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- Planned merger reopens academy trust size debate
- MAT points to clusters model and training benefits

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WEEK

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**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](mailto:news@schoolsweek.co.uk).

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One of our fundamental roles as journalists is to relay what important, influential members of society say to a wide audience.

It ensures transparency, but also equity for those members of the sector who can't – for various reasons – attend events in person.

It's on this basis we feel deeply uncomfortable with the press being barred from attending numerous events this year where public servants are speaking.

There has already been debate about whether civil servants should be "gagged" from speaking publicly. There is clearly nuance in this debate, around officials' seniority and other factors.

But for an academy trust body to stop the press from reporting on the schools minister's speech at one of its events – in a year of major reform announcements – feels perverse.

Other conferences are also not letting us in, or placing restrictions on what parts we can attend if civil servants are speaking.

We are grateful to the conferences for hosting us. But we shouldn't have to justify

why our presence is important.

With the rise of disinformation and deep fakes, reporting on elected and appointed officials' words is paramount to transparency.

Not allowing press entry means access to the minister and other highly influential officials and leaders is only reserved for those that can attend, often because they pay to be there, or because they live close enough to travel there.

There is also an argument to be made that such transparency should extend automatically to speeches delivered by academy and school leaders too. They are, after all, public servants.

As sector press, we do not seek to catch anyone out. We are not trying to gain access to private, confidential discussions between colleagues. These are advertised speeches and workshops at major sector events.

A huge part of our job is reporting real experiences from the chalk face of education. That's harder to do if we're not allowed in the room.

## Most read online this week:

- 1 Complaints to Ofsted rise as parents urged to approach schools first**
- 2 Revealed: First MAT set to surpass 100 schools with merger**
- 3 Ofsted chief criticised over inspection framework comparison**
- 4 Revealed: DfE's secret plan to cut special school expansion**
- 5 Trust bosses to lead DfE KS3 alliance**

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# 'Real concerns' health service missing in SEND reforms

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Government SEND reforms don't go far enough to force health services to deliver support, experts have warned.

MPs warned ministers last year the health sector played a "more passive role", with schools and councils "shouldering most of the responsibility" on SEND.

The education committee said the "limited engagement" of health services in the current system "stems from a lack of robust and enforceable accountability mechanisms".

The white paper thrusts schools into the driving seat of government's reforms, prompting questions on whether health services will also face further scrutiny.

Anna Bird, chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership, said the organisation had some "real concerns" about how far the white paper "goes on health".

Speaking at a health and social care committee hearing this week, she said: "There aren't any new rights to health provision in the package of reforms. There hasn't been an overhaul of health accountability in the proposals.

"I think it's a bit of a mark that health hasn't been as much around the table as we would've liked during the development of the proposals."

The white paper is co-signed by the health secretary Wes Streeting, but Bird said there was "a lot to unpick, but it doesn't feel yet like we've got the health bit of this system quite nailed".

## New 'experts at hand' service

Plans include a new £1.8 billion "experts at hand" service, aimed at boosting availability of external support for schools such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists.

Bird welcomed this but said there wasn't yet clarity on how families could flag concerns.

"Do you complain to health? Do you complain to the school? It's really not clear what that is for families."

The government has told councils and health bosses to begin planning their "experts at hand" offer. Guidance is due in the spring.

Documents seen by Schools Week request areas provide a "defined route" for mainstream schools to



Anna Bird



Wes Streeting

access specialist support.

The government wants to "shift to increased group-based models and whole-setting advice and support".

This means health and education staff can "deliver evidence-based support and intervention with greater impact and value, ensuring, where possible, needs do not escalate.

"This not only makes better use of a limited workforce but also reduces dependence on costly, individualised provision."

There should also be "effective joint commissioning" between councils and integrated care boards, "including strategic planning and co-production", the documents added.

But areas have flexibility in how they commission or employ the expert workforce.

Options they are encouraged to explore include deployment through "special schools and colleges, alternative provision schools, neighbourhood health services, best start family hubs and multi-disciplinary family help teams".

Whatever the approach, they must ensure support "is not disproportionately accessed by the most proactive schools".

## Warnings over 'patchwork' of provision

Big questions remain around recruiting sufficient staff for the "experts at hand" service.

Sally Payne, from the Royal College of Occupational

Therapists (RCOT), told MPs currently there's a "real patchwork of different" delivery models.

"We've got OT who work in NHS core services, we've got provision being provided by local authority funded-OT, by independent practitioners.

"We've got that real challenge around that inconsistency. That model's pretty unsustainable in the long run."

Local health chiefs told MPs there should be a "national framework" on SEND, which includes metrics showing how well health services are performing.

Elliot Howard-Jones, chief executive at Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust, called for more "crunchy" data to hold authorities to account.

He said the white paper "talks more about the targeted, targeted plus and education, health and care plans, which is shifting the boundaries of the existing system rather than designing a new system".

"It's hoping that by shifting those boundaries we will move away from (education, health and care plans), but I think the reason why people get EHCPs is because they are frustrated with the system not working beneath that.

"Part of the framework has to be how they access that earlier and how that's mandated."

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson told the Commons earlier this month: "Health authorities must play their full role alongside local authorities in delivering better support."

# Agnew: 109 schools leaves United Learning 'spread thin'

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Plans to run more than 100 academies could leave the country's biggest trust "spread thin", a former academies minister has warned.

United Learning (ULT) this week unveiled proposals to merge with south west chain Authentic Education.

But the move has reopened debates over size, and prompted calls for ministers to order the largest multi-academy trusts (MATs) to draw up models for "servicing and working" with local communities.

National Education Union boss Daniel Kebede said: "In its recent white paper, the government set out its ambition for MATs to be geographically coherent. ULT schools are scattered across the country.

"The merger demonstrates the need for greater government oversight of MATs so that their private aims fit within the society's needs for the education system as a whole."

## United Learning 'not huge'

Jon Coles, ULT's chief executive, has already been interim leader of Authentic's since November, after former CEO Fay MacRitchie's departure three months earlier. The merger will see 96-school ULT grow to 109 academies.

Coles said two years ago his trust was "not a huge organisation" compared to other sectors.

Noting that the largest universities were "two-and-a-half times our turnover financially", he argued the sector needed to "recalibrate" its understanding of what big is.

"There are 2,000 trusts in the system – that's not a sensible way to run a public service. I think the system as a whole would be a great deal better if the average size of a trust were significantly bigger than it is at the moment."

## Size less key for Labour

Last month's white paper revealed government hopes for all schools to join or form trusts.

It noted chains "should be large enough to optimise benefits in terms of driving pupil progress, estates planning and financial resilience".

Unlike previous governments, Labour ministers have not expressed set views on size or set deadlines, however.



Theodore Agnew

Former minister Theodore Agnew said he "was very cautious about allowing MATs to get too big too quickly" in the early academy era.

He suggested the sector was then commercially "immature", with high levels of financial incompetence, or at least naivety".

## Average trust has over 5 schools

But in 2016, David Carter, the then-national schools commissioner, called for smaller trusts to run up to 20 schools. He said trusts with fewer than six academies would "struggle to be sustainable".

The Conservatives then told all schools to start joining MATs by 2030, and trusts to work towards having at least 10 schools. Both policies were eventually dropped.

Pepe Di'Isasio, general secretary of school leaders' union ASCL, backed Labour's approach.

"Expansion is certainly a challenge as trusts have to scale up central services and ensure there are strong governance structures. But this is a matter of how trusts organise themselves rather than a question of how many schools is the right number."

Confederation of School Trusts boss Leora Cruddas said there was no "single, optimal size". There is "room in the system for a range of approaches".

Government data reveals trusts now average 5.6 schools, up from 3.6 in 2021.

## Schools benefit from clusters'

Agnew noted that the system is now "much more

stable". Many large MATs are "highly competent", and able to "hire the very best commercial people from the private sector". But his "only reticence" is around geographic proximity.

ULT "is spread thin across England which means it loses the benefits of inter-school collaboration. [But] I am sure they would argue differently."

But United Learning said the merger would mean it had 19 schools across Bournemouth, Poole and Weymouth.

"This continues our policy of building clusters of at least 3 to 5 schools of the same phase within half an hour's journey time of one another – precisely so that all our schools and colleagues get the advantages of geographical proximity."

The trust also said its scale meant it had "exceptional teacher training for 400 new teachers each year in our own group and for other schools and trusts", as well as early career training for "many hundreds more" and leadership training.

The white paper said "quality and geographical coherence" will be priorities in new guidance. More details and partnership are promised to ensure "a vibrant landscape of coherent high-quality, innovative trusts across each area".

Government will "welcome dialogue" with MAT chiefs about whether isolated trust schools might be better served within a more geographically coherent" chain.

Jonny Uttley, a former trust CEO, said government should "give a very clear steer on locality". Trusts should have either "clear community coherence" or a "clear model" for working in and servicing local communities.

# Fury as Ofsted digs in on 'low expectations' barb

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Ofsted chief inspector Martyn Oliver has been blasted for an "incendiary" speech to school leaders, as headteachers insist schools' contexts are not being adequately considered in inspections.

Oliver told the ASCL conference on Friday he would "never acquiesce to the quiet curse of low expectations that would see Ofsted prioritise context over outcomes for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children".

He claimed that where disadvantaged and vulnerable children are underperforming, critics "argue we should recognise the work and the effort – and downplay disappointing outcomes."

"Of course we will recognise the work, celebrate where that school is doing well and identify the contextual challenges being faced. But we can never downplay the disappointing outcomes."

The comments have been widely condemned by leaders and unions, amid growing frustration at Ofsted's use of national averages in new report cards. Leaders claim the new framework is unfair on schools with higher levels of disadvantage and SEND.

But Ofsted argued this week the entire point of Oliver's speech was to "take-on the claims that Ofsted is not doing enough to take account of context in its achievement grades."

"He was clear that consideration of context is central to our grades. But he was also clear that children have one chance at education and it is right that Ofsted has exacting standards in the interests of all children."

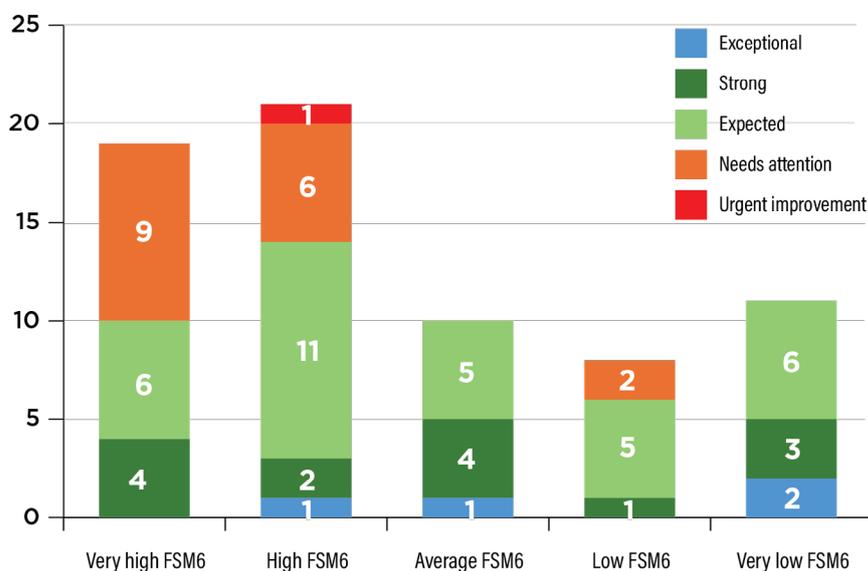
## 'Nobody is disregarding outcomes'

But Richard Sheriff, former chief executive of Red Kite Learning Trust, described Oliver's speech as "incendiary", calling his language "brutal" and "Trumpian".

"It basically says 'you lot are not doing enough ... what you need is Ofsted to set the bar higher, to make you jump higher and run faster'"

Richard Uffendell, headteacher of Ashton Park School in Bristol, said Oliver's approach "ignores the daily realities of a stretched education system and suggests a profound lack

## Achievement grades by free school meals



Source: Analysis by Steve Wren, using Ofsted data

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of connection with the sector".

"There was genuine hope that new leadership in Ofsted would usher in a more humane accountability system. Instead, we are left with a framework that fuels despair."

On social media, leaders, teachers and education experts described Oliver's approach as "tone deaf", "disrespectful" and having "done serious harm".

Amid growing tensions, ASCL general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio said no leaders had "low expectations" of pupils, adding they "work tirelessly...often in very difficult circumstances" to achieve the best for them.

"Nobody is seeking to duck accountability, disregard outcomes, or lower the bar in any way."

## Context 'not being properly factored in'

Oliver said that Ofsted would recognise schools working in challenging contexts to deliver positive outcomes.

He acknowledged claims the achievement grade "is intertwined with outcomes data", and therefore puts those working in difficult circumstances "at a disadvantage".

But he added: "It is not true that we ignore context entirely and automatically grade 49 per cent of schools 'needs attention' for achievement."



Martyn Oliver

"I will ensure context is seen as a core part of the assessment."

But leaders claim this is not happening, and inspectors are relying too heavily on schools' data.

To be graded 'expected standard' for achievement, inspectors must be satisfied that "on the whole" pupils at a school "achieve well".

"Typically, this will be reflected in their attainment and progress in national tests and examinations, which are broadly in line with national averages, including for disadvantaged pupils," the inspection toolkit states.

Analysis by education consultant Steve Wren of the 69 first secondary report cards suggests

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a correlation between lower achievement grades, and schools with below-average prior attainment or above-average disadvantage.

Of the 18 with 'very low' prior attainment, more than half (55 per cent) were 'needs attention' and 45 per cent 'expected'. Of 15 with 'very high' prior attainment, 40 per cent were 'expected' and 'strong', and 20 per cent 'exceptional'.

Wren said Ofsted's use of national averages in toolkits seemed to directly conflict with its "rhetoric around published data being only the starting point and understanding context being crucial to the inspection process".

"We know that the published data predominates inspector thinking."

Ofsted said the data it used was "mostly composed of the DfE's published performance data.

"Any statistical calculations and presentation of the data are made to support inspection and help inspectors interpret the data in a consistent and fair way, including understanding a school's context.

"We know that starting points are not always reflected which is why data only forms part of the picture on inspection. For example, the case

sampling methodology that happens on site helps us understand individual pupils' starting points and progress and the impact of the support they receive."

**'Challenge' to meet results average**

Cheshire Academies Trust has had two inspections under the new framework.

CEO Steve Ellis claimed the toolkit "put a ceiling on achievement and affected other grades like leadership as well", particularly in the school with higher disadvantage.

Meanwhile Oakmoor School in Hampshire scored strong and expected standard across the board, except for achievement which was graded 'needs attention'.

Its report card said pupils "do not achieve as well as they should" in national assessments, though noted progress and attainment "are improving" and pupils with additional needs "achieve in line with their peers".

Part of the issue is a lack of Covid-era key stage 2 SATs results, meaning progress made for pupils with low prior attainment is not demonstrated in schools' statistics.

Oakmoor headteacher Nigel Wright said this meant the inspection failed to take into account

its year 11 pupils' "very low start points".

He added it would be "much more challenging" for the school's attainment results to be "broadly in line with national average".

**New framework fails to lift confidence**

The speech and fallout come after the watchdog recently reached a deal with leaders' unions to increase monitoring of headteacher wellbeing.

But Oliver sparked anger last week for saying Ofsted issuing more 'needs attention' grades than it issued 'requires improvement' grades under the old framework is a sign it is "raising standards" and "being more exacting".

NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman believes Ofsted "has seen fit to ratchet up pressure" despite the fact its recent reforms were prompted by the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

A Teacher Tapp poll from Wednesday suggests that confidence in the inspectorate has not increased in the last year-and-a-half despite Ofsted's reforms.

Of more than 9,000 teachers and leaders polled, just 12 per cent agreed Ofsted "acts as a reliable and trusted arbiter of standards across all different types of schools", virtually unchanged on the 11 per cent who said the same in September 2024.

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# NEU: Teachers' shift to Greens a 'wake-up call' to Labour

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The Green Party's surging popularity among teachers should be a "wake-up call" to Labour, the general secretary of the National Education Union has warned.

Daniel Kebede told a press briefing that the Greens and its leader Zack Polanski "align very closely with the education policies" of the teachers' union.

The Greens, who have five MPs, "are the only party at the minute...that are advocating for an end to austerity in schools and education".

Kebede also praised its stance on Ofsted and free school meals.

The Greens' 2024 manifesto pledged £8bn more for schools, including a £2bn pay uplift for teachers.

It also pledged to end "high-stakes" pupil testing, scrap Ofsted and give all pupils free lunches.

Polanski will speak at the NEU's annual conference later this month.

Kebede said the union is "very proud" to be politically independent, but added: "We will work with politicians, organisations, NGOs, who



Daniel Kebede

align with our policies."

He said Polanski is clearly "the most favoured politician amongst our members at the moment".

"If I was the Labour government, I would certainly treat this as a bit of a wake-up call."

## Labour support plunges

NEU polling in December found support for Labour had fallen by 70 per cent since the general election.

Among more than 3,700 members polled, 60 per cent said they voted Labour in July 2024. Yet just 18 per cent said they would vote Labour again if a snap election was held now.

The Green Party topped popularity rankings, with support rising from 10 to 23 per cent.

Liberal Democrat support was at 7 per cent, Conservatives at 4 per cent and Reform UK at 6 per cent.

## 'Hyper-austerity' with Reform

Kebede told journalists the NEU has "real, broad concern around what a Reform government would mean for education," should Nigel Farage's party win the next election.

He believes Reform would "not only...bring back hyper-austerity in public services, including education, they will make education a real

hostile place for children who are LGBT, black, migrant, refugee."

The NEU has previously described Reform as "far-right".

"They work contrary as a political organisation to the views of our union and our profession more broadly," said Kebede.

Suella Braverman MP, Reform's new education spokesperson, would not be a "positive force for education".

Braverman responded: "These comments show everything that is wrong with our education system."

She accused unions of "driving down standards and failing teachers, parents, and children by supporting a dumbing-down of the curriculum and promoting sexualised content in our schools".

"Reform UK doesn't care about your skin colour, your gender, or your religion. We want a world-class education system that is built on love of our country, excellence and high standards, not ridiculous DEI policies that are poisoning the minds of young people."

A string of motions will be voted on at the NEU's Brighton conference on March 30. Concerns over the rise of the right and SEND reform look set to be key themes.

Kebede warned over the recent white paper: "You can't have inclusion done on the cheap."

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## Special schools over capacity by 11,000 pupils

Special schools were over-capacity by around 11,000 pupils last year, outstripping growth in the number of schools, new figures show.

Department for Education data shows England's 1,100 special schools officially had space for 160,000 pupils last May.

But actual child numbers totalled 170,000, which "means that there are approximately 11,000 more pupils on roll in special schools than reported capacity".

The DfE said the figure was "due to the number of schools at or over capacity (around two thirds), but also may be a result of the way capacity has been measured which does not take account of type of need".

The numbers are rounded, which is why the over-capacity figure appears overly large.

The figure of 11,000 marks a 37.5 per cent increase on the capacity gap a year earlier - 8,000. It comes despite a net increase in the number of special schools of 12.

The data also reveals councils expected 260,000 pupils with an education, health and care plan would need specialist provision places in 2025-26. That includes independent units in mainstream and alternative provision.

Data was collected before the DfE announced its SEND reforms.

Councils forecast pupil growth would "gradually slow" from 6.8 per cent in 2025-26 to 4.2 per cent in 2029-30.

The increases contrast with a predicted decline in the school population at primaries, and expectations that secondary growth will level off. DfE said this "implies the proportion of pupils with an EHC plan that need a place in specialist provision is forecast to increase".

It comes after the government cancelled 18 special free school projects, and gave councils the choice between proceeding with

a further 59 or expanding existing provision with the funding.

*Schools Week* recently revealed councils decided to go ahead with more than half of the 59 specialist school projects.

Ministers also plan to give councils' deficits plans top marks if they avoid expanding specialist provision.

Meanwhile the data shows specialist places in mainstream schools, and the number of schools providing them, have both continued to increase. It comes ahead of government reforms that will ask all secondaries to have an inclusion base.

Some 1,915 schools reported having specialist provision last year, up from 1,631 in 2022-23.

There were 22,165 places in resourced provision last year, up from 17,820 in 2022-23. SEND unit places rose to 10,069, up from 9,010 in 2022-23.

# Reporters shut out of events with ministers and officials

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Journalists are being banned from conferences where ministers, senior government civil servants and advisers are slated to speak.

Three events in recent weeks have seen Schools Week reporters denied access, either entirely or while Department for Education civil servants are presenting.

The Confederation of School Trusts will not allow the press at its “community” conferences, with ticket prices starting at £350.

This includes its CEO summit in July, where schools minister Georgia Gould will be speaking.

Its timely SEND and inclusion conference in May features a keynote from Tom Rees, who chairs DfE’s expert advisory group for inclusion.

Tim Coulson, the DfE’s director general for regions, spoke at CST’s finance and operations conference last month. Other speakers included MAT chief executives and finance bosses.

There’s no suggestion speakers requested media were not present, however.

Schools Week has attended some of these events in previous years.

## **CST: Media-free spaces ‘important’**

Leora Cruddas, CST chief executive, said they were “trailing running our community conferences without a media presence.”

She said it is “important to create different types of spaces to support school and trust leaders”.



“We value the work of our media colleagues and warmly invite them to attend key events, such as our annual conference.”

The British Educational Suppliers Association curriculum conference this week began with a talk from Bethany Caines, DfE’s deputy director for qualifications and curriculum strategy.

The session was due to explore “major themes” from the recent curriculum review and “what they signal for the future of teaching and learning”.

However, BESA said they had an agreement with the DfE to hold the session without press attendance. It’s not clear how much tickets cost.

The DfE did not comment this week, and directed us to the Cabinet Office and Number 10.

## **Inconsistent rules**

Last year, think tank the Institute for Government reported government had issued internal guidance that “banned any official from speaking at events that include question and answer sessions, or where the media are expected to be in attendance”.

Following a backlash, cabinet office minister Nick Thomas-Symonds replied to an IfG letter stating the guidance “makes clear that civil servants are able to take part in stakeholder engagement and sector engagement activity.”

“Where media outlets are likely to be present at public events, further approvals may be needed, subject to the judgment of departments on the nature of the activity”.

There appears to be some inconsistency. Other events reporters regularly attend without restrictions include the Westminster Education Forum, which often features civil servants.

However, a Westminster Insight SEND reform event in May is closed to the press.

Speakers include sector SEND leaders, council officials and a member of DfE’s neurodiversity task and finish group. Other events of theirs are open to reporting.

Andy Jolley, a school transparency campaigner, said restrictions were “outrageous”.

Not allowing reporters to attend is “disadvantaging vast swathes of people”.

“Anybody unable to attend their event can’t follow the important things these senior people are saying. It really makes you question why they are doing it.”

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## Trust bosses to lead minister’s KS3 alliance

Prominent academy trust bosses Becks Boomer-Clark and Lesley Powell will lead the government’s push to improve children’s transition into secondary school.

The CEOs – who run Lift Schools and the North East Learning Trust – will oversee a national alliance that ministers say will “drive innovation and build the evidence base for what works” at key stage 3.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said their experience will be “invaluable in spreading best practice across the country and supporting all children to achieve and thrive in these crucial years of adolescence”.

She added: “For too many children this transition is challenging – engagement can fall,

absence can rise and opportunities begin to narrow with disadvantaged pupils impacted the most.”

“That’s why I’m determined to give these years the focus they deserve.”

The Department for Education said the alliance will be supported by “regional networks to facilitate sharing of excellent practice with all schools and harness local innovation”.

It will have a particular focus on “increasing engagement and belonging, improving literacy and numeracy, strengthening assessment and data coherence in key stage 3 and embedding skills, agency and pathways to adult life”.

Phillipson added: “As young people navigate

the transition to adolescence, it is more important than ever that schools are intentional about how they support, challenge and inspire them to keep learning and growing.”

The government revealed it would launch the programme in its response to the curriculum and assessment review last year.

Proposals were also mentioned in the schools white paper, which said the scheme will help schools collaborate on issues including the transition from primary, teaching and curriculum, attendance, and strengthening KS3 data.

It will form part of the government’s universal RISE offer, a service designed to help all schools improve.

# More strikes 'inevitable' as trusts axe jobs to stay afloat

**JACK DYSON**

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Ministers have been warned tensions are growing between unions and cash-strapped leaders, amid fears of job cuts to keep schools afloat.

Dozens of schools have been rocked by strike announcements this week over planned restructures dubbed "neither fair nor sustainable".

But one multi-academy trust (MAT) chief emphasised he had already exhausted other cost-saving options, with academies struggling with falling rolls.

Stephen Morales, Institute of School Business Leadership chief executive, warned: "If we continue to find ourselves in a tight fiscal environment, then it is inevitable that we're going to see more of this.

"You shouldn't be surprised to see leaders make difficult decisions, and it's inevitable disputes with unions will emerge."

## Walk out by support staff

Support staff in Unison will walk out next week at the St Ralph Sherwin Catholic MAT, affecting 14 schools in the east Midlands.

The union claimed trust plans will see "pay significantly reduced" and "substantial reductions across key roles", including teaching assistants, administrative staff and chaplaincy teams.

Josie Lloyd, of Unison, said: "Slashing the wages of some of the lowest-paid employees, while expecting them to do the same or even more work, is neither fair nor sustainable."

St Ralph's latest accounts show it ended last year £9.2 million in the red.

The Department for Education issued a notice to improve in February, its second in three years.

It told the chain to "provide evidence it is expediting efficiencies to bring in-year savings, including staff restructuring".

CEO Kevin Gritton said he has worked with the DfE on a financial recovery plan, with changes planned to "staffing structures at some schools and our central team". Consultation is underway.

"We hope to achieve the savings we need to through voluntary means, and compulsory redundancies would always be a last resort."

## Falling rolls blamed

Unison staff will also strike at eight schools in the Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic MAT in the same



region.

James McGeachie, trust CEO, said the chain was working with academies to improve its finances.

But it has "a small number", most with falling rolls, where savings "have not been high enough".

McGeachie launched a consultation on "new staffing structures for these schools" to bring employee numbers "more in line" with DfE-recommended levels.

The Confederation of School Trusts' (CST) annual survey revealed many CEOs were looking at cutting staff to balance the books.

But Unison said members working for Our Lady of Lourdes and St Ralph fear the proposals could mean children "lose access to essential support and supervision".

## iPad reviews and funding questions

Meanwhile in Rochdale, teachers at St Cuthbert's RC High School went on strike last month over allegations of "violent and abusive behaviour from some pupils".

Union NASUWT accused its trust, St Theresa of Calcutta, of stripping the school of staff and resources.

Councillors penned an open letter questioning the size of St Theresa's top slice, and a planned restructure. The trust declined to comment.

Earlier this year staff across 20 Arthur Terry Learning Partnership schools also walked out over planned redundancies.

The trust – which has a deficit of over £8 million – later "agreed to end all current consultations

linked to staffing restructures".

Instead, it hopes to secure its financial recovery by "honouring all voluntary redundancy requests" and restructuring roles and responsibilities among central team members.

It is also consulting on the next phase of its controversial use of iPads, having bought 5,500 devices and leased 5,500 more.

In a letter to parents, Arthur Terry said their usage was "no longer financially sustainable in its current form".

Lee Miller, its interim chief executive, said: "It is still the case that we need to make difficult decisions to reduce the trust's deficit and secure the long-term future of our schools, but we are working in a transparent and open manner with our union partners."

## 'All trusts impacted'

More than 80 per cent of CEOs polled by CST said budgets were the biggest barrier to their priorities.

More than half (53 per cent) described falling rolls as the most immediate risk to financial sustainability, followed by SEND costs (46 per cent) and teacher costs (37 per cent).

Former trust chief Nick Hurn added: "There's not enough money in the system to finance what we've had in the past. Unfortunately, this invariably means you're going to shed staff.

"With the economic realities as they are, there will be increased tension and conflict moving forward between schools and unions."

# ‘We’re not magicians’: Sixth form fury over cash squeeze

ESMÉ KENNEY

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Sixth forms have warned resources are being “stretched to the limit” and funding levels are unsustainable, as ministers announced lower-than-expected increases for post-16 students.

The Department for Education announced last week that the national funding rate for 16- to 19-year-olds would rise by just 0.5 per cent in 2026-27.

Yet the skills white paper last October had promised above-inflation increases, given rising numbers of 16- to 19-year-olds. Inflation is currently running at 3 per cent, and stood at 3.6 per cent when the pledge was made.

Sixth form leaders have said the funding gap could threaten their ability to offer a broad range of subjects, hold down class sizes and pay staff competitively.

They added that the timing of the announcement would leave them “flying blind” just as students are choosing their options.

The 0.5 per cent increase, which lifts per-pupil funding to £5,133 next year, is the lowest since rates were frozen in 2021-22. Last year funding rates rose 5.4 per cent, significant above inflation.

## ‘Unacceptable and unworkable’

Sacha Corcoran, principal at Big Creative Academy in east London, said the increase was “simply unacceptable and unworkable”. She highlighted the “ever-increasing expectations put on post-16 provision to provide not just a quality education but a plethora of wraparound support and guidance for our young people”.

“At a time when we have rising youth unemployment and over 10 per cent of young people in England are [not in education, employment or training], never has it been more important to invest in further education.

“This will continue to seriously impact the wellbeing and retention of staff, not just at the academy but across the sector, as this is not sustainable.

“We simply cannot deliver on all the expectations of Ofsted and the DfE, tackle staff workload, support our learners, manage estates, with the funding rate agreed. We are



not magicians.”

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported that real-terms spending per pupil in sixth forms is now 18 per cent lower than 2010-11.

Benedicte Yue, chief financial officer at the River Learning Trust, said the increase was “effectively a further cut when viewed against the backdrop of an 18 per cent real-terms erosion of sixth form funding over the last 15 years”.

“We are being asked to deliver a 21st-century ‘skills revolution’ on a budget that has been systematically hollowed out.

“The lack of adequate core funding leaves us with no levers left to pull other than increasing class sizes.

“This may put the viability of minority subjects at risk, which directly threatens the ‘broad and balanced’ curriculum the government claims to value.”

In October the government had promised “significant investment”. It said it would ensure there was a real-terms increase in per-pupil funding in the next academic year to respond to the “demographic increase in 16 to 19-year olds.”

## Delayed announcement ‘compounds pressure’

James Kewin, deputy chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, said the increase “falls well short” of the government’s promise.

“In reality, this is a real-terms funding cut that will make it harder for our members to provide the high-quality education and personalised support that students need to succeed.

“This settlement will also make it more difficult to provide support and teaching staff with a competitive pay award.”

Kewin said the Treasury must make additional funding available “to ensure that sixth forms receive a genuine real terms increase in 2026-27 - raising the funding rate by 0.5 per cent falls well short of that”.

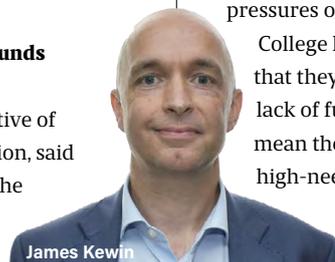
In previous years, the government has announced the base rate in December. This year the announcement was delayed until March.

Yue added that the timing of the announcement “only compounds the pressure”.

“Announcing a marginal increase now, while we are still waiting for our final sixth form statements, leaves school leaders flying blind at the exact moment students are making their critical post-16 choices.

“You cannot build a world-class technical and academic pathway while the base rate fails to keep pace with the most basic inflationary pressures on staffing and resources.”

College leaders previously told *FE Week* that they were “disappointed” with the lack of funding. They warned it could mean they have to divert funding from high-needs provision and staff pay.



James Kewin

# DfE staff threaten walkout as six offices face closure

**RUTH LUCAS**

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Hundreds of civil servants have said they are willing to take strike action over Department for Education plans to close six regional offices.

The DfE plans to close its Croydon, Peterborough and Watford offices in June, followed by its Newcastle office in October, and Leeds office in November.

Early years minister Olivia Bailey has confirmed there are no plans to publish a “business case, workforce plan, equality impact assessment or redundancy mitigation measures” over the closures.

The DfE has reportedly said 359 roles are affected.

“This is an internal business decision and does not impact the department’s remit, strategy of delivery plans, nor have any direct impact on the sector”, Bailey said in answer to a written question by another Labour MP earlier this month.

The Public and Commercial Services Union has opposed plans, warning closures could leave members commuting for up to 90 minutes to their nearest DfE office.

If closures go ahead, offices in London, Sheffield, Coventry, Manchester, Darlington, Nottingham, Bristol and Cambridge would remain.



## ‘Unnecessary and avoidable’

In a consultative ballot of 792 PCS members, 68 per cent said they were prepared to take strike action. Some 88 per cent said they were prepared to take action short of a strike.

A PCS spokesperson claimed that the DfE has not provided a “detailed or convincing explanation for the closures” and has “repeatedly refused to guarantee that there will be no compulsory redundancies”.

“We believe these proposals are unnecessary, avoidable, and risk damaging staff wellbeing, morale and ultimately the delivery of public services.”

The DfE currently requires staff to be in workplaces rather than remote 60 per cent of the time. The PCS said the DfE has “failed to

explain why it will not consider flexible working solutions that could deliver efficiencies while avoiding the negative impact of staff”.

The union said talks with the DfE had been underway since August, but had been subject to a strict embargo until early February.

The buildings the DfE plans to move out of will remain open for other departments, according to the PCS. The union claimed this called into question “whether any real savings will be achieved”.

## The last DfE strike

It comes after some staff had to work in corridors and canteens after civil servants were ordered back to the office by government in 2022.

At the time, staff were told to work in the office 80 per cent of their week, which has since been reduced to 60 per cent.

Staff outnumbered desks by almost two-to-one across the DfE’s 12 offices, figures seen by Schools Week showed.

DfE staff last went on strike for one day on April 28, 2023, as part of mass walk outs across government departments over pay. They also went on strike on February 11, 2023, the same day as National Education Union teacher strikes.

The DfE was approached for comment on the reason for the office closures and to respond to the PCS claims but did not respond.

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## Pilot to recruit inspectors en-masse from school groups

Ofsted is trialling recruiting school and college leaders alongside peers from the same networks or organisations as part-time inspectors.

The watchdog is promising time for group reflection to make inspections “more collaborative than ever before”.

School and college inspections are carried out by his majesty’s inspectors (HMI), who work full-time, and contracted Ofsted inspectors (OIs), who are typically part-time serving leaders.

OIs typically join Ofsted as individuals. The inspectorate admits this “can restrict chances for two-way professional reflection and shared learning”.

Ofsted said in a statement it is trialling recruiting OIs as “groups of peers drawn from

professional organisations and networks they’re already part of”.

This includes multi-academy trusts, local authorities, dioceses and school networks.

The scheme is already underway, and it is hoped it will encourage OIs to “form a professional community with each other and with HMI”.

For inspectors who work full-time in a school or trust that releases them for inspections, the watchdog pays employers for their time.

Those who inspect in their own time, for example those who are part-time in school leadership or semi-retired, are paid directly.

Under the pilot, “there is no separate inspection fee”. Instead, Ofsted will contribute to employers’ costs so staff can become an OI “as part of their professional development

pathway”.

Ofsted confirmed contributions will continue to be paid to employers once inspectors are trained.

OIs on the pilot are promised regular opportunities to share feedback together, and reflect on what they’re seeing and learning. These experiences “will then feed directly into how Ofsted continuously improves inspection”.

The first participants in the pilot began training in January, and are now taking part in shadow inspections.

They are expected to start proper inspections later this term, and further cohorts will begin training later in the year.

The pilot will continue throughout 2026 and feedback will be gathered to help inform future recruitment.

**Birmingham**

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# Not Tata yet - pension scheme handover delayed again

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The handover of the teachers' pensions scheme to an Indian IT giant has been delayed for a second time.

Tata Consultancy Services was due to take over the reins managing the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) from outsourcing firm Capita last October.

But the transfer was delayed a first time last August, with completion instead promised this summer by the Department for Education.

Now it has been delayed again until later this year, the DfE confirmed. *Schools Week* understands it will transfer in October.

Capita, which has managed the scheme since 1996, will continue to run it in the meantime.

The DfE had initially promised a two-year "transition", from October 2023 until the new contract began in October 2025.

The department said additional time was required to complete the transition "effectively" and "maintain service continuity for members and employers".

It's "priority is to ensure a smooth and secure handover of the Teachers' Pension Scheme after almost thirty years of administration by Capita".

"This change does not affect pension



entitlements or payments. The department remains committed to supporting current and retired teachers throughout the process."

A Capita spokesperson said: "The Department for Education is a long-standing and valued partner, and we are working with them to continue to deliver the Teachers' Pension Scheme until later in 2026. Our focus is on supporting a smooth handover."

One insider with knowledge of the situation told *Schools Week* anonymously they felt the delay "doesn't fill one with optimism that it's going to be a smooth transition".

But Natalie Highfield, senior policy officer at school leaders' union ASCL, said delays were "far

preferable to the handover being rushed through prematurely, and issues then arising".

"It is important that there is a smooth transition to the new provider and that all necessary requirements are in place."

Highfield said delays should not affect members' pension entitlements.

She added: "This delay is probably sensible and prudent, especially given the concerns we raised last year about members facing delays in receiving pension payments and remedy statements following the McCloud judgement"

The McCloud scheme was designed to correct age discrimination in public sector pensions, after 2018 court judgment ruled reforms three years earlier had treated younger workers unfairly.

A *Schools Week* investigation previously revealed that 77,600 retired teachers had not yet received McCloud remedy statements as of last March. As of mid-November, 69,700 were still waiting.

A senior Tata figure said it was "delighted" to partner with the DfE and would "digitally transform" the administration of the TPS when the company won the contract in 2023.

"Enhanced customer service has been the cornerstone of our platform's value proposition to clients in the UK pensions industry," said Vivekanand Ramgopal, the firm's president for financial products and platforms, at the time.

Tata was approached for comment.

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## CEO quits as DfE takes control of school land quango

The boss of the Department for Education's property arm LocatED is stepping down, as the government prepares to take the arm's length body in house.

CEO Lara Newman announced she will take on a "new challenge" when the body gets absorbed into government next month.

The body was launched nine years ago under the Conservatives to buy sites for new free schools. Its brief has since grown, including buying and selling other DfE sites, and giving officials and leaders "expert commercial property consultancy".

Newman wrote on LinkedIn: "After nearly a decade, I'm leaving LocatED.

"I won't be joining the team as they transfer to DfE on April 1 — instead, I'll be taking on

a new challenge that I'm not quite ready to share the details of yet."

The Labour government's decision to in-source LocatED came after the Cabinet Office launched a review of all arm's length bodies earlier this year. The hope is to save money and strengthen ministers' powers.

LocatED's latest accounts state it "generated important capital receipts, delivered substantial savings to the public purse and is at the heart of delivering programmes to enable our schools to reduce their energy consumption".

Newman added: "We delivered. Schools built, sites found, estates managed, complex land transactions completed that others had written off as impossible.

"Sometimes unglamorous, technically difficult work that rarely makes headlines but genuinely changes communities. I couldn't be prouder of it all."

Accounts show LocatED's budget in 2024-25 was around £9 million. Around £2.2 million was spent on "project related pre-acquisition costs for sites [and] mixed-use developments".

A further £5.4 million went towards employee costs. Newman earned between £220,000 and £225,000. She received between £40,000 and £45,000 in performance-related pay.

Her wages eclipsed those of permanent secretary Susan Acland-Hood, who earned £180,000 to £185,000 last year.

# Teacher pay proposal threatens recruitment, DfE warned

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Teachers' salaries will rise slower than their peers in other industries in the coming years, threatening recruitment and retention, a new report has warned.

The school teacher labour market in England annual report, published today by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), paints a "happier" picture of the workforce than recent reports, with recruitment and retention improving.

But it warned government it is "not the time for complacency", as progress could "easily be reversed".

## 1. 6.5 per cent rise could mean falling pay

Recent above-inflation pay rises mean teacher starting salaries have finally recovered in real terms to where they were in 2010-11.

But experienced teachers' salaries "have only partially recovered" from over a decade's real-terms decline. They remain around nine per cent lower than in 2010-11.

The DfE has proposed a 6.5% rise over three years to the School Teachers' Review Body. NFER points out that average UK earnings are predicted to grow by 7 per cent over the next three years.

The gap risks a "mild loss of competitiveness", which "could undermine the positive recruitment and retention picture".

## 2. Overall recruitment appears 'much improved'...

Recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) improved in 2025-26. This is "likely driven by deteriorating employment opportunities in the wider labour market", according to NFER.

Primary recruitment exceeded targets for the first time in four years, with 9,800 recruits against a 7,700 target. Overall ITT recruitment was also the highest in four years.

Higher bursaries "may have helped some subjects", but success appears "largely" to reflect a cooling labour market, particularly for graduate and entry-level jobs.



## 3. ...but secondary recruitment remains below target

However, overall recruitment remained below target for secondary, with under-recruitment in around half of subjects.

Business studies – including economics – was the worst-performing with just 270 recruits, around 70 per cent below its target for 900 recruits.

Secondary recruitment targets have been missed every year since 2015-16, bar 2020-21.

## 4. ...and special schools will need 2.3k more staff

The NFER predicted special schools and alternative provision will need thousands more teachers by 2027-28.

Their pupil numbers are forecast to grow by 8.2 per cent, likely meaning "additional demand for teachers". An equivalent rise in staff would mean 2,300 more full-time equivalent teachers.

## 5. Science recruitment appears to improve...

Physics recruitment had its best year since 2016-17, hitting 78 per cent of its target.

The NFER attributed it to more international recruits. Bursaries were opened to foreign nationals for the first time since 2022.

Chemistry recruitment exceeded its target for the first time in over a decade.

## 6. ...but bursary cuts are being felt

The NFER said overall recruitment "may well have been ahead" of targets had bursaries not been cut.

Subjects where bursaries have been cut by £10,000 or more have seen a 36 per cent fall in accepted applicants, compared to the same point last year.

By contrast, accepted applicants are up seven per cent on average across subjects that have not been cut.

## 7. Retention improves modestly

Teacher retention has improved slightly in recent years.

The exit rate for first-year teachers was 10.3 per cent, the lowest on record. The NFER said the new early career framework (ECF) may be having a positive effect.

Whether these cohorts have permanently lower exit rates "remains to be seen" however, it added.

Between nine and 11 per cent of teachers have left the state system every year since 2010, except during the pandemic.

Nine per cent left between 2023-24 and 2024-25, equating to more than 8,000 teachers.

## 8. Teachers feeling more positive...

Teachers are more positive about workloads than four years ago. Working hours have fallen slightly, according to two different surveys.

But the NFER said "there is further to go". Teachers are 11 percentage points more likely to say they want to work fewer hours than similar graduates.

And the think tank warned curriculum and SEND reforms could increase workloads.

## 9. Recommendations

With the final pay award yet to be announced, the report made three recommendations.

First, the STRB and government should "aim to maintain the competitiveness of teachers' pay" by matching the growth in average earnings outside teaching, and funding schools to deliver this.

It also urged the government to consider bursary increases for languages and arts subjects not meeting new teacher recruitment targets, to support the implementation of the revised curriculum.

It said the DfE should also "conduct more deliberate workforce planning" for special schools and alternative provision, as it does for primaries and secondaries.



## Phillipson: Anti-SEND reform lawyers profit from status quo

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Attacks on proposed SEND reforms by “vested interests” and lawyers profiting from “exploiting parents” are no surprise, the education secretary has said.

The government’s plans aim to educate more pupils in mainstream schools.

The current SEND system is fraught with bureaucracy, often forcing parents to turn to lawyers for help securing education, health and care plans for their child.

Under the new system, schools will have to draw up individual support plans for children, with EHCPs reserved for only the most “complex needs”.

During a press conference at the ASCL leaders’ union annual conference last week, Bridget Phillipson was asked if reforms would see fewer lawyers involved in the process.

### ‘Vested interest in failed status quo’

“It’s been little surprise to me that there’s been such vociferous criticism from lawyers about the changes that we’re bringing,” the education secretary said.

“They’ve got a vested interest in maintaining the failed status quo. There’s profit to be made. They want the system to remain as it is, because they make a profit, often out of exploiting parents.”

She added that she didn’t “for one second blame parents” for pushing to get what their children need.

“But it’s a fundamentally unfair system if parents who’ve got the money to hire lawyers end up getting a better deal than those who don’t.”

A survey by The Sutton Trust found 65 per cent of working-class parents spent no money on EHCP applications, compared to only 29 per cent of middle-class parents.

Applications are supposed to be cost-free, but the charity found 11 per cent of middle-class parents spent over £5,000 on applications, compared to just 1 per cent of working-class parents.

Phillipson said her government’s “support to tilt the system to much earlier support, a fairer system of support for all children, is absolutely the right approach, backed up by the evidence supported by the profession.



Bridget Phillipson

“But it’s little surprise to me that the vested interests and the lawyers are opposed to change, because they’ve got a lot to lose from this.”

### ‘Cynical attack’

But Ed Duff of HCB Solicitors said it was a “cynical and contrived attack on the legal profession” which “seeks to deflect from the specific concerns raised, in an increasingly typical attempt to avoid engaging with the issues”.

“The claim of exploiting parents is sickening. Lawyers have supported parents for decades, and fought hard to ensure that rights are understood and enforced.

“It is a fundamentally unfair system when a local authority can make decisions that had life-long impact on disabled children, with parents having limited to no ability to challenge it.”

The government announced earlier this year it will wipe 90 per cent of councils’ historic SEND deficits. In exchange, town halls will have to put together plans to support government reforms.

Schools Week revealed that those plans will be tested against a rating system, with those seeking to minimise the expansion of specialist provision given higher rankings.

Responding to the story, Phillipson said special schools “have a really important role to play in the system, and there is much brilliant expertise.

“I want that to be spread more widely across the school system as a whole, and we’ve set out our

ambition to achieve that in the white paper.

“But of course, we will work with local authorities, with schools to make sure they’ve got the right provision locally to support children.

“There’s record capital investment into creating those places, but I do at the same time want to see more specialist provision in mainstream schools through inclusion bases, so that children don’t have to travel so far to get the education they deserve.”

### SEND bailout has strings attached

The government has also warned councils they will face greater scrutiny over SEND provision, and could even have their powers stripped from them and handed to not-for-profit trusts.

Phillipson told Schools Week councils would have a “critical role” in delivering a better and reformed SEND system.

“Whilst I do recognise that many of the challenges that they face are because of the system and how it operates, that isn’t adequate to explain the huge variation between local authorities.”

“There is significant variation in terms of outcomes for children, and where for too long, parents and children have been badly let down.”

She added that the 90 per cent write off “is not unconditional, and will require councils to work with us to demonstrate that they are providing the places, the provision and the support for families that aligns with the vision of this government”.

## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Katharine Vincent****Ofsted HMI****Start date:** April**Current role:** Senior director of research, innovation and improvement, Mulberry Schools Trust**Interesting fact:** Public service runs in Katharine's family, with eight teachers, two chairs of governors, a parish councillor and a university administrator just in her immediate family.

# Movers & Shakers

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

**Aron Whiles****Executive director of secondary education, David Ross Education Trust****Start date:** June**Current role:** Education director at Ormiston Academies Trust**Interesting fact:** Aron is an avid motorcyclist in his spare time and rode a full lap of the 37.7 mile Isle of Man TT circuit last year as part of a visit to watch the island's famous TT races.**Kimberley Lawton****Executive director of primary education, David Ross Education Trust****Start date:** February**Previous role:** Regional director, DRET**Interesting fact:** Kimberley once road-tripped across Spain chasing music festivals featuring Amy Winehouse and the Foo Fighters before later becoming a mum of four, including a surprise baby girl 11 years after her three boys.**Nick Marsh****Chief executive officer, School-Home Support****Start date:** March**Previous role:** Director of fundraising, impact and communications at Breast Cancer UK**Interesting fact:** Nick founded a successful charity working with disadvantaged communities in Asia.**Susie Whigham****Chief executive officer, The Brilliant Club****Start date:** March**Previous role:** Chief programmes and communities officer, The Brilliant Club**Interesting fact:** Susie was once a backing dancer in a Bollywood pop video (she is relieved that the video seems impossible to track down now!)**Anat Hassner****Chief operating officer, OneSchool Global****Start date:** February**Previous role:** Acting chief operating officer**Interesting facts:** Anat comes from a family of teachers and when she was growing up, she had a part time job teaching third graders how to build wooden airplanes.**Sally Burns****Head of school, Kingsbourne Academy****Start date:** April**Current role:** Assistant headteacher at Pebble Brook Primary School, Crewe**Interesting fact:** Sally played roller derby for a number of years as a jammer for the Loco Rollers. She competed in the national championships in her first year where the team placed third in the tier.**Stefanie Sullivan and Jo McIntyre**  
**Joint executive directors, Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers****Start date:** April**Current role:** Jo is professor education at Nottingham University. Stef is deputy head of the school of education at the same university.**Interesting fact:** Jo grew up in Blackpool where she met all the stars. Little and Large opened her primary school fair, she went to school with the sister of one of the Pet Shop Boys, her brother was in Les Dawson's daughter's maths class, and she delivered Jimmy Armfield's newspaper on her paper round.

# Profile

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## 'It's our job to serve all children'

A visit to Holyhead secondary reveals a school and community seemingly light years away from Robert Jenrick's dystopian description of Handsworth in Birmingham. And Central Region Schools boss Guy Shears tells Freddie Whittaker it matches his trust's vision – which dictates everyone is welcome

Last year, the then Conservative shadow justice secretary Robert Jenrick prompted a fierce backlash when he described an area of Birmingham as "one of the worst integrated places I've ever been to", and "as close as I've come to a slum in this country".

My recent visit to Handsworth, with Central Region Schools Trust CEO Guy Shears, painted a different picture. On its bustling main road sits Holyhead School, our destination.

As we approach the secondary school, Shears says visitors encounter "something very different" to what Jenrick – now a leading politician in Nigel Farage's Reform UK – described.

Instead they see "a school with a strong sense of community, full of joy, respect and a great sense of fun, where diversity is celebrated and everyone is welcomed".

As we tour the grounds and buildings this rings true. Pupils are models of politeness, holding doors for visitors, and are excited to greet and talk to Shears (and to pose for our photographer).

### Desperate state

Shears, also an Ofsted inspector and a member of a government academy advisory board, has led his trust since it formed in 2012 from the academisation of Arrow Vale High School in Redditch, Worcestershire.

He had recently become its headteacher, and the school was in a "desperate state", with a £1.2 million deficit and an intake far below its capacity.

There was a fire on his first day and when he went onto the playground "there were a good 60 children smoking. The deputy told me, 'we don't

go down there".

After three months, the local council told him it would close the school.

"I gave them half an hour as to all the reasons why that wouldn't happen, because we had plans, which have luckily been successful," he says.

Due to its grades, the school was eligible to become a sponsored academy. Its governors were "fiercely" against it. Shears was "pretty ambivalent", but had worked with the Royal Society of Arts group of academies before, and saw an opportunity.

After a persuasive meeting with then RSA director of education (now head of the Education Endowment Foundation) Becky Francis, the governors chose academisation over closure.

"I'm one of the very few heads, I imagine, who

## Profile: Guy Shears

has taken their own school into a forced re-brokerage with a sponsorship,” says Shears.

It was still the early days of the academies programme, and there were “seven lawyers in the building for months”.

“I was interviewed for my own job by a panel in Sanctuary buildings who were really fierce, and then were delightful afterwards,” he recalls.

Arrow Vale is now over-subscribed, says Shears. It was rated ‘outstanding’ in 2014 and again in 2018. Its latest report in 2024 noted leaders had taken “effective action to maintain the standards identified at the previous inspection”.

The trust now has 14 schools in the West Midlands. Half have been intervention projects “of one form or another”.

### Moaning about life

Born and raised in Birmingham, Shears studied geography at university but stumbled on teaching by accident.

He’d been working as a lorry driver and living in Australia. When he returned he worked at the Martineau Education Centre, where the local education authority was based.

He’d seen an advert for the PGCE at Birmingham university, and he would often overhear education staff when he was working on reception.

“The level of moaning... moaning about children, about life in general, I genuinely thought, goodness me, if that’s what our children are getting, then that’s quite alarming.” He decided to do a PGCE.

He stayed in Birmingham, training at Swanshurst School and then joining its staff. He quickly became head of geography and later assistant head.

It was an exciting time to be involved in school leadership.

At the time, the city’s director of education was Tim Brighouse, who later led New Labour’s London Challenge school improvement programme.

Shears says Brighouse was “truly inspirational”. He set up school networks in different parts of Birmingham, some of which survive in some form to this day.

Those networks showed “without any structural intervention, the power of collaborative work”.



## ‘That notion of genuine collaboration is something I believe in’



“The city was quite disparate,” he recalls. “Bringing people together, helping each other, is something that I guess, on reflection, is now sort of formally structured into what is a multi academy trust.

“But that notion of genuine collaboration as public servants for each other and the school down the road is something that I really strongly believe in.”

### Larger trusts

The government has said it wants to see all schools in multi-academy trusts. Shears believes this would be “desirable”, though there are “barriers”.

“I think it’d be a good thing for schools to join together. It will be interesting to see what happens. There’s clearly some sort of preference for larger trusts. So I think we’re in

## Profile: Guy Shears



Taking son Felix to his first Aston Villa match, aged 5



With sons Felix and Dexter after his last cricket century at Sidmouth

interesting times.”

The barriers are twofold, Shears believes. One is the “waifs and strays” – very small schools with big deficits and old buildings with no rebuilding plans.

“I think we may end up with the vast majority of schools in trusts and then outliers that somehow there needs to be some sort of solution for.”

The other risk “is that there are trust boards seeking to offload the most challenging schools through the accountability structure”.

He says this is linked to the “weight of accountability that comes down, rightly, where a school’s been inadequate”.

“I’m not saying we should accept inadequate schools. Of course we can’t,” Shears adds.

The Central Region Schools Trust now has four secondaries, eight primaries and two middle schools.

The government opted not to state in its white paper its preferences on trust size. But the financial constraints of the last few years have made many smaller and medium-sized trusts consider mergers or expansion.

“We’re 7,321 pupils. And I think if you roll it forward three to five years with funding constraints, that starts to sit on the ‘probably too small’ side,” says Shears. But he is unsure if the government has a “sweet spot” in mind.

“I would have thought around 10,000 pupils, in

## ‘As a founding principle we seek to serve all children within our gift’

order to do a great job for the children that you serve, is quite possibly where it may end up. I don’t know. That’s how it feels to me.”

He adds the trust has always been “cautious” about moving at speed.

“I’m talking to colleagues in other MATs where they’ve added five schools in a short period of time, and they all describe it creating turbulence.”

### Serve all children

Leaders have for weeks been poring over the government’s proposed SEND reforms, which aim to make mainstream schools more inclusive.

Shears praises the white paper’s “excellent intent around special educational needs in particular”, especially given the “known behaviours of some schools in terms of not serving the community”.

He adds: “It’s well known that there are all sorts of devices that schools will operate to push away families. We do the opposite of that, and this carries some risks. But we as a founding principle seek to serve all of the children within our gift.”

The white paper proposes a clampdown on off-rolling, but when it comes to children with

SEND, Shears believes it is “more a matter of not on-rolling”.

“The battles that some parents have to get the provision that their children deserve are really heart rending, and it’s not OK. We’re public servants. That’s what we are.

“We serve the children of the country, and if they’re in your community, then you should be letting them in.”

### Power of language

Shears also chairs a “RISE community of learning” made up of 40 school leaders in the West Midlands. Part of its role is to explore how to “codify behaviours” in trusts.

This includes looking closely at the “power of language, and knowing what you’re saying and how you’re saying it.

“If you’ve got people who may say the wrong thing, that can set a spiral of decline for a young person. And of course, there’s the opposite, praise that lifts children up.

“I could give strong examples of individual children where just one sentence to them at the right moment is life changing to the positive. That’s the gift we have in our hands, and the responsibility and privilege, and of course the risk.”

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## CAROLINE BARLOW

Headteacher, Heathfield Community College and co-chair, Headteachers' Roundtable

## Remembering how we managed Covid can help us meet the SEND challenge

**Collaboration between teachers and schools boosts everyone but we risk backsliding to a culture of competition and compliance, warns Caroline Barlow**

The long awaited and now much dissected schools white paper suggests three main drivers to achieve its ambitious aims: investing in people, collaboration and innovation.

These are core elements the system has been calling for. But can collaboration be the driver for the cultural shift required for SEND reform, unlocking ambitions for the disadvantaged and creating unity in a fragmented system?

In 2020 leaders took collaboration into their own hands providing the civic leadership and agency that ensured they did all they could collectively to reach young people isolated by the pandemic in more ways than one.

Even the 2022 education white paper challenged organisations to work towards a proposed "collaborative standard".

Repeated studies show collaboration between teachers, schools and networks of schools is beneficial for improving teacher knowledge, skills and job satisfaction, as well as confidence and trust, all of which boost teacher retention.

So why does this still need to be stated, encouraged and structured by

government?

If the ambition and associated levers determining system behaviours are fulfilled to their potential, collaboration could revolutionise the way schools, trusts and wider partners engage, interact, perform and are measured.

But like anything, it requires training and support alongside the right conditions for this way of working to thrive.

Requiring schools and trusts to cooperate not just on key areas like admissions or attendance, but for wider civic responsibility, is a far cry from the competitive marketplace of a pre-pandemic landscape that encouraged narrow performance measures and high-stakes accountability.

Now the pandemic is behind us, but we face a whole different set of challenges, and we do not seem to have learned the lessons.

### Collegiality lost?

While "inclusion" is to be authenticated by the inspectorate, the myriad of banners and buzzwords do not show any sign of dissipating.

We risk the return of fear and compliance that stifles innovation. Has the sector lost its sense of collegiality?

At Heathfield, in developing a collaborative culture we adopted an understanding close to that summarised by Cat Scutt in 2020: an



## “ Why does it still need to be structured by government? ”

authentic commitment and sense of accountability, promoting challenge alongside alternative perspectives, time for reflection and developing shared knowledge and expertise.

As a result, the outcomes of everything we do are far greater than the sum of our parts.

Post-pandemic, this extends to wider work supporting rural families and approaches to SEND provision.

Across the country we see evidence of collaboration to reduce disadvantage, increase community partnership and to co-construct models of professional development.

There are examples and track records of great practice in this space. But it is not yet commonplace.

Any efforts to work collaboratively inevitably face the challenge of context and, in our current system, competition.

### Sticking-plaster approach

It is at times rewarding and impactful for all involved, genuine heads-together moments focused on solving common problems. At other times, efforts stall through lack of time, resource and clarity, or through ego and status.

Too often I hear of sticking-plaster approaches masquerading as

collaboration.

The dominance of a trust brand or trend can supersede the interpersonal, individual contextual understanding that is required.

Genuine area partnership and authentic, mission-led collaboration across sectors has the potential to be transformational.

The white paper hopes for "an environment that helps set our children up for life, achieving higher standards, stronger professional practice, and better outcomes".

But all voices, expertise and experience have to be valued.

The experts at hand may not always be the biggest entity or the loudest voice in the room. Collaboration requires parity of all partners, a truly shared sense of mission and a genuine willingness to learn together.

We must ensure that levers of accountability and advantage are not allowed to undermine the process or the goal. Fear and mistrust will stifle the necessary innovation and professional openness.

The secretary of state calls these reforms a once-in-a-generation opportunity. It is therefore up to us all to hold our nerve and grasp the opportunity – together.

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## REZA SCHWITZER

Principal consultant, Avencera

## How to go from well intentioned to success with SEND reform

**A readiness to readjust, sustained political focus and the capacity to deliver on goals are vital if Labour is to succeed where the Tories failed, says Reza Schwitzer**

For too long, families have found themselves battling against a complex and fragmented system.

"These reforms ensure support fits in with their needs and not the other way round... a simpler and more joined-up system that focuses on children."

That isn't Bridget Phillipson or Georgia Gould talking. It's Edward Timpson, the Conservative minister announcing reforms to SEND in 2014.

Firstly, fair play to the Timpsons for having a minister in post both then and now (Edward's brother, James, is a Labour justice minister).

Secondly, and more importantly, this reminds us that the major challenge on SEND lies in the implementation as much as it does the policy.

Don't get me wrong, the latest SEND reforms are absolutely on the right track.

Early universal intervention, targeted mainstream support and specialist provision for those with the most complex needs. Many would agree those are the key to solving the problem.

But I always remember a meeting I had as a civil servant in 2019, with a director of children's services in a local authority.

The 2014 reforms, he said, were very well intentioned and had the right ideas. The problem was they just weren't deliverable. In his words "they gave us a platinum system, but with tin funding."

### Crucial requirements

Fast forward to today, what does that mean for Bridget Phillipson and Kevan Collins? Here are three things I would watch for specifically.

First, keeping an open mind. To deliver something successfully, especially as complex as SEND reform, you need to be able to adapt to what you're finding on the ground.

Too often, scared of the political ramifications of U-turning, government sticks rigidly to its policy plans.

Instead, as you roll out a major programme, you need to be ready to redesign elements if it becomes obvious they aren't working. That means listening to and acting on the feedback of the people who are actually going to be delivering.

Second, keeping up political interest. In modern politics, it can become very tempting for ministers to announce something, engage with the press and the public on it, and then move on to the next



“ It can be tempting for ministers to move on to the next announcement

announcement.

But this doesn't work. Departments need to feel from their ministers that successful implementation is as important as media splashes, and to know exactly what ministers define success as looking like (Better outcomes? Lower spending? Both? Something else?).

The children's commissioner having a direct role in holding the government to account on SEND implementation is welcome, as is Collins's role working with the Department for Education's delivery unit on the reforms.

This implies there will be regular, robust reporting on how things are developing. But ministers will need to ensure they remain engaged as well.

Finally, clarity of roles and the capacity to deliver them.

As in 2014, the department's vision is of an interconnected system which works around children to cater to their needs.

That means local authorities working with schools, alternative provision, the NHS and sometimes other agencies.

Each of these actors must know what their specific responsibility is, and be funded to deliver it.

### Awaiting clarity

Within schools, we are not yet clear what these changes will mean for SENCOs, school leaders, teachers and support staff, and whether they are manageable for them.

Cross-agency working is famously hard to deliver in practice. And while £4 billion of new funding for SEND is extremely welcome, it does not on its own alleviate the wider constraints on council capacity that have got steadily worse since 2010.

Nor is it clear exactly how future funding will be distributed – something which can be fiendishly complicated and time-consuming in its own right.

This is not intended to be downbeat. The government has a strong policy proposition which could improve the lives of millions of children with SEND.

But to succeed it will need to think as carefully about 2014 as it does about 2034, when we can only expect another Timpson will be a government minister.

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## RACHEAL SMITH

Head of parent-friendly schools,  
Parentkind

### The white paper's a blueprint for strategically engaging parents

**Bridget Phillipson's emphasis on parental partnerships is an opportunity for schools to properly bring parents on board with their children's learning, says Racheal Smith**

In its schools white paper, the Department for Education committed to "minimum expectations" for home-to-school partnerships as support for children's education. It could prove to be a significant shift in the relationship between schools and families.

For years, parental engagement has been widely encouraged as good practice but rarely defined. Data from our parent-friendly schools accreditation programme shows schools are generally engaging well with parents, but not yet as strategically as they could be.

The white paper has moved parental engagement from being a "nice to have" to a focus for all schools.

It's part of a broader political recognition that improving outcomes for children requires stronger partnerships between schools and families.

When secretary of state for education Bridget Phillipson spoke at the launch of the national parent survey last year, she told us that "over the last decade, I believe that parents have been

underrepresented in our national conversation".

She also provided a solution, getting all in education to "treat parents as genuine partners", adding that "the hallmarks of a good partnership are trust, support and responsibility".

#### Learning at home focus

The work of Dr Cat Jones and others has shown how important this partnership is.

Jones's work has shown that parent engagement is too often focused on providing information about school-centric activities, not on engaging parents with learning at home.

A lack of training for teachers is a key issue in her analysis, with only 10 per cent of teachers reporting they have received any training in parental engagement.

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation demonstrates that effective parental engagement leads to an average of four months' additional academic progress a year.

Despite this, Parentkind's national parent survey from 2024 found that more than half of secondary school parents do not get clear information to support their child's learning at home.

For school leaders, the government's "minimum expectation" raises practical



“It recognises parents as the missing piece of the jigsaw”

questions about who in a school is responsible for engagement, what these minimum expectations will be and what schools will need to do to meet them.

The white paper sets out expectations in five areas: effective and timely communications, high expectations of families, support for effective transitions, empowering families to support home learning and creating a strong school culture of parental involvement.

This is a strong guide for schools to build these partnerships and mirrors our blueprint framework for parent participation developed with Canterbury Christ Church University.

#### Teachers untrained

Our exclusive polling of 5,400 teachers conducted with TeacherTapp last month found 93 per cent have received no training in handling parent complaints and 83 per cent of schools have no staff member with specific responsibility for parent engagement.

This shows us all where we need to begin.

A quiet revolution is taking place in our schools system, with one in every 100 or so schools in England committed to becoming an accredited parent-friendly school.

The white paper gives both the DfE and schools plenty of work to do. Politically, the department will be working with schools, trusts and parents to develop these expectations so they are not imposed but designed to support improvement.

They will need to work for schools and parents to ensure this is a true partnership. If we have expectations, they should work both ways on parents and on schools.

The government's "minimum expectations" should not be seen as another compliance exercise. They are a signal that the education system, as well as the government, is beginning to recognise parents as the missing piece of the jigsaw.

Anyone working in schools will recognise that not all parents get it right all of the time, but we can also recognise the potential for better relationships and stronger partnerships to support children.

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ED  
ROBBINS

CEO, Fresh Start in Education

## A child who drops out isn't a failure, they just need support

**Education can be rebuilt at any point, says Ed Robbins, and the key factor is having adults who meet the child where they're at**

When a child disengages from education, it rarely happens overnight and usually follows a gradual loss of confidence.

They start feeling like they can't keep up, they're always getting it wrong or that learning is something to dread instead of enjoy.

By the time this becomes noticeable in their attendance, behaviour or grades, they've probably been struggling internally for a long time.

People often think that once a child falls behind, whether academically or emotionally, it's impossible to re-engage them. But that's usually not the case.

Education can be rebuilt at any point. The most important thing isn't what the child has missed but how the adults around them deal with the stage they're at now.

### When learning starts to slip

A child's learning often breaks down because something else has taken over, whether it be anxiety, constant setbacks, friendship problems or just feeling like they don't belong.

Some children act out or become quiet, and many still turn up every day but aren't there mentally, doing

the least amount possible while losing more belief in themselves.

This is almost always because they don't trust their school, adults and themselves, not because they're not intelligent or capable.

Before we can rebuild learning, children need to feel safe, understood, accepted and that they matter. For pupils who've struggled, that sense of safety is often fragile.

Many are just waiting to fail again or to be judged by standards they think they can't meet, and this is where adults who are steady, calm and predictable really help.

When children are shown understanding instead of frustration, and when adults keep composure even when things are tough, trust can start to build back up.

This approach doesn't mean lowering expectations, but it should focus on helping the child believe their effort will be noticed, they won't be punished for their mistakes and that they can truly make progress.

### Meeting children where they are

One of the biggest things that stops children re-engaging with school is expecting them to work at a level they're not ready for.

If their confidence and key skills haven't been built back up yet, being pushed too much too quickly can be crushing, and they might avoid things to protect themselves.



“ Many are just waiting to fail again

Small, doable steps can help them associate effort with success again, which will slowly build their confidence back up.

When progress feels manageable and achievable, they start to care because they believe they can do it, not because someone is making them.

For many children who've given up on learning, not knowing what to expect makes everything harder.

Mixed messages, unclear boundaries or constant change can leave them feeling anxious and unsure of what's expected of them. Clear routines give children something familiar to rely on.

Structure works best when it's delivered with warmth and understanding, so students feel supported, not controlled, and can concentrate better.

Children who struggle with their feelings, get frustrated easily or have trouble with friends often find school overwhelming, and these challenges affect how they can engage with learning every day.

Helping them recognise their feelings and solve problems makes learning feel less scary.

### Working together around the child

Rebuilding a child's education works best when teachers, families and any specialist support all understand what the child needs.

Being consistent is vital, as when children are given the same boundaries and support across home and school, life feels more safe and predictable. Families also play a huge part – when schools and parents work together, children are far more likely to feel seen and supported.

Rebuilding a child's education starts with seeing what they can do now, not just focusing on what's gone wrong in the past.

Negative behaviour and being withdrawn are signs that a child needs support, not that they've failed. With the right guidance, consistent routines and patient support, children can start reconnecting with learning and believing in themselves again.

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## BEN SPERRING

Director, LETTA School Improvement

### Knocked for six by year 11s' secondary transition project

**A peer mentoring scheme for children about to start secondary school was a fantastic advert for teenagers' commitment, says Ben Sperring**

In the busyness that is the world of education, we are grateful when an opportunity comes along to tackle a few things simultaneously.

Our year 11 learning mentor programme helped prepare younger pupils for a significant transition while providing meaningful development for our older students post-GCSEs.

The long, often unproductive summer after GCSEs can be a period of drift for year 11 students, while year 6 pupils begin to feel the natural anxieties of moving to secondary school.

Our three-week, post-GCSE volunteer programme turned this downtime into a meaningful personal and career development opportunity while supporting pupils in year 6 to prepare for year 7.

To ensure the programme's impact, we deliberately structured it to mirror a workplace qualification, pitched at roughly a level 3/4 standard.

This professional approach began right from recruitment. We advertised across our four London secondary partners Oaklands School in Bethnal Green, George Green's School on the Isle of Dogs,

Langdon Park School in Poplar and Bow School in Bow.

Students had to submit a formal application form and attend an interview before being offered a place. Twenty-one year 11 students were selected to participate across four primary schools.

The training element of the programme was delivered by LETTA staff, the same staff who train and develop apprentices and new teachers. It covered essential professional skills, including:

- Defining the mentor role
- Understanding professional conduct and boundaries (e.g. how to be friendly, but not a friend)
- Practical skills like listening techniques, specifically the "model of repetition" for confirming understanding
- Safeguarding issues

This intensive preparation involved two full days of upfront training, followed by weekly sessions throughout the placement, including roleplay and peer-to-peer exercises to build confidence before entering the classroom.

The primary schools identified pupils who would most benefit from the support, and we used personal introductions from both the mentors and pupils to match pairs based on shared interests and compatible personalities.

Once in their placement school, the mentors were very much active



“Many of the students expressed an interest in teaching”

participants, not observers, and were expected to engage confidently with pupils, rather than sitting on the sidelines.

For example, each student was required to plan and lead an icebreaker and introduce an activity to the class. A supervisor supported mentors one day per week, providing guidance, encouragement and a space to reflect on their developing skills.

#### UCAS personal statement

The timing of this programme was, in part, a response to the new structure of the UCAS personal statement, where question 3 specifically asks students to detail their outside-of-education preparation and explain its usefulness.

This can be tough for some teenagers. Supervisors led discussions on how the students' newly acquired mentoring, communication and professional skills would be valued across various career paths.

On the final day of the programme, our 21 mentors came together to

share their experiences.

The local MP attended to thank them and congratulate them on their success, a gesture which helped to reinforce just how seriously everyone took the work they had been engaged in.

Genuinely, the commitment and professionalism of this first cohort of mentors blew us away.

Interestingly, it turns out that the programme is already acting as a powerful recruitment pipeline for the teaching profession.

Many of the students expressed an interest in teaching following the programme, leading to an optional, teaching-focused Q&A session where we outlined pathways into teaching.

This programme offers a compelling model for trusts and schools looking to strategically invest in both year 7 transition support and career development for older students.

We will be following up with this cohort to keep their aspirations warm and are looking forward to applications for this summer's programme.

# THE INCLUSION LEADER

Insights on how schools can support all children



## By focusing on schools, white paper fails to put children first

**Frances Akinde**

**Education consultant  
and former headteacher**



Like everyone else in education, I'd been waiting for the schools white paper for a long time.

On the day of its release, I was up late, spending time analysing both the white paper and the SEND consultation paper. It took me seven hours.

Because I read them so intensely, I noticed many things should have been included but aren't, and that's really starting to frustrate me.

At first, I couldn't put my finger on why so many aspects of true inclusion, things I felt were vital, were missing.

Then it dawned on me: even though the language is about the rights of children, the Department for Education documents are all very much centred on the school.

There is little to no meaningful mention of:

- Intersectionality, particularly between race and SEND
- Racism, both the barriers and the harm it causes
- Trauma-informed practice as a systemic necessity
- Emotionally based school avoidance
- Elective home education
- Children missing in education

Although the white paper refers to "white working class" children 25 times, there is less emphasis on racially minoritised groups within working-class communities.

This is despite evidence that disadvantage affects all racial groups, with children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller and Black Caribbean backgrounds the least likely to reach their potential or have their underlying SEND needs accurately identified whilst still in school.

I'm not saying white working-class children should not be a priority. This group needs attention. But we also know that attainment and disadvantage intersect with ethnicity.

Regarding parental engagement and co-production, will we see national standards for these, or will they be included in the national inclusion standards?

I would also have expected to see explicit



mention of behaviour policies, and the harm that is caused when they are not applied through a trauma-informed, neuro-affirming and intersectional lens.

### Schools as site of change

Throughout both documents, schools are repeatedly framed as the primary and key unit of change. This matters because it positions schools as the site of change, rather than the child within their wider ecosystem.

When you reverse this framing, you ask different questions. What are the barriers to learning for this child? What does the ecosystem around them look like? How are these systems interacting to shape their experience of education?

This way of thinking is not new. It is something I learned working in alternative provision and can be framed through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework.

Scotland has embedded this thinking into policy and practice through the "Getting it right for every child" framework. How can two nations, both part of the United Kingdom, have such different approaches to children's wellbeing?

The language in the white paper is very much rights-based, but those rights are translated exclusively into what schools should do, deliver or manage. What is missing is the clear articulation of children's entitlements.

Where is the explicit commitment to a child's entitlement to use their voice and have it heard and respected? Where is the recognition of lived realities shaped by racism, ableism, trauma, poverty and disadvantage?

We are using words like "belonging", "thriving" and "inclusion" more frequently, but we seem much less comfortable with phrases such as "dignity", "safety", "freedom from harm" and "mattering".

We know schools have become the catch-all for wider societal failures. And yes, the white paper explicitly talks about re-establishing schools as "anchors" within their communities, but this framing still prioritises the system over the child.

### Missed opportunity

I welcome the shift towards a more relational approach alongside high standards and the growing recognition of executive function.

But I was hoping for more. This white paper has missed a significant opportunity to state clearly that children really do come first.

But this is nothing new. We rarely go far enough. Instead of sitting with uncomfortable truths, we become defensive.

One of those truths is that schools can be sites of harm for many children.

The more I learn about education and social justice, the more I want to see a system built around children as individuals.

Week in

# Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

## FRIDAY

Bridget Phillipson's words at the ASCL school leaders' conference were like music to our ears.

"I don't need to tell you how difficult it can be to publish a white paper," the education secretary said.

"There won't be another one along soon. This is it."

Phew. That's a relief. But it also reminds us that should the government mess up the reforms, it's not a great legacy to leave behind!

\*\*\*

ASCL's stage also prompted great debate on Friday morning, but over something entirely different: the Ofsted chief inspector's footwear.

Martyn Oliver was sporting smart trainers with his suit while delivering his (still yet to be properly understood) speech, something that became an unexpected talking point at the conference.

On *that* speech, Ofsted was so proud of it, the watchdog was putting out social media posts with his most controversial quotes, attracting many confused and questioning comments from the sector.

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The Department for Education's posts were also going viral for the wrong reasons again this week.

It posted a series of slides on the SEND reforms answering some key questions – but then appears to have deleted them.

They were reposted a few days later with slightly different wording.

For instance, under "what does complex needs mean?" (something many experts have been asking) it states: "It's



about support that goes beyond what a mainstream school can routinely provide day to day."

But they deleted a line saying: "But every child is different."

Hmm. One slide about inclusion bases was rewritten, but what was originally there doesn't seem that controversial. Bizarre, but the whole saga has led to people thinking DfE has something to hide.

## MONDAY

Dream job alert! Well, for some maybe.

The DfE is looking for a new private secretary for a minister. For £40k a year, you would be joining the private office at "an incredibly exciting time", the job ad beams.

They are looking for someone with "outstanding skills and judgement". They must be flexible, adaptable and proactive in the face of changing circumstances, as well as confident dealing with "senior stakeholders".

You also get the harder-than-it-sounds job of setting a "strategic direction on how the minister spends their time".

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It's hard to forget the Holland Park School scandal that unfolded several years ago.

In 2022 the west London school was rated inadequate by Ofsted, which found "mistrust and disharmony" between stakeholders. There was also a legal battle over the then-standalone academy joining United Learning.

This week Ofsted gave it five 'strong standards' and two 'exceptional' marks. Pupils and staff speak about the "culture shift" that has happened "and why they feel happy to come to school".

Inspectors found "significant improvements" since it joined the trust.

## THURSDAY

Another of Ofqual's standards directors is leaving to join exam board Pearson.

Ian Stockford will become the assessment giant's principal for measurement in assessment insight in June. He has been at Ofqual since May 2019.

Cath Jadhav, the previous director of standards at the exams regulator, left in 2023 to join Pearson as its responsible officer.

Stockford has been put on immediate garden leave, because he is moving to a role with "a conflict of interest".

Ofqual said his appointment has been approved under the business appointment rules. Appropriate conditions are said to have been put in place to protect "both crown information and any information that may be proprietary, sensitive or of commercial relevance to regulated entities."





## CHIEF EDUCATION OFFICER (SECONDARY)

£128,447 - £141,693 (L38 - L42), ROCHDALE

We believe every young person in Rochdale deserves an excellent education and a genuine opportunity to succeed. Altus Education Partnership is a values-driven trust committed to raising educational standards and widening opportunity across the borough. Inclusion sits at the heart of our work: we believe every young person, including those with additional needs, should be able to thrive. Today the Trust serves around 5,000 pupils and students across a growing family of academies, including the nationally recognised Rochdale Sixth Form College.

As Chief Education Officer (Secondary), you will provide strategic leadership across the Trust's secondary phase including Kingsway Park High School and Edgar Wood Academy, ensuring consistently high standards of curriculum, teaching, inclusion and outcomes.

This is your opportunity to:

- Influence education across a growing and ambitious trust
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- Lead improvement across diverse secondary contexts
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Or contact Raymond Kelly at Navigate NDC on 01625 800862 for a confidential discussion.

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## Headteacher

BDAT is looking to appoint an inspirational Headteacher for this exciting leadership role. We are seeking to appoint a strong and proven leader who will build on the strengths of our school so that it continues to provide a high quality education for all its students. Our goal is to transform the lives of our students, staff and community and to inspire each other to keep on developing and improving.

This post is a fantastic opportunity for an ambitious leader looking either to extend their experience of headship or to start their first headship in a highly supportive and rewarding environment.

We offer access to high quality personal and professional development for all our staff, with a great emphasis of supporting and developing the lives of everyone in the academy. You will also benefit from the close partnership working with the four other secondary academies within our multi-academy trust and the support of our colleagues in the Diocese of Leeds Education Team.

### We need from you

- A commitment to ensuring our children achieve their biggest and bravest ambitions.
- A love of teaching and learning.
- A passion for developing your team.
- Strong, innovative and strategic leadership and management.
- A firm commitment to achieving success through partnership and teamwork.
- Excellent interpersonal and communication skills.
- Drive, ambition and high expectations.
- Commitment to the vision and values of the school and trust.

### We can offer you

- A supportive and forward-thinking leadership team in an inclusive academy and trust.
- A stimulating, attractive and welcoming learning environment.
- An approach that supports and stimulates professional growth, with a bespoke CPD package.
- Cross-trust opportunities for collaboration and development.
- The opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives and careers of pupils and colleagues.
- A career in a forward thinking trust.