

ForumStrategy

National #TrustLeaders Symposium 2026

Pure Accountability: people and communities at the heart of improvement and innovation. A post-white paper reality

Michael Pain's Keynote Speech

Nottingham, 3rd June 2026

Good morning,

I want to begin this morning with a call to the education sector

It is time we started taking greater ownership of accountability, in its roundest sense

At its very best, accountability is a tool of masters

Yet, for many in this sector, for too long, the notion of accountability has been reductive - simply seen as a piece of compliance, a framework to be followed, or a lever of competition

Today we will distinguish between accountability for compliance and competition – not that these don't have their place in the world. And accountability that commits us to truly being masters of our craft and endeavour; and brings people with us in doing so.

We will consider accountability at its most profound, at its most constructive, at its most inspiring

Accountability as a means of genuine progress, engagement and as a positive influence on so many people's lives. Not least pupils and families.

Because our too often limited perspective of accountability as something that is simply a judgment, that is wholly institutional, that is high stakes, and that is 'done to' from afar – has been holding our sector back for too long.

As a learning sector, that reductive mindset is an anomaly. As learning organisations, it can become self-defeating

In limiting our perspective of accountability in this way, we limit our possibilities and our potential. We place boundaries on the potential of leadership and the potential of the communities around us.

I am two minutes into my speech, and I am falling into the trap. I am mentioning Ofsted

Ofsted is a piece of the accountability puzzle. OK, it's a few pieces of the puzzle.

And, let me be clear from the beginning: it has its place.

Nobody wants to go back to the free for all of the 1960s and 70s – not everyone was a winner back then. Too many children and young people didn't get the education they deserved because Ofsted didn't exist; the baseline didn't exist. On that note...

If good accountability is like a jigsaw puzzle, Ofsted is those pieces on the bottom row, that give you a starting point. You can tell where the border is. In beginning here, we have a reference point, pieces that should provide a sense of foundation, a thing that provides us with a level of assurance. In my view, that is Ofsted's role.

No going back to 1970s style free for all.

But it is far from the whole jigsaw. It does not provide us with the beautiful picture that comes together, that inspires our leaders, teachers, parents, pupils and communities to do incredible things. It does not – alone - shape long-term vision or take us towards the horizon that a community is headed towards.

Bringing all those accountability pieces together is where the role of leaders, of masters, comes into its own.

And this, for me, is about not just good, compliant, responsible leadership; it's about mastery in leadership.

In a world of sheer complexity, rapid change, and of endless possibility – we, and especially our pupils, families and communities - need accountability to be much more than the bottom row of the jigsaw. We need it as a tool to be levered, to help us to create a bigger picture and to commit together to work towards a brighter horizon.

That matters more than ever in this daunting, unpredictable, and, yet opportunity-filled world.

We can't be satisfied with just piecing together the bottom row.

As CEO and senior trust leaders, you will be invited to many conferences that focus on regulatory accountability. And that's OK. They'll tick the boxes, help prepare the forms, and they probably won't make your exceptional brains hurt so much. They'll focus on the bottom row. Because it's a necessity.

Today is different.

Today is not about compliance and baselines.

As you would expect from a Forum Strategy symposium it goes beyond this.

Exceptional brains may hurt a little here... That's a good thing. As Steve would say, thinking is the true business of leadership. And the quality of your organisation is in direct corollary to the quality of your thinking.

Today is about the kind of accountability that takes us beyond general, standardised expectations to address the profound challenges, opportunities and necessary ambitions for our times.

It requires us to address some things that seem to have become conventional thinking since the 1980s

It takes us beyond the notion of the parent and family as customer – to the partner and participant.

It takes staff beyond employees – to being our educational missionaries, masters in their own fields, embracing peer review, and agents of improvement

It takes us beyond organisations that simply seek to 'secure' and 'exceed' against the latest frameworks – to organisations and communities that thrive together and are built – culturally and operationally - to thrive, for the long term.

And it takes us beyond leadership as managerialism, to leadership as mastery of our craft and our shared destinies.

Because Ofsted and league tables are still a product of 1980s managerialism. And that's OK. It does a job. It's just nowhere near enough

anymore.

Today is the grit behind the aspiration for thriving trusts and thriving communities.

Today is about **pure accountability**

What is pure accountability?

Well, it's evolved. Like any good concept does.

It emerged from Forum Strategy's work in 2020 as we saw a need to shape and hold on to accountability as a means of informing improvement and innovation during the pandemic, at a time when so much standardised accountability was suspended.

To my mind, there were – generally speaking - three kinds of leaders when it came to accountability during covid

Those that kind of missed the reference point of Ofsted – believe it or not. Those who were indifferent to a lack of accountability. They waited and some may even had breathed a sigh of relief.

And those who decided it was time to double down on being accountable and generating accountability for the things that mattered to them, as well as the standardised things measured by Ofsted and league tables, whilst they have the space to do so.

To use Jonny Uttley's term they doubled down on 'measure what you treasure'

Many of the examples you will hear today trace their inception to that time.

So, what do we mean by pure accountability

Well, here's the latest iteration

“Pure accountability is formative accountability forged and sustained by those who are part of a collective endeavour – often at a local level. It generates a shared understanding of thriving trusts, schools and communities; public promises that ensure we progress towards and achieve this; and a shared sense of responsibility in our efforts to make this a reality.

For those of us who lead it, it is about empowering those we serve and work alongside to provide feedback and insights that contribute to the strategic direction, ongoing improvement and responsiveness of our organisations over time. It also helps clarify what our organisations are responsible for, and where others – including communities- are best placed and expected to contribute and take ownership themselves in this shared endeavour.”¹

What defines pure accountability?

It is formative – it feeds our ongoing learning and growth

It is not judgmental – it encourages openness and vulnerability for that learning

It is real time – it keeps up with progress and need

It reflects a shared vision – connecting accountability with common purpose and ambition

And it is inclusive, encouraging shared endeavour and collective responsibility – because we can’t take on all the responsibility or realise success as single institutions alone

Sounds good, doesn't it? It's also how many sectors and most organisations across our society view accountability first and foremost. It's not new. But in this sector, it has too often been eclipsed by regulatory and compliance accountability.

Indeed, if I can mention Forum Strategy for a moment – I believe we must model what we preach. We are first and foremost accountable to our community of trust leaders. Yes, we have regulations and accounts to provide. But we are commissioned directly by trusts – no government contracts for us. You decide how we do, or don't do. And that means we have to keep learning, keep refining, keep getting better to meet your needs. We don't auto renew our membership like many others; we expect to be good enough to ensure our members actively renew. But, like all good pure accountability, we also return accountability. We expect members to be engaged, to contribute learning and ideas, to be

1 Pain, M.; Pure Accountability, latest iteration 2025. © Forum Education Limited 2025

collaborative – and that is why we have now moved back to an application process for new CEO members of the trust leaders’ network. We need to see that commitment before we welcome others into this network, or it will undermine its precious ethos.

Forum Strategy’s success over the last fifteen years has been built on pure accountability. It’s our long-term strategy.

But back to trusts and schools

Why are we now in a position where pure accountability matters more than ever? Let me share some statistics with you

- Those who believe the nation is divided by “culture wars” has risen from 46 per cent in 2020 to 67 per cent today.
- The Children’s Society’s latest index found children’s average happiness scores across five aspects of their life - their family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork - were all significantly lower than a decade earlier.
- Around 3.8 million children in the UK have high BMI, making us one of the worst-performing countries in Europe.
- More than half of children aren’t spending the recommended amount of time outdoors in physical activity.
- School readiness is declining, not least in terms of speech and language development, but also in terms of social skills.
- The number of graduate job vacancies is falling significantly, as employer expectations shift, sometimes radically.

And – as we saw last week in the Milburn report - nearly 60% of young people who are NEET now are economically inactive. They are not just out of work. They are not looking for work. Shockingly, 6 in 10 young people who are NEET today have never had a job, up from 4 in 10 in 2005.

I could go on.

And let’s be clear about our accountability system, the one that dominates so many of our conversations, energies and efforts.

None of the issues I’ve raised is sufficiently covered by it. Not wellbeing, not school readiness, not time spent outdoors, not healthy use of

technology, not destination data, not self-confidence and aspiration.

Think of that. So many of the fundamental issues that matter most to us and those who use our institutions day to day.

So many of the things we all treasure.

Now, the white paper proposes a step in the right direction.

It proposes a belonging measure.

It proposes a review of home and school agreements (that became no longer mandatory since the Cameron government)

It proposes expectations on the role of local governing bodies to hear communities and engage with communities

It proposes that trusts demonstrate their public benefit through a published annual return

Whilst encouraging steps, we cannot wait for a white paper. Great leaders don't wait around for politics to catch up.

And I know that many trusts and schools aren't waiting to harness pure accountability locally. We'll hear from some of them today.

But the onus on pure accountability – capturing so many of the things we and our communities collectively treasure - needs to have as much weight in our board meetings, in our executive team meetings, in our annual reports, on our websites, on our social media, in our leadership narrative, as Ofsted.

Not only do Ofsted and performance tables not capture some of the biggest issues we face.

They also don't generate the collective endeavour necessary to address them. Why?

They are summative. It simply tells us what has been. It doesn't look forward sufficiently to what's next.

It's standardised. It doesn't speak to the depth and diversity of aspirations, hopes and dreams of communities and localities

It isn't collective – it's about institutional accountability, the job of leaders, not shared responsibility and endeavour.

So, we do need to generate something else, that takes us higher up that jigsaw.

There are two big starting points here.

What will capture hearts and minds, in terms of bringing people into this shared endeavour

What gets people invested enough to embrace pure accountability?

1. Being asked

One is simply being part of this endeavour, to understanding one's part, to knowing that everyone has a contribution to make and a responsibility in making a difference. Sometimes, simply, to be asked.

Research has shown that not just simply raising awareness, or nudges, but the act of asking people with agency to play their part and to demonstrate their agency

This means home school agreements that ask and expect parents to read with their children nightly; that ask them to moderate and encourage healthy screen time; that ask them to genuinely commit to high attendance and punctuality, not simply using crude carrots or sticks

This means asking local employers to make provision for genuinely inspiring work experience or to help inform curriculum development; it means asking local football, rugby or cricket clubs to provide sports coaches on a regular basis; asking cultural institutions to reach out to bring the arts to those children who don't otherwise access them.

This means trusts and schools feeling confident to ask each other to provide advice or support where they feel they need help or to improve.

That's a game changing mindset in a system that seems to be adding more and more responsibility simply at school leaders' doors – even where they

have little circle of control.

The starting point for pure accountability is asking people to play their part. To take responsibility. To set shared expectations.

But, as well as distributing leadership and responsibility, here's where we need trust and school leaders to double down

What gets people invested enough to embrace pure accountability?

2. Generating a bold, compelling, galvanising vision

The other is shaping that bold vision to where we are going together.

I recently wrote in Schools Week about the vision that will get everyone up in a morning to take on this shared endeavour, and embrace pure accountability for it.

Because at the moment, a national vision doesn't fit this bill. The white paper was a flat disappointment here. As trusts – if we're going to get this right - we need something captivating, something galvanising – nothing less.

I call these the education blue zones

Why? Because geographical blue zones have captured everyone's imaginations for the twilight years of life. Books, Netflix documentaries, social media sites. Their focus on why people live well into old age is fascinating and motivating.

These blue zones inspire, enthuse and intrigue

But what about blue zones for the formative years of life and the environment around them

Why not inspiring others with blue zones for growing up, not simply growing old.

What do these look like...

Localities where trusts and schools sit at the heart of the community - provide a culture and learning experience that values both academic excellence and personal development and enrichment.

A zone that cherishes mental and physical wellbeing as much as “scores on the doors”

A zone that equips pupils to be healthy and creative users of technology. One that forges meaningful partnerships – with employers and cultural institutions, for instance – building aspiration and opportunity through times of economic change.

Critically these zones would also place expectations that parents and pupils will be active participants in a culture that values learning and healthy habits, be constructive contributors to improvement and innovation, demonstrate values such as kindness and togetherness and respect shared environments.

This will generate the willingness to be held accountable. And for leaders it is about rising to the opportunities and challenges of your time, that isn't simply about recognition from a regulatory, but mastery in your profession and as a community leaders

To achieve these blue zones, to realise the mastery of leadership in achieving them, we need to recognise the collective effort and responsibility required. It's not about one leader, or one leader's term, or one organisation.

It needs to embrace the whole community, and master leaders facilitate, generate, and expect

Aurelius wrote:

“Keep reminding yourself of the way things are connected, of their relatedness. All things are implicated in one another and in sympathy with each other. This event is the consequence of some other one. Things push and pull on each other, and breathe together, and are one.”

Marcus Aurelius

Pure accountability gets this in a way that traditional regulatory accountability does not

School readiness

Attendance

Behaviour

Belonging

Wellbeing

Aspiration

Employability

Every trust should have ambitions for these

And every trust should be opening up participation and responsibility around them

It isn't simply forged in our institutions – important though they are. To believe so is narrow and it is misguided. It is achieved through shared endeavour, and a shared responsibility and accountability that goes beyond boundaries laid in inspection reports.

The best leaders are forging that shared sense of responsibility and accountability, and through it making their visions and strategy a reality. Their own blue zones are shaping up.

Masters recognise that only through others, through connectedness, through an endless well of learning, feedback, ideas, and shared endeavour can they achieve greatness

Einstein said:

“We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them”

Albert Einstein

A system that talks about great leadership but relies heavily on a 1980s managerialist model of accountability alone, won't do this alone.

That accountability system, where it dominates culture, has absolved parents of too much responsibility – treating them like customers rather than partners; it has reinforced the notion of institutions as islands – fully responsible for a growing range of issues, and not interdependent – as they are in reality - on others; and it has created a culture that encourages compliance too often at the expense of innovation.

Rebalancing traditional accountability – not replacing traditional accountability – with pure accountability is the gateway

A system that accepts top-down accountability won't and can't go away

But also, that embraces accountability generated from within and across

That truly does measure what we treasure

That is about learning

That is about refinement

That is about mastery and becoming masters of our own destinies as communities and learning institutions responding to a changing world, whilst also acknowledging we must remain responsible custodians of our institutions

Mary Shelley wrote:

The beginning is always today

It's time to reset our relationship with accountability, and in doing so create our legacy.

Our blue zones of educational and developmental excellence
To make tangible public promises, and to deliver on them as
Communities in shared endeavour and togetherness in a turbulent world

This – as you can probably tell – won't begin anywhere else but with the people in this room. But isn't that the business of leadership, the business of masters

We shape the future, with the context and the tools at hand

Accountability isn't something to manage, it is something to harness. It's the gateway to success in turbulent times.

I want to end by saying this last, probably most important point.

In embracing pure accountability, we can also model something truly profound to a generation of children and young people that need – more than ever – to see their stake in the world and to realise their own place in it. We can model the potential of ambition, responsibility, and agency to them.

“At critical moments in time, you can raise the aspirations of other people significantly, especially when they are relatively young, simply by suggesting they do something better or more ambitious than what they might have in mind. It costs relatively little to do this, but the benefits to them, and to the broader world, may be enormous. This is in fact one of the most valuable things you can do with your time and with your life.”

Tyler Cowen, economist, b. 1962

That is the power of pure accountability in a nutshell.

Enjoy a day of rich discussion, ideas, and learning – I know you will have much to give, and will take much away.

Thank you