

Alice Gregson's Speech to the National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference 2022 – 22nd September 2022

Good morning

A really warm welcome to you all for our annual CEO conference - the fifth of its kind and incredibly now, a half decade of bringing together this vibrant, diverse network. In the current ever-changing world, it's nice to be able to have some continuity and stability - but more on that later.

It's great to see so many of you here with us today - there are many familiar faces, as well as some new ones too as we come together to talk about hope. Hope not just for ourselves, but also for our staff and our young people and communities at a time of great challenge and change.

At last year's conference, Michael commented that two years prior, who would have known what awaited us. And I think we can say the same again now, but through a different lens - a lens of political and wider societal change and uncertainty. A context that is requiring almost all of us to dig very deep to generate hope for better.

Having come most of the way through the height of the pandemic over 2020 and 2021, we have quickly been met with further challenges and it has, at times, undoubtedly felt relentless.

But as CEOs, you are of course, no strangers to challenge and change. I am sure most of you could give me a long list of very tough situations you've faced and somehow found a way to overcome. It comes with the territory...to a certain extent.

But, I think we also have to recognise that after years of continual crisis leadership, this all feels a little different and something feels like it needs to give. Particularly when we consider the cost pressures you are enduring. We've done some very recent research with our partners at The Key to look at the cost of living pressures facing our members. And this has

given us some really interesting findings to share with you today.

One of which is that the vast majority of those responding (94%) said the cost-of-living increase is impacting their trust's work. This is perhaps unsurprising as a finding, but it is huge in terms of considering the magnitude of this impact.

Much like the pandemic of the last couple of years, this is yet another crisis brought about through no fault of your own and, yet, all of you are left with the responsibility for dealing with the impact head on. I know from my recent trust visits and through individual conversations with many of you, that you are now having to reconcile the deep sense of service and commitment you have to your communities and staff, with having to consider and make some unimaginably hard decisions. Again.

I know this is deeply tough for you. Shouldering all the accountability with very little control. Finding yourselves in constant crisis mode without the cognitive room to be strategic and address the long term challenges and opportunities for children and young people. And yet many of you are miraculously managing to do it all. But, as I asked in a recent article for the TES, for how long? How long will it be until this constant crisis mode leads to its own national leadership crisis when we see more and more leave the profession?

We are already seeing this elsewhere. Recent research from Korn Ferry looked at the sectors in the US with the highest leaving rates for CEOs. 174 non-profit and government sector CEOs - including the CEOs of food banks, hospitals, and schools - left their posts in the first six months of 2022, a 39% jump from the same period in 2021. Crisis and 'politics' being the most cited reasons for doing so.

Last year, a report found two fifths of school leaders (40%) plan to leave the profession - for reasons other than full retirement – within five years. The vast majority (nine in 10) stated the pandemic had been either the main or a contributing factor in their career decision. Meanwhile, a report from NAHT earlier this year, found that following the pandemic, fewer school leaders aspire to headship than ever before. Indeed, more than half of assistant and deputy heads (53%) say they do not aspire to headship.

This is troubling data and yet is a reality that needs to be faced. We have been saying through every route possible recently that education and those who lead it and deliver it, cannot and should not be seen as a cost to this country, but as a vital investment in its future. At Forum Strategy, we've been unwavering in this message to the government and clear on its urgency to be addressed.

And this investment from the government would be a wise one. Because, the solutions to many of the issues prevalent among our children and young people are in this room today. Addressing the attainment gap; ensuring a platform for young people's health, happiness and wellbeing; modeling leadership and actions that addresses the climate crisis and that fosters equality and inclusivity. These are all solutions (and more) that can be driven forward by your organisations and that is what gives me hope more than anything else. The power of leadership and the power of people that is represented in this room - collectively that's astonishing. Indeed, in my visits to trusts this Summer such as the Embark Federation, Lionheart, Victoria Academies, Tudor Grange and Greenwood Academies - I have seen hope manifest in practice and action; driven by CEOs, who empower and support their organisations to flourish. I hope to visit many more CEOs and trusts in the coming year.

As you all know, we have long been advocates for you as leaders to set your own path and direction, not to wait for government directives that too often don't come or are changed at last minute. There were some incredible examples of you doing exactly this at our recent roundtable on the cost of living pressures, finding ways to drive out efficiencies where it's possible. However, as well as your own autonomy and power as leaders, we are also acutely aware that some fundamentals (such as funding) have to be forthcoming and we want you to know we are committed to standing with you in calling for the proper support for the sector.

As CEOs, undoubtedly you are cognisant of the need now to lead through continually volatile times, something our national CEO network chair Steve Lancashire has recently touched on in his blog for us and will be speaking about shortly. But that doesn't mean accepting things as they are and not hoping for (and working to drive) change. And so, we come onto hope and it's undeniable link to leadership.

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Hopeful leadership, rooted in collaboration and professional support networks is so important during these times. That is what this CEO network is about - and has been about for half a decade now. Consistency of collaboration. And so, I cannot think of a better time to bring you all together as leaders from across the country to reaffirm that collaboration and to generate hope. Indeed, thinking not only about how you keep the hope alive for yourselves, but how you act as generators for those around you to keep going and to keep hoping for better.

But as we consider what hope is, I'm aware it can and will mean many things to many different people. But for me, having a psychology background I like this more clinical take on it from Arizona State University and I like it because it makes hope an intentional act:

“In psychology, hope is a cognitive practice that involves the intentional act of setting goals and working toward them with purpose. Optimistic people see the glass as half full, but hopeful people ask how they can fill the glass full.”

This definition implies that while optimism is the attitude, hope is the vehicle that helps us to deliver something. It is intentional.

So let us be intentional in coming together today - in sharing our own experiences of hope, in listening to others' experiences of hope. And let us share the intention to take away the energy this undoubtedly generates at the end of today, to our loved ones, our colleagues and the communities we deeply care about and serve. Let us consider not just how we fill our own glass but how we top up others' too.

The hope and sense of collaboration and support that can be generated through today's range of incredible speakers and your deep connections as colleagues and friends, can send ripples through the system and I hope will lift us all at a time when we likely all need some lifting.

And as for stability and continuity which I did say I would return to, let me just end with this.

We, at Forum Strategy, are here for you. We have been here for you over the last nine or so
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years, we remain here for you and I can say with confidence, we will be here for you in the years that come. Whatever that may hold. There can of course be no promises that the tough times won't keep coming but, as a CEO network, you now have the support and stability to weather these storms together. Alone we are strong...but together we are stronger.