



QSG

QUEEN STREET GROUP

ANNUAL REPORT
2025 – 2026

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The Queen Street Group is grateful for the continued support of Bates Wells, a truly purpose and impact-driven law firm, and the firm of choice for charities and education providers.

Cover photo:
CLF Priorswood Primary School

FOREWORD

Welcome to the 8th Annual Report of the Queen Street Group of Multi-Academy Trusts

Our leadership conference this year was entitled “Towards 2039: leading Trusts to shape a future still being written”. It is a title that captures the reality facing schools and trusts today: a landscape characterised by constant change, emerging challenges and significant uncertainty.

On one level, 2039 feels a long way off. Yet it is the year in which pupils entering Reception in September 2025 will complete their education and leave Year 13. Our responsibility is to provide an education that equips them for the world as it exists today, and also for a future that is evolving rapidly and in ways we cannot fully predict.

The impact of artificial intelligence on both the workforce and educational practice is already apparent and will only deepen. At the same time, established patterns of social cohesion, civic identity and political allegiance are shifting, creating new challenges for school leaders as they support their communities and stakeholders. Alongside these developments, the publication of a new Schools White Paper, the introduction of a revised Ofsted Framework, and a year bookended by changes to the Department’s ministerial team have helped shape the direction of national education policy.

Against this backdrop, QSG has been energetic and purposeful throughout the past year, supporting members to navigate these challenges while identifying opportunities and maintaining a sense of optimism about the future.

First, we have continued to engage directly with policymakers and regulators to ensure that the voice of those responsible for leading schools every day is heard. Meetings with senior officials from the Department for Education and Ofsted, including His Majesty’s Chief Inspector and the Secretary of State, have enabled decision-makers to hear a wider range

of perspectives in an environment characterised by candour, trust and professional honesty, free from the pressures of publicity or lobbying.

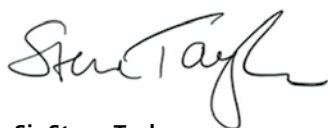
Second, the work of our seven Expert Groups continues to flourish. As this report demonstrates, these groups are increasingly influential forums for professional collaboration. They engage with policymakers, shape thinking, develop innovative practice, and provide invaluable networks of expertise and support for members across the sector.

Finally, QSG members are supporting one another more actively than ever before. Whether facing professional challenges or seeking personal advice, members benefit from a culture of generosity, trust and mutual support. During the year, we have often reflected on the importance of creating a space that is at once psychologically safe and intellectually challenging: one in which colleagues can disagree openly, test ideas rigorously and learn from one another. Equally important is the willingness of members to offer immediate, unconditional and non-judgemental support when it is needed. That spirit of mutual commitment remains one of QSG’s greatest strengths.

My term of office as Chair will conclude at our AGM in November, after which the role will be divided between an Executive Chair and a Board Chair. This development reflects the maturity of an organisation that has continued to grow, professionalise and strengthen over the past decade. QSG has never been about individuals; building a sustainable, influential, and relevant voice within the Trust sector has always been our shared ambition.

It has been both a humbling privilege and a profound honour to serve as Chair of such a forward-thinking, highly skilled, and values-driven community of leaders. I am deeply grateful for the friendships, insights and shared sense of purpose that have characterised my time in the role, and I look forward to supporting the incoming Chairs as one of team of Vice-Chairs over the coming period.

I also look forward to continuing my involvement more broadly with an organisation that is exceptionally well placed to go from strength to strength as we continue our journey towards 2039; the future may still be being written, but QSG is well placed to help shape it.



Sir Steve Taylor

Chair, Queen Street Group



WHY WE EXIST

Origin

QSG started when a group of CEOs in the early days of Trust organisation started to meet informally. They wanted to connect and support one another, with the added purpose of engaging with and influencing the direction of policy, so that it took account of the reality of running schools.

Purpose

We seek to improve the quality of education and opportunity for all pupils in all our schools.

The distinctive ways in which we do this are through:

- constructive provocation and debate
- thinking partnership
- peer support

We have two main sets of peer and partner meetings:

CEO meetings

These are for Trust CEOs with no deputisation to enable the building of authentic relationships and trust.

Expert Groups

We have seven groups for differing areas of Trust operation: Education, EdTech, Finance, HR, Estates, Safeguarding, SEND and Inclusion. These provide for the leaders of these areas the same environment and purpose as for CEOs.

1

QSG as a thinking partner

Our membership is intentionally structured to sound the diverse voices of all types and localities of Trusts. Our collective voice is grounded in the lived experience of leading Trusts. It articulates the range of viewpoints of our members, not a single policy position. We debate with honesty and robustness, recognising and celebrating divergence of opinion, mining for evidence and exploring ambiguity.

This enables us to be a thinking partner for policy-makers and educational leaders, offering authenticity and innovative challenge within a context of Chatham House Rules.

2

QSG as a peer support partner

Our membership is intentionally capped at 50 so that we are large enough to have influence and small enough to build trust in a confidential peer environment, to share failures as well as successes, to learn and grow as leaders and as organisations, and to share the ideas that improve our Trusts.



QSG VALUES & PRINCIPLES

Thinking partnership

In our challenge of each other and others who lead our system, we are rigorous, constructive and informed by evidence. Our voice is grounded in the day-by-day practice of leading and managing successful groups of schools.

A safe space for growth

Whilst we are robust in challenging thinking, we are kind in our support of one another and our guests. We recognise that leadership can be lonely and provide a safe space for the sharing of failures and doubts as well as successes. We look out for one another, and support each other to grow as people and leaders.

Eclectic and inclusive

All our members have a voice in how we operate. Our CEO and Expert Groups provide networks for leaders across all areas of Trust operation to share knowledge, develop professionally and personally, and influence policy.



Multiple voices entwined in common purpose

Our Trusts are diverse in many ways, including type, geography, context and size. Each is accountable to its own Board and stakeholders. We seek to influence policy by reflecting nuance and concentrating the impact of these multiple voices, not by condensing them into a single viewpoint.

We support one another, improve our practice and seek to influence policy through:

- **regular meetings of CEOs**
- **regular meetings of seven Expert Groups involving leaders of:**
 - ~ Education
 - ~ SEND and Inclusion
 - ~ Finance
 - ~ Human Resources
 - ~ EdTech
 - ~ Safeguarding
 - ~ Estates
- **discussions with policy-makers, regulators and other sector leaders**
- **publication of briefings and blogs**



QSG ANNUAL RECEPTION

QSG's Annual Reception attracted over 100 attendees. It has now cemented its place in the calendar of leading figures in education, providing a forum for CEOs and Chairs of Trusts to share their thinking with policy makers and other leaders.

Once again the event was held at One Great George Street, thanks to the generous sponsorship of Bates Wells.

QSG over the year:

- membership has now reached 50 Trusts. The QSG Board feel that this is the optimum size to be able to exercise influence whilst remaining small enough for members to know and trust one another
- the fourth annual conference focused on the rapid social, political and technological changes confronting Trusts: "Towards 2029: leading Trusts to shape a future still being written"
- Dr Tim Coulson moved from CEO of Unity to be Director General of the Regions Group, and Dr Vanessa Ogden from Mulberry Trust to be London Regional Director

Areas of focus for 2025–26

In the context of seeking to influence the content of the proposed White Paper:

1. Thought grounded in practice

Use our influence to ensure recent policy reforms have appropriate impact

2. Promote inclusive education

→ Work to transform the life chances of all children through exceptional provision in SEND and Alternative Provision

→ Build on new community and other partnerships

3. Re-imagining schooling

Learn from each other in adapting to the financial climate, new technology and changing expectations from employees and stakeholders



Guest speaker

Jonathan Simons, Partner and Head of Education, Public First

Jonathan challenged the audience with what we can learn from developments in the USA and UK, leaving us with a call to action.

Three things to learn from USA:

- i) **Attendance:** the impact of migration issues on schools
- ii) **Tutoring:** \$190bn in subsidies from the Biden administration. What is the learning from high dosage tutoring? More broadly, how to take the programmes introduced as a result of Covid and scale them for now?
- iii) **Federal government:** what is the impact of the abolition of the Education Department which pushes power down to states? What happens when there is no alignment between funding, accountability and actions, in contrast to the UK?

Two things to learn from the UK:

- i) **What stays the same under this government:** families of schools; accountability stays strong; KS2 tests remain important; improvement teams come largely from Trusts
- ii) **What is different:** a new emphasis on the civic responsibilities of Trusts; more family support such as Best Start, breakfast clubs, extension of childcare, child poverty strategy, post 16 destinations

Call to action:

Schools remain more trusted than almost any other public service, and government sets the weather on only a very few things.

So the rest is up to us:

It is the role of schools and Trusts to exercise servant leadership and lead communities through the next stage of education development.



Also in attendance were senior figures from :

#BeeWell; Action Tutoring; Ambition Institute; AQA; ARK; ASCL; Bates Wells; Be Human First; Catholic Education Service; Centre for Education Systems; Chartered Institute of Teaching; Church of England; CoachBright; Confederation of School Trusts; Department for Education; Education Policy Institute; Edurio; Fair Education Alliance; Foundation for Educational Development; Impetus; Inspire Educate; Institute of School Business Leaders; IPSEA; John Murphy Education; Magic Breakfast; Music Mark; NAHT; National Foundation for Educational Research; National Governance Association; National Institute of Teaching ; Ofsted; Parentkind; Pearson; Place 2 Be; Prince's Education Trust; Public First; School Partnerships Alliance; Schools Week; Teacher Development Trust; Teacher Tapp; TES; The Access Project; The Difference.

QSG LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 2026

“Towards 2039: leading Trusts to shape a future still being written”

This was our fourth Annual Conference.

Our theme reflects both the uncertainty and the opportunity ahead of us. Over the course of the conference, we explored what it means to lead with purpose, creativity and optimism in a system undergoing profound change. How do we lead in a way that ensures our Trusts remain resilient, inclusive and ambitious for the communities we serve?

A stimulating evening Reception

Amjad Ali, Professional Development and Inclusion Lead at Chiltern Learning Trust; co-founder of the BAMEed Network

With great humour, Amjad reflected on his own experience of leadership to argue that the future of education depends on human-centred leadership, strong relationships, inclusive schools and deeper engagement with communities and societies.

He gave a series of essentials for great schools in the future:

- many aspects of schooling may **not change dramatically**, but leadership and culture must
- **inclusion and supporting disadvantaged learners** will be key
- help young people understand and engage with real-world social issues
- schools as **community anchors**, closely connected to the communities they serve
- **human-centred leadership** focused on empathy, relationships and wellbeing

- leaders must avoid creating homogeneous teams and actively support **diverse leadership**
- the future success of education depends on **relationships, values, and community engagement**, not just systems or technology

Guest speakers

1

Sam Freedman,
Senior Fellow,
Institute of Government

We cannot crystal ball gaze into 2039 but we can identify trends:

a) Money

The tight fiscal environment will remain over the next five years at least. Government spending is up 10% since 2010. Most has gone to health, with a small amount of growth to education. It is likely that SEND will absorb most of planned education spending increase, although White Paper SEND reforms will not impact for a number of years.

Trusts have to work out how to make the best of what they have: the overall fiscal environment shows there is unlikely to be a spike in funding.

b) Politics

There has been a long- term shift away from the two-party system since the 1950s. There is no longer a deep link between party and identity, replaced by a more consumerist approach. So it will become harder to create big policy plans and implement them over long time scales; this will be exacerbated by minority and coalition governments.



A high accountability system led by Trusts has been fairly stable over a number of Conservative and Labour governments. A government with Reform or Green elements is likely to have more extreme policies. So Trusts need to focus on what is under their control. There is a space for the sector to take on more direction of itself.

The hard right has been rising throughout Europe at the cost of the centre right over the last 10 years. Race will be more prominent in politics. Tensions in communities will grow and managing this will become an increasing part of the job of schools.

The changing sources of news are having impact. Young people are getting news through their social media feeds which often push people towards more extreme views. How can schools help young people to think through what they are receiving in decontextualised contexts?

c) Technology

There is massive increase in accuracy and capability of AI in just the last two years. Even those in AI companies are not feeling in control of what might happen next.

We still learn best through writing and memory: schools need to be cautious because AI systems will change so rapidly.

d) Volatility

Schools are oases of calm and tranquillity in communities undergoing rapid change and disruption. We need to remember the role schools played during Covid, with their work enhanced when they link up with other social institutions.

People do not remember what you said or did as a leader:

but how you made them feel

Maya Angelou



2

Baroness Sue Campbell, Chair, England Netball, and former Director of Women's Football, The FA, Former Chair of UK Sport

Be history or make history – the choice is yours: Sue outlined inspirational learning from her own success

How do you make the impossible possible?

- have to start with deep belief in possibility of change – it will not happen otherwise
- what is your North Star? Why did you come into education?
- you are the leader of your organisation: do what you need to do, not wait for permission from others
- start with ambition, not with what the White Paper or anything else is telling you
- no excuses, no compromises. Do not listen to naysayers. Integrity is doing what is right not what is expedient

Build a team

- drive a collective culture that challenges the status quo for the right reasons. Demand to know why not? Why can we not change?
- create one team: grow the capacity of every colleague to be even better, no matter how good they already are
- develop trust: your own communication has to be honest and they have to trust that you are giving difficult feedback for the right reasons



3

Ernest Jenavs,
co-founder and CEO, Edurio

Insights into key themes from the White Paper based on the data:

a) Pupil/parent engagement:

- well-being dips from year 7 to 13
- how interesting pupils find lessons drops through Primary, with a marked drop in year 7; declines to year 11 and then rises again in 6th form
- gap between parent satisfaction in primary and secondary but closing
- just over half of parents do not understand the role of the Trust
- active listening: only one third of each of staff, parents and pupils feel that their feedback has impact

b) Workforce sustainability

- top reason for wanting to leave is feeling undervalued: leaders can do something about this. Overwhelming workload is a close second



We are grateful to Ernest Jenavs and Edurio for their generous support of this conference.

edurio

4

Panel discussion: how we maximise the power of place-based partnerships

James Townsend,

Executive Director, Reach Foundation;

Claire Gething, Director of Community, Windsor Academy Trust;

Julie Houlder, Chair, Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust;

Louisa Mitchell, CEO, All Child

a) Place

Define place as the neighbourhood where I can push a buggy in 15 minutes. There is too much focus on individual schools and Trusts rather than on the neighbourhood. Relationships with local schools are the most important partnerships: Who serves the same children as us? How can you lead your schools to put as much energy into those partnerships as they do with other schools in their Trust?

b) Prevention

Only 6% of UK health expenditure goes to prevention. 1million 16–24 year olds are NEET.

There are consistent priorities across health and education: tackling inequalities; early intervention; workforce development.

c) Partnerships

Families in crisis find it difficult to navigate school, community and health opportunities. All Child runs projects to bring these together. Place-based partnerships can shift the emphasis to prevention. This shift at scale can only be done with significant funding and capacity; partnering with private companies can help achieve this.

The early stages of partnership are vital: spend first months on deep listening and building shared vision; hold each other accountable for agreed outcomes. It is a job in itself not something you can layer on top of another job.

d) REACH's Cradle to Career programme

Start with relationships and understanding of the various nurseries and schools in a community. What is the child's journey through these institutions? Which people do you know and not know along this journey? Are you spending your budget on what gives the biggest leverage to change the trajectory of a child born in poverty?

5

Darren Coxon,
AI education
specialist



A fork in the road: we can use AI to digitise what we do now more efficiently or to re-imagine teaching and learning

a) What is the teacher's irreplaceable value?

We need to re-think the role of a teacher, and how we develop critical AI literacy

Only humans can:

- read a room and adapt in the moment
- build relationships and trust
- inspire curiosity and ambition
- navigate the messy emotional reality of learning
- make ethical judgements about a child

People need people and young people need them even more

Teacher as learning architect:

- experience designer
- thinking coach
- assessor of process
- AI orchestrator

b) The widening digital divide:

- 77% 13–18 year olds are using AI
- 69% of UK schools have no AI policy
 - fewer than 5% of ITT programmes cover AI literacy
- teacher gap: most teachers have never been trained in AI
- parent gap: parents cannot supervise what they do not understand
- equity gap: students with AI tools at home have an advantage over those who do not

c) Actions for Trusts now:

- audit AI use in your schools. What is being used? does it meet 2026 standards?
- line up AI champions
- put AI policies in place
- educate staff, students, parents on AI literacy



EXPERT GROUP (1)

Education

**Chairs: Suzannah Wharf (Education South West);
Sally Apps (Cabot Learning Federation)**

The Education Expert Group has met regularly throughout 2025–26, bringing together Directors of Education and senior leaders from across QSG Trusts. Across the year, the group has provided a thoughtful forum for professional dialogue, combining expert external insight with practical experience from within our Trusts.

Our discussions have remained firmly focused on the realities of leading education across complex organisations. While engaging with national policy, research and inspection developments, we have consistently sought to translate these into practical approaches that improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people.

Key themes from the year

1

Pupil engagement as a driver of outcomes

One of the most significant areas of focus has been pupil engagement. Drawing on research from The Engagement Platform and Professor John Jerrim, we explored the growing evidence that engagement is not simply an outcome of successful schooling, but a leading indicator of attendance, progress and wider pupil experience.

The research highlighted concerning trends, particularly the decline in engagement during the transition from primary to secondary education and the post-pandemic reduction in pupils' sense of belonging and emotional connection to school.

Key takeaway

Trusts should consider how engagement can be measured and monitored alongside more established performance indicators, using it as an early signal for intervention and improvement.

2

Evidence-informed school improvement

Through contributions from Harry Fletcher-Wood and others, the group examined the factors underpinning England's educational improvement over recent decades. Discussion centred on the interaction between curriculum, teaching, professional development, accountability and system leadership.

A recurring theme was the importance of coherence. Sustained improvement is rarely the result of a single initiative; it emerges when aligned approaches are implemented consistently over time.

Key takeaway

Improvement is more likely to come from disciplined implementation and alignment than from continual structural or strategic change.

3

Inspection, accountability and inclusion

The group spent considerable time exploring inspection and accountability, particularly in highly disadvantaged contexts. Members reflected on how schools demonstrate impact when starting points are low and progress is necessarily complex.

These conversations raised important questions about how inclusion is recognised, how performance data is interpreted and whether current measures adequately capture the work schools undertake to improve life chances for vulnerable pupils.

Key takeaway

Strong accountability requires both rigour and context. Trust leaders must be able to articulate impact through a rounded understanding of progress, inclusion and pupil outcomes.

Expert witnesses:

Matthew Stevenson, Deputy Director, Schools' Strategic Delivery, DfE

Jess Easton and Dr John Jerrim,

The Engagement Platform (TEP), ImpactEd

Lee Owston, Ofsted

Harry Fletcher-Wood, teacher and researcher

4

Making sense of policy change

The group continued to provide a space for collective sense-making around policy developments, including curriculum reform, SEND and wider system change. Input from Matthew Stevenson and professional dialogue between members supported Trusts in interpreting national developments and considering local implications.

Key takeaway

Effective responses to policy change are strengthened when Trusts collaborate, share interpretation and maintain focus on their core educational priorities.

5

A maturing understanding of leadership

Alongside discussions about school improvement, the group reflected on the role of the Director of Education itself. A growing theme throughout the year has been the importance of leadership judgement: knowing when to act, when to hold, and how to create the conditions in which others can succeed.

Members explored the challenge of leading in increasingly demanding contexts, recognising that clarity, decisiveness and pace must sit alongside care, integrity and an unwavering commitment to values. Increasingly, leadership is revealed not in moments of stability, but in moments of pressure.

Looking ahead

The group will continue to support Trusts in responding to a changing policy landscape while deepening work on engagement, inclusion and the intelligent use of data. Above all, there remains a strong commitment to collaboration: learning from one another, refining practice and sustaining a shared sense of purpose across the QSG network.

EXPERT GROUP (2)

EdTech

**Chairs: Ash Mudaliar (Creative Education Trust);
Sarah Hand (Inspiring Futures through Learning)**



The QSG EdTech Group brings together a unique mix of technology and education leaders, enabling members to explore the rapidly evolving EdTech, AI and digital strategy landscape from multiple lenses. This year, the group convened six times with strong attendance. We held in-person meetings at Adobe HQ and Microsoft's London offices and successfully trialled a QSG EdTech "Lunch and Learn" during Bett 2026.

Guest speaker insights and expert contributions

James Garnett, EdTech Consultant,
former Director of IT at United Learning

James opened the year with a session on cyber security trends and threats, including practical steps for MAT leaders, common gaps, recent attacks, lessons learned, DfE support and sustainable cyber resilience.

Jonny Wathen, TransforMATive, CEO and Founder

Jonny challenged the group to think about data strategy beyond dashboards, focusing on data maturity, digital leadership and the ecosystems needed to avoid siloed data and support better decisions.

Jen Halmshaw, DfE, Head of EdTech
Evidence and Adoption

Jen delivered a timely session on the DfE's strategic EdTech goals linked to the White Paper, giving members insight into future priorities and opportunities for QSG to contribute to national initiatives, including the AI Tutoring Tools programme.

Ed Fairfield, Elementary Technology,
Co-CEO and Vice Chair of NAACE

Ed explored the NAACE EdTech Review Framework and how it can support Trusts to review digital provision, strengthen strategy and improve technology and procurement decisions.

The group also benefited from member-led sessions, including **Richard Canning** on Ormiston Academies Trust's approach to cyber governance, and **Mike Gardner** on Maritime Academy Trust's use of EdTech and AI to support oracy.

Key achievements and outcomes

1

QSG / DfE AI Tutoring Tools workshop

Following strong engagement with Jen Halmshaw's DfE presentation, the group strengthened its collaboration with the DfE through a dedicated AI Tutoring Tools workshop. Trust leaders provided feedback on rollout, safety, effectiveness, pupil engagement and pedagogical alignment, helping ensure the national programme reflects school and Trust implementation realities.

2

AI agents: development and professional learning

A number of QSG members have advanced their use of AI through bespoke agents to solve practical problems, save time and enhance services. One example is Creative Education Trust's AdaptEd agent, designed to support teachers with adaptive teaching strategies as more learners present with complex needs.

3

QSG EdTech focus areas and working groups

Following Tablet Academy's presentation at the QSG Bett Lunch and Learn, the group accessed Microsoft funded Copilot AI agent training. This helped colleagues develop skills to create their own agents, while also opening up opportunities to share approaches and existing agents across the group.

Across the year, the group focused on four priority areas: AI, Cyber Security, Data Strategy and Pedagogy-led Technology (PedTech). Members split into working groups to enable deeper discussion, informed by guest speakers, member expertise and the practical experience of Trusts at different stages of development. This culminated in end-of-year presentations sharing recommendations and good practice, providing valuable insight and practical support for all members.

QSG EdTech Working Group recommendations and good practice

1. Artificial Intelligence

The AI working group focused on safe, ethical and purposeful AI adoption to reduce workload, improve inclusion, support teaching and learning, and strengthen efficiency.

Recommendations:

- Establish a Trust-wide AI position so tools are selected intentionally, with clear policy, acceptable use guidance, DPIAs, supplier checks and assurance processes
- Prioritise use cases linked to workload, inclusion, operations and quality of education
- Build staff confidence and capability through AI champions, CPD, coaching and practical examples
- Protect assessment integrity through clear guidance
- Keep human judgement and ethical oversight central

2. Cyber Security

The Cyber Security working group focused on sustainable, Board-assured cyber resilience across Trusts, including the need to meet the DfE Cyber Security Standard.

Recommendations:

- Establish cyber governance and assurance, executive ownership, board reporting and a cyber risk register
- Map readiness against key national standards, including the DfE Cyber Security Standards and Cyber Essentials
- Strengthen MFA, patching, backups, access management and vulnerability scanning
- Take a proactive approach by rehearsing cyber response through tabletop exercises and building secure behaviours across the organisation
- Include overlooked systems such as CCTV, Building Management Systems, door access and cashless catering

3. Data Strategy

The Data Strategy working group focused on moving from siloed reporting to better decision-making, with links to AI readiness, school improvement, safeguarding, SEND, attendance and finance.

Recommendations:

- Start with the “why” by defining the decisions and outcomes which data should support
- Map systems, data flows, manual processes, siloes and duplication
- Define single sources of truth for key data areas
- Build governance around ownership, permissions, GDPR, DPIAs and escalation routes
- Invest in central capacity to turn data into insight



4. PedTech

The PedTech working group focused on pedagogy-led technology use across five areas: inclusion and accessibility, assessment, modelling, oracy and dialogue, and task design.

Recommendations:

- Define the educational problem before choosing technology
- Create PedTech principles and guiding questions that help leaders judge purpose, evidence, compliance, accessibility and impact
- Standardise core classroom technology expectations
- Invest in CPD using modelling, coaching and classroom examples
- Evaluate impact through pupil voice, teacher reflection, workload, accessibility and outcomes
- Simplify the EdTech ecosystem by removing tools that add workload or lack clear purpose

EXPERT GROUP (3)

Estates

Chair: Jon Ward (Creative Education Trust)

The strength of the Estates group lies not only in the quality and experience of its members, but also in the open and collaborative way we support one another, develop colleagues, test ideas and share practical solutions.

Expert contributors included:

Natalie Wargent, Joanne Burton and
Graham Shaw, VMW legal team
Lindsay Harris, Deputy Director Estates, DfE

Strategic context: responding to the DfE's Education Estates Strategy, February 2026

The publication of the Department for Education's "Education Estates Strategy: a decade of national renewal" has provided an important framework for the group's work this year. The strategy sets out a ten-year direction for improving the education estate in England, with a clear shift towards

proactive estate management, long-term strategic maintenance, renewal, risk management and resilience. It also reinforces the importance of ensuring that education buildings are safe, suitable, sustainable and sufficiently-sized to support opportunity for all learners from Early Years to post-16.

For the QSG Estates Expert Group, the strategy has created both a shared language and a practical point of focus. Across the year, members have used the strategy to explore how Trusts can strengthen governance, improve condition data, build estates' capability, plan capital investment more strategically, support sustainability and prepare for new DfE expectations such as Manage Your Education Estate and the new autumn 2026 self-assessment return against the School Estate Management Standards.



Key achievements and outcomes 2025–2026

1

Education Estates Strategy

- using our structured forum, estates leaders across QSG Trusts were able to interpret the Education Estates Strategy and translate national policy into practical Trust-level action
- we developed and shared a constructive sector response to the DfE, including six key system-level requests focused on implementation, funding, skills, data, governance and practical support
- strengthened dialogue with the DfE regarding the developing strategy, the new Autumn Return, future condition survey arrangements, Manage Your Education Estate inputs and data submissions, and the development of critically important estate management capability

2

Condition surveys

We identified the need for a QSG working group on future condition surveys, with a focus on reducing duplication, improving data quality and ensuring local Trust surveys can support both internal planning and national insight.

3

Workforce capability

The capacity and professional competence of the workforce are key risks for implementation of the strategy, particularly for smaller Trusts with limited estates capacity.

4

Sharing emerging practice

This covers estate governance, board accountability, statutory compliance, capital planning, sustainability, retrofit, renewal and the use of under-occupied space.

5

Future areas for collaboration

We will include Autumn Return feedback, Trust inspection framework implications, policies, skills offerings and links to EdTech, safeguarding and finance groups.



Good practice guide

The group's discussions have generated several practical good practice themes that will be developed into further case studies or guidance. Our aim is to share the excellent work taking place across QSG Estates teams with the wider sector. This includes Trust approaches and practical recommendations that other organisations can adopt, with particular emphasis on supporting those that do not have the capacity needed and where skills can grow.

Good practice example: preparing for the Education Estates Strategy

- use the strategy's four principles – safety, suitability, sufficiency and sustainability – as a simple framework to support board reporting
- review existing estate strategies and asset management plans against the School Estate Management Standards
- ensure trustees and senior leaders understand the estate as a strategic risk, not just an operational or maintenance issue
- use the autumn self-assessment return as an opportunity for honest baseline assessment rather than a compliance exercise
- identify gaps in data, skills, governance and capacity early so improvement plans can be phased realistically

Good practice example: condition data and capital planning

- move from reactive repairs towards planned, risk-based and lifecycle-informed investment decisions
- maintain up-to-date local condition data that can support trust prioritisation, funding decisions and future DfE reporting
- separate survey, project management and delivery costs clearly so capital expenditure is transparent and easy to explain
- use common data definitions where possible to support comparison across schools, Trusts and national programmes



- consider how future surveys can capture issues such as structural risk, drainage, perimeter security, sustainability and energy performance

Good practice example: building sector capability

- map the skills and competencies required for effective estate management across central teams and school-based staff
- recognise that smaller Trusts and schools may need practical peer support, buddying arrangements or shared resources
- capture examples of successful Trust support models that help others improve statutory compliance, contractor management and strategic planning
- develop guidance that is accessible to non-specialists, including trustees, governors, finance leaders and school leaders
- use QSG meetings to test emerging DfE proposals and provide rapid, practitioner-informed feedback

EXPERT GROUP (4)

HR

Chair: Angela Bull (Unity Schools Partnership)

Workforce strategy, system collaboration and leadership capacity

During 2025–2026, the HR Expert Group has continued to provide a national forum for Trust HR leaders to collaborate on shared workforce challenges and develop practical, evidence-informed solutions. Building on the previous year's focus on recruitment and retention, the group has broadened its work to include SEND workforce models, workforce data benchmarking, union relations, temporary workforce supply, and digital transformation through AI.

The group met regularly throughout the year, combining virtual sessions with an in-person meeting in May, ensuring a balance between operational problem-solving and strategic leadership development.

"Waiting is not a safe strategy... proactive investment now in culture, capability and clarity is far more effective than reactive defence later."

QSG HR Expert Group and Bates Wells

Expert witnesses and sector collaboration

1

Mark Pinches Head of Coaching, Westerfield Health

Mark led a session on leadership resilience, emphasising the importance of wellbeing and professional networks in sustaining effective leadership.

2

Nick Heard-Jones
COO, Damar Training

An exploration of how leaders can challenge established approaches and drive organisational change.

The group engaged further with Damar on apprenticeship pathways to support workforce development and long-term talent pipelines.

2

Bates Wells

A detailed employment law session, covering the implications of the Employment Rights Act 2025 and wider legislative reform.

This highlighted:

- the increasing complexity and pace of change in employment law
- the need for stronger documentation, consistency and proportionality in decision-making
- growing expectations around fairness, safeguarding alignment and leadership judgement

Building on this session, the HR Expert Group worked collaboratively with Bates Wells to write a QSG HR Expert Group Blog "Getting Ahead of the Curve", which set out practical steps for Trusts to strengthen employment practice and reduce organisational risk.

This reflects the group's ability not only to share insight, but to translate learning into practical guidance for the wider sector.

Key areas of focus and impact

1. SEND workforce and Teaching Assistant roles

A focus this year has been the Teaching Assistant (TA) workforce and SEND provision, recognising:

- increasing complexity of need in mainstream settings
- challenges in recruitment and retention

The group has progressed:

- collaborative sharing of TA roles, structures and pay approaches
- sharing of SEND hub staffing models and specialist provision
- early system-level thinking on workforce reform

2. Union engagement and industrial relations

The group has supported each other collaboratively in a changing industrial relations landscape, including:

- increased union activity and escalation
- variation in local and national engagement approaches
- more complex grievance and dispute scenarios

The focus has been on:

- strengthening proactive communication strategies
- sharing effective approaches to union engagement and consultation
- supporting consistent, confident leadership across Trusts

3. Digital transformation and AI in HR

A key emerging theme this year has been the growing use of AI and digital tools in HR, including:

- recruitment and onboarding
- policy drafting and communications
- workforce data analysis

The group has explored:

- opportunities to improve efficiency and reduce workload
- risks relating to data protection, bias and governance
- the need for clear Trust-wide AI strategies and guidance

Several Trusts are beginning to pilot AI-enabled tools and agents, particularly in high-volume HR processes.

4. Leadership development and workforce culture

The May 2026 in-person meeting provided an opportunity to focus on leadership, resilience and culture, including:

- leadership wellbeing and sustainable practice
- building resilience through networks and collaboration
- developing cultures that support innovation and challenge

This reinforced the role of HR leaders as system leaders shaping workforce strategy and organisational culture.

Conclusion

Across 2025–2026, the HR Expert Group has:

- strengthened collaboration across Trust HR leaders
- delivered practical solutions to shared workforce challenges
- deepened understanding of emerging legal and policy risks
- begun to shape more digitally enabled HR models

Through a combination of expert input, peer collaboration and sector-facing outputs, the group continues to support Trusts in building sustainable, high-performing organisations where staff feel valued and supported to thrive.

EXPERT GROUP (5)

Finance

**Chairs: Sarah Garner (Unity Schools Partnership);
Bobby Thandi (L.E.A.D. Academy Trust)**

The QSG Finance Expert Group has met four times this year, including a full-day session in March. The group brings together most Chief Finance Officers from QSG trusts. Although many members hold wider leadership responsibilities and use different titles, finance remains a central part of their roles.

The group meets to discuss:

- QSG priorities
- current issues
- legislative changes
- opportunities to engage with key sector partners
- networking and collaboration

In 2025–26, the group focused on the following priorities:

1. Budget setting and financial planning

- budget-setting throughout the year, with strong attention to assumptions, KPIs and three-year planning
- widespread use of Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP), especially in secondary schools, with growing interest in effective primary models
- continuing financial pressure from pay awards, falling pupil numbers and rising SEND costs
- the balance between investing in pupils and holding reserves to satisfy DfE and audit expectations

Financial benchmarking and value for money

- detailed benchmarking of central finance functions, including cost per pupil, staffing levels and activity volumes
- process-level costing to identify inefficiencies and guide system and structural changes
- how to assess the quality and impact of central services, not just their cost

2. Pupil numbers and demographic change

- national and regional forecasts showing falling pupil numbers, with primary schools most affected
- the effect on school and Trust viability, budget sustainability and place planning
- the need for difficult strategic decisions, including mergers, repurposing or the closure of very small schools

3. SEND funding and provision

- rising SEND demand alongside funding and inspection pressures
- sharing SEND delivery models, including central specialists, SEND hubs and internal alternative provision
- a strong interest in learning from Trusts with established, scalable SEND approaches

4. LGPS, pensions and workforce costs

- significant variation in LGPS rates, and examples of collective action to challenge pension fund assumptions
- governance concerns about LGPS decision-making and Trust representation
- continuing uncertainty over Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) eligibility for senior and central roles

5. Cyber security and risk management

- case studies of cyber attacks highlighting operational and financial risk
- the importance of staff cyber training, insurance requirements and rapid incident response

6. Sector policy and future landscape

- the national funding outlook, SEND reform and inspection implications
- future Trust structures, including scale, shared services and the use of AI in education and central services



EXPERT GROUP (6)

Safeguarding

Chair: James Clarke (Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust)

The QSG Safeguarding Expert group met five times in its inaugural year with strong representation on each occasion. The group includes strategic leaders of safeguarding in their Trusts, many of whom also undertake other leadership responsibilities including

attendance, Alternative Provision and behaviour. This has enabled rich discussion conducted in a spirit of collaboration and professional generosity, with an unwavering focus on sharing approaches that promote the welfare of children.

Areas of Focus in 2025–26

- 1 Understanding the new inspection framework:** investigating Ofsted inspection experiences, highlighting the challenges and successes we have encountered in showcasing excellent cultures of safeguarding within our schools.
- 2 The safeguarding implications of Artificial Intelligence:** members discussed some of the emerging safeguarding risks with which AI has confronted them, as well as some of the strategic decisions taken to mitigate these.
- 3 Effective safeguarding of pupils accessing Alternative Provision:** members outlined their approaches to safeguarding quality assurance of alternative providers, particularly those that are unregistered, and their ongoing monitoring of these provisions.
- 4 Safeguarding quality assurance and audit:** discussing different methods used to provide Trust Boards with the required assurances of the safeguarding arrangements within schools, including the use of both internal audit/QA frameworks and external providers.
- 5 Conceptualising vulnerability:** members shared the approaches within their Trust to the identifying vulnerabilities of individuals and cohorts of pupils. They highlighted a range of practices that enable all pupils to be provided with the right support at the right time to help them thrive.
- 6 Safeguarding training:** the strategies used to ensure that staff in Trusts are provided with ongoing high quality safeguarding training, in terms of both the wider staff body and those colleagues with designated safeguarding responsibilities.
- 7 Supervision:** the different models of supervision that take place in Trusts in order to provide those staff managing some of the most challenging and complex safeguarding issues with the space to reflect on their own practice and receive any emotional support they may need.

EXPERT GROUP (7)

Inclusion, SEND and AP

Chair: Jayne Keller (Education South West)

This Expert Group plays a central role in advancing QSG's commitment to inclusive education, bringing together leaders from across Trusts to share practice, challenge thinking and respond to a rapidly evolving national context.

Key themes of 2025–2026

1

The shifting national SEND landscape, including emerging reforms, the role of Regional

Improvement and Innovation Alliances, and the importance of strengthening partnerships with local authorities and wider services.

2

Trust-wide Alternative Provision and Inclusion models, setting out a continuum of provision that enables

schools to balance universal entitlement, targeted intervention and specialist pathways.

3

Inclusion as a core strategic priority, embedded within whole-school and whole-Trust

improvement rather than operating as a separate strand. Leaders have increasingly described inclusion as “everyone’s responsibility”, with strong emphasis on shared language, consistent expectations and visible leadership at all levels.

4

Coherent models of provision, with Trusts moving towards integrated approaches that bring together SEND

and Alternative Provision, ensuring that pupils experience continuity and connection rather than fragmentation. This includes clearer entry and exit processes, stronger assessment and milestone tracking, and a consistent focus on reintegration and long-term outcomes.



5

The Ofsted Framework: shared experiences have highlighted the increasing prominence of inclusion, with a particular emphasis on the lived experience of pupils, the articulation of need, and the ability of leaders to evidence impact through case studies and day-to-day practice. This has supported greater confidence and clarity across Trusts in preparing for and responding to inspection.

6

System and partnership working: discussions have reflected growing recognition that effective inclusion depends on collaboration across education, health and social care. Leaders have explored how to engage more effectively with local systems, navigate thresholds and capacity constraints, and contribute to place-based solutions.

Practical insights which are now informing practice in Trusts:

- designing provision as a continuum, with clear pathways between universal, targeted and specialist support
- embedding inclusion within curriculum, teaching, leadership and quality assurance processes
- using technology to increase independence, accessibility and engagement for all learners
- developing behaviour frameworks that distinguish between need and choice, enabling more appropriate responses for pupils
- strengthening leadership capacity and professional development to ensure sustained, high-quality inclusive practice
- focusing on the lived experience of the child through case sampling, observation and pupil voice

Case study 1

Advantage – the use of technology in our Trust pedagogy (Truro and Penwith Academy Trust)

The Trust is developing the use of technology to enable “invisible inclusion”, allowing pupils to access learning independently and in ways that reduce stigma while increasing participation.

Advantage is our use of technology to enhance teaching and learning across our Trust in upper key stage 2 and in our secondary schools. It provides a one-to-one device environment (iPads) for students.

The focus is on four areas: direct instruction, independent practice, feedback, and assessment, supported by specific apps (Showbie, Operative, Explain Everything).

Seven expectations:

1. **Direct Instruction:** teachers use iPads and Apple TV to teach lessons, record explanations using Explain Everything, and share these with students for repeated access, supporting absent students and personalised learning.
2. **Independent Practice and Inclusion:** the project enabled students, especially those with SEND, to revisit instructions independently, fostering greater independence and reducing reliance on adult support.
3. **Workflow and feedback:** Showbie is used for distributing resources, collecting student work (including scanned bookwork, audio, and video), and providing feedback. This approach allows students to demonstrate understanding in multiple formats, reducing barriers for those who struggle with traditional pen-and-paper tasks.





4. **Creativity and parental engagement:** students can create podcasts, videos, and other digital projects. Parents can access their child's work and teacher explanations at home, supporting learning.
5. **Assessment:** digital tools provide instant feedback and support formative assessment.
6. **Accessibility:** iPads' built-in accessibility features (colour overlays, text-to-speech, speech-to-text, translation, etc.) are leveraged for all students, normalizing their use and removing stigma.
7. **Home use:** devices are sent home with controls on usage times and content, and students have access to digital library resources, including EAL materials.

Case study 2

Behaviour and conduct (Sea View Trust)

Sea View has a clear framework that distinguishes between need-driven behaviour and intentional conduct, supporting schools to reduce suspensions and exclusions through greater clarity and consistency.

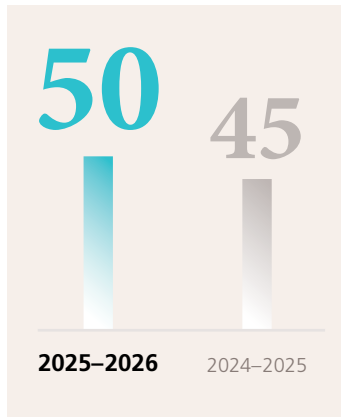
Applebee Wood Specialist Community School has a challenging context and joined the Trust in need of improvement. Louise Parrish, Deputy CEO, outlined the actions taken to improve behaviour in the school:

- due diligence identified lack of consistency, unclear policies, insufficient data, and staff needing professional development
- the conduct policy was re-written following stakeholder consultation. A deliberate distinction was made between "behaviour" (unconscious actions) and "conduct" (intentional choices)
- clear roles and responsibilities were introduced with induction and training, and a phased approach to embedding routines, secure environments, rewards, consequences, and data collection
- staff development was supported through the use of deliberate practice, instructional coaching, and video exemplars from other Trust schools
- conduct support plans for pupils with complex needs were co-produced, involving staff, parents, and external professionals

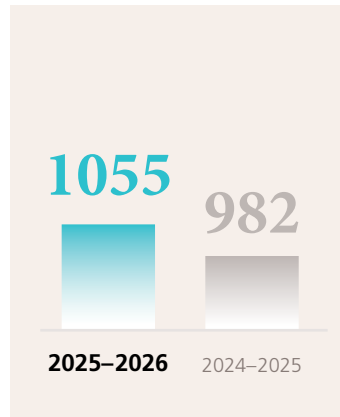
QSG IN NUMBERS

In 2025–2026 the numerical profile of QSG was as follows:

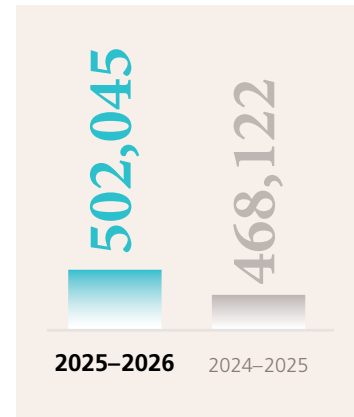
Trusts



Schools

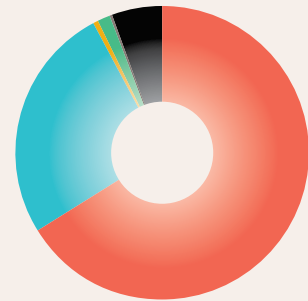


Pupils enrolled



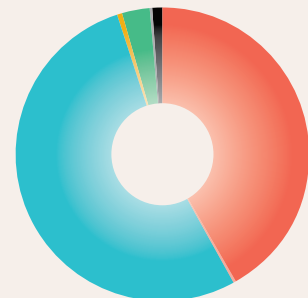
Schools

	2025–2026	2024–2025
Primary	698	653
Middle (deemed primary)	1	
Secondary	276	266
Middle (deemed secondary)	6	6
All-through	15	14
16 plus	2	2
Other	57	41



Pupils

	2025–2026	2024–2025
Primary	210,182	189,746
Middle (deemed primary)	524	
Secondary	266,452	255,207
Middle (deemed secondary)	3,210	3,237
All-through	15,245	15,118
16 plus	1,258	1,219
Other	5,173	3,595



Trust Size: Spread

Smallest by Pupils (Olive Academies Trust)

Olive Academies has also worked with 41 LAs, around 500 schools and has supported over 100,000 pupils through its commissioned inclusion work over the last year.



363 pupils

across **6** schools in **5** LAs

Smallest by Schools (Big Education Trust)



1,711 pupils

across **3** schools in **3** LAs

Largest by Pupils (Ormiston Academy Trust)



34,763 pupils

across **45** schools in **18** LAs

Largest by Schools (Reach2 Academy Trust)



22,522 pupils

across **65** schools in **20** LAs

Trust Size: Pupils

1,000 – 5,000 pupils

10 Trusts

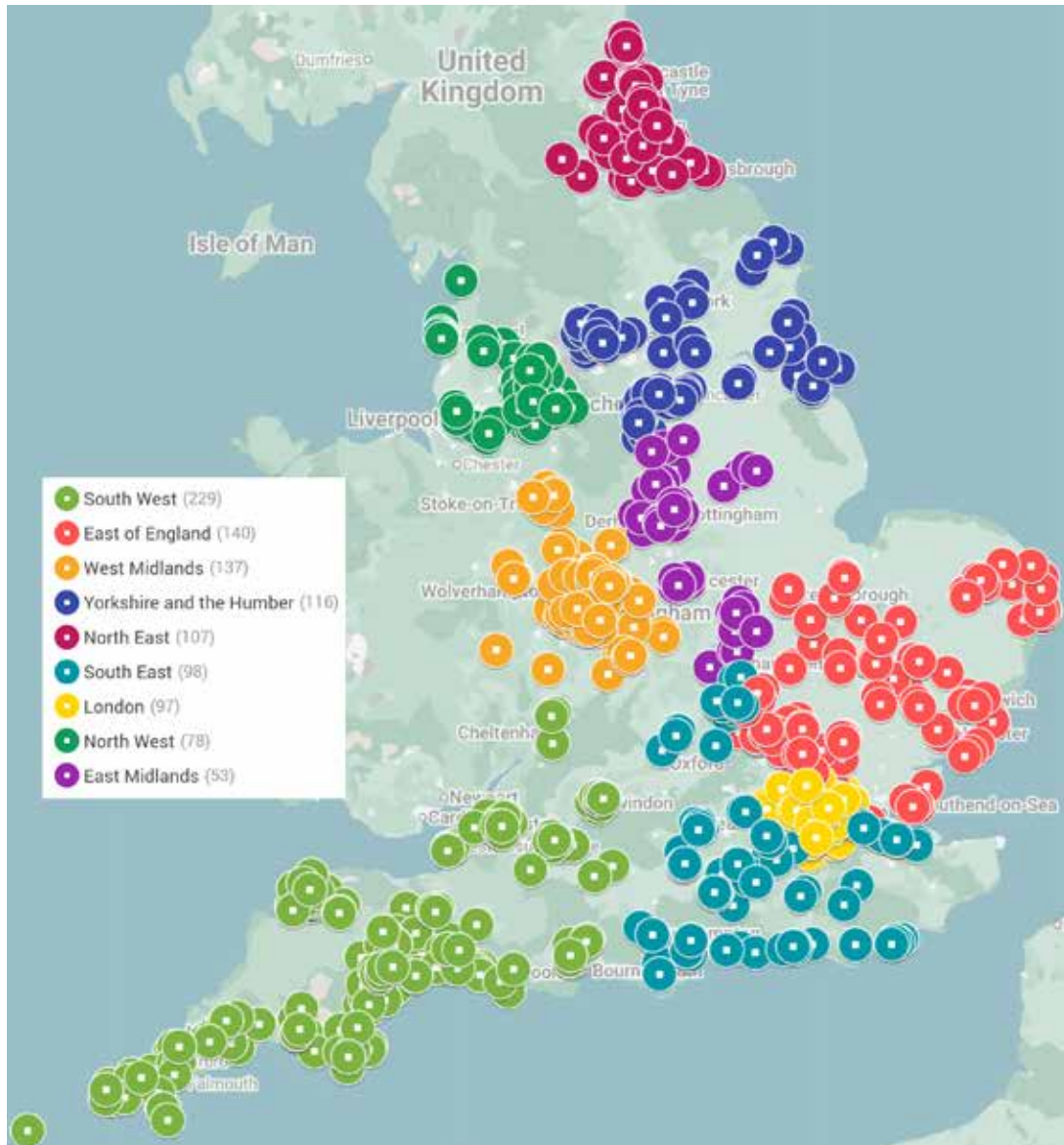
5,000 – 12,000 pupils

25 Trusts

12,000 – 40,000 pupils

15 Trusts

GEOGRAPHY OF QSG SCHOOLS



GETTING AHEAD OF THE CURVE: PROACTIVE EMPLOYMENT AND SAFEGUARDING MEASURES FOR SCHOOLS AND TRUSTS

Authored by the QSG HR Expert Group and Bates Wells

The pace of change in employment law over the next two years is unprecedented. With the Employment Rights Act 2025 and reforms due to follow, Trusts are operating in a landscape where risk is increasing faster than certainty.

One message is already clear: waiting is not a safe strategy. Instead, Trusts must focus now on strengthening systems, culture and practice so they are ready – legally, operationally and reputationally.

Drawing on recent legal updates, case law and sector experience, this blog highlights practical, proactive steps Trusts can take now.

1 Strengthen early intervention and record keeping

Across grievance, safeguarding, performance and whistleblowing cases, one consistent theme is emerging: delay and informality create risk.

Recent tribunal decisions in the education sector demonstrate that failures are often not about malicious intent, rather:

- concerns being minimised or reframed
- informal conversations replacing formal action
- poor records making it impossible to evidence decision making

In *Pearson v Greenwood Academies Trust* (Employment Tribunal, 2025), the Tribunal was clear that safeguarding failures were systemic and could not fairly be attributed to one individual, criticising the Trust for attempting to locate institutional failure in a single member of staff.

The significant compensation awarded underlines the importance of robust records, clear escalation routes and collective accountability.

What Trusts can do now:

- re emphasise the distinction between complaints, conduct, low level concerns and safeguarding issues
- ensure leaders understand that good intent does not negate safeguarding thresholds
- audit record keeping practices – assume documents may be disclosable
- encourage professional curiosity and escalation rather than reassurance and closure

This is as much a culture issue as a procedural one.

2 Revisit safeguarding and boundaries through an employment lens

Several recent cases underline the importance of clear behavioural expectations, particularly where there is not an explicit “no touch” or professional boundaries policy.

Schools are uniquely exposed because safeguarding decisions are often judged retrospectively, against evolving standards.

In *Hewston v Ofsted* (Court of Appeal, 2025), the court found a dismissal unfair where there was no clear policy or training prohibiting the conduct in question, despite the safeguarding sensitive context. The judgment is a reminder that where expectations are unclear, disciplinary decisions – even well intentioned ones – become legally vulnerable.

What Trusts can do now:

- refresh safer working practice guidance and staff training
- ensure expectations around physical contact, one to one working and professional boundaries are explicit
- train leaders to separate:
 - safeguarding thresholds
 - employment investigation standards
 - proportionality of outcomes
- Ensure staff understand why boundaries matter, not just what they are

Where expectations are unclear, decision making becomes exposed.

3

Prepare now for a more demanding fairness test

From January 2027, unfair dismissal rights will apply to all employees after six months, with the cap on compensation removed. This significantly raises the stakes for:

- probation management
- early capability concerns
- sickness related decision making

In *Higgs v Farmor's School* (Court of Appeal, 2025), the court made clear that dismissal driven by reputational concern – without objective justification and proportionality – will be unlawful. This has direct relevance for schools navigating difficult issues at the intersection of values, safeguarding and public scrutiny.

At the same time, statutory sick pay reforms and expanded family rights will place additional pressure on systems.

What Trusts can do now:

- ensure probation frameworks are robust, with meaningful mid point reviews
- clearly separate performance management and protected disclosures
- consistently handle sickness absences, supported by timely Occupational Health referrals
- make decisions grounded in evidence, not assumptions
- in practice, behave as though unfair dismissal protections could apply from day one

4

Take a more strategic approach to grievances and concerns

Grievances are becoming longer, more complex and increasingly framed as whistleblowing – often supported by AI generated submissions.

Left unaddressed, or handled defensively, concerns can quickly escalate into:

- regulatory scrutiny
- tribunal claims
- reputational damage

Recent cases show that tribunals are highly alert to whether concerns were genuinely investigated, proportionately handled, and kept separate from employment outcomes. Informal resolution without clarity or documentation is rarely defensible in hindsight.

What Trusts can do now:

- clarify who investigates what, and why
- ensure Terms of Reference are explicit and proportionate
- avoid conflating grievance handling with disciplinary outcomes

- be transparent and communicate well about process, even when outcomes are uncertain

Trusts should ask themselves: would our process stand up to external scrutiny two years from now?

5

Get ahead of the duty to prevent sexual harassment

From October 2026, employers will be required to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment, including harassment by third parties.

For schools, this intersects directly with safeguarding, pupil behaviour and parental conduct.

What Trusts can do now:

- review policies and training through a prevention lens, not just in terms of being responsive
- ensure reporting routes are trusted and accessible
- consider how third party interactions (e.g. with parents, visitors, contractors) are managed
- embed prevention into leadership practice, not just compliance documents

Prevention will be judged by what was reasonably foreseeable and addressed upfront, not just what happened after the event.

6

Invest in leadership capability, not just policy

Ultimately, policies do not make decisions – people do.

Many of the most significant risks arise where leaders:

- are unclear on thresholds
- avoid difficult conversations

- over rely on reassurance
- delay escalation out of concern for relationships

Cases such as *Lilly v Southend High School for Boys Academy Trust* (Employment Tribunal, 2026) highlight the importance of proportionality, reasonable adjustments and seeking appropriate advice – including Occupational Health – before moving to dismissal, even where safeguarding rules are breached.

What Trusts can do now:

- hold scenario based training for senior and system leaders
- create safe spaces for leaders to test judgement and decision making
- establish clear escalation routes that support challenge, not blame
- ensure strong alignment between HR, safeguarding and executive leadership

This is particularly important where experienced Headteachers are operating in wider system or associate roles.

Looking Ahead

The legal direction of travel is clear: greater worker protection, higher expectations of employers, and reduced tolerance for poor process.

For Trusts, the question is not simply what will change, but how prepared are we for scrutiny when it does?

Proactive investment now – in culture, capability and clarity – will be far more effective than reactive defence later.

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Dr Dan Nicholls



Windsor Academy Trust
Dawn Haywood

QSG

QUEEN STREET GROUP

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