

ForumStrategy

Provocations for the future: five truths for trust leaders

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Colleagues, friends.

I want to begin with a moment of reflection.

Many of us in this room are part of the first generation of trust leaders. We stepped into a landscape with no blueprint, no manual, no settled definition of what a trust was for — let alone how to lead one.

We made decisions in real time. We navigated politics, policy, structures and staffing while trying to build something of value.

We got some things right. We did our best. We learned fast. And often, we led alone.

But now a second generation of trust leaders is arriving. And what they're inheriting is not yet a system fit for purpose. It's a set of structures shaped by necessity, not by design.

The risk is that we've created a framework that functions — but

doesn't yet liberate. A model that can run — but hasn't yet asked: run toward what?

So today, I want to offer five provocations. Not solutions. Not slogans. But five hard truths about what it means to lead trusts now — and what must change if we want to hand over something better.

PROVOCATION ONE: THE SYSTEM WE'VE BUILT IS TOO SMALL FOR THE PROBLEMS WE FACE

We have built much — and fast. But the system we've developed wasn't designed from first principles. It emerged from policy shifts, urgency, pragmatism and improvisation.

It functions. But it constrains.

We are still working within frameworks built for containment, not transformation. Systems of inspection, accountability, and governance that reflect yesterday's questions, not tomorrow's needs.

Meanwhile, our remit has expanded. We are asked to tackle entrenched inequality, anchor fractured communities, renew the workforce, hold local responsibility. And we are trying to do all of that inside a model that was never designed for it.

If we keep leading inside those boundaries, we'll stay locked into small solutions for large problems.

This is where pure accountability matters. Because accountability is not one-way. It works in both directions. Communities have a responsibility for raising children too. Institutions cannot bear the weight alone.

Our role is to awaken that collective capacity — to help families and

communities rediscover their responsibility and power. Because the village always has more resilience than the single organisation.

Question: What do we need to walk away from — and what new scaffolding must we now build — to lead at the scale this work demands?

Challenge: We cannot solve 2030's problems with the tools of the last decade — even if we built them ourselves.

PROVOCATION TWO: TRUST LEADERSHIP NOW DEMANDS ORIGINAL THINKING — NOT REFINED EXECUTION

We have mastered operational excellence. But that is not leadership anymore.

Trusts cannot just become more efficient machines. They must become creative institutions. Our job now is not to refine inherited models — but to invent what comes next.

That means more than pilot projects. It means making space for imagination at the top table. It means accepting failure as part of innovation. And it means resisting the temptation to only do what is inspectable, fundable, or safe.

If the second generation simply inherits our caution, we will have built an efficient system that still avoids the boldest questions.

Question: When was the last time we tested an idea no one else had tried?

Challenge: If we are not making something new, we are just maintaining what's broken.

PROVOCATION THREE: SCALE WITHOUT STRATEGY IS A LIABILITY

Growth has been equated with success. But scale is not neutral. It amplifies whatever is already there — whether culture, clarity or confusion.

Some of us are now leading very large organisations with thin cohesion. That is not sustainable. Being big can create the illusion of strength. But without strong identity and direction, scale masks fragility.

Growth is not a win. Growth is a responsibility.

This is the moment to recalibrate. Not just the rate of growth, but the reasons for it.

Question: Are we growing because it is right — or just because we can?

Challenge: If scale outruns strategy, impact becomes accidental.

PROVOCATION FOUR: AI WILL EXPOSE WEAK THINKING — NOT JUST REPLACE LOW-SKILL TASKS

AI is not just a tool. It is a force that will reshape judgement, trust, and the very nature of expertise.

If we treat it only as a way to save time on admin, we will miss the deeper transformation — and risk automating the very biases we should be dismantling.

This begins with philosophy. Every trust needs a set of guiding principles for AI use — before diving into the detail of ethics, systems, or safeguards. Few have one. If we fail to set out our stance, the

technology will set it for us.

Here I want to credit Ofsted's recent research briefing, which was unusually strong: clarity of principle must come before application.

The leaders who thrive in this era will be those who understand the ethical, strategic, and intellectual consequences of AI. Those who integrate it with care, not default to it in haste.

For the second generation, AI will not be a novelty. It will be the norm. And it will either embed our wisdom — or magnify our blind spots.

Question: Are we shaping AI — or is AI quietly reshaping us?

Challenge: The future is not man versus machine. It is integrity versus automation.

PROVOCATION FIVE: TRUTH TO POWER MEANS CENTERING ON THE LIVED REALITY OF THOSE WE SERVE

Trusts exist to serve children, families, communities — not to preserve systems.

Too often, our measures of success are internal: dashboards, inspection outcomes, strategic reports. The danger is that we build systems that look strong from above — but feel hollow on the ground.

Truth to power must begin with lived reality. Are students flourishing? Are families trusting us? Are staff thriving? Do communities feel our presence in tangible ways?

This is pure accountability. And it works both ways. We open ourselves to the truth of how our work is experienced. And we also help communities reclaim their responsibility in raising children.

Trust leaders must act as the bridge that reawakens this reciprocity — enabling schools and communities to stand together, not apart.

Question: What happens when lived reality — not system performance — becomes the true test of our success?

Challenge: A trust cannot be excellent if the people it serves experience it as absent, indifferent, or extractive.

CLOSING

So — five provocations.

Not because we have all the answers. But because if we keep asking the same questions, we will keep getting the same system.

We are no longer in an era of maintenance.

This is the age of invention. Of place-based leadership. Of radical responsibility.

We are not just running trusts. We are shaping what education will mean in our communities for a generation.

That is no small thing.

Let's not play small.

Thank you.