invest more into this mainstream inclusion model”.

Reducing EHCP reliance “is the dream scenario”, she added, but stressed there “are some children that do require that pathway” and the cluster model is “not a replacement as yet.” The idea is “to support children that maybe just need that early intervention”.

Nottinghamshire County Council, the earliest cluster model adopter, has still seen EHCP requests rise by more than 150 per cent to 1,719 in the five years to 2024. This compared to an England-wide rise of 87 per cent.

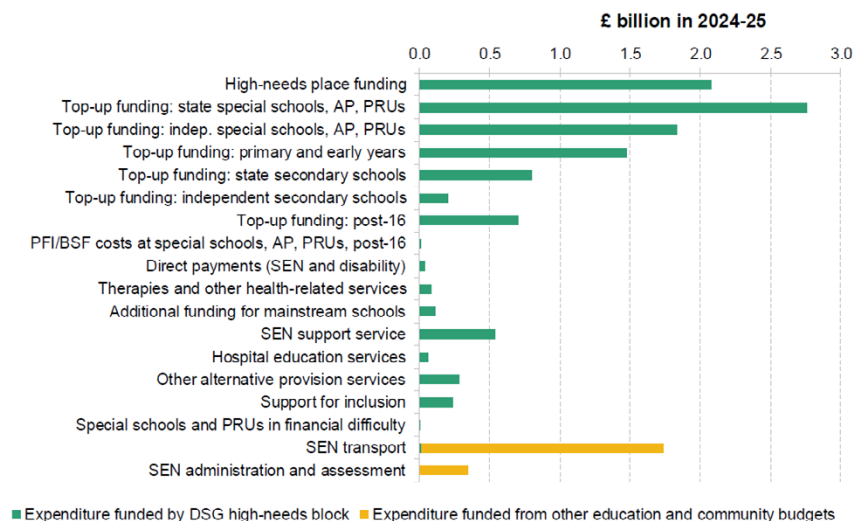
But it still has “one of the lowest number of EHCPs in the country”, said Orlaith Green, head of psychology and inclusion services, as children can access funding without one.

In some LAs, schools are now expected to seek cluster funding before EHCP referrals are considered.



Orlaith Green

Most spending is place or top up funding for state and independent special schools



‘With an EHCP, it’s in the school’s interest to hang on to it’

But Abigail Hawkins, a former SENCo who now runs support service Sensible SENCo, said cluster funding should enable early intervention, and “not be used as the barrier to an EHCP”.

Supporting groups of pupils

Clusters often prioritise interventions that support several children rather than individuals.

In Southampton, around 86 per cent of requests made through the model have been “project-based” or “group” based, with only 14 per cent made for individuals. In Kent, its cluster funding scheme is limited solely to whole-school interventions.

Debbie Kelly, a former headteacher involved in establishing Kirklees’ cluster model, said her cluster initially focused on funding staff CPD, to “skill up more people to impact more children”.

In Hounslow, 60 per cent of funding applications have been for group initiatives, such as additional speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, learning mentor support, and creating “nurture spaces”.

Lyn Gray welcomed the shift “away from supporting just the individual”. But she noted the approach appears better suited to primaries. “You can pull children from classes in a primary and work in groups...[but] in a secondary school [that] won’t always work because of timetabling”.

Hounslow SENCo Georgie Venn-Coffey said her school secured funding for a teaching assistant to support year 2s who were struggling with reading, which “has been really successful”.

Another school used funding to train a therapy dog, while a secondary in Chiswick secured funding for a sensory space.

Abdicating responsibility?

But the model isn’t without its doubters.

One trust CEO, in a letter to Kent County Council, said cluster model “bids for funding for individual pupils are much less likely to be successful”, meaning schools will have to “compete with one another for much-needed funding”.

A Kent SENCo, who did not want to be named, added the model “feels like an attempt to solve a funding crisis without actually putting in more

Feature: Cluster funding

money”.

“The local authority is abdicating its responsibility [onto schools],” they added.

Kent County Council says the model “has significantly reduced bureaucracy and administration for both schools and the LA, so more staff time can be focused on delivering services where they are needed most.

“The model means school leaders, rather than KCC officers, are making more financial decisions. This decision-making needs to be well-managed, efficient and properly recorded, providing greater clarity and accountability for the use of public money.”

The council acknowledged the introduction of cluster funding is “a complex change”, adding it is “very aware the model needs to evolve further”.

But it said the aim is for “more timely responses to pupil need and strengthened SEND support, by maintaining the budget, but distributing in a different way”.

Professional development

Meanwhile, in areas where the model is established, SENCos appear to value it.

Orlaith Green said SENCos appreciate being able to “share practice” and “problem solve together”.

A recent survey of Hounslow SENCos found 72 per cent said discussions at cluster meetings had influenced their practice.

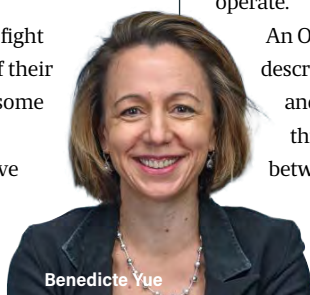
Meg Jones, headteacher at Kingsgate Primary School, Camden, said the model has “transformed” how children with SEND are supported locally.

“By allowing SENCos to apply directly to a panel of peers, we’ve reduced delays and responded more quickly and effectively, without relying solely on the EHCP process,” she said.

“SENCos feel trusted and empowered and families benefit from faster, more coordinated support.”

In Kirklees, an anonymous survey carried out after the cluster model’s first year found 90 per cent of SENCos supported it.

Dr Gray said SENCos “don’t just fight each other... for the betterment of their own school. They recognise that some children have bigger needs than others at different times, and we’ve got to have some local, collective responsibility for meeting needs across the broader area”.



Benedicte Yue

‘Families benefit from faster, more coordinated support’

Lack of uniformity

But without legislation or national guidance, consistency of decisions is problematic.

“I can submit two applications of equal quality, yet one may be accepted for assessment while the other is declined,” said the Kent SENCo.

Hawkins also warned the system could “pit SENCos against each other” with personal politics sometimes influencing outcomes.

And Green added any “breakdown in relationships” between SENCos “affects the consistency” of funding decisions.

To address this, some LAs have introduced quality assurance measures such as annual moderation, or cluster leads who coordinate decision-making and support applications.

But Hawkins argued the model “needs definition” and “consistency” between LAs, calling for clarity on “where it sits within all of those layers of funding”.

Green agreed a “consistent approach across the whole country” would help, particularly for SENCos working across multiple local systems.

Accountability needed

Benedicte Yue, chief financial officer at River Learning Trust, said “some form of accountability” is essential.

“When you devolve funding, you need a way to hold people to account,” she said, calling for reporting mechanisms to track how clusters operate.

An Ofsted area SEND inspection in October described Hounslow’s MIP as “successful” and improving children’s experiences through improved communication between schools and services.

But inspectors said the local area “does not have a strong oversight of how well education providers use

their allocated funding”.

Yue believes an “intermediary mechanism” is needed to reduce “variability between the clusters” and provide “quality assurance”.

And Dr Gray hopes to see “regional communities of practices” formed so LAs can work together to implement cluster funding, and offer “constructive peer support and challenge”.

The government is understood to be interested in the cluster model as it prepares to reveal SEND reforms this term.

It currently spends around £12 billion on high-needs funding, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. But DfE data suggests just £2.4bn was given to schools in SEN funding in 2023-24.

Around £2 billion is spent on SEND transport, with another £1.8 billion on placing children in independent SEND schools (despite just five per cent of pupils with EHCPs attending such schools), estimates suggest.

“At the moment the whole high-needs block is completely saturated [and] locked into statutory requirements for EHCPs,” said Yue. “There is no money left for early intervention.

“The idea of the cluster is to give less money to EHCPs – because we don’t think the individual funding is an appropriate model when you’ve had such an increase in complex needs.”

‘We could be getting great value’

Sanders, at Kirklees Council, said they have 230 youngsters costing £30 million in private SEND schools.

“If we can reduce that number because we’ve got the right capacity and skill in our state funded sector, then we’re getting value for money.”

The council also gained the “confidence of parents and carers” by involving parent and carer forums in developing their model.

Dr Gray pointed out that as authorities’ deficits are continuing to grow anyway without intervention, the hope is allocating funding via clusters will help reduce other spending long-term.

It does not mean “get[ting] rid of the statutory framework”, but “moves towards there being less need for that model because people are more confident in an alternative”.

He added: “It’s not a perfect system, it’s a developing system, but it’s one that’s got the most potential in terms of addressing the mess we’re in at the moment”.

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Opinion

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ROBIN BEVAN

Former headteacher, trust CEO
and NEU president

GCSE resits don't deliver social justice – but alternatives can

The policy makes us an international outlier and limits our ability to recognise what learners can do, writes Robin Bevan. We know what would work better, so let's do that

The start of a new term brings fresh hope – but also a sort of collective amnesia. Only a few weeks ago, the national media reported lamentable statistics about GCSE resit results, raising a clamour for change. But attention has moved on, potentially condemning another resit cohort to the same inevitable fate.

This summer, over 300,000 compulsory post-16 resit exam entries in English and maths were graded below a pass. Every year, this policy fails a number larger than the entire city population of Bradford or Belfast.

Former schools minister Nick Gibb was swift to defend his compulsory resit policy on grounds of social justice, arguing a reversal would 'hurt poor children'.

His motivation may be admirable. Indeed, his view from the moral high ground may even appear sunlit, but for the vast majority who don't pass, things look decidedly cloudier. Aspirational virtue and blinkered rectitude do not make for good assessment and accreditation policy.

Competency uncertainty

There was good news. The total number of post-16 grade 4+ 'passes'

rose for the fourth year in a row, to over 60,000 in English and 50,000 in maths.

However, the pass rates remained stubbornly low at only 20.9 per cent and 17.1 per cent respectively. For English, this is almost 10 percentage points lower than 2019. For maths, it is significantly below the pre-pandemic level of 21.2 per cent.

These young learners clearly warrant sustained literacy and numeracy support to secure accreditation and lifelong skills.

The problem is with the qualification structure under which they (and others at foundation level) are required to perform.

The examination papers are designed to assess swathes of content intended to be accessible only for those seeking higher grades.

The lower the grade awarded, the higher the uncertainty about a student's competency.

Alternatives exist.

Rigorous literacy and numeracy proficiency tests that students can take when they are ready, could be introduced readily. As could cumulative accreditation over time.

Or re-introduced.

Good-quality, modular, 'test-on-demand' and 'repeat-as-necessary' foundation-level GCSEs have a proven track record.

GAIM changer

In the 1990s, Graduated Assessment in Mathematics (GAIM) provided



“Blinkered rectitude is not good assessment policy

exactly such a gateway to GCSE qualification, with suitably customised skill-focused numeracy assessment.

GAIM was a game-changer, securing enhanced motivation and improved outcomes, including for students I taught at a north London comprehensive in a pioneering provision with the more-able pupils on roll at the local special school.

The old paper-based GAIM approach could easily be computerised. There are signs that AQA is ready to deliver such adaptive online tests here, having initiated similar projects in Wales and Scotland.

Ladders of opportunity

Asset Languages Ladder (ALL), developed just after the millennium, offered an equivalent assessment structure based on 'can-do' proficiency testing in foreign language learning.

ALL provides an excellent case study, not only for reforming approaches to accreditation in MFL, but also to inform revised literacy standards for GCSE assessment.

Such tests can be flexibly administered. Learners can subsequently progress to higher levels of assessment.

Additionally, this approach to accreditation suits special school

cohorts, for whom few other options exist.

International outlier

The potential impact of reformed GCSE design for the 300,000 is not to be under-estimated.

The opportunity exists for a transformational change through motivational testing 'when ready' and re-engagement of resit cohorts in a trajectory of lifelong learning.

This would sit alongside more informative accreditation, not least for employers, with certification of demonstrated skills.

Expert academic voices, supported by representatives of parents, industry, students and the profession, have repeatedly made the case for such assessment reform.

My own role on the Independent Assessment Commission helped consolidate my professional commitment to equitable reliable assessment.

Internationally, proficiency-based testing has been a hallmark of school qualifications in many varied jurisdictions, while aspects of our resit model position us as an outlier within a global assessment perspective.

When the curriculum and assessment review reports, this one change must not be sidestepped. It is time to move rapidly forward.

Opinion

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KERRY BOFFEY

CEO, Fellowship of
Inspection Nominees

How to make the most of Ofsted's new nominee role

Schools can't afford to allow this new feature of Ofsted's framework to go unnoticed, writes Kerry Boffey. It can transform the inspection experience

In January, I argued in these pages that introducing an inspection nominee role in schools could be one of the most positive outcomes from the Ofsted framework reforms. It has come to pass, and I strongly believe that it marks a significant shift in the way schools experience inspection.

The reception for this change has been largely muted, because this is unfamiliar territory. Yet in further education and skills inspections, nominees have long been recognised as central to inspection readiness and success.

Schools that grasp the strategic value of this role will quickly see that it is far more than an administrative add-on; it is an opportunity to shape the narrative of inspection.

At the heart of every inspection is dialogue. Inspectors are seeking evidence, context and assurance that a school is delivering high-quality education and safeguarding pupils effectively.

A nominee who is confident, informed and prepared acts as the anchor point for this dialogue.

Where the headteacher is inevitably balancing multiple demands during inspection week

(leading the school, reassuring staff, managing parents and engaging with governors) the nominee ensures that no question goes unanswered, no context goes unexplained and no evidence is left behind.

As one senior inspector put it: "A strong nominee ensures the right people are in the room at the right time, with the right evidence. This saves time and avoids missed opportunities that could influence judgements."

Nominee benefits

While Ofsted's formal guidance outlines operational responsibilities such as coordinating meetings, briefing staff and liaising with inspectors, the nominee role extends beyond logistics. In practice, nominees can:

Shape perceptions

By highlighting context, they ensure inspectors see the full picture of the school.

Anticipate needs

By pre-empting evidence requests, they reduce pressure and disruption during the inspection.

Safeguard leadership time

By acting as the day-to-day contact, they enable the headteacher to concentrate on strategic leadership rather than operational firefighting.

A trained nominee who is fully



“Your nominee can be a buffer and a facilitator

focused on inspection management also takes pressure off headteachers. This ensures that leaders are not automatically drawn into every meeting or line of questioning, allowing them to step back, remain strategic and intervene only when their leadership voice is truly needed. In this way, the nominee becomes both a buffer and a facilitator, protecting headteachers while strengthening inspection dialogue.

Pitfalls to avoid

Despite the potential benefits, schools risk underestimating or mishandling this role. Common pitfalls to avoid include:

Last-minute decisions

Waiting until inspection is announced before identifying a nominee leaves no time for preparation.

Lack of authority

Choosing someone too junior, without credibility or influence, undermines the role.

Lack of training

Assuming the role is straightforward risks gaps in knowledge and missed opportunities to provide evidence.

Inspection success is rarely about surprises; it is about preparation. While Ofsted says no preparation is required in advance of inspection, our experience in the FE and

skills sector tells us that effective preparation is closely linked to quality improvement and better outcomes.

To maximise the value of the nominee role, we have already highlighted that a school should identify a nominee well in advance and rehearse their role. Schools should also invest in nominee training and simulation exercises.

It is important to carry out mock inspection exercises with the nominee, where they have opportunity to manage communication, gather evidence speak with inspectors.

This support for the nominee should also be embedded by ensuring other senior leaders understand how to work with the nominee during inspection.

With the nominee role, there is now an opportunity to manage inspections more proactively, reducing risk and enhancing the school's ability to showcase its strengths. Far from being a bureaucratic addition, the nominee is the game-changer in inspection readiness.

By embracing this role, schools move beyond a defensive stance in inspections. Instead, they can engage in a professional dialogue that highlights impact, celebrates achievements and ensures inspectors fully understand the school's story.

Opinion

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POPPY NOBES

Head of professional development, Aldridge Education

NPQs must evolve to avoid a policy 'boom and bust'

Cohorts have reached a plateau as the incentives around courses have changed, writes Poppy Nobes. Now the courses must adapt or face becoming irrelevant to most

In many ways, this is the golden age of professional development, but there's a gap in our provision which could be storing up problems for the next generation of school leaders.

Renewed focus on professional development has brought about welcome change. A growing body of research shows what good CPD looks like, trusts are investing in training and schools are scrutinising the quality of every hour spent on staff development.

The government's post-Covid recovery package helped drive this. The Department for Education funded new National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), opening doors for thousands of staff.

But the momentum hasn't lasted. Funding priorities have shifted and cohort numbers have fallen from two annually to just one this year. This is a story of 'peak and plateau' rather than 'boom and bust', but the plateau is real. The new NPQs have changed the professional development landscape, but their impact is flatlining.

For course leaders like me, NPQs are inspiring to run. The cohorts are engaged, hungry to learn and often

willing to study in their own time.

But here's the nagging question: once the final case study is submitted, what difference does it actually make in schools?

Golden thread or golden ticket?

As part of the government's 'golden thread' strategy, NPQs were meant to offer a window into the demands of leadership, giving aspiring leaders a chance to test whether they're ready for the next step.

But there's another part to the story of their appeal: having an NPQ on your CV helps you stand out in the quest for promotion – at least in theory.

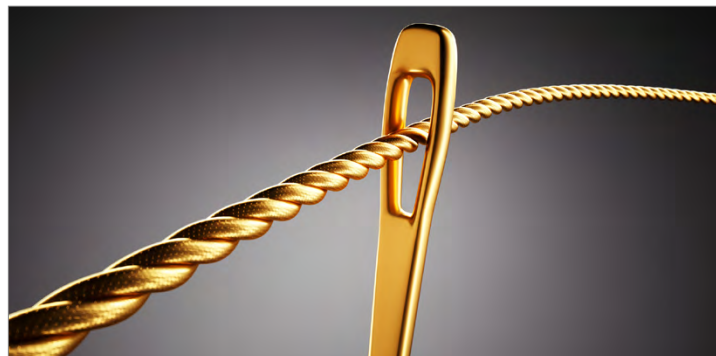
Now, with so many applicants holding the qualification, that advantage has faded. And if you're not in the role already, the qualification's benefits can feel distant.

Banking knowledge for some future point in your career is appealing, but in a profession driven by urgent priorities, the reality is that NPQs can feel abstract.

I've tried to close that gap in my own delivery of NPQs. Every seminar ends with participants setting concrete actions, which we revisit at the next session.

Sometimes, it works brilliantly: staff are allowed to shadow senior leaders or trial aspects of leadership. But too often the follow-up is: "I haven't had time."

Schools are stretched and



“ The current model risks being too theoretical

opportunities aren't always available, resulting in understandable frustration and lost momentum.

This tension isn't new. The old NPQ courses culminated in large-scale projects that taught participants to run initiatives from end to end. This was time-consuming and restricted numbers.

The current framework is broader and more accessible, but risks being too theoretical.

Practical solutions

There are several options worth considering to finally strike that balance:

In-school coaching

Each participant could be paired with a coach to help them apply their learning in context. Schools lack capacity for this, but funding could be redirected – similar to the early career training programme model – to release senior staff for coaching.

Cohort networking

Mix aspiring leaders with those already in post and make peer reflection and shadowing a structured part of the programme.

Practical checkpoints

After each module, require participants to evidence a real-world task before moving on. This

could mean attending a governor meeting, presenting to staff or analysing school data.

Reformed assessment

We've piloted internal programmes such as Management Mastery, which demand live application. They work, but limiting NPQs only to staff already in leadership roles would shut out future talent. The qualification must meet participants where they are, not exclude them.

The golden thread's impact is undeniable. Some of our first National Professional Qualification for Headship participants are now stepping into headships – a tangible return on investment.

But with tighter funding and fewer places, the challenge is ensuring every participant sees similar value. That means blending theory with practice so they not only learn leadership but live it.

As we recruit our ninth cohort, we face a choice: prioritise leaders already in post, or nurture future ones? Either way, if NPQs are to remain relevant, practical application must move from the margins to the centre of the framework.

Because in leadership as in learning, you use it or you lose it.

Opinion

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CLLR ZENA BRABAZON

Cabinet member for children,
schools and families, Haringey
Borough Council

What the inclusion push can learn from Haringey

AP should be seen as a lifeline, not a footnote, writes Zena Brabazon. Haringey's model shows what's possible when we prioritise its pupils and their aspirations

AP exists for young people who, for a multitude of reasons, cannot thrive in mainstream settings. In Haringey, we've taken this responsibility seriously. Over the past few years, we've transformed our approach with a vision rooted in inclusion, dignity and opportunity.

In 2018, the borough faced a serious problem: our AP wasn't working. It was fragmented and not delivering for our most vulnerable learners.

At that time, it was delivered by Tri-borough Alternative Provision (TBAP). But the trust collapsed in 2020, marking a significant turning point. After years of financial instability, it went into liquidation, prompting a major shift in how we managed and delivered AP locally.

While some saw this as a crisis, we saw it as a positive opportunity to reimagine what AP could be. Led by our director of children's services, Ann Graham, we developed our bespoke *Model for Change* strategy and brought our provision back in-house, launching Haringey Learning Partnership (HLP).

This wasn't just a structural change; it was a philosophical one. We moved away from outsourcing and

towards a model that is inclusive, locally accountable and embedded in our borough's educational ecosystem.

At the heart of HLP is Commerce House, a bespoke setting which supports students, including those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. These are young people who have often been excluded from mainstream schools.

Under the leadership of its executive headteacher, Gerry Robinson, Commerce House has developed into a school with strong values, where these students are seen, supported, educated and respected.

Students wear uniforms, follow a structured and broad curriculum, and take part in numerous enrichment activities which extend their learning and experience.

Commerce House is not a holding space for students with difficulties; it's a place of growth and belonging. Its amazing GCSE results over the past few years demonstrate that this approach works.

As a secondary head, Gerry attends headteacher meetings across the borough, reinforcing that HLP is not an isolated service but a vital part of Haringey's school ecosystem which works in partnership with the wider sector as well as other schools.

Since launching *Model for Change* in 2020, we've seen a dramatic and positive shift. Over that period, 402 students have successfully returned



“ This is a sector full of expertise

to mainstream education.

In addition, our outreach teams have supported hundreds of children at risk of exclusion. As a result, we've recorded exceptionally low rates of suspensions and permanent exclusions.

The latest Department for Education data for academic year 2023-24 confirms this. Haringey recorded the lowest permanent exclusion rate in London and the third lowest across England. This is a great achievement, especially for our children and young people.

We've also established Primary Nurture Hubs, like the one at South Grove Primary, supporting our younger children before exclusion becomes a possibility.

This transformation didn't happen by accident. It was driven by the local authority, with vision, determination and collaboration. We've built a system that doesn't give up on children – one that understands behaviour as communication and learning as a developmental journey.

We are proud of what we've achieved, but we remain committed to doing more. Every child in Haringey deserves an education that

meets their needs, respects their dignity, and prepares them for a hopeful future.

So as the government aims for a more inclusive education system, we want to share our experiences.

First, the solutions to many of the problems driving exclusion are local. The causes will look different in every local authority, but it's key that every provider in that area plays their full part in delivering those solutions and is committed to doing so.

Second, AP is central to any strategy to increase inclusion. It must not be a last-ditch attempt to keep young people in an educational setting of some kind. This is a sector full of expertise.

Our experience through Haringey Learning Partnership highlights the crucial relationship between AP and mainstream schools. Together they can work wonders for the students who need a more focused approach.

Most importantly, AP can and should have high aspirations for its students. Perhaps the highest. Because it is not the end of the road, but a new beginning.

Solutions

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK



REBECCA
MAW

CEO, The Key

Five do-now strategies to ease the Year 7 dip

Year 7 disengagement is rightly attracting sector-wide attention. Here's what we've learned from our programme in an area where the problem is pervasive, explains Rebecca Maw

Not quite halfway through the first term, schools' work on transition is already morphing into phase two: preventing 'the year 7 dip'. For too many, a positive start quickly turns to disengagement. For others, disengagement was already 'baked in'. A few weeks was never going to undo the habits that come with that.

Teachers know the signs: waning enthusiasm, growing anxiety, unexplained absence. National research led by ImpactEd Group shows this is no coincidence. Tracking some 80,000 pupils, the study found that over one in four begin to disengage during Year 7, with sharp drops in enjoyment, trust and feelings of safety.

Follow-up research revealed in these pages two weeks ago that low-income white children start year 7 already less engaged than their peers across all measures: they value learning less, are less likely to put effort in and are less likely to enjoy being in school.

The challenge is particularly stark in the north east, where Department for Education attendance figures for last autumn put the persistent

absence rate at 19.6 per cent, compared with a national figure of 17.8 per cent.

Put simply: if pupils aren't settled by now, the risk of long-term disengagement grows.

The good news is that schools are not powerless. Our KEY+ Transitions programme points to practical steps that can help pupils belong, connect and thrive.

Based on lessons from that programme, here are five actions school leaders can take right now.

Prioritise belonging

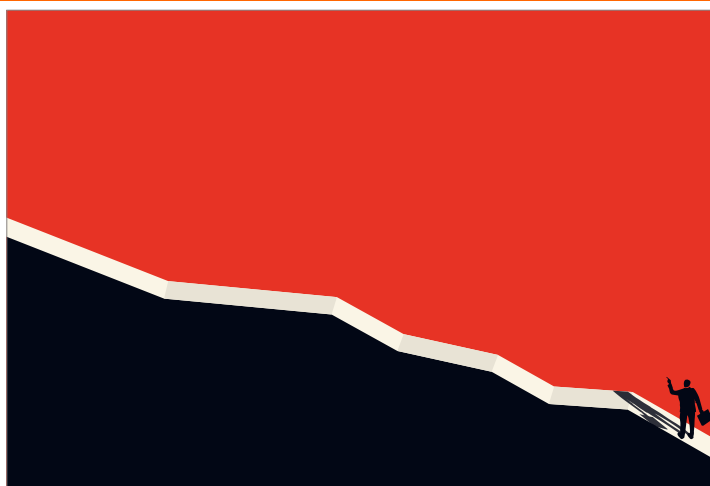
Transition isn't just about navigating timetables and classrooms. It's about identity. Pupils need to feel they belong.

In fact, belonging is one of the strongest predictors of motivation and attendance. If pupils feel known, safe and valued, they are far less likely to drift into disengagement.

Schools can prioritise this by building connections with form tutors, creating welcoming rituals and ensuring no child feels invisible in the first term.

Embed youth work principles

While teachers and pastoral staff provide structure and guidance, these are often not enough for the least engaged. Youth work adds something complementary: relationships based on trust, informal conversation and the freedom to experiment.



“The dip is real – but it is not inevitable”

When those principles are embedded in schools, pupils feel heard and empowered. That's exactly what's needed when confidence and belonging are at risk.

Give pupils agency

That's because pupils who help shape activities feel a stronger sense of ownership. Involving them in designing projects, even on a small scale, builds motivation and confidence.

Pupils involved in our programme consistently reported higher resilience and greater confidence as a result of leading group projects.

One Year 7 explained: "I didn't want to come into school before [the project]. Doing this has made me want to come in. I make sure I come in now."

Create safe peer groups

One of the key reasons this works is because small, focused groups give pupils a chance to share their worries, support one another and build friendships in a way that busy classrooms don't. Indeed, the Education Endowment Foundation highlights peer support as a protective factor during transition.

As one Year 7 pupil supported by

KEY+ put it: "Seeing other friends worried, just like me, helped me realise that I'm not by myself or alone."

Partner with others

Of course, youth work isn't a school's natural way of working, and there's no avoiding the sector's capacity issues. But the good news is that schools don't have to carry the load alone.

Across the country, charities and youth organisations are clamouring for opportunities to meet young people where they are. They can bring extra capacity and expertise in resilience-building, peer work and informal learning – the kind of wraparound support that prevents a rocky start from turning into long-term disengagement.

The Year 7 dip is real, but it is not inevitable. With national research showing the scale of the problem and practice-based evidence showing what works, schools have a unique chance to intervene.

The evidence is clear: with the right support, pupils don't just survive transition, they can thrive through it. Midway through the term, the window for action is still open.

THE LEGAL LEADER

Expert advice on education and the law



The accountability implications of 'the Hillsborough Law'

Esther Maxwell

Partner, education and employment law, Shakespeare Martineau

Kamal Chauhan

Partner, regulatory law, Shakespeare Martineau



Legislation making its way through parliament will place new ethical responsibilities on schools and trusts, explain Esther Maxwell and Kamal Chauhan

The Public Authority (Accountability) Bill 2025 is the result of a decades-long campaign for justice for the victims of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. It is currently making its way through parliament but stands a good chance of passing without significant change, and it could have significant implications for schools and trusts.

Commonly referred to as the Hillsborough Law, the bill aims to address past failures and to set a blueprint for how public life should be conducted.

Here's what we know about its provisions and how they could impact the education sector.

Code of ethical conduct

Every school and trust will be required to develop, implement and publicise a code of ethical conduct that promotes candour and integrity.

This code must align with the seven principles of public life ('the Nolan principles') and include provisions for protected disclosures (whistleblowing).

The code will not only apply to all staff but also to independent and student governors, and to staff governors as governors – all of whom are currently expected to observe the Nolan principles as a matter of good practice.

Legal duty of candour

At the bill's heart is the creation of a legal and professional duty of candour. Public officials and authorities will be legally required to act with honesty, integrity and transparency during investigations, inquiries and inquests.

This new duty mandates that relevant information must be disclosed proactively and promptly, rather than reactively or selectively.



Failure to comply with this duty (especially where there is intent to mislead or obstruct) will be treated as a criminal offence, punishable by up to two years' imprisonment and/or a fine.

New offence: Misleading the public

The bill introduces a new statutory offence for misleading the public. Public officials who knowingly or recklessly provide false or seriously improper information in their professional capacity may face criminal sanctions.

The conditions required for the offence are dishonesty that:

- was significant or repeated (including concealment or obfuscation),
- caused or had the potential to cause harm to a person, and
- departed significantly from what is to be expected in the proper exercise of the person's functions.

There is a defence of reasonable excuse.

Implications

Inquests, inquiries and instances of misleading the public are relatively rare, so the main implications for schools and trusts relate to the creation and implementation of an ethical code of conduct.

This code must promote ethical conduct, candour, transparency and frankness within all parts of a school or trust's work.

It must set out specific behavioural expectations for discharging the duty of candour and explain what employees should do to comply with it.

And it must set out the disciplinary

consequences for failing to act in accordance with these expectations, including any circumstances where such failure may amount to gross misconduct.

The code will need to include a mechanism for employees and others to raise concerns about unethical conduct and breaches of the codes by college employees, and to whistleblow where appropriate.

While few would argue that these are unreasonable expectations, and many would argue that the sector already abides by these principles, these new legislative requirements will require schools and trusts to review how they do things in many different areas.

Governance will need to adapt to the new expectations (particularly when considering how to deal with matters regarded as controversial or confidential) and how this sits with their duty as charity trustees to protect the reputation of the organisation.

Staff will need to be trained on what the duty of candour means in their areas and how it interacts with other legal duties, for example those related to privacy, confidentiality and data protection.

Schools and trusts will need to review their processes for managing disclosures and concerns about unethical conduct, as they could face significantly more of these once the legislation comes into force.

Finally, the new law could have a significant impact on dealing with complaints and claims.

In short, now is the time to start preparing for what could be a pivotal shift in public accountability and transparency.

THE RESEARCH LEADER

What we've learned about schools and their communities this week



Our national wellbeing problems require local solutions

Vivienne Avery

Group director of policy and research, Elevare Civic Education Group



We've listened to 3,000 young voices, who echoed national concerns about mental health but brought some surprising local intelligence to our plans, explains Vivienne Avery

Published today, our *Three Thousand Voices* research gives a powerful insight into what it is really like to grow up as a child or young person in south east London. We all work hard to understand our different cohorts, but some of the findings surprised us.

This work is underpinned by the largest survey we have ever carried out across our schools and colleges. Its aim: to ensure our learners' experiences inform and directly shape our priorities.

One key finding was a dramatic drop between ages 11 and 12/13 in the number of learners who say they had someone supportive to talk to. At 11, more than 80 per cent feel they have this support. By ages 12 and 13, that number plummets to less than half.

We know that the transition from primary to secondary school is a time of turbulence, but seeing that sense of security fall away so sharply is sobering.

This research echoes the 'Year 7' dip identified in national data, but our local findings provide additional insight.

For example, a key factor is the loneliness some children experience when starting secondary school. At precisely the moment when puberty, new peer groups and academic pressure collide, too many children feel they are losing trusted adults.

It reminds us that every structural change in education has an emotional cost, and that we must not underestimate the fragility of trust at this age.

Loneliness emerges in other ways throughout this research. For example, we were also surprised that so many young people voiced their need for help to make friends.

For years, loneliness has been discussed almost exclusively as an issue of older age.



This sense of isolation is clearly not limited to the elderly.

Austerity saw the loss of thousands of youth clubs and the pandemic further reduced opportunities for connection. Many learners told us they had very few chances to take part in activities outside school, leaving them reliant on school-based provision for social bonds.

This generation is now directly asking us for help to make and keep friends.

Relatedly, belonging came through repeatedly in our findings. Our learners who had been excluded from mainstream schools spoke about feeling ignored and even discriminated against.

These are not abstract complaints: the sense of unfairness lingers long after the exclusion itself, shaping attitudes towards education and society.

We talk a lot about inclusion but hearing so many young people describe the profound effects of exclusion on their friendships, trust in adults and belief in themselves reinforced why it cannot be treated as a side issue.

Perhaps the most consistent and worrying findings concern wellbeing among LGBTQ+ learners, particularly trans young people. The data showed lower wellbeing scores and our focus groups revealed why: experiences of prejudice, being attacked in public, feeling unsafe online and struggling to find informed support at home or in services.

In the national debate, fixation on toilets and

technicalities misses this fundamental truth: too many LGBTQ+ young people simply don't feel safe. What they want is not culture war headlines but mentoring, safe spaces, inclusive activities and adults who understand.

In spite of all these challenges, our research includes some positive themes and uplifting stories.

When asked what they would do if they were the CEO of our new charity, learners overwhelmingly prioritised support for mental health, activities to make friends, and promoting understanding of different identities.

They spoke about reducing exam stress, having opportunities to explore new places and staying physically healthy while studying. Many also expressed a strong desire to be role models, to help their peers and to make a positive difference.

These are thoughtful, grounded priorities. This, at least, should not surprise us.

This research underlines why understanding wellbeing through a local lens is so important. National data can show the trends, but only by listening directly to our own young people can we grasp their complex realities and take the right actions.

The ways to fully meet our learners' needs are right there in their own words. We've listened, and now we know, not just *that* we must act, but *how*.

Read the full 3,000 Voices report [here](#)

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

SUNDAY

How the tables have turned. Three years on from the infamous Tory conference where as schools minister he showed up at every fringe and boomed out (leaked) policy pronouncements left, right and centre, Jonathan Gullis was back on the circuit.

This time he was in the audience, demanding loudly that unions state their position on mobile phone bans. On that issue, and probably that issue alone, he found widespread agreement with his position – that a national ban is necessary.

MONDAY

Ofsted sent a letter to school leaders today, praising those who had offered up their schools as the first to be inspected under the new report cards. It was “heartening to see that the majority of school leaders recognise the importance of shaping narrative around accountability”.

Erm, do they?

We might have a better idea of whether this is true if the watchdog had published even the most basic findings from its big consultation earlier this year on what the sector thought about its report card plans.

Despite admitting it had collected data on how many responses to questions were positive, negative or neutral – it's still refusing to disclose the findings publicly.

A little insight into how government communications work. The Department for Education sent an embargoed press release today boasting “Pupils to benefit from more specialist teachers in classrooms as up to £31K tax-free training incentives announced”.

It added the training incentives came as “government ramps up efforts to get more excellent teachers in the classrooms”.

From the few details in the press release, it smelled fishy. Government had confirmed a handful of subjects would *continue* to have £31,000 bursaries – like they did last year – while they were actually *cutting* an



apprenticeship bursary for modern foreign languages by £5,000.

We thought best to see the full release on bursaries on Tuesday morning before giving it any coverage...

TUESDAY

...and lo and behold, it turns out the government actually swung a humongous axe to many of its teacher training incentives – with most bursaries and scholarships seeing a cut or being ditched altogether (see images).

You can only admire/despair at the government's spin attempt.

But let's hope the changes don't mow down the small shoots of recruitment recovery that have emerged over the past year.

Back at the utterly dull Tory party conference, while the usual hordes of lobbyists had jumped ship for Labour – the education events were still quite well attended.

That included former-journalist-turned-politician-turned-journalist-again Michael Gove who, as editor of the *Spectator* magazine, interviewed shadow education secretary Laura Trott.

Showing his searing interview skills that no doubt bagged him the swish journalism job, Gove asked Trott searing questions such as whether policymaking outside of the Tories was now “based more on vibe and meme than detail and evidence”, to which Trott said “yes”.

The interview also gave Trott another opportunity following her earlier main stage speech to launch more direct attacks

on Bridget Phillipson.

She said the education secretary and Labour deputy leadership contender was only trying to satisfy the unions and the Tories were fighting to ensure children were not “sacrificed on the altar of Bridget Phillipson's ambition”. Opposition in action!

WEDNESDAY

Speaking to TES earlier this year for a story about consultants making a quick buck from selling training on new Ofsted inspections, Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio said the advertising of CPD courses and training before final report card plans were even drawn up was “a sign of just how high-stakes the inspection system is”.

But he clearly thinks it's fine to squeeze some more dosh out the sector now the plans have been finalised (and despite Ofsted running its own, free, webinars).

ASCL is now running webinars with “analysis, recommendations and support” on report card inspections. Sessions will cover “the type of evidence that inspectors will look for to make judgements and will suggest a possible self-evaluation method to aid leaders in their preparation”.

All for £120 (plus VAT) a pop!

At the start of September, Astor School headteacher Lee Kane called being a RISE school an “accolade” in a government press release (super handy for ministers, whose improvement plans have been criticised by some in the sector for being incoherent).

Four weeks on, the Kent school got namechecked by the secretary of state in a speech today to south west leaders.

Phillipson said Astor was “one of schools on the frontlines of my vision for education” – pointing to it having more than average numbers of pupils on free school meals and how it had boosted attendance.

Pats on the back all round!





INSPIRING TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES

Join the Harris Federation and play your part in shaping a brighter, more inclusive future for our students. Across our academies, we are seeking teachers and leaders who combine subject expertise with a deep belief in every child's potential.

Whether you're a classroom innovator, a creative subject lead, or an experienced SEN professional, you'll find a culture that values collaboration, professional growth, and joy in teaching. You'll

work with passionate colleagues who share your drive to create classrooms full of curiosity, confidence, and opportunity.

We are proud to work in communities where education transforms lives – and where your impact will truly matter.

Be part of something bigger. Join Harris and help every student discover what they're capable of.

SENCO

at Harris Academy Clapham

Location: 33 Clarence Ave,
London SW4 8LD

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: Leadership Scale L4–L8
(£61,398 – £66,402)

Lead the provision for students with SEND in a nurturing, high-achieving academy. You'll work closely with staff and families to ensure that every child thrives.

TEACHER OF DESIGN TECHNOLOGY

at Harris Academy Orpington

Location: Tintagel Rd, Orpington BR5 4LG

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: MPS/UPS (Outer London)
+ Harris Allowance

Inspire creativity and innovation through hands-on learning. Join a dynamic team that equips students with the skills and confidence to design, build, and problem-solve for the future.

HEAD OF CLASSICS

at Harris Academy Chafford Hundred

Location: Mayflower Rd, London, Chafford Hundred, Grays RM16 6SA

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: Leadership Scale L5–L10
(£62,178 – £70,434)

Bring the ancient world to life in a modern, high-achieving academy. You'll lead a subject that connects history, philosophy, and language — inspiring students to think deeply and see the world differently.

[CLICK HERE TO APPLY](#) →



ENGLISH LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Join the Harris Federation as we continue to shape the future of English education across our academies. We're looking for passionate, visionary leaders who believe that language and literature can change lives – and who are ready to inspire the next generation of confident, articulate learners.

Whether you're leading a thriving department or ready to take your next step, these two opportunities offer the chance to make a genuine impact within supportive, ambitious school communities.

You'll be part of a network that values collaboration, celebrates creativity, and invests in professional growth.

At Harris, we don't just teach English – we open doors. We nurture a love of words, stories, and ideas that stay with students for life. If you share our belief in high expectations, joyful learning, and the transformative power of great teaching, we'd love to hear from you.

Get in touch and find your next chapter with us:

DIRECTOR OF ENGLISH

at Harris Academy Merton

Location: Wide Way, London CR4 1BP

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: Leadership Scale L9–L13
(£66,402 – £72,480)

A high-performing and inclusive academy where English is central to student success. As Director, you'll drive excellence in teaching and curriculum design, mentoring a talented team and shaping a culture of academic ambition and creativity.

HEAD OF ENGLISH

at Harris Academy Orpington

Location: Tintagel Rd, Orpington BR5 4LG

Contract: Permanent, Full-time

Salary: Leadership Scale L9–L13
(£66,402 – £72,480)

Lead a vibrant, forward-thinking department where reading, writing, and communication sit at the heart of the school. You'll inspire both colleagues and students to reach their full potential.

[CLICK HERE TO APPLY](#) →



Teacher (SEN)

Valley Bridge School is an independent special school for pupils aged 6–19, set in a beautiful location near Gloucester. We are seeking enthusiastic, class-based teachers who are open to learning modern, creative approaches to supporting pupils with social, emotional, and mental health needs. Our curriculum is personalised, project-based, and rooted in student interests, with a strong focus on well-being, independence, and building meaningful relationships.

Care and connection are central to our ethos—for both students and staff. We prioritise staff well-being, offering a supportive work environment that encourages a healthy work-life balance. As part of the growing Spaghetti Bridge group, we provide high-quality professional development and opportunities to collaborate across schools. While each school is unique, all follow shared values and high expectations to ensure equality of opportunity for all pupils. This is an exciting opportunity to join a forward-thinking team and make a real difference in the lives of young people.

[CLICK HERE TO APPLY](#)



HEADTEACHER

Excelsior Academy offers transformative education at the heart of a vibrant and highly diverse area of Newcastle. We proudly serve a community that, whilst it has experienced long term disadvantage and challenge, is ambitious for the future.

Due to the retirement later this year of our current Headteacher, the Trustees are seeking to appoint an inspirational, values led individual to lead Excelsior Academy.

This full-time role is an exciting opportunity to lead a large, inclusive Academy into the next, exciting stage of its development. Excelsior is a coeducational Academy which opened in 2008. Over the next few years, the primary phase will gradually close with the Academy reverting to provision of education for the 11-18 age range.



The successful candidate will possess the vision, knowledge, experience and tenacity to enable the entire Excelsior community to move forward together.

[CLICK TO FIND OUT MORE](#)



INSPIRE YOUNG MINDS. SHAPE BRIGHT FUTURES. LEAD WITH PURPOSE.

PRINCIPAL – ASHTREE PRIMARY ACADEMY

Location: Stevenage | **Salary:** Leadership scale £67,898 - £75,050 | **Start:** January 2026

Ashtree Primary Academy, part of Future Academies, is seeking a dynamic and visionary Principal to lead our school into its next chapter. This is an exciting opportunity for an experienced leader with ambition, creativity, and a passion for raising aspirations and life chances.

As Principal, you will:

- Provide strong and strategic leadership, shaping the academy's vision within its local context.
- Inspire staff and pupils to achieve excellence in teaching, learning, and wider school life.
- Champion high expectations, inclusion, and opportunity for every child.
- Recruit, retain, and develop talented staff, ensuring a culture of collaboration and professional growth.
- Work in partnership with Future Academies' central team to realise the ambitions of trustees and the executive team.

About Us

Future Academies is a flourishing multi-academy trust, founded to improve life chances and raise aspirations for young people. We deliver a knowledge-rich curriculum, rich cultural and

extracurricular opportunities, and a strong pastoral system. Our ethos is underpinned by our values of Knowledge, Aspiration, and Respect, and by our motto *libertas per cultum* – "freedom through education".

Staff Benefits

We recognise our colleagues as our most important asset and offer:

- Excellent CPD and career progression opportunities.
- Employer contributions to Teachers' Pension Scheme.
- A supportive ethos and strong focus on staff wellbeing.
- Access to Mintago benefits, Virtual GP, and Employee Assistance Programme.

We warmly welcome visits to the school. To arrange this, or to have a confidential discussion about the role, please email HREnquiries@futureacademies.org. Alternatively, contact Oliver Wimborne, Director of Education, via oliver.wimborne@futureacademies.org.

Join us in shaping the future of Ashtree Primary Academy.

