



ANNUAL REPORT

2020 – 2021

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	01
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	02
1 THE QUEEN STREET GROUP: ORIGINS, AIMS AND VALUES	09
1.1 Origins	
1.2 Aims and values	
2 MEMBER TRUSTS AND THEIR SCHOOLS: FACTS & FIGURES FOR 2020–21	12
2.1 Overview	
2.2 Commentary	
2.3 The Queen Street Group and the national picture	
3 QUEEN STREET GROUP: ACTIVITIES IN 2020–21	16
3.1 Nine new Trusts join QSG as COVID–19 disruption continues	
3.2 Operations: Queen Street Group practice in Education, Finance and HR	
3.3 Strategy: Queen Street Group CEOs in discussion with national education leaders	
3.4 Developing the infrastructure of The Queen Street Group as a public benefit organisation	
4 REFLECTIONS ON 2020–21 AND LOOKING AHEAD	26
4.1 A second extraordinary year in school education	
4.2 QSG's strategic objectives for Education, Finance and HR	
4.3 The challenge of 2030	
5 CONCLUSIONS	30
APPENDIX 1	31
Multi-Academy Trusts and COVID–19: March 2020 to February 2021. A review of work by the Queen Street Group's schools and member Trusts (March 2021)	
APPENDIX 2	35
The Queen Street Group: Object, Purposes and Principles (December, 2020)	

FOREWORD

This third Annual Report of The Queen Street Group of multi-academy Trusts (MATs) sets out its work during 2020–21, the second year of the COVID–19 global pandemic. As in 2019–20, the year included a sustained period during which most pupils were required to remain at home during term time (January to March) and the abandonment of summer public examinations for students in Years 11 and 13.

Consequently, the continuous improvisation in QSG schools which we reported in 2019–20 continued, especially in supporting the children of families going hungry and those for whom 'lockdown' at home was particularly damaging to their education. In addition, teachers faced the unprecedented task of allocating summative achievement grades to teenagers who had followed courses of study during 2019–21 designed to be assessed through final examinations and compromised by school closures.

Yet, as last year, our report of Queen Street Group activity in 2020–21 is as much an account of continuity as of dislocation. Certainly, much effort went into mitigating as far as possible the educational disruption caused by the pandemic. Even so, QSG has deepened its effort to balance operational demands with sustained thinking as to how those who govern and manage MATs can continue to ensure high-quality learning in a challenging environment and a changing society.

Much of this focused on enabling staff in schools – not just teachers but all those who contribute in various roles – to work as effective and fulfilled professionals. At the same time, QSG continued to refine its understanding of the core expertise required of MATs in the key areas of Education, Finance and HR, and how to exercise such expertise with probity and effectiveness primarily in mind.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Queen Street Group: origins, aims and values

Following discussions begun in June 2015, a group of MAT CEOs decided to create a formal legal entity to facilitate the exchange of operational insights across their organisations, peer-to-peer. The Queen Street Group (QSG) was incorporated in November 2018 with 17 Trusts in membership and as a practical body designed to encourage organisational development, both collectively and within each Trust.

[Section 1.1]

This activity matured during 2020–21 as the insights derived from mutual exchange became increasingly important to members. These benefits were experienced at three levels:

- ~ within each Trust – as CEOs and senior staff sustained their detailed involvement in QSG work;
- ~ across the Trusts – as mutual priorities became major topics for discussion and communication with outside bodies; and
- ~ for QSG as an organisation – especially through continued development of its infrastructure.

QSG's formal object is 'To advance education for the public benefit'. As part of this, its constitution articulates particular collective values, based on common ethical standards in the provision of high-quality school education. [Section 1.2]

The Queen Street Group: facts and figures

- ~ *Pupils and schools.*¹ In October 2020 the 23 Trusts in membership of QSG were, between them, educating 278,000 pupils enrolled across 482 schools (an increase since 2018–19 of 76,700 pupils and 108 schools). The schools are located across 81 local authority areas and in all of the eight regions of England overseen by Regional Schools Commissioners; two thirds of the pupils are being educated in secondary schools. The Trusts are highly varied in origin, size and geography but share a commitment to improving the education of children living in disadvantaged circumstances whose schools have lost their way and require a fresh start. [Sections 2.1–2.2]

¹ The data in these three paragraphs relate to the 23 QSG Trusts which were in membership throughout 2020–21 (see p. 11). Data for the three further Trusts which joined QSG in May 2021 (also listed on p. 11) will be included in next year's Annual Report.

~ *Pupil characteristics.* Compared to the national average, pupils in schools managed by QSG member Trusts are considerably more likely to qualify as Pupil Premium students. In addition to family poverty, QSG schools serve communities with highly contrasting demographic profiles in terms of ethnicity and spoken language. More commonly than in England as a whole, QSG pupils are white British. However, many QSG schools serve pupil populations where there is a high incidence of first languages spoken other than English.

~ *School performance.* The member Trusts' common commitment to pupils in disadvantaged circumstances means there is a much higher proportion of sponsored academies across these schools than is found in MATs across England as a whole. As such, the inspection results of schools in QSG Trusts are much stronger than the overall national picture for schools with troubled histories. [Section 2.3]

Activity in 2020–21

Last year's Annual Report highlighted a dramatic increase in the pace of QSG activity, the content of its work-streams and the frequency of meetings due to COVID–19.

During 2020–21, the continuing pandemic served to reshape some aspects of the Group's activities, notably hybrid ways of working and greater use of digital technologies. Nevertheless, the member Trusts' core concerns – already well-established prior to COVID–19 – retained their salience across Education, Finance and HR operations, and in relation to the strategic priorities of their CEOs.

These core concerns were explored and refined during the year by an enlarged Queen Street Group. In September 2020 six new Trusts came into QSG membership, bringing with them 45,700 pupils in 83 schools characterised in general by two specific pupil demographics: schools where the pupil population is strongly white British, alongside those where ethnic minorities are strongly represented. [Section 3.1]

QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN 2020–21

Of high operational importance throughout the year was the provision of a consistent education to pupils when, in any given week, between one in seven and one in twelve were absent due to covid–19. This placed particular emphasis on formative assessment, especially for those in Year 6 leaving their primary schools, and in Years 11 and 13 once it was announced (in January) that no summer examinations would be sat in 2021.

The QSG Directors of Education thus spent much time discussing together how to ensure curriculum continuity of benefit to all pupils through the greater use of digital technologies, while also accommodating the imperative of ‘school improvement’ in many of the member Trusts’ sponsored academies during a time of uncertain examination results, heightened awareness of staff well-being and complex but partial evidence of how Covid-related disruption to learning might be affecting particular groups of students in unpredictable ways. [Section 3.2]

FINANCIAL PLANNING IN 2020–21

Towards the end of 2019–20 the QSG Directors of Finance were faced with a range of changes to their financial plans due to disruption caused by the pandemic (for example, the volume of out-of-hours school activities, catering costs and payments to groups such as examination invigilators).

With revised forecasts largely in place by the beginning of 2020–21 it was possible to give time during the school year to developing a set of strategic QSG papers in readiness for publication during 2021–22. These are intended to generate wider discussion about the optimal use of resources which become possible when schools are grouped in multi-academy Trusts. Papers at various stages of development by the end of the year had the following working titles: ‘The future of finances in a multi-academy Trust’, ‘Effective management of resources in MATs’, ‘Reserves: a QSG discussion paper’ and ‘Income generation in multi-academy Trusts’. [Section 3.2]

HR CONSIDERATIONS IN 2020–21

During 2019–20 the covid–19 crisis saw effective employee consultation and communications become a major priority for QSG Directors of HR. This continued during 2020–21 as formal meetings with trade union representatives, surveys of staff well-being and turnover, and various employee relations tasks all received heightened scrutiny.

However, this activity pointed beyond merely operational concerns and reinforced the strategic interest of the Directors of HR in working practices in schools, the extent to which these are currently optimal and whether they will be (or should be) influenced by the significant workplace change occurring among other professional groups. An initial QSG think piece on this topic was published in March 2021,² with a second expected in 2021–22 designed to draw other MATs into discussion of the future design of the school workplace. [Section 3.2]

THE CEO PERSPECTIVE: EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF TRUSTS

Along with their responsibility for oversight of the operational challenges confronting Education, Finance and HR in their Trusts, the QSG CEOs maintained their focus during 2020–21 on three areas of priority work identified the previous year: the continued generation of intelligence for ministers, their advisers and other national leaders; the provision for a wider audience of thought leadership on the evolving role of schools in a fast-changing society infused with digital technologies; and a continued focus on policy and ethical practice within MATs that undertake the task of improving education in schools in challenging circumstances.

Given their strategic importance, these areas of work were scheduled as a sequenced set of steps. In the area of intelligence, the continuing disruption to children’s schooling required an initial focus (September to December) on advice to the Department for Education as to how such disruption might be minimised. Following the renewed closure of schools to most pupils from January, the CEOs next undertook a wide-ranging evidence review as to the resilience of QSG Trusts during the first 12 months of the pandemic. They then issued a pair of statements on the purposes, principles and working practices of the Queen Street Group as these bear on school improvement, ethical leadership and moral purpose. [Section 3.3]

²‘Preparing for the Next Generation of Teaching: Defining the employee experience in the academy of the future’, see: <https://queensstreetgroup/Preparing-for-the-next-generation-of-teaching-defining-the-employee-experience-in-the-academy-of-the-future/>.

DEVELOPING THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE QUEEN STREET GROUP
AS A PUBLIC BENEFIT ORGANISATION

During 2020–21, the QSG CEOs also worked to make all of the Group's activities adhere to a single coherent strategy, while initiating some additional lines of enquiry. In pursuit of their aim for strategic coherence, the CEOs took several steps:

- ~ strengthening the presence of QSG in the two English regions where it has fewest schools;
- ~ enhanced protocols in the working methods of the Education, Finance and HR expert groups;
- ~ revised procedure for the development and publication of QSG articles, blogs and papers. *[Section 3.4]*

New lines of enquiry saw the QSG CEOs undertaking inter-Trust benchmarking of pay scales across a range of work-roles, establishing a systematic review of 'Diversity' (within the QSG membership and across the workforces of the member Trusts) and beginning work on major recommendations for the evolution of school education in England by 2030.

In addition, three further domains of expert work within multi-academy Trusts were identified for systematic discussion and development from 2021, namely: IT, Estates and Governance. *[Section 3.4]*

A second extraordinary year in school education

A principal purpose of The Queen Street Group is to increase the sophistication and effectiveness of its member Trusts through peer-to-peer encouragement, learning and support. Thus, it is no surprise that a second year of unparalleled disruption in schools underscored the importance of collegiality and shared expertise among those responsible for leading and managing Trusts.

As last year, it was notable how the common QSG priorities first identified in 2018 helped significantly in rising to the challenge of improvisation and innovation during pandemic conditions. This was clearly evident in the CEOs' work to ensure stability, resilience and ethical priorities in all aspects of MAT operations, something which they re-stated in December 2020 when tasking the QSG expert groups for Education, Finance and HR with strategic objectives. *[Section 4.1]*

QSG's strategic objectives for Education, Finance and HR – and the challenge of 2030

The objectives set for the QSG expert groups from 2021 are:

Education: to recast provision by MATs of teaching and learning in response to the experience of the pandemic, in support of those who most need to 'catch-up' and to make long-term improvements for the benefit of all pupils.

Finance: to maximise the resource available for teaching and learning in MATs, while running schools effectively and sustainably.

HR: to support Trusts in recruiting, developing and caring for motivated and effective staff.

These objectives are accompanied by a set of specific tasks designed to make their realisation both possible and (through explanation of how they have been pursued) replicable. *[Section 4.2]*

Also significant this year has been strong endorsement by QSG of an emerging national view that although the pandemic has brought many difficult challenges it has, in addition, enabled far-reaching discussion of the substantial innovation needed in school education during the remainder of this decade to keep pace with wider societal change. The QSG CEOs' project 'Education in 2030' – underpinned by the objectives they have set for Education, Finance and HR – is intended as the Group's contribution to this process of national reflection and review. *[Sections 4.1 and 4.3]*

Conclusions

The third year of QSG activity has seen the work-streams established in 2018–19 maturing further, even as the overall situation remained highly challenging due to disruption caused by COVID–19.

QSG grew as an organisation in two stages during 2020–21 (six new Trusts joined in September and a further three followed in June), but the heartland of its contribution to school education remained organised through strategic (CEO-level) work and operational activity led by expert groups (Education, Finance and HR).

By the time the school session 2020–21 came to a close it had come to be seen as something of a ‘bridging’ year. The continued challenge of the pandemic had deepened the problems of ‘learning loss’ already inflicted on pupils but, at the same time, important new opportunities were opening up – particularly where these have the potential to equip schools more effectively to meet the challenge of the late 2020s and early 2030s.

It is in this context that QSG’s member Trusts will continue their distinctive work of providing an effective and energising fresh start for schools with troubled histories, while educating all of the pupils in their care to a standard acknowledged nationally as exceptional. *[Section 5]*

1 THE QUEEN STREET GROUP: ORIGINS, AIMS AND VALUES

This opening section explains the rationale of The Queen Street Group (QSG), describes its aims and values, and provides information about the member Trusts and the QSG board.

1.1 Origins

A group of multi-academy Trust (MAT) chief executive officers (CEOs) began meeting informally in June 2015. This group became a voluntary alliance that met regularly during 2016–18 to exchange operational insights, peer-to-peer. During 2017–18, the CEOs decided to create a formal legal entity to encourage and extend these discussions, leading to the Queen Street Group being incorporated in November 2018 with 17 Trusts in membership.³ Six further Trusts joined QSG in September 2020, followed by three more in June 2021.

1.2 Aims and values

QSG is a very practical body designed to encourage organisational development, both collectively and within each Trust. It achieves this by:

- ~ exchanging insight
- ~ identifying the operational goals shared between Trusts and regulators
- ~ developing the expertise of specialist senior staff, especially in the areas of Education, Finance and Human Resources
- ~ undertaking data analysis
- ~ publishing briefings and blogs

As in 2019–20, the way in which these five activities developed and matured during the year occurred at three levels.

- (i) Within each Trust – detailed involvement in QSG work-streams has allowed the CEO and senior staff in each Trust to triangulate their practice and benchmark it in relation to Trusts of similar kinds.
- (ii) Across the member Trusts – priorities have been revised in respect of major topics for discussion or communication with the Department for Education, the National Schools Commissioner, the Regional Schools Commissioners, Ofsted, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), prominent politicians and other bodies involved in school-level education.

³ The origins of the Queen Street Group are described in more detail in the QSG Annual report, 2018–19, pp. 6–7, see: <https://queenstreet.group/wp-content/uploads/QSG-Annual-Report-2018-19.pdf>.

- (iii) For QSG as an organisation – there has been further development of the Group's infrastructure, with its formal object 'to advance education for the public benefit' providing a common rationale.

In respect of the first of these points, the Foreword to this report (p. 1) has already referred to QSG's work in 2020–21 to refine its understanding of the core disciplinary techniques required of MATs in the key areas of Education, Finance and HR, and this is described in more detail in §3.2, below.

Similarly, QSG's public benefit responsibilities touched on in point (iii) are described more fully in §2.3, where the pupil demographic across QSG member Trusts is described and the performance of member Trust schools (predominantly troubled schools where family poverty is high) is set out.

Perhaps particularly notable during 2020–21 were the topics discussed by QSG with national education bodies relating to point (ii), given the political importance of the Government's indication in April that it intends to oversee further expansion of the national Academies programme. Highly salient in this context was a statement agreed by the QSG CEOs in December on the Group's Purposes and Principles coupled, in March, with their analytical review of the resilience and effectiveness of member Trusts in the 12 months following the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 (see §3.3).

The Queen Street Group Board (2020–21)

► Simon Beamish	Leigh Academies Trust
► Dr Nicholas Capstick	The White Horse Federation
► Sir Andrew Carter	South Farnham Educational Trust
► Sir David Carter (Co-opted)	
► Marc Jordan (Chair)	Creative Education Trust
► Rowena Hackwood	Astrea Academy Trust
► Diana Owen	Lead Academy Trust
► Steve Taylor (Vice Chair)	Cabot Learning Federation
► Sir Nick Weller	Dixons Academies Trust

Company Secretary: Roger Pope

Queen Street Group: Member Trusts and their CEOs

September 2020 to May 2021

► Academies Enterprise Trust	Julian Drinkall
► Astrea Academy Trust	Rowena Hackwood
► Avanti Schools Trust	Nitesh Gor
► Big Education	Liz Robinson / Peter Hyman
► BMAT Education	Helena Mills
► The Brooke Weston Trust	Dr Andrew Campbell
► Cabot Learning Federation	Steve Taylor
► Community Academies Trust	Philip Hamilton
► Creative Education Trust	Marc Jordan
► Dixons Academies Trust	Sir Nick Weller
► Education South West	Matthew Shanks
► The First Federation Trust	Paul Walker
► Future Academies	Paul Smith
► Lead Academy Trust	Diana Owen
► Leigh Academies Trust	Simon Beamish
► Oasis Community Learning	John Murphy
► Ormiston Academies Trust	Nick Hudson
► South Farnham Educational Trust	Sir Andrew Carter
► Star Academies Trust	Sir Hamid Patel
► Summit Learning Trust	Catherine Anwar
► Unity Schools Partnership	Dr Tim Coulson
► Ventrus Limited	Gary Chown
► The White Horse Federation	Dr Nicholas Capstick

May to August 2021 – new joiners

► Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust	Dame Maura Regan
► North East Learning Trust	Lesley Powell
► Northern Education Trust	Rob Tarn

June 2021 – change of CEO

► Academies Enterprise Trust	Rebecca Boomer-Clark
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2 MEMBER TRUSTS AND THEIR SCHOOLS: FACTS & FIGURES FOR 2020–21

In each of its three years of operation, The Queen Street Group has conducted a census of the Trusts in membership. In this section data collected during school year 2020–21 is compared with that for 2018–19 (with comparable figures for the earlier year italicised in brackets).⁴

2.1 Overview

NUMBER (AND AGE) OF MEMBER TRUSTS

- ~ **23** (17 in 2018/19)
- ~ The oldest member Trust was founded in 2004 and the newest in 2017.

PUPILS, SCHOOLS AND TRUST SIZE

- ~ QSG Trusts between them educate **277,909 pupils** (201,237) enrolled across **482 schools** (374)
- ~ The smallest Trust educates 1,700 pupils in three schools within a single local authority
- ~ The largest educates 32,000 pupils in 58 schools across 26 local authorities

GEOGRAPHY

- ~ QSG Trusts are distributed among all eight of England's RSC regions and across 81 local authority areas.

SCALE

- ~ Trusts educating between 1,000 and 5,000 pupils – six (*four*)
- ~ Trusts educating between 5,000 and 12,000 pupils – eight (*nine*)
- ~ Trusts educating between 12,000 and 35,000 pupils – nine (*four*)

SCHOOL TYPE, PUPIL CHARACTERISTICS AND INSPECTION OUTCOMES

Compared to the situation nationally:

- ~ schools in QSG Trusts are much more likely to be sponsored academies than in the average MAT
- ~ QSG pupils are much more likely to qualify for the pupil premium

~ QSG Trusts perform well above the national norm in improving educational quality in schools which operate in challenging circumstances, and this performance is continuing to strengthen

GROWTH OF QSG: SCHOOLS AND PUPILS

In its first three years of operation:

- ~ the number of QSG pupils has grown by 38%
- ~ the number of QSG schools has grown by 29%
- ~ QSG's broad profile has remained constant since 2018, although both its proportion of Free Schools and its geographical reach across England have increased.

2.2 Commentary

The QSG Trusts are highly varied in origin, geography and size and, as such, broadly reflect the range of multi-academy Trusts nationally. However, QSG Trusts are unified in having clear commitments in common, including a majority specialism of improving education for pupils in schools where circumstances are challenging.

The **482 schools** (374) managed by the member Trusts break down as follows:

- ~ Primary schools: 267 (55%) (216: 58%)
- ~ Secondary schools: 180 (37%) (140: 37%)
- ~ All-through schools: 15 (3%) (6: 2%)
- ~ Special schools: 15 (3%) (12: 3%)
- ~ Other: 5 (1%) (2: 1%)

The average number of schools in each member Trust is 21, with the actual number per Trust ranging from 3 to 58.

Of the 482 schools, 49 are free schools and 5 are schools of another specialist type (e.g. Alternative Provider, in-house resource unit).

Across the **277,909 pupils** (201,237) the pattern in individual QSG Trusts is also highly varied. The average number of pupils in each member Trust is 12,083 (11,914), with the actual number per Trust ranging from 1,657 (1,559) to 31,877 (33,548).

The type of school being attended by pupils can be broken down in several ways.

⁴ Data for the three Trusts which joined QSG in May 2021 (Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust, North East Learning Trust and Northern Education Trust) will be included in next year's Annual Report.

(1) Type of school by **age phase / special provision**

PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS:

93,304 (35%) (67,863: 34%), with the actual number of primary school pupils across member Trusts ranging from 849 (793) to 13,043 (11,637)

SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS:

175,730 (65%) (132,070: 65%), with the actual number of secondary school pupils across member Trust ranging from 0 to 30,144 (0 to 29,454)

SPECIAL SCHOOL PUPILS:

1,711 (1%) (1,304: 1%), with the actual number of special school pupils across member Trusts ranging from 0 to 596 (0 to 551)

(2) Type of school by **administrative category***

- ~ Sponsored academies: 261 (54%) (217: 56%)
- ~ Converter academies: 170 (33%) (142: 36%)
- ~ Free schools: 49 (10%) (15: 3%)
- ~ Special schools 15 (3%) (14: 4%)
- ~ Other (UTC, studio school): 5 (1%) (2: 1%)

(3) Type of school by **inspection judgement**

- ~ Outstanding: 72 (15%) (68: 17%)
- ~ Good: 241 (50%) (218: 55%)
- ~ Requires improvement: 69 (14%) (64: 16%)
- ~ Inadequate: 18 (4%) (22: 6%)

(In April 2021, 82 QSG schools (17%) were awaiting their first full inspection since joining their member Trust, compared to 27 (6%) in 2019.)

The **demography of pupils** can be broken down as follows.

- ~ Pupils qualifying for premium funding:
89,565 (32.7% of all QGS pupils) (2018/19 national average: 27.7%)
- ~ Pupils whose first language is not English:
64,245 (23.4% of all QGS pupils) (2019/20 national average: 19.5%)
- ~ Minority ethnic pupils:
81,941 (29.9% of all QGS pupils) (2019/20 national average: 33.2%)

* The comparator year in this and the next section ('Type of school by inspection judgement') is 2019–20.

~ EHC pupils (Education, Health and Care plan):

6,980 (2.5% of all QGS pupils) (2019/20 national average: 3.3%)

~ SEND pupils (Special Educational Needs & Disability):

41,548 (15.1% of all QGS pupils) (2019/20 national average: 15.4%)

When it comes to **geography**, the distribution of QSG Trusts is fairly even across all eight of the areas overseen by Regional School Commissioners (RSCs).

The varying size of the Trusts means that some are quite localised. 15 of the 23 Trusts have schools in only one RSC region, while one has schools in seven of the regions and another has schools in all eight. Similarly, the spread across local authorities is varied, ranging from a Trust with schools in one authority to another with schools in 26.

2.3 The Queen Street Group and the national picture

Size of MATs. Just as the size and shape of MATs nationally is highly varied, so is the picture across QSG. However, the shape of the QSG pyramid contrasts with the national picture. In 2016 it was estimated that: 80% of MATs in England managed between 2 and 5 schools; 19% managed between 6 and 11 schools; 5% managed between 12 and 25 schools; and just 13 out of 587 MATs managed 26 or more schools. Across QSG Trusts these proportions run in the opposite direction: a majority of QSG pupils are being educated in larger Trusts.

Pupil Demographic. Compared to the national average, QSG pupils are much more likely to qualify as Pupil Premium students. In addition to family poverty, QSG schools serve communities with highly contrasting demographic profiles in terms of ethnicity and spoken language. Pupils in QSG member Trusts are more likely to be white British. However, many QSG schools serve pupil populations where there is a high incidence of first languages spoken other than English.

Categories of school. Perhaps most significant is the administrative categories of the schools in membership of QSG Trusts. This reflects the priority that these MATs place on working to improve schools in challenging circumstances. Across the academies sector nationally the ratio of sponsored academies to converter academies is 2:8. Across the Queen Street Group this ratio is 6:4.

School standards. When these 'school type' ratios are considered in relation to inspection outcomes, QSG member Trusts perform well above national norms in fulfilling their commitment to improve the education of pupils in troubled schools where family poverty is high. 78% of QSG schools (a majority of which are *sponsored academies*) have received 'Good' or 'Outstanding' inspection judgements since becoming members of their Trust, compared to 85% of academies nationally (where four in every five schools is a *converter academy*).⁵

⁵ For data on the national picture see: *Inspection Statistics: LA-Maintained schools and academies*, (Liverpool: Angel Solutions, May 2019), p. 3.

3 QUEEN STREET GROUP: ACTIVITIES IN 2020–21

This section summarises the work of The Queen Street Group over the past year. The nature of its activities is described and the results are discussed.

3.1 Nine new Trusts join QSG as COVID–19 disruption continues

At the beginning of 2020–21 six new Trusts⁶ joined the existing group of 17, bringing 79 new schools into the Queen Street Group (of which only 15 are converter academies). This represented an influx of 45,700 pupils and the QSG census set out in Section 2 of this report indicates that across the 83 joining schools there were two specific pupil demographics: schools where the pupil profile is strongly white British *in tandem* with schools where ethnic minorities are strongly represented. In May 2021 three further Trusts joined QSG.⁷

Across England as a whole, all pupils were permitted to return to school in September (in contrast to the previous term which saw only the presence of ‘key worker’ children) but patterns of attendance continued to be disrupted, the Department for Education estimating that on average through to Christmas 2020 14% of school places were unoccupied. During the remainder of the school year pupil attendance fluctuated in response to the incidence of COVID–19 in the wider population, but as the 2020–21 session came to a close in July Departmental figures showed that 8.5% of pupils remained out of school.⁸

Compared to the extreme disruption of April–July 2020, the work of teachers in schools and staff in the central teams of QSG member Trusts became more normal but a noticeable change to the dynamic of staff meetings of all kinds was a new mix of virtual and face-to-face sessions. For multi-academy Trusts with a wide geographical distribution of schools, the opportunities offered by the retention of some virtual meetings – now seen as routine events – may come to mark 2020–21 as the year when this working practice became a normal and welcomed feature.

When it came to meetings across the Queen Street Group, almost all of these remained virtual during the year and assumed a new, enlarged and more regular rhythm. The Trust CEOs held 11 meetings between September and June. In parallel, QSG’s specialist professional groups for Finance and HR met on six occasions between September and July, while the Education Group held seven main meetings during the year and a further two specialist sessions on assessment in the Primary phase.

The reporting which follows presents QSG’s work thematically and in a way that continues the mode of presentation provided in last year’s Annual Report.

3.2 Operations: Queen Street Group practice in Education, Finance and HR

As during the previous two years, a principal QSG activity in 2020–21 was the operation of three specialist working groups: Education, Finance and HR. Each of these is made up of executives across QSG responsible for directing these operational areas of Trust work.

The headline ways in which the work-streams of QSG’s three expert groups developed during 2020–21 are now set out.

⁶ Avanti Schools Trust, Big Education, BMAT Education, Community Academies Trust, Star Academies Trust and Summit Learning Trust.

⁷ Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust, North East Learning Trust and Northern Education Trust.

⁸ Autumn term 2020: How COVID–19 affected England’s state-funded schools (London: House of Commons Library, March 2021); ‘Huge surge in number of pupils sent home due to Covid’ (BBC Education News website: 6 July, 2021).

Education: 2020–21 Overview

Planning

The QSG Directors of Education began 2020–21 with the three challenges they had identified by the end of the previous year:

- ▶ Maintaining **curriculum continuity** for pupils in each year group, in circumstances where patterns of school attendance are unpredictable and liable to change at short notice.
- ▶ Determining the extent to which **blended learning** (face-to-face vs. on-line, in school and at home) is an expedient for managing through the pandemic or represents the beginnings of an important pedagogic shift.
- ▶ Increased focus on the reliability and timeliness of **formative assessment**.

The year's work

The three themes for the year were double-sided, representing major topics of educational importance placed under a specific operational spotlight due to the pandemic. Thus, the **assessment** theme focused on general teacher expertise as a source for effective and fair results in summer 2021 public examinations, in the absence of formal written papers. Similarly, the question of **blended learning** was discussed both as a broad topic of developing teacher expertise and a particular necessity in a pandemic where the sizeable non-attendance of pupils is a reality. The broadest question under review was **curriculum continuity**, both week-to-week during the pandemic but also over the medium term, including the meshing of 'school improvement' with high quality of teaching and learning across the curriculum.

Meanwhile, themes discussed during 2019–20 continued to resonate: acknowledging the stability of **school financing** during the pandemic (compared to other aspects of society), while diverting resources where possible to ease the uneven disruption to learning caused by COVID–19 and keeping **staff well-being** under close review in terms both of personal safety and professional fulfilment.

Evolving priorities

By the end of 2020–21 the discussions within the QSG Education work-stream had thrown up new priorities which suggested topics needing to be carried forward into 2021–22.

- i) **Delayed attainment and disadvantage** – a large and complicated challenge whereby the anxiety of all pupils about disrupted learning is not allowed to obscure the specific problem of how 'learning loss' may come to entrench aspects of educational disadvantage among specific groups of pupils.
- ii) **Professional Development** – a hardy perennial when it comes to enhanced quality in teaching, but now given fresh post-pandemic impetus through the much wider use of digital technology in learning.
- iii) **Academy Improvement** – a core remit across QSG Trusts, especially in respect of sponsored academies, now needing to be fused with the resumed operation by Ofsted of its September 2019 'Education Inspection Framework' prioritising quality of educational provision.

Finance: 2020–21 Overview

Planning

The QSG Directors of Finance began 2020–21 with the three challenges they had identified by the end of the previous year:

- ▶ A need to undertake as **accurate financial forecasting** as continued conditions of uncertainty in school operations will allow.
- ▶ Refined processes for assessing financial viability when **taking on new schools in challenging circumstances** and the feasibility of undertaking essential **capital projects**.
- ▶ How these tasks can stimulate public discussion of one or more **strategic themes**, such as: the most sophisticated ways of managing MATs' financial reserves; assessing the varied performance of individual schools in relation to their funding; and determining the additional costs borne by those Trusts which specialise in reviving the fortunes of ailing schools.

The year's work

These three challenges were confirmed during the autumn as operationally important but best undertaken when supported by broader analysis of the main aspects of MAT funding and strategic financial management. As a consequence, the Directors of Finance divided their QSG discussions over the year into detailed monitoring and review of **operational financial management** (including the uncertainties and exceptional items generated by COVID–19) alongside discussions designed to bring greater sophistication to **strategic financial management** within MATs.

The monitoring and review of **operational matters** remained demanding in 2020–21 in the sense that COVID–19 required significantly more improvisation than would occur in a normal school year, but operating conditions generated some savings (schools continued to work below physical capacity) and this allowed redirection of funding to important educational priorities such as the provision of computer hardware to the families of pupils unable to access remote learning.

Meanwhile, the Finance Directors' wider discussions led to the drafting of **strategic papers** on important topics in readiness for publication during 2021–22, with working titles which included: 'The future of finances in a multi-academy Trust', 'Effective management of resources in MATs', 'Reserves: a QSG discussion paper' and 'Income generation in multi-academy Trusts'.

Evolving priorities

By the end of 2020–21 the QSG Finance work-stream had thrown up new operational priorities which suggested topics needing to be carried forward into 2021–22.

- i) **Capital funding** – a continuing priority for all QSG member Trusts and one which would benefit from the greater income generation potential existing in MATs.
- ii) **Procurement strategy** – another aspect of finance able to benefit from the economies of scale latent within multi-academy Trusts.
- iii) **Equality Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)** – taking a fresh look at how the finance function within MATs can address EDI to reduce pay gaps, enhance retention and recruitment, and minimise absence costs.

HR: 2020–21 Overview

Planning

The QSG Directors of HR began 2020–21 with the three challenges they had identified by the end of the previous year:

- ▶ The continuing importance of **employee consultation and communications** while operating conditions under COVID–19 remain uncertain.
- ▶ The need for further reconfiguration of **work roles** among school staff, both to include the flexibility to teach pupils online and, when necessary, from home, but also to accommodate the uneven patterns of blended learning that are likely.
- ▶ Looking beyond the pandemic at **future career patterns** for teachers in a society where the expectation of work and workplaces among employees appears to be shifting rapidly.

The year's work

Each of these themes retained its salience throughout the year. Inevitably and importantly, employee consultation and communications remained a high priority as the pandemic continued, calibrated through **satisfaction surveys** and at formal **meetings with trade union representatives**. Staff turnover was lower than normal throughout the year (not necessarily a desirable development) and ‘casework’ (dispute hearings and related procedures) increased after a quieter than normal period during ‘lockdown’.

Alongside such operational activity, the HR Directors returned consistently through the year to the question of the **design of work-roles in schools**. Is this currently optimal; is it likely to change as a lasting effect of the pandemic (prime examples being skill development in the provision of blended learning and increased teamwork among staff in schools across member Trusts); or will it, in the event, revert relatively unchanged to pre-2020 working practices? Whatever the answers, there remained a concern during 2020–21 to identify more clearly for the under-30s the attractions of a career in teaching in comparison to other professions and to tackle a widely identified need to enhance the employee development of school support staff.

Evolving priorities

By the end of 2020–21 the QSG HR work-stream had thrown up new operational priorities which suggested topics needing to be carried forward into 2021–22.

- i) **Staff aspiration, stability and turnover** – in the aftermath of COVID–19 the extent to which pre-2020–21 assumptions about the culture of supply, recruitment, reward and retention of staff (teaching and non-teaching) have been up-ended or will reassess themselves.
- ii) **Employee satisfaction and support** – with some QSG Trusts seeking to develop well-being charters, ensuring that employer expectations about evolving working practices are clearly articulated or allowed to ‘emerge’ (e.g. through consultation and discussion about such matters as personal routines, the length of the school day and ways to support the aspirations of various groups of teaching and non-teaching staff).
- iii) **Staffing cultures, including Equality, Diversity & Inclusion** – being able to meet growing demand for coaching and mentoring (including for support staff, teachers and leaders) and determining the role of HR in ensuring a diverse and inclusive culture within a Trust’s workforce.

3.3 Strategy: Queen Street Group CEOs in discussion with national education leaders

As in other areas of QSG’s work during 2020–21, the intense crisis management activity sparked in March 2020 had resettled by the autumn into a more regular pattern of interaction among member Trust CEOs aimed at generating a steady momentum for future collaborative work. Consequently, the CEOs’ group met monthly during the year (12 meetings) with agendas designed both to continue dialogue with national education leaders and develop strategic activity across a set of related themes important to the effective operation of maturing multi-academy Trusts.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE

In support of effective national dialogue, working sessions of various kinds were held between the QSG CEOs and:

- ~ **Nick Gibb**, Minister of State for School Standards
- ~ **Robert Halfon**, Chair, House of Commons Education Select Committee
- ~ **Amanda Spielman**, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools
- ~ **Eileen Milner**, Chief Executive, Education and Skills Funding Agency
- ~ **Dominic Herrington**, National Schools Commissioner
- ~ **Mary Bousted**, Joint General Secretary, National Education Union
- ~ **Leora Cruddas**, Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts
- ~ **Unity Howard**, Director, New Schools Network
- ~ **Carl Ward**, Chair, Foundation for Education Development
- ~ **Alison Oliver**, CEO, Youth Sport Trust
- ~ **Peter Hyman**, Executive Headteacher, School 21
- ~ **Relevant DfE officials** responsible for academies policy and for qualifications in England (online discussion meetings)
- ~ **Regional Schools Commissioners** (small group meetings)

As in 2019–20, these sessions had a threefold purpose: to deepen the collective insight of the CEOs about the nature of incremental improvement in pupil education; to allow each national leader to reflect on the contribution of their own organisation in assisting QSG Trusts to achieve this shared goal; and to illustrate how the COVID–19 crisis had demonstrated that schools managed by effective MATs could improvise confidently in light of the intelligence and expertise held across the central executive team in each member Trust.

OPERATIONAL ADVICE

Alongside dialogue related to national MAT policy and practices, the QSG CEOs' second priority during 2020–21 was a continued focus on the effective operations of maturing multi-academy Trusts.

In the first half of the year this entailed concentrating on how to secure maximum stability for the educational work of schools while the covid–19 threat remained severe and by Christmas 2020 this work was bearing fruit. Led by John Murphy of Oasis Community Learning, a set of pandemic-related operational imperatives, firmly linked to ethical principles, was established across the CEOs' group at a time when government advice and guidance to schools were particularly uncertain.

Consequently, QSG was able to offer operational advice to government officials and advisers on four related topics:

- ~ **feeding pupils** – how to ensure vouchers for free school meals were easily accessible to schools and effectively distributed;
- ~ **controlling the virus** – how to decouple and simplify the parallel operation of covid–19 test & trace and mass testing for the virus in ways causing the least disruption in schools;
- ~ **vaccination policy** – how making school staff a priority for vaccination could minimise the disruption experienced by pupils;
- ~ **reducing uncertainty**:

Early Years provision – the need for clearer national guidance during the pandemic on the operation of educational settings for the youngest children
school reopening – how particular notice periods and operational guidance would ensure proper planning for school reopening

pupil assessment – the urgency of clarifying summer 2021 and summer 2022 public assessments and examinations for students in Years 6, 11 and 13

school inspection – similar clarity on how and when school inspection would resume

In proffering this advice the QSG CEOs acknowledged the acute nature of the pandemic crisis and how this made coherent policy making difficult. As such, the CEOs saw their role as that of an informed 'critical friend' to Whitehall and to Westminster.

QSG PERSPECTIVES: THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS

Mindful of the opportunity not to let a crisis go to waste, the CEOs generated a paper in March which reviewed the evidence as to how QSG member Trusts had proved able to improvise effectively and resiliently under covid–19 during March 2020 to February 2021 (see Appendix 1 on pp. 31–34).

This analysis was part of the CEOs' effort during 2020–21 to address the question of those qualities which characterise strong and effective multi-academy Trusts, and how the intelligence-sharing and collaborative analysis of QSG member Trusts both elucidates and encourages these qualities. This work proved timely as a speech delivered in April by the Secretary of State for Education signalled the intention of the government to provide additional momentum for its policies in support of multi-academy Trusts.

Central to the success of such policies will be political and public acceptance that MATs are a valuable and effective method of school governance and management. Accordingly, the CEOs agreed a statement in December elaborating the Purposes and Principles of The Queen Street Group (see Appendix 2 on pp. 35–36, below), seeing this as a valid and worthwhile contribution to the task of securing public acceptance of the benefits of schools being governed by multi-academy Trusts.

Taken together, the main points arising from the work-stream followed by QSG CEOs during 2020–21 can be described as follows.

CEO Perspectives: 2020–21 Overview

Planning

The QSG Trust CEOs began 2020–21 with the three challenges they had identified by the end of the previous year:

- ▶ the continued generation of pandemic-related and general intelligence for ministers, their advisers and others;
- ▶ the provision of thought leadership for a wider audience on the evolving role of schools in a fast-changing society infused with digital technologies;
- ▶ a continued focus on policy and ethical practice within multi-academy Trusts that undertake the task of improving education in schools in challenging circumstances.

The Year's Work

Given their strategic importance, these areas of priority work remained unchanged for the QSG CEOs during the year and were scheduled as a sequenced set of steps. In the area of intelligence, the continuing disruption to children's schooling required an initial focus (September to December) on advice to the Department for Education as to how such disruption might be minimised – an activity pursued alongside a wide-ranging set of working discussions (November to June) with national politicians, their advisers and leaders of national bodies.

Following the renewed closure of schools to most pupils from January, the CEOs concentrated thought leadership in two areas: a wide-ranging evidence review as to the resilience of QSG Trusts during the first 12 months of the pandemic; and a pair of statements on the purposes, principles and working practices of the Queen Street Group as these bear on school improvement, ethical leadership and moral purpose, and open working methods that foster eclectic yet inclusive practice.

Evolving priorities

By the end of 2020–21 the salience of the work of the QSG CEOs suggested priorities for the year ahead little different from those pursued since 2019.

- i) Continuous school improvement – in concert with many other organisations, reviewing and commissioning examples of innovation in the ways in which groups of schools can best meet the needs of a fast-changing society.
- ii) Thought leadership and advice – not least through specific insights into the steps needed for educational recovery in schools following the pandemic and the characteristics which define strong multi-academy Trusts.
- iii) Effective communication – continuing the task of explaining to a range of audiences (political, professional and lay) what multi-academy Trusts with proven track records and clear ethical commitments are seeking to achieve, especially in relation to schools in challenging circumstances.

3.4 Developing the infrastructure of The Queen Street Group as a public benefit organisation

Last year's QSG Annual Report noted a set of developments in the infrastructure of the Group⁹ and these were further advanced during 2020–21 as the organisation sought to make all of its activities more strategic and embark on further lines of enquiry.

The desire to make all of QSG's activities aspects of a single coherent strategy stemmed from the CEOs' December 2020 statement on the Queen Street Group's Purposes & Principles (Appendix 2 on pp. 35–36). This was given additional momentum in March by the evidence review of QSG's resilience and effectiveness during the pandemic (Appendix 1 on pp. 31–34). As a result of both publications, the CEOs took several further steps later in the year:

- ~ strengthening of QSG's presence in the two English regions where it had fewest schools;
- ~ enhanced protocols on the working methods of the expert groups for Education, Finance and HR (e.g. additional CEO and administrative support; success indicators for each group);
- ~ revised procedure for developing and publishing QSG articles, blogs and papers (e.g. authorship attribution, genre styles, editorial process).

The CEOs' motivation to pursue additional lines of enquiry – some during 2020–21 and others in 2021–22 – also emerged from their confidence that the QSG member Trusts had been able to provide efficient, coherent and wide-ranging support to pupils and their families during the pandemic. In the current year new work began in the following areas:

- ~ inter-Trust benchmarking of pay scales across a range of work-roles;
- ~ 'Diversity' (within the QSG membership and across the workforces of the member Trusts, including case studies);
- ~ 'Education in 2030' (articulating QSG's vision of how, in a changing society, the power of school education can be realised to ensure the highest standards and opportunities for children and young people from all backgrounds).

Finally, the CEOs indicated an intention during 2021–22 to initiate systematic discussion of domains of work within member Trusts beyond that already established for Education, Finance and HR – namely IT, Estates and Governance – while also looking to strengthen the role of the Trust head office function through the existing network of QSG Executive Assistants.

⁹ Section 5 on pp. 25–28, see:
https://queenstreetgroup/wp-content/uploads/QSG_Annual-report_website-AW-2019-2020-pdf.pdf.

4 REFLECTIONS ON 2020-21 AND LOOKING AHEAD

As well as continuing the work of 2019–20, QSG set itself new objectives during 2020–21 and these are now set out and explained.

4.1 A second extraordinary year in school education

In last year's Annual Report we reflected on 2019–20 as an extraordinary year of disruption and innovation in schools governed by multi-academy Trusts. In particular, we noted how the enduring priorities for QSG member Trusts had prevailed during a year with unprecedented conditions of week-to-week operational uncertainty and improvisation.

This remained true for much of 2020–21, with QSG's longer-term, value-driven priorities continuing to define its activities and working culture under several headings:

stability – the extent to which the enactment of a Trust's strategic plan by its leaders can remain securely on course, even while week-to-week activities are severely disrupted or suspended;

standards – what it means for a Trust to provide appropriate and effective education for pupils, underpinned by sound financial management and the ethical duty of being a fair and progressive employer;

resilience – insight as to how those multi-academy Trusts in the hands of capable and experienced trustee boards, can demonstrate constancy of values and optimum deployment of resources in pursuit of education for the public benefit.

The effective realisation of these values is a core theme running through the March 2021 evidence review undertaken by the QSG CEOs to establish how their Trusts demonstrated resilience and community leadership during the most dislocating phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 to February 2021).¹⁰

RECASTING EXPECTATIONS: OPERATIONAL AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR EDUCATION, FINANCE AND HR

Having experienced two school years of ethically-informed improvisation, and with the acute phase of pandemic dislocation appearing to ease, it is unsurprising that QSG activity towards the end of 2020–21 turned to a fresh look at the professional priorities to be pursued by its expert groups for Education, Finance and HR.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 on pp. 31–34.

Consequently, the practice of previous years whereby the QSG expert groups met in June and July to identify analytical and practical priorities for the following year was this year complemented by strategic objectives drawn up and set alongside these priorities by the CEOs' group. The result was a list of operational objectives in each area for 2021–22, set by the groups themselves (see boxes in section 3.2 on pp. 18–20), requiring alignment in the year ahead with the following strategic objectives for each area set out by the CEOs.

4.2 QSG's strategic objectives for Education, Finance and HR

A STATEMENT BY THE QSG CEOs' GROUP OF STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR EDUCATION, FINANCE AND HR WITHIN MEMBER TRUSTS (DECEMBER, 2020)

From 2021, QSG will work towards the following objectives though our expert groups.

Education

Objective

To recast provision by MATs of teaching and learning – in response to the experience of the pandemic, in support of those who most need to catch-up and to make long-term improvements for the benefit of all pupils.

Accelerating the design and impact of blended learning

- ▶ Share approaches to blended provision in support of all children across all age phases in order to mitigate the impact of closures and absences
- ▶ Re-imagine the design of blended learning to improve the education of all pupils

Re-casting our approaches to assessment

- ▶ Urgently review assessment in all year groups to support progression during the period of continuing disruption and in response to uncertainties in assessment and examinations in summer 2022
- ▶ Re-imagine approaches to assessment beyond the immediate pressures of 2021–22
- ▶ Use this thinking to influence national policy

Developing our models for improving standards across a Trust

- ▶ Explore the most effective approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment across a Trust
- ▶ Suggest models to maximise the educational effectiveness of Executive Leadership
- ▶ Offer this thinking for the benefit of the wider school system

Finance

Objective

To maximise the resource available for teaching and learning in MATs, while running schools effectively and sustainably.

Develop innovative ways to maximise income generation

Pursue options for procurement that are compliant and more efficient

Make recommendations on the funding available when failing schools are incorporated into Trusts by

- ▶ determining the most effective ways of conducting due diligence
- ▶ developing methods to measure the costs over time of incorporating failing schools
- ▶ planning how best to make this case to policy-makers

HR

Objective

To support Trusts in recruiting, developing and caring for motivated and effective staff.

Re-imagining the employee experience for the next generation of teachers in schools

- ▶ Examine how employee expectations are changing
- ▶ Define the employee experience needed to meet those expectations
- ▶ Consider how teaching is necessarily different from most other professional spheres of work
- ▶ Determine where the experience of teaching it is out of step with the expectations of professions in a changing society, and the actions needed to attract and retain the very best trainee, early career and experienced teachers
- ▶ Plan how best to use the outcomes to improve practice across the school system

Considering how to create a more diverse workforce

- ▶ Explore how a wide range of benefits can appeal to different kinds of prospective applicant
- ▶ Derive lessons from overseas employment practices in schools
- ▶ Re-imagine the performance management of school staff, and pay and reward structures for support staff

4.3 The challenge of 2030

By the summer 2021, QSG's member Trusts had a strong record of ethically-driven improvisation during the pandemic on which they could draw. Developed and evidenced over the previous eighteen months, this organisational success had been forged at a time when some of the most familiar features of school operations – pupil assessment and examinations, school inspection, budget setting and monitoring – had been either in suspension or significantly altered by the COVID-19 crisis.

In reviewing this experience, QSG's four constituent groups (CEOs, Directors of Education, Directors of Finance and Directors of HR) drew two important conclusions. First, they concurred that meeting the challenge of the pandemic had been made possible by an underlying continuity in the professional and moral purpose espoused by the member Trusts collectively since 2018. Second and just as significant, they observed that this continuity of purpose, lived out week-to-week during the crisis, had proved more resilient (and more urgently practical) than central aspects of the national regulatory environment, most notably public examinations and school inspection.

This did not imply a rejection of the need for summative assessment, inspection or financial regulation, but within QSG and in many other educational organisations it led to increasing expression of unease as to how effective the pre-pandemic situation had been, particularly the fit between teaching, learning and assessment in schools and the kind of skills today's pupils will need as adults in employment and as active citizens, in a rapidly changing society experiencing widespread technological change and significant cultural and environmental upheavals.

If this unease could be reduced to a single concern this was, perhaps, whether the pace of evolutionary change in school education over the decade prior to the pandemic now seemed sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of schooling in England by 2030. As such and notwithstanding the urgent task of securing 'educational recovery' for those groups of students most educationally disadvantaged by the impact of COVID-19, the pandemic had provided the stimulus – and, potentially, the political and administrative opportunity – to re-think and re-cast fundamental aspects of school life.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The third year of QSG activity has seen the work-streams it established in 2018–19 maturing further, despite the operational environment in each area remaining highly challenging due to disruption caused by the pandemic.

The most acute emergency measures of 2019–20 – securing safe buildings, procuring personal protective equipment and managing virus outbreaks – became more familiar during 2020–21. As a result, QSG made space during November and December 2020 to begin reviewing a number of strategic assumptions about how its activities might develop in the short (2022), medium (2023–2024) and longer terms (2024–2030).

The organisation itself had grown in two stages during the year (six new Trusts joined in September and a further three followed in June), but the heartland of its work remained organised through strategic (CEO-level) and expert operational activity (Education, Finance and HR).

Nevertheless, by the end of 2020–21 the past twelve months had come to be seen as something of a ‘bridging’ year during which the strain imposed by the pandemic on important aspects of national policy and practice in education suggested significant underlying fault lines. These coincided with an urgent new challenge – mitigating over the next decade or so the effect of COVID–19 on those most educationally disadvantaged by it, even as the very experience of needing to improvise during the pandemic suggested to many commentators and professional staff in schools important new opportunities for accelerated evolutionary change in order to position schools more effectively for the challenges of the late 2020s and early 2030s.

It is in this context that QSG’s member Trusts will continue their distinctive work of providing an effective fresh start for schools beginning the road to recovery from recent troubled histories, educating to a nationally recognised high standard the students in these schools and those with more established records of success, while also continuing to refine MAT operational expertise and contribute to conversations across England about the kind of enhanced policies and practices best likely to serve the nation’s schools over the next decade.

APPENDIX 1

Multi-Academy Trusts and COVID–19: March 2020 to February 2021. A review of work by the Queen Street Group’s schools and member Trusts (March 2021)

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

1 QSG and MAT capacity

What is QSG and how do its schools perform? The Queen Street Group is an alliance of 23 effective and maturing multi-academy Trusts (MATs) which educate 278,000 pupils across 482 schools. QSG schools operate in all eight RSC regions and QSG pupils are significantly more likely than average to qualify for the Pupil Premium or not have English as their first language.

The schools in QSG MATs are predominantly sponsored academies, many operating in highly challenged communities where family poverty is high. Ofsted inspection judgements across QSG schools are well above the national average.

MAT capacity. This paper describes how QSG’s member Trusts responded to the COVID–19 pandemic and what they learnt in the process. After rapid, flexible and effective response to the immediate onset of the crisis, QSG MATs recorded **three main achievements during the March 2020–February 2021 pandemic period.**

- i) Balancing the priorities of organisational and community leadership to generate reassurance and confidence.
- ii) Improvising and innovating while maintaining standards and always acting on clear moral values.
- iii) Demonstrating how COVID–19 has validated the MAT model of resilient and effective school governance.

2 Confronting the immediate crisis: keeping children safe and keeping them learning

What happened immediately? During March to May 2020, when the COVID–19 pandemic struck, QSG MATs were able to take **decisive and sound immediate actions**, often in advance of official guidance. Through their enhanced organisational capacity, they also took secure steps to create some initial stability for their pupils.

What were the initial achievements? It soon became clear that covid-19 would turn schools upside down for an extended period. QSG MATs had the benefit of **cohesive central offices** and **webs of high-trust connections with school principals and other local leaders**. This allowed them to demonstrate:

- ~ a good intuitive grasp of how to prioritise actions through a prolonged emergency; while
- ~ strengthening professional relationships of trust and providing continuity in pupil learning

How were rapid adaptations made effectively? Trust central office teams adapted rapidly to a new normal, based on **enhanced communication and listening**. Working from home, Trust leaders checked in with school staff (both those on the premises and those at home) who, in turn, made contact with pupils.

Between April 2020 and February 2021 – the main period of school closures – the new rhythms of work established at the outset of the crisis **crystallised into inherent strengths on which QSG Trusts could now draw**. These centred on providing continuity of education for pupils; encouragement and support of staff; renewed focus on the safety of children; and MAT organisational strengths and flexibilities.

3 The organisational advantages of strong and effective MATs during the longer pandemic

In February 2021, the QSG member MATs reviewed what they had learnt during the pandemic and which of these lessons have national significance. Three main themes stand out.

LESSON (A):

Balancing priorities: corporate and community leadership. Because the pandemic created space for MATs to innovate, QSG Trusts learnt new things about themselves and their communities during the crisis, including what needs to be done differently in future. A central conclusion our Trusts have drawn is that the Covid crisis **underscored and strengthened the collective moral action which lies at the heart of school education**. This collective insight has important implications for the better execution of national policies and can be summarised under six headings:

- ~ Communication is critical
- ~ No decision in isolation: make good decisions together
- ~ Asking, listening and responding to families' needs
- ~ We are jointly accountable
- ~ Our values demand the best of us
- ~ Going above and beyond: using moral agency to confront educational poverty

LESSON (B):

Maintaining standards for excellence. A majority of the schools in QSG member Trusts are sponsored academies, often working in deprived areas. 'Maintaining standards for excellence' in such schools has required a dual concentration on the **quality of children's education** while also **tackling logistical barriers that might disrupt educational continuity** for children when learning from home.

Physical barriers have been overcome through virus control measures in schools and sourcing IT to those homes where it is needed. The quality of children's education has been bound up with the national imperative for a model of remote learning that keeps pupils and teachers connected.

Under covid-19, QSG Trusts have **spoken nationally** as organisations representing numerous schools, while locally **enabling school leaders** to be the primary conduits in shaping the thinking of parents, carers and children about continuity of education.

This balance emphasises the importance of **trusted relationships** 'on the ground' while allowing Trusts, as organisations, to work purposefully in the background.

A combination of intensive training on remote pedagogy, investment in devices for the use of teachers and families, and tuition during the summer half-term, summer holiday and autumn half-term have been essential to ensuring the **continuity of high-quality learning** among children.

QSG Trusts have also been clear about maintaining a relentless focus on **high academic standards** through remote learning. To ensure standards are maintained, a **typical member Trust checklist** included:

- ~ surveying and questioning children and families regularly
- ~ schemes of work designed with pupils' conceptual development in mind
- ~ uninterrupted principles of good pedagogy (and not confusing pupil online attendance with engagement)
- ~ continued quality assurance through drop-ins to virtual lessons
- ~ a Trust-wide range of 'How to' video clips; loan of expert staff to work on developing online resources through the Oak Academy; and regular review, including parent/staff/pupil consultation utilising School Cloud and SeeSaw

LESSON (C):

MATs as resilient organisations. By stress-testing the values and organisational cultures of QSG member Trusts from top to bottom, the Covid pandemic has been a supreme – and successful – indicator of the **resilience of MATs as stable and effective organisations**. This success can be drawn upon in the months and years ahead, since organisational resilience is a core asset as we resume the central task of ensuring that all children can flourish in well-organised, purposeful, effective and innovative schools.

Seven characteristics of MAT resilience emerge from the joint experience of QSG's 23 member Trusts during March 2020–February 2021. Developed to meet a crisis, these traits also hold good for more normal times.

- ~ New perspectives on core organisational processes and attributes
- ~ A focus on well-being, staff support and staff recognition
- ~ Understanding reciprocal roles, including strong central services, a clear focus on pupil education and the place of teamwork
- ~ The central importance of IT management and functionality
- ~ The significance of facilities and estates
- ~ Starting from a position of financial and staff strength
- ~ Demonstrable resilience leads to community reassurance and trust

Case Studies

Two case studies may be highlighted, one on MAT innovation and the other on MAT resilience during the pandemic.

- (i) *MATs, the Pandemic and Innovation – Efficacy of initial teacher training in a MAT.* The work of **Surrey South Farnham SCITT** exemplifies how multi-academy Trusts can make an outstanding contribution to teacher supply and teacher development. The structural advantages of MATs enable training at scale and allow rapid response to change/need and effective collaboration – especially during a pandemic.
- (ii) *MATs, the Pandemic and Resilience – The 2020 pandemic as validation of the MAT structure of school governance and effectiveness.* This second case study recounts how the COVID-19 pandemic has served to demonstrate to one of our member Trusts – **Cabot Learning Federation** – the effectiveness and validity of its organisation as a sound and resilient provider of school education, even in crisis conditions.

APPENDIX 2

The Queen Street Group: Object, Purposes and Principles

The following statement was agreed by the QSG CEOs at a meeting held on 9 December 2020.

1 Our object in our Articles of Association:

'To advance education for the public benefit'.

2 Our purpose:

- 2.1 To improve continuously the quality of education for all pupils in our schools, and ultimately across the school system, through mutual support and challenge, sharing knowledge, and developing the very best practice in leading and managing every aspect of multi-academy Trusts (MATs).
- 2.2 To assist policy-makers and stakeholders in growing ethical, successful MATs that serve the needs of our communities, especially the most disadvantaged.

3 Our principles:

3.1 Ethical leadership and moral purpose

We seek to lead our Trusts in the best interests of all our pupils, especially the most disadvantaged, and so help to build a more just and equitable society.

3.2 Thought grounded in practice

We are intellectually rigorous, positive, and constructive in how we seek to influence the development of education in Trusts and across the school system. Our distinctive contribution is that our voice is grounded in the day-by-day practice of leading and managing successful groups of schools.

3.3 Open and transparent

Through our website and publishing, both physical and virtual, we are open in the way we form and share our views.

3.4 Eclectic and inclusive

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

3.5 Multiple voices entwined in common purpose

Our Trusts are diverse in many ways, including geography, context and size. Each is accountable to its own Board and stakeholders. We seek to reflect and concentrate the impact of these multiple voices, not to condense them into a single viewpoint. We share a common conviction that all schools can benefit from being part of a multi-academy Trust.

3.6 Proactive and focussed

We have no ambition to grow into a mass-membership organisation, nor do we feel the need to react to every shifting change or event in the educational world. We are proactive in focussing on the issues that experience in leading successful groups of schools tells us are of importance.

QSG

QUEEN STREET GROUP

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