Forum**Strategy**

Reflections on system leadership in 2023: Why it matters in the evolution of the English Education System and how it can be done

A summary of the thinking emerging from Forum Strategy's system leadership professional learning communities

September 2023

Background to the paper

In April 2023 Forum Strategy and The Brown Collective published a thinkpiece entitled **'What does system leadership look like in 2023 and beyond?'.** This provided a helpful source of reflection and provocation. It was a timely reminder that system leadership has much more untapped potential to help the education system develop and improve further, including opportunities to identify and address cross-community, cross-sector challenges and the potential to collaborate with other influencers.

This second paper builds on the first by setting out the key thinking from Forum Strategy's System Leadership Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) Programme, which involved ten Chief Executives of academy trusts (see below) working across two groups over the Summer of 2023. We undertook this process of exploration and reflection specifically with CEOs, not least because Forum Strategy is a support organisation for Chief Executives (and other executive leaders), but also because the CEO role is highly influential in determining how academy trusts engage and involve themselves with wider systemic matters and partnerships. Within this, we do also recognise that education leaders at all levels of the system have a significant role to play and we know there are conversations ongoing more widely across the sector that reflect this well. But – as things stand – no one is going to prioritise, provide direction for, or sufficiently generate, system leadership of the scale and nature we are discussing here, if Chief Executives are not, at the very least, involved and engaged from the outset. Indeed, in almost all of the examples we have seen so far, CEOs were crucial to igniting and sustaining external system leadership efforts across and beyond trusts.

With thanks to the CEOs who took part in our professional learning communities (PLCs) and their valued contributions to this paper:

- Sarah Baker, CEO, TEAM Education Trust
- Nick Blackburn MBE, CEO, Lingfield Education Trust
- Jo Evans, CEO, St Christopher's MAT
- Rebecca Meredith, CEO, Transform Trust
- Katrina Morley, CEO, Tees Valley Education Trust
- Nick Osborne, CEO, Maritime Academy Trust
- Mark Unwin, CEO, Create Partnership Trust
- Sam Vickers, CEO, Batley Multi-Academy Trust
- Mike Westerdale, CEO, Brigantia Learning Trust
- Gary Wilkie, CEO, Learning in Harmony Trust

With thanks also to David Horn and Sir Steve Lancashire for their contributions.

A. Why system leadership matters

Collectively defining system leadership and evolving our understanding of what it means to be a system leader is a re-emerging priority in the English education system. This is particularly important given the growth of academy trusts in recent years and also the emergence of new and complex opportunities and challenges that face this generation of children and young people.

We're not starting from scratch. Much progress has been made over a number of years in terms of the internalisation and sophistication of system leadership for school-to-school improvement within academy trusts and elsewhere, such as in federations. Within thriving trusts, we see a culture of collaborative enterprise where school leaders and staff are working together across multiple sites, and at scale, to drive improvement. All underpinned by visionary and distributed leadership. However, the wider system leadership (that is the focus of this paper) is an expansion of that collaborative intent to achieve improvement and better solutions that improve children and young people's lives. This emerging level of system leadership goes beyond the internalised model or school to school model, and involves leaders working across trusts themselves, across the wider public sector, and across communities with wider stakeholders to address new and complex challenges that will define the success or otherwise of the system in the decade(s) ahead.

That need for system leadership at a new level, across the wider eco-system of trusts and other stakeholders is driven by the emergence of ever more complex and multi-dimensional challenges facing young people as they steer their path to adulthood. The impact of social, economic, technological, environmental and demographic factors is having a huge influence on pupils' lives and life chances - and these are issues we cannot address as individual institutions or professions. Alongside this, the academy trust system remains very embryonic, and it is therefore necessary that these organisations and their leaders work together to inform one another's development and improvement over time, in order to achieve widespread successful and sustainable trusts.

System leaders don't need to be told this, they are adept at identifying a clear, identifiable and collective need, often through a strong evidence base and the feedback of their end users. It is this need that Professor Toby Greany refers to as the 'wicked issue'; an area of need that has the potential to galvanise those within our organisations to action but also, crucially in this context, galvanise those beyond it to invest the time, energy and resource necessary in the endeavour. It provides us with the 'why' when considering why system leadership matters in our own context.

Examples of those wicked issues are all around us and abundantly clear in today's climate, but they may also vary depending on local context. These examples may include:

- A need to address declining levels of mental health and life satisfaction amongst children and young people in a particular locality or community, requiring partnership amongst local health, social care, and educational leaders;
- A trust that is struggling to establish its school improvement model, and would benefit from the help and support of other more established trusts to inform its development;
- A locality struggling with poor youth unemployment, where trusts, the local authority, and local employers work together in raising aspiration and curriculum development;
- A need to prepare pupils for a fast evolving and demanding digital economy, where automation and artificial intelligence are defining the skills and traits required to thrive and succeed as adults

These are just a few, but very familiar and fundamental issues in many parts of the country, and system leadership is essential where there is - in so many cases - a vacuum in national solutions. As we have seen in the recent system leadership paper produced by Forum Strategy and the Brown Collective, this work is happening now, but it is also happening in pockets and has not yet become a cultural phenomenon across the sector. It needs to, and that is why this paper and the work of the Professional Learning Communities of CEOs that informs it, is so important. In the words of William Gibson, 'The future is here, it's just not evenly distributed yet'. This paper aims to put this new level of system leadership clearly on the agenda, with some clarity about what we mean by it and how it can be further supported and enabled.

However, as trust leaders we must accept that it is within our gift to shape a fractured system leadership culture into a more integrated one. Do not expect it to be facilitated from government (local or national) or elsewhere. Do not reminisce back to the 'golden age' of the National College or organisations like the London Challenge and wait for their return. They are gone. Whilst we are starting to see some progress in the emergence of greater reference from policy makers to its important role in driving quality and continuous improvement (for example, within **Annex A & B of the DfE's 'Commissioning High Quality Trusts' guidance**), this does not at present go nearly far enough in defining what it means to be a system leader (particularly from a trust leaders' perspective) and does not explore potential effective practice around system leadership. It is clear that we must drive this for ourselves, creating a system leadership culture within and across our communities, with new and influential partners that we may not have worked with before. Within this, as trust leaders, we must also be honest with ourselves about our relationship with other trusts. We work within a competitive culture where trusts are seeking to grow, sometimes at the expense of other trusts. We must be wary of working inwardly towards our challenges rather than more globally. This culture of system leadership starts – but certainly does not end - with how trusts collaborate with one another.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that system leadership behaviours, some of which we touch on in this paper, are not the exclusive domain of the trust CEO. It is the job of the CEO to not only model these behaviours individually and demonstrate the potential for and unleash opportunities for system leadership, but also to challenge all within their

organisation and across their partners to broaden their vision for collaborative practice and what it can achieve.

So, to conclude this section, the reason system leadership matters is that it:

a. accelerates school and trust improvement
b. aligns with our core purpose to establish and develop collaborative practice at multiple levels, aimed at having a meaningful and positive impact on pupils' lives and life chances
c. releases the capacity and expertise in the system that might otherwise remain untapped
d. allows our sector a voice in shaping local and national policy

B. How we can do it

There are four key themes that felt central to explaining how we can create a culture of system leadership that reaches beyond individual trusts:

1. **The underpinning 'system leadership behaviours'**
2. **Trust to trust support and learning**
3. **Area wide/locality leadership**
4. **Influencing and informing system-level direction and policy**

1.System leadership behaviours

Inspired by the initial work from the Brown Collective within the first paper, there were eight system leadership skills and behaviours identified as essential to effective system leadership when working within education and beyond it. These need to be codified as they are fundamental to establishing a culture of system leadership. There should be absolute clarity about expected leadership behaviours and these should be built into all job descriptions, including the CEO.

The following eight system leadership skills and behaviours for system leaders were agreed upon. They provide the golden thread that sits at the heart of effective system leadership.

System leaders take the initiative in identifying the 'wicked issue' and galvanise others around it
System leaders are adept at identifying collective need using robust evidence and end user feedback, galvanising those within our organisations to action but also, crucially in this context, galvanising those beyond it to invest the time, energy and resource necessary in the endeavour.

These driving needs that underpin system leadership are always strongly grounded in service to children and the next generation. Yet examples of how this can manifest vary. Two trusts could come together to review and advise upon the development of

their school improvement models; or a trust might mobilise partnerships with local health and social care representatives to address growing mental health challenges amongst pupils; or a CEO might reach out to local businesses with employment and skills shortages to help them raise aspirations amongst school leavers; or a group of CEOs might come together to write a submission to an Education Select Committee inquiry on funding and resourcing for special educational needs provision.

System leaders recognise that if they are to galvanise, drive, and sustain partnerships they should be built upon the need to address a wicked issue that holds all partners together and speaks to both their moral purpose and their organisational priorities. Identifying this shared need and desire for change is at the very foundation of the work. In doing so, the parties will agree on a shared vision for what meaningful change looks like and then articulate it.

The 'wicked issue' doesn't have to be a sizable one. If a partnership is new or embryonic, it could be related to something that matters greatly to all the organisations involved, but requires a small project or initiative in order to move forward. The point is that however big or small the endeavour, the starting point is crucial. As one leader put it "system leaders take the initiative in bringing us together on the things that matter to all of us, where others don't." System leaders are self-starters in addressing the wicked issues their organisations and end users face, and in galvanising and mobilising others externally - they don't wait for someone else to set the agenda or tell them what to do or how to do it. This is a crucial and defining feature of system leadership.

System leaders are adept at articulating the collective challenge and emphasising the power and potential of partnerships to bring about change
Once a wicked issue has been identified and a sense of partnership emerges, it is essential to 'make the case' for the investment of time, energy and potential resources amongst senior leaders from across organisations.

Again, this is about finding common ground. What binds the group together? Of course, it is the 'wicked issue' and the rationale for addressing it must be set out in clear terms. But there are other things too that system leaders seek to emphasise, such as the shared 'sense of place' or 'sense of professionalism' that binds people together; the myriad of reasons the various parties are keen to address the issue (these may vary depending on standpoint); and, of course, the shared vision for the desired outcome(s) and often, the link to moral purpose.

System leaders know it is the determination to address the wicked issue, and the clarity of vision for a better outcome, that is the glue ultimately holding people together as part of a meaningful collaboration. They develop what could be described as a 'system leadership narrative', returning to it in opening partnerships meetings, in staff forums, in sharing the partnership's efforts with the press and media, and in ensuring the continued support of their boards and executive teams. They ensure it is a narrative everyone involved agrees with and subscribes to, and they champion it from the outset with and through others.

This is as much about reinforcing commitment and focus, which is crucial when all parties are volunteering their time, energy and resource, as it is about anything else. We are reminded of a passage from Stephen Dennings book, The Secret Language of Leadership where he writes:

"Once a commitment is made, the goal will seem larger, bolder, and more exciting [...] leaders need to fix on it like a laser beam. They need to see it intensely, even obsessively. They feel it. They hear it. They taste it. They smell it. It becomes part of them, their very identity, because it is something they are committed to make happen, come what may, whatever it takes."

By making this collective commitment public, the group is also generating a sense of soft, peer to peer accountability to its aims and ambitions, rather than one that requires top-down oversight or a domineering leadership style.

System leaders are great at relationship building and reaching out beyond organisational and sector boundaries

Effective relationship building, including developing relationships beyond organisational and sector boundaries, is another essential skill for system leaders. They identify, then seek out, relationships with individuals across a range of contexts, bringing them together towards a common goal/purpose. The **NHS refers to this approach as 'systems convening'**. This is where work takes place across boundaries; where there is a development of strong, genuine relationships; and there is strategic coordination to develop system level activity and focus. The ability to build genuine, effective relationships is undeniably a key element of being able to lead at a system level.

Really effective system leaders, especially at CEO level, have an 'outward' looking mindset. This goes beyond simply outward looking within the profession - to other schools and trusts; but also, to other civic organisations and leaders, and to political and policy influencers. CEOs see themselves as part of a wider ecosystem, and 'get out there' - networking, building relationships, and generating the opportunities to do so. They are very strategic in how they do this. This is a shift from the role of school leader and executive leader, where time and capacity are greatly limited to professional partnerships and internal management and coordination; and an opportunity for CEOs to grasp in their efforts to realise the potential of their trusts and local partnerships to generate meaningful and impactful change. System leaders take every opportunity to unlock these relationships, and if there are no opportunities, they create them.

Of course, intention is also critical and quickly determining others' genuine ability and commitment to affect deep meaningful collaboration, is key. Spending and investing time on relationship building must, over time, demonstrate outcomes and system leaders recognise this. Individuals who are able to create deep, meaningful collaborative relationships demonstrate humility, respect and collegiality (more said below on this) and commitment (through tangible actions) to the relationship and the work together. Central to this is the development of trust and the adoption of a 'learner's mindset' in interactions with others - the acknowledgement that although everyone brings knowledge and expertise with them, there is always more to learn

from others.

In the work of the NHS on 'systems convening', **one of the seven enabling principals is specifically centred around role of 'the individual'**. Within this, they refer to the importance of connecting through values and appealing to 'hearts and minds', as well as the vital role of common/shared purpose and the development of trust, also highlighting the need for shared (collective and individual) energy to drive change.

System leaders demonstrate humility, mutual-respect, and they foster a culture of collegiality

System leaders recognise they do not have all the answers. If they did, they would not seek to address their 'wicked issue' in partnership with others. It's inherent, to an extent, that people driving system leadership have a degree of humility. In embarking upon this work, they have recognised the need to bring together a range of individuals and organisations who can collectively, over time, solve the challenge together.

Yet, we are all human. Humility matters enormously here and cannot be taken for granted. There are those (a minority, we hope) who may have other drivers for embarking upon system leadership such as personal status, a badge, or an opportunity to empire build. This isn't conducive to meaningful and impactful system leadership, and these pitfalls are important ones to keep in mind.

System leaders are able to bring other people into a partnership because there is a sense of vulnerability, and openness to learn from and share with others, and a huge potential for mutual benefit. It is about creating the environment where, despite the challenges at hand, people feel valued and confident and comfortable enough to contribute and not feel domineered, directed or professionally disrespected. System leaders achieve that balancing act of recognising the skills, expertise, knowledge and particular needs and motivations of others in the group, whilst providing the necessary leadership that moves the group along towards its shared aim.

In achieving this, system leaders address elephants in the room early on. They are confident enough to demonstrate their own vulnerabilities and needs, whilst also demonstrating leadership and facilitation of the partnership. Indeed, in modelling this, they seek to encourage it in others. They are also able to bring to fore any reservations others may have about competition, empire building, or 'territory grabbing.' This allows people to speak openly and overcome any invisible barriers to partnership working from the outset, ensuring the chances of a successful endeavour are enhanced.

System leaders encourage - but do not necessarily prescribe - a fully formed plan, setting clear goals and identifying and unleashing capability and capacity as they go

There was a debate across this work around how prescribed system leadership activity should be, and how organic it is in practice. Part of the challenge and opportunity of working with a range of partners is that it is difficult to know, initially, what others' capability, capacity, and contribution could be, and that system leaders should allow that to emerge and flourish over time as trust and mutual-understanding builds.

There is a clear challenge here for a system leader to ensure inclusivity and evolution in the work, and that participants – especially given the seniority of others involved in much of the partnership working at this level – feel ownership and do not feel 'done to'. The process of identifying others' capacity and capability to contribute, encouraging it, and joining the dots with the capacity and capability of others across the partnership is a key trait of system leadership. Plans, roles and responsibilities are allowed to emerge and evolve in a timely fashion.

Yet key to this, the groups felt, was the role of a system leader to help the group to identify and work towards common and shared goals and to not lose sight of these. Creating the space and dialogue that ensures goals are set from the outset and that these goals are ambitious, clear, achievable and time specific. Within this, facilitation was deemed essential. Groups working together towards shared purpose and goals also need to be kept on track and some accountability mechanisms incorporated across the group to ensure sustainability and full engagement. Therefore, the balance of organic activity together with a degree of structure, is an important one for system leaders to strike.

System leaders ensure momentum and delivery

System leadership is inescapably dependent on finding the time and capacity – beyond high level meetings – to ensure commitment to the delivery (and continued momentum) of system level activity and leadership. This is not always an easy task when things come up unexpectedly, but the ability to commit to the work is vital, otherwise system level work can be at risk of losing momentum and/or engagement from others also involved. Some of this relates back to how system leaders build capacity within their organisations, enabling them therefore to commit to system level work. Without effective teams and leaders around them within their own organisations, the ability to fully commit to system leadership may be challenging.

This is also where the importance of an element of 'project management' and proper delegation and shared accountability across a group of system leaders / partnership needs to be recognised. Often, all individuals coming together towards a common goal and purpose to drive systemic change, are busy, with demanding 'day jobs'. For system leadership to gain and continue momentum and buy-in, there needs to be a degree of project management in place and agreement to distribute tasks, activities and accountability fairly across the group - both of these are often underestimated but vital skills to securing sustainability over short, medium and long term.

Linked to this, system leaders are also attuned to the need to regularly demonstrate progress (or highlight a lack thereof). They ensure mechanisms are in place to check progress against initial commitments (and any measures if they are in place), using regular 'stock takes' to highlight how the work is progressing and any actions that might need taking as a result. This is a vital skill in keeping all stakeholders engaged and in securing ongoing momentum over the longer term.

System leaders bring their own organisation with them and sustain success within it

One area not to be overlooked by any system leader is the need to bring our organisations with us, and not to put at risk or compromise its own work. This is

something to be particularly mindful of in a context where trusts and schools face enormous funding challenges, recruitment and retention challenges, and where issues such as poverty, growing SEND needs, maintaining and improving educational standards and attendance, for example, continue to demand huge attention.

Yet, it is not only desirable but essential that we work beyond our organisations as system leaders and in system leadership activity in order to overcome these challenges and make our organisation stronger. So, the two are not mutually exclusive, but are in reality mutually reinforcing. System leaders will need to make a case to their boards that the work of system leadership is a positive and impactful use of their time. They will need to demonstrate that as learning organisations, learning from others and collaborating with others who have other experiences, skills and expertise will add value. Some in the group cited the learning from the National Leader of Education initiative (referenced in the April 2023 thinkpiece) that saw both schools receiving system leadership support, and those providing it, seeing their outcomes improve in the late 2000s and early 2010s. System leaders must be able to demonstrate over time that the work is having at the very least, an indirect benefit on the organisation and the pupils it serves.

It is also clear for established and accomplished Chief Executives and senior leaders that participation in system leadership activity and the development of system leadership skills is a key next step for them, and can also aid their retention for years to come. These leaders wish to continue to develop as leaders, to stretch their thinking and practice, and to establish themselves as civic leaders in their localities and more widely across their profession.

One way in which system leaders can achieve this, it was said, was through having a very clear capacity building and development strategy, whereby senior executive leaders have the opportunity (with support) to take on some of aspects of the Chief Executive role, and that this 'stepping up' can cascade down the organisational pyramid so that others are also stepping up and benefiting from 'on the job' leadership development opportunities. System leaders will have a clear plan for how the organisation will manage the work, ensure capacity, and benefit from the development opportunities it provides.

System leaders demonstrate bravery and courage, taking calculated risks to drive progress

In order that challenging system level issues are identified, explored and addressed, it requires a level of bravery and courage from system leaders to put forward the issues in the first place and offer commitment to working to address them. And further to this, then to commit (time, money, resources) to seeing solutions developed, particularly when the solutions often won't be easy or quick. System leaders are often either going into uncharted territory or are going back into territory where solutions have previously stalled. So there needs to be an appetite for risk and innovation, weighing this up to ensure that bravery doesn't become blind belief or stubbornness. System leaders are adept at balancing their courage with practicality.

There is also one other behaviour that may be harder to codify, yet is fundamental. Great system leaders are ultimately driven by a strong moral imperative to do more

for children and young people irrespective of what organisation they are a part of. They do so because they can. They also do it expecting no reward for themselves or their own organisation. It is about the greater good and staying rooted to our 'raison d'etre'.

2. Trust to trust support and learning

The huge potential of trust-to-trust support is widely recognised as a powerful way to help a relatively new and evolving system to mature; especially where trusts demonstrate such diversity in response to the needs and circumstances of their local communities and schools, and where national frameworks and guidance might be somewhat helpful, but have their limitations.

Indeed, there is also a growing expectation nationally that trust to trust support work takes place. The DfE's work on the academy trust CEO role states that one element of the public duty aspect of the role is "sharing effective practice between trusts, and with the wider sector, building capacity and effective mechanisms for doing so." Meanwhile the template CEO job description published by the National Governance Association and Forum Strategy in 2021 includes a full dedicated section to 'Builds external relationships: fostering social and professional capital.' One aspect within this element of the job description, encourages CEOs to be "engaging in appropriate opportunities to inform the development of other trusts".

There is no doubt that there is some encouraging and impactful practice taking place in terms of trust-to-trust support. The emergence of examples of peer-to-peer review between trusts who are keen to improve further, are heartening and give an indication of what is possible (if the system leadership behaviours deployed, align to those characteristics in the previous section).

The most effective practice currently depends on trusts themselves self-identifying and self-generating opportunities for trust-to-trust support with clear system leadership protocols explicit at the outset. It depends on trusts working as equal partners and being clear about the system leadership behaviours required to make trust to trust collaboration effective.

Yet, trust to trust working is still generally sporadic and superficial in many places and there is not, as yet a strong and presiding culture of in-depth trust-to-trust support working either locally, regionally or nationally.

For many it is not clear what opportunities exist and which trust(s) is best placed to collaborate with on areas of interest or need. In the small number of cases where trust collaborative learning is brokered by government representatives, it is felt that often, this is not with the trusts' needs at the heart and comes with a hidden agenda in terms of who the trust requesting the connection, is eventually linked to.

In places, it is hampered by an underlying sense of competition between academy trusts in some areas, where, for example, there may be competition for schools, or competition for pupil numbers (a growing issue). But also, and perhaps more as a result of, a lack of local coordination, facilitation or brokerage that works to identify

opportunities or the need for meaningful and impactful collaboration between trusts.

There is also an argument that more knowledge and understanding is required amongst CEOs and executive leaders around how to embark upon effective and impactful trust to trust learning and support. The development of potential guides, shared platforms, training, and more case studies may help to better support CEOs and executive leaders in embarking upon and sustaining this aspect of system leadership.

Related to this, there is the question of how well trust to trust support and learning is acknowledged and recognised by those 'overseeing' the system. One potential route to ensuring that working collaboratively with others across the system was better recognised and embedded, would be through more explicit integration into frameworks and 'measures', also ensuring this is consistently an expectation within the job descriptions of CEOs and their executive leaders, and is fully supported/ encouraged by trust Boards. Although some progress is being made in these areas already, for example system leadership is referred to within the recent DfE guidance on 'Commissioning High Quality Trusts' (within **Annex A - Trust Quality Descriptors**), there is a question as to whether this progress goes far enough. It would be good to see system leadership appear more consistently and explicitly, running as a golden enabling thread, with more support given around how effective system leadership might be demonstrated and practice captured.

3. Area-wide / locality leadership

Area wide / locality leadership was collectively recognised as an important part of being able to work with other influential actors locally and regionally who can work with trusts to help them address some of the key challenges their pupils, families and communities face – 'the wicked issues'.

Indeed, some examples of the challenges that it was felt could be overcome by effective locality leadership included:

- **Increasing careers aspirations and opportunities** by formalising partnerships with businesses and careers specialists to enrich the curriculum experience and raise aspiration, build cultural capital, and expand horizons from the early years right through to adult education.
- **Strengthening community cohesion with agencies** such as the police, local authorities and other local partners.
- **The growing expectation and need to model and encourage environmental sustainability**, a complex and fast-moving issue where trusts need to work with experts, businesses and agencies committed to that cause, be they local, national or international, in order to make progress.
- **Addressing economic poverty through work with charities and other local actors committed to that aim.** For example, working in partnership with others to ensure all children have the very basics for their health and wellbeing, such as to have a bed to sleep on, get fed, are clothed and are equipped to learn.

Many excellent case studies of CEOs and executive teams leading from the front

here have already been captured. Trusts are organisations that very often sit at the very heart of their communities. Combined with this, it is also the case that through the scale at which trusts work across communities and localities, and the profile of their roles, CEOs of academy trusts in particular have the ability to engage, focus, and mobilise other local and civic actors, providing system leadership and strategic facilitation and accountability metrics in doing so. This dimension of system leadership, in a context of complex challenges that directly impact pupils and little political direction in response, is becoming an increasingly fundamental part of the CEO and executive leader role.

It is certainly an aspect that has been increasingly reflected in thinking about the CEO. The template CEO job description published by the National Governance Association and Forum Strategy in 2021 includes a dedicated section to 'Builds external relationships: fostering social and professional capital' . The template highlights a number of elements of specific relevance to 'locality/area-wide leadership':

- Creating a sense of openness and proactive engagement with local, regional and national stakeholders. Prioritising external relationships with reference to strategy and potential impact.
- Steering the organisation to engage with and embark on relationships that will add sufficient value to the organisation and pupils' educational experience, while avoiding collaborative overload and ensuring there are mutual benefits for all involved.
- Encouraging the board to play their part in building and maintaining key stakeholder relationships, while also ensuring their impact on pupils and benefits of all external partnerships are demonstrable and relate sufficiently to core business.
- Building constructive relationships with politicians and civil servants; communicating in a way that engages key influencers and ensures they remain informed about the organisation's work and progress.
- Accessing peer-to-peer networks (within and across sectors) that are relevant and add value to the CEO and the senior team's professional development.
- Working with the board to generate a culture of 'pure accountability' to communities – including staff, parents and pupils – that ensures the trust is openly committed to understanding and meeting their general needs and expectations over time.

4. Influencing and informing system led direction and policy

When considering how and why we influence and inform system led direction and policy, we need to be clear on why it matters. Fundamentally it is to ensure that system leadership is promoted and sits central to our strategic development thinking.

The wisdom, lived experience, and insight of trust leaders should be capitalised upon to inform and influence policy and national and regional direction. There are some encouraging signs. Indeed, this aspect of system leadership has been reflected in some of the national level work around the CEO role. The template job description produced by Forum Strategy and the National Governance Association in 2021 again covers this aspect as part of dimension six, reading:

"Contributing to the development of the wider sector through taking part in the work of sector bodies and engaging in appropriate opportunities to inform the development of other trusts and to inform government policy."

Yet, it is currently, in many ways, a missed opportunity. As things stand, the opportunities to inform and influence national policy are sporadic and the routes to 'self-nominate' rather than be 'chosen' are limited which in turn, may impact the diversity and range of voices/perspectives being heard. It is felt that more could be done by government and national sector bodies to ensure a more equitable approach to informing policy, whereby there was better representation from trusts of varied sizes, phases, and specialisms. It would do more to live the belief that the most effective collaborative practice stems from a belief that we are all equal partners.

As one group member put it: *"We might be different MATs of different sizes, geography, phases but, we are ALL the education system ...and we all need to remember that".*

It is clear that more can be done (as referred to earlier) by policymakers and those with oversight across the system to provide greater recognition of the role of system leadership, along with some definition as to how this is reflected/recognised in the national frameworks and measures in place (e.g., Ofsted, DfE). Leaders who are currently part of these groups that help to shape these frameworks and measures, have a fundamental role to play in influencing policymakers to recognise and incorporate system leadership where appropriate.

The decisive point here, is not to forget that system leaders don't wait for direction, they just do it because the moral imperative is too great not to do so.

C. Conclusions and ways forward

In the words of Jonathan Crossley-Holland, a leading commentator on the power of locality leadership, we have a golden opportunity. We can build and capitalise upon the innovation already demonstrated by trusts and academy trust leaders – as models of school-to-school support system leadership – to take this to another level, demonstrating system leadership even more widely to further benefit pupils and local communities.

This paper sets out why system leadership matters and some initial thoughts on how it could be done, including some of the hurdles that need to be overcome to get there. The challenge for us now is to be brave enough not to settle for an inward mindset of collaboration purely within our own trusts but have the vision and determination to use our position as trust leaders to influence change. To help overcome the artificial boundaries that exist across trusts, local authorities, child services, charities and organisations like the police, health, careers providers and wider stakeholders that share similar objectives to us. To use what we have learnt about leading change collaboratively across a trust to create a more outward looking system leadership culture that expands the knowledge base, capacity and capability to improve standards and life chances for young people at a faster pace.

In order for us to tangibly move forward, there is consensus that there needs to be more detailed guidance and support to enable more CEOs, as well as new CEOs and senior leaders, to step up to system leadership and join the discussions around this. The following suggestions were made for potential ways forward over the next 6-8 months, with the view that at that point, progress could be reviewed and further suggestions made that build upon this progress.

1. Development of a set of system leadership principles. Based on this work and on the thinkpiece published in April, a set of system leadership principles should be developed to underpin and inform the work of CEOs and trusts in leading system leadership activity. These principles could also inform CEO leadership development programmes and be used by system leadership groups as a reference point for how to work together, including the skills that will need to be drawn upon and/or developed.

2.More should be done to celebrate and capture the work of system leaders, recognising its impact nationally and encouraging it further. The Department for Education and others can do more in this regard. This can be through the creation and promotion of national case studies; by recognising it in Ofsted's summary evaluations of trusts and in Ofsted reports; or through some kind of awards. This would greatly aid the cultural encouragement of and provide the 'permission' for system leadership work, as it clearly isn't universal yet. Progress made, such as the inclusion of system leadership work within the recent DfE 'Commissioning High Quality Trusts' guidance, should go much further in future and ensure that system leadership is widely and explicitly referred to as an important part of education improvement.

3. There should be clearer expectations around system leadership built into job descriptions, particularly CEO job descriptions. This should also include how the CEO role can encourage and support others in the organisation to develop and contribute to system leadership. Whilst it was recognised that the NGA/Forum Strategy template job description, and the DfE's CEO role descriptors, are strong on this, it is not always translating consistently into CEO job descriptions in practice.

4. Linked to the above, more work should be done to educate Boards on the benefits of system leadership. In doing this, Boards can ensure they encourage CEOs to be system leaders and support them in engaging with work to address system issues. Organisations such as Forum Strategy, NGA, CST and others can support with this, working closely with Boards to develop their understanding of system leadership and the benefits it can bring to their organisations as well as the wider system.

5. Individual CEOs should develop and sustain their skills, knowledge and activity around system leadership. This can be done through undertaking appropriate development opportunities and programmes to support this, reading the latest research and thinking in this space, being a part of networks that regularly have this focus at their heart and critically, seizing opportunities to lead, capture and share work that can offer system level improvement and progress.

This paper will be shared at Forum Strategy's national #TrustLeaders CEO conference in September 2023 and also made available on our website as part of our ongoing work around system leadership in 2023 and beyond. Each member of the professional learning communities will also develop some next steps to outline how they plan to continue to contribute to system leadership into the future, including how this work might be shared with their Boards and local MPs.

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