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What does system leadership look like in the English education system in 2023?

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A. Introduction

This thinkpiece is intended to set in context our current understanding of system leadership in the English academy trust system; and how our understanding of system leadership may have evolved, particularly in terms of the role of Chief Executives of academy trusts and their immediate executive teams. The system has moved on from one where the model of school-to-school support and improvement – demonstrated by those such as National and Local Leaders of Education over the previous decade – can be considered to be a cutting edge ‘system leadership’ role. This is now, in theory, embedded within the day-to-day practice of academy trusts and a small number of ‘federations’, though we acknowledge much work remains to be done to equip, develop and sustain school improvement leadership at scale in all trusts - especially those working towards maturity.

We argue that it is now time for us to redefine what system leadership is, particularly in terms of senior trust leaders’ roles, for example - in supporting one another’s development and improvement across trusts themselves; in galvanising goodwill and wide-ranging expertise and capacity across localities to meet pupils’ and communities underlying needs; and in informing and shaping the direction and priorities of the education system as a whole. We believe there is a significant, yet still underdeveloped, opportunity for the Chief Executives of trusts; though a number are already demonstrating the potential of the CEO role for a new kind of system leadership. In considering this we have not only reflected on developments within the English system, but provide reflections on the development of system leadership both outside of the sector, and internationally through the expertise of The Brown Collective.

B. The leap we have taken

The English education system has changed significantly over the last two decades. We have moved from a sector dominated by individual schools, generally working in relative isolation from one another under the overarching oversight of local government, to one where over fifty percent of schools now belong to an academy trust. Academy trusts – which are generally still small groups of schools (the average is currently six or seven¹, though the largest groups run up to around eighty schools) - are bound together by shared corporate governance and legal identity, shared executive leadership, shared workforce, and to varying degrees shared financial management, curricula, and other resources. At their best, they have, first and foremost, internalised the importance and commitment to school-to-school improvement and the strategic sharing of resources and expertise across schools, which is generally overseen and coordinated centrally by executive leaders. This, where practice excels, is complimented by transparency of and responsiveness to data, a culture of peer review and constructive challenge, high quality professional development, and quality assurance, across and between schools. The education system is now one where that word ‘sharing’ defines the relationships between schools internally within these groups and, often, encouragingly, beyond them also.

Academy trusts are now the dominant governance and operational delivery model for schooling in England. Yet, the confidence for and commitment to a shared model of educational delivery and improvement took some time to emerge.

1 [Ofsted Annual Report 2021/22 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100000/Ofsted-Annual-Report-2021-22.pdf)

C. Background to system leadership in the English education system

The system of generally isolated, individual schools did not mould into the academy trust system overnight. Neither did the policies of Michael Gove and the coalition government of 2010 to 2015 form the cultural basis of this new system. In the decade before the Academies Act of 2010², the system had been on a long journey towards a notion of system leadership. An initiative called the London Challenge³, led by Sir George Berwick, had formed the basis for schools and school leaders across the capital working together in sustained and focused partnerships for improvement. Up until this point, the predominant model for improvement where schools were struggling had been to ‘parachute’ an excellent headteacher into a struggling school, removing them from their substantive school in the process (and, very often, their staff would follow them). Indeed, this model was captured in popular culture at the time, when Lenny Henry played the part of a ‘super head’ in the hit BBC television series *Hope and Glory*. In reality, these ‘super heads’ were being rotated around the system – moving from one school to the next, generally achieving positive impact in the schools they moved to, but rarely leaving a legacy of sustainable improvement in the schools they left behind. The London Challenge and the subsequent National Leader of Education model changed that, formalising the notion of system leadership - working across organisations and localities in a sustained way to achieve collective improvement.

The premise of the London Challenge and subsequently the National Leader of Education model was for high-performing headteachers and their staff to remain in their substantive school, whilst providing intensive support to other schools drawing on their expertise, but also the capacity of their staff. The bar was set high to be an NLE⁴. A headteacher, together with their school, had to demonstrate commitment to working with other schools, a strong track record of school improvement, and the capacity for themselves and their team to support others without compromising standards in their substantive school. In return, these headteachers were designated as National Leaders of Education, and their schools were designated as National Support Schools.

This was a big cultural shift – parents needed convincing, staff needed convincing, and subsequent governments needed convincing. Yet, the data showed that not only did these headteachers and schools – generous with their time and driven by moral purpose – achieve improvements in the schools they were supporting; they tended to achieve above average improvements in their own schools also, as staff refined and reflected upon their own practice, and took the best ideas from others⁵. In 2009 The National College for School Leadership asked: “*Where could this lead us?... examples are emerging of chains of schools or local federations of schools working together to secure improvement, supported by overarching chief executive-style leadership and governance structures.*”⁶

2 [Academies Act 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

3 [Case study 5: The London Challenge | The King's Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/case-study/5-the-london-challenge)

4 Schools Leading Schools: the power and potential of National Leaders of Education; NCSL with Matthews and Hill (2008)

5 Schools Leading Schools: the power and potential of National Leaders of Education; NCSL with Matthews and Hill (2008)

6 School Leadership Today; NCSL (2009)

Indeed, soon - with the Coalition Government convinced of the impact of formal school partnerships and quickly overseeing the passage of the Academies Act 2010 - many of these NLEs began formalising their partnerships with their partner schools through the academy trust model, bringing them under shared legal and organisational identity and governance structure. System leadership, as we knew it, appeared to have become rapidly internalised and institutionalised through the academy trust model.

Whilst we are still some way from seeing high quality and mature system leadership internally within all trusts, and much is still needed to be done to achieve maturity in this respect right across the system, we also recognise that there is now a very clear understanding of what this looks like in practice as it has been achieved by many trusts, and there is therefore the ability to codify and replicate it. Therefore, in embarking upon this thinkpiece, we have recognised the English education system has evolved significantly in the last decade, and it is now time to consider system leadership on another plane - as it exists both between academy trusts, and between academy trusts and their wider communities, and the wider education system itself.

D. A wider definition of system leadership

In considering what system leadership is today, both at an organisational and sector level it is important that we should begin by considering it in the broadest possible terms, from which we can begin to put forward a proposition for our purposes in 2023. The Social Care Institute for Excellence puts forward such a well-regarded definition⁷, as follows (underlinings are our emphasis):

System leadership is about building relationships and connectivity across organisations and sectors to drive the improvement, innovation and transformation of services.

Effective system leadership is:

- *shared, participatory, diffused and co-productive*
- *relationship building, personal and person-centred*
- *place-based and community-oriented*
- *adaptive and solution-focused*
- *capable of surfacing conflicts and consensus seeking*
- *primarily accountable to people and communities.*

Many of the examples that follow in this thinkpiece, together with the emerging strands of system leadership, meet these criteria. Indeed, it is helpful to consider, before looking back to our own sector, how system leadership has evolved in other sectors over the past decade.

7 [System-leadership for integrated care | SCIE](#)

E. What does system leadership look like in other sectors?

System leadership in other sectors, particularly the public sector, has, much like education, been a concept discussed and considered for some time, with much of the early research dating back to the early 2000's. But, as with education, the context for many public services has vastly changed and with it, the understanding and application of systems thinking and leadership. Below, we explore some of the thinking offered by the NHS, Staff College, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), Civil Service and Police Service. In doing this, we can learn from some of the latest thinking but also start to gauge where education sits in terms of its progress on system leadership work over the last decade.

The NHS

Across the NHS there has been vast amounts of work shared on system leadership but much of it dates back by five years or more, when the context was very different. There are still, however, some useful ideas from this time period, from which we can learn. For example, in their 2017 publication 'Developing Systems Leadership'⁸, the NHS Leadership Academy succinctly defines system leadership as **“working beyond organisational boundaries on issues of mutual concern that cannot be solved by any one person or institution.”**

The publication offers a system leadership development framework that focuses on four interconnected domains that help in creating the conditions for effective system leadership: individual effectiveness; relationships and connectivity; learning and capacity building; and innovation and improvement. Within this, some key behavioural indicators provide further detail of the kinds of behaviours needed to be effective under each of the four domains. Some examples of developmental activities to support the growth and development of system leaders are also outlined (such as group and individual coaching or mentoring, workshops/training, network development). Without being applied too rigidly, this is an approach that may prove useful when considering the role of trust leaders in system leadership today - providing clarity about not only what system leadership can achieve (the outcomes) but also how we identify and develop those with system leadership capabilities now and in future.

Interestingly, in more recent years, there has been less thinking produced and shared around system leadership as a whole concept, and more on focusing specific work on each of the four core domains (individual effectiveness; relationships and connectivity; learning and capacity building; and innovation and improvement). The fourth in particular - innovation and improvement - has seen a large body of thinking publicly shared. Termed now as 'leading the spread and adoption of innovation and improvement', the work explores how those within the system can lead innovation and improvement service wide, to create a better NHS for patients, staff and communities. Within this, it introduces the concept of 'systems convening' which puts emphasis on defining a way for individuals (working in complex systems such as the NHS or education), who work across disciplines and professional boundaries, to open up dialogue and develop joined up thinking. System conveners are described in simple terms as those who look at the wider landscape in which they operate—this could be an organisation, a city, a community, a country or even the world—and they identify unrealised potential for improvement across traditional boundaries and silos. In practice, they work to open up opportunities for new kinds of conversations and to produce new partnerships between people on different sides of a boundary. This is a shift in focus from the 2017 publication as it starts to recognise the vital role collaboration, partnership working, discussion and innovation have, in driving systemic change and improvement. Moving away from too much

⁸ [Developing Systems Leadership: Interventions, Options and Opportunities; NHS Leadership Academy; 2017](#)

focus on individuals and their behaviours, more towards exploring methods of practice that lead to systemic improvement.

Guidance produced from the NHS in 2022⁹ outlines what the concept of systems convening looks like in practice and also highlights some of the challenges those working in this way are likely to face. Including the challenges of leading through influence rather than power or control; lesser immediate benefits in favour of long-term benefits; vulnerability to political change; highly impactful but often less visible roles, and much more besides. In doing this, it recognises the role of those who seek to lead across the system as challenging and not always obvious, but impactful all the same. There are several interesting case studies showing how those leading across the NHS (and the usual professional boundaries) in this way, has contributed to improved patient, staff and community outcomes: [NHS England » Spread and adoption case studies](#)

Although one might argue, systems convening is just one part of the wider concept of system leadership, it appears symptomatic of the way in which thinking around it has moved on. Drawing focus to activities and ways of working that lead to system wide improvement rather than too narrowly focussing on how individuals should think, act and behave. It allows for more people within (and affected by) the system to contribute rather than those with select roles, behaviours and ways of thinking to be the primary focus. There is a growing body of work and research around this that could prove useful for trust leaders to reflect upon when considering how system leadership in education might look in 2023 and beyond.

The Staff College (formally known as the Virtual Staff College)

Within the earlier NHS work around systems thinking (in 2017), reference is made to a paper produced in 2013 by the (then called) Virtual Staff College, an organisation providing professional support to leaders of Children's Services. The paper titled 'Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times'¹⁰ outlines the findings of a multi-method study on system leadership. It defines system leadership as **"an attempt to effect change for the social good across multiple interacting and intersecting systems, resting on the assumption that better and more efficient public services can result from more joined-up working across multiple service sectors"**. As with other research papers and guidance, the paper goes on to define the behaviours of system leaders but interestingly, also goes a step further in offering thoughts on particular attributes such as the personal values, perceptive abilities and cognitive style of a system leader. Six overarching dimensions are also outlined seeking to define system leadership in practice: ways of feeling; ways of perceiving; ways of thinking; ways of relating; ways of doing; and ways of being. Although the paper does acknowledge that these dimensions are to be used flexibly and are not a 'fixed recipe' for effective system leadership.

There is also a useful model (Figure 1 of the paper) setting out system leaders and system leadership within a wider public services context, which the paper delves into in more detail. Acknowledging the vital role of political and legislative contexts and the role of culture in enabling systems thinking to be effective and importantly, sustainable over time. Although this paper is now a decade old, there is still some useful thinking within it, particularly in exploring the wider impact and roles of a public services context specifically and, the importance of building leadership capacity as well as capability when seeking to improve and transform services.

9 [NHS England » Systems convening](#)

10 [Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times; Virtual Staff College; 2013](#)

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

The SCIE¹¹ has done some very detailed thinking and work around system leadership and offers rich resources to help in shaping thinking in this space, including think pieces, detailed research and case studies which would be impossible to synthesise in this paper as there are so many. It is clear that the SCIE believes that for effective care to be delivered to communities, it must be integrated with other services across the care sector (and beyond it). System leadership is considered the facilitator to achieving integrated care services, through the creation of a shared vision with staff and communities about what the purpose of care is and how it adds value.

The SCIE emphasises the critical role of safe spaces in which all people throughout the organisation can think and act differently to explore new ways of approaching issues and utilising resources, to the delivery of effective care. And as with education, it is clear that through keeping the interests of the communities which it serves at the heart of decisions and through partnerships and collaboration, it can help to create a system that all staff and those who access services can be proud of.

Although there is research linked to and case studies offered through the SCIE, it also recognises that gathering research and evidence to demonstrate improved outcomes as a direct result of system leadership is challenging, as often there are other contributing factors that are difficult to separate out. Instead, it describes numerous examples where system leadership has been shown to be a key enabler to integrated care. This is an important point to consider when thinking about system leadership for education, seeking to define it as a **key enabler** to improving outcomes, not that it, in itself, leads to improved outcomes.

System leadership in practice: A CEO case study from The Kings Fund publication 'The practice of system leadership: Being comfortable with chaos' (2015)

In this case study, Lord Victor Adebowale CBE Chief Executive of Turning Point (a health and social care organisation providing services for people with complex needs) reflects on his experiences of system leadership. Turning Point (in 2015) operated at some 206 locations in England and Wales and employed some 3,800 people, most of whom worked across different locations and settings - from prisons to police stations to hospitals to hostels to people's homes. So very much a system, and a complex one at that. Lord Adebowale gives examples of system leadership across different services, particularly the NHS. But the personal example he draws upon is his leadership of work across the police, social services, health and ambulance services to change the Metropolitan Police's response to people in mental health crisis and through doing this, also shifting the experiences of very vulnerable people. By exploring the issues as an interconnected system and therefore implementing solutions across the

11 [System-leadership for integrated care | SCIE](#)

services involved, there was significant improvement in the experiences of vulnerable people in vulnerable situations.

Lord Adebowale shares a number of characteristics of a successful system leader at CEO level: longevity and in particular, staying in the role long enough to learn through making mistakes; recognising the politics of power and how to manoeuvre within/around these; putting those who use services front and centre - making it impossible for people to hang onto what is not of use to those people.

He ends with describing his future ambition for the system, which is to develop a means by which those who use services, can hold a mirror up to the core business, and hold them to account. He describes how this will be one of the ways 'we' (as a system) force power to take account of its purpose - which is to provide health and social care that makes a difference to the people of this country.

You can read more about Lord Adebowale's experiences here (page 32) and further case studies: https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_file/System-leadership-Kings-Fund-May-2015.pdf

The Police Service

Work on system leadership across the police service is relatively limited, or at least that which is shared widely, is limited. From the little that could be found, as with other sectors, initial work in the police service breaks down system leadership into the key interconnected elements which in this case are: The System (complex systems insight); The Community (coalition building and advocacy tactics); and The Individual (collaborative leadership skills).

In 2022, the College of Policing (CoP) pulled together guidance for leaders at various levels within the service outlining 'Leadership Expectations'¹² and within this, outlining some behaviours for 'leading across boundaries' for all levels, and then breaking down specific expectations for first line leaders all the way up to chief officer level. The expectations provide leaders with an understanding of the types of behaviours needed to demonstrate that they are 'leading across boundaries'. Furthermore, the leadership expectations are then used to inform the CoP's Competency and Values Framework (CVF) which in turn is used to underpin selection and assessment approaches and professional development offers. In essence, the CoP are using an approach that offers some high-level insights on effective behaviours for system leaders (or, in their words, those leading across boundaries) and embedding it, through the CVF, within recruitment, development and promotion opportunities. This is an interesting approach as one could argue that by integrating system leadership into the ways in which we recruit, train and promote individuals, we nurture it at all levels. However, without seeing further detail (and perhaps some case studies) on the outcomes and impact of this approach, it is difficult to say how successful it has been.

System leadership in practice: A case study of structure - the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC)

Formed in 2015, the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) was set up to provide national police coordination and leadership across the 43 police forces of England and Wales. Essentially, establishing an organisation to bring UK police chiefs together to set direction in policing and to drive progress for the public through three main areas: coordination (joining up the operational response to critical national policing issues to deliver services now and also to shape services for the future); collaboration (working in partnership as part of the whole policing system and beyond to improve public safety); and communication (sharing the collective expertise, views and actions of UK police chiefs). Whilst the NPCC cannot possibly cover every aspect of policing (and nor should they, as some aspects should be local force led and driven, taking into account local context), they do cover key areas of national importance (and where the pooling of leadership expertise can lead to service/system wide improvement) such as recruitment, retention and development, digital and technology, the national race action plan and much more.

Funded through contributions from the forces across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, national leads are designated for core areas of system need and they take responsibility for driving progress across key issues. The NPCC works with police chiefs and the police and crime commissioners to set a national vision for the service (the current one is '[Policing Vision 2025](#)') and local forces (and their chiefs) are expected to contribute (and show progress) towards these priorities. This provides an interesting example of system leadership, coordinated through an established, well structured organisation. The approach allows for local context and priorities at force level but where there is need across a particular strategic area nationally, it is picked up and led through a nationally established group of senior leaders who can pool their expertise, help to set priorities and importantly, track progress that can then be reported back to the public.

You can read more about the work and structure of the NPCC here: <https://www.npcc.police.uk/our-work/>

The Civil Service

There has been some very timely guidance shared lately, dating as recently as January 2023. In their guide 'Systems Leadership Guide: how to be a systems leader'¹³ produced by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS), their definition of systems thinking is introduced alongside some practical guidance for implementing systems approaches, including how to shift culture to support systems thinking. The civil service is a prime example of where somewhat distinct departments, teams and business areas must come together to deliver for the public and therefore arguably one of the best examples of where systems thinking can succeed or fail depending upon how well it is utilised and implemented. Without a level of systems thinking, the civil service cannot deliver effectively for the country and it is good to see that recognised through this publication.

In acknowledging that **"systems approaches are essential for delivering credible, viable,**

¹³ [Systems Leadership Guide: how to be a systems leader - GOV.UK](#)

and adaptive plans to achieve complex challenges like net zero” and that this level of thinking takes us closer to ensuring wider societal goals are achieved beyond those directly related to specific teams or departments, the guidance shifts the focus many organisations have on understanding issues and developing goals that fulfil one specific single objective, more towards thinking about approaches to fulfil multiple, higher level goals. In doing this, it also helps to explore solutions that address the root causes of problems rather than continually trying to treat the symptoms. Net zero is a good example of this (and a case study to support this is offered further on). Initiatives to tackle the impact of a high rate of emissions over the years on its own is not enough, we will lose a constant battle. But seeking alongside this, to identify root causes of high emissions and their threat across society, and then implementing the right policy, legislation and education to address them, is vital and considers the bigger picture (and all the subsystems that must work together) to achieve the desired outcome of net zero.

The guide goes on, similar to other publications, to define a set of system leadership behaviours and shares a ‘key principles’ model to guide how individual thinking can be structured around an issue to support a systems thinking mindset. The content of the guide is **“Grounded in the idea that good systems leadership seeks to understand the structural causes of a problem before co-designing and testing solutions that truly address important problem causes”**. In other words, the focus of it is in how we use system thinking to fully understand the root causes of complex issues before moving to the development of solutions to address them.

Interestingly, this guide takes consideration of two main types of ‘systems’ which, depending on the type of system being operated within, informs the approach to system thinking and the potential outcomes. A differentiation is made between ‘soft systems’ and ‘hard systems’. The former encompasses less quantifiable, human behaviour-based issues (such as education or the NHS; or the performance of a team or an organisation) and the latter encompasses physical or technical issues relating to a specific thing (such as an IT system or a car). Soft systems tend towards outcomes that result in collaboration, better understanding of the system and win-wins rather than a single solution or outcome; and hard systems tend towards a known outcome that gives a quantified specific solution. This is useful to consider when we think about learning from other system thinking as it underlines the importance of drawing comparison with those similar to education and avoiding those where the outcomes (and therefore approach) would differ and potentially be too simplistic. It also supports the idea that with complex, human focussed systems such as education, the outcomes achieved through system leadership may not always be entirely quantifiable, although in most cases a level of measurement would be desirable in order to track progress. We may need to think carefully about what those measures ought to be.

Finally, the guidance shares some valuable case studies demonstrating systems thinking across areas of the civil service in practice - some examples are linked below that might be particularly useful for education as they pertain to key issues for education too: net zero, team performance, finance systems and tackling disadvantages.

[Case study 1: Creating a tool to improve net zero policy design](#)

[Case study 3: Improving the performance of a government directorate](#)

[Case study 6: Creating a healthy business finance system in the UK](#)

[Case study 10: Tackling multiple disadvantage](#)

Overall

As an overall picture, there appears to be pockets of the wider public sector that have progressed well with their thinking around system leadership which is helpful as it provides some more recent thinking and some examples from which to learn for system leadership in an educational context. Some key takeaways from cross sector work on this are:

1. There are several practical examples (including formal case studies) of where system leadership has contributed to improved outcomes in other sectors. It is therefore **important and timely for education to be revisiting the work on system leadership** and considering what it looks like in 2023 (and beyond), particularly when the education context has significantly changed and we have many challenges that systems thinking may help to address. Capturing the impact of system leadership across education will be a useful addition to wider sector examples.
2. What many of the examples shared here have in common, particularly those where system leadership can be said to have contributed significantly to improved outcomes, is **a shared vision and a sense of what system leadership looks like in these sectors**. They also depend, to a certain extent, on **a level of central coordination or oversight, and investment in the development of thinking**. In education, and particularly so for trust and trust leaders, we will need to consider to what extent we need this for our sector and once we have that, consider how far we should be linking to other sectors to really achieve system thinking in its widest sense.
3. In considering system leadership definition, frameworks to set out the behaviours and expectations of system leaders (who they are) are helpful to a degree but **perhaps more helpful, are frameworks that describe the principles, activities and ambitions of system leadership (what they do)** so that all can play a role in system improvement and transformation, not just those formally designated as system leaders.
4. **Considering the type of system we are working within (i.e. a soft system with all the complexities that come with human behaviour) is an important part of agreeing the outcomes we want to achieve** (and how measurable they can be) as well as the approach we need to take. Analysis of 'the system' we now work within (and its links of course to the wider societal system it sits within) is as important as defining what we want system leadership to look like.
5. We should see system **leadership as a key enabler to improved outcomes rather than it leading directly to improved outcomes**. Due to the complexity of some systems, particularly education, it will likely be impossible to say that system leadership was directly responsible for improvement and so using nuanced language will allow us to manage expectations and show iterative impact.

Education has the potential to add to these emerging bodies of work and to provide its own examples of where system leadership has led to improved outcomes, particularly for children and young people.

F. What has the academy trust model meant for our understanding of system leadership?

As discussed earlier, the academy trust model has internalised and to a certain degree defined our understanding of system leadership on an across school-to-school level and in terms of school improvement at scale. Many trusts are clear on the skills and attributes required for those in internal 'system' leadership roles, such as School Improvement Directors, Education Directors, specialist leaders and others; this is encapsulated in frameworks such as Forum Strategy's 7 pillars of improvement at scale¹⁴, and training is also available for those in such roles through the government designed National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership¹⁵. Indeed, in his book *Being The CEO*¹⁶ Michael Pain writes about the distinction between leaders of improvement and 'deliverers' of improvement which has helped us to understand the skills, traits and experiences that enable people to make the leap into internal system leadership roles from expert practitioner roles. This kind of system leadership, whilst fundamentally important, is established 'business as usual' in thriving trusts. Where it isn't yet, we now have - in theory - the knowledge and ability in the sector to transfer understanding and practice.

What is clear is that there is now an opportunity emerging for trust leaders - especially Chief Executives and their immediate teams - to take on multi-faceted external system leadership roles, across organisations and sectors. Indeed, this external aspect to system leadership is important when we consider the introduction to the definition in D above: *System leadership is about building relationships and connectivity across organisations and sectors to drive the improvement, innovation and transformation of services*. Many CEOs are already - without any direction or impetus from government - taking on a system leadership role within their communities and across the trust system. Indeed, what makes these emergent forms of system leadership different from former concepts and definitions of system leadership in the English education system, is that these are and will, for the most part (at least in the medium-term), emerge irrespective of government policy or co-ordination, and therefore it is even more important that they are understood and captured by those of us supporting the system itself.

Strands of emerging external system leadership amongst academy trust CEOs and senior leaders

There are, at least, three aspects of system leadership emerging (mostly organically) within the work of numerous trust leaders. These are:

1. Trust to trust support and learning
2. Area-wide / locality leadership
3. Influencing and informing system-level direction and policy

1. Trust to trust support and learning

It is no surprise that those who have a long track record of providing support across organisations (in the guise of school-to-school support) now continue to demonstrate that

14 [7 Pillars of Improvement at Scale | Forum Strategy](#)

15 [National Professional Qualification \(NPQ\): Executive Leadership Framework \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

16 *Being The CEO*; Pain, M; John Catt Educational; 2019

commitment in the trust CEO role- albeit without formal recognition or a national framework for doing so. Certainly, when CEOs are asked which external partners they spend the most time working with, it is clear that it is other trusts.¹⁷ Yet, formal or centrally coordinated opportunities for trust-to-trust support and sharing of practice still remain relatively limited. There is certainly very little in terms of national coordination by a government or sector-level organisation of trust-to-trust improvement and development activity.

Where it is happening, it happens on a continuum from softer forms of sharing to contracted (but often fairly transactional) collaborations.

For example, we know that many CEOs and trusts that are part of Forum Strategy's National #TrustLeaders CEO Network undertake informal visits to one another's trusts. They often meet to share ideas, practice, or to provide mutual support. This is not to be underestimated - and finding the time for and making the commitment to do this on a regular basis is a form of system leadership in itself. It's also right that these interactions do remain relatively informal and sometimes spontaneous. Indeed, one way of bringing an element of formality to these - or at least ensuring they happen and have impact - is for trust boards to recognise the value of them and to ensure they encourage their CEOs to make the time for informal trust to trust learning as an ongoing development priority.

System-leadership in practice; informal trust to trust learning

This podcast¹⁸ from 2022 captures the learning between Focus-Trust and Maritime Trust - two primary trusts based over two hundred miles apart, one in the North West, one in the South East of England. The CEOs of the trusts were brought together by Forum Strategy during the National #TrustLeaders Symposium 2022¹⁹ and were encouraged to share their bold ambitions for their organisations; including where they may need the input and challenge from one another's trusts.

The bold ambition identified by Focus-Trust is #ECR7 – Every Child a Reader by the age of 7. This is because the trust currently has a significant number of children who do not meet the expected standards in reading by the age of 7 and some who do not meet it by age 11, so this is a huge challenge for a number of the schools. Therefore, their bold ambition is that by 2025, every child will meet the expected standard in reading by the end of Year 2.

The bold ambition identified by Maritime Trust is to set up a Saturday school for children across the trust, in order to better address the disadvantage gap – principally to give children access to experiences that traditionally are regular and frequent activities for better-off children. The original plan was that this work would be led by Matthew in the central team and involve headteachers from across the trust who would be part of the working group to develop these plans. However, having been challenged on the day of the Symposium (and subsequently) through their discussions with Helen (CEO of Focus-Trust) and colleagues, Nick (CEO of Maritime Trust) and Matthew realised the key to its success would be to spread the messaging more widely and more rapidly.

Nick described their 'Year 1' ambition as getting the Saturday School up and running, and

17 Being The CEO Survey 2020, 2021 and 2022; Forum Strategy

18 [#TrustLeaders InTheLoop – Episode Eight | Forum Strategy](#)

19 [National #TrustLeaders Symposium 2022 | Forum Strategy](#)

then once it is established, Year 2 being about making the best use of that precious time and enhancing the offer to pupils, with Year 3 realising the impact of those experiences back in school through behaviours and other outcomes.

Helen and Nick and colleagues agreed to have regular scheduled meetings to hold each other's trusts to account for developing and subsequently realising the outcomes of their respective 'bold ambitions'. Colleagues from both trusts agreed that the dynamic of the relationship they have developed as a consequence of the Symposium and their follow-up work is key to achieving their ambitions going forward. Since they first met in June 2022 the two trusts have had half termly virtual meetings to share and review progress and practice. All colleagues involved in these conversations find them a valuable time to pause and reflect on progress towards their Bold Ambition, to consider the impact they've had to date and a chance to challenge each other further. They're very grateful to Forum Strategy for bringing them together.

More formally, we have seen some trusts 'loaning' out key members of staff - such as Chief Operating Officers or School Improvement Directors - to work with other trusts where capacity is needed due to absence or unforeseen resignations; or where a smaller or emerging trust cannot yet afford to fill a key vacancy. Whilst it is clear that the trust providing the individual employee can 'charge out' for their time, and generate some income, it must also be recognised that in doing so they are giving up some practical capacity in the process and are often - where organisation building is involved - willing to release intellectual property and expertise for the good of the wider system. This approach to system building should continue to be encouraged where possible, and, in our view, we must do more as a system to encourage and recognise the contributions being made here.

Even more formally, and with greater risk, we have seen examples of trusts and CEOs taking on interim support of other trusts - alongside their substantive posts - when another trust (often local to them) gets into a very challenging situation. This, in some cases, goes above and beyond what we have seen even in the most formal system leadership roles of the past, as CEOs and executives take on formal organisational responsibility for the other's trust. One of the first major examples of this took place in 2022:

System leadership in practice; Wayne Norrie takes on interim-CEO role alongside substantive post

Following a two-day inspection in early 2022, The Harlow School, which was part of The Evolve Trust based in Mansfield, was closed. According to local news reports "The school had prompted a raft of complaints from parents and education chiefs had also raised concerns at the closure."²⁰ Immediately, The Evolve Trust reassured the community that it would be appointing new leadership, an interim CEO and executive headteacher. Interestingly, rather than bring in independent individuals or consultants, the trust and school was able to immediately draw upon the support of Wayne Norrie, CEO of the neighbouring Greenwood Academies Trust, who took on the role of interim CEO of the trust alongside his substantive

20 [New interim CEO of troubled Mansfield educational trust aims to 'transform lives' in new role | Mansfield and Ashfield Chad](#)

role. Meanwhile interim executive leadership of the school was also provided by Luci Windle, who was seconded to the academy from the Nexus Trust. Working together, the two trusts sought to put in place the support required, and to ensure sufficient staffing and resources were in place. A key aspect in the response was the power of two trusts working together to support another.

According to news reports, parents were immediately reassured by the changes put in place by the interim leadership and support from the two other trusts respectively²¹. Indeed, the school was again inspected in the Summer of 2022 and praised for the improvements that had been put in place since the previous inspection. It has since joined the Nexus Trust.

Wayne has reflected since on the support he provided to Evolve as interim CEO: "It was possible because I had the capacity and the systems in place within my substantive trust - Greenwood Academies in order to be free to provide this support alongside my day job. I also had the support of the board, and the partnership with Nexus and the support of other CEOs was hugely important. My becoming interim CEO also gave people at Greenwood the opportunity to step up and develop further as trust leaders, and in fact we achieved our best results yet in 2022 whilst providing this trust-to-trust support. We're seeing more leaders grow and develop within Greenwood, and many are going on to senior executive leadership positions in other trusts which is fantastic to see."

Trust peer to peer review

One more formal example of trust-to-trust support and improvement that is steadily emerging is that of peer-to-peer review between trusts. There are now a number of organisations that provide a framework and facilitation for trusts to embark on working with others to identify their key areas for development, to review one another's practice in a given area, and to provide constructive feedback and, in some cases, follow-up support and advice. One such example is the MAT Partnership Programme delivered by the Education Development Trust .

System leadership in practice; Trust to Trust peer review with the MAT Partnership Programme (MPP)

In this series of VLOGS, the CEO of Pathfinder Trust, Ann Davey and the CEO of Ethos Academy Trust, Jayne Foster, speak in depth about their experience of undertaking a trust to trust peer review together through the MAT Partnership Programme. The two CEOs had met as part of Forum Strategy's Being The CEO programme a few years previously, and had developed a good relationship based on ongoing dialogue and visits to one another's trust. The two trusts are geographically distant, with Ethos based in Yorkshire, and Pathfinder based in Northamptonshire. As Jayne Foster explains " I still see Ethos Academy Trust as a relatively new trust being three years old, and I still regard myself as a relatively new CEO. In that time we have learnt so much, but we also recognise we have so much to learn... we

21 [Parents hail improvements at troubled special school near Mansfield | Mansfield and Ashfield Chad](#)

also have a commitment to continuous learning with other trusts and have always been outward-facing and intend to continue to be so.” Meanwhile Ann Davey adds: “we knew one of the most important things for a successful peer review was trust, and to be prepared to be vulnerable. To share our weaknesses and our strengths in order to genuinely learn and improve together.” The two trusts identified areas where they required review and support from the other, and the process - through careful facilitation - allowed the trusts to share and reflect in-depth on their development and identify next steps for improvement.

Indeed, whilst instigated and driven by the CEOs initially, the process has opened up partnerships and collaboration between leaders at all levels of the trusts, who are sustaining the peer to peer work between the trusts in various guises. Ann describes this as ‘the long lasting ripples’, that are so often the result of great system leadership.

You can find out more about the trust to trust peer review here: [A MAT-to-MAT peer review journey - Schools Partnership Program \(schoolspartnershipprogramme.com\)](https://www.schoolspartnershipprogramme.com) (Please note that the Schools Partnership Programme is part of a paid for partnership with Forum Strategy)

Trust to trust traded services

It could be argued that we should add trust to trust traded services here. Whilst this is an approach that allows for trusts to specialise in a particular aspect of educational delivery, and for those accessing the services to access capacity and expertise from their peer organisations; we are not convinced that this fully meets the definition of system leadership - as it is more purely commercial than the other examples given. Examples of this may be the provision of traded IT services to other trusts; the provision of catering services; or professional development courses.

That said, we believe it is important that the CEOs and trust leaders delivering these services should be recognised for identifying a key system-wide need; and that they have an important system leadership role to play in championing their areas of specialism across the system and ensuring that discussion and thought-leadership is taking place. For example, a CEO or senior trust leader overseeing the provision of educational psychology services to numerous trusts and schools, could be expected to be a key voice on issues in relation to this service at a regional and national level, and to advocate and encourage higher standards through cutting edge research and insight. Some CEOs increasingly see themselves operating in this space, especially when it is also a key strategic priority for their own trust and its communities.

2. Area-wide / locality leadership

“No child is an island; no MAT is an island; no institution can be.” Katrina Morley, Tees Valley Education Trust

We are seeing many Chief Executives of trusts take on more of a community-leadership role. This is driven by a sense of opportunity to be able to mobilise more expertise, capacity and

support beyond the school gates to contribute to making a difference to pupils' learning, healthy development and aspiration. It is also driven by the fact that trust leaders are in a unique position, because of the scale they operate at and their profile across a locality, to bring influential people and organisations together around these issues that matter so much to them and their organisations.

As Katrina Morley articulates so well, no school or trust is an island, and children and young people grow and develop as part of a wider community. Academy trusts are in a unique position whereby their schools are serving children, parents, a significant workforce; and where trusts are locality based they, inherently, have a key presence across their communities. Indeed, as Michael Pain said in his speech to the National #TrustLeaders CEO Conference in 2019, 'nothing binds together a community like service to the next generation.'²²

What is becoming evident is that where CEOs take a lead, especially where their trusts have a strong locality presence, they can galvanise support and generate capacity in the best interests of pupils. This is partly about opening doors, but also about bringing others into a shared vision and ambition for their localities, and ensuring that organisations and individuals work together with sustained impact and innovation.

Examples of this include a CEO who has developed relationships with a local airport and football club (based in the same town as the majority of his schools) to deliver a shared approach to work experience opportunities, physical and mental wellbeing support, and even the letting out of school car parks to generate income for the trusts schools during the Summer holidays. Other examples, as we will see shortly, include building strategic partnerships with local employers, charities, and health services in order to find common solutions to collective challenges/opportunities for their communities.

Indeed, we often see trusts and their leaders begin to align the identity and the communications of the trust with the community's identity itself, in order to help generate a shared sense of connection and commitment. This, where it happens, can be very powerful. It is clear that CEOs and their teams, if they are to realise the potential to be system leaders in this new era, need to deliberately recognise themselves not simply as leaders of schools or education systems, but as 'civic leaders'. This generates some questions.

Some key reflections here may include:

- What are some of the key skills that CEOs need for area-wide / locality leadership?
- What kind of strategies work in establishing and sustaining strategic and impactful area-wide partnerships?
- What does success look like and how do we measure it?

22 [Michael Pain's Opening Keynote Speech to the National #TrustLeaders Conference 2019 - YouTube](#)

System leadership in practice: Links with local employers; The Education Alliance (TEAL)

A key part of TEAL's vision is not only to prepare their students for employment, but also to give this preparation a central place in the curriculum across its schools. CEO, Jonny Uttley and, Director of Employability, Sarah Barley were clear that links with local employers would be key to raising aspiration and opening doors for pupils, as well as ensuring that the curriculum remained at the cutting edge.

This was the impetus that led Sarah, with the support of Jonny, to seek out and develop partnerships with business and industry in the local community that would help bring employability to life and allow students to understand the links between the classroom and employment.

Sarah attended local networking events, including BizWeek in Hull, to get to know the local business community and build connections. Siemens Gamesa, a flagship local employer, who had a new factory in the local area, were very interested in supporting students at TEAL to learn more about careers, and to help them to link their work at school with the world of work. They also appreciated the opportunity to share what kind of jobs were available within their business, promote themselves as a local employer, and encourage young talent. At the same time TEAL wanted to help students become more aware of different local career opportunities, make links between the school curriculum and the world of work, and develop their employability skills.

As a result, in 2016 the partnership between TEAL and Siemens Gamesa was born. Led by Sarah, TEAL recruited a number of staff from Siemens Gamesa to act as industry mentors. Those staff came into schools and delivered assemblies, one-to-one mentoring, and workshops to support employability and promote young people's understanding of STEM careers. They also ran a project - the Green Power project - for students interested in becoming engineers. This involved students building an electric racing car after school, and then attending events and racing with it, including the Hull Street Race.

What is clear from these examples of locality or area-based system leadership, we can see they are so often driven by a trust vision that reflects the particular needs and aspirations of these communities, an idea that is central to the concept of Thriving Trusts. Indeed, CEOs and their teams tend to be significantly driven by this, and it helps them to connect and inspire others across communities who they may not necessarily have formal leadership or managerial responsibility for, or resources to share with, to work with them on cross-organisational initiatives that make a difference. The ability to bring local partners into the process of the trust's visioning and strategy can help to forge links; inform a deeper understanding of community issues, challenges, and aspirations; and generate a sense of collective commitment across organisational boundaries.

In building partnerships and locality-level initiatives, we are also seeing CEOs use their influence and reach at a national level to bring on board key regional and local partners

to add capacity and expertise at a local level. One such example is that taken by Marino Charalambous at North Star Community Trust, which has not only developed a key locality-level service, but in doing so has brought on board international charity, Save The Children as a key partner.

System leadership in practice; Developing and providing outreach services across a locality; North Star Community Trust

“I knew that in the first year, it was important as CEO to be actively supporting this initiative and getting involved in lots of the various activities.”

Marino Charalambous is the Chief Executive of North Star Community Trust in North London, educating 2,600 pupils, employing over 350 members of staff, and working with the wider community to develop over 100 trained volunteers.

A key part of the trust’s vision is to ensure that families are supported and engaged with the life of the schools and in their children’s learning and development. Engaging and supporting families is fundamentally important to the trust as it serves one of the most deprived parts of the country and its schools are made up of more than 75 different nationalities. 33% of households claim Universal Credit and there are very high levels of children receiving free school meals and who have English as an Additional Language (EAL).

To achieve this vision, Marino knew instinctively that the trust needed a radically different approach, but - at least initially - there wasn’t a large unallocated pot of money to buy people, expertise and services in. Partnerships were key, as was making the most of the capacity and skills of people across and beyond the organisation as the solution had to be achieved - at least initially - at net zero cost. Drawing on three teaching assistants, he created a central Community Outreach team and gave them a base to ensure a greater presence and the ability - in time - to run a large range of onsite courses for parents and families with a number of partner organisations. The schools did lose part of a TA but leaders recognised that the results from Outreach work would far outweigh their loss.

To launch the team and the service to families Marino began simply, so that large numbers of children and parents could easily get involved. The team began by encouraging families to read together and called it their ‘Read Aloud’ campaign, modelling it on a successful idea from the USA. There were lots of very low-cost activities including free book swaps and storytelling after school. The marketing team began to promote it extensively and critically, the Outreach team was in the playground every day talking to families, something they continue to do to this day to build their direct relationships with families.

As the initiative developed, and trustees allocated funding and management capacity, broader partnerships were pursued; most notably that with Save The Children. Marino outlined the trust’s vision and ambitions, and its commitment to working with a national partner who could bring such valuable experience and expertise to the table. He worked

with the organisation to understand what their most impactful programmes were in terms of parental engagement, identifying the Families and Schools Together (FAST). The programme - aimed at increasing parents' ability to help learning in the home and to improve family relationships - came with a warning. This was an activity across 10 weeks that would need to involve 60 parents and children in each school, plus a further 10 parents and other volunteers to run the events, and it would need to feed everybody each week. It was a huge challenge but Marino knew that if they pulled it off it would give a huge boost to the team and it would set out the scale of their ambition. Word of mouth travelled quickly!

As Marino explains: "The FAST programme was transformative for so many of our families. The Outreach team exceeded all expectations and were so successful that Save the Children later sent a team of their senior managers to study why it had been so successful in the schools. Tracking the children showed a 25% improvement in educational performance as well as many other benefits, such as better behaviour in the classroom and at home." Building on this initial success, the Community Outreach team now runs over 30 courses, in addition to events, with a range of voluntary and educational partners, from English Language classes to learning to cook from fresh ingredients, from supporting children with their homework to first aid sessions. The trust runs parent cafes and has created its own libraries. It has also set up hardship and uniform funds. Parents can speak confidentially to the Outreach team about family problems. Indeed, the strength of community partnership and involvement is such that the trust has now created and trained a team of over 100 parent volunteers who directly support the schools. All schools now employ parents who have progressed from volunteers into paid employment.

The closeness to families and the sheer numbers who engage with Outreach activities mean that early intervention work can take place where it is needed. Outreach work very closely in this regard with the central Safeguarding team. Families are now supported in their health care, in increasing their parental and job skills needs, from nursery until the end of Sixth Form. Outreach is able to offer parents in their pregnancies - and those in the wider community - regular on site ante and post-natal services in partnership with the local NHS Trust, as well as regular community dentist sessions.

The Outreach Service has been praised nationally by Save the Children and The Children's Society.

Forum Strategy members can read the full case study at: [The transformative power of parental and community engagement | Forum Strategy](#)

As with earlier system leadership roles, such as National Leaders of Education, it is likely that this strand of system leadership amongst CEOs will evolve to become a fundamental part of the organisation's approach; especially as we come to realise the power and potential of trusts being at the heart of their communities as outlined in the Thriving Trusts thinkpiece.

3. Informing regional and national system policy and direction

The third key strand to system leadership as we see it in this evolving system, is the role of

CEOs and senior trust leaders in informing and influencing policy and direction.

What formal roles currently exist at this level?

In terms of formal system roles for CEOs and trust leaders - very few currently exist. The Department for Education (DfE) has, over the last few years, created the role of 'headteacher boards', which are now known as 'advisory boards' and exist regionally. The advisory boards - the members of which are elected by their peers - are responsible for advising and challenging Regional Directors on academy-related decisions.

Advisory boards (ABs) use knowledge, professional expertise, and experience to consider proposals brought forward under the regional director's decision-making framework and offer advice and challenge to the regional director to inform those decisions.

Where a regional director wishes to make a decision that is not in line with the advice of its AB, the decision must be escalated. All AB members have equal status. Members of ABs tend to be:

- former academy headteachers
- CEOs of multi-academy trusts or business leaders
- playing a non-executive role

The DfE also regularly convene what they describe as 'Expert Groups' to advise them on issues of policy development. These are very limited in terms of the numbers of CEOs involved, and have sometimes been subject to criticism for a lack of clarity around how members are identified for such responsibilities and the credentials required to join such groups. It is important that CEOs across the system have strong confidence in how these groups are convened and how they operate, and we would suggest that greater transparency and clearer criteria are needed around these groups in order to contribute to a healthy culture of system leadership in the sector.

Influencing through thought-leadership

One very clear, although largely informal, way in which CEOs and executive leaders are influencing is through writing and speaking - sharing blogs on issues such as the education white paper; recruitment and retention issues; school improvement at scale; and more. We often see a number of CEOs speaking regularly at conferences - sharing the work of their trusts and the impact they have had, or contributing to articles in the national press. Social media provides another, yet too often polarising, dimension to engaging in debate and discussion.

System leadership in practice; Dr. Paul Heery's Blog

One excellent example of this in action is Dr. Paul Heery's blog. Paul is one of a number of CEOs who writes quite frequently setting out his views on key trends and policy in the sector, his own experience of leadership; and how - potentially - the sector can adapt and respond. One recent blog, produced in early 2023, set out some of the key issues that Paul, as a CEO,

felt needed to be prioritised in the coming year - such as SEND, recruitment, and funding - with a clear rationale based on evidence and experience. Another recent blog set out, as objectively as possible, what in Paul's view were the key questions that any school looking to join a trust should be asking CEOs - a hugely valuable resource.

These blogs and articles help to do a number of things. They help to raise the profile of the issues via their readership who, through social media, can be widely influential. They provide an impetus for discussion and the sharing of ideas and resources between CEOs, executive leaders and trusts. And, they can also provide leaders a sense of togetherness when issues that so many are facing are articulated and collectively discussed via online forums and follow up meetings, for example.

You can read Dr. Heery's blog here: [Dr Heery - Dr Heery \(drheeryedublog.com\)](https://drheeryedublog.com)

Whilst this is very positive and should be encouraged, it is clear that not all leaders - including many highly experienced and impactful CEOs - feel as comfortable as others in engaging in this, and that some support or training may be required to encourage greater numbers to use their platforms in a way that contributes to thinking, support and ideas sharing that supports the development of the wider system. This is important so that a growing and diverse range of voices and experiences are heard.

Involvement in national and regional networks and partnerships, within and beyond the sector

The opportunities to influence and inform also come through networking and membership of various groups regionally and nationally.

Organisations such as Forum Strategy, CST, and NGA often bring trust leaders together around big issues in order to identify key trends and to inform the wider system of the challenges they face, how they are responding, and how national policy could support progress and solutions. These opportunities can often take the form of roundtable discussions, consultations, and/or written reports. There is no doubt that many of these outputs are seen by ministers and policy makers, as these professional support organisations work hard to share them at this level.

Indeed, membership of such organisations also helps to share and disseminate best practice, as they so often capture the work and experiences of trust and school leaders through articles and case studies.

Other sector level organisations that trust leaders can, and do often contribute towards, are the professional associations (such as ASCL and NAHT) and expert and specialist groups such as NASEN (National Association for Special Educational Needs).

Beyond the sector, we know that there is also opportunity for CEOs to engage with a range of bodies such as the local chamber of commerce, the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, and education action boards (such as those across the north of England), all of which play an important role informing policymakers and advocating on behalf of their areas and regions.

System leadership in practice; Trust Leaders roundtable with Ofsted on the development of accountability of academy trusts

In 2018, Forum Strategy hosted a roundtable discussion between a number of CEOs from across our network, and a senior representative of Ofsted. The intention of the roundtable was to reflect on Ofsted's potential approach to evaluating or inspecting trusts, and was an opportunity for the body, through structured discussion, to hear the views and experiences of trust leaders themselves.

A copy of the roundtable report - which was shared with Ofsted and disseminated across the system - can be accessed here: [FINAL-Forum-Education-Policy-Roundtable-Spring-2018.pdf](https://forumstrategy.org/FINAL-Forum-Education-Policy-Roundtable-Spring-2018.pdf) (forumstrategy.org)

G. Some key questions for system leadership in 2023?

We believe this thinkpiece raises some important questions on system leadership as it applies to the growing academy trust sector, and the role of CEO and executive leaders:

- Should system leadership be more formalised than it currently is? Is it right to be left to evolve and develop iteratively - as it currently seems to be? Or should there be greater central efforts to define, co-ordinate and invest in system leadership working across the trust sector?
- Are there more categories of system leadership at this level than the three strands outlined? If so, what do these examples look like?
- What are the key skills for the emerging three strands of system leadership identified:
 - Trust to trust support
 - Locality-based leadership
 - Informing and influencing regional and national policy
- How do we best develop those key skills?
- How do we support more CEOs and executive leaders to develop and practice as system leaders?
- Should more be done to measure the impact of system leadership at this level; what would that look like?
- How do we properly recognise and celebrate the work of system leaders in today's context?

These questions will now be taken forward by a Professional Learning Community initiative led by Forum Strategy. The groups of established CEOs will meet until the Summer of 2023, with more groups set to run in late 2023. The first groups will report on their thinking in September 2023.

H. Reflections from an international perspective; how does England's journey compare with others, and what can we learn from international developments?

System leadership is of keen interest globally as policymakers and leaders themselves recognise that a collective, cross-school approach to school improvement is necessary to meet the demands of increasingly uncertain and complex societies. Interest in system leadership is of equal concern in both centralised and decentralised systems. The current focus on system leadership seems driven by several factors. These include a better understanding of how people learn, what and how we teach, a global shift from access to equity, the push and pull for equity and increasing recognition of the value of the collective. These have been encoded in policy texts (e.g. student learning & performance standards) and the design of policy technologies (e.g. curriculum, student assessments, textbooks). The dominant driver internationally of system leaders appears to be the quest for equity and sharing the privilege, knowledge, and expertise of more successful and better-resourced institutions with those in more challenging circumstances. It rests on the belief that different groups working together can create almost boundless possibilities and success beyond what individual units can achieve.

We have collected our comments in seven emerging themes which aim to capture the essence of system leaders - what they do. We do not claim these are comprehensive; they are proposed to continue and stimulate further discussion about system leadership.

System leaders as:

-  **Sense makers and translators**
-  **Distributors of leadership within and across systems**
-  **Weavers of conditions which nurture learning, performance and connection**
-  **Network architects, builders, spanners, energizers and brokers**
-  **Agile pilots connecting micro with macro system levels**
-  **Contextualizers, partners and strategizers of policy growth and enactment.**
-  **Touchstones of purpose**

Seven system leadership themes

The seven themes are listed below.

1. Sense makers and translators

The importance of system leaders as sense-makers is common across international systems. To drive excellence and equity, system leaders must make sense of the complex environment

within which they lead, help others make sense of the changes happening and needed, and the tsunami of ideas and innovations flowing into their systems. Working in such an environment calls on leaders to have a *future orientation*, be *intentionally reflective* and acutely aware of their *ever-shifting settings*. For leaders, it is about clarifying the *why* for change and *why* a systems approach is the best way to improve student learning and lives. For this to happen, system leaders learn to make sense of the policy and the pragmatic environment for themselves. Before they do this, they cannot help nor motivate others toward excellence. Helping others make sense of change is about purpose, vision and understanding the dissonance between what is, and what needs to be improved. Helping all system actors make sense of both ways and means calls for system leaders to translate ideas, policies, and processes in ways that other leaders, teachers, parents, and the wider community can understand and apply in their roles. In other words, to help others make sense, they learn to talk in multiple 'languages'.

2. Distributors of leadership within and across systems

There is growing international recognition that for systems to effect meaningful change, leadership must be distributed within and across educational institutions and systems. System leadership is not restricted to those at the 'top-end' of systems; it is intentionally distributed both broadly and deeply throughout the system, from boardrooms to classrooms to home dining rooms. This is not to downplay the vital role of higher-placed leaders - without them, nothing can happen. Top-level leaders set the vision, interpret the environment, and nurture the conditions and relationships needed for educational institutions and professionals to work together. However, real change and greater equity are unlikely to happen unless teachers, principals, department heads, boards, and community groups see improvement as a shared, system-wide responsibility. Change across systems often involves a redistribution of resources, which means some sacrifice for the greater good; without a density of leadership, this is difficult. For example, approaches to system change in China prioritise lower-performing rather than higher-performing schools, rely on and utilise the resources of better-performing schools to support lower-performing schools, employ professional development systems that continually increase school quality, cultivate cross-school instructional leaders, and grant them honours and responsibilities and build a truly professional, distrusted model of teaching and teachers (Qian & Walker, 2020²³). Whereas the institution of such policies flows from a strong centralised system, they cannot work without engaging multiple leaders and multiple levels. System leaders internationally want leadership to emerge from all corners of the system.

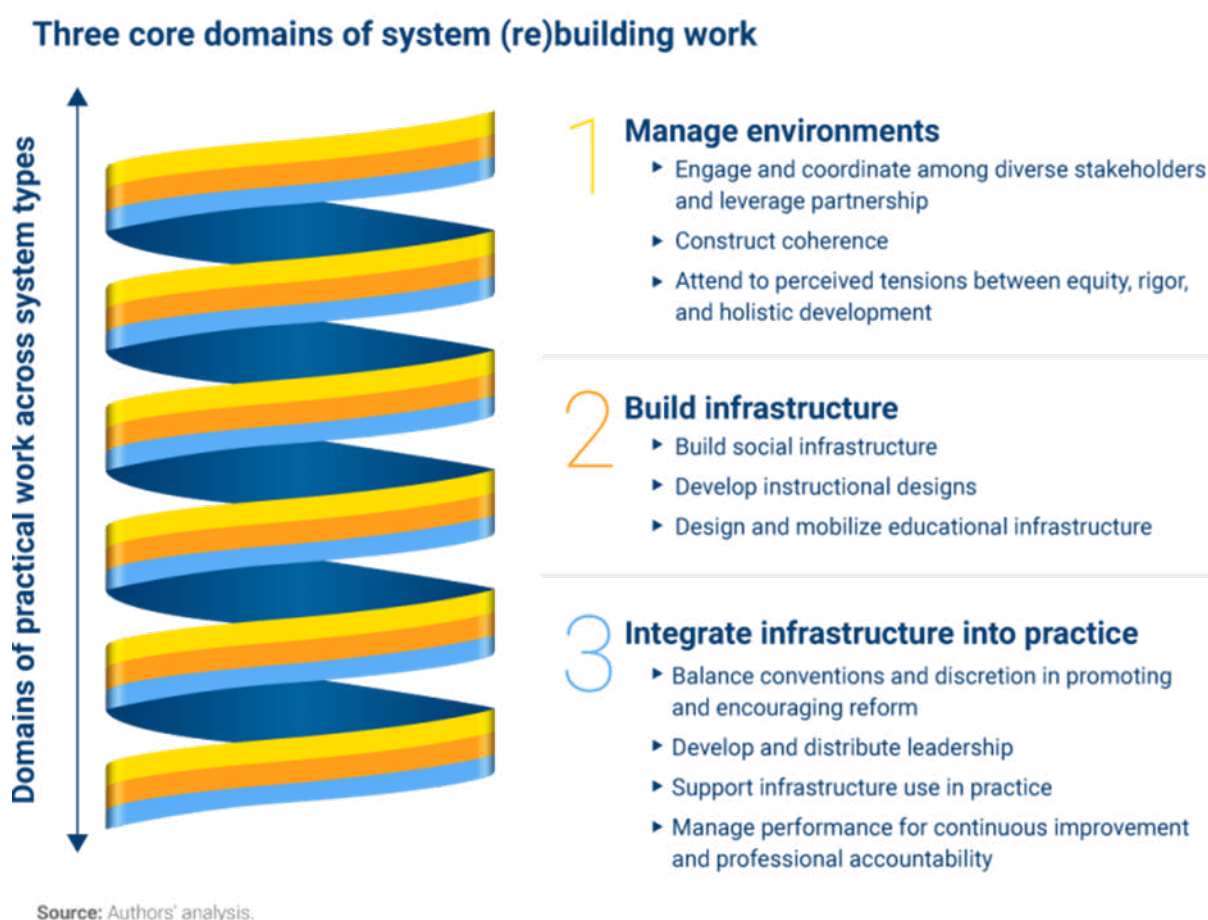
3. Weavers of conditions which nurture learning, performance, and connection

System leaders internationally nurture conditions which allow systems to flourish and innovate and staff and students to learn and grow. These conditions are necessary for sustaining innovation, responsibility, accountability, commitment, and energy. Critical conditions internationally include high levels of trust built upon honesty, protection (buffering) of professionalism and instructional time, respect, equality, transparency, and creativity. System leaders build and sustain structures which relentlessly focus on improving organisational and workforce capacity – teacher learning and agency are acknowledged as the key to improvement across the system. Capability-building structures intentionally cross

²³ Qian, H., & Walker, A. (2020). System reform in China: Mobilising and sharing resources across schools. In M. Jones, & A. Harris, A. (Eds), *Leading and transforming education systems: Evidence, insights, critique and reflections* (33-46). Springer Nature, Singapore.

organisational boundaries and focus on getting teachers ‘talking to each other regularly about teaching’ – they understand building professional relationships, and feedback loops are vital for systems to keep learning.

Datnow et al. (2022)²⁴ studied seven international systems, focusing on how they build (or rebuild) systems specifically for holistic student development. They asked two key questions. Their empirical question looked for evidence that it is possible to (re)build academically focused education systems to support holistic student development. All seven systems operated in policy contexts pursuing academic excellence and equity but also explicitly enacted incentives to enhance holistic student development. The research concluded that ‘... system transformation involves three key interrelated and overlapping domains of system (re)building work: *manage environments*, *build infrastructure*, and *integrate infrastructure into practice*.’ (p 6.). See the framework which they suggest can guide system transformation in Figure 2. Their detailed domains provide useful indicators of the conditions seen as important to system leaders internationally.



4. Network architects, builders, spanners, energizers, and brokers

Networks are the essence of systems and system leadership internationally. System leaders work across multiple boundaries (often simultaneously) for individual entities to form

²⁴ Datnow, A., Park, V., Peurach D., & Spillane J. (2022, September). Transforming education for holistic student development learning from education system (re)building around the world. Center for Universal Education at Brookings, Washington, DC, USA.

functioning, productive systems. Without boundary spanners, systems risk losing connection and stalling or spiralling downwards. All levels of system leaders are responsible for 'working across boundaries' regardless of their form, while higher-level leaders model the importance and exercise of boundary spanning. Boundaries can be horizontal, vertical, stakeholder, demographic, geographic, cultural or relational, to name but some.

Boundary spanning internationally relates to both strategy and action, i.e., system leaders consciously (often very busily) work across multiple boundaries using different practices for specific purposes. These include *Buffering*, or defining boundaries to create safety, *Reflecting*, or creating an understanding of boundaries to foster respect, *Connecting*, which involves suspending boundaries to build trust, *Mobilising*, to reframe boundaries to develop community, *Weaving*, or interlacing boundaries to advance interdependence and *Transforming*, or cross-cutting boundaries to enable reinvention (Ernst, & Chrobot-Mason, 2010²⁵). Successful system leader boundary spanners are personally credible across their systems, possess outstanding interpersonal skills (emotional intelligence), stay in touch with their stakeholder's opinions and communicate consistent messages.

Boundary practices relate to the developmental stage of the system. At different times system leaders may need to focus more on clarifying system-wide professional values, designing and building formal and informal system infrastructure, defining roles, and establishing routines. At other times they may concentrate on actively and intimately spanning newly entrenched boundaries or pumping energy into established systems to keep them 'sparking'. Energising systems may entail promoting aspirational thinking across boundaries, where people (and systems) conceive success as valuable wherever it occurs within a larger system, not just their own educational institution.

A further important role for system leaders as boundary spanners across contexts are 'knowledge' and 'learning' brokers. As such, they help different parts of systems overcome organisational, social, and relational barriers and facilitate opportunities for different system individuals and communities to meet, talk, exchange and interact. This is particularly important for enhancing student learning and building teacher capacity. Although not always easy, system leaders internationally place high importance on weaving and sustaining the infrastructure and fostering networks and interactions across organisations and other supportive system (or ecosystem) components.

5. Agile pilots connecting micro with macro system levels

The previous point stressed the importance of multi-directional boundary spanning in systems around the globe. Complex systems call for different levels of systems thinking and boundary spanning - vertical, horizontal, and 3-dimensional. This point stresses the importance of system leaders, particularly higher-level leaders, being able to connect micro and macro levels, for example, teachers with system purpose, teachers with students, policymakers with student perspectives. System leaders are agile enough to connect with and understand students and connect their needs with what the system does and why it does it. They see the importance of bringing the range of micro levels together with the wider macro level to stay focused on student needs and releasing student voice within their communities.

25 Ernst, C., & Chrobot-Mason, D. (2010). *Boundary spanning leadership: Six practices for solving problems, driving innovation, and transforming organizations*. McGraw Hill Professional, New York.

6. Contextualizers, partners and strategizers of policy growth and enactment

System leaders internationally enact policy within their organisations and systems. But they do not see themselves as just implementers but as partners and strategizers through policy-making and policy enactment. This role is built upon their partnerships with different actors within their systems. They work with and through policymakers to connect the needs of students in their system and individual schools with proposed policies, working to ensure relevance within and across their communities. Working to shape policy and subsequent enactment calls for courage, a deep knowledge of their system's communities and a dedication to 'reality'. As partners, they demand input into high-level policy, whether it relates to curriculum, resource allocation, professional development emphasis or personnel structures and processes. As strategizers, system leaders maintain a future orientation and collect and use relevant data to input into the system. They do not wait for policy to be 'done to them' but work to shape policy and help embed the values and tenets across their systems before major change arrives

7. Touchstones of purpose

System leaders internationally safeguard the purpose of the system - to provide an equitable system whose sole purpose is to improve the learning and lives of the students and the betterment of their immediate and broader communities. System leaders ensure this purpose stays at the forefront of discussions and continually remind people within and beyond the system. The purpose drives the system's vision and mission and feeds system, school-level, and classroom goals. They adhere to and champion the purpose even as complexity swirls around. The seven systems studied by Datnow, and her colleagues (2022) focused on holistic student development – this was their purpose. Interestingly the research found that the systems bore “remarkable similarity to system (re)building for *academic development*, though imbued with new concern for *moral legitimacy and responsibility* alongside established concern for *pragmatic legitimacy and technical effectiveness*” (p. 6, emphasis in original).

Although not included explicitly in the above themes, one point cuts across all seven. System leaders care. System leaders care deeply about the success and happiness of their students, colleagues, and communities. They also care for themselves, not in a selfish way, but know that to do their work; they must look after their physical and mental health, have an ongoing learning orientation and stay interested in things 'outside of work.' Like all of us, they also need to be valued and acknowledged for their work, which can be easily lost in complex systems. A big part of this is the professional development needed by future system leaders.

At a base level, much of what is written about system leadership resonates with what we know about successful leadership in educational institutions across different settings. This is how it should be. However, as we work to build cadres of system leaders, our professional development needs to be geared more toward leading across boundaries, not just within organisations. Such development seems to be the joint responsibility of systems in partnership with universities and government accreditation agencies. Professional development for system leaders at all levels may incorporate, for example, increased emphasis on relationship building, network construction, sustainability and expanding mindsets.

Conclusion

System leadership is concerned with how to lead and manage a complex and rapidly changing system with fluid boundaries in an increasingly volatile world, yet somehow still create outcomes that achieve cherished values, and important results, within trajectories of continuous, transformative reform (Hargreaves, 2020²⁶). Exploring the expression of system leadership from different contexts validates an emerging set of individual professional practices and behaviours. The seven themes outlined above have degrees of resonance and nuance to the English system insights around system leadership drawn from a diverse range of organisational settings. These are system leaders being and acting as boundary spanners; network builders; building relationships; meaning makers; lattice leaders, or weavers of high-impact conditions such as the high levels of professional trust and the ability to pivot back to their personal 'why?'-the touchstones of purpose. There are concepts and ideas from this short commentary which invite curiosity and further dialogue, such as 'system convening' and the need to have a deep love and connection to place, communities, and microcultures as the foundation on which to build system level influence and leadership now and in future. As our contexts evolve and change, so too should our understanding of system leadership across these contexts; this paper provides a solid starting point on which to open up dialogue and explore system leadership further.

26 Hargreaves, A. (2021). Foreword. In S. Brown & P. Duignan (Eds), *Leading education systems*. Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, UK.

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