

ForumStrategy

National #TrustLeaders Symposium

5th June 2025

Pre-reading and reflective questions

What is changing, and what next? A discussion paper for trust leaders

By Tom Richmond for Forum Strategy (tom.richmond@edsk.org)

Forum Strategy's fourth National #TrustLeaders Symposium takes place on 5th June 2025 in Nottingham. This paper is pre-reading for that event and contains some key questions for you and your executive teams to reflect on in preparation.

The purpose of this paper

This paper is intended to:

- Provide useful pre-reading for our individual CEO, COO and Education Leaders' Networks members who are entitled to attend this event
- Be shared with your senior executive teams for their reading and reflections ahead of your internal team meetings
- To support your executive team discussions, and provide a helpful steer for you - as a member - to bring to the Symposium itself to discuss with other trust leaders

What we are asking you to do

We are asking you (together with your teams) to consider:

- **What has changed about your strategy and leadership as a trust as a result of the developments since the new government's election? How is that adaptation going so far?**
- **Where are you still waiting on key developments and direction before developing strategy further and making investments of time, resource, and energy?**
- **What key strategies and innovations are you taking forward as a trust irrespective of government and national policy? What are the risks and opportunities that change brings for these strategies and innovations?**
- **What key messages must trust leaders - as a whole - be sharing with policymakers? Where could policymakers make the greatest difference for the system and your work as trust leaders?**

The National #TrustLeaders Symposium on 5th June

At Forum Strategy's upcoming [fourth National #TrustLeaders symposium](#), the focus for the day will be to create space for you as trust leaders to reflect on the past year in the sector and consider what this means for you and your organisations now and in the future. It will be an important opportunity to take stock of all that has changed (and is changing) and consider the role that you, as trust leaders have, in responding strategically on behalf of your trust, your locality and the system as a whole.

A significant part of this is, of course, the political landscape. Whilst being mindful of ensuring it doesn't overly dominate your leadership and your vision for your trust and communities, you will need to be cognisant of the national picture and create time to consider how the political landscape will apply to your trust and the trust landscape as a whole. In this thinkpiece, I set out what we know so far in relation to the national landscape, what this is likely to mean for trusts and trust leaders and provide some reflective questions for you to consider ahead of the symposium with your executive team.

We recognise this paper only covers the policy landscape, and doesn't cover the myriad of societal, economic and demographic issues that are also influencing the work and strategic response and investments of trusts. These include shifts in employee and employer expectations, the shifting demands for certain skills and characteristics in the jobs market, the emergence and evolution of new technologies such as AI, the growing complexity of so many pupils' needs, the environmental sustainability agenda, and so much more. Please bear this in mind and give some reflection to these wider aspects as you consider the following task - and headline questions - as you prepare to join us at this year's symposium.

Some background

In the run-up to the General Election in July 2024, the Labour Party manifesto outlined several commitments that were relevant to school and trust leaders. These included the following proposals:

- *"Labour will recruit an additional 6,500 new expert teachers [...to] get more teachers into shortage subjects, support areas that face recruitment challenges, and tackle retention issues."*
- *"Labour will create a new Excellence in Leadership Programme, a mentoring framework that expands the capacity of headteachers and leaders to improve their schools."*

- *“Labour will introduce new Regional Improvement Teams, to enhance school-to-school support, and spread best practice.”*
- *“We will enhance the inspection regime by replacing a single headline grade with a new report card system telling parents clearly how schools are performing. We will also bring Multi-Academy Trusts into the inspection system.”*
- *“Labour will take a community-wide approach, improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, as well as ensuring special schools cater to those with the most complex needs.”*
- *“We will make sure admissions decisions account for the needs of communities and require all schools to co-operate with their local authority on school admissions, SEND inclusion, and place planning.”*

Although the future of academies and MATs in the school landscape did not explicitly feature within the election manifesto, Labour’s team of education ministers had made a number of public statements in advance of the election that indicated their preferred direction of travel.

In 2022, then Shadow Schools Minister Stephen Morgan said a new Labour government would plan to bring in *“ambitious”* legislation on schools *“early on”*, which would force academies to follow the National Curriculum and local admissions arrangements. He added that their goal was to focus on *“improving outcomes, not meddling with structures”* if they won power, so he did not set out concrete plans for the school system. In addition, Labour would not support ‘forced academisation,’ but he pledged to leave well-performing academy trusts alone.

In 2023, then Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said she would *“end the needless micro-management”* of schools from Westminster and *“celebrate the achievements of both academies and maintained schools”*. She said Labour was *“not interested in wholesale structural reform”* but wanted to *“smooth the differences”* between different types of schools. Although she acknowledged the *“mix and match landscape of maintained and academy schools”*, she insisted the distinction *“mostly means nothing to parents”*. She noted that Labour *“will not be imposing top-down structures, but we will demand collaboration and cooperation in the best interests of our children”*. In terms of trust leadership, she wanted *“...trust [leaders] to know when you need help”*, although that didn’t *“mean we will not have high standards”*. Furthermore, she was concerned that the current system too often left leaders and teachers feeling *“exposed and unsupported”* and repeated her warning that accountability and inspection *“has become too high stakes”*.

The current policy picture

In the context of these earlier comments alongside the Labour election manifesto, many recent policy developments under the new Labour government are unsurprising:

REDUCING THE STAKES OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

- Ofsted grades for schools will be replaced by a new 'report card' system that Ofsted claims will provide parents with a more detailed breakdown of their performance across at least eight areas using a five-point colour-coded scale from 'causing concern' up to 'exemplary'. Safeguarding will be judged separately.
 1. Leadership and Governance
 2. Curriculum
 3. Developing Teaching
 4. Achievement
 5. Attendance
 6. Behaviour and Attitudes
 7. Inclusion
 8. Personal Development and Well-being

Schools found to have weaknesses in specific areas will receive focused follow-up visits to assess progress and ensure appropriate improvements are being made (see 'intervention' section below). Other new approaches from Ofsted include a focus on inclusion throughout their inspection areas, a greater consideration of context to ensure schools are assessed within their local circumstances, and the publication of 'toolkits' describing the quality that Ofsted expect to see at each point on the scale.

- New Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams - made up of civil servants and 4-6 seconded school leaders in each region - are being introduced. Although the default position will still be for a 'change in governance' for maintained schools and academies in need of intervention i.e. judged to be in 'special measures', schools that are judged to 'require significant improvement' will instead receive "*mandatory targeted intervention*" from the RISE teams that delivers a package of support. The school would then have around 18 months to improve (including up to five monitoring visits from Ofsted), after which it would be subject to a change in governance if improvements are not sufficient.

Schools will be split into three 'tiers' based on Ofsted's report cards:

- i. universal help (minimal issues and strong leadership, with the RISE team developing local priorities, sharing good practice, and signposting to available support)

- ii. targeted support (one or more issues but the leadership is capable of addressing them, with the RISE teams commissioning appropriate support from external bodies such as MATs or local authorities)
- iii. intervention (change in governance required, no role for the RISE team)
- iv. RISE teams will also engage with MATs / local authorities where *“there are concerning levels of pupil attainment [in a school], including large year-on-year declines”*.

‘SMOOTHING THE DIFFERENCES’ BETWEEN ACADEMIES AND MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

(via the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill)

- Academies will have to follow the National Curriculum to end the current *“discrepancy between maintained schools and academies”*, although it is not clear whether the ‘National Curriculum’ in this context refers to a high-level framework or a detailed set of content descriptors for each subject / year / phase (particularly with the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review still underway).
- Allowing councils to open new community and community special schools by removing the ‘free school presumption’ that required councils opening a school to first seek an academy. The DfE (via their Regions Group) would decide if a local council was the best option for opening a new school to prevent conflicts of interest.
- Requiring academies to observe minimum pay rates and have *“regard”* to other national pay conditions to create a consistent ‘floor’ for all state-funded schools.

GREATER EMPHASIS ON COLLABORATION

(via the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill)

- New duties on mainstream state schools and councils to co-operate on admissions, and for mainstream, special and AP schools to co-operate with local authorities on place-planning.
- More powers for councils to direct academy admissions and object to an academy’s PAN.

While these commitments may be unsurprising, that does not mean they have gone unchallenged. Several trust leaders along with current and former Conservative Party ministers have voiced strong reservations about some of the Government’s proposals, particularly the potential loss of freedom over

the curriculum. Some in the Conservative Party have gone as far as describing the loss of freedoms for academies as ‘an act of vandalism’. Labour MP Dame Siobhain McDonagh has also warned that the proposed reforms put at risk a ‘proven recipe for success’ to help pupils, after she saw the impact of converting failing maintained schools to academies in her own constituency.

What do all these changes mean for trust leaders?

With such a large majority in Parliament, the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill is set to eventually become law, even if some aspects of the Bill are altered along the way (as we have seen with aspects relating to teacher pay and conditions). On that basis, it seems prudent for trust leaders to prepare for numerous changes to the school landscape in the coming months and years. Several important issues are already visible in the announcements made since the Labour government took office:

- A change of governance for maintained schools and academies in ‘special measures’ will remain the default option for school improvement, but schools judged to be struggling yet still able to improve themselves will be given time to do so, with the new RISE teams having the task of supporting those schools over the following 18-24 months.

That said, the proposed ‘tiers’ of support (universal help, targeted support, and intervention) remain under development. That these tiers have been proposed before Ofsted has finalised its new inspection framework or ‘report cards’ has caused considerable confusion. It is also not known how the success (or otherwise) of RISE teams will be judged.

- The lines of accountability for improving schools have become increasingly blurred following the creation of the RISE teams. For example, the DfE has not explained what would happen if a school / MAT that supposedly needs more support disagrees with the support or advice offered by a RISE team.

Bridget Phillipson has claimed that the RISE teams were necessary because *“support for school improvement has been fragmented and complex”*, yet there is now a risk that the school improvement landscape will become even more confused because no-one knows who will be held accountable in future if a school fails to improve.

- It seems there has been little consideration of where the expertise and capacity for school improvement lies within the state school system, with some local councils having lost the ability to perform this role due to funding constraints. Kent County Council¹ - England’s biggest local authority

1 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/school-improvement-unaffordable-for-countrys-biggest-council/>

- has already admitted it cannot afford to provide school improvement support.

For many years, the previous government allowed MATs to build up their own internal expertise on school improvement, yet this does not appear to have been factored into the Government's decisions. The extent of any remaining capacity in councils will vary greatly across the country, so it is not obvious whether councils could play an expanded role in the school system even if they were required to do so.

- There is a concern that the emphasis on 'commissioning trusts' to provide school improvement via RISE teams will generate a greater sense of competition and create barriers to collaboration within the system; as many seek to access opportunities, funding and resources to deliver improvement at scale that others - including other trusts, schools' groups, and local authorities - may also wish to receive. The removal of the conversion funding and capacity funding will also make resources tighter and the opportunities for growth potentially more sparse - which could have the potential effect of some trusts reducing collaborative activity with other trusts as they seek to recruit new schools in similar areas. That said, a context of tighter funding and resources could, and it could be argued should, lead trusts to enhance their collaborative working - looking to share expertise and resources intelligently, and to align their responses to local and systemic challenges, where it's possible to do so in order to best serve their localities.

Questions for trust leaders

Given these emerging issues and the policy agenda of the new government, trust leaders could face challenges and opportunities on multiple fronts. The questions below are intended to stimulate conversations within your executive team about how well prepared your team and wider trust is for a range of future scenarios:

- 1. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:** What opportunities and risks do the new RISE teams present? Is your school improvement model and capacity clearly articulated and made visible so that RISE teams are aware it exists and its nature? How easily could the school improvement capacity in your trust be redeployed in the event of an interaction with, or intervention from, a new RISE team? Are your school improvement processes sufficiently evidenced to satisfy any questions that a new RISE team may ask about your capacity to improve your schools, especially when the team may include other trust leaders? How well placed is your trust to provide the bespoke support that the RISE teams will need to commission to support other schools in your area(s)?
- 2. CURRICULUM:** To what extent does your offer in Key Stages 1-3 differ from the National Curriculum? If it differs, do the original aims behind your decision to diverge still hold true today? Could you achieve those aims through other means even if you had to follow the National Curriculum? What impact would a requirement to switch back to the National Curriculum have on your trust in terms of curriculum planning, resources, and staffing?
- 3. ROLE OF LOCAL COUNCILS:** To what extent do the councils covering the area(s) in which you operate believe they have sufficient capacity and expertise to support local schools, both maintained and academies? How confident are you in the perspective of your local council(s) on such matters? What impact would a requirement to collaborate more with councils on admissions and place planning have on your current processes and procedures? How much confidence do your local stakeholders have in your existing approach to admissions and place planning? Are your local councils likely to want to set up their own new school if additional places are needed, and would they have a strong case for doing so? How well do you collaborate with your local authority on school improvement, and do you have any plans or developments that serve to enhance that commitment to and opportunities for collaboration?
- 4. OFSTED:** Does Ofsted's 18-month timescale for resolving weaknesses in your schools match your current quality assurance models? To what extent is your approach to inclusion visible across your trust, and is this easily evidenced in terms of processes and outcomes? Is a greater consideration

of contextual factors likely to be a benefit or drawback for your schools in terms of explaining past and present levels of performance? Should your trust consider mirroring the three 'tiers' of intervention proposed by the Government when organising your own thinking around internal accountability? How could you get the greatest benefit from Ofsted's new toolkits in terms of improving pupil outcomes and wellbeing?

- 5. SUSTAINABLE TRUST GROWTH:** Are you looking to still 'make the case' to other local schools - using models and frameworks such as Forum Strategy's Thriving Trusts thinkpieces: <https://forumstrategy.org/thriving-trusts-thinkpieces/>? With the withdrawal of capacity funding and conversion grants, how will this impact your trust's plans to grow? Is growth needed in your trust to remain sustainable? If it is not, is growth needed, or will your trust start to think about how to maximise its positive impact at the size that it is? Is 'growth in other ways' - such as through the development of specialist and/or even 'traded services' - something your trust is considering?

Again, we recognise this paper only covers the policy landscape, and doesn't cover the myriad of societal, economic and demographic issues that are also influencing the work and strategic response and investments of trusts. These include shifts in employee and employer expectations, the shifting demands for certain skills and characteristics in the jobs market, the emergence and evolution of new technologies such as AI, the growing complexity of so many pupils' needs, the environmental sustainability agenda, and so much more. Please bear this in mind and give some reflection to these wider aspects as you consider the following task - and headline questions - as you prepare to join us at this year's symposium.

What we are asking you to do

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we are asking you (together with your teams) to consider:

- **What has changed about your strategy and leadership as a trust as a result of the developments since the new government's election? How is this adaptation going so far?**
- **Where are you still waiting on key developments and direction before developing strategy further and making investments of time, resource, and energy?**
- **What key strategies and innovations are you taking forward as a trust irrespective of government and national policy? What are the risks and opportunities that change brings for these strategies and innovations?**
- **What key messages must trust leaders - as a whole - be sharing with policymakers? Where could policymakers make the greatest difference for the system and your work as trust leaders?**

As the Forum Strategy member on your team, please bring your answers to these questions to the symposium - and be prepared for a day of rich, supportive, and open-minded discussion with colleagues from across the country - as we make sense of the current landscape and look forward strategically, together.

ForumStrategy

This paper is published by Forum Education Limited 2025. © Copyright Forum Education Limited 2025

This document is shared in good faith (February 2025) and no liability is accepted for decisions made as a result of accessing and using this document. The document is a starting point for discussion and should be considered alongside other key sources of advice, guidance and sector recognised information and the other thinkpieces in this series. ForumEducation Limited cannot be responsible for external websites and encourages users to undertake relevant virus and security checks before accessing these.