SCHOOLS WEEK

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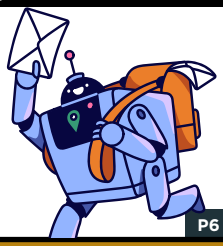
The DfE could soon answer your emails with AI



P6

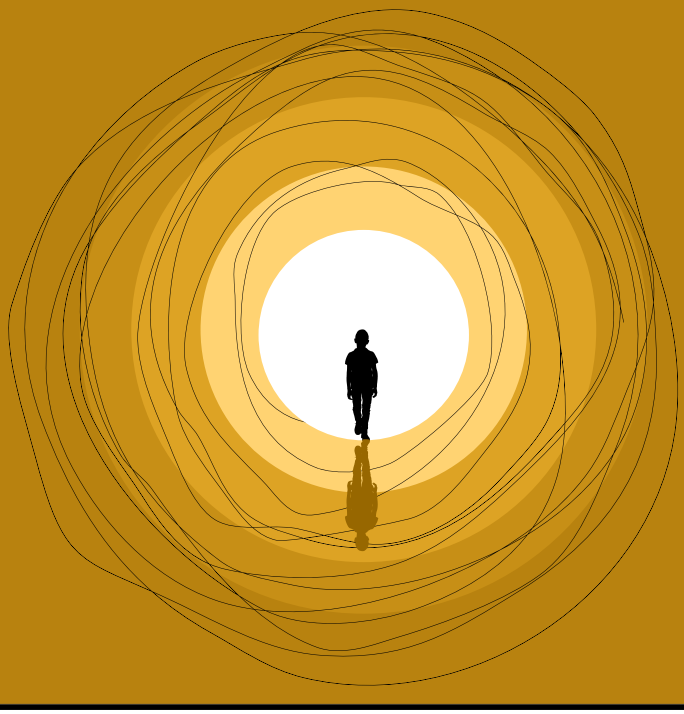
What the new generation of voters needs from schools

P27

'The decent thing was to look schools in the eye'

P19

INTERNAL EXCLUSION: RESET OR REJECTION?



INVESTIGATION | Pages 8-9

Trusts face closure for education failures as new inspections arrive

- MAT inspections could begin as soon as 2027, says Phillipson
- Law change will beef up DfE powers to shut down trusts
- Inspectors will be allowed to enter HQs and seize documents

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Page 4

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EducationScape

MAT inspection must benefit us all

Much fanfare was made earlier this week of the government's confirmation that it will introduce academy trust inspections, as it has long pledged to do.

But a key plank of the proposed reforms is what the government will do with the information it gets from those inspections.

At present, ministers wanting to close a trust wholesale and move all of its schools at once to another chain can only do so if there is a failure in its governance or finances.

We can all remember many high-profile cases where this has happened, for good reason.

But educational failure is treated differently. At present, trusts can lose individual schools or groups of schools if they are deemed to be failing.

The proposed change will give ministers beefed-up powers, so if a MAT is failing from an education standpoint at trust level, it can theoretically be closed.

Like some who have commented on this story, we suspect the number of wholesale closures to be limited, reserved for occasions of significant failure.

But, nevertheless, it is a big tool to add to the government's growing arsenal of intervention in schools. Remember the children's wellbeing and schools bill already gives the secretary of state wide-ranging direction powers over academies.

Key to this will be the design of the inspection system. MAT inspection must become a net benefit for the system.

A chance for real introspection, but also an opportunity to celebrate the best practice we know exists in the academy sector.

2027 may, in this context, be an overly ambitious target for implementation. With everything else going on at Ofsted, it is important to get this right.

Most read online this week:

1. Lift academy trust set to hand over two special schools
2. Ofsted MAT inspections could begin in 2027
3. New year's honours knighthood for Cabot CEO Stephen Taylor
4. New GCSE results app to be rolled out nationwide
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NEWS

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Stand up and be judged, MATs told

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS
@LYDIACHSW

The government looks set to hand itself sweeping powers to close MATs based on trust-level education failures alone, once new Ofsted inspections are introduced.

At present, ministers can re-broker individual schools from trusts if inspectors find them to be failing. But trusts can only be closed and all their schools moved to other chains in one go following financial or governance failures.

The proposed power forms part of a government amendment to the children's wellbeing and schools bill that would require Ofsted to regularly inspect academy trusts.

More than half of schoolchildren in England are educated at just under 11,000 multi-academy trusts.

Currently, Ofsted only carries out summary evaluations of trusts (MATSEs), which involve batch inspections of schools within the organisation.

But the amendment would give Ofsted new powers to inspect the way trusts' central teams work, from as early as next year.

New powers to terminate agreements

The DfE confirmed this week the proposed legislation would also give the education secretary new powers to terminate trusts' funding agreements if Ofsted finds the chain underperforming from an education perspective.

If trust leaders "are failing to lead, manage or govern" either the trust or an academy "to an acceptable standard", Ofsted must notify the education secretary.

It must also lay out whether it feels leaders show "capacity to secure the necessary improvement".

The education secretary may then serve a termination warning notice to the trust.

If the trust fails to comply with this notice – by failing to take specified action, or respond on time – the secretary of state could terminate its academy funding agreement.

Its academies would be moved to a strong trust, and the department would support this process.

Pepe Di'Iasio, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said once there was "a proportionate and effective system" in place, it would seem appropriate to consider how trust level intervention might need to change.

Pepe Di'Iasio

But this had to be done carefully. Trusts must not be discouraged from taking on schools in challenging circumstances, he said..

"Trust level intervention would clearly have significant ramifications and we would expect the secretary of state to use these powers very rarely."

Michael Barton, head of policy and impact at the National Governance Association, said if a trust inspection identified significant trust-wide concerns, it was appropriate that it lead to proportionate trust-wide intervention "just as it does where Ofsted currently identifies significant concerns at the school level".

Paul Stone, the chief executive of Nene Education Trust, said while "a big change", the proposal would level the playing field between academies and maintained schools.

"There are failing maintained schools and there are failing academies," he said. "[Closure] is to be expected, if a MAT's not working."

The DfE said MAT inspections "will raise standards in education" and "make the system fairer [and] more transparent", helping to close what it described as a "gap in accountability".

"It is not right that...the overall approach taken at trust-level by members, trustees and senior executives is not eligible for independent inspection."

Stone said MAT inspections "will help the system improve [and] will prove to the [sector] that the system works".

"I can't think of a MAT leader who hasn't wanted this for a long time."

How will inspections work?

MAT inspection reports will cover "the quality and effectiveness" of "leadership, management and governance" of a school, states the proposed legislation.

It gives Ofsted a duty to inspect trusts at specified intervals, although the length of those intervals has not yet been confirmed.

It also grants powers for non-routine inspections. This will mean "where specific concerns arise, they can be investigated quickly", according to DfE policy guidance.

A question mark remains over the form inspection reports will take, but this will be laid out in a new framework.

The legislation also gives inspectors powers to enter trust or academy premises, seize documents and records, and access computers used in connection with documents.

Tom Campbell, the chief executive of E-ACT, said MAT inspections could bring "real potential benefits" if "done well".

But he pointed out MATs "are complex organisations and no two are the same. Inspectors will need a deep understanding of how trusts operate and where accountability genuinely sits at local, regional and national level."

He questioned whether there was "an inspection workforce with the right expertise to do this well".

The DfE has not said whether Ofsted will receive more funding. Inspections will be piloted before being rolled out.

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Large MAT to give up two special schools

JACK DYSON
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EXCLUSIVE

Ministers are being urged to settle debate over their desired make-up of academy trusts after a huge MAT opted to give up two special schools it believes are better off in a SEND chain.

Another trust said it would be "impossible" for it to take on some special schools, while another chief executive warned there wasn't "external resource to meet the needs of those children" in his area.

Despite this, more trusts are opting not to specialise, amid an explosion in the number of children with special needs.

No direction

Jonathan Simons, director of education at the Public First think tank, believes this "reflects the conflicting currents and eddies in the system", with leaders without "a single direction of travel".

"We simply don't know enough to determine what the best structure is – but if the government wants more children educated in mainstream settings, then it will need to engage with these different currents and eddies."

Lift Schools, the fifth-largest trust in the country, is set to hand over two special schools, both in Essex, which cater for children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) and severe learning difficulties (SLD).

Lift said that "as part of its long-term strategic planning", it concluded "the next phase of development for both schools is best supported within a specialist trust".

The move will leave the chain with just three special schools, which have different specialisms. The trust said it has "made clear" to its wider staff "that the plans only apply to their two PMLD and SLD schools".

Elsewhere, the Meridian Trust, which runs 35 academies, including three special schools, called the "crisis in SEND provision" one of its – and the country's – "principal risks".

The "scale of the deficits" reported by some special schools had made it "impossible" to welcome them into the trust.

With local authorities "allowed to slide into irrecoverable debt" and "run far into the ground", key "multi-agency support required for quality provision is seldom seen".

Recruitment was also a "significant challenge", Meridian added, because of an "under-provision" of SEND teacher training and "the comparative pay of support workers".

Paul Rickeard, the chief executive of the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust, said "a lack of external resource to meet the needs of these children" made it unlikely he would take on a special school.

He said his MAT has had to stump up for private educational psychologists and occupational therapists, as the local authorities in his area were "struggling to meet demand with increasingly long waiting times".

"If such resources were more forthcoming the trust would then welcome such a provision," he said.

More mixed MATs

Analysis of government data shows 223 trusts have at least one special school, up slightly from 202 in 2020. Just over 560 (28 per cent) of the 2,030 academies in the trusts are special schools.

That figure stood at 32 per cent in 2020, suggesting they have taken on growing numbers of mainstream schools.

In August, it was announced that Transforming Futures Trust – which runs three special schools and one AP – will merge with the Reach South Academy Trust.

Reach South said the move would build "its capacity to deliver high-quality education across a broader range of needs".

Billingborough Primary in Lincolnshire was given the go-ahead to convert to academy status the year before, following "a change in pupil make-up" triggered by a rise in the number of youngsters with "complex and additional needs".

The Community Inclusive Trust was the school's "preferred option" as it could "benefit from the experience and expertise of practitioners in special school settings".

Leora Cruddas, the chief executive of theConfederation of School Trusts, noted every chain "is different and will be looking at their strategic approach and how they can best support their schools".

Some might be "all primary or all specialist, for example, or ... a mix of different types and phases of schools".

White paper hopes

It was recently revealed that government officials are working on white paper proposals to encourage all schools to be in a "group", though it is not known how this would be defined.

However, Tom Richmond, a former DfE adviser, believes "a clear steer" is needed on "whether the [department] want trusts to branch out or stick to what they know".

"We have spent years muddling through whether trusts should be specialist or generalist. With the tight funding settlement set to continue, the case for specialising within trusts is becoming stronger."

The DfE has been approached for comment.


Jonathan Simons


Tom Richmond

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DfE plans to use AI to reply to outside queries

RUTH LUCAS
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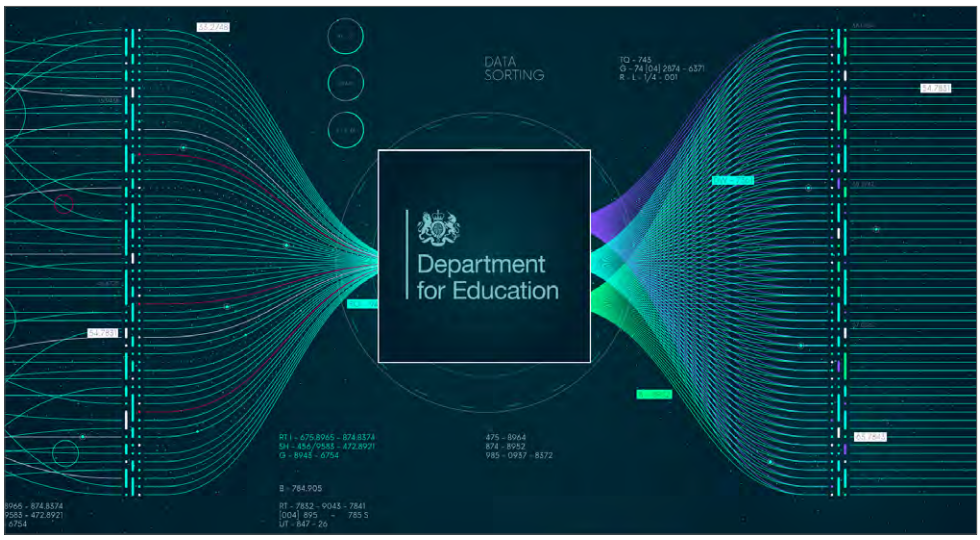
EXCLUSIVE



The Department for Education could soon use artificial intelligence to draft responses to as much as 80 per cent of its external correspondence.

Plans published in December by the Cabinet Office, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Government Digital Service reveal details of the DfE's "correspondence drafter tool".

The plans say the system can reduce the time it takes to draft a response to external correspondence from 30 to just one minute.

It will "create opportunities to prioritise more complex and high priority work" and in turn "hopefully enhance the department's reputation with regards to responding to external queries".

The department told *Schools Week* the tool will help to support some types of public correspondence from early this year. It is not clear whether it will be used to answer formal complaints.

But a digital safety campaigner has warned the tool cannot replicate the "necessary nuance and sensitivity to reply to a human being", while the Public and Commercial Services Union has urged the government to protect employees' jobs.

The tool will use Microsoft's Open Azure AI, which can be used to write a first response to external queries.

The AI searches for the relevant documents and information before drafting the response in an email template format.

A staff member must review the text and is able to edit it before copying and pasting.

The Azure model provides "extra security" compared with other large language models, plans indicate, while open-source LLMs – which scan the internet rather than uploaded documents – have not been approved.

The next phase of any rollout will include uploading about 400 documents to the system.

The government says it expects the tool ultimately could address 80 per cent of the DfE's monthly queries.

An impact assessment completed in November 2023 did not raise any concerns around the design of the tool, but the DfE said there were risks of hallucinations – misleading or false information presented as fact – that might impact accuracy.

'Who gains the most? We may find it's those AI companies'

The model has been developed to only pull information from inputted data, which should mitigate the danger of such hallucinations.

If the query does not relate to topics within the model's data, it will default to a message saying it is not available.

The DfE did not respond when asked by *Schools Week* whether the introduction of the model would result in staff cuts.

But it said AI "has the power to transform the way we live and work, and like many organisations, we are harnessing AI and technology across the government to improve efficiencies".

Its present use of AI to support responses to public enquiries "has led to improved efficiencies, faster response times and better allocation of resource".

Plans say the model "will create opportunities to prioritise more complex and high-priority work" and "in turn hopefully enhance the department's reputation with regards to responding to external queries".

But Fran Heathcoate, the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents civil servants, said any use of AI "must improve workers' lives and public services".

"We are urging government departments and arms'-length bodies to protect employees and public from potential harms, ensure accountability and to strengthen trade union rights in relation to AI."

Jen Persson, the director of Defend Digital Me, questioned whether the plans "actually solve a problem".

"The idea that text generators can do the thinking that incorporates the necessary nuance and sensitivity to reply to a human being is often misplaced – time and effort are rarely reduced in drafting correspondence."

Persson said there were "questions here to consider for liability, confidentiality, stability and security".

"I suspect once we see independent research we will find it is overall felt to be helpful, but in terms of who gains the most, we may find it's those AI companies, rather than budgets, our civil servants, or public interest."

AI is already used across a range of government departments, according to a House of Commons Library report.

The DfE is also experimenting with an AI tool to assist teachers by pooling government documents such as curriculum guidance and lesson plans, with Ofsted testing AI tools to predict which schools may decline in performance.


Jen Persson

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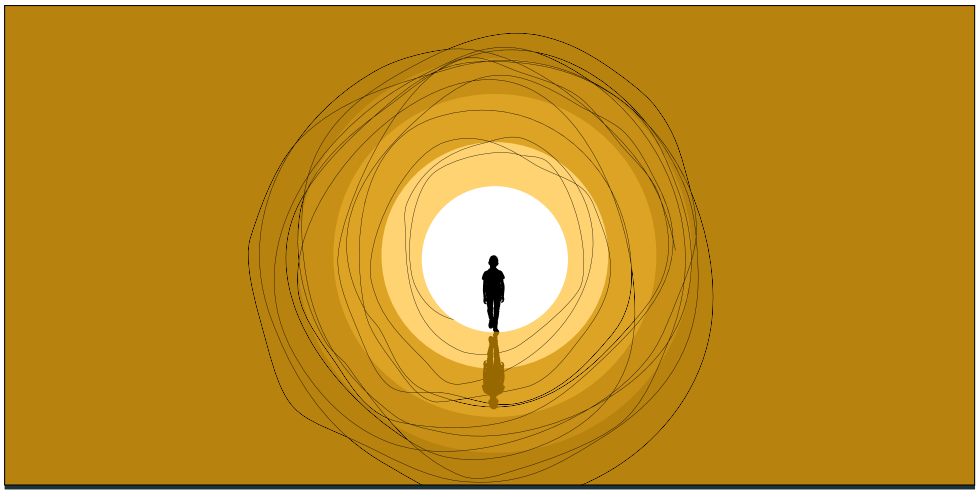
INVESTIGATION

Isolation in the spotlight with new data

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

The government does not collect national data on internal exclusion. But new figures reveal how often the controversial practice is used



'She felt she was being imprisoned for things she wasn't able to control'

Secondary schools that use internal exclusion are isolating almost a fifth of their pupils from their classmates at least once each year, new data shows.

Department for Education guidance states that removal from the classroom – sometimes called internal exclusion or isolation – "should be considered a serious sanction" and used once all other behaviour strategies are attempted.

Despite the seriousness of the measure, the government does not collect national data on its use.

But analysis of hundreds of schools by The Key Group, which owns management information system provider Arbor, has laid bare how often the measure is practised.

It comes as parents report that children with unmet special educational needs felt "imprisoned" after internal exclusion, while others said their child became selectively mute after feeling like the "reject kid".

But some sector leaders defended the practice as a "reset strategy designed to reboot the student's behaviour and attitudes" and as a way to prevent suspensions or permanent exclusions.

Data from The Key Group revealed 18.4 per cent of 856,654 pupils were internally excluded at least once in the 762 secondary schools that recorded internal exclusion in 2024-25.

The proportion was similar to the previous two academic years – 18.6 and 17.2 per cent. The data excludes schools that recorded no use of internal exclusion.

Haroon Chowdry, the chief executive of the Centre for Young Lives, said the research showed why better data and transparency on internal isolation was needed "as well as other back-door forms of lost learning and exclusion".

"The government should routinely collect this, both to shine a light on it and to ask why it is happening."

The figures, extracted from Arbor in November, also show a further 2.16 per cent of 16,217 primary pupils were internally excluded across 443 schools, with 7.43 per cent of 6,782 special school pupils.

Nicola West Jones, the director of insights and external relations at The Key Group, said it was previously "impossible to obtain the data view" needed to understand internal exclusion rates.

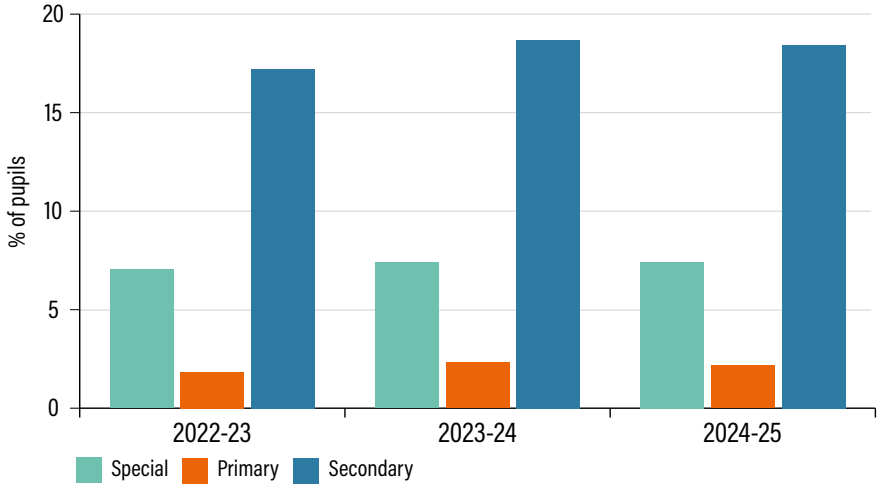
"Schools can make their own decisions about the extent to which they use internal exclusions.

"So to that end, it's interesting to see that overall, over the past three years, there has been very little change in both the percentage of secondary pupils who have had at least one internal


Haroon Chowdry


Nicola West Jones

Proportion of pupils internally excluded at least once in schools that use the practice



Source: Extracted from Arbor management information system on November 27, 2025

Secondary base: 2022-23: 396,097 pupils; 2023-24: 587,740 pupils; 2024-25: 856,654 pupils
Primary base: 2022-23: 82,639 pupils; 2023-24: 114,133 pupils; 2024-25: 160,217 pupils
Special base: 2022-23: 4,106 pupils; 2023-24: 5,427 pupils; 2024-25: 6,782 pupils

SCHOOLS WEEK

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION

exclusion recorded in Arbor, as well as the rate. It will be interesting to see if this changes –in either direction – over time."

How schools approach internal exclusion

When Sam Strickland became principal of Duston School in Northamptonshire nine years ago, he found its isolation room in "total disarray".

It had about 30 pupils, "making the member of staff who's managing the room's life a misery, graffiti everywhere".

Instead of getting rid of internal exclusions, Strickland changed how they worked.

Now, disruptive pupils are removed from the classroom and placed one-to-one with a senior member of staff in their office. They complete their work, but also get pastoral support.

"You are truly isolated, you are on your own with a member of staff," Strickland said.

"The flip side of that is that member of staff isn't going to just ignore you, will support you if you need that help. But equally you can't really mess around."

At Beacon High School in north London, pupils are sent to a "refocus room".

Those who may have underlying issues affecting their behaviour are directed to the wellbeing centre within the room to receive pastoral support.

Pupils who persistently misbehave are placed on a "pathways programme", where the school identifies and provides support for particular issues that might be causing their behaviour.

Alan Streeter, the school's head, said his system showed pupils, three quarters of whom are eligible for pupil premium, that "we're not just here to punish you, we're here to understand what you need to be successful".

Tom Bennett, the government's behaviour and attendance ambassador, said internal exclusions should be "described as a reset".

"It's a strategy designed to reboot the student's behaviour and attitudes in a small group environment. It's not a punishment, but a way of preventing or reducing actual suspensions and permanent exclusions."

Bennett argued the practice was important to "demonstrate to the rest of the school community that their safety and learning matters".

'Unimaginable consequences'

But many campaigners have warned against the impact of internal exclusions.

Ellie Costello, from parent support organisation Square Peg, said an internal exclusion can "set a ball off in a child's life that can have unimaginable consequences" that "disproportionately harms those facing the greatest challenges".

Sam Strickland

A study by the University of Manchester found pupils with an education, health and care plan, eligible for free school meals, and from black, Asian and mixed heritage backgrounds were more likely to be sent to isolation.

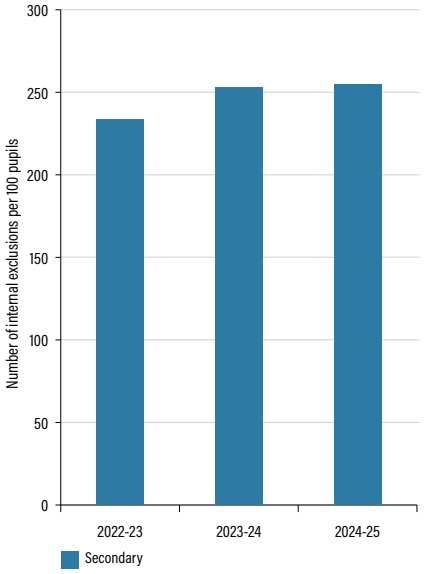
Nikola Jones, from south Manchester, said her son's time in one school's isolation room after a playground incident "caused six weeks of anguish" and resulted in him becoming selectively mute.

"He kept calling himself the reject kid. His social workers said it retriggered all these feelings of rejection, shame and humiliation," Jones said.

Another parent from South Hampshire, who requested anonymity, described how his daughter with unmet SEND needs was sent to an isolation room on a weekly basis.

"She felt at times she was being imprisoned, for things she wasn't able to control, and for reasons she didn't feel were right and weren't properly explained to her."

Rate of internal exclusion per 100 pupils, secondary schools, 2023-25



Source: Extracted from Arbor management information system on November 27, 2025

Secondary base: 2022-23: 396,097 pupils; 2023-24: 587,740 pupils; 2024-25: 856,654 pupils

SCHOOLS WEEK

> 'It's designed to reboot the student's behaviour and attitudes'

Do some schools use it more than others?

The Key Group's data found that out of 6,782 pupils at special schools using internal exclusions, 7.43 per cent were sent to isolation at least once.

Horizons Education Trust runs three special schools. Adam Dabin, its chief executive, said putting pupils with social, emotional and mental health or ADHD in isolation "is probably [asking] everything they can't do anyway".

"If you then expect them to sit there and do that in silence, not move, have no support – how are we expecting them to succeed in there?"

At Orchards Academy in Kent, headteacher Hannah Carter introduced "movement breaks" for disadvantaged pupils who would otherwise find themselves in isolation.

"To exclude them from the room may be perceived as a form of rejection", Carter said.

Instead of being sent to an isolation room, pupils can access learning in another classroom teaching the same subject.

Carter said it had "been working really well" because "it means they stay within the subject that they were learning and are following the same curriculum, but it's a fresh start in a new classroom".

The Key Group's data also suggests schools run by multi-academy trusts are more likely to use internal exclusions as a behaviour management tool, compared to council-maintained secondaries.

In the 2024-25 academic year, there were 266.04 internal exclusions per 100 pupils in MAT-run secondaries, while LA-maintained secondaries had a rate of 153.02 per 100 pupils.

However, The Key Group said "any differences between MAT and LA schools could be explained by MAT-wide policies around recording internal exclusions on the MIS, for consistency of reporting, so we should be cautious about interpretation of these results".

Bennett suggested MATs may be using internal exclusions more "because they have understood that resets can be a useful device to reduce suspensions".

Steve Rollett, the deputy chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said it was difficult to draw conclusions from the data as internal exclusions "can cover a lot of different practices".

"Schools of all types use a range of techniques to address behaviour."

NEWS

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No internal audit for trust with £8.4m deficit

JACK DYSON
@JACKYDYS

A trouble-hit academy trust has admitted it did not conduct internal financial checks as its deficit swelled to more than £8 million and it received another government loan to keep it afloat.

Accounts for the Arthur Terry Learning Partnership show the 24-school MAT could also receive a further £1 million in emergency funding.

Schools Week previously revealed how Arthur Terry had racked up seven-figure losses after purchasing iPads as part of an initiative to provide 11,000 devices for all pupils and staff.

The news comes after another major trust pulled itself out of six-figure deficit and into a surplus of more than £1 million.

Deficit grows

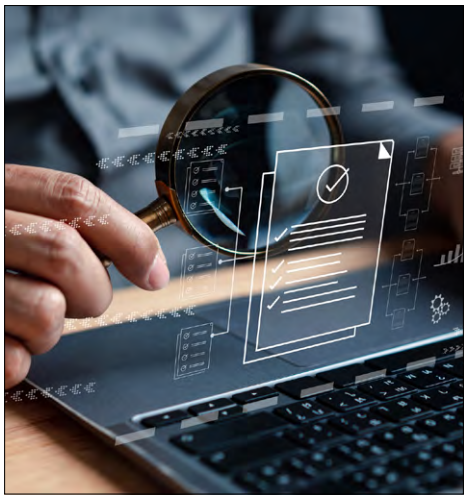
In 2024, Arthur Terry was issued with a notice to improve by the DfE on financial grounds after being offered a £1.5 million government loan and posting an almost £4 million deficit.

But 2024-25 accounts, published this week, show it received more "deficit funding", as it slipped to an £8.4 million deficit.

In all, it has been loaned £3.5 million, all of which "had been drawn down by the year end".

The accounts added trust chiefs had struck an agreement in principle with officials for "an additional £1 million of repayable funding".

A trust spokesperson said it "has navigated



through several financial challenges over the past few years".

While it "accept[s] that some are due to internal issues, it is also well recognised that the ... landscape for schools over this period has caused and is causing all schools to make difficult decisions".

Internal checks

Accounts also said "no financial internal audit activity took place" over the year. This was "due to significant changes being implemented to financial processes, systems and platforms, alongside considerable turnover within the finance team".

An audit of "changes implemented in 2024-25 has since taken place, with an initial review undertaken during November to validate and assess the changes implemented".

However, Phil Reynolds, of PLR Advisory, said the checks could have helped with the deficit as procedural issues "could be slipping the net quite easily" without them.

"An internal audit isn't there to find financial issues. If that wasn't done this year, how can the trustees get assurance that these are being adhered to?"

The academy trust handbook says trusts must establish "a programme of internal scrutiny ... to provide independent assurance to the board that its systems, controls and risk management procedures are operating effectively".

The trust stressed it "obtained assurance during the year through several deployments" of government school resource management advisers (SRMAs).

Its spokesperson added the MAT has "worked with several external professionals over the year to ensure that financial planning is scrutinised".

Deficit to surplus

Elsewhere, the Diocese of Norwich Education and Academies Trust posted a £1.4 million surplus after a £180,000 deficit the year before.

Oliver Burwood, its chief executive, said the MAT – which runs 40 primaries and one secondary – "overachieved on its budget this year".

He acknowledged the trust had been "overoptimistic in terms of income" predictions before shifting to a "cautious" approach.

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Impact of RISE teams to be published this year

Ministers are set to publish data on the effectiveness of new RISE school improvement teams this year – but they won't out individual advisers for poor performance.

Sixty-five experienced turnaround school leaders were appointed as advisers on the Labour programme, which launched last year.

They are appointed to struggling schools in their region to identify priorities and propose an outside organisation to deliver support.

Regional directors within the Department for Education then make final decisions, with up to £100,000 funding available for each school. No information on the scheme's impact has so far been published.

But in response to a question from former education secretary Damian Hinds, Georgia Gould, the schools minister, said: "The department expects to start publishing that data with appropriate comparisons over time during 2026."

She added the "impact of RISE intervention will rely on both a quantitative evaluation of the impact on pupils ... and an evaluation on the process and delivery of RISE".

A review "measuring change over time in key success measures, such as attainment and attendance, for schools receiving" support set against "a suitable group of comparator schools will be carried out in due course".

A *Schools Week* investigation last year found one in five of the schools receiving support are getting it from an organisation employing another RISE adviser.

One trust chief executive, who did not want to be named, said it "gives the perception of jobs for the boys".

However Gould, when answering a question from shadow education minister Nick Timothy, confirmed the government "does not intend to publish individual adviser objectives".

"These are part of personal performance management and may constitute personal data that cannot be disclosed under data protection requirements."

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LONG READ

Falling rolls not just a capital crisis

CHAMINDA JAYANETTI
@SCHOOLSWEEK

Declining childbirth rates are hitting school demographics with many schools facing closure. Schools Week investigates

'I may no longer be able to afford a lot of things I want for my pupils'

Shiremoor Primary was once a two-form-entry school. But in the past couple of years, pupil numbers at the North Tyneside school have dropped off a cliff.

"All of a sudden, the year before last, the admissions numbers were just really far down and we ended up with about 34 children, which obviously isn't enough," says headteacher Barbara Middleton.

"I've lost essentially two classes."

With school funding based on pupil numbers, she has already had to let go three teachers.

"Shiremoor is an old mining community, and it means that we need a lot of resource to support children in reaching the standards that we want them to reach," she says.

"I've always overstaffed so that we could do really great interventions ... so that we could reduce class sizes. This year we just haven't been able to overstaff in the way that we would normally."

Shiremoor is rated 'good' by Ofsted. Children get a Chromebook each to take home for school work and benefit from specialist Spanish and music teachers and intensive support in phonics.

But these interventions could be under threat.

"My worry is that a lot of the things that I have been able to afford for my children, I may no longer be able to," says Middleton.

Shiremoor is far from alone. Declining childbirth rates since 2012 are now hitting school demographics, taking many well above the advised 5 per cent rate of surplus places to maintain flexibility.

Most attention has focused on London, where birthrates started falling a year before the rest of the country and where housing prices and Brexit are driving emigration from the city. But falling school rolls are biting outside the capital too.

Analysis of council documents shows Stockport has 17 per cent surplus places in reception year alone, and 32 per cent surplus capacity in Edgeley, a suburb in the city.

Southampton is forecasting 3,000 surplus places in 2029-30, equivalent to 100 classes. Central Bedfordshire is forecasting around 10,000 surplus places in 2030-31.

A quarter of Stoke's 71 primary schools are predicted to hit at least 20 per cent surplus capacity in the coming years, and at least one school in south Norfolk was allocated no children for its 2024 intake.

Councils view school closures as a last resort, with a government presumption against the closure of rural schools – but they are happening. Even where they're not, local authorities warn they may become inevitable.

The Standard reported last summer that 30 London schools were set to shut at the start of the 2025-26 academic year.

But closures aren't limited to the capital. Last year Hackforth and Hornby Primary School in North Yorkshire shut after it shrank to just eight pupils. Snape Wood Primary in Nottingham will shut this autumn after its unfilled capacity rose to 42 per cent, while Hertfordshire County Council is consulting on closing two primaries.

So far declining birthrates have mainly hit primaries, but secondary schools will be affected as the demographic black hole progresses up the age range.

In Camden, north London, which has experienced a 36 per cent fall in childbirth rates since 2012, the council has already cut secondary school intake by 4.5 entry-year classes.

Parental choice can exacerbate the situation. Declining numbers mean the most popular local schools are less likely to be oversubscribed.

As more parents to flock to these popular schools, less popular schools are left with rapidly shrinking pupil numbers.

A recent Norfolk County Council report said that in its rural Cromer and Sheringham planning area, which has 32 per cent surplus capacity in its primary schools, "uncontrolled parental preference" for more popular schools has led to "the total destabilisation of other schools in the area".

The first response is to reduce published admission numbers (PAN), cutting the number of pupils schools can admit. This allows more realistic planning, and potentially lower staff

Continued on next page

LONG READ

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headcounts. But it can also mean mixed-year classes.

"To support effective models of curriculum planning and delivery, we will seek wherever possible solutions that enable single-age classes," a Norfolk council report said in October.

"Where this is not possible, cohorts of 15 support two-year mixed-age group classes, or 10, which supports three-year mixed-age group classes limits the impact of mixed-aged teaching."

But while PANs can be cut, the size and cost of senior staffing and school buildings are more static.

The next stage is for schools to either join a multi-academy trust or federation, or merge with another school, enabling staffing efficiencies, including at management level.

Schools that shrink or merge are also left with potentially redundant buildings to maintain. But councils are keen to hold on to them as birthrates may rise again.

There are opportunities here as well, with the

'Reducing published admission numbers can mean mixed-year classes'

government encouraging primary schools to open nurseries in unused classrooms.

Other alternatives for redundant school buildings include SEND provision, sharing facilities with community groups, and post-16 programmes.

Government "falling rolls funding" can usually only be spent on schools that can show their shrinking pupil numbers are temporary, and will be reversed within a few years.

But this funding can be used to repurpose space to create SEND provision or early years places, even where no bounceback is forecast.

Repurposing school buildings is not a panacea, however.

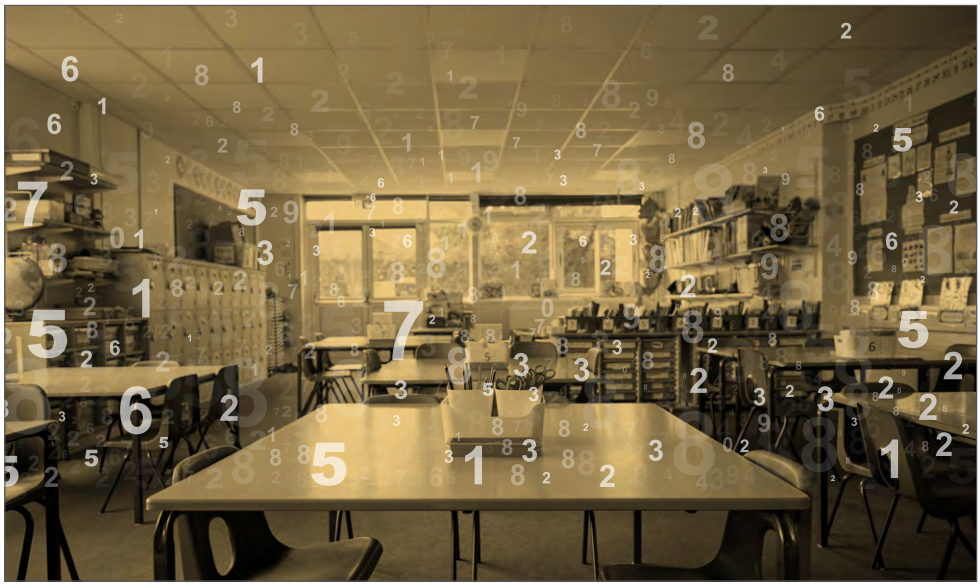
"Whilst the government's agenda around early years and childcare and sufficiency will utilise some surplus capacity in primary schools," West Sussex County Council warned in a recent report, "this will not be sufficient to actively plan for the significant reduction in need for primary school places projected".

Closure is a last resort.

Last month Newham Council in east London approved shutting Calverton Primary School at the end of this academic year after filling less

Continued on next page

LONG READ



‘A reduction of just ten pupils can have a significant financial impact’

than half its capacity.

All children will be offered places at local schools, while those with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) will have early annual reviews to determine their next placement.

The school’s specialist SEND provision – something the government wants to encourage – has made its closure particularly controversial.

Ofsted rated the school ‘outstanding’ in all areas last summer and lavished praise on its SEND provision.

Darren Williams, the executive head of the CPD Schools Federation that includes Calverton, said the closure was “inevitable”.

“We marketed the school as best as we could, and particularly amongst our parents with younger children, to get them in as early as possible. But other than that, we were in a very challenging position where the roll has been falling for a number of years.”

He says the council has given assurances that pupils with EHCPs will be found alternative provision. But he worries about those with high needs but no EHCP.

“A much smaller number of schools have resourced provision, and a large number of mainstream children that access our resourced provision require that more specialist support.”

Local authorities are setting out criteria on how they will judge PAN reductions and what might lead them to close schools.

However, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator has shown its willingness to block inadequately laid plans. Last year it stopped closures in Lambeth, south London, and the Isle of Wight.

“The Department for Education should ensure that all schools, including academies, work together as a local ecosystem to manage the implications of any school closures,” says Amanda Hopgood, chair of the Local Government Association’s children, young people and families committee.

There is much evidence of the impact falling rolls have on school finances. More schools in Southampton have running deficits, with a council report noting this is “largely due to a decrease in pupil numbers leading to a reduction in funding”.

There was a 20 per cent fall in reception year pupils in Islington, north London, and a 10 per cent fall in year 7 pupils between 2021-22 and 2024-25, with schools’ collective net balances falling from £9.5 million in 2020-21 to £5.3 million in 2024-25.

Amanda Hopgood

So far three schools have closed and two have merged into other schools.

“A reduction of just ten pupils can have a significant financial impact on a school’s income, but very little impact on its ability to reduce costs,” a council report said.

According to the Confederation of School Trusts (CST), 53 per cent of trust chief executives identified falling rolls as one of the three most immediate risks to their financial stability in 2025, up from 28 per cent in 2023.

Almost 80 per cent of CEOs of trusts with more than 20 schools flagged falling rolls as an immediate financial risk, compared with 26 per cent of CEOs of single-school trusts.

Leora Cruddas, the confederation’s chief executive, says trusts are “looking carefully at costs and where unused classrooms can be repurposed for things like nursery provision. But this is not always straightforward.*

School closures also present a financial risk to councils.

Calverton’s closure is expected to cost Newham up to £3.5 million, with the council having to absorb its estimated £2 million deficit by the time it shuts – worsened by falling pupil numbers – plus £1 million in redundancy and pension costs and £500,000 for leasing agreements.

Newham’s report described such costs as “a growing risk given a number of other, mainly small schools are on a similar path of falling pupil numbers without reducing expenditure budgets at a matching pace”.

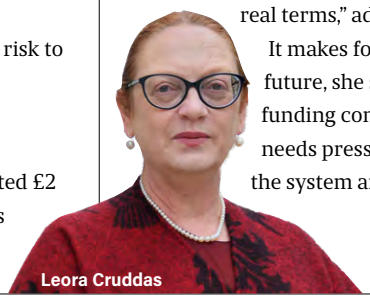
Housebuilding can help push back the tide. But this can mean some councils having to deal with both pupil growth pressures and falling school rolls at the same time.

Wokingham has a surplus of primary places and will require “further reductions” in admission numbers. But rising roll numbers in some parts of the borough mean there is “insufficient local provision”, a report said.

The cuts in funding driven by falling rolls only compound the impact of years of real-terms reductions.

“You're talking double figure years since we've had a rise in the amount of money per child in real terms,” adds Middleton.

It makes for a bleak financial future, she says, as the cut in funding combines with special needs pressures that are costing the system an “absolute fortune”.



Leora Cruddas

NEWS

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SEND sessions 'have shaped our thinking', insists Gould

RUTH LUCAS
@RUTHLUCAS_

Accountability and better support for parents have been "consistent themes" emerging from SEND "conversations", the schools minister told *Schools Week* as she assured the sector that feedback would be reflected in upcoming reforms.

Georgia Gould said the listening sessions, dubbed by the Department for Education as the "biggest national conversation on SEND in a generation", have "really shaped our thinking" on the white paper, set to be released in the coming weeks.

Schools Week attended the penultimate session held in Darlington on Thursday and attended by about 100 people, including parents, headteachers, local government officers and SEND specialists. Thousands have attended online events hosted by Gould.

Parents and campaigners have said the exercise was "futile" because it ran so close to the delayed white paper's publication date.

But Gould said the government "can be really clear" that reforms have come "directly from these conversations". However, she did not reveal what these were.

Gould, a former council leader, said accountability, greater support for parents and better partnership between health, local authority and schools had been "consistent themes" across the country.


Georgia Gould

On Thursday, DfE officials on roundtables heard from one parent about how the money wasn't there to fund identified support.

The parent added it was only because they could privately fund their child that he could succeed in his education.

One school leader said more teacher training was needed. Another participant said there had been a "lack of national leadership".

Parents have previously expressed their frustrations that little effective action has followed the many reviews or reports into the SEND system.

Gould, who was appointed in September, told *Schools Week* there had been "hundreds and hundreds of conversations" before the events, all of which were "helping us shape the white paper".

ON LOCATION

"This is such a huge, huge reform. It's so deeply important for people around the country. It's a system that affects so many young people – it's critical that we get this right."

"I felt, we all felt, it was important to take that extra time to do these listening events. I'm so glad that we have because we've got so much out of them."

When asked what has surprised her the most, Gould said a group of young people with SEND told her they wanted someone with "lived experience, whether that was a kind of mentor, a teacher, that they could talk to [about] having special educational needs and disabilities".

They told her it would make a "huge difference".

Responding to an article published by *The Times* that suggested children with more "moderate needs" such as ADHD could lose statutory support, Gould only said "there's always going to be a legal basis to support for children with special educational needs".

The last online event will take place next Wednesday evening. Then the wait for the reforms begins.

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOOTH

GCSE results available by app this year

All schools, colleges and year 11 pupils in England will have the option to view GCSE results on a government app this summer.

The "education record" app is being rolled out nationally after a pilot in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands last year, in which only 6 per cent of invited settings took part.

If taken up nationwide, ministers believe it could save schools and colleges up to £30 million, as it would get rid of photocopying and reduce manual data entry.

Pupils will still go into school on results day to meet with their teachers and receive their grades, which will later be available on the app. It will also make it easier for pupils to enrol at their post-16 destinations.

If schools choose to sign up, they will have to link the pupil's data to the youngster's mobile. The Department for Education populates the records.

A-level results will be available on the app in future.

Jacqui Smith, the skills minister, said no pupil "should have to rifle through drawers looking for a crumpled certificate when preparing for a job interview".

"This app will give young people instant access to their results whenever they need them, while freeing up teachers and college staff from unnecessary paperwork."

When launching the pilot last year, the DfE said more than 95,000 young people would get their results via the app. A total of 487 schools and colleges were invited.

But only 29 schools took up the offer, meaning the pilot only involved about 4,000 pupils. The DfE said it was run on an optional basis, and it was not mandatory for schools or pupils to take part.

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Heads given gongs in new year's honours


Vanessa Langley with former pupil Ellie

Four primary school headteachers have been awarded MBEs in the New Year Honours List.

The serving heads are among 57 people working in or with schools who have been recognised in a list that included a knighthood for an academy trust chief executive and a damehood for a professor of social mobility.

Remi Atoyebi, the head of Osmani Primary School in east London for 20 years, was "gobsmacked" when she found she had been awarded an MBE for services to education.

Thirty-five per of pupils at her school are eligible for free school meals and 99 per cent speak English as a second language.

Atoyebi has worked hard to widen pupils' horizons through programmes such as partnerships with City firms. The school also runs a range of classes for parents, including English and computing workshops, and a volunteer scheme to help parents gain work experience.

As a member of the BAME community, Atoyebi is "deeply committed to inclusive leadership" and has coached and supported more than 50 people from BAME backgrounds to reach senior leadership roles.

News of her MBE "still feels very surreal".

"I'm deeply grateful, and I'm humbled," she said, adding the recognition is "not just for me" but for staff, pupils, parents, and Osmani's governing body.

Edison David, the executive headteacher of the 'outstanding'-rated Granton Primary in south London said he was "deeply honoured" to have received an MBE.

"It has been a privilege to serve children, families and school communities in this country for nearly two decades". He moved to the UK in 2001 and is believed to be the first person of Filipino heritage to receive an MBE for services to education.

"I share this honour with all overseas teachers and leaders who contribute so much to the fabric of British education," he said.

Vanessa Langley, the head of Arbourthorne Community Primary School in Sheffield for 18 years, said she was "elated" to have received the honour, which she dedicated to the community.

"Genuine inclusion for learning sits at the heart of what makes us special," she said.

"We've got 38 languages spoken here, 45 per cent of the children on the special education needs register, 70 per cent entitled to pupil premium and 44 per cent global majority. It's a vibrant and energetic environment."

Ofsted described the school in 2022 as "a place of joy, inclusivity and learning" where "everyone is valued".

The school redistributes surplus food, grows produce on-site for families, and runs a community kitchen for parents.

"Parents have some very challenging circumstances," said Langley. "Unless we address the needs of the community...it's very difficult to get the outcomes that we've been looking for."

John Francis Towers, the head of the private Barrow Hills School in Surrey, also received an MBE.

Meanwhile Rebecca Bollands, head of Earlson Primary in Coventry, was made an MBE for services to cultural education.

She has helped create cultural opportunities for thousands of young people, particularly those "who would not otherwise" have them, through roles at the Coventry Cultural Education Partnership and the Royal Ballet and Opera.

She described the "transformational" effect of the arts, and importance of ensuring access for disadvantaged young people. "Going into our heritage places, cultural places, theatres, that's something that they have a right to as well.

"It's about that accessibility – them realising actually I've got as much right to be in these buildings as all these people with tons of money and...advantage."

Knighthood for trust CEO

Dr Stephen Taylor, the chief executive of the 35-school Cabot Learning Federation (CLF) and chair of the Queen Street Group of academy leaders, was knighted for services to education.

He paid tribute to those at CLF and in the wider sector "whose work and successes have inspired me over the years to strive to do my best for the children we serve".

He was "extremely grateful for this honour and look forward to sharing the news with colleagues and sharing the experience with my family, whose support I never take for granted".

Sonia Blandford, professor of social mobility at Plymouth Marjon University and founder of the school improvement charity Achievement for All, was made a dame.

She thanked "all my colleagues, friends and family for your support and kindness throughout my career", adding: "I am proud to be a member of the teaching profession."


Edison David


Remi Atoyebi


Rebecca Bollands

Continued on next page

NEWS: HONOURS

The Schools list

DAMEHOOD

Professor Sonia Blandford, professor of social mobility, Plymouth Marjon University

KNIGHTHOOD

Dr Stephen Peter Taylor, CEO, Cabot Learning Federation

CBE

Professor Teresa Mary Cremin, professor of education, The Open University

Shazia Kauser Hussain, director of children's social care, Department for Education

Deborah Anna Jones, lately executive director children, families and education services, Croydon Council

Heather Ann Sandy, executive director of children's services, Lincolnshire County Council

OBE

Anita Frances Maria Bath, CEO, Bishop Bewick Catholic Education Trust

Jonathan Bishop, CEO, Cornerstone Academy Trust, Devon. For services to Education. Devon

Simon Elliott, CEO, Community Schools Trust

Emma Kate English, executive director, British Educational Travel Association

Clare Elizabeth Flintoff, former CEO, Asset Education

Linda Susan Jones, CEO, Prospere Learning Trust

Carolyn Morgan, former CEO, The Ascent Academies' Trust

Gaynor Alison Rennie, former headteacher, All Souls Church of England Primary School, Lancashire

Paul Thompson Rickeard, CEO, Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust

Dr Nikolaos Savvas, CEO, Eastern Education Group

Timothy William Sherriff, vice-chair, Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors

William George Stewart Smith, CEO, Greenshaw Learning Trust

Thomas Brendan Tapping, CEO, Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust

Victoria Ann Wells, former director of sport, Youth Sport Trust

Rachel Emma Wilkes, CEO, Humber Education Trust

MBE

Olusola Oluronke Anike Alabi, director, Exam Success Education Centre

Oluremi Morenike Atoyebi, headteacher, Osmani Primary School, Tower Hamlets

Helen Victoria Bingham early years practitioner, Aspire Academy Trust

Rebecca Jane Bollands, headteacher, Earlson Primary School, Coventry

Georgina Burrows (Georgina Stafford), senior teacher, Rumworth School, Bolton

Mervin Cato, head of secondary behaviour support service, Enfield Council

Judith Lesley Charlesworth, former chair, Barnet Special Education Trust

Eileen Gillian Clark, vice-chair, Pickwick Academy Trust Board

Lucy Conley, former CEO, South Lincolnshire Academies Trust

Kathryn Anne Crewe-Read, former headteacher, Bishop's Stortford College

Edison David, executive headteacher, Granton Primary School, Lambeth

Jacqueline Anne Dellar, former CEO, Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust

Andrea English, former executive headteacher, North and South West Durham Learning Federation

Margaret Antoinette Fisher, former chair of governors, Dorridge Primary School

Fiona Mary George, trustee, Rumbletums Community Cafe, Kimberley (for services to SEN)

Beth Gibson, head of attendance and inclusive pathways, Birmingham City Council

Vanessa Marie Graus (Vanessa Langley) headteacher, Arbourthorne Community Primary School, Sheffield

David John Gurney, CEO, Cockburn Multi-Academy Trust, Leeds

David William Hudson, former headteacher, Royal Latin School, Buckinghamshire

Amanda King, early years strategic lead, Warwickshire County Council and Coventry City Council

Michael Andrew Loncaster, former headteacher, Molescroft Primary School, Beverley

Karen Ratcliffe, former headteacher, Harton Primary School, South Shields

Kylie Melissa Spark, CEO, Inspiring Learners Multi-Academy Trust

John Francis Towers, headmaster, Barrow Hills School

Rachael Warwick, former CEO, Ridgeway Education Trust

MEDALLISTS OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (BEM)

Jake Oliver Armstrong, careers leader, Addey and Stanhope School, Lewisham

Amila Begumahmed (Amila Ahmed) teaching assistant, Cyril Jackson Primary, Tower Hamlets

Kelly Clarke, inclusion manager, Hanson Academy, Bradford

Annabel Susan Alice Gittins, chair, Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians

Frances Elizabeth Hill, caretaker, John Ruskin School, Coniston

John Melvyn Johnson, volunteer, Wolverhampton Grammar School

Susan Renee Marshall, for services to education in Weston-super-Mare

Bhajan Matharu, assistant headteacher, Deanesfield Primary School, Hillingdon

Lisa Riding, head of the speech and communication specialist resource, St Thomas à Becket, Wakefield

Cindy Marie Sutcliffe, inclusion manager, Hanson Academy, Bradford

Brenda Irene Wright, volunteer, St Issey Church of England Primary School, Wadebridge

Nerd note: All honours are for services to education unless specified. Please bear in mind we only cover the schools sector in England

Profile

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOOTH

RAAC but not ruined

Baroness Barran's time as an education minister was dominated by falling concrete, but the peer counts numerous achievements as the Tory party crumbled around her

A few days after she was appointed as academies minister in 2021, officials described to Baroness Diana Barran the severity of a key item in her in-tray.

"This is your Grenfell, minister."

They were describing the RAAC crisis that has now blighted hundreds of England's schools.

Huge sheets of reinforced autoclave aerated concrete installed decades ago were sat above thousands of children. If water gets into the material, its metal reinforcements rust, causing it to fall down as one piece.

Barran recalls the "peace time" during 2022 and early 2023, when she agreed that the department would offer free surveys to all schools where staff thought they might have the crumbly concrete and then replace it, before the dramatic "war time".

In the summer of 2023, three "low risk" planks collapsed. Thankfully no one was harmed, but this kickstarted a chain of events that dominated newspaper headlines for months.

More than 100 schools were told days before the start of the academic year to close entirely.

Few will have forgotten then education secretary Gillian Keegan's 'hot-mic' moment, in which she was recorded asking why she wasn't thanked for doing a "f***ing good job".

But while admitting others may disagree, Barran believes the government's response to the crisis was one of her proudest moments.

She visited every school that couldn't teach on-site while facing remedial works.

"There was a very difficult school with autistic children and I went there several times and met with the parents," she recalls.

"I don't know whether it did any good or didn't do any good, but I just felt the decent thing was to look them in the eye because if you've got a

Profile: Baroness Barran

severely disabled child, school closing is just much more than school closing.

"They had terrible worries about whether the children would be able to go to another setting – it was really, very difficult. I think we behaved as decently and as humanly as I knew how.

"We might have been able to do it better, but it was as good as I knew how."

Resisting the churn

During a period of huge churn in education ministers towards the end of the last Conservative government, whether you agreed with her policies or not, Barran became a consistent face in Parliament for the sector.

She served as minister for the school system from September 2021 until the general election in 2024.

"I think if I put myself into the shoes of civil servants, it must be so frustrating when ministers change every five minutes, I had five secretaries of state in three years. Admittedly, three of them were very short, but even so, it's far from ideal."

She quickly earned a reputation for hard work, not something always considered synonymous with the public reputation of the House of Lords.

In 2022, during the dying days of Boris Johnson's government, she was tasked with introducing the schools bill – a proposed blueprint for academy system reform.

Former academies ministers joined a cacophony of opposition, and after long debates and late nights in the chamber, the bill was finally dropped by Rishi Sunak's administration.

After the 2024 election, fellow peer Lord Leigh of Hurley described Barran as "one of many Lords ministers who quietly got on with their job to improve people's lives without fuss, seeking credit or even pay".

Like many other Lords, Barran did not draw a ministerial salary on top of her attendance allowance.

Barran knows the Lords like the back of her hand. When we meet, she walks us down corridors and up small staircases resembling a scene out of Harry Potter to find a tucked-away meeting room.

Although she is a Tory peer, Barran doesn't consider herself particularly political.

Barran in House of Lords

Photo: House of Commons Flickr

'We behaved as decently and as humanly as I knew how'

"I just want to do the right thing, which I know sounds a bit cheesy."

Before being nominated to the Lords by then home secretary Theresa May, Barran had a long history in the charity sector.

She set up a domestic abuse charity, called SafeLives, after realising existing help was "unacceptable" as it usually expected women and children to go to a refuge. Barran believed they should be supported to stay safe in their homes.

The charity instead looked at what other support routes were available, such as having one consistent person to advise women on their options.

As well as helping to change these women's lives, Barran said one of the things she's proudest of was giving opportunities and jobs to those "who maybe otherwise in life might not have had them.

"I didn't really care how many O-levels, A-levels, degrees, anybody had. And there were a number of people who were very senior at SafeLives who were absolutely brilliant and I was a part of giving them an opportunity to shine and change the world a bit."

One of the "distinguishing features" in 66-year-old Barran's childhood was her elderly father, a City banker who was diagnosed with dementia when she was about 11 years old.

Her Jewish mother had fled Budapest aged just 22, hours after Hitler invaded. Barran described her as coming from a "culture which felt that women could do anything".

For instance, Barran's grandmother had set up a business in the 19th century which only employed women.

"She was quite a long way ahead of her time," Barran explained. "So I definitely was brought up believing there's nothing you can't do as a woman."

Barran studied at a Catholic convent junior school, a girls' grammar school and then Benenden School, an independent boarding school in Kent.

"My brother was eight years' older than me, he'd

Profile: Baroness Barran

already left home, my dad was very ill. So just being around, selfishly, people your own age was good fun," Barran says.

She initially read law at Cambridge, but transferred to history and stuck with it after her father died as she did not wish to study a four-year degree.

"I think I would have done much better at law as I have a pretty analytical brain, but I just feel actually, I've had so much luck in my life, I have absolutely no grumbles."

During her first career working in investment in the City, she was one of about five women out of 800 employees who were not administrative.

But she never felt "any discrimination at all", adding: "I always thought I was treated exactly the same as everybody else."

Whip hand

In the Lords, Barran served initially as a government whip and then as minister for civil society.

In 2021, when she was asked to become an education minister, she was handed a "whopping" portfolio.

It included academies and multi-academy trusts, intervention in underperforming schools, capital investment, admissions, safeguarding and counter extremism, to name a few. She also became the department's go-to minister for everything AI.

"It's invidious to make comparisons, but it was huge. So one of things I tried to do was work out what were the big things that I was going to concentrate on.

"Some of those things you can't choose, like the RAAC crisis. But other things I actively chose.

"I suppose the battle is not to get sucked into all kinds of micro stuff and just say, what are the things that are going to move the needle for children?"

Her big focus was on the number of children in inadequate or "double requires improvement" rated schools.

"There were about three quarters of a million children and we did a not very sophisticated back-of-the-envelope [calculation] as to how many kids you could move out of those schools.

Photo: DfE Flickr

'I had five secretaries of state in three years, it's far from ideal'

"So bring in a new trust, the school [could] be inspected – we reckoned it was about 100,000 a year. It's a massive thing for children to go from a failing school to a high functioning school."

Barran said they beat their target, but it was a "journey" as civil servants were "so sceptical and not believing that I really meant that this was a real target".

"By the end I would be getting text messages at nine o'clock on a Friday night going 'minister, really sorry to interrupt you but last month we were at 37,000 which means we're ahead'.

"Suddenly, it was super rewarding for them."

She felt she was able to "unlock brilliant work" by a team of civil servants on attendance data, with more granular data now published on types of absence.

But Barran wishes she could have focused "even more on execution and implementation much earlier".

"In the early days, you'd go into a meeting and you'd agree something. And then six months later I'd say 'what happened to that?'. And the answer was 'nothing', and I thought it was happily happening in the background.

"So I became an unbelievable pain but I kept track of everything myself and then got my private office to chase it up. After a bit, people realise that you're actually serious. When you agree 'X', it means that it's done."

Barran still keeps a close eye on academies, now serving as opposition education minister in the Lords.

Of Labour's proposed changes, the one she disagrees with most is the removal of automatic academy orders for failing schools.

"I remember going into a school that had been sponsored and asking one of the children who was showing me around 'what was it like a year ago?'.

"She looked at me in horror and said, 'we wouldn't have left you alone in the corridor, miss'."

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Opinion

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BECKS BOOMER-CLARK
CEO, Lift Schools

Intentional design: What stewardship of the school system really demands

A mature school system should allow for specialisation without stigma and divestment without failure narratives, argues Becks Boomer-Clark

When I was the regional schools commissioner for the south west, I used to pose a deliberately uncomfortable question.

Would a sane and objective observer in 2030 look at a map of England's school system and conclude that it had been shaped by wise stewardship?

It wasn't a rhetorical flourish. It was an attempt to surface something we often avoid naming: that the school system we inhabit today is not the result of a single, coherent design, but of thousands of individual decisions made under pressure, over time, by many of us – trust leaders, boards, civil servants and ministers alike.

This is not about criticism or blame. Some of the most high-profile examples of incoherent growth were not only permitted but encouraged.

Every academy order has ultimately been signed by a regional schools commissioner or regional director acting under delegated authority from the secretary of state. The landscape we navigate is one we've all had a hand in creating.

And that brings responsibility.

As the system matures, the question is no longer simply whether trusts can grow, but whether they should – and under what conditions.

Structures do not raise standards, people do. But well-designed structures allow expertise to grow, talent to flourish and improvement to sustain itself.

I was often asked variations of the "too big/too small" question.

How large should a trust be? How many trusts should there be in a place? My honest answer was usually: we know what too small looks like, but we don't yet know what too big is. And in many places, there were simply too many trusts.

At Lift Schools, we have spent the last two years grappling with these questions.

We operate nationally, across multiple regions and local authorities, but we are unapologetically local in our impact.

That is not accidental. It has required deliberate choices: creating coherent regions, clarifying accountability and governance, and ensuring our regional directors carry responsibility equivalent to CEOs of similarly-sized trusts, while benefiting from national scale and resilience.

This is what I mean by intentional design: shaping organisations so they serve children, staff and communities, not asking people to contort themselves around inherited structures.

> "The school system is the result of thousands of individual decisions

It is also why we recently took the difficult decision to explore transferring our two schools for children with profound and multiple learning disabilities and severe learning difficulties, Lift Columbus and Lift Pioneer, to a specialist SEND trust, The Bridge MAT.

We did this because, on reflection, we didn't believe the long-term needs of pupils with profound and complex needs were best served within a predominantly mainstream trust, however strong its inclusive intent.

Highly specialist provision benefits from depth: SEND-specific leadership pathways, peer networks, professional learning communities and system infrastructure designed explicitly around complex needs.

We believe both schools will be better served within a trust whose sole purpose is to serve young people with complex and very specialist needs. This is what system maturity should look like, recognising complementary strengths, not competing identities.

As we enter a period of renewed focus on SEND reform nationally, these questions will only intensify.

How do we organise the system so expertise is not diluted? How do we balance scale with specialism? How do we avoid confusing growth with success? Above all, what leadership does this moment demand of us?

For trust leaders and boards, it demands humility. The willingness to say, "this school may now be better served elsewhere".

For regulators and policymakers, it demands clarity of vision about the role of trusts and the shape of the system we are collectively building. For all of us, it demands the courage to prioritise coherence over comfort.

Intentional design is not about perfection. It is about stewardship. And if, in 2030, someone does look back at the system we shaped, I hope they will see not just growth, but wisdom and ambition for young people.

Perhaps the harder truth is this – if every trust believes it must be able to do everything, we will end up doing too many things thinly, rather than a few things really well.

A mature school system should allow for specialisation without stigma and for divestment without failure narratives.

Opinion

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DR HERMINDER CHANNA

Regional director, Oasis Midlands

We need your input to ensure NPQs provide the skills needed in schools

National professional qualifications must evolve and the DfE's review is seeking views on where improvements can be made, says Dr Herminder Channa

In just a few years, national professional qualifications (NPQs) have moved from being a niche offer to a shared language of development for the profession.

Since the 2021 reforms there have been more than 144,000 NPQ starts, and 88 per cent of schools have engaged with them.

This is a sign that teachers and leaders want structured, serious professional learning, even in the most pressured of circumstances.

That tells us something important. When the offer is coherent, evidence-informed and properly funded, teachers and leaders will show up. They will carve out time they do not have, to do work they know matters.

But professional life in schools is not standing still.

The demands on leaders are shifting, and the frameworks that support them have to move too. Evidence and practice evolve, so must NPQs.

The government's ongoing review is not about tearing up what works. It's about making sure our national infrastructure for professional learning is ambitious, practical and future-facing.

We know that, overall, delivery is working well.

What we hear just as clearly is a desire for NPQs that get even closer to the grain of daily leadership, helping people translate insight into action, not just pass another assessment.

The review is our opportunity to refine, strengthen and futureproof on the back of real experience.

As a leader, I know the value of strong leadership and the positive impact of good quality CPD.

Since January last year, I have been working closely with the Department for Education on the review of NPQs.

Drawing on insights from the EEF and what we have heard so far from the sector, we are exploring several areas where the frameworks could do more of the work that leaders are asking of them. They are:

- Inclusion running through every framework, not sitting in a single module – from curriculum and culture to behaviour and assessment
- Sharper guidance on key operational responsibilities such as finance, HR, governance and risk, so leaders feel better equipped for the decisions that keep schools safe, solvent and stable
- Stronger focus on culture, staff development and relational trust, reflecting what we know about collective teacher efficacy and the conditions that keep great teachers in the classroom
- A clearer place for parents, carers and communities in leadership practice, recognising that the work of schools never starts and ends at the gate
- A better line of sight from early years foundations – especially communication, language and transitions – into leadership content, so NPQs speak across the system, not only to statutory school phases
- Guidance on digital literacy and the wise, safe use of technology, supporting leaders to navigate both opportunity and risk

> "We need to hear about the trade-offs you make

These are not pre-baked decisions. They are the live questions we want the sector to help us answer.

The next phase of the review depends on the voices of those who are living this work every day. Leaders in early years, schools, special and alternative provision and FE.

The DfE's call for evidence went live on December 10 and is open until February 20.

One theme that has come through powerfully in early conversations is inclusion.

Leaders are clear inclusion cannot sit in a corner of the framework while other content carries on as usual.

It has to be the spine of leadership – visible in how we think about curriculum, attendance, behaviour, staffing, enrichment, safeguarding and resource decisions.

That spine will only be strong if it is built from the lived realities of leaders, teachers and families.

We need to hear about the tensions you manage, the trade-offs you make, what has helped you build more inclusive cultures and where the current NPQs fall short.

Leadership is more than managing systems. It is setting a clear direction, creating the conditions for great teaching, and building cultures where every adult and every child can do their best work.

It is where inclusion is non-negotiable and where evidence is used with judgement, not just quoted.

If we get this right, NPQs will remain a shared, evolving entitlement to serious professional growth, owned by the profession as much as it is sponsored by the government.

Opinion

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DR VASILIS STROGILOS

Associate professor, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Given the choice, do we want SEND segregation in education?

The special schools versus specialist facilities debate fails to appreciate that all educators should be working to support SEND students in mainstream settings, says Vasilis Strogilos

The government recently announced the cancellation of some planned special schools and has instead given local authorities the option to develop more specialist facilities within mainstream schools (e.g. resourced provisions, specialist units).

This decision has prompted concern from parts of the specialist sector and some parent organisations, who argue this ignores the growing demand for special schools.

It is important, however, to reflect on what this rising demand really tells us.

The increasing call for more special schools should be understood not as clear evidence of their necessity, nor as proof of genuine parental choice, but as a symptom of a wider system failure: our ongoing inability to educate students with more complex needs effectively in mainstream schools.

One of the most common arguments in favour of expanding special schools is that there is insufficient research evidence about the effectiveness of specialist facilities within mainstream schools. This is partially true.

While it is true we have a limited evidence base on the effectiveness of resourced provisions and specialist units, the same can be said of special schools. We rarely ask where the robust evidence is for the effectiveness of special schools, despite their longstanding presence.

The evidence we do have on specialist facilities is largely qualitative, drawing on the experiences of teachers, teaching assistants, parents and pupils.

This evidence is, overall, overwhelmingly positive (see the 'current landscape and prior research' section of this article).

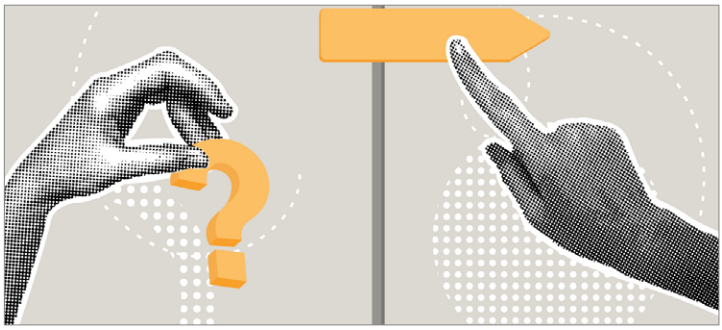
Teachers reported students receive high-quality support in specialist facilities and parents expressed strong satisfaction with the organisation, staff expertise and the support received. Pupils also highlighted the opportunity to learn alongside their mainstream peers and build friendships.

Producing other forms of evidence, such as direct comparisons of attainment outcomes between pupils with SEND in special schools and those in specialist facilities, would require experimental studies.

These are difficult to design ethically and practically. Their findings would still be open to interpretation.

At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental question about the kind of education system we want.

I strongly believe policy should prioritise creating more opportunities for inclusion within mainstream schools and fewer opportunities for segregation.



> "There's a fundamental question about the kind of system we want

By definition, educating pupils in special schools removes them from everyday participation in their local mainstream communities.

It is worth remembering the social model of disability, which strongly criticised the segregation of disabled children in special schools and shaped inclusive education policy worldwide, was developed in England.

Against this backdrop, a debate framed as "more special schools versus more inclusion" feels misplaced.

We should be asking different, more constructive questions. How can mainstream schools be supported to educate a wider range of learners with SEND well?

What knowledge, skills and resources are needed to enable more students to move successfully from special schools into mainstream settings?

How can specialist facilities avoid becoming spaces of withdrawal and segregation rather than inclusion (see the Down's Syndrome Association's argument about this)?

If we accept specialist facilities should exist primarily to support inclusion, rather than as parallel systems, we must consider how to measure their effectiveness.

This is as complex as measuring inclusion and first requires clarity about what we mean by "effectiveness".

I would suggest effectiveness has two distinct but equally important dimensions.

The first relates to the quality of teaching and support provided within the specialist facility.

The second concerns the facility's role in supporting pupils with SEND to access mainstream classrooms, the curriculum and wider school life, and its contribution to developing inclusive practice across the whole school.

Both dimensions can be evaluated using a combination of evidence sources: pupil, parent and staff views, evidence of pupil progress and wider indicators such as attendance and exclusions.

If specialist facilities are given adequate resources, appropriate training and a clear inclusive purpose, there is good reason to remain optimistic about their potential.

This should be seen not as an end point, but as the beginning of a journey – one that focuses on understanding the real value of specialist facilities and on identifying the support required for them to function as inclusive services for the whole school.

Opinion

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CHRIS THACKRAY
Digital strategy lead, Ark

Why digital transformation must be a priority for schools in 2026

AI tools to improve teaching, workloads, admin and pupil results are all here – the challenge is to implement them equitably, says Chris Thackray

Digital technology and AI are reshaping almost every aspect of our lives, fundamentally changing our world and how we work, communicate, shop and even think.

Education cannot afford to be left behind. Technology has the potential to improve pupil outcomes, reduce staff workload and prepare all our young people to be safe and confident in this evolving digital world.

The question is no longer whether schools should integrate digitally, but how quickly and how equitably we can make it happen.

Picture a school day where teachers begin with clear data-driven insights into how each pupil is progressing.

A world where well-designed intelligent tools streamline lesson planning, so teachers are free to focus on their students. And where classrooms buzz with young people confidently using digital resources to enhance their learning.

The good news is this is no longer a dream. Much of the underlying technology we need to make it a reality already exists – the challenge now is bringing it all together and making it usable.

Digital equity

Right now, the benefits of digital transformation aren't distributed equally across the education sector.

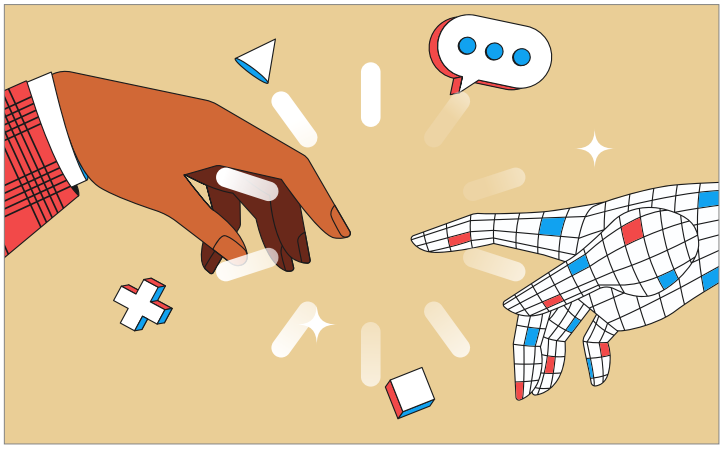
Private schools and those serving wealthier demographics have moved faster, benefiting from bigger budgets and more staff capacity and training.

For too many schools serving less privileged communities, the pace of change has been slower, as leaders are forced to choose between essential frontline services and the initial investment required to modernise.

If we are serious about levelling up, we must ensure that digital advantage does not become another marker of socio-economic privilege.

In my experience, there are three main barriers to digital progress in schools:

1. School capacity: With stretched budgets, schools often lack the time and expertise to find, develop and test new tools. At Ark, we're fortunate to be able to provide network-wide support.
2. Access to devices: It's very hard to use digital tools well – and cost effectively – if pupils don't have access to a device. At Ark, we've invested in giving every student their own Chromebook from year 3. That consistency means that when a digital tool or approach proves effective, we can quickly and fairly roll it out across our whole network.



> "Those serving wealthier demographics have moved faster

3. Staff capability: All school staff need an understanding of digital technologies. We're providing foundational training for our colleagues.

An evidence-based approach

Ark's approach is always evidence-led. We want to fully understand where digital can demonstrate improvement.

To begin with, we've identified teacher workload, SEND and cost savings as areas where digital tools can make a real difference to our children, staff, and parents.

And we're testing new tools and approaches in each of these fields:

1. Marking and assessment: We are piloting four different marking and assessment tools to see which approaches work best.
2. Support for SEND: We're testing tools that transcribe exams – where previously students had to dictate to a scribe. This improves engagement and outcomes for students with SEND while reducing costs.
3. Reducing the cost of supply through digital learning: Rather than using supply teachers, we're rolling out a model where students instead undertake personalised learning on their Chromebooks, in a larger supervised group.

Where next?

We're reworking our curricula to ensure students leave school able to use digital tools safely and effectively. School leavers should be creators and critical thinkers – not passive consumers of whatever technology arrives next.

Top of our 'to-do' list is expanding our current AI pilots, co-developing new tools with our partners, and harnessing big data and automation to make operations smarter – from timetabling and attendance analytics to safeguarding workflows.

No single trust or school can deliver digital transformation alone. We need to work together to build a sector where every school – regardless of postcode and demographics – has the capacity, tools and confidence to use digital well, so that no child misses out.

If we seize this opportunity, digital can help us build a much fairer, more effective education system. But if we hesitate, we risk entrenching inequality for yet another generation.

Opinion

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KATIE CARR
Associate director (education), Public First

First 16-year-old voters are already political, they just need structure

Our focus group study of 12 and 13-year-olds who will vote in 2029 reveals they're forming views without the structure or understanding schools should provide, says Katie Carr

By 2029, around 1.7 million 16 and 17-year-olds will be eligible to vote for the first time – a new electorate the size of several cities. The decision to lower the voting age has sparked familiar arguments about whether young people will be ready.

But after spending time with the 12 and 13-year-olds who will become the first 16-year-old voters, I am increasingly convinced we are worrying about the wrong thing.

The real issue is not whether these pupils will be ready at 16, it is that their political identities are forming already, long before most schools consider civic understanding a priority.

This week, Public First is publishing new research with these pupils – one of the earliest attempts to understand how the first 16-year-old voters are already making sense of politics, and what that means for the schools that teach them.

We spoke with 40 year 8 pupils in four focus groups in two very different parts of the country: County Durham and Bristol.

What emerged was both striking and quietly profound. These pupils are not apathetic, they are not disengaged, they are not waiting to "become political" at some later stage.

They are already absorbing, filtering and interpreting the world around them – but through the lens of place, family and lived experience rather than through any formal civic education.

In County Durham, immigration dominated the conversation – not in simplistic or hostile terms, but in emotionally complex ways that reflected local anxieties, family narratives and the political symbols they encounter daily.

In Bristol, pupils were more preoccupied with crime, NHS funding and the pressure on public services.

These are two groups of children of similar socio-economic status, living in the same country, asking the same questions – yet already inhabiting entirely different political worlds.

Schools do not create these worlds, but they are one of the few institutions that reach across them.

One of the most revealing aspects of the research was pupils' sense of confidence – or lack of it.

In Bristol, young people talked fluently about ways to influence government: petitions, letters, protests. They knew how voices can gather power. In County Durham, pupils struggled to imagine any route into political participation at all. The idea felt distant, abstract, reserved for adults with authority.

> "They are already interpreting the world around them

These are not trivial differences. They signal emerging inequalities in civic confidence that will shape whether young people feel that democracy is something they can take part in or something that happens to them.

At the same time, pupils demonstrated a surprisingly sophisticated awareness of misinformation.

They cross-check, they distrust what feels too dramatic, and they instinctively reach for sources they feel are accountable. Their instincts are sound.

What is missing is not scepticism, but structure. They are navigating political content without the conceptual tools that schools are uniquely well placed to provide.

These pupils are forming political identities through instinct, conversation and observation – in the absence of structured knowledge about how politics works.

They recognise Nigel Farage but cannot name the prime minister. They can decode the politics of a flag but struggle to explain the role of Parliament.

They can sense bias but are unsure how to analyse competing political claims. Their understanding is shaped, but unevenly. Alive in practice, but unanchored in knowledge.

This is the moment when schools matter most. Not to tell pupils what to think – but to help them understand how political systems function, how information is constructed, and how to evaluate the competing stories they hear at home, online and in their communities. If schools do not step into that space, others will.

If we want those future 16-year-old voters to enter the electorate with confidence rather than confusion, and understanding rather than instinct alone, we need to start earlier.

Schools cannot erase the differences between Bristol and County Durham, and nor should they.

But they can provide something that no other institution is in a position to offer: a shared foundation of civic understanding that gives every young person, wherever they grow up, the knowledge and tools to participate meaningfully in our democracy.

THE BUSINESS LEADER

Views on top education priorities from school business leadership

School business leader role has evolved but do policymakers know?

Stephen Morales
CEO of the Institute of School Business Leadership

As we start 2026, the question of what school business leadership needs from government is layered and complex, shaped by local context, phase, and organisational maturity.

One issue that deserves greater attention is how we describe the profession itself.

I am no longer convinced that the term "school business professional" fully captures the breadth, complexity and strategic influence of the role in the way it might have done a decade ago.

Today's practitioners lead across finance, estates, people, digital systems, governance and organisational improvement. The language we use has not kept pace with that evolution.

How government names, frames and understands the role matters, because it shapes policy design, workforce development and the extent to which operational leadership in schools is recognised as both specialist and strategic.

School business leaders are no longer simply stewards of budgets and buildings, they are the architects of organisational resilience in a system under sustained pressure.

Rising costs, persistent SEND demand, workforce shortages and ageing estates have exposed the limits of short-term fixes and reactive policymaking.

What we now need from government is not just incremental funding uplifts, but a more mature, strategic partnership that recognises the operational reality of running complex public organisations.

At the heart of this is stability. Schools cannot plan effectively when funding settlements arrive late, when pay awards are only partially funded, or when national policy signals shift year to year.

Sustainable education systems depend on multi-year certainty that reflects real costs, particularly staffing, energy, pensions and compliance.

Without this, even the most skilled business leadership is forced into firefighting rather than long-term value creation.

Yet funding alone will not solve the problem.

By 2026, the case is strong for government to actively support a more codified, professional approach to school operations, grounded in the principles of operational excellence.

Too often, operational practice in schools has developed in isolation, driven by necessity rather than design. A nationally endorsed framework would help schools move beyond compliance towards excellence, efficiency and continuous improvement.

Operational excellence in education must be understood as a balanced system. Culture sets the tone: schools need psychologically safe environments where improvement is encouraged, inefficiencies are surfaced without blame, and leaders at all levels understand their role in stewardship of public resources.

Government can reinforce this by aligning accountability frameworks with learning and improvement, rather than fear and short-term performance management.

People sit at the centre of delivery. School business professionals, estates teams, finance staff and operational leaders require the same deliberate investment in development that teaching staff receive.

Clear professional pathways, funded training and recognition of operational leadership as mission-critical would strengthen capacity across the system and reduce reliance on goodwill and overwork.

Systems and processes must also be intentionally designed. Fragmented digital platforms, duplicative reporting requirements and inconsistent guidance consume time and energy that should be directed toward pupils.

Government has a unique role in standardising where appropriate, simplifying procurement, and ensuring that national systems genuinely reduce burden rather than shift it.

Data is another underused asset. Schools generate vast amounts of operational and financial data, yet too little of it is turned into insight.

A stronger national approach to data standards, benchmarking and analytics would allow school business leaders to make earlier, smarter decisions, identify inefficiencies, and demonstrate value for money with confidence.

Crucially, this data should be used to support improvement, not merely to audit failure.

Finally, continuous improvement must be embedded rather than episodic. In high-performing organisations, improvement is not a project but a habit.

Government can enable this by funding improvement capability, sharing best practice across the sector and allowing schools the space to innovate without constant structural reform.

SEND provision, estates management and workforce deployment would all benefit from iterative, evidence-led improvement rather than repeated system resets.

In 2026, what school business leaders need most from government is recognition that operational excellence is not optional in education, it is foundational.

With stable funding, clearer policy horizons and explicit support for a whole-system approach that intentionally integrates culture, people, systems, data and continuous improvement, schools can move from survival to sustainability.

Week in Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

MONDAY

As we dust off the keyboards and snaffle down that last Elizabeth Shaw chocolate (they're the best – letters to editor if any disagreement), what better way to get back into the education spirit than listening to an edu-themed political podcast.

Bridget Phillipson was interviewed by George "Austerity" Osborne and Ed "Ed Balls" Balls on their Political Currency podcast.

It confirmed what we suspected.

We're not sure anyone loves politics more than Phillipson, who admitted that even when she's walking her Jack Russell Maisie she sees things and says to herself, "hang on, that makes me think about how that connects to the role of government.

"I'll often jot myself little reminder notes and then I'll pick them back up in a bigger forum later. If you're really invested in politics you do spend a lot of your time just thinking about what you believe, why you believe it and how you make things happen."

She also hinted at *that* viral "apology" stunt on social media, in which the DfE lauded its achievements in a way slammed as "smug" and "tone deaf" by sector leaders.

"The deputy [Labour] leadership contest did make me think quite seriously about how we reach wider audiences. Also sometimes you've got to take a risk. We've done that in the department with some of our social media, some of which has attracted mixed responses."

We'd love to know what the success metric is for "trying to engage people" because, sure, it had 740,000 views on X alone – but the negative replies don't exactly paint it as a win. Who knows.

***

So long, Capita. The outsourcing giant's chequered time running the SATs contract is fading into a distant memory.

The past few years were fairly drama-free to be fair, but few primaries can forget the 2022 woes when – among other things – the primary assessment gateway went into meltdown with some schools unable to access results.

This week the DfE confirmed the gateway has closed as exams giant Pearson takes over the contract.

***

A petition to reduce the school week to four days was debated by MPs in Westminster Hall.

The petition's creator, a secondary school teacher, is campaigning for a shorter week to give teachers more time to spend with their families and encourage them to stay in their jobs.

It garnered 126,000 signatories... teachers must have felt so strongly on this? Oh wait...

Dave Robertson, the Labour MP for Lichfield, said he suspected – "and the laughter tells me that colleagues do too" – that many of the signatories may "well be of school age".

Nick Timothy, the Tory MP for West Suffolk, admitted he had not told his own children he was in the debate, "because my job tonight is to complete the party consensus and disappoint the signatories".

TUESDAY

The schools white paper can't come soon enough – if anything to stop the leaks about the government's supposed proposals for SEND reform.

The latest was in *The Times*, which reported parents would be stripped of their legal right to certain support, except in severe cases.

At the latest "SEND conversation" event this week, one parent told schools minister Georgia Gould to "please stop leaking stories to the press. It's very anxiety-inducing for us parents".

Gould assured "anyone watching, that any leaks or speculation that does happen, no one is more frustrated about that than I am, because we are really committed to working with families to get this right".

While it's important to get the reforms right, is anyone else slightly concerned they are still hashing out details this close to publication?


Closed petition

Reduce the school week to four days a week

We urge the Government to require all schools to reduce the school week to four instead of five days by making each school day one hour longer whilst requiring the school week to be four instead of five days.

This petition is closed
All petitions run for 6 months

126,014 signatures

Show on a map 100,000

Education Village
Academy Trust

Chief Executive Officer

Education Village Academy Trust
Location: Darlington
Salary: £140,000 – £155,000

Who we are

The Education Village Academy Trust is more than a multi-academy trust; we are a community where learning has no limits and our mission is to deliver exceptional educational experiences that inspire and challenge all learners to achieve their potential. Our Trust serves a diverse community in Darlington, providing high-quality education across multiple phases, including mainstream primary and secondary schools, post-16 provision and specialist SEND education.

About the role

Following the retirement of our CEO, Mike Butler, Education Village Academy Trust (EVAT) is seeking a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to lead our high-performing, values-driven multi-academy trust.

As our CEO, you will provide day-to-day strategic, civic and operational leadership for all aspects of the Trust, delegating responsibilities to the executive leadership team while maintaining overall accountability. In this multifaceted role, you will balance the educational needs and aspirations of our pupils with running an organisation that is efficient, sustainable and fit for the future.

Who we are looking for

We are seeking an exceptional leader who will embrace the Trust's values and ethos, putting children and young people at the centre of every decision. You will have a proven track record of successful strategic leadership, ideally within an education or complex organisational context, with experience at board level and in working effectively with Trustees and key stakeholders. Experience within the education sector is not essential however knowledge and understanding of the education landscape and its challenges is critical. This knowledge, combined with strong business acumen, will be essential to enable you to critically evaluate how the Trust operates and identify opportunities for improvement to ensure sustainable growth and efficiency.

Closing Date: 9 a.m., Wednesday 21st January 2026

Click here for more info

Education Village
Academy Trust

Principal – Specialist Provisions

Education Village Academy Trust
Location: Darlington
Salary: Leadership salary scale L30 – L34 £105,594 - £116,455 (more may be available for an exceptional candidate)

Who we are

The Education Village Academy Trust is more than a multi-academy trust; we are a community where learning has no limits and our mission is to deliver exceptional educational experiences that inspire and challenge all learners to achieve their potential.

Our specialist provisions play a central role in meeting the full range of needs of children and young people with EHCPs. Our schools cater for all four broad areas of SEND: Communication & Interaction; Cognition & Learning; Social, Emotional & Mental Health; and Sensory & Physical Needs.

About the role

The Executive Principal – Specialist Provisions is a key executive leadership role with responsibility for the strategic direction, performance and development of EVAT's specialist schools. The postholder will have strategic oversight of our specialist provisions and ensure that the schools are delivering high-quality, holistic education and care. The postholder will ensure there is accurate academy self-evaluation, impactful school improvement planning and ongoing curriculum development. for specialist settings

Who we are looking for

We are seeking an experienced senior leader with a strong track record in education including successful leadership as a headteacher or equivalent, and credible knowledge of SEND practice, curriculum pathways, assessment, transitions and commissioning. You will have a detailed understanding of the demands of specialist provision and the importance of high-quality teaching, safe practice, and well-organised leadership. The role requires strong people leadership skills, including experience of mentoring, managing and developing senior colleagues. Above all, we are seeking a leader who is committed to continuously improving provision and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Closing date: 9 a.m. Monday 2nd March 2026

Click here for more info

IVESHEAD SCHOOL

Headteacher, Iveshead School, Leicestershire

L24 - L29

MOWBRAY

Are you an inspirational leader who has the creativity, courage and commitment to enable staff and students to achieve and who has a track record of leading change and improvement?

We are delighted to be appointing an experienced aspirational leader to join our trust secondary leadership team as Headteacher of Iveshead School at this exciting time for Mowbray Education Trust.

Our vision is to deliver first-class teaching and learning with integrity. Meaning that everyone attending our schools, regardless of background or ability, receives a first-class education. Our common values of inclusivity, aspiration and collaboration underpin all that we do.

The Headteacher of Iveshead will play a crucial role in supporting the development of our secondary phase, working collaboratively across the secondary leadership team within the culture of the Trust and sharing accountability for the performance and success of the secondary schools.

Contact us:
futuretalent@mowbrayeducation.org

For more information, please visit our careers portal.

St John Fisher Catholic Primary School
Part of the Romero Catholic Academy

Principal Opportunity

Saint John Fisher Catholic Primary School

The Romero Catholic Academy
Nurturing the Talent of Tomorrow

Lead with Faith, Vision & Purpose

Saint John Fisher Catholic Primary School in Coventry is seeking a faith-driven leader to take up the role of Principal from Summer term or September 2026. Rooted in Gospel values and part of the Romero Catholic Multi-Academy Company, this vibrant, inclusive school serves children aged 3–11 and is committed to nurturing every child academically, spiritually, and socially.

This is a rare opportunity to shape the future of a thriving Catholic school with a strong foundation and a clear mission: *"Through Christ we live, love and learn, in our caring community."* The successful candidate will be a practising Catholic with a deep commitment to Catholic education, bringing proven leadership experience, strategic vision, and a passion for inclusion and excellence.

You will lead with compassion and clarity, embracing a trauma-informed approach where every child is respected and loved. Your role will involve strengthening the school's ethos, driving high standards in teaching and learning, and fostering strong relationships with parents, parish, and the wider community.

In return, you'll join a faith-filled, supportive environment with dedicated staff/governors, engaged pupils, and a collaborative leadership network. You will benefit from centralised MAC services, a strong School Improvement Team, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

If you are ready to lead with heart, purpose, and impact — and help shape lives through Catholic education — we invite you to apply.

Salary: £78,702 – £91,158
Closing Date: Friday 9th January 2026 at 9am
Interview Date: w/c 19th January 2026 (TBC)
Start Date: Summer term or September 2026