CST Position Paper

Building strong trusts

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Confederation of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts

Confederation of School Trusts

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England, advocating for, connecting, and supporting executive and governance leaders. Our members are responsible for the education of nearly three million young people.

Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

About the author

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Building strong trusts

In February 2022, CST published an influential discussion paper asking the question, 'What is a strong trust?' Since then, we have engaged in a sector-wide discussion to understand how our proposed domains of organisational strength and resilience aligned with sector thinking and the emerging evidence base.[1]

Underpinning the original discussion paper was the concept of education as human flourishing. We need to think hard about how we create school environments where all children flourish, ensuring both the optimal continuing development of their intellectual potential and their ability to live well as rounded human beings. This means a relentless focus on high quality, inclusive education – advancing education for all our children.

Building strong and resilient organisations is key to education as human flourishing.

But we also need environments where the adults flourish. As Lynn Swaner and Andy Wolfe write: "Where there are few flourishing adults, there will be few flourishing children."[2] So, we need to care deeply about our workforce and give renewed consideration to what 'good work' means and how we might strengthen our understanding of what it means to be a good employer.

And we need to think about the flourishing of our schools working together in deep and purposeful collaboration as one entity, under a single governance structure, to improve and maintain high educational standards across a trust. In our view, deep and purposeful collaboration is at the heart of the trust structure – it is the way we keep the focus on improvement at scale. And from our point of view, structures are in fact very important because they create the conditions for this intensely focused collaboration.

We believe that 'public benefit' gives expression to the civic role of trusts. CST has long made the case for the trust as a new form of civic structure, alongside the university, the NHS trust, the further education college. These are civic structures anchored in place – and in that sense, they are 'anchor institutions' with a duty to contribute to the wider common good.

If we are going to build a successful school system, with schools coming together with a single governance and accountability structure, we need to be explicit and eloquent about what constitutes a strong trust. Building strong and resilient organisations, that actively promote the relationships between and among our seven domains of organisational strength, is key to education as human flourishing.

1 Muijs, D (2022) *Trust Quality – an Overview of Research*, CST

2 Swaner, L and Wolfe, A (2021) *Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators, and Schools.* William B Eerdmans Publishing. The concept of flourishing draws on the thinking of Swaner and Wolfe, explored in this reflective review.

Codifying the features of strong trusts – creating the conditions to keep getting better

The codification of effectiveness is important because it gives us a blueprint to build strong trusts in every part of the country. We think there is merit in considering wider regulatory theory here, balancing the prevention of harms with promotion of goods. Regulatory theory provides a way of thinking about the role of baseline standards to prevent harms, otherwise it becomes very hard to regulate. However, to promote goods we need more aspirational framing, which is more than a minimum to be met, and more an ideal to strive towards.

Our domains are therefore tentative, iterative, and designed to be developmental. As the sector matures, we need to define organisational strength and resilience in a way that enables the sector to work towards a common understand of what good (and better) looks like. The domains are indicative so that trusts have room to give creative and innovative expression to what it means to be a strong trust in their own unique circumstances.

What has changed since the publication of the discussion paper?

Since the publication of our discussion paper, we have disaggregated school improvement from the quality of education. Although we continue to believe that school improvement is the *process* by which high quality education is achieved, our discussions with the sector have led us to believe that its central importance to the work of trusts means that it should be a separate domain. We have also added a domain: expert, ethical leadership. In our original discussion paper, we perceived leadership to permeate across all domains (and we still consider this to be the case) but we think the work on codifying trust leadership does merit a separate domain.

Our domains map to the trust quality descriptors published by the Department for Education but are different in a few respects. We separate out strategic governance from leadership because we think a clear separation between the domains of governance and leadership is important. Since our inception we have made the case for the power of public benefit and the trust as a new form of civic structure.

CST domains	DfE trust quality descriptors
Strategic governance	Governance and leadership
Expert, ethical leadership	
High quality, inclusive education	High quality and inclusive education
School improvement at scale	School improvement
Workforce resilience and wellbeing	Workforce
Finance and operations	Finance and operations
Public benefit and civic duty	

The power of purpose and the importance of culture

'Flourishing together' comes primarily from the power of purpose: the capacity to link people through a shared belief about the identity, meaning and mission of an organisation. In the strongest trusts, there is a deep sense of collective purpose. Our purpose is drawn explicitly from the charitable object of most trusts: advancing education for public benefit.

Purpose is enacted across a trust through the culture that the trust establishes. We do not see culture as a separate domain of trust strength because to be a true culture it

must be embedded and alive in each of the domains.

- **Strategic governance**: The trust anchors its strategy in the needs of its schools, the communities they serve and the wider educational system in line with its charitable objects.
- **Expert, ethical leadership:** The accounting officer and executive team create a culture of expert, ethical leadership based on the Seven Principles of Public Life. They create a culture of one organisation, built around the trust's purpose and values.
- **High quality, inclusive education**: The trust creates a culture that is motivating and ambitious for all, especially disadvantaged children, and children with SEND, so that all pupils can achieve their potential.
- **School improvement at scale**: A strong conception of quality and culture of continuous improvement is pervasive across all the schools in the group.
- **Workforce resilience and wellbeing**: The trust creates a positive working culture for all staff that promotes collaboration, aspiration, and support.
- **Finance and operations**: Everyone in the organisation recognises the importance of effective and efficient use of resources for the wider benefit of all pupils.
- **Public benefit and civic duty**: Part of the culture of the trust is to work beyond its own organisation with other trust leaders and civic actors for the wider common good.

Importantly, the trust builds a single organisational culture across all these domains.

As we said in our pamphlet, *Starting with Why*, in these difficult times of upheaval and uncertainty, it is up to the sector to lead on building a strong and resilient school system, that has the capacity and can create the conditions to keep getting better. We believe that is the dividend of a trust-based system.

1. Strategic governance

The trust anchors its strategy in the needs of its schools, the communities they serve and the wider educational system in line with its charitable objects.

Strategic governance is one of the defining features of trusts. This structure goes much further than other collaborative structures, such as federations or alliances. Strong governance of the legal entity of the trust hardwires collaboration and shared accountability in a way that no other school structure does. A trust board carries both the accountability and the power of intervention, where necessary at a governance level, for its schools. This is a key reason why the trust is the most appropriate vehicle to drive school improvement.

The conflation of the proposition of maintained governance with trust governance is potentially damaging. CST has strongly theorised and codified the proposition of trust governance in our recent guidance, *Governing a School Trust*.

Governing a group of schools is a complex task, which is why the local tier of governance is so important to the task of strategic governance. Local governance is not well defined in the trust sector. Because there is a tendency to bring the mental model of maintained school governance into the trust sector, the roles and responsibilities of local governance are sometimes muddled with maintained school governing boards. Instead, the trust board is the statutory, strategic governance board which delegates to the local tier of governance the roles and responsibilities the trust board wishes to them to perform.

The trust is the most appropriate vehicle to drive school improvement.

We argue that local governance structures should have specific responsibility for ensuring depth of understanding of the community and holding schools to account for using that understanding to enable children to flourish.

There are a range of names for local school committees. In CST's guidance on governance structures, we advise that the naming of this tier of governance should reflect the functions which are delegated:

- **Local advisory boards, committees or councils:** the advisory committee is tasked with meaningful engagement with parents and local communities but has no delegated governance functions or powers.[3]
- **Local school committees**: limited delegated governance functions (but no powers) for example scrutiny of standards, health and safety and safeguarding, and community engagement.
- **Local governing boards**: a fuller set of delegated functions and some powers, which may include some decisions over school level finance.

Whatever the constitution of the local tier, there is more that can be done to use the local tier of governance more explicitly for the purposes of community anchoring. For the avoidance of doubt, CST is not advising that the local tier of governance should have *only* this function, but rather that there is enormous potential in mobilising local governance for the purposes of community anchoring.

3 Successful advisory boards are clear about their purpose. If your trust board chooses this form of local governance, it should be clear from the outset how the board wishes to deploy the advisory board. Communicating the roles and expectations and articulating the mandate and purpose of the board is essential. The advisory board must have an unambiguous mission and definition.

2. Expert, ethical leadership

The accounting officer and executive team create a culture of expert, ethical leadership based on the Seven Principles of Public Life. They create a culture of one organisation built around the trust's purpose and values.

CST has been at the vanguard of developing and beginning to codify the leadership knowledge and mental models required to lead school trusts in our work on the core responsibilities of trust chief executives. This is based in an emerging theory of the expertise of trust leaders.

There are six interlinked areas of a school trust chief executive's core responsibilities. These are:

- **Strategic leadership**: trust values, culture and strategy
- **Quality of education**: which includes school improvement
- **Finance, sustainability and compliance**
- **People strategy**
- **Governance and accountability**
- **System leadership and civic responsibility**

Our work on the domains of a strong trust and the core responsibilities strongly influenced the Government's trust leadership development content framework. In this work, we have attempted to ask the question, 'What is trust leadership and how can we develop it?' Barker and Rees explore how expertise is predicated on knowledge. They argue that it is to adopt a broad definition of knowledge and to understand what they identify as the 'hidden' knowledge of experts: informal, impressionistic and self-regulatory.[4] There is much more for us to do to codify the expert knowledge of trust leaders, as we develop and iterate this work, but it is an important question for us, given the critical roles that trust leaders play in education and more widely society.

As leaders of educational charities, chief executives of school trusts are expected to demonstrate consistently high standards of principled and professional conduct. Chief executives should always uphold and demonstrate the Seven Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan Principles). The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education translates these into principles for education leadership:[5]

- **Selflessness**: School and trust leaders should act solely in the interest of children and young people.
- **Integrity:** School and trust leaders must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. Before acting and taking decisions, they must declare and

4 Barker, J and Rees, T *Expertise, mental models, and leadership knowledge*. Ambition Institute.
5 ASCL (2019), *Navigating the Educational Moral Maze - The Final Report of the Ethical Leadership Commission*. The ethical leadership commission was convened by ASCL and brought together national educational organisations. The framework on page 10 has been slightly amended for the trust sector.

resolve openly any perceived conflict of interest and relationships.

- **Objectivity:** School and trust leaders must act and take decisions impartially and fairly, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias. Leaders should be dispassionate, exercising judgement and analysis for the good of children and young people.
- **Accountability**: School and trust leaders are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.
- **Openness**: School and trust leaders should expect to act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from scrutiny unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.
- **Honesty**: School and trust leaders should be truthful.
- **Leadership**: School and trust leaders should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

School trust chief executives are responsible for upholding public trust in the leadership of their organisations, and in their enactment of civic and system leadership, and should maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour. Chief executives should serve in the best interests of the trust's pupils, conducting themselves in a manner compatible with their influential position in society.

3. High quality, inclusive education

The trust creates a culture that is motivating and ambitious for all, especially disadvantaged children, and children with SEND, so that all pupils can achieve their potential.

The core purpose of trusts to advance education is cemented in each trust's articles of association. As we said in the introduction to this paper, we need to think hard about how we create school environments where all children flourish, ensuring both the optimal continuing development of their intellectual potential and their ability to live well as rounded human beings. This means a relentless focus on high quality, inclusive education – advancing education for all our children.

There is particularly urgent for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds where a gap between them and their peers has opened up. We believe that education in a school or trust cannot be considered high quality if it is not so for *all* children.

In an important paper for CST, *A good life: towards greater dignity for people with learning disability*, Ben Newmark and Tom Rees argue that we need a broader and more ambitious vision of what a good life is. Human flourishing and dignity for all, requires us to place greater value on things such as contribution, difference and the process of learning and work itself, to balance the meritocratic values of academic credentials, occupational status, and wealth. The standard of education we expect for those who find learning hardest should be characterised by the same high expectations and intellectual rigour than that which society demands for our most able children.

The safeguarding and safety of all pupils is key to advancing education in all of our schools.

4. School improvement at scale

A strong conception of quality and culture of continuous improvement is pervasive across all the schools in the group.

The strongest trusts are focused on the quality of education. They have strongly theorised, coherent models of improvement and they can scale improvement by knowledge-building through evidence-informed professional development, and by creating communities of improvement. This is recognised throughout the sector: when asked about their reasons for joining a trust, 72% of primary schools and 85% of secondary schools cited providing more professional development opportunities for staff.[6]

In our paper *Knowledge-building: School Improvement at Scale*, we offer four propositions on school improvement, which act as a theory of change:

- The goal is for every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in what they teach (the curriculum) and how they teach (pedagogy).
- For this to happen, we need to mobilise for every teacher the best evidence from research.
- There is no improvement for pupils without improvement in teaching, and no improvement in teaching without the best professional development for teachers.
- Strong structures (in groups of schools) can facilitate better professional development and thus better teaching and improvement for pupils.

This is not to dismiss the procedural processes of building capacity, undertaking a forensic analysis of need, supporting and deploying leadership, providing access to effective practice and monitoring improvements in the quality of provision. Indeed, these are essential. But without the intentional practice of knowledge building, improvement is not sustainable. It may not result in an enduring change in practice and therefore in the quality of teaching.

When asked about their reasons for joining a trust, schools cited more professional development opportunities for staff

Our paper *Communities of Improvement: School Trusts as Fields of Practice* takes these ideas further and considers school improvement as a field of practice rather than a series of disconnected activities.

Essentially, we are trying to codify how some of our best trusts do school improvement at scale – how they put improvement front and centre of all that they do; how they develop strong theorised models of improvement and then are able to implement/deliver these effectively across their schools. It is important to note that there is not a consensus around the model of improvement and there are different models of improvement which appear to be effective in different trusts and different contexts.

The trust has been the vehicle for intervening in cases of educational failure in some of the most challenging parts of the school system. Strong trusts work quickly to improve schools where the quality of education is not yet good enough. In this way they add value to the education system.

6 Department for Education (2021) *Schools' views on the perceived benefits and obstacles to joining a multi-academy trust*

5. Workforce resilience and wellbeing

The trust creates a positive working culture for all staff that promotes collaboration, aspiration, and support.

People matter. If trusts are to build sustainable infrastructure to lead change, improve schools and respond to the legacies of the pandemic then they need a knowledgeable, skilled, and resilient workforce. The strongest trusts understand their responsibilities and duties as employers – they are good employers. They recruit, train, deploy and retain great teachers, support staff and leaders throughout their careers, supporting their development by using evidence-informed professional development and ensuring a manageable work-life balance, paying close attention to wellbeing.

CST's paper *The Role of Trusts as Talent Architects* sets out the vital role trusts play as employers, and how they can build sustainable people strategies to deliver education for the public benefit. The paper argues firmly that trusts themselves are the key enablers of quality people management in our sector and will play a central role in building a sustainable education workforce.

People management is necessary but not sufficient. If we look back to our theory of change in relation to school improvement, there is a very strong focus on professional development and growth. Strong structures (in groups of schools) can facilitate better professional development and thus better teaching and improvement for pupils.

A growing body of literature places teacher professional development at the heart of efforts to improve the school system. CST has recently published a paper that seeks to explore the role of professional development, what it is, why it is important, and how we might be able to do it better.[7] In doing so, it builds upon the idea that school improvement – in order to be lasting and sustainable - should be underpinned by deliberate and intentional knowledge building. Professional development of teachers is core to these knowledge building efforts.

The paper argues that pupils who benefit from more effective teaching not only learn more, they live happier and healthier lives.[8] The effect is strongest among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.[9] In order to improve the quality of teaching, we could try to recruit better teachers into the profession, but this is a slow and uncertain route - in part because it's hard to identify a great teacher right at the start of their career.[10] A

7 Barker, J and Patten, K (2022) *Professional development in School Trusts: Capacity, Conditions and Culture*, CST.

8 For example, Jackson, K, Rockoff, J.,and Staiger, D (2014) 'Teacher Effects and Teacher-Related Policies'. *Annual Review of Economics* 2014 6:1, 801-825; and Chetty R, Friedman J N, Rockoff J E (2013) *Measuring the Impacts of Teachers II: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood.* NBER Working Paper 19424.

9 The Sutton Trust (2011) *Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK: interim findings*.

10 Wiliam, D (2016) *Leadership for teacher learning: creating a culture where all teachers improve so that all students succeed.* Chapter 2. Learning Sciences International.

better, and indeed a more ethical approach, is to focus our efforts on helping existing teachers to improve.

This is the hard task of creating cultures and communities of improvement across professionals in a group of schools designed using the 'active ingredients' of professional development.[11] This is hard to do and not yet the norm in our education system, but we believe that the trust structure is uniquely well placed to do this.

Our contention is that school trusts can work to overcome some of the challenges associated with the design and implementation of high-quality professional development through leveraging their capacity (scale and expertise) alongside their ability to systematically control the conditions and culture in which *all staff* work, and in which professional development takes place.

In a compelling series of blogs, Steve Rollett reflects how trusts can create the conditions for teachers to connect to each other and to professional knowledge in ways that were previously impossible for too many teachers.[12]

The future of the school system resides in building on the best of what has come before. Rollett attempts to describe some of the best practice that existed in some maintained school settings and explains how these nascent professional connections can be more consistently and robustly built on, deepened, and scaled up by trusts in the coming years.

This is a vision of trusts in which professional connections are not left to chance, or undermined by competing priorities, but rather hard wired into our schools. This is not yet typical of our system which tends to rely on state-mandated professional development, which are a hugely important contribution to the evidence on improving teacher quality, but there is more to do.

These principles apply equally to support and central staff, many who find themselves in novel roles as trust establish new structures and approaches. The strongest trusts will encourage a culture of lifelong learning for all employees.

11 Sims, S, Fletcher-Wood, H, O'Mara-Eves, A, Cottingham, S, Stansfield, C, Van Herwegen, J, Anders, J (2021) *What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. Education Endowment Foundation.

12 Rollett, S (2022) *Hard wiring connections: Part 1 – Knowing*; and *Hard wiring connections: Part 2 - Connecting*, CST.

6. Finance and operations

Everyone in the organisation recognises the importance of effective and efficient use of resources for the benefit of all pupils in the schools in the trust.

Trusts can make the most effective use of resources to empower schools to focus on teaching and knowledge building. Strong trusts ensure all staff and functions are focused on improvement, so that central functions empower teachers and leaders to focus on advancing education.

Because school trusts are public organisations, funded by government with a funding agreement that requires trusts to spend their money in the way that parliament intends, it is essential that the efficient use of public money (for example through organisational design, effective procurement and contract management) is part of our narrative about strong trusts.

Efficiency, while fundamentally important to deliver value to the public, is necessary but not in itself sufficient. Effectiveness (obtaining the best educational outcomes) is made possible through efficiency (which may be defined at obtaining the best possible outcome for the resources input).

This is important because the most efficient trusts can release resources to re-invest in the pursuit of educational quality.

These investments are not always visible from published financial data, but we do need to understand better how methodologies like curriculum-led financial planning enable investments into the quality of education, and can therefore be seen as mechanisms of improvement within a school trust.

Trusts must fulfil their safeguarding and health and safety responsibilities. This paper does not attempt to restate the statutory requirements for trusts. The statutory responsibilities of safeguarding and health and safety are in fact relevant to all the domains of a strong trust. The finance and operations domain includes how that environment can be maintained by risk management processes and effective back-office support. Staff must understand their roles through clear policies, procedures, and designation.

7. Public benefit and civic duty

Part of the culture of the trust is to work beyond its own organisation with other trust leaders and civic actors for the wider common good.

The primary focus on education quality as the quality of teaching is absolutely necessary but not sufficient. Education has wider purposes in intellectual, social, and cultural development; the formation of character; and helping pupils to understand and play a role in society and contribute to the wider common good. Many of the strongest trusts are explicit in their commitment to creating the conditions for human flourishing.

Embedded in the heart of each trust's governance document, its articles of association, is the imperative of public benefit. CST has published guidance for trusts on the articulation of public benefit. For many trusts the public benefit narrative is already embedded in the annual report within its published accounts, but it could form part of a wider narrative, or even a wider ambition driving the trust's strategy.

The public benefit narrative also locates the trust as part of a wider public services narrative. CST has long made the case that the trust is a new form of civic structure.[13]. As a legal entity which is independent from local government, school trusts (like universities and NHS trusts), have a wider civic responsibility to advance education for the public good in the communities they serve.

Executive leaders are civic leaders who should work with others in their localities for the wider common good.

If we accept that trusts are a new form of civic structure, then a new domain of leadership emerges. Executive leaders are also civic leaders who should work with other civic actors in their localities or regions for the wider common good.

As school trusts emerge as civic structures, we see an opportunity for them to be anchor institutions in their communities. Anchor institutions, alongside their main purpose, play a significant role in a locality by making a strategic contribution to the greater social good and prioritise support for those experiencing disadvantage. Typically anchor institutions:

- Have strong ties to the geographic area in which they are based.
- Tend to be larger employers and have significant purchasing power.
- Are public sector, not-for-profit or as in the case of school trusts, charitable organisations.
- Tend to receive (or are significant stewards of) public resources.

In our policy work, we will continue to build the narratives of the trust as a civic institution which anchors its schools in their communities.

13 Cruddas, L and Simons, J (2021) *School Trusts as New Civic Structures*, CST.

Postscript

We are at an exciting point in the history of education in England where, with care and attention, we could become the best system at getting better.

If this is to become a reality, we must ask difficult questions, interrogate the evidence, commission more research and put the mission to advance education for public benefit at the heart of all that we do.

We welcome your engagement with the ideas in this paper as we work together to build a strong and resilient school system in England.

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