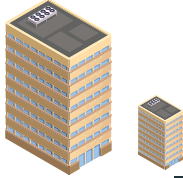


Free meals extension will leave schools hungry for more cash



P7-8

Could shrinking schools host local health hubs?



P12

Lessons from peer review for new trust inspections



P20

Tips for DfE to repair school-parent trust



P25



INVESTIGATION | Pages 16-17

Trusts shore up reserves as more rainy days loom

- Analysis shows chains improved their financial positions last year
- But leaders brace for tough years, with many schools still in deficit
- And FSM extension funding shortfall creates additional pressures

JACK DYSON | JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

INVESTIGATIONS | Pages 5-8



INSPIRING
LEADERSHIP
CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION

4-5 June 2026 | ICC Birmingham

Don't miss the event for school leaders looking to develop their leadership & find their inspiration.

[FIND OUT MORE AT INSPIRINGLEADERSHIP.ORG](https://www.inspiringleadership.org)

SCHOOLS
WEEK

Meet the news team

**Freddie Whittaker**
EDITOR@FCDWHITTAKER
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK**Samantha Booth**
DEPUTY EDITOR@SAMANTHAJBOTH
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK**Nicky Phillips**
HEAD DESIGNER@GELVETICA
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**
SENIOR REPORTER@LYDIACHSW
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK**Jack Dyson**
SENIOR REPORTER@JACKYDYS
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK**Ruth Lucas**
REPORTER@RUTHLUCAS_
RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK**Shane Mann**
CHIEF EXECUTIVE@SHANERMANN
SHANE.MANN@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM

Got a story?

If you have a tip-off for the news team, or if your school is doing something new and interesting that you think warrants a visit from a journalist, please email news@schoolsweek.co.uk.

THE
TEAM

Managing Director: Scott Forbes | Senior Designer: Simon Kay | Relationship Manager: Clare Halliday |
Operations and Finance Director: Victoria Boyle | Event Manager: Frances Ogefere Dell | Senior Administrator: Evie Hayes |
Finance Assistant and PA to CEO: Zoe Tuffin | Office Administrator: Zoe Belcher | Sales Administrator: Tyler Palmer



SCHOOLS WEEK

FE WEEK JOBS

Powered by education week jobs

FEATURED
JOBS

This week's top available jobs in the schools sector. To find out more information please turn to the centre of *Schools Week* or visit the web address listed

To advertise your vacancy with Education Week Jobs and Schools Week please call **020 81234 778** or email recruitment@educationweekjobs.co.uk



**DRB IGNITE, HOB GREEN
PRIMARY SCHOOL -
HEADTEACHER, £73,105.00 -
£84,699.00 ANNUALLY (ACTUAL)**



**EDUCATION VILLAGE ACADEMY
TRUST, EXECUTIVE PRINCIPAL -
SPECIAL EDUCATION, £105,594
- £116,455 / L30 - L34**



Schools need more cash – and more joined-up thinking

Without wanting to sound like a broken record, it's time to talk about school funding (again).

The battle for adequate cash to run our schools properly has been going on for years, and seems never-ending.

This is in part due to repeated short-term – and short-sighted – decisions by various governments over the past decade.

It is also due to increasing resources having to prop up a failing SEND system, and the impact of falling rolls.

The findings of our investigation into trust deficits this week are therefore bittersweet.

It is undoubtedly good news that the financial picture for many has got better, allowing them to improve their reserves.

The bad news is that those reserves are probably going to be needed in the years to come, and may not be enough to weather the upcoming storm.

The government is already facing a battle

with teachers over its plans to raise pay by 6.5 per cent over three years.

Many schools will struggle to afford even the modest rises suggested. If the School Teachers' Review Body asserts its independence again and recommends larger rises, the challenges will be more severe.

We also reveal this week that a paltry rise in free school meals funding means the extension of meals to all those from households claiming universal credit in September will end up costing schools tens of millions of pounds more in subsidies.

Schools understand the public finances are tight. They are not demanding a blank cheque. But many factors within the government's control continue to come together to make their jobs harder.

They need ministers to heed their calls not for unlimited funding, but more joined-up decision-making.

Most read online this week:

- The school that confiscates phones for six weeks**
- Suspensions tumble as trust embraces 'emotional intelligence'**
- DfE wants to scrape real-time MIS data from schools**
- New complaints guidance urges parents to be 'respectful' and use AI with 'caution'**
- New £200m scheme 'will offer SEND training to all teaching staff'**

[CLICK LINKS TO READ STORIES](#)

Disclaimer:

Schools Week is owned and published by EducationScape Ltd. The views expressed within the publication are those of the authors named, and are not necessarily those of Schools Week, EducationScape Ltd or any of its employees. While we try to ensure that the information we provide is correct, mistakes do occur and we cannot guarantee the accuracy of our material.

The design of the digital newspaper and of the website is copyright of EducationScape Ltd and material from the newspaper should not be reproduced without prior permission. If you wish to reproduce an article from either the digital paper or the website, both the article's author and Schools Week must be referenced (to not do so, would be an infringement on copyright).

EducationScape Ltd is not responsible for the content of any external internet sites linked to.

Please address any complaints to the editor.

Email: Freddie.Whittaker@schoolsweek.co.uk with Error/Concern in the subject line. Please include the page number and story headline, and explain what the problem is.

SCHOOLS WEEK

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

EDUCATIONSCAPE LTD

C/O 1 EDCITY WALK, EDCITY, LONDON, W12 7TF
T: 020 8123 4778
E: NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

ADVERTISE WITH US

If you are interested in placing a product or job advert in a future edition please click on the 'advertise' link at the top of the page on schoolsweek.co.uk or contact:

E: advertising@schoolsweek.co.uk
T: 020 81234 778 or click here



SCHOOLS WEEK

School leaders' favourite newspaper | No bluster, just the facts

Did you know about the Schools Week Daily Bell?

Schools Week also publishes a daily email delivering the top education stories straight into your inbox at 5.30pm. And it's free!

schoolsweek.co.uk | [@schoolsweek](https://t.me/schoolsweek)

You can sign up here →



DfE loses schools' group head with SEND reforms imminent

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

The senior civil servant in charge of schools and SEND policy is set to leave her role, *Schools Week* can reveal, just as ministers are poised to unveil sweeping reforms to the system.

Juliet Chua, the director general of the schools' group at the Department for Education, is to become director general for the Cabinet Office's economic and domestic secretariat.

It comes as the government is expected to release its schools white paper next month, including wide-ranging reforms to the system of support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.

It is not clear when Chua will leave.

The DfE said Chua "has played a pivotal role in the work to deliver the schools white paper so far, and will continue to do so. She will then move into her new role".

Julia Kinniburgh, the department's director-general for skills, will take over as interim schools boss. She in turn will be temporarily



Juliet Chua

replaced by Sinead O'Sullivan while a permanent schools director-general is recruited.

'Outstanding leadership'

Susan Acland-Hood, the DfE's permanent secretary, said she was "incredibly grateful for the outstanding leadership Juliet has shown, guiding schools' group to drive progress on key issues, including strengthening school accountability

and publishing the curriculum and assessment review.

"She will continue to play a pivotal role in ensuring the successful delivery of the schools white paper.

"As interim director general, Julia Kinniburgh will bring a breadth of knowledge of the business of the department and strong leadership at a crucial time, ensuring continuity and momentum in the delivery of our reforms."

The DfE added Chua would continue to "play a crucial role" in ensuring the white paper's "successful implementation across government".

"Reforming the education system so that all children achieve and thrive remains an urgent priority across government and Juliet is committed to supporting this work."

Chua has been a civil servant since 2004. She had been assistant chief executive of Camden Council.

She worked at the DfE from 2014 to 2017, before holding senior posts at the Cabinet Office, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for International Development and the Foreign Office.

She returned to the DfE in 2023 in her current schools role.

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Ex-minister's social media ban bid passes in Lords

The House of Lords has amended the children's wellbeing and schools bill to include a clause that would force ministers to enact a social media ban for under-16s.

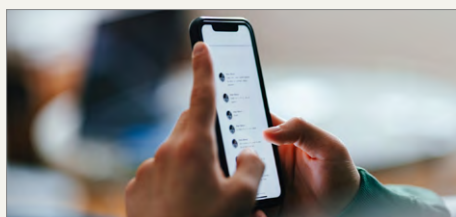
John Nash, the Conservative peer and former academies minister who put forward the amendment, told the upper house the country faced "nothing short of a societal catastrophe caused by the fact that so many of our children are addicted to social media".

It places further pressure on the government to enact a ban, something it has pledged to consult on following growing calls for action.

Sir Keir Starmer will now need to decide whether to let the bill pass back through the Commons with Nash's amendment included.

It would require the government to pass legislation requiring all regulated social media companies to "use highly effective age-assurance measures to prevent children under the age of 16 from becoming or being users".

Another amendment, which also passed in the



Lords, would seek to ban under-18s from using virtual private networks (VPNs) that could allow them to skirt such a ban.

"Many teenagers are spending long hours — five, six, seven or more a day — on social media," Nash, the founder and chair of Future Academies, told peers.

"Our teachers say that it is the number one cause of disruptive behaviour, and, in their view, will be the biggest source of pressure for students in the future. Our children are turning up at school sleep-deprived."

It comes as the government announced Ofsted will check every school's policy on mobile phones. New "tougher guidance" will also

ensure they will be "expected to be phone-free by default".

The new guidance is non-statutory. However, a government consultation will consider whether leaders "should have a clear legal obligation to consider the guidance in setting and implementing mobile phone policies".

The Department for Education said this week that "immediate action will include Ofsted checking school mobile phone policy ... with schools expected to be phone-free by default thanks to today's announcement".

But it did not say if "immediate" meant inspectors would start checks this week.

The watchdog will "examine both schools' mobile phone policies and how effectively they are implemented when judging behaviour during inspections.

"Schools that are struggling will get one-to-one support from attendance and behaviour hub schools that are already effectively implementing phone bans."

Trusts’ finances improve, but leaders brace for rainy days

JACK DYSON
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Dozens of academy trusts have bolstered their reserves by up to 900 per cent, as leaders tighten their belts ahead of the coming financial storm.

But some continue to be saddled with hefty deficits as they count the cost of sudden government funding cancellations, and in one case, a major cyber attack.

Schools Week investigates...

Deficit to surplus

We analysed the latest accounts for 51 trusts ranging in size from one to 62 schools. The chains in the sample run, on average, 16 schools each.

Thirty-seven of the trusts registered improved reserves by the end of 2024-25, up from 20 the year before.

Trusts improve their reserves by running in-year surpluses. Those with deficits have to dip into reserves to pay for them.

Diocese of Norwich Education and Academies Trust (DNEAT) went from posting a deficit of £178,000 in 2023-24 to a surplus of £1.4 million by the end of August – a 900 per cent gain.

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 in previous years before shifting to a “cautious” approach.

“We’ve been on the wrong end of discussions with the DfE around our finances... you don’t want to be in that position where you’re going to one of your regulators and saying, ‘We’re not in a surplus position,’” he said.

First time in years

REAch2 Academy Trust – which runs 62 primaries across England – added to its reserves for the “first time in several years”.

CEO Cathie Paine said the rebuild was aided by a restructure in 2023-24 that delivered “a more streamlined and efficient operating model”. Her MAT’s reserves leapt 108 per cent, from £2.3 million to £4.8 million.



‘Fragile stabilisation rather than a windfall’

The trust also bolstered “the financial capability” of its heads “through strengthened training and support”, which gave them “greater visibility of budgets”.

Despite this, both DNEAT and REAch2 remain below target reserves. Paine said her organisation was “on track” to reach its goal of 5 per cent of income “over the next couple of years”, while Burwood noted he was “nowhere near” the same level.

‘Fragile’

Research by the Kreston group, a network of accountancy firms, found the proportion of trusts racking up in-year deficits more than trebled in three years to 58 per cent in 2023-24. Its study for the latest accounting year is due to be published next month.

The Department for Education recommends trusts hold reserves of at least 5 per cent of total income “for contingency to protect cashflow”.

Twenty per cent above or below that level is considered too much.

Kreston also warned last year that trusts’ financial buffers were collapsing, with 31 per cent falling below the threshold, up from 17 per cent two years earlier.

But accountancy firm Bishop Fleming’s head of academies Kevin Connor, a report author, said this week that he had “seen a more positive financial performance on the whole this year”.

Trusts have also achieved surpluses “irrespective of their size, which has not been the case for a number of years”.

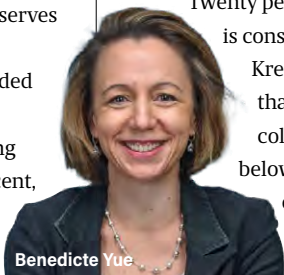
Connor said this “has been achieved through a combination of continued efforts to centralise and manage costs, but also from in-year funding” provided via the core schools budget grant, issued by government to help cover previous teacher pay rises.

But Benedicte Yue, a trust chief finance officer, described this as a “fragile stabilisation rather than a windfall”. This is because “funding levels are just back where they were 15 years ago in real terms while demands on schools have increased significantly”.

Strategic teams

This could also reflect growing caution among leaders as they brace themselves for further squeezes to budgets, Red Kite Learning Trust boss Richard Sheriff argued.

Schools are expected to have to find more savings to deliver teacher pay rises over the next three years, which the government has suggested



Benedicte Yue

should total 6.5 per cent.

Meanwhile, per-pupil funding will rise by around 1 per cent in real terms each year until 2028.

“The last three years have been absolutely horrible financially for schools and last year was the first time we started to get some greater warning of what’s going to be happening,” Sheriff explained.

“[Trusts] are building in the resilience they will need financially to cope with these years ahead.”

Sheriff’s trust – which runs 16 academies in Yorkshire – witnessed a 30 per cent rise in reserves in 2024-25, from £3.6 million to £4.6 million.

Among other measures, Red Kite launched a “strategic delivery team” of heads and business managers to help tighten belts. One of its decisions was to procure supply and cover teachers centrally, which is expected to save £200,000.

What about LA schools?

Analysis reveals council maintained schools are faring worse than academies.

Government figures show 18 per cent of local authority-maintained schools (1,884) were in deficit last year, up 2.5 percentage points on 2023-24.

Just over half (5,354) registered in-year losses of up to £2.8 million. Sixty-six were over £1 million in the red overall.

Julia Harnden, of the Association of School and College Leaders, said this was “symptomatic of an education system that is hugely underfunded, with schools continually being asked to find further savings”.

New IFS research, published this week, found that after “accounting for planned spending on SEND”, mainstream school funding per pupil “only grew by 5 per cent in real terms between 2019-20 and 2025-26”.

This means it is “about the same level it was” 10 years ago.

... but some trusts still suffering

However, some trusts remain in financial difficulty.

Fourteen of the 51 trusts in our analysis registered in-year deficits, compared to 31 the year before.

The largest percentage fall in reserves in 2024-25 was seen at the Arthur Terry Learning Partnership, which plunged further into deficit.

It was previously revealed the trust had racked



‘The last three years have been absolutely horrible financially for schools’

up seven-figure losses after purchasing iPads as part of an initiative to provide 11,000 devices for all pupils and staff. Now it’s £8.4 million in the red.

An Arthur Terry spokesperson stressed the “primary reason” for its debt was “significant over-staffing”. Returning to a “financially sustainable position, therefore, means taking some difficult decisions”.

It was followed by the Kingsway Community Trust and the Ron Dearing UTC, which both registered 62 per cent drops. Kingsway, which runs three schools in Manchester, saw reserves dip to just over £286,000.

It accounts said it was “confident that a programme of cost-cutting measures can be implemented over the coming 12 months to ensure ... [It] can continue to operate”.

Meanwhile, Ron Dearing in Hull said its reserves were hit by a £75,000 “reduction in growth funding”.

The “decision was communicated mid-way through the academic year by the DfE, leading to the deficit increasing rather than decreasing as previously forecasted”.

Connor added there were “significant gaps in the surpluses achieved by single-academy trusts and small MATs” compared to those of larger chains.

Yue also said the ability of those holding reserves to generate investment income had contributed to this “increased variation” in finances.

Three trusts in red

Arthur Terry and Ron Dearing were two of only three trusts in the

sample that were in an overall deficit.

The other was the Mayfield Grammar School in Gravesend. While its reserves rose by £23,000, it remained in a deficit of £345,000.

Its issues stem, in part, from a “major cyber-attack” in 2023.

It required “substantial expenditure to restore all IT networks, coupled with a negative impact on self-generated income and a substantial increase in staffing, supply, and overtime costs to recover and rebuild all systems”.

In accounts, the trust noted it was “regrettable that there is no central government funding to assist schools when such events occur ...when all DfE cyber-attack protocols were in place”.

The financial storm

A Confederation of School Trusts study found around 60 per cent of trusts expected to draw from reserves to tackle immediate increases in costs in 2025-26.

They are also “looking at cuts to classroom staff to balance the books in the longer term”, CST CEO Leora Cruddas said.

Yue noted the “post-election honeymoon is over”, with the sector “now entering a period of intense fiscal tightening”.

Harnden said the struggles of some trusts were “indicative of the continuing reality of severe pressures on school funding”.

“What we can say with certainty is that the funding situation is not easing and seems likely to get worse over the next few years, leaving trusts with more tough decisions to make,” she added.



Leora Cruddas

More free meals leaves schools hungrier for cash

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Extending free school meal eligibility to all children from families receiving universal credit will leave schools tens of millions of pounds further out of pocket, analysis suggests.

Ministers expect around 500,000 children to benefit when the extension comes into effect in September.

But leaders have warned plans to put up per-meal funding by just 5p go “nowhere near far enough”, with many already spending tens of thousands from their core budgets to subsidise food.

The Department for Education confirmed to Schools Week that funding for means-tested free school meals would rise from £2.61 per meal to £2.66 in September.

However, School Food Matters estimated in 2024 that the true cost of providing a meal was £3.16. Some catering groups estimate the figure is even higher.

Taking the £3.16 estimate, this would mean a shortfall in funding for the 500,000 expected to gain free school meals eligibility in September of £47.5 million.

‘There is nothing left to cut’

Mairead Waugh, headteacher at St Philip Howard Catholic Primary School in Hatfield, Hertfordshire, said caterers charge £3.50 for her school’s meals.

Plugging the 89p-per-meal gap for the school’s 100 pupils on FSM costs “approximately £23,000”, she said, and the 5p uplift will go “nowhere near far enough”.

While she welcomed the expansion of FSM, Waugh said: “Potentially we have 400 [pupils] on universal credit. We are heading for the perfect storm.”

She added that between FSM and other financial demands, including unfunded pay rises and delivering breakfast clubs, “something has to give”.

“We have cut everything back to the bone. There is nothing left to cut back.”

Professors Greta Defeyter and Paul Stretesky, who research child food insecurity including school meals, said varying proportions of pupils receiving FSM caused inequalities between schools.



‘Potentially we have 400 pupils on universal credit. We are heading for the perfect storm’

They spoke of a headteacher from the north east who recently “[had] to close her forest school” as she owed caterers “approximately £6,000”.

“This resulted in a loss of an educational activity that benefited all children,” they added.

Julia Harnden, deputy director of policy at the Association of Schools and College Leaders, said the FSM expansion must be “adequately funded”.

While the union welcomed the funding uplift, she added: “We are concerned this is not enough to prevent some schools having to cover the cost of free school meals from their own budgets.

“This is something that needs to be put right. The government must avoid giving with one hand and taking away with the other.”

Stephanie Slater, founder and CEO of School Food Matters, said the FSM expansion “must be matched with realistic funding”.

Fears quality will fall

Simon Kidwell, headteacher at Hartford Manor Primary School and Nursery in Northwich, Cheshire, and a former National Association of

Headteachers president, said his school spent around £10,000 on free school meals, up from £5,000 two years ago.

And this is despite just 6.6 per cent of pupils claiming FSM, well below the 26.3 per cent primary school average.

The sum would otherwise be spent on education – “extra hours for a teaching assistant, curriculum development or speech language intervention”, said Kidwell.

He feared the situation may worsen when FSM expands in September, pointing out the 5p increase “amounts to a rise of less than 2 per cent”.

He added: “With the minimum wage set to rise by 4.1 per cent and food inflation running above 4 per cent, this is, in reality, yet another cut in funding.

“[Schools will] start looking for the cheapest possible catering option, [leading to] a fall in nutritional standards, or portion size”.

Cuts of meat

Research suggests many caterers are already making compromises.

In a member survey by industry body LACA, 30 per cent of caterers said they



Stephanie Slater

INVESTIGATION

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

had reduced portions of certain items due to increasing food prices, while 13 per cent had reduced the size of overall meals.

Over half (56 per cent) had replaced meats with cheaper protein sources, and 60 per cent had reduced menu options.

Just two in 10 caterers said they were able to provide a school food standards-compliant meal within existing funding rates, and those that couldn't estimated they needed £3.25 per meal.

LACA national chair Brad Pearce said the government's new £2.66 per-meal funding rate was "wholly insufficient", particularly in light of the September FSM expansion.

"Food inflation has risen by more than 50 per cent since 2020, yet this rate is expected to cover food, labour and overheads for both primary and secondary pupils," he said.

"As eligibility expands, this chronic underfunding will place even greater pressure on schools and caterers. Expanding entitlement without properly funding it risks undermining both the quality and sustainability of the service."

Catering firm closures

The underfunding is already having consequences for the catering sector.

In the second half of 2025, five catering providers announced they would cease operating in schools, including three local authority-run firms.

Co-operative firm CATERed, run by Pearce, will stop offering meals at schools in Plymouth after July. Plymouth City Council announced the closure with "enormous regret".

"Due to continually rising costs and the level of funding available for [free school meals] this is no longer viable – the sums simply no longer add up," it said.

Elsewhere, Leicestershire County Council will also stop providing school food services in July, citing "a backdrop of significant challenges, including unprecedented increases in food and labour costs".

It said: "The council notes that funding from central government for universal infant free school meals and free school meals has not kept pace with inflation and that research from School Food Matters and others indicates that



funding should be in excess of £3 per meal."

A Department for Education spokesperson said the FSM eligibility expansion would benefit "over half-a-million" pupils and "lift 100,000 children out of poverty".

"To make sure meals are high-quality and nutritious, the government is working closely with the sector to review the wider school food system so it supports the FSM expansion and the upcoming school food standards."

Inclusion and Belonging Summit

EducationScape
Training+Events

Join EducationScape's Inclusion and Belonging Summit to move beyond compliance and build genuinely nurturing educational environments where every learner can truly flourish.



Tuesday 17 March 2026, 09:15–16:30



EdCity, 1EdCity Walk, London



£150 incl VAT

Book today

With many speakers, including:



**PROFESSOR
STUART
KIME**



**PROFESSOR
HAILI
HUGHES**



**ADAM
KOHLBECK**



**JAMES
POPE**



DfE sets out guidance on parental complaints

RUTH LUCAS
RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

New Department for Education-backed guidance on parental complaints urges families to ensure "clear, respectful communication", to avoid social media and to use AI with "caution".

Joint guidance published by the DfE, Parentkind and Ofsted introduces five steps to making a complaint.

It comes after a Parentkind poll of 2,000 parents found one in four said there had been a breakdown of trust between them and their child's school.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said guidance would help "reset the relationship" between parents and teachers while giving families the "confidence to raise concerns".

Five-step process

The new guidance first urges parents to consider whether they have feedback, a concern or a formal complaint for their child's school.

Formal complaints should be used in scenarios in which a parent was "dissatisfied with the school's actions or lack of action".

Issues "can be best resolved by the person closest to your child", it says, recommending a teacher or form tutor if the matter concerned something in the classroom, or a senior leader if it involved bullying or behaviour.

Headteachers should be contacted over "whole-school issues, serious concerns or if earlier steps haven't worked". This could include safeguarding, staff conduct or health and safety issues.

If a complaint was raised, parents should keep a record, stay objective, suggest a clear outcome and be positive.

A complaint could then go to a governing body or trustees if a parent was unhappy with the school's response.

The DfE would become involved if a parent was unhappy with the way their complaint had been handled, or if a school had blocked the complaints process.

The guidance added that Ofsted did not resolve disputes between parents and schools, but might keep complaints on file for inspection.

Use of social media and AI

Social media and aggressive behaviour could "make matters worse".



AI should be used "with caution" as it "doesn't always get it right when citing laws and can make a complaint more complex than necessary".

Complaints should not be made "personal to individual staff members" and there should be no "building a crowd" of parents in support.

Schools could pause complaints, issue verbal or written warnings and ban parents from school grounds in the most extreme cases, it added.

'Strong partnerships'

Phillipson said guidance "will give families the confidence to raise concerns, encouraging schools and parents to work together to address their worries in a positive and respectful way".

It comes as the upcoming schools white paper will set out improvements to the complaints system.

Sir Martyn Oliver, the chief inspector, said it was "always better" when complaints could be resolved directly between a parent and their child's school "without things spiralling on to social media or relationships becoming unnecessarily heated".

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the school leaders' union NAHT, said while there were many cases of "extremely positive" relationships between parents and schools, processes "must be used appropriately".

"We welcome the focus ... on solving problems in a positive manner, and particularly welcome the advice to parents to keep complaints away from social media, and to not to use AI to draft complaints," he said.

The guidance has also been supported by

13 education bodies, including the National Education Union, Association for School and College Leaders and the Local Government Association.

Be positive and transparent, schools advised

In corresponding guidance published by Parentkind, schools have been told not to "bury" complaint policies on their websites and be positive and transparent when dealing with parents.

The new guidance – which unlike the guide for parents was not prepared in collaboration with or backed by the government – gives schools a checklist for resolving issues "quickly, easily and positively".

It said school websites could "bury" complaint policies and could often be written in an "inaccessible and overcomplicated way".

Schools should first categorise the type of issue, then listen to the parent's concerns and emphasise with their emotions.

Schools should not "simplify parents emotions – anger could actually be frustration or fear from their own school trauma or their protective instincts.

"Even if the issue sounds incorrect or absurd, it is real to them, and your response should acknowledge their perspective rather than force your own."

Schools should then create a shared agreement with parents over what should happen next and respond, all of which should be documented.

See pages 24 and 25 for advice from our experts

New AI platform promises to make sense of 'myriad of data'

JACK DYSON

JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK

Two trust bosses have teamed up to develop their own artificial intelligence platform to solve the "challenge of data fragmentation" in schools.

Open Education AI (OEAI) plans to bring assessment, behaviour, attendance, safeguarding, staffing and operations information into dashboards that automatically update ready for analysis.

Academy chains have already used it to predict which children are most likely to miss class and face safeguarding risks.

'Leveller'

Lauren Thorpe, OEAI's executive chair, said the tool was "a mechanism to enable trusts who haven't got a lot of technical expertise off the shelf to have...an environment where they've got all the data organised pretty much automatically."

"It's a leveller. We can draw better insights from the data if we can bring it into our own environment."

Thorpe, the chief transformation officer of United Learning, England's largest trust, worked with Matthew Woodruff, an AI company director and chair of the Kite Academy Trust, to create OEAI in 2023.

It has now been formally launched as a "sector-led non-profit", with support to expand from the charity Purposeful Ventures.

The pair banded together after noticing the amount of time school staff spent trying to compare their schools' data on different platforms.

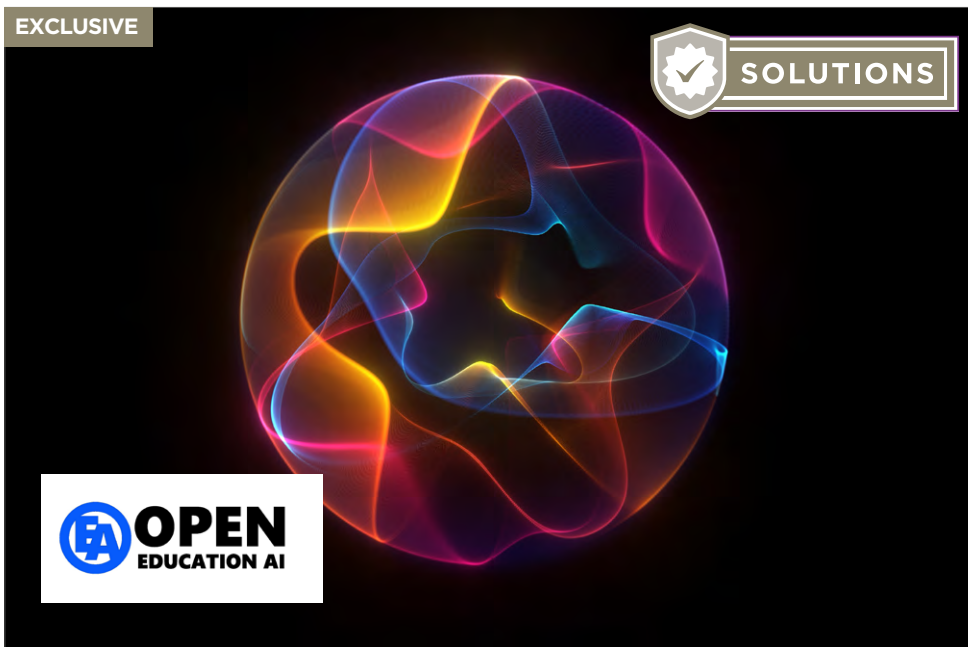
Thorpe said OEAI was able to draw data from 30 edtech companies, with all the management information system (MIS) providers.

"Obviously, there are thousands of edtech apps, so this is very early days."

She said it could "level the playing field for all schools and trusts" and enable them to make better sense of the myriad of data that underpins their work.

The tool is used by more than 30 trusts running more than 600 schools. It allows them to bring their data from various platforms into one place where it is stored, accessed and standardised before it is used for analysis.

EXCLUSIVE



'There are thousands of edtech apps, so this is very early days'

Trust predictions

One trust has used OEAI to create a predictive attendance tool showing the pupils at risk of being absent. This helped inform its school preventive action.

Another academy chain is using it to anticipate which children are most vulnerable to safeguarding risks, based on their school results and local crime data.

Sir Jon Coles, United's chief executive, said his organisation had used OEAI to build its own "data product, United Analytics, which allows us both to take advantage of others' developments and share our own".

Groups that are part of OEAI can also access analytical tools that can be customised and developed

with other educators. It is currently free, but a subscription fee is expected to be introduced.

Shireland



Lauren Thorpe

Collegiate Academy Trust has also partnered with OEAI. Sir Mark Grundy, its chief executive, said the "model of shared development of tools is such a refreshing change".

"There are so many schools who can benefit from this, whether they are already using data insights widely or not."

Access to researchers

OEAI also wants to allow researchers to "securely and anonymously access larger datasets". It hopes this will "unlock system-level insights with greater accuracy and lower cost".

This comes after Schools Week revealed the government wants school management information systems (MIS) providers to help it "harness the potential" of the real-time data they collect to inform policy decisions.

Ministers believe the scheme could help heads benchmark their schools with others across the country and contribute to government decision-making much quicker.

Among the data MIS providers collect are figures for attendance, payroll, admissions, behaviour and assessments.

Combined judgment 'bothers' chief inspector

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Ofsted's boss has admitted merging the behaviour and attendance judgment areas in the watchdog's new inspections "did bother" him "tremendously".

At BETT UK in London, an audience member asked Sir Martyn Oliver about the new joint "attendance and behaviour" judgment, warning it was particularly difficult for schools in "highly deprived" areas where attendance might be lower.

Oliver stressed his "original intent" was to have behaviour and attendance as separate areas, as proposed in Ofsted's original plans.

But he said that during consultation, "many people, many organisations" said "very clearly there were too many areas [and they'd] want to see a number of them combined".

"And the areas that they talked about combining were curriculum and teaching, and attendance and behaviour."

Ofsted's consultation summary noted criticisms



Sir Martyn Oliver

around "the increased number of evaluation areas", but did not cite any calls for those areas to be combined.

About 4,900 education professionals contributed to the consultation, making up 75 per cent of the 6,500 respondents.

Yet the watchdog has come under fire for only giving a broad, narrative summary and not providing details of how many supported or opposed its plans.

Under the final framework, the overall minimum number of judgment areas was reduced from eight to six.

"I have to say, it did bother me tremendously," said Oliver, speaking about the merger of

attendance and behaviour.

"At the start...my expertise said they should be separate. But...consultations are real. It was overwhelmingly 'combine'."

Following the publication of the first "report cards", leaders expressed concerns over the joint judgment area.

One leader, whose school was graded 'needs attention' after it was marked down for attendance – although inspectors praised the behaviour of pupils – said it was "regrettable" the new system worked this way.

Oliver said the category was "something that I am watching".

"We'll carry on watching it," he said. "But there was a moment where I said, 'I did tell you so.'" He added the system had "got what you wished".

Oliver also announced newly inspected schools would soon be given QR codes to help prevent them from "cherry picking" grades shared with parents.

The codes, which would be introduced soon, could be published in letters to parents about Ofsted results, giving them fast access to the full report.

But schools would not be required to publish the code, said Oliver.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

AI tools to be trialled 'in cut and thrust of classrooms'

The government is investing £23 million in a four-year pilot to trial artificial intelligence (AI) and edtech tools in schools.

Opening the BETT UK conference, Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said the scheme would "put the latest tech and AI tools through their paces in the cut and thrust of classrooms across the country".

It is an expansion of a nine-month pilot in which schools and colleges trialled "innovative" edtech tools. It is not clear how many took part.

More than 1,000 schools and colleges will be involved in the new project, which will begin in September.

A Department for Education spokesperson said it "will recruit schools and colleges to put the latest edtech to the test in classrooms, analysing their impact on pupil outcomes, including those with SEND, and on teacher workload".

Phillipson told the conference the pilot



Bridget Phillipson

would track how the latest tech and AI tools performed, the difference they made for teachers "and, above all, the difference they can make for children".

She said the pilot would gather "genuine evidence about what's working, the cream of education tech and AI rising to the top so that we can spread that transformative potential far and wide".

The DfE said it had had more than 280 expressions of interest from the edtech sector

to be involved in the scheme.

The announcement comes days after the DfE launched new standards for AI tools in schools, to help protect pupils' mental health and cognitive development.

Phillipson also announced the government would deliver "new skills pathways for... teachers and support staff" to help them "build digital data and tech skills".

These would be incorporated into existing qualifications and training programmes.

Phillipson said she was "so excited about AI", which she said offered "the chance to make the education system work better for every single learner".

But she stressed the importance of "human connection", adding: "There is nothing to match a great teacher at the top of their game."

"We need to take what's great about the people in education and combine it with the incredible power of AI."

Community health hubs could use empty classrooms

JACK DYSON
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK

Classrooms in schools rocked by falling rolls could be used by the NHS as “community health hubs”, the boss of the Department for Education’s property arm has said.

Lara Newman, the chief executive of LocatED, also said she was “seriously worried” about plunging birth rates undoing the free schools programme.

A drop in birth rates since the early 2010s has left primaries struggling to fill places and forcing the worst-hit urban councils to slash intakes and close schools.

Councils ‘can’t afford it’

Speaking at a Westminster Education Forum on school buildings last Thursday, Newman said: “Local authorities are in a really difficult position around their own funding. They cannot afford to keep empty schools going.”

She argued that “finding some medium-term way of usefully utilising” empty space was “absolutely crucial”.

Options that could keep school buildings occupied and viable “if and when children return”, included using empty spaces as “community health hubs” alongside public health and wellbeing services.

A slide during her talk noted paediatric clinics, vaccination centres and mental health drop-ins would all be “suitable for school settings”. It also recommended “NHS workers embedded for referrals and staff training”.

NHS in schools

The Bridgemary School in Hampshire has had an NHS mental health support team on its site since 2019, when the 1,200-place secondary was about 50 per cent full.

Tom Garfield, Bridgemary’s head, said the school charged a “peppercorn rent” with the team “pretty straightforward” to accommodate.

The facility, which uses office space and two former classrooms, has its own entrance

“What we get in return ... is the capacity for our staff to have booked-in clinic time to talk through [school] strategies and queries we may have. If we got back to 1,200 [pupils] we wouldn’t have to evict them.

“If schools do make a decision on falling rolls



‘You do need to think about pupil numbers rising again’

to occupy spare space with other services, there does need to be consideration over what would happen if pupil numbers rose.”

Declining childbirth rates are taking many schools well above the advised 5 per cent rate of surplus places.

But Education Policy Institute research shows the impact over the next five years “is projected to be more pronounced in London”, with declines expected in “almost all” boroughs.

By 2028-29, primary pupil numbers in Islington and Lambeth are forecast to fall “by around 30 per cent compared to a decade earlier”. Twenty-three schools have closed in the 10 councils with the “largest declines” in primary pupils since 2020-21.

Free school worries

Newman said birthrate rises in the Noughties created a “massive need” for new primaries and secondaries, which was addressed by the free schools programme.

“The department had to put a lot of money into that programme to buy lots and lots of sites across London to deliver it.

“If we lose those schools – whether those are free schools, academies or local authorities, it doesn’t really matter – we will be in a very difficult situation trying to figure out ... how we then secure those sites at a point down the line.”

Newman pointed to Churchill Gardens

Primary School in Westminster. The site was left empty after its amalgamation in 2024 with a neighbouring school in the same trust, Future Academies. Newman is one the MAT’s directors.

Dr Lawrence Foley, its chief executive, said the space now housed Future’s head office, a childminding service, and a mentoring and work experience organisation.

Another community interest company was also set to run a “winter warm hub for the elderly, after-school clubs for young people with SEND and a prayer space for women and children”.

Foley said it “made sense” for the trust to “hold on to the site and run some of the outreach activities from that building”, in part, because it runs three other schools nearby.

More school solar panels

In 2024, LocatED released a handbook to help local authorities and academy trusts “unlock potential” in their estates.

It told schools to consider trying to secure sell-on agreements with developers when flogging surplus land to fund rebuilds.

The company is also leading the delivery of solar panels to schools as part of government-owned Great British Energy’s first major project. The scheme was expanded to 250 schools in October.

But during last week’s talk, Newman confirmed “it is likely” more will be added, adding: “[But] I don’t know who that is.”

More children are not 'school ready', says charity

SAMANTHA BOOTH

SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Primary school teachers reported more children are joining reception not "school ready" last year, a survey has found.

A survey by the early years charity Kindred Squared found 37 per cent of children were not ready for school, an increase from 33 per cent in 2024.

The charity defines "school ready" as children "ready to access the learning and development opportunities available to them in reception, where this is not due to a previously identified special educational need or disability (SEND)".

The government is aiming for 75 per cent of five-year-olds to achieve a "good level of development" by 2028.

Kindred Squared surveyed 1,000 primary school staff, including teachers, senior leaders and teaching assistants, and another 1,000 parents.

The charity found the gap widened regionally, with 45 per cent of children not school ready in the north east compared with 34 per cent in the east Midlands, eastern England and London.

It also found that 26 per cent of children starting reception



were not toilet trained, up from 24 per cent in the previous two years.

A quarter missing 'basic language skills'

The survey also asked how much time was taken up with nappy changing or going to the toilet. Staff reported helping these pupils took an average of 1.4 hours of each school day.

Staff said about 25 per cent of reception children did not have basic language skills, such as saying their name, up from 23 per cent. But fewer children were unable to communicate their needs – 26 per cent, down from 29 per cent.

More than half (52 per cent) of primary staff said the proportion of children not school ready this year has increased – up from 49 per cent in 2024. Just 12 per cent thought it had decreased.



Pepe Di'Iasio

They estimated that catch-up meant children missed out on 2.4 hours of daily class teaching time, up from 2.1 hours in 2024.

However, 88 per cent of parents said their child was ready for school. The charity said this "highlighted a persistent gap between parental confidence and classroom experience".

Felicity Gillespie, Kindred Squared director, said: "Primary school staff report frustration at the number of parents believing schools are responsible for the development of basic life skills and independence."

'Complex' reasons

In 2024-25, 68.3 per cent of children had a "good level of development" in their early years foundation stage profile assessments – up 0.6 percentage points from the previous year.

The Department for Education said while challenges remained, the "continued upward trend suggests that outcomes in reception are improving over time, reflecting the work of early years settings and reception teachers in supporting children's development".

Pepe Di'Iasio, the general secretary of the school leaders' union ASCL, said: "Schools put a huge amount of work into providing support for children who are not school ready but it does mean that these youngsters are already behind their peers right at the outset of their education."

RUTH LUCAS | RUTH.LUCAS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

More school leaders need mental health support

Almost half of school leaders needed mental health support in the past year, with nearly three quarters saying their job has affected their wellbeing.

An annual poll by the school leaders' union NAHT found most heads said their role affected their sleep, with many reporting they were supporting more staff members with mental health issues.

Paul Whiteman, the union's general secretary, said the findings were "extremely worrying" and "should be a real cause for concern for government".

The survey of 1,517 school leaders found 45 per cent of heads reported needing mental health and wellbeing support in the past year.

Seventy-two per cent of respondents said

their job had a negative impact on their mental health, up from 65 per cent the previous year.

And 92 per cent of heads said the role had affected their sleep, with 83 per cent reporting increased worry and stress and 61 per cent identifying a negative impact on their physical health.

These were up from 88 per cent, 77 per cent and 59 per cent in the year before.

The survey also found 87 per cent of heads said they spent more time in the past three years supporting staff with mental health issues as teacher wellbeing rates drop to the lowest since 2019.

"It is little wonder that the profession loses many school leaders within a few years of their appointment, and that is a huge

waste of talent and experience," Whiteman said.

The union is urging the government to agree to universal entitlement to professional supervision for all leaders to air concerns about their roles.

It is also calling for the government to rule that employers should not contact leaders during weekends or holidays except in exceptional circumstances.



Paul Whiteman

NEWS

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

Concerns over make-up of curriculum drafters group

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEET.CO.UK

Sector leaders have criticised the “limited breadth and diversity” of experts recruited to help write the new national curriculum.

The Department for Education has chosen 46 “curriculum drafters” following a public tender. The government said they were chosen “based on the best fit for the role, taking into account expertise in subject knowledge and in school leadership”.

But the list’s release has prompted questions about diversity and the way the experts are unevenly split across 13 subject areas.

For example, there are 10 experts helping to draft the PE curriculum, compared with just one for languages and two for English.

The two experts chosen to help with English are Matt Carnaby, the director of curriculum and assessment at Astrea Academy Trust, and Dr Timothy Mills, a RISE adviser and former executive director of primary education at the STEP Academy Trust.

Critics point out they are both white men either attached or previously attached to multi-academy trusts. Both were approached for comment.

Ian Cushing, a reader in critical applied linguistics at Manchester Metropolitan University and a fellow of the English Association (EA), described the selection as “disappointing but perhaps not surprising”.

“No subject should have its content designed by such a small number of individuals, and certainly no subject should have its content designed by exclusively white men.”

He said it was “insulting” to a teaching workforce made up primarily of women.

English helped pupils to explore social issues including “race, class, gender, disability, linguistic diversity, colonialism”.

“We need a curriculum designed by people who have lived experience and expertise in those things...[and] allows people from diverse backgrounds to see, feel, and hear themselves represented in it.”

Dr Rebecca Fisher, the chief executive of the EA, said it “regrets that the DfE did not appoint a larger and more diverse group” to take in the discipline’s “deep expertise and experience”.



‘No subject should have its content designed by such a small number of individuals’

But Fisher said the association looked “forward to supporting Matt Carnaby...who brings extensive knowledge of curriculum design and of the subject, and phonics expert Dr Tim Mills”.

Professor Becky Francis’s Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) report said the national curriculum “is for all our children and young people, and they should feel both included in it and represented by it”.

Allana Gay, a co-founder of BAMEed, a black, Asian, and minority ethnic educators’ network, said actions since the CAR “indicate that once again truly inclusive practice is going to the fringe rather than being embedded into the curriculum”.

The Francis review made clear the drafting process “must involve teachers, as well as be informed by subject specialists’ knowledge of the discipline”.

Shehla Zafir, a curriculum director for English at a multi-academy trust, and BAMEed co-lead for the West Midlands, said she was “genuinely disappointed at the lack of diversity and representation” in the list.

She is worried that the next iteration of the national curriculum would continue to have “unconscious biases built in because of the make-up of this group.”

“This group reinforces the whiteness of the curriculum,” she said. “Diverse voices may be invited to join the discussion, but they do not have a seat at the table.”

Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union, criticised the “limited breadth and diversity” of drafters, as well as “the absence of practising teachers”.

The government is due to start publishing draft programmes of study for consultation from this spring. The final versions will come in spring 2027, and the new curriculum will be taught in schools from September 2028.

Kebede said the government “must trust and empower the profession as curriculum-makers and ensure drafting teams reflect fully the experiences and expertise of teachers and the societies they serve”.

Stuart Tiffany, a history teacher, said the subject’s eight expert drafters had “immense knowledge, experience and talent”.

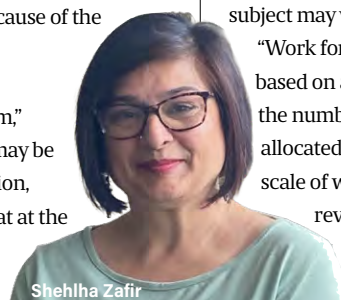
But he questioned whether they had enough experience in key stages 1 and 2, and said he hoped they would “proactively seek out the specialist understanding required to effectively plan for the youngest learners”.

A DfE spokesperson said the contracts were with a range of suppliers, both organisations and sole traders – “hence why numbers of drafters per subject may vary”.

“Work for each subject has been allocated based on a set number of days, rather than the number of people. Each supplier has been allocated a set number of days based on the scale of work required to respond to the review recommendations.”



Allana Gay



Shehla Zafir

SCHOOLS WEEK

FE WEEK JOBS

Powered by education week jobs



Find your dream job in 2026

Get in
touch



Contact: **Clare Halliday**
+44 (0) 7834 165 664
clare.halliday@educationscape.com

Set up a job seekers account **today**



www.educationweekjobs.co.uk

@EduWeekJobs



PART OF



EducationScape
INVESTIGATE · INFORM · INSPIRE

Investigation

CHAMINDA JAYANETTI | NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

The long, lonely wait for special needs help

A debate about the future of children's rights is raging as the SEND reforms loom.

It has been widely reported the government will seek to reduce the number of children with legal rights to support, a move that worries many families. But some believe ministers should go further, and claim those rights are too easily won.

As schools and families await the white paper, Schools Week speaks to three families who have found specialist provision hard to come by.

Nine-year-old Leo* has ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and sensory processing disorder. He struggles with reading, writing, motor skills and is incontinent.

His mother Jackie* says that over time he shows more and more signs of not understanding social cues, says inappropriate things and thinks people are out to attack him.

There is a "massive chasm" between his IQ and his achievement, she says.

Leo's health professionals told Jackie an education, health and care needs assessment was needed to identify what support he should receive and whether it could be delivered in his current school.

Last June she approached his school with evidence, reports from the NHS and diagnoses.

The application was sent to Surrey County Council in October.

Surrey's initial request to his school was for more information on Leo's attendance. Jackie said she found this "mind-boggling, because that can't be the deciding factor".

"He was going to school, because we're down the road and we just manage things. But that doesn't mean he likes it and that doesn't mean he copes.

"He's had attempts where he's tried to throw himself off the banister, and had attempts where he's got knives to his chest."

On December 4, Jackie was told the application for an assessment had been denied. She says she was told he was doing "OK under ordinarily available provision".

She says the council noted Leo had been taught mechanisms to deal with his anxiety, but included "nothing about the suicide attempts, nothing about any of that".

Interventions for his dyslexia are "great", but "he's still below where he should be.

"He's not catching up to his classmates. He is still getting into playground incidents. He is still crying. It is still hard. He says school's like a prison and he wants to die."

To make matters worse, the night before his needs assessment was denied, Leo "tried to strangle himself".

"I obviously intervened. We had a chat ... and a cuddle. I sent an email to the deputy head explaining what had happened and how concerned I was for his wellbeing.... The following

Investigation: SEND

day we get the refusal letter. And I was just like, 'oh my God'."

In the past two weeks the council has backed down and agreed to carry out an EHC needs assessment in response to safeguarding concerns – seven months after Jackie first approached Leo's school.

Jackie wants an EHCP to give a legal footing for the provision Leo already receives, plus more specialised supervision during playtimes to avoid escalations and fights. She also wants help with dyspraxia, emotional literacy support assistance and some one-to-one support with reading and writing.

Jonathan Hulley, Surrey County Council's cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning, says the council has agreed to 90 per cent of requests for an EHC needs assessment so far this academic year.

"We respond to requests for mediation and are keen to resolve any issues without the need for formal tribunals," he told *Schools Week*.

The council has also "trialled a new mediation and dispute resolution officer role, and over 90 per cent of the cases they concluded were resolved without the need for formal processes. A permanent team has now been created to build on this success."

James Mahaffey's nine-year-old son Rhys has autism and ADHD. He is very bright in certain areas, but struggles to make real friendships and get on with his peers.

He can get "quite angry and quite unmanageable" and sometimes "completely can't control his emotions," says James.

He's had a one-to-one support worker since year 1, with whom he has a great relationship, but his mainstream school can't meet his needs long term.

He can only concentrate for a maximum of 20 minutes so his support worker is "basically keeping him distracted while the rest of the class get on with other bits and pieces," says James.

"A lot of the time he's left to do colouring-in and cutting-out and sticking and stuff that he likes doing and that keeps him occupied, but isn't actually helping him thrive in terms of learning."

He also becomes disruptive if his one-to-one



'He says school's like a prison and that he wants to die'

support is changed. "He's been running around that school before – they can't catch him." He has been put in rooms to calm down, but has kicked the windows in.

After three years working through the EHCP process, his family weren't able to find a specialist placement through Hampshire County Council, leading them to tribunal.

The family identified a special school they felt was suitable. But the school said it was full and that Rhys's needs were not severe enough.

James says the council suggested a secondary school, even though Rhys is below secondary age, and another mainstream setting.

"We're back trying to find a school that will accept him, but they're all full because we've been through this process once already," says James.

"It just seems to be delay tactics upon delay tactics. And then when you finally get to the point where you might actually get somewhere, [the council] roll out a highly trained, highly paid barrister to block you and push you right back to the start again."

Pro Bono Economics has estimated the total public sector spend on SEND tribunals could be as high as £80 million, despite councils losing in 98 per cent of cases.

James is now taking advice from a specialist education solicitor at a cost of £275 an hour.

"From the council's point of view, my belief is [they think] it's just easier that way, leaving him

where he is. He's not causing any trouble, he's not achieving anything, but then equally, he does go in and then he comes home."

Megan Carter, head of Rhys's Berewood Primary School in Hampshire, said she could not discuss individual pupils, but her school and trust worked "very closely with all our families and the local authority to ensure every child is well supported and has a rich and meaningful learning journey."

"Whenever there are challenges it is always our intention to work together to find solutions and put in place whatever support is possible."

A spokesperson for Hampshire said it understood "that parents want the very best for their children – and this is something we strive to deliver for all children within our educational settings".

"Demand for special needs provision continues to grow exponentially, locally and nationally. In Hampshire alone, the number of EHCPs has risen by 243 per cent since national reforms in 2015.

"Coupled with growing complexity in children's needs, this makes finding available and suitable placements increasingly challenging.

"Where we are unable to place a child in a family's preferred school, we work closely with the child's current school and parents and explore further adaptations to the child's existing provision to ensure their needs continue to be met."

Investigation: SEND

In early 2024, seven-year-old Meghan Correa snuck into her school bathroom to drink water. She nearly died.

Meghan, now 9, has end-stage kidney failure that means her fluid intake has to be severely restricted and closely monitored.

After the bathroom incident, she had to have four operations in a week, which nearly killed her.

Meghan is limited to 200ml of water a day. She receives 12 hours of dialysis daily and is on ten different medications. She has been on a waiting list for a kidney transplant for years.

Her family applied for an EHCP not long after the incident – and after the school told them to seek extra council help, says her mother, Edith Saenz Asto.

Meghan's adult sister, Ivanna Colana Saenz, says the school was "not able to check if Meghan was, for example, going to the toilet or going to these water [fountains] to have some."

Martin Blain, the head of Meghan's school, Galleywall Primary in south London, said: "When a child has a high level of need, there is almost always a delay of many months before an EHCP can be agreed."

"The child's needs must be met from within the school's existing resources. Imagine a child requiring constant one-to-one supervision: this means the school has to employ a whole new staff member which is unfunded. This is unsustainable in the current climate."

Sarah Kee, the school's assistant head, said delays in and refusals to secure appropriate support and funding placed schools under significant pressure.

"Families understandably seek reassurance and timely provision, while schools are often required to meet increasingly complex needs without sufficient funding or specialist resources."

"While schools continue to do their utmost, sustained pressure on staffing, budgets and morale highlights the need for more timely processes and adequate funding to ensure ... provision is effective and sustainable."

Meghan has to take medicine at school, needs to eat and avoid specific foods, and must have someone with her for drips.



Meghan (right) with her family including Edith (left) and sister Ivanna (second from left)

'She's going to school but she's not able to share with the kids'

But Southwark council refused to assess her for an EHCP, which could have funded a specialist staff member. Her family say the council suggested she go to a special school or into home education, but she wanted to stay at her mainstream school.

"Meghan has a disability, but she has the ability to play with the kids, to talk with them, to eat with them, all of that. So we tried to explain," says Ivanna.

The family went to tribunal, before Southwark conceded the appeal in January 2025 – only to then assess Meghan for an EHCP and decide she did not qualify for one.

Now her family are going to tribunal again, with the hearing set for September – two-and-a-half years after they originally applied.

Meghan is still going to school, but she is kept in at playtime to avoid any mishaps.

"We understand the priority is her health, but she's going to school and she's not able to share with the kids," says Ivanna.

Jasmine Ali, Southwark's cabinet member for



Meghan

education, said the council was "so sorry to hear about the challenges that this family are facing and sincerely wish this child the very best with their treatment."

But "when a child does not have special educational needs, there is no EHCP".

Ali said responsibility for supporting children undergoing significant health treatment lay with the NHS, the school nursing service and the "school making reasonable adjustments for accessibility".

These three cases are not isolated incidents. The latest government data shows just 46.4 per cent of new EHCPs were issued within the statutory 20 weeks. In 2024, 7.3 per cent took more than a year.

The examples also come as councils grapple with huge and growing high-needs deficits. All three local authorities mentioned above have "safety valve" agreements to reduce their deficits.

The government recently said it would take on any new cost pressures from 2028, but has not said what it will do about the historic deficits, set to swell to £14 billion in the next three years.

* Some names have been changed

Samaritans are available 365 days a year. You can reach them on free call number 116 123, email them at jo@samaritans.org or visit www.samaritans.org to find your nearest branch



16TH ANNUAL

FESTIVAL OF EDUCATION

at Wellington College | 2-3 July 2026

HEADLINE PARTNER

AQA
Questions matter

2,000 FREE TICKETS AVAILABLE



Made possible by
Wellington College Education



WELLINGTON
COLLEGE



APPLY FOR YOUR FREE TICKET



BY FRIDAY 13 FEBRUARY

BOOK TODAY

Visit educationfest.co.uk for further
information and to book tickets

FOUNDED BY



WELLINGTON
COLLEGE



KATE
CHHATWAL

CEO, Challenge Partners

Our trust peer reviews provide lessons for upcoming legislation

Challenge Partners has delivered reviews since 2018 and our experience could guide the blueprint for trust inspections, says Kate Chhatwal

Academy trust inspection is about to become more than just an ambition. As they legislate, ministers have a golden opportunity to set expectations that are both ambitious and achievable. But without a sense of how inspection will operate in practice, there is a risk of creating bureaucracy and pressure for trusts and inspectors without improving outcomes for children. At Challenge Partners, we have delivered trust peer reviews since 2018, independently evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research and informed by our experience in facilitating thousands of school quality assurance reviews. Peer review is not inspection, and should not replace public accountability. But the parallels are close enough to offer practical lessons that ministers would do well to consider before committing their plans to legislation and subsequent regulations.

Be clear about purpose
Our reviews pivot around a simple question: what is this trust doing to

improve the educational experience and outcomes for all pupils – and is it working? That question cuts across structure, scale and organisational philosophy. If trust inspection does not start from the same core purpose, it risks becoming a compliance exercise rather than a lever for improvement. At their best, inspections should strengthen public accountability while also matching the best of peer review in driving improvement and learning at trust and sector level.

Uphold high standards without imposing constraints
Trusts vary enormously in size, structure, and maturity. Unlike school performance, where the evidence base allows for detailed quality assurance rubrics, there is far less robust data on trust effectiveness. We use detailed descriptors for school reviews, while trust peer reviews take a lighter-touch, question-led approach. Ministers should ensure legislation allows for this flexibility. The bar for pupil outcomes must remain high. But the model for achieving them cannot be rigidly defined while the evidence is still emerging.

Don't overreach on scope or expertise
Our peer reviews typically involve one lead reviewer and six peer



“ We rely on ‘climate walks’ to test alignment between intent and practice

reviewers working alongside host trust leaders over three days. Even with this time and resource, there are limits to what a review can meaningfully cover. We always focus on how the trust improves schools and outcomes. Beyond that, trusts can select one or two areas for additional scrutiny, using CST’s strong trusts assurance framework as a guide, with many choosing a focus on central operations or readiness for growth. We avoid overreach into areas such as governance and finance, not because they’re not important, but because conducting audits requires specialist skills. Inspectors are not accountants, procurement specialists, or legal experts. If trust inspection requires Ofsted to make definitive judgments in these areas without the right skills in the inspection workforce, credibility will suffer. Ministers should ensure expectations align with the expertise inspection teams can realistically bring.

Clarify the interplay with school inspection
Trust inspection will also need a clear and realistic relationship with school inspection. In our peer reviews, we rely on

“climate walks” in a representative sample of schools to test alignment between trust leadership intent, what is happening in practice and whether it is having the desired impact. We haven’t yet been able to devise a reliable way of connecting school and trust-level peer reviews, and this will be even harder for Ofsted given the numbers involved and longer gaps between school inspections.

Invest in the right people
Finally, quality will depend heavily on who conducts trust inspections. Our own peer reviews are led by recently-retired CEOs of effective trusts, supported by trained peers from leadership, governance and operations roles. That blend of expertise matters. If trust inspection is to command confidence, Ministers must invest just as deliberately in inspection capability. Trust inspection is coming. But the most important decisions are being made now – not by inspectors, but by lawmakers. If ministers want inspection to drive improvement rather than compliance, they should leave themselves room to learn, adapt and build on what the sector already knows.



IAN
DEWES

CEO, Odyssey Collaborative Trust

Here are three lessons to give schools great governance

Experience shows that governors can provide powerful insights into the wider community, while others share their professional strategic know-how, says Ian Dewes

When academy trusts first emerged, the layers of governance were often misunderstood.

Over time, like many trusts, we've refined our approach – learning what genuinely adds value, what strengthens decision-making, and what helps children thrive. Three lessons stand out.

Parents are the beating heart of our governance structure

Parents aren't just stakeholders – they're partners. We have parents involved at every tier: one trust member, two trustees, and typically two parent governors on each local governing board.

There's a long-standing myth that parents pursue personal agendas. In reality, we've found the opposite. Parents usually go out of their way not to discuss anything related to their own child to avoid the appearance of bias.

What they do bring is a powerful mix of professionalism, community insight and a deep commitment to ensuring every child succeeds.

Local governance remains essential, because context matters

Some trusts have reduced the role

of local governing boards, but our experience shows that strong local governance is a major driver of school improvement.

A key enabler has been our template for headteacher reports, built around principles from the government's *Understanding your data: A guide for school governors and academy trustees*. The headteacher reports give governors clear national and local comparator data, allowing them to challenge, support, and ask the right questions.

This isn't about duplicating scrutiny between the central team and the local board. It's about benefiting from different perspectives. Local governors bring something no dataset can provide: lived experience of the community.

Recent examples include:

- Families taking term-time holidays to see relatives abroad: This has become an increasingly common occurrence, sometimes leaving school leaders unsure whether carrot or stick is the best approach. Governors who reflect the backgrounds of the school community have been helpful in deepening leaders' understanding of the reasons why some of these absences are occurring and this has been a great support for decision making.
- The ripple effect of a high-profile local safeguarding case: When there were serious issues with a family in the community, governors who lived in the area



“ They gave feedback about the community's thoughts and feelings

gave helpful feedback about the community's thoughts and feelings. This was crucial in helping the headteacher to navigate a very delicate time with timely communications pitched at the appropriate level.

- In both cases, local governors helped us look beyond the numbers and understand what was really happening for families.
- That is why local governance matters – and why we continue to invest in it.

Governance thrives when the right people are in the right roles

Governance is not one-size-fits-all. Some volunteers want the hands-on experience of supporting a single school, seeing rapid change and building relationships in one community. Others prefer a strategic role across multiple schools where decisions have a system-wide impact.

Having served as both a local governor (REACH2) and a trustee (Coventry Diocese Academy Trust), I've seen the contrast first-hand. Both roles are rewarding, but the focus, responsibility, and skills needed are very different.

For example:

- Trustees often make financial, strategic, and compliance decisions, which is ideal for those with skills in areas like finance, HR, estates, law, or audit.
- Local governors offer insight into a school's unique community – best filled by people deeply rooted in the locality.
- Matching people to the role that fits them best is one of the most important decisions a trust can make.

So how do you become a governor or trustee?

Start with your strengths and your motivation.

If you want to make a difference to children in your community and enjoy seeing progress up close, a local governor role is likely the best fit.

If you want to shape strategy, use your professional expertise, and influence outcomes for thousands of children, consider becoming a trustee.

Either way, governance is one of the most meaningful ways to give back, and our schools need talented, committed people more than ever.



GEMMA
LAVIN

Senior director of strategy and innovation, Haberdashers' Academies Trust South

Ensuring a MAT is fit for purpose isn't a job you finish overnight

Multi-academy trusts are not automatically better than other models, but in a system under strain, purpose-led trusts may be our best chance, says Gemma Lavin

As we await the schools white paper, the conversation feels familiar. Behaviour. Attendance. SEND. Workforce. Standards. Accountability.

Each matters. But together, they point to something deeper than a list of policy challenges.

They describe a system operating under sustained strain – a perfect storm of rising need, shrinking capacity and public expectation, and an increasing risk that we mistake activity for progress.

It is tempting to ask whether our current ways of organising schools have lived up to their promise. The honest answer is: not always. Scale in itself guarantees nothing. Pretending otherwise weakens the case for system-level reform.

But it would equally be a mistake to conclude that the underlying idea – that schools are stronger when they work together – has failed.

Multi-academy trusts are the primary way this collaboration is realised at scale, providing a structure through which shared capacity, collective responsibility and mutual support can be built across schools.

Doing that well, however, requires organisational maturity. The organisations now carrying that responsibility are still relatively young, operating in conditions their original architects could not have anticipated.

Like any complex system, they take time to develop the coherence, feedback loops and trust required to function intelligently.

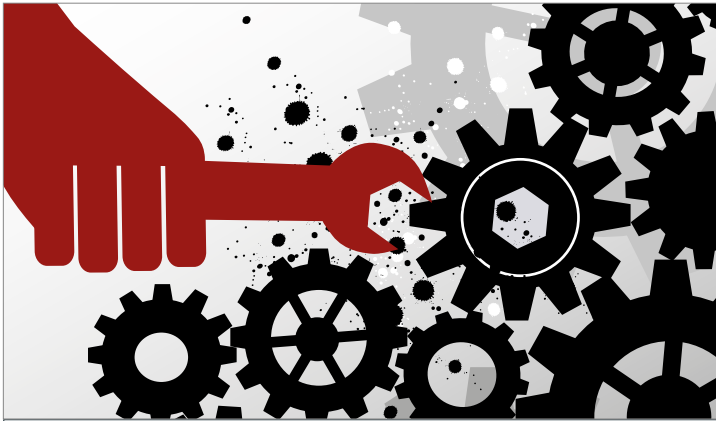
In such organisations, the impact of design choices is often felt later than the effort required to implement them, which is why clarity of purpose and leadership discipline matter as much as structure itself.

Why the debate needs reframing

Much of the scepticism about school groups and trusts stems from experiences where policy has outpaced purpose.

Structures were created, but operating models were not. Central teams were established, but not always designed to solve the problems schools could not solve alone. Systems were introduced, but without a clear view of how they can reduce workload, improve insight or support inclusion.

Well-led systems behave differently. They focus on reducing duplication, sharing intelligence early, creating consistency where it benefits pupils and flexibility where it benefits practice, and using digital systems to connect people and insight.



“ It can appear the organisation is adding complexity

‘One trust, one team’ as a discipline, not a slogan

In the current climate, working as one organisation is not a branding exercise. It is a leadership discipline. It means making choices that favour long-term capacity over short-term autonomy. It means explaining decisions clearly and repeatedly. It means aligning systems, practice and culture around a shared moral purpose.

That work is slow. It is unfinished. And it is exactly what this moment demands.

There is, however, a reality the sector does not always name clearly enough.

Moving from a group of schools to a genuinely coherent system often requires focused effort and adjustment before its benefits are realised.

Aligning systems, adopting shared platforms and changing ways of working can feel like extra workload in the early stages, particularly because the benefits are structural and long-term, while the disruption is immediate and personal. Judging change from the middle of it is often misleading.

For those who join part-way through a journey of system-building, it can appear as though the

organisation is adding complexity rather than removing it. They may encounter change before they experience the full dividend of working as part of a coherent system.

This is not a sign the work is misguided. It is a predictable feature of building systems.

Purpose-led systems do not pretend this phase is effortless. Instead, clear leadership, shared purpose and consistent communication turn what could feel like disruption into a shared effort towards greater impact.

Over time, what once felt complex becomes clearer, more predictable and easier to sustain.

A better question for the next phase

As the white paper approaches, the more important question may not be whether one structure is better than another, but whether we are prepared to thoughtfully adapt how our trusts and organisations work, ensuring roles, support and ways of working are clearly understood, collectively shaped, and fit for the challenges schools now face.

In a system under sustained strain, purpose-led organisations working together can create capacity, coherence and resilience that no school can build alone.

Opinion

WANT TO WRITE FOR SCHOOLS WEEK? CONTACT US
OPINION@SCHOOLSWEK.CO.UK



LINDSAY
PATIENCE

Co-founder,
Flexible Teacher Talent

Leaders must be willing to bend
now flexibility is enshrined in law

The Employment Rights Act means schools must properly consider a staff member's request for flexible working – but that change could benefit leaders, says Lindsay Patience

Flexible working is increasingly common in many workplaces. But the adoption of flexible practices in schools has been slow and patchy.

For many leaders, requests for flexible working feel like a procedural hurdle to process and often decline.

But the passage in December of the Employment Rights Act marks a significant shift in how flexible working requests must be handled.

While it has not become an automatic right, the bar for refusing a request has been raised, and schools that fail to adapt will expose themselves to legal risks. Having a blanket policy of no flexible working is not a safe approach.

What has changed?

Schools can still refuse flexible working requests, and the eight statutory grounds for doing so remain in place.

However, refusals must now be “reasonable” – a higher legal test. It is no longer enough to just state one of the eight reasons. Leaders must demonstrate why a refusal is reasonable in the specific circumstances of that request.

Consultation with the employee is mandatory, so schools must meaningfully engage with the individual before a decision is reached.

This is not a courtesy meeting or rubber-stamping exercise. It must show genuine consideration of whether the request, or a modified version, could reasonably work.

Any refusal must be accompanied by a written explanation setting out the reasoning. Generic language and blanket statements of policy wording are unlikely to stand up to scrutiny.

In short, flexible working has moved from being a procedural exercise to a substantive decision that schools must be able to justify with evidence.

Beyond the legal risks

Many experienced teachers and leaders now expect some degree of flexibility, particularly those with caring responsibilities or health needs.

If requests are refused without robust justification, as well as the risk of an employment tribunal, schools risk losing skilled staff.

From a workforce planning perspective, leaders will need to show they have at least considered alternatives.

That might include job sharing, timetable tweaks, remote working or creative use of part-time leadership.



“ It nudges schools towards a more positive conversation

From a risk management perspective, a poorly handled refusal now carries a higher chance of challenge.

Employment tribunals will expect to see evidence that leaders actively weighed the impact on pupils, colleagues and the organisation against the needs of the individual, and that they did so reasonably.

For governing bodies and trust boards, this raises important questions about oversight. Are leaders being trained to make legally defensible decisions? Are policies being applied consistently across schools? Are flexible working decisions being monitored from a governance perspective?

This legislative change should act as a catalyst for reflection. Senior and middle leaders need training.

Flexible working requests are often handled at departmental or line-manager level, yet many leaders have never been taught how to assess them properly. Without clear guidance and understanding of the relevant legislation, inconsistency and risk are inevitable.

Next, flexible working policies need to be reviewed. Many school

policies are out of date, and can be overly restrictive or written with refusal in mind. A policy that does not reflect the new legal test is a liability.

Instead of a source of anxiety for leaders, this should be an opportunity for schools to take a strategic look at the flexibility they already offer.

Where has it worked well? Where has it failed and why? What assumptions are being made about what can and can't be done?

To summarise, flexible working has not become an automatic yes, but saying no has become harder.

For schools and all other employers, this is about being able to show that each request has been taken seriously, explored properly and decided fairly.

For many schools, this will be a significant shift. Ultimately, the Employment Rights Bill nudges schools towards a more thoughtful and positive conversation about flexible working.

For schools willing to engage with this change, that may turn out to be an opportunity rather than a burden.



TIFFANY
BECK

Head of education, PLMR and
chair of trustees,
Maritime Academy Trust

Carefully crafted communication
is the way to avoid complaints

As new complaints guidance for schools and parents is published, schools should remember it's poor messaging that often sparks problems, says Tiffany Beck

Parents and schools want the same thing: the best for children. Yet misunderstandings, unmet expectations or a lack of clarity can create tension, and tension too often escalates into formal complaints.

New complaints guidance for schools and parents has been published, and the education secretary has signalled a desire to reset parent-school relationships in the white paper.

But if we are serious about reducing complaints and rebuilding trust, we need to address a root cause sitting beneath policy and process: communication.

Working closely with hundreds of schools means we have a unique view of complaints.

We often find patterns of initially poor communication, about even relatively straightforward matters, snowballing into tricky, complex, persistent and vexatious complaints.

Of course, there are valid grounds for some complaints. And there are some parents who will never be satisfied regardless.

But schools can do more than respond as best they can to parental concerns. With better

communication, many issues can be pre-empted before they escalate.

Why communication matters

When communication breaks down, trust erodes.

Periods of change are particularly sensitive, becoming flashpoints for tension. Parents are more likely to accept decisions when they understand the reasoning.

Whether it is a change to a behaviour policy, uniform, teacher or facilities, explaining the why matters just as much as setting out the what.

Being upfront about the rationale (and its impact on children's wellbeing, learning or school culture) helps parents see the bigger picture.

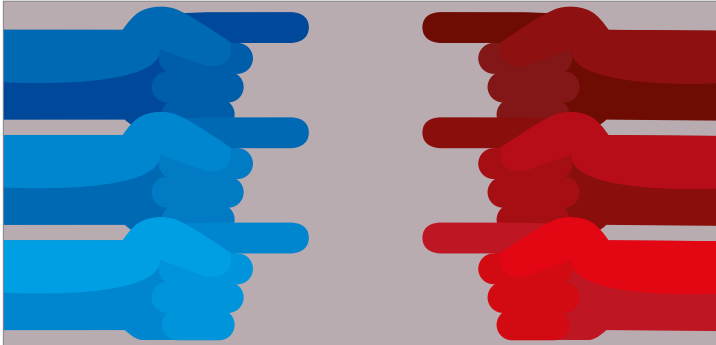
Sometimes leaders believe they have communicated clearly. But tone, timing, jargon or confusing wording can mean the message does not land as intended. Communication needs to be strategic.

While the complaints system can be improved, preventing escalation in the first place is more powerful.

Too many complaints intensify because parents don't feel heard early enough. Often the issue is not hostility, but a sense of being left out of the loop. Acknowledging concerns, even where schools cannot meet every request, can lower the temperature.

It's also important to resist the temptation to default to blame.

However challenging a situation feels, defensiveness rarely helps.



“ Acknowledging concerns
can lower the temperature

As the new guidance rightly emphasises, empathy is a practical tool for de-escalation and often parents just want to feel heard and acknowledged.

Clarity matters too. Parents are not education specialists, so jargon or acronyms only add confusion. Plain, accessible language builds understanding and trust.

Good communication can feel time-consuming in already stretched schools. But investing effort upstream saves far more time, energy and stress later.

Complaints in the age of AI

A newer challenge is the growing use of AI by parents to draft complaints.

These letters can be lengthy, legalistic and intimidating. The instinct may be to respond point-by-point in kind, perhaps even using AI in return. That is rarely effective.

What de-escalates complaints is not formality, but humanity. Warmth, empathy and reassurance always outperform an impersonal or technical response.

Equally, when staff feel personally attacked, responding emotionally can inflame matters. Taking a step back, sometimes drawing on external perspective, can help maintain proportion and focus on resolution, whilst maintaining

authenticity.

Practical steps schools can take:

- Communicate early and often, sharing positive updates as well as difficult news
- Always explain “why”, particularly around change
- Avoid jargon and keep language accessible
- Make contact easy with clear signposting on your website
- Stay measured and professional. Avoid point-by-point responses to long letters as these risk escalation
- Keep responses human, empathetic and calm
- Find ways to bring parents on the journey of change with you, through consultation or co-creation

There is growing recognition that strong communication underpins successful parent-school relationships. Effective schools do more than transmit information, they build understanding and trust. That investment pays dividends when challenges arise.

By placing communication at the heart of engagement – explaining decisions clearly, listening carefully and responding with empathy and understanding – schools can reduce complaints, support staff wellbeing and, most importantly, focus their efforts on enabling children to thrive.

THE LEGAL LEADER

Expert advice on education and the law



Repairs to the school-parent contract must come from the top

Victoria Hatton
Partner, Browne
Jacobson



Following breakdowns in relationships between schools and parents, Victoria Hatton suggests policy and legal changes from government that could rebuild cohesion

It's time we acknowledged the elephant in the room, a problem that has become too big to ignore.

The social contract between schools and parents has broken down. Since the pandemic, complaints from parents have risen exponentially.

As two-thirds of respondents told our school leaders survey two years ago, many of these are classed as "vexatious".

This is not only increasing the administrative burden on schools and trusts, it's wedging a further divide between schools and parents.

The situation is not irreparable, however, and the first small steps have already been taken towards forging a more positive home-school relationship.

Complaints guidance for parents and schools

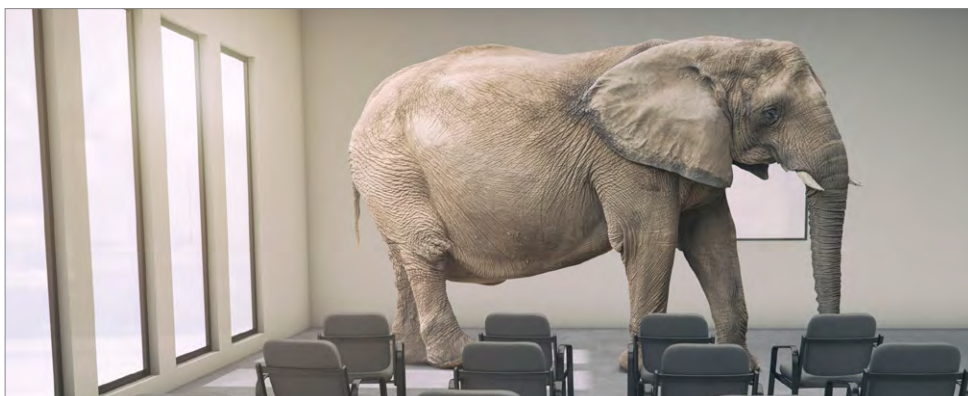
New Department for Education-backed guidance for parents offers schools an opportunity to reopen the conversation with parents about how to give effective feedback or raise concerns or complaints appropriately.

Further guidance for schools from [Parentkind](#) also gives leaders the chance to reconsider their own approach to complaints management, including their complaints policy and programme of dispute resolution training for staff.

However, many gaps remain in addressing the issue. With the schools white paper on the near horizon, there is a real opportunity for the government to give legislative "teeth" to enforce the home-school expectations it aims to set out.

Rebuilding the social contract

The first priority should be to reintroduce a mandatory "home-school agreement", which clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of both parents and schools.



Such a document would outline what parents can expect from the school in terms of education quality, communication and handling of complaints, as well as what the school expects from parents regarding support, engagement and communication.

Previous legislation should be reinstated and enhanced to stipulate that a child will not be registered at a school until all parents known to the school have signed the agreement.

Improve landscape of school complaints management

The government should align the legislative, regulatory and best practice frameworks for maintained schools and academies.

This should include clear, unified guidelines on which aspects of "staff conduct complaints" fall outside the school complaints process.

Government should also ensure the governor review stage focuses solely on how the complaint was handled at earlier stages, not reinvestigating the complaint itself.

Comprehensive guidance is required to prevent duplication across stakeholders such as the DfE, Ofsted, local authorities, Teaching Regulation Agency, MPs and even the police.

Alongside this, enhanced regulatory measures should introduce a foundational rule that no external agency may review a matter unless the school's internal complaints procedure has been exhausted.

Developing a centralised portal as the sole entry point for parents to submit complaints that may require the attention of external agencies would support this policy, while identity verification would discourage anonymous

complaints and ensure accountability.

DfE must back schools

The complaints issue has been punctuated by a rise in "vexatious" complaints and unreasonable behaviour from parents.

Common behaviours cited in our survey include personal attacks on staff, lengthy and overly complex emails, raising multiple complaints about the same issue and insistence on unrealistic outcomes.

The DfE must therefore give explicit backing to schools via enhanced guidance on what constitutes a vexatious complaint via clear definitions and examples.

Perhaps most importantly, the legislative "teeth" should come in the form of a last-resort mechanism that allows school leaders to remove a pupil from the school roll where there has been an irretrievable breakdown in the home-school relationship.

This would require a robust framework including mandatory mediation, documented warnings and a fair review process, ensuring all parties are treated justly and the pupil's welfare is fully considered.

Final thoughts

While the challenges are pervasive, there is a significant opportunity for the government to implement transformative solutions that can repair the weakened social contract between schools and parents.

The Parentkind guidance is a welcome start to this discussion, but the schools white paper must provide the building blocks to a new era for the home-school relationship via new frameworks, guidance and regulations.

THE
RESEARCH LEADER

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

Pupil premium paperwork reveals schools snub effective strategies

Emma Dobson

Chief operating officer, WhatWorked Education

Our review of 550 pupil premium strategies found many schools aren't strategic at all – which suggests leaders need help to use evidence effectively, says Emma Dobson

Every primary school publishes a pupil premium strategy. Inspectors read them. Governors scrutinise them. Leaders devote hours to drafting and updating them.

But are these documents genuinely helping schools make better decisions for disadvantaged pupils, or are they a compliance exercise?

A regional review of more than 550 primary school pupil premium statements across the north east suggests the answer is not straightforward.

The positive finding is that schools are actively engaging with evidence when designing their strategies. Less encouraging, however, is that some of the approaches with the strongest evidence for improving attainment and narrowing disadvantage gaps remain underused.

The review, funded by the North East Combined Authority and conducted by WhatWorked Education, examined every published primary pupil premium strategy across the region for 2024-25.

At first glance, the findings are encouraging. Ninety-four per cent of statements referenced the Education Endowment Foundation's teaching and learning toolkit.

Very few schools were spending on approaches with weak or unclear evidence. This matters, because it suggests school leaders are not ignoring the evidence base.

But across the region, schools typically referred to just two of the EEF's five highest-impact, low-cost strategies.

Oral language and reading comprehension approaches featured strongly, reflecting the centrality of language development.

But feedback appeared in fewer than half of strategies. Metacognition and self-regulation featured in just over a quarter. Peer tutoring appeared in only two per cent of statements.



These are well-established approaches with extensive supporting evidence. Their absence raises an important question for school leaders: why do some of the most effective strategies struggle to move from research summaries into classroom practice?

Approaches such as metacognition and peer tutoring are not "bolt-on" interventions. They require careful design, staff training and sustained attention to implementation.

In busy schools under constant pressure, leaders may understandably gravitate towards approaches that feel familiar or are easier to explain to multiple audiences.

Another explanation lies in how pupil premium statements themselves are being used. In many weaker examples, the toolkit was referenced but not meaningfully engaged with.

Strategies were listed, but without a clear explanation of why they were chosen, how they would be implemented or how leaders would know whether they were working.

In these cases, the document became descriptive rather than strategic, a catalogue of activity rather than a plan for improvement.

The strongest statements looked very different. They began with careful diagnosis, often drawing on standardised assessment data in English and maths alongside attendance and pastoral information.

They selected a small number of approaches tightly aligned to identified needs. Crucially, they explained what staff would do differently in classrooms, how implementation would be supported, and when leaders would review

impact and make any necessary adaptations.

This distinction matters because pupil premium strategies now sit at the intersection of accountability, improvement and inclusion.

Ofsted inspectors use them to understand how leaders think about disadvantage. Governors rely on them to hold schools to account. Staff look to them for clarity on priorities. When strategies are vague or generic, they fail all three audiences.

There are also lessons at system level. Patterns of over and under-use can tell us where professional development is needed. Gaps between evidence and practice can highlight where implementation support matters more than new guidance.

The question, then, is not whether schools are using the toolkit. It is whether they are being supported to use evidence well.

Which high-impact approaches are hardest to implement in real classrooms? Where do leaders need practical support to translate research evidence into classroom routines? How can schools effectively review impact and adapt?

The lesson from this analysis is not that schools are getting pupil premium "wrong". It is that evidence use is no longer the main challenge. Implementation is.

If pupil premium funding is to deliver on its promise, strategies must move beyond referencing evidence towards embedding it through sharper diagnosis, clearer planning and stronger review.

Publishing a strategy is easy. Making it do real work for disadvantaged pupils is much harder.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

MONDAY

Education questions in the Commons this week should have been renamed "SEND questions".

But ministers were also pushed on getting exam boards to introduce a Ukrainian GCSE.

Parliamentary rules dictate MPs should limit their questions to those linked to the headline topic, but Josh Babarinde, the Lib Dem MP for Eastbourne, decided to try his luck.

"Does the minister agree with me that any Ukrainian GCSE should also include teaching on the importance of national sovereignty and the international rules-based order?"

"If so, does she agree that Donald Trump should be the first to sit that GCSE, so that in relation to Greenland, he can learn to keep his hands off a country that is not his?"

Commons speaker Lindsay Hoyle stepped in: "I do not think the minister even needs to worry about answering that. Let us move on."

TUESDAY

Mobile phone bans in schools are hitting the headlines again (groundhog day, anyone?).

But it got us thinking. Just a few weeks ago, the DfE was encouraging schools to sign up to its flashy Education Records phone

app that will allow pupils to see their GCSE results.

OK, you could argue that results' day is when they are 16 and it's within the school holidays. But pupils still have to download the app and scan a QR code from their school beforehand.

It was also revealed this week that the DfE has spent £5.5 million on the app over the past two years and it's going to cost about £1 million a year to run.

Let's not forget only 29 out of 487 schools and colleges took up the offer to trial the app last year... kerching!

WEDNESDAY

Caroline Wright, the director general of the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA), took to the main stage at BETT UK just after Bridget Phillipson on Wednesday.

She got some chuckles when she said: "Thank you, secretary of state, it's fantastic to welcome you to BETT for a second year running. Remaining in post long enough to return to any event is a political rarity nowadays, and something many of your predecessors failed to accomplish."

She went on: "Length of tenure is not necessarily a fair indicator of impact or success. Of

course, only two secretaries of state for education have served in post for more than four years since 1997 – David Blunkett and Michael Gove.

"And whilst one education secretary invested in edtech, introducing the national agency vector to help support the implementation of technology in schools, the other abolished it."

Cue audience flashbacks to Conservative's "bonfire of the quangos".

The DfE took the time to update its "social media use" page this week, refreshing its list of social media channels, including Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn.

But it feels a shame that the department is still using X, considering the platform's horrifying deepfakes and nudification scandal involving its AI tool Grok.

Schools – take note. Ofsted top boss Martyn Oliver is a Hobnob man. Not a Rich Tea, nor a Ginger Nut (like his predecessor). Time to stock up.

Quizzed at BETT on his favourite biscuits, he said: "I'm 6ft 4in, I like all biscuits."

"So my answer would be the box, not the packet. But I would always go with Peter Kay – I always think [of] Hobnobs because you can dunk them, and carry on dunking them."





Headteacher Vacancy

We are seeking an exceptional Headteacher who shares our values and has the vision, drive, and resilience to lead Hob Green Primary School into the next phase of its development. This role offers a unique opportunity to secure continued and rapid school improvement, while also contributing leadership capacity across drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust, enabling schools to learn from one another and beyond.

Hob Green Primary School is a one-form entry primary school serving pupils aged 3-11 years, located in Dudley. The school is widely recognised for its deeply embedded inclusive culture and holds Centre of Excellence status for the Inclusion Quality Mark.

The school provides exceptional specialist provision, including:

- A well-established Speech and Language Resource Base
- A newly opened SEND Unit for pupils with a primary need of Communication and Interaction, providing specialist support to meet the complex communication and cognition set out in pupils' Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

In its most recent Ofsted inspection in February 2025, the school was judged Good in all areas, with Early Years achieving Outstanding. We are now seeking an inspirational leader to build on this success and take the school to the next level in its improvement journey.

We are looking for a Headteacher who will:

- Demonstrate the resilience, experience and creativity, with a strong commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning, through continuous school improvement.
- Have proven leadership experience across the primary phase.
- Value every child and promote high aspirations for both pupils and staff.
- Act as a positive role model, with the ability to motivate children, staff and the wider community, inspiring all to reach their full potential.
- Champion a deeply inclusive ethos and show a genuine passion for ensuring every child thrives, regardless of background or ability.
- Be an active and influential member of drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust, contributing to trust-wide collaboration and improvement.
- Show a strong commitment to nurturing the development, wellbeing and professional growth of all pupils and staff.

What we can offer

- CPD opportunities which will support your career development
- Strategic support
- Collaborative networking
- An enthusiastic, skilled and dedicated staff team
- Clear pathways for professional growth and career development
- A strong commitment to staff wellbeing and in investing in our people

The post will be of interest to experienced and high-performing Headteachers, or Deputy Headteachers ready to take the next step, who are dynamic, emotionally intelligent, and resilient leaders. The successful candidate will value collaboration and embrace the mutual benefit of being part of a strong and supportive Multi Academy Trust.

Interested candidates can have an informal discussion about the role by contacting James Hill, our Executive Director of School Improvement at jhill@drbignitemat.org

Closing date: 9am Friday 13th February 2026

Interview date: w/c 23rd February 2026

Safeguarding

The Trust is absolutely committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and adults through its safer recruitment processes. An enhanced DBS check will be required for this post. All shortlisted candidates will be subject to online searches.

**CLICK HERE
TO APPLY**



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](#)

SCHOOLS WEEK

FE WEEK JOBS

Powered by education week jobs

Endless Scrolling For Jobs?

No need- we'll notify you



www.educationweekjobs.co.uk



@EduWeekJobs

