

# System leadership in disruptive times: robust policy making and enactment in School Trusts

University of Nottingham School of Education in Partnership with  
the Confederation of School Trusts<sup>1</sup>

*Robustness in policy-making...“captures the principle that conscious and proactive building of key capabilities can allow systems, organisations and policies to change and adapt in order to cope with shocks and still maintain their core functions... In this way robustness has a developmental and evolutionary quality that is not necessarily shared by the ‘bounce back’ nature of resilience” (Rollett, 2020, p.4)*

Christopher Day, Stanimira K. Taneva and Rose Smith  
The University of Nottingham  
April 2021



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<sup>1</sup> **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** We would like to thank the University of Nottingham for funding this project, the Confederation of School Trusts in the UK for its substantial collaboration throughout the whole project, and especially the 15 School Trust CEOs for their invaluable contributions, which made substantial positive difference to our knowledge of education policy and leadership in disruptive times.



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## Introduction

*Trust leadership is necessary but not sufficient if we are to build a connected system in which all actors work together. Trust leaders must also understand their role as civic leaders. School Trusts are a new civic structure. As such, leaders have a duty to engage with each other and other civic actors for the wider good... Trust leaders are civic leaders. As well as leading a group of schools to give children a better future, trust leaders also look out beyond their organisation. They work with each other in a connected system and they seek to work with other civic actors to ensure the value of the child in the locality, and that the collective actions of all civic actors protect high-quality education. (Cruddas, 2020, Systems of Meaning).*

This is a significant report. It corroborates findings by [Ofsted](#) in their Autumn visits to schools. The Ofsted research found that: “For the school leaders we spoke to, the support of their trust was crucial. They told us about support with safeguarding, interpreting COVID-19 guidelines, developing remote learning and integrating this with the curriculum.”

This report by the University of Nottingham delves deeper into the ways in which Trusts enacted policy, identifying twelve indicators of robustness and rigour. It demonstrates empirically that trusts are robust structures that have withstood the perturbations of the pandemic and will withstand future perturbations.

The lessons about leadership are particularly noteworthy. The research finds that “regardless of the size and geographical distribution of their schools, [CEOs] had demonstrated a strong sense of efficacy, agency and robust resilience, a profound sense of care, and agile, adaptive, values-led leadership which had permeated their schools, minimising disengagement of most of their pupils from learning, connecting closely with their parental communities and external agencies.”

The research speaks to new forms of leadership that needed to be enacted. CST has already begun work on mapping the [systems of meaning](#) within which school trusts are located and redefining leadership of school trusts. CST describes three nested leadership narratives: trust leadership, civic leadership and system leadership. We make the case that leadership of the organisation (trust leadership) is necessary but not sufficient. We also need to enact civic leadership



– how we work with others to advance education as a wider common good. Civic trusts create the conditions for purposeful collaboration between and among trusts and other civic organisations. The third narrative is about system leadership: not in the old definition of ‘working beyond the school gates’, but rather how we need to act on, rather than just acting in the system.

This research shows how civic leadership has been enacted through the pandemic and argues for the importance of connecting with others. As we begin to construct ways of leading in a post-pandemic world, we will need forms of leadership that enable schools to be ‘protective organisations’ that can mitigate the economic, social, health and educational impacts of Covid-19 on children and families. The story of the impact of Covid-19 on our children and young people has not yet been written. What we do next – the way we lead – is crucial to ensuring that we enact the sacred duty of holding trust with children.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leora Cruddas".

Leora Cruddas  
Chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts

## 1.0 The Research

The research discussed in this report is based upon a project, funded and conducted by the University of Nottingham (UoN), in collaboration with the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) and the CEOs of 15 Trusts in the Midlands region. This is part of larger scale, on-going research project on the policies and strategies that different School Trusts across the UK have been employing, since March 2020, to manage multiple disruptions to students' academic learning as well as students' and teachers' health and wellbeing.

### 1.1. Objectives

The project's objectives were to:

- Capture the ways in which School Trusts serving different socio-economic communities have managed challenges to core aspects of: i) the academic progress and wellbeing of various groups of students; and ii) teachers' wellbeing and ability to maintain high-quality teaching and learning, during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Identify successful approaches to policymaking and implementation, and especially those approaches that can be described as "robust" and "resilient".
- Gain early insights into the impacts of robust and resilient policymaking for both students and teachers.
- Explore the role of CEOs, as system leaders.
- Produce an evidence-based "policy directions" document for the purposes of local and national education policymakers.
- Contribute to the establishment of a national Trust -wide "think tank", focussing upon robust policymaking, enactment, and impact.

The report presents the findings from the first "pathfinder" stage of the University of Nottingham's on-going research on system leadership in disruptive times. A more wide-ranging report of findings from further data collection from Trusts in other regions across the UK, will include developments following the return of all pupils to schools from March 2021 to September 2021, and will be available by October 2021.

### 1.2. Context

In line with the project's aim to explore the policies and policy-implementation strategies employed by School Trusts in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, six milestones (or proxy indicators) of "policy change points" were identified for the period between March 2020 and January 2021. The milestones can also be associated with major disruptions to continuities to



students' learning and achievement opportunities. Based on the results of national attainment tests (EPI), they have subsequently been claimed by government (DfE), to have resulted in significant "learning loss" among students, especially those from disadvantaged communities, and reports of increased mental health problems among students and school staff (EPI, 2020; DfE, 2020).

The first milestone (*Milestone 1*) refers to the first national lockdown in March 2020, when attendance was restricted to vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers, and schools and Trusts moved rapidly to remote education for all other pupils. *Milestone 2* is associated with the wider re-opening of schools (beginning with primary schools) with strict public health controls in place in June 2020. At *Milestone 3* (Summer term 2020), processes for centre-assessment grades were initiated. During *Milestone 4* (in September 2020), full return to schools with DfE and PHE "system of controls" took place. However, in some areas, rolling closures of "bubbles" resulted in significant disruption in some schools. In November 2020 (*Milestone 5*), there was a second national lockdown. Schools were required to remain open despite significant disruption in some areas due to staff and pupil absence. Finally, *Milestone 6* (January 2021), refers to the starting up of C-19 testing on secondary school sites and the beginning of the third national lockdown. Attendance to schools was restricted to vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers. All other pupils were educated remotely until the beginning of March 2021, when schools were re-opened for all pupils.

### 1.3. Participants

The size of the main sample for this "pathfinder" project was specified as a minimum of 13 participants. This followed recommendations from the qualitative methodology literature that the adequacy of the sample size in qualitative studies should be guided by the "information power" power of the sample, which refers to the aim of the study, the sample's specificity, the use of established theory, the quality of dialogue, and the analytical strategy (cf. Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015). Given the established theoretical framework (i.e. "system leadership") and the aim the project presented here, the analytical approach involved and the role of the participants as strategic leaders of their Trusts, it was decided that a research sample of 13-15 participants would have sufficient information power.

In January 2021, CST and the University of Nottingham approached 24 Trusts across the Midlands region, with an initial invitation for participation in the project. 17 Trusts responded positively to this initial invitation and were, consequently, approached directly by the UoN team with specific invitations for participation in each of the four studies of the Pathfinder project (see the following sub-section for more detail). A total of CEOs from 15 Trusts participated in the project. Thirteen (13) CEOs returned fully completed survey questionnaires. Another three questionnaires were submitted only partly completed and were, therefore, not included in the data analysis. Eleven (11) CEOs participated in individual interviews, including 9 CEOs who participated in both the survey and interview studies, and provided electronic copies of policy documents. In addition, a total of 12 headteachers from one small (4 schools), one medium (11 schools) and one large (36 schools) Trust participated in a three focus-group interviews.

The 15 CEOs represented one national Trust, 10 Trusts in the East Midlands, and four Trusts in the West Midlands region. Most Trusts were of a medium size (i.e. with between six and

14 schools), three were small (with up to five schools), and three were large (with over 15 schools). Nine (i.e. 60%) Trusts were predominantly “primary-school” and five (i.e. about 30%) had at least one special school.

#### **1.4. Data collection and analysis**

The research followed a mixed-method qualitative approach, which comprised of four stages (studies) of data collection between January and March 2021 and was conducted in line with the University of Nottingham research ethics procedures and requirements.

At the first stage (study 1, January/February 2021), data were collected through an on-line qualitative questionnaire (administered by the online survey tool Qualtrics) with Trusts’ CEOs. The survey included open questions about the policies and strategies that Trusts, initiated, developed and implemented in response of each of the six policy change milestones (disturbances), and the observed effects of these policies in five key outcome areas including students’ engagement, learning, welfare and wellbeing and staff morale and wellbeing. Once retrieved from the software, the data was coded and anonymised.

At the second stage (study 2, March 2021), semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with CEOs of 11 Trusts were conducted. Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were video or audio-recorded, with the permission of the study participants. The audio-recordings were transcribed and anonymised. The interviews included sets of extended questions around Trust CEOs’ general and bespoke approaches to policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic and were partly based on the outcomes of the survey data analysis (collected through study 1).

At the third stage (study 3, March 2021), Trust CEOs provided, at their discretion, electronic copies of ‘best practices’ policy documents, including amendments or additions particularly associated with the disturbances during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the final stage (study 4, March 2021), three focus group interviews with Headteachers from over all three Trusts were conducted. Interview questions were focused on further exploring the policy implementation processes across Trusts. As with the individual interviews, the focus group interviews were video-recorded and, consequently, transcribed and anonymised.

The data collected at three (i.e. 1, 2 and 4) of the research stages were analysed through employing a phenomenological psychological approach, where the focus is on exploring inductively the participants’ authentic experiences of policymaking and implementation in disruptive times rather than testing a strictly predefined conceptual framework. Instead of relying on processes of categorising and quantifying things, phenomenology focuses on describing how things are experienced by the people directly involved (cf. Denscombe, 2007) and was, therefore, suitable for the purposes of this study. Interview transcripts were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). A similar thematic analysis approach was applied to the policy documents collected from the Trusts (study 3).





## 1.5. Report organisation

The following three sections of the report outline the key project findings. Section 2 offers an overview of the developing responses of the School Trusts to six ‘milestone’ challenges to the continuity to pupils’ school-based education over a twelve-month period since March 2020. Section 3 presents twelve key outcomes as indicators of robust and rigorous, values-led, principled leadership and management strategies designed to stimulate, build and sustain the motivation, commitment, engagement, capabilities and capacities of key stakeholders in system-wide robust and rigorous responses to the unprecedented challenges of the time. These include curriculum, delivery of teaching, students’ welfare, wellbeing and academic progress, staff development and wellbeing, re-distribution of responsibilities, building Trust-wide collegiality, optimising engagement with students, families, stakeholders, and wider communities. The final Section (4) reflects on the overall findings.

## 2. The journey: managing disruptions and discontinuities between March 2020 and March 2021

### 2.1 Key challenges since March 2020

In the interviews (study 2), the CEOs reflected upon a wide range of challenges, which had occurred in result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The prevailing themes were around continuing to maintain all core processes while also having to respond to rapidly occurring new demands, to comply with the frequently changing government guidance, re-frame key policy areas and approaches, and build a new organisational structure (Trust). These themes are illustrated with quotes in the following paragraphs.

**Keeping calm and carrying on.** For all participants, making sure that their Trusts continue fulfilling their core functions, with a vision of expanding these functions in the face of the rapidly changing demands and increasing insecurities, became a key priority. For example, two of the participants explained that: *“From my perspective, everything has changed, and nothing has changed. It’s almost as if we’ve just carried on, in the sense that we’ve set up something that is there for a particular purpose, and whatever the landscape, the environment, you’ve got to run through it, and you know why it’s there”* (T10, interview); and: *“Making sure that we do the right thing, remain credible and provide a service in the face of a lot of fear and inconsistencies”* (T13, interview). Another CEO reflected upon their leadership strategy by saying: *“...to be pragmatic, to concentrate on the operational plan and to try and give a sense of business as usual as much as possible while supporting those who were finding themselves in very, very difficult times”* (T3, interview).

**Responding to changes in national policy.** According to all participants, designing and implementing Trust-wide systems to ensure compliance with government guidelines became a significant aspect of their work and leadership function after March 2020. This was often viewed as a major challenge due to the frequency of the Government-driven policy changes, the unpredictability of many of these changes, and the overall perception of lack of effective communication channels between the Government and Trusts.

Most of the interviewed CEOs shared their frustration with this process. For example: *“Inconsistencies in Government policies have been frustrating...”* (T13, interview); *“Our systems and structures are very rigid and suddenly to say, well, you know you may be coming back next week... all of these things, these changes, some of which were subtle, some of which were quite profound, made things very, very difficult for us”* (T3, interview).

The experiences of lack of clear communication and direction from Government resonated throughout the interview conversations with the CEOs: *“... it [the policy change] kind of unfolded in instalments rather than clarity. I have a block of time and I think that makes things*

*more difficult to plan for....” (T3, interview), and: “...people think schools know in advance. We don't, they [DfE] announce it [the policy change] on the television for everybody” (T2, interview); “Lockdown 2 open but no staff...Lockdown 3 digital divide...Slow and contradictory leadership from DfE and exam boards” (T11, interview).*

**Re-framing “Health & Safety”.** Updating and re-designing their Trust’s Health & Safety policies constituted a major responsibility for the CEOs over the previous year. For them, this had to come first, alongside attempts to maintain acceptable education provision. For example, in the words of one of the CEOs: *“...during that particular time... not really focusing on educational standards, it was more ensuring that children had somethings to do...So, initially it was around safety, ensuring that we could keep our staff safe because our schools were open...so, essentially it was all of the work associated with a robust, safe closing...Round up robust risk assessments and safety processes on sites...” (T4, interview).*

In addition, the Trusts faced the urgent need to re-frame and extend their safeguarding approaches in order to be able to provide adequate support to all students, and especially to those from vulnerable groups whose situation had worsened during the period after March 2020. This issue is depicted, for example, in the following quote: *“The key challenges for us are the free school meals pupils, issues around poverty....40% free school meals, and 30% on the breadline, ‘jam’ families, with no support. A lot of the children are incredibly vulnerable, and we have seen a rise in domestic violence during the pandemic, so we have an excellent safeguarding team” (T11, interview).*

**Changing teaching and learning approaches.** Another main theme of policy-related challenges refers to the pressing need to rapidly and substantially change the traditional, well established teaching and learning approaches. A key characteristic of this change is the transition from classroom-based to remote teaching and learning, which has had lasting effects on the way in which schools are working and will be working in the future. The following two quotes provide some insights into this complex challenge, experienced across all Trusts:

*“So, the first thing that was difficult for us was around an immediate flip from classroom-based delivery to remote learning and, I think, across the sector there were very different levels of preparedness for that capability, different levels of funding... so that, that kind of policy I think drove an immediate wedge between those that could and those that couldn't. I would say that's probably been the most challenging aspect...I think as a system, again, as well as from my perspective as Chief Executive that has created, you know, the lack of technological readiness” (T14, interview).*

*“I think, the key challenges have obviously been the delivery of dual approaches to learning, those children who have remained in school throughout, those children, the majority of which, of course have been learning remotely varying elements of expertise, when it came to*

*delivering remote [learning], up-skilled very, very quickly, and the Trusts are able to support them in that and the schools were able to support each other in that” (T3, interview).*

**Building a School Trust in disruptive times.** During the interviews, about one-third of the CEOs mentioned that their Trusts were formed at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and two CEOs shared that they had joined their current Trusts after mid-2020. Although not applicable to all Trusts, this is important information, related to the Trusts’ policymaking experiences and approaches. For these new Trusts, the development and implementation of policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the formation of their organisational structure, which in turn positioned the newly developed policies and their implementation strategies at the core of the Trusts’ systems from the very beginning. This challenge is communicated, for example, in the below quote:

*“We were trusted, grown from a school improvement perspective. So, we did that really well but ... then we’ve doubled in size very quickly... And that meant that we needed to concentrate on building the actual Trust operating model, and therefore that has been challenging at times in terms of the cultural change required to move away from an old CEO to a new one and a new operating model” (T4, interview).*

## 2.2 Trusts’ policy responses over time

The overall process of policy development over the past year is outlined in the following paragraphs, illustrated with quotes from the survey (study 1) and the interviews (study 2), and with a reference to each of the six policy change milestones (disturbances and discontinuities).

**Centralising processes and reorganising resources.** Although this theme re-occurred across policy milestones (major disturbances), it was most clearly articulated by the participants in relation to *Milestone 1* (i.e. during the first national lockdown in March 2020, when attendance was restricted to vulnerable pupils). Across all Trusts, the centralisation of processes and policies was viewed as an effective leadership strategy, which allowed easing the burden on schools and strengthened the Trusts’ policy presence: *“The pandemic has brought us very rapid change, which is the ability to work as a much tighter centralised, policy driven unit. It gave us permission to do what we had hoped, to relieve the burdens, administrative, bureaucratic, financial resource-based, site-based tasks and responsibilities that distract and deflect them [schools] from their purpose, which is primarily safeguarding and teaching and learning” (T5, interview).* This centralised approach was also seen as a vehicle for ensuring higher levels of *“...compliance with guidance and statutory requirements... across schools” (T2, survey).*

A distinctive element of the process of centralisation was the re-organisation of resources. On one hand, this referred to structural changes in the Trusts’ resource systems. For example: *“...there has been a switch of some work... there was also, I think, a rerouting of work because of the restrictions some things couldn't be done, and this gave us some capacity to do other things... that was simply because of the volume of issues and making sure that we could connect with all of our school sites very, very promptly” (T3, interview).* On the other hand, it

meant changes in the roles of the CEOs: *“I think, as senior leaders, we've had to be adaptable to so many different roles. And you know, you go from being that teacher and that senior leader so, you know, to virtually have hinted to be a doctor and a nurse”* (T6, interview).

**Refining newly developed policies and policy implementation approaches.** At Milestone 2 (i.e. the wider re-opening of schools in June 2020), the main focus in Trusts shifted from centralising policy processes and establishing new systems (hence, policy implementation strategies) to refining these policies and systems. As explained by the CEOs, this included revising, expanding, and developing new policies where necessary: *“Build[ing] on processes of first response, with more advanced planning...”* (T7, survey); *“Policies revised/adapted and new ones (e.g. face coverings) written.”* (T5, survey); *“Additional H&S support and guidance provided to ensure that any H&S visits took place without incident...”* (T10, survey).

These processes of policy development were underlined by the continuously expanding and improving centralising strategies, implemented across all Trusts. For example, some participants explained: *“Cross-Trust curriculum teams, pastoral teams and development teams have also continued”* (T9, survey); *“... practice-sharing and guidance centrally coordinated and reviewed by central teams, including 'walk throughs' and QA of Risk Assessments and health controls....More detailed guidance, support and CPD produced/co-ordinated from the centre...”* (T7, survey); *“Developed a capacity document which informed the re-opening plans and reviewed the risk assessment templates.... Risk Mitigation tracker updated”* (T8, survey).

**Process optimisation through shared experience.** The tendency to process optimisation, which emerged at the previous milestone (2), was more explicit at Milestone 3 (i.e. during the Summer term 2020, when processes for centre-assessment grades were initiated). A prevailing sub-theme in this context was the value of shared experience as a pathway to robust policymaking. This was experienced between and within Trusts. The acknowledgement of one of the CEOs that: *“Trust relationships with other Trusts allowed for some sharing of practice to support and reassure secondary leaders... ASCL & CST proved informative partners”* (T2, survey), was echoed by many other. In addition, various forms of shared experience were utilised by the schools across all Trusts. For example: *“Use of trust-wide structures and executive leadership to land a common approach”* (T12, survey); *“Facilitated secondary schools working together and adopting same practice and approach...Trust ensured that practice was robust... Schools shared information on things like appeals and then agreed shared policy - Exam Officers worked together...Schools used staff from the other school as potential independent specialist subject experts”* (T5, survey).

**Improving process consistency and efficacy: prioritising academic performance.** Improving process consistency and efficacy remained a priority at Milestone 4 (i.e. the full return to schools with DfE and PHE “system of controls” in September 2020). The main focus of the policy-evolution processes in Trusts this time, however, was on students’ academic performance. The notion of “robustness” in this respect was frequently expressed by the participants in their survey responses. For example: *“There was a robust system of moderation in place both within individual academies and then across the Multi Academy*

*Trust, which ensured validity of results. The grades went through a number of checks and balances to achieve consistency across the Trust” (T11, survey); “Reporting to the Board. Managing limited numbers of appeals became easier following the 'stamp of assurance' from the Trust” (T3, survey); “Support for schools for developing robust evidence bases, their methodology/mechanisms for data collection, collation and processing and QA (internal and at Trust level) ... Data platform and processing support for schools from the centre” (T7, survey).*

**Further increasing resources and support.** Building upon the good practices around policy development and implementation, which occurred during milestones 1-4, at *Milestone 5* (i.e. the second national lockdown in November 2020, when schools were required to remain open). Trusts were likely to increase their efforts in securing additional resources and support for schools. These resources referred mostly to securing additional teaching staff, supporting self-isolation staff and students, and technological support for remote learning and working. For example: *“...we were able to secure supply staff to cover absences as required due to staff self-isolating or illness...Central IT system and support meant that staff who were self-isolating but well, were able to remote in to lead lessons...Shared attendance officer across primaries supporting on chasing pupil absence” (T2, survey); “Launched laptop donation campaign” (T9, survey).* As some acknowledged: *“This was the hardest milestone, as staff absence really impacted on the quality of education” (T13, survey).*

**On-going revisions and adjustments.** Finally, at *Milestone 6* (i.e. the starting up of C-19 testing on secondary school sites and the beginning of the third national lockdown in January 2021), Trusts’ CEOs were largely engaged in ongoing revisions and adjustments of the previously developed policies and implementation strategies. This tendency is illustrated by the following quotes: *“All previous measures were adopted, and academies carried on in the same way they did in September” (T11, survey); “Revision of initial lockdown guidance re wellbeing, staff protocols, etc...Central updates re. safeguarding, procurement (education resources, H+S materials, etc) ...Central monitoring re supply, staffing, etc” (T7, survey); “... Consistent reference to risk assessments, and revisions on a regular basis as tiering introduced. Mixed diet of remote and on site learning created capacity issues” (T3, survey).*

Trusts supplied a range of policy-related documents (study 3), revealing a broad set of themes in eight key policy areas: *Safeguarding, Risk Assessment and Planning, Interpreting COVID-19 Guidelines, Remote Curriculum, Curriculum Changes (In School), Staff Wellbeing, and Student’s Wellbeing.* A summary and examples of each of these policy areas is presented in Appendix 1.



### 3.0 Policy making and enactment in School Trusts: twelve key indicators of robustness and rigour

Over the twelve-month period of unanticipated disruptions and discontinuities, these Trusts had gone beyond ‘coping’ or merely ‘surviving’. Their CEOs, regardless of the size and geographical distribution of their schools, had demonstrated a strong sense of efficacy, agency and robust resilience, a profound sense of care, and agile, adaptive, values-led leadership which had permeated their schools, minimising disengagement of most of their pupils from learning, connecting closely with their parental communities and external agencies.

Indicators of the key aspects of robustness of their policymaking and implementation were present not only in what they reported in their responses to surveys and interviews, but also in their documentation of policies and through interviews with focus groups of headteachers from three of the Trusts. A combination of twelve areas of action were indicators of their robustness and rigour.

#### 3.1 Re-distributing responsibilities

**CEOs spoke of the period not only as a challenge to be met, but as an opportunity for roles and responsibilities to be revisited. Structural relationships between the central Trust team and the Trust schools were re-defined. The central Trust team took responsibility for the organisation and provision of necessary health and safeguarding protocols; HR; investment in new technologies; information exchange; working across the Trust to ensure that individual academies could focus on developing appropriate teaching and learning; the welfare of pupils and staff; and the engagement of parents. These increased efficiencies won the confidence of their schools, enabling them to respond to the disruptions and discontinuities in ways which minimised their impact on pupils’ welfare and academic learning.**

*The Board's responsibility for the opening (or otherwise) of schools gave them a heightened sense of responsibility. Their work to interrogate and subsequently validate schools' risk assessments and protocols was exceptional (T3, survey).*

*We have a covid response line that we have set up. So, if any school has a case of Covid, or something that is worrying them, they email the Covid response line, and we take it in turns. At weekends we rotate, so we are always on duty (T15, interview).*

*We've done important things with the community. We've been really trying to lead on that and I think there have been some really significant moments... we're raising money for the charity that we work with, providing the food parcels... it's given a sense of purpose to the schools and reinforced our ethos and values, which has been really significant... (T1, interview).*

*Clarity - is key... Having really effective back-office services - an effective and proactive CFO is vital - giving Headteachers the head space, time and resources to focus on the day to day*



*running of their schools teaching and learning, supporting staff and pupils with wellbeing, safeguarding (T5, interview).*

*The attendance manager's role has been twofold: to support positive attendance but also to ensure consistency across tasks, and her role switched...so she could then do some of the reporting for us with the Department and with the local authorities. So rather than have to send the information to those different parties, she could collect them each day from the schools...It meant that we had a trust-wide total each day in terms of our attendance and how that was looking, including vulnerable children, which vulnerable children were attending. And so, it gave us that that assurance, in terms of Trust-wide trends, so that role was really, really important for us (T3, interview).*

**CEOs reported that feedback from staff across schools was that they had felt supported, appreciated and part of a larger team approach and in one Trust, a survey of staff had found that 98% had confidence in the leadership of schools and the Trust.**

### **3.2 Building Trust-wide collegiality**

**Feedback from staff was that they felt closer to the Trust than before because of the compassionate way they have been supported. All spoke of the greater sense of collegiality that had grown stronger over the twelve-month period of the pandemic, and the desire in Trusts to help each other.**

*I think the system has led. ...the system has stepped up, and I think Trusts have massively led that step up, and consequently we've become far more transparent and collegial, and sharing with our resource is in a way which we've never seen before.....What has come out is a greater development of collegiality. Making sure people felt connected and we were communicating (T13, interview).*

*We've learnt the value of a Trust. We've learnt how much easier it is to do things when you have an infrastructure that allows you to do that, and that you're not an individual head trying to do things. And so, operationally we've been really effective. Even right from the very beginning when schools closed so incredibly quickly, we started meeting every morning online (Chief Finance Officer, my Operations person, the Governance person and the school improvement leads). Between us we would read all the DfE mailings, all the Public Health, England. And we set up informal 'Whats App' groups with our Heads, so that they could send quick messages about problems etc. between us, we would answer. We relayed information out (T13 interview).*

*A Trust gave us all their policy documentation, all kinds of things for free. Education had become very adversarial, everybody mindful of numbers on seats, pitting one Trust against another. The pandemic allowed us to see beyond this, beyond the silos we had built, to help each other. I think that has become the narrative. If we lose that, we will be impoverished again (T5, interview).*





*Just that sense of team at every level at the central Trust, at leadership level, and then just the stuff on the ground. I think that's been the biggest success and the biggest heart-warming (T2, interview)...building individuals but also building the team. And this is something that we're looking at rolling out across the Trust to our leaders and other staff going forward" (T6, interview).*

*There is that support network which is really helpful and has been really supportive when other principals are having the same problems. And you know, I know that if I was having any problem with anything, I could go to various Directorates or speak to (CEO). And I know that if I contacted (CEO). There are other people go to, but I know that if I needed to because I wasn't getting any help from anywhere then I would go there. There is that trust there that I know, ultimately (C4).*

### **3.3 Innovations in teaching and learning: use of digital technologies**

*A quantum shift in staff confidence and abilities in using digital/remote learning technology (T5, survey).*

#### **All Trusts invested in IT to support remote learning.**

*The investment in IT was crucial because I think that without it, we would not have been anywhere near as successful. It really helped that we have digital learning advisers in the Trust, and a whole lot of Microsoft-badged educators. So, we had a lot of expertise already. We have a digital strategy, and we continue to embed that (T11 interview).*

*Overall, this has been very positive. We had already begun to do this - all of our [older] pupils had a 'Chromebook', for example, and we have developed real skills in presenting online learning. We can particularly see the value in blending home and school learning, and using IT in subjects like MFL, for example. All of our secondary students are now familiar with 'Teams', and we will continue to use this for sharing resources and lesson materials, homework and collaborative work (T1, survey).*

#### **All Academies provided live and recorded lessons, and teachers were upskilled in the uses of technology.**

*Teaching has been 'stripped back' and so some poor habits from teachers - over-talking, reading around the room etc. - no longer takes place. Early adopters - schools and staff - became prized assets, and there was a great upskilling that has helped drive forward technical innovation and curriculum creativity" (T3, survey).*

*The use of resources such as YouTube for science experiments will mean that bubbles who are still not in a science lab will at least have some experience of practical science" (T13, survey).*

*There were huge benefits in upskilling staff in the use of EdTech which also applied in professional collaboration and remote CPDL (T8, survey).*

**Many Trusts were able to make significant financial investments in Trust-wide digital strategies. In many, all pupils received live and recorded lessons, and one-to-one contact with teachers, pupils with IEPs had dedicated times with Teaching Assistants.**

*The Trust has invested in a digital strategy, working in partnership with Microsoft. The Trust has a high number of Microsoft 'Showcase' academies and also the highest number of Microsoft approved teacher educators (MIEs) in the country. This investment paid dividends in the switch to remote learning...In addition we provided all of the 8000 secondary school pupils with a device (T11, survey).*

### **3.4 Maximising the engagement of all pupils in remote learning**

*We were intent on providing really high-quality work for the students. There's nothing that will make students more anxious than if they feel that they are being let down in terms of the provision. So, the best thing that we could do for our students and our pupils was to make sure that the quality of what we did was as good as it possibly could be (T3, interview).*

**A key principle which guided the actions of CEOs and others in their Trusts was maximising the continuing engagement of all pupils in learning. Given the nature of the pandemic and its management at national level, and, for most, the existing school-based cultures and practices of teaching and learning, these were ongoing challenges.**

*I think the first thing that was difficult for us was around an immediate flip from classroom-based delivery to remote learning and, I think, across the sector there were very different levels of preparedness for that capability, different levels of funding (T14, interview).*

**Although there were variations in the ways in which Trusts resolved issues of remote learning, CEOs were unanimous in speaking positively about the ways teachers and Headteachers in their Trusts had responded.**

*We haven't had large numbers of children and adults being reluctant to engage in learning or being reluctant to return to school, and I think that that is the most profound success that I think we can point to (T3, interview).*

*There have been high levels of pupil engagement in remote learning (Microsoft Insights and teacher reporting) and of parental satisfaction [surveys] (T9, survey).*

*Staff confidence with live streaming is helping engagement. Across the Trust we have relatively high levels of engagement against our five step criteria.... using the Oak Academy as an expectation (T7, survey).*

*So, if pupils didn't attend, so if they didn't come into the lesson, we would text the parent during that lesson and say they're not in the lesson now. So they all attended. We had almost 100% attendance(T1, interview).*

**For younger pupils, however, there was an issue of concentration span.**

*There are some who don't want to spend their entire life in front of a camera, and there are others who love it. But we've got to think about the children. They don't want 6 hours of sitting in front of a screen all day. They need to be dipping in and out of things and they don't want to be shackled to their computer and miss something else that's going on (T5, interview).*

*Learning tasks were differentiated and we used a blending approach which was not all online (T11, survey).*

**Example of policy use: Maximising the engagement of all pupils in learning**

Remote teaching and blended learning quality assurance document T15 adopted a comprehensive and ambitious quality assurance policy which aimed to deliver high quality remote teaching to all pupils. The policy adopts government guidance on providing ambitious and meaningful learning for all students. The quality assurance process aimed to ensure equivalent hours and level of remote teaching was delivered to that which the student would receive in school. The process included speaking with students to ask them about their experiences of remote and blended learning.

**Despite the many successes, factors beyond the control of schools - multi-child households, parents working from home, access by parents to e-resources (suitable devices, internet) affected the quality of pupils' ability to engage with remote learning.**

It is beyond the remit of this research to unpick the complex patterns and effects of 'isolation', differences in the quality of home support, broken 'bubbles', staff illnesses, 'take-up' of remote learning by pupils, and teachers' abilities to learn and adopt over the period of the pandemic, the skills necessary to promote pupil engagement and progress their learning in different environments. Although all CEOs were optimistic about the pupil engagement achievements of the schools in their Trusts, they were aware also, that there remains ongoing challenges in engaging all pupils in learning and assessing their progress' (T2 survey); and that some students require additional support to engage. There were difficulties in convincing some of the benefits of, ...digital literacy; lack of subject knowledge by parents; parental support for home learning; and rural poor quality broadband.

*Quality engagement from pupils is becoming increasingly difficult and differentiation for pupils harder than in the classroom. We still have families who cannot access sufficient devices (T4, survey).*

Trusts continue to refine what they mean by engagement... Initially this was simply being assured that priority pupils were either in school or linking in with remote learning either through their own devices or those provided by the academies and DfE. However, as noted in Section 2 of this report, as the year progressed, this remote learning was extended and nuanced to ensure that teachers were able to make more effective ongoing contributions to all pupils' engagement with learning.

### 3.5 Minimising disengagement of vulnerable and hard-to-reach pupils

*“It's difficult, isn't it? Because when you look at the culture of a particular Trust, and their vision and their values, it doesn't really matter when all are kind of doing the same things...the best outcomes for their pupils regardless of their backgrounds. And some Trusts may focus more on the disadvantage that they've noticed, but we are very much trying to ensure that every pupil is able to find what they are good at and excel at that, and whether that's academical, whether that sport or whether that's the arts. But it's very much trying to create that environment for them to succeed...It doesn't matter that the policies are there to make sure that that you succeed” (T4, interview).*

Trusts worked hard to ensure equity, where all students were supported in the ways they needed most, and where no one would feel left out or undermined. For some, the challenges were centred on poverty, for others, vulnerabilities in the home which required safeguarding. For others, the issue was efficiencies of communication or parents being unwilling or unable to challenge their children's lack of engagement.

*We have no control over pace of learning - less motivated students can lower their pace without necessarily disengaging fully. Particularly those that are HPA - doing enough to get by/under the radar” (T5, survey).*

*It was often 4 weeks before Academies had evidence of a lack of engagement to insist they returned to academies. This was a very small percentage in each cohort. However, these significant few are currently lost to education and may not come back (T13 survey).*

*Some factors were beyond our control - multi-child households, parents working from home, access to e-resources (suitable devices, internet) are just some of the factors affecting students' ability to engage with remote learning (T7, survey).*

Despite these challenges, in all cases, CEOs were driven by ambitions to make a positive difference in dealing with under-privileged families and children.

**A key step forward associated with Trusts' policies for supporting students' welfare, health and wellbeing and academic progress was the continuous *re-conceptualisation* of “vulnerable” groups. As a result, all participants reported that the numbers of vulnerable students across Trusts had grown significantly.**

*We already knew the vulnerable families before the pandemic, and we just kept on adding to the list as people lost their jobs, were laid off or furloughed... So, we had a lower benchmark to identify who was vulnerable” (T5, interview).*

The evolved conceptualisations of “vulnerability” seemed associated with a relatively wide variety of factors, amongst which were students' age (developmental stage), learning needs, and family situation: *“...teenagers identified as most at risk due to sense of isolation from peers” (T2, survey); “...our broad definition was that if we felt that a child in terms of their learning and care would profoundly benefit from being in school, not just benefit a little,*

*because all children would benefit from being in school live” (T3, interview). Some Trusts implemented more formalised systems for identifying vulnerable groups, for example: “We have a ‘vulnerability’ index” (T15, interview); “We have an Educational Psychologist Service to help us this year, including support for principals. We have far more pupils who we would class as vulnerable than before” (T15, interview). Others referred to their bespoke approaches: “We use ‘local intelligence’ to help... We were really flexible” (T5, interview).*

*We had to be creative and find what worked for these children. Sometimes it was offering them a place in school. Sometimes it was adapting the provision e.g. workbooks instead of online, face-to-face zooms or phone calls to help with the work. We used our pastoral teams to reach out to these families (T6, survey).*

*We reached out to individual pupils and making them feel more important/cared for, and that has helped engagement. Inviting those struggling to attend site has had some success... but a small proportion are still hard to reach. We know who they are and will use additional interventions to support on return (T2, survey).*

*We've provided care packages and hampers for children, not just the food, but things like shampoo and those kinds of things, to where we've known that a child's been in particular need. I think those kinds of things have really made a difference to our communities (T14, survey).*

*“In terms of remote learning, etc., our pastoral team are vigilant with this sort of thing across all of our age groups and how they engage with students and with families. We've had such a wide variety of examples from, food parcels and clothing. Now schools are open, and families can come into school and access clothing from old school uniforms. We have some great examples from some primary schools of engagement, particularly in deprived areas, such as fancy dress around the streets and offering incentive points for themselves and their classes, along with virtual merit assemblies (T4, interview).*

*We have distributed about 400+ devices to disadvantaged families, and access to free data where families don't have internet access (T9, survey).*

*Increased interaction with parents has enabled schools to better 'reach' some students...[and]... evaluation of how/why students do/don't engage will inform future strategic planning (T7, survey).*

The theme of re-defining “vulnerability” re-occurred across all Trusts, demonstrating the variety of innovative approaches and the significant amount of effort involved into caring for their students.

**These examples indicate the intensity and extent of the investment which the Trusts and the schools within them, made in attempts to minimize learning disengagement especially among vulnerable pupils, during this twelve (12) month period.**

### 3.6 Connecting with others

**All CEOs spoke of reaching out to regional and national networks and other organisations beyond their own Trusts. They spoke of the benefits gained from the information and advice received, and the opportunity to share the challenges they faced as being pivotal to their decision-making.**

*I think there is a real sincere perception that CST are battling for all of us when it comes to the things that we need Ministers to know about. And that's really important. Their briefings and policy updates were instrumental in helping Trusts steer a path through the early days of the pandemic. It's really important for us, the daily bulletins. During the most critical times, the CST bulletin would often have information out prior to the DfE Zone bulletin (T3 interview).*

*The CST has elevated the role of the Board collectively. For the very first time, some of them felt very actively involved in pivotal decisions within the school. They challenged me. They challenged the core team. They're really challenging our actions and our decisions, rather than making a decision of their own and acting in their own capacity (T3, interview).*

*“Having an organisation like CST, filtering out and streamlining DfE guidance made life so much easier, particularly in the first three months, when nobody really knew about covid, and managing the anxiety levels.” (T5, interview).*

*Another thing that we do is that we always seek the use of external consultants where possible, where we think that that will add value to get that third-party corroboration (T4, interview).*

*We've used the Education Endowment Foundation's research to inform our catch-up plan across the trust (T6, interview).*

*We have connected more with LA and other Trusts, and the sector seems less fragmented (T13, survey).*

### 3.7 Optimising communication with families

**All CEOs emphasised the special importance that they and their academies had attached during the period to engaging parents and wider families in new ways in their children's education. In schools where strong relationships of 'unity and mutual trust' (T1, survey) had**

**been formed, reinforced and extended such that schools had been able to reach the parents and carers of otherwise 'hard-to-reach' children, they had become a 'key foundation' and provided the 'best results' (T5, survey).**

*We've really prioritised communication, setting expectations, daily calls where necessary. Structured daily timetables with regular live interaction (T1, interview).*

*We have set up good systems for this, for example automatically delivering a notification to parents if a student is not marked present in a remote lesson, and we follow up all cases of*





*disengagement, often with a home visit or a phone call. We have also been able to provide suitable connectivity/IT (T1, survey).*

*We developed robust systems to promote engagement.....parental communication; setting expectations, daily calls where necessary. We structured daily timetables with regular live interaction... established systems for tracking vulnerable pupils - daily communication, home visits (T9, survey).*

*We made sure that the vulnerable families were getting the support .... that their children with special educational needs were being catered for. Questionnaires allowed schools to reach out to parents and families and offer bespoke support (T6, survey).*

*All academies have family support workers who regularly visit families from a social distance and work with supported children on Teams... Regular 'check ins' were held between teachers and children (T11, survey).*

*Pastoral teams support academic staff by engaging with families (T12, survey).*

*Persistent absence is followed up with phone calls to home (T4, survey).*

### **3.8 Ensuring pupils' welfare and wellbeing**

Pupils' wellbeing was a theme across most Trusts. Welfare during lockdown focused on updated safeguarding policies to reflect changes in location, staffing and external risks to students. Concerns for pupils' mental health during lockdown and on the return of all pupils to school were reflected in Trusts' curriculum and risk assessment policy documents. For all Trusts, extending the provision of support regarding pupils' welfare and wellbeing after March 2020 had become a key challenge and a guiding principle:

*"I think that, at the moment, it's around welfare, isn't it? It's been around getting the child in the right place to learn and, I think, we've really focused our time and energy on that and their catch-up strategy group using the [name of a research organisation] research about that as well." (T6, interview).*

Existing policies were re-written and new policies were developed to ensure that all groups of students were well cared for, in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much effort had

been directed towards supporting vulnerable groups of pupils. This led to improved practices and consequently, outcomes for these groups. As one of the CEO's outlined: *"...we have much better and parental relationships with our more vulnerable children... So, for our vulnerable children, not universally, but in a lot of cases we're seeing really enhanced relationship between home and school. And more broadly, that's also true" (T14, interview).*

In addition, some participants noticed that the effects of their wellbeing-related policies and strategies varied across different age-groups of pupils: *"...but in terms of wellbeing, it was the other way around. So, in terms of wellbeing, the younger children were just happy to be back*

*and skipped into school and just picked up where they left off. Whereas it was sort of more...the teenagers who were sort of struggling with what the isolation had meant to them, I mean" (T2, interview).*

A key indicator of robustness and rigour was Trusts' inclusivity, as expressed through the **extended monitoring and support** provided throughout Trusts for pupils' welfare and wellbeing. All Trusts monitored student wellbeing through student engagement and extended communication with both students and families. For example: *"All children had regular contact with their class teacher and classmates through regular social session on Teams... Any student not engaging with home learning would be contacted on the first day of absence" (T11, survey); "Individual wellbeing calls to pupils and parents as needed...Family Support Workers/pastoral staff/learning mentors responding to need" (T2, survey).* The CEOs' narratives, communicated (mostly) in the survey, demonstrated a wide variety of wellbeing support strategies and activities. Some of these are summarised in the following quotes:

*"Early help provision which included food packs, work materials and even Christmas gifts for some families to ensure everyone felt included and supported" (T8, survey).*

*"Reward systems adapted so that pupils still get sense of congratulations from teachers...Assemblies to ensure all feel connected" (T2, survey).*

*April reading challenge - how many books can you read and share, June creating feel of collaboration and wider network including 'apple' activities e.g. exercise week etc...writing a kindness curriculum for Easter launch" (T8, survey).*

*Integrated wellbeing time including outdoor activity to weekly timetable for pupils in school and at home" (T9, survey).*

*Use of counselling services in addition to phone calls, on site meetings etc. Schools have actively engaged to encourage to attend school" (T5, survey).*

At this stage of policy development, many CEOs were already looking forward with a vision how to embed the successful models of students' wellbeing in their Trusts in the longer term. For example: *"Developing a more proactive than reactive approach, ...opportunities to look at how we can have wellbeing-friendly practices, explicitly developed in our schools and how all teachers are 'teachers of wellbeing access to specialist agencies'...Developing specialist*

*informed CPD which we can invest in over the long-term" (T7, survey).* Some Trusts had gone a step further to develop their bespoke approaches, for example: *"We've tried to make sure that these things are kind of not one size fits all..." (T1, interview); "The Rising Star" curriculum was crucial to this, ensuring staff had the tools and training to support pupils...e.g. 'Smiler Projects' to support the seven ways to wellbeing, community orienteering" (T6, survey).*

Despite these significant policy-development achievements, CEOs highlighted a number of **unresolved challenges**. Some of these issues were related to difficulties in monitoring the students' access to and the outcomes of the implemented wellbeing policies: *"... quality and impact of interventions when remote, harder to achieve and measure; lack of visual and verbal*



*clues as to individuals' happiness that are often picked up around school and acted on" (T12, survey). Others referred to factors affecting pupils' wellbeing beyond the CEOs and school staff control, such as: "... particularly anxiety from isolation, lack of 'normality' and on-going uncertainty re assessment arrangements for key cohorts" (T7, survey). Some CEOs felt let down by the "absence" of external support services, which meant that their Trusts had to step in, and provide further support in place of these agencies.*

*Challenges include the withdrawal of support services and other agencies. They have become conspicuous by their absence...I think, all safeguarding leads or attendance leads, heads of year, pastoral leads, they were very, very busy, and they were trying to manage the shortfall in terms of the other agencies that just didn't seem to be around (T3, survey).*

### **3.9 Supporting staff morale and wellbeing.**

*It was critical to keep staff morale high because if staff lose faith in what's happening, or if they begin to go under, then you sink. It was an easy priority to make. So, we looked at ways that would either physically support them, show that we cared, or offer emotional and mental wellbeing support...using local intelligence and people on the spot (T5, interview).*

A key policy area, which developed rapidly and significantly after March 2020, relates to supporting staff morale and wellbeing. This was a high priority policy area for all Trusts and included a wide range of activities planned to address the increasing demands of maintaining higher levels of staff morale and wellbeing, while isolating or teaching remotely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As in other policy areas, the range of activities designed to support staff morale and wellbeing had been drastically extended over the previous year. For example, a significant effort was directed towards re-distributing workload to make sure that staff are not overwhelmed with excessive workload: *"Weekly meetings to identify what practical support for workload reduction can be provided by the central team" (T9, survey); "Workload is sensibly spread by academy HTs" (T10, survey); "Reviewed workload pressures on the calendar and reduced QA.... Reviewed roles and responsibilities.... Early finishes on site...Email timelines and wider response expectations" (T8, survey).* In addition, some MATs took measures to ensure that staff are having opportunities for a break and recuperation: *"Full close down of trust school sites for a two-week period to ensure that all staff, especially HTs got a well-earned break" (T4, survey).*

Many Trusts increased communications around staff wellbeing and implemented policies of extra support and mental health service provision for staff. Trusts demonstrated policies of ensuring good communications between Trusts, schools, staff, parents, and students. Despite increased pressure on staff during COVID-19, many Trusts maintained a community focus, highlighting the voluntary action of staff and students in the community and promoting helping others during the pandemic, such as making PPE for local hospitals. As one of the CEOs said: *"...we unashamedly put a lot of emphasis into the wellbeing of staff, and around health and safety procedures" (T11, interview).*

**Monitoring staff morale and wellbeing** was seen as a robust mechanism for identifying problematic areas and designing support strategies. All Trusts reported some level of monitoring of their staff's wellbeing. All Trusts demonstrated their extended consideration of

and care for staff wellbeing through intensified multi-channel communication. Some of these strategies are outlined in the following quote: *“Regular check-ins with line managers, weekly email from CEO was sent to all staff” (T11, survey)*. Moreover, almost all participants shared that their Trusts developed and applied more “standardised” approaches to collecting feedback on staff wellbeing. For example, many designed and administered online survey questionnaires: *“Wellbeing questionnaires are sent out and actions taken as a result” (T10, survey)*; *“We did a national Trust-wide survey around morale.” (T11, interview)*. The staff online surveys were often seen as measures of the effectiveness of a Trust’s staff wellbeing policy: *“Annual staff survey in June actually showed increased staff happiness and pride than previous years” (T2, survey)*; *“Feedback from staff has been incredibly positive and schools are appreciative of the support but excited about the future” (T6, survey)*.

The formalised monitoring systems were usually linked to bespoke support systems. For instance: *“Monitored via questionnaire and links with pastoral support staff. We have a Trust Wellbeing committee made up of a selection of stakeholders from across the Trust” (T4, survey)*; *“Checking in everybody. They all had a buddy as well as their line managers” (T11, interview)*. Some were innovative in incorporating elements of wellbeing support in their annual performance review systems: *“Revised performance review to focus on wellbeing” (T9, survey)*.

A common approach to support staff morale and wellbeing across Trusts was the provision of creative engagement and socialising activities. These were often offered in combination with other, more traditional or formalised wellbeing support approaches: *“CEO’s letter at Christmas encouraged staff to speak to someone if lonely etc...5. Trust has engaged a counselling service that HTs can refer staff to...6. Local networks id staff who are at struggling” (T5, survey)*; *“From the start, I sent a daily email to all staff, we have offered lots of things including wellbeing, stress and wellbeing courses, yoga etc. we have provided ‘treats’ and special events (we had a weekly staff quiz for example)...” (T1, survey)*; *“Some other Trusts that I know have done lots of staff socials to try to keep everybody engaged with the workplace and keeping in touch with their colleagues. We’ve not done that so much, but we’ve just made sure that we’re keeping a close eye on our staff and making sure that any concerns that they have a seriously and properly taken into account” (T14, interview)*.

Another, large cluster of initiatives was focused on increasing staff’s wellbeing awareness and ability to develop capacity to maintain and improve their own wellbeing. For example: *“We are now more wellbeing aware in our work with staff than we ever have been... More openness in our dialogue regarding wellbeing” (T7, survey)*; *“We have a map. We’ve offered increased amounts of training. We’ve offered really strong support and counselling for principals, so we have national confidential service that they are available to” (T13, interview)*. About half of the CEOs in our sample reported that their Trusts used standardised service packages, available upon subscription, to provide their staff with access to a wider range of wellbeing support options. Examples include: *“...we have a staff assistance programme where staff can phone for access to 1:1 counselling etc... we have introduced Wellbeing champions” (T4, survey)*; *“Mental Health First Aiders for staff. All staff received some training on mental health and wellbeing in September 2019” (T5, survey)*; *“Each member of staff was assigned a ‘buddy’ to talk to should they need one. The Trust provides all employees with an assistance programme with access to counsellors” (T11, survey)*.

The data from both the survey and the interviews clearly indicated the **formative role of the Trusts' leaders** (CEOs) for the improvement and successful implementation of the policies around supporting staff morale and wellbeing in their Trusts. This is illustrated well in the following quote: *"...that is an area I'm really quite passionate about. We have a Trust wellbeing group that is made up of a variety of different people, from teachers to senior leaders. And I sit on that myself... We have also introduced wellbeing champions in all of our schools to access that informal network to ensure that people and teachers particularly have got somewhere to go to and somebody that they can talk to" (T4, interview); "Wellbeing remains a key priority in the trust development plan" (T5, survey); "We shared lots of resources and ideas around mental health support of staff. We've tried to make sure that through line management we picked up on questions about wellbeing, and we developed a wellbeing policy" (T1, interview).*

Supporting staff morale and wellbeing, however, proved **challenging** for many Trusts for various reasons. Some expressed scepticism about the validity of this approach in the present circumstances: *"... we normally do a staff wellbeing survey and I've kind of resented to do it now. What's the point in doing it? You know, what does it tell us? Just that we're all living in very challenging times. But we will do that at some point and will do a kind of backwards looking one as well to see what people thought" (T1, interview).*

Other challenges were associated with the wider risks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to stay composed in the face of these difficulties. For example: *"... a number of staff have struggled because of their own circumstances, and everyone has reported feeling tired. My Head Teachers have fed back to me their feelings of being overwhelmed but having to remain outwardly confident" (T1, survey); "For some people it has been a period when they have found it very depressing. Even some of our leaders have found that, particularly if they have complicated family circumstances. It's been hard for us to support teachers remotely" (T15, interview).* The ineffective communication from the Government (DfE) was perceived as another major challenge to support staff morale and wellbeing, and especially for those with

leadership responsibilities: *"Responding to late/no notice changes from DfE/government which impact on time away from work, especially for leaders..." (T7, survey); "It has been a real challenge because of the lack of guidance as to who is considered 'clinically extremely vulnerable'..." (T11, interview)*

Despite the success of support measures, sometimes the complex pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic took their toll on staff's health and wellbeing, and especially the health/wellbeing of those in high responsibility roles. This is captured in the below quotes:

*"We found that teachers were more tired..." (T11, interview).*

*"Staff feeling increasing beleaguered as roles seen moving towards being more health care professionals than teaching?" (T4, survey).*

*"...the challenge of the increasing fatigue amongst staff members...particularly given leadership positions...It has been the intensity I think, and the fact that people are making big*

*decisions all the time. People do that anyway, but the intensity!... I've been doing this for quite a long time and, you know, I never experienced anything like that before..." (T1, interview).*

#### **Example of policy use: Supporting Staff Moral and Wellbeing**

T5 provided communications correspondence evidencing a concerted policy of prioritising staff mental health and well-being during Covid-19. Information about national mental health support services was circulated to staff and staff holiday was ringfenced. External counselling sessions were purchased which staff could access through the Staff Wellbeing Referral process. Regular communications were sent to staff acknowledging that this had been a period of great stress for staff and encouraging staff to raise problems or issues with management (T5, policy documents).

### **3.10 Monitoring and evaluating pupils' academic progress: 'learning loss' and 'catch-up'?**

*"There will be winners and losers in this, but, I think, we have to realise that children have not lost learning during this period of time universally" (T14, interview).*

CEOs acknowledged that some groups of pupils were more likely (than others) to be prone to experiencing (some) loss of learning. For example: *"...when we came back in September it was quite obvious that the greatest learning loss was with the younger children, because obviously if you're six or seven, that learning really isn't embedded. So, we found that for the younger children the learning loss was greater than the older children..." (T2, interview); "There's also other students, students with special needs who can't hear you, can't access online learning in quite the same way, and also some students who got particular issues around anxiety and all sorts of kind of mental health issues" (T1, interview).* All CEOs shared that their Trusts had proactively tried to address existing and potential barriers to learning in order to reduce the risk of learning loss, e.g.: *"...we've had some students who just virtually didn't access any learning... So, this year we had really good systems for chasing them up and saying you need to do this and that last summer when we were waiting for laptops to come through when we were still kind of getting these things up and running, not knowing what was happening" (T1, interview).*

Importantly, the changed models of teaching and learning after March 2020, had also appeared to be beneficial for some students in terms of their academic progress, as exemplified in the following quotes:

*"One consequence of online learning is that for some groups of children with special educational needs, their progress during this period of time has rapidly accelerated, so there are some groups, particularly of neuro-diverse children. For example, for some children it has really been beneficial not having to navigate the interpersonal relationships of being in a classroom and, you know, if you happen to have certain types of, say, Asperger syndrome or something like that, it's been really helpful for those children to be able to put their phones on focus just in a single-track way on a single screen. And one of the challenges that we now have*



*is how do we not lose it? That was as the child returns to school because we don't want to then go back to a different system in which that child makes less accelerated progress. So, we're really excited that there were some learning points that could really enhance some children's ability to make rapid educational progress" (T14, interview).*

*Many SEND students have made better progress in remote than face to face. Issues around literacy, reading ability and social skills will all have gone backwards and will need immediate attention" (T13, survey).*

During the final period of the research, Trusts had only recently re-opened to all pupils. Trusts were in the process of assessing the effects of the year-long discontinuities in pupils' learning opportunities.

*"We've had regular monthly management information that tells us a number of things. One is that it tells us how many children are engaging with their learning... But it gives us that overarching view. Then, the next thing is that we have set up in all of our secondary schools that are doing live synchronous teaching. I'm at the same attendance systems as we would have if children were not turning up to a class face to face, so their teacher immediately sends an email to the attendance team who immediately then follow up" (T14, interview).*

*In primary schools, we are concentrating on literacy and numeracy, the basic skills that children need to access the curriculum. We try to influence the attitudes of the teachers and parents so that they don't feel that they have lost anything. We need to give them reassurance, look after them. Let's make sure that they are feeling confident (T15, interview).*

*We're really focused as a Trust on early reading because we think that that's been one area that's been a real drop away for two reasons. One is that we have very high proportions of EFL children in a lot of our schools. The other reason why it's been problematic is some very well-meaning parents have been doing phonics with their children at home but have maybe been using the wrong sounds in the wrong mouth shapes and those things. So, there's a bit of unpicking of really well-intentioned work that we need to do as well, but we will do that in due course. So, what we're doing at this stage is we are really focusing in on that just to re-baseline. And then we're using the next 18 months rather than the next four or five months as a continuous academic year to really understand the progress of all children in all years (T14, survey).*

*At the moment it's around welfare. It's around getting the child in the right place to learn and, I think, we've really focused our time and energy on that and their catch-up strategy group using the EEF research about that as well (T6, interview).*





However, they were not yet able to share their assessments with others:

*If you ask me next month, I can, because we're just in the middle of doing that... we are doing a pilot this term to look at the most effective interventions to catch up... we want to find these pockets of excellence through this strategy group and then roll that out next year... it'll be really interesting to see the whole picture, because every time you tried to do any kind of quantitative data, it's sort of been disrupted as a net over there last year... It's not really an accurate yet, but it will be (T6, interview).*

*It's too soon to say if we think that we can evidence that there has been a gap that has resulted because of this pandemic (T4, interview).*

*I'm not going to share any assessment data. We've got some assessment data now, but I'm not going to share it because it doesn't tell you what you know. It's so open to misinterpretation, because all it says is what we've learned so far when they've been back a week in 1/2. It doesn't tell us what they might learn next... they have missed seven or eight weeks, but if you've got seven or eight or nine years, and if you're taught well at that time, then I think you know we would expect that becomes a fairly minimal impact over time (T1, interview).*

Some CEOs expressed scepticism of the government's use of the terms, 'learning loss' and 'catch-up'.

*I'm on the side of just celebrating what the children have achieved in this period, not what they have missed out on...So I think 'learning loss' is an artificial construct. I think it's incredibly negative and harming to tell children that they've missed out (T5, interview).*

*We don't talk about 'falling behind' or 'catch up.' There is no 'lost generation'. We've got a 'reconnection curriculum'- reconnecting to each other, reconnecting our teachers to our environment, which is about resilience through independence and emotional wellbeing (T11, interview).*

Most CEOs asserted that it was not so much that pupils had experienced learning losses, but more that they had experienced discontinuities in their school-based learning opportunities, that the extent of these varied between pupils, that these related to the quality of home support and remote learning, and that, bound up with these, were effects on their mental health and wellbeing. Some Trusts had focussed as much on pupils' readiness to engage with school-based learning as academic learning: behaviour, levels of social skills, and mental health, working to ensure pupil engagement. Some identified a decline, particularly in those pupils from disadvantaged families. They had found that the ability to support SEND pupils and those with additional and wider needs has been compromised over time, and were identifying 'learning gaps', for example in early years pupils reading and phonics and examination content, which they were now in the process of assessing more closely in order to inform the planning of a 'recovery' curriculum.

All CEOs expressed cautious optimism about pupils' resilience, and the quality of their teachers' curriculum planning.

*We would have classes supervised by teaching assistants rather than teachers, who would be delivering the lessons remotely to the children who were in the classroom or at home. That worked really well. We will probably do more of that in the future. We had a discussion yesterday about flexible working (T15, interview).*

*Teacher assessments but also some online maths and reading tests which the children are actually enjoying doing, but really are not telling us where the child is in terms of age related, because a lot of them are behind, but it's identifying the gaps so we can do question level analysis and find out where's the actual gaps in learning so that we know where to focus interventions and attention" (T2, interview).*

*We have things like 'Accelerated Reader', so we can see diagnostically how children are with their learning. We use 'Century Tech' as well for GCSE, so there are some quantitative pieces of data as well that we that we can use. I think it's a mixture really of both the qualitative and the quantitative (T3, interview).*

*We just did a trust questionnaire on the remote learning and the impact on children. And that was most of the responses were sort of above 90% positive but, you know, that allowed us to address any gaps that we've missed (T6, interview).*

**Example of policy use: Monitoring and evaluating pupils' academic progress: 'learning loss' and 'catch-up'?**

T13 evaluated the impact of Covid-19 on students' learning and adopted a recovery plan to meet the needs of students going forward. This policy focused on recovering lost learning and mitigating the long-term impact of lockdown on students. The policy places strong emphasis on mental health support for students identified as in need. More broadly, the policy focuses on emotional, academic, and practical support. The aims of the policy include not just academic improvement but wider goals such as improving students' social skills and general wellbeing (T13, policy documents).

### 3.11 Sustaining a broad curriculum

**The data from CEOs and Headteachers reflected a consensus view that, whilst the pre-pandemic curriculum experienced by pupils had been adapted, every effort had been made to ensure that it had not been narrowed, and that what was offered for those attending school was mirrored in what was offered to those who were learning remotely. This was supported by increased attention by teachers to re-structuring curriculum content and sequencing.**

Curriculum policies were separated into remote curriculum learning and curriculum changes for whole school return to site. Remote learning plans had to include large amounts of practical guidance and flexibility to ensure all students had access to learning whether they could use and access IT devices or not. Return to site policies tended to incorporate innovative

teaching practices including outdoor learning and extra support for students impacted by the lockdown. Trust policies evolved over the course of the year as government guidelines changed. Trusts also developed their own policies in relation to clinically vulnerable and shielding students and staff.

*This offer was continually developed for our children. We had to adapt the curriculum so children could access this at home. We also made sure that the offer to children in school was mirrored at home. We are proud we maintained most aspects of curriculum delivery in school. We used school and Trust current teaching and learning priorities to frame remote learning priorities and practices (T6, survey).*

*We've been really resistant on narrowing our curriculum...to kind of curriculum, focused on catching up in English and maths. So, we've operated full timetables, have included music and drama and so, but it's obviously been different (T1, interview).*

*Lessons were well planned and structured. Work was uploaded and assessed. The curriculum delivered was the same as if all schools were open (T11, survey).*

*We have just worked on the curriculum and developing a more sequential and engaged curriculum across the Trust, and we have used the same model. So we have mini teams that look at sequential learning that might look at feedback and we use different research models to inform our practice (T6, interview).*

*We are looking to provide a richer curriculum with lots of outdoor work (Trust 12, interview).*

*We recently did a questionnaire for parents and the results were outstanding. 95%. My child has received good feedback from the teacher. ...97%. We knew what work was expected each day (all schools above 95%)...91% have found the home learning platforms used by school (Google Classroom/Seesaw/Dojo/Teams/Purple Mash) easy to navigate (T6, survey).*



*(T5, policy documents)*



### 3.12 Moving forward: system leaders' perceptions

*We're not just dealing with Covid... I think it's the sense that we're kind of moving on (T1, interview).*

**System leaders described their work over the previous year as 'relentless', 'exhausting', and 'without respite.'**

*I've been doing this for quite a long time and, you know, I never experienced anything like that. It was literally from before 7:00 in the morning 'till you went to bed... just constantly emails, phone calls, online meetings or managing crisis situations really. So, I can see people have been exhausted. (T1, interview).*

*It's scraped the barrel of everybody's resilience (T2, interview).*

*Being a leader in a school is relentless and so you just have to move on. Whether you've dealt with the latest debacle on mask wearing, whether it's the death of a member of your community, whether it's poor behaviour, you just have to keep moving. (T13, interview).*

**Despite the pressures of their work, these leaders remained enthusiastic, highly motivated, and committed to their work, celebrating their achievements, those of their central teams and Headteachers and teachers in schools across their Trusts.**

CEOs variously described themselves as 'putting our arms around the schools and giving them a purpose and a vision for the future (T6, interview), 'making sure that schools stayed connected' (T3, interview), 'building relationships' (T11, interview) 'going back to our values' (T6, interview), and 'defining what we mean by success' (T10, interview).

*Some colleagues worked on staff wellbeing, some worked on child wellbeing. Some worked on lessons learned from the pandemic and what we could use going forward and some worked on the actual curriculum that we were going to deliver for the children when they returned. The collaboration and the purpose that this gave our staff was really inspiring (T6, interview).*

**Key achievements reported by all CEOs related to risk assessment, communication, high levels of attendance and engagement, and the development of digital learning.**

*I think there have been certain things like the risk assessment and the communication, I would say have been really strong. You know that we have maintained, you know, we were checking in with heads on a fortnightly basis and I think those are weekly basis at some points and I think that's been really key and the feedback from them is, I suppose, has been heart-warming things where they've come back and said, you know they wouldn't have got through it if they were leading a school on their own and not part of the trust. (T2, interview).*

*When I met with the IT champions and they were feeding back how you know the progress in the remote learning. You know, things, it's moments like that isn't it? When you see how far*

*you come talking to you actually when you realise what we've done, what we've done over the last year? (T6, interview).*

**All also spoke of a momentum that had been built as a result of their work, bringing out the best in colleagues, and were assertive in planning for the future.**

*We've been sharing lots of strategies and policies and that has never happened before. This has given us an opportunity to really reflect. We are rethinking what we are about, and to review our ethos. Moral purpose, building relationships, and enduring agency have really come to the fore during this time (T10, interview).*

*It started off really as just a curriculum for the children when they came back, but it turned into so much more than that, and it turned into an almost a pathway to recovery, a recovery road map, looking at how it was impacting on staff, how we could support them in returning to school. The most important thing in this for me was that it reflected our values as a Trust. We've got four core beliefs as a trust, which is teamwork, family, integrity, and success. We kept those at the heart of this recovery curriculum and the collaboration (T6, interview).*

**These perspectives were mirrored by the 12 Headteachers from three Trusts who participated in the focus group interviews. Although they had found their work to have been 'intense' and at times 'relentless', they spoke of the benefits of Trust membership, associating these with a sense of leadership, belonging, support, and forward momentum.**

Within these broader categories, they voiced an appreciation for a sense of security; having a close-up network of supportive colleagues; eliminating any potential sense of isolation or loneliness; feeling able to be connected to their staff and communities; not having to seek all their own solutions to problems; engagement in collective decision-making, regular communication; information sharing and dissemination, expertise and advice, especially in relation to risk assessment, HR and IT; and opportunities to revisit purposes and values, keeping them rooted in the responsibilities of being a headteacher, and having a voice.

### **Leadership**

*Headteachers were asked to identify three words that describe the last 12 months, and I didn't really recognise any of them, because I think that the overriding word that I would use to describe the last 12 months has been responsibility as opposed to stress or anxiety, indecision... It's been about responsibility and I think that that process of being driven by your responsibility to staff, students, parents, community has been something that's come through our discussions. Because you don't think about your school, you think across schools and therefore thinking about or indeed focusing on the why we're doing stuff as opposed to the what it is that we need to do has been really important. So, rather than just mulling a decision over in your head by having those sorts of conversations, you automatically revisit the 'whys' rather than just the 'whats'. The decisions you make are rooted in the responsibilities that you have in terms of the role, so for me that's been the biggest benefit.*

*Yes, absolutely to be able to call on expertise, but it's kept me rooted in the responsibilities of*



*being a head, rather than getting caught up in the actions of things that I need to get done. (A3).*

*Being part of the Trust has been extremely beneficial this last year in terms of organising risk assessment and organising and providing resources such as PPE, all the cleaning bits and pieces, so that on its own has taken a great weight of my mind. Also, our weekly meets, both the timetabled ones and also the catchup meets have been brilliant, just to have somebody else to talk to (A1).*

*Because the involvement is so positive, I think the staff felt well supported. We've had that other umbrella above us so we can focus on our staff and ensure... and that's not to say that there's no ups and downs with it all. But the fact is that if there is a significant concern with a staff member, we have the HR Department who are phenomenal to support us and to support them most importantly, and there's a lot of wellbeing aspects in place to support them (B5).*

*I've never ever felt unsupported, and I've often felt that if I was a school alone, how would I cope with what's happening? I think (CEO) in particular has bought the Trust together. Before, we were quite distant. Staff, particularly TAs or admin staff didn't really hear from the previous (CEO). But he's been brilliant in writing newsletters and making them really personal about his family and his own experience. And I do feel like we have come together over this experience and become much more interconnected (C6).*

*Having the Trust behind you and a chance to talk about things in a secure environment, that's helped us to then disseminate our information through to the staff as clearly and as responsibly as possible (A2).*

*There's a massive gulf of distance between our political masters at whatever layer and the reality on the ground. Their information is delayed, its conflicting, and that causes tension. One of the things I would say about the Trust is that whilst we've been supported to do our job, which is to run the schools, there's been a body of work going on in the background with the Executive to forward think, so to help us slot back in to where we're going to be in the future. We're still sitting here nearly a week towards the end of term, not knowing how the guidance is going to change after Easter because we were told the guidance is only going to go up to Easter. There are so many questions, but it doesn't keep me up at night because I know that all of the compliance team and the lead executive leadership are thinking about how it's going to be for us and anticipating those things (B3).*

*It's almost become a blind acknowledgement that we're going to be blindsided, and I think in the start of the year, I personally had a lot of concerns and worries about guidance, not marrying up and making sure that everything was done by the book. But I think for me the strength of that was my colleagues around me, particularly the wider Trust. We have people in Compliance and HR who've done an absolutely fantastic job of just trying to sift through the nonsense of it (B1).*



## **Belonging**

*That notion of leadership being quite lonely, is never something I particularly felt because I feel that I can either contact one of my other heads or HR, or the CEO, and that has been incredibly supportive as well as having a strong team around as well, but it has been incredibly challenging (B1).*

*In terms of resilience, we're all different, but I know that I would think that within the Trust support is definitely there and you've never felt lonely or if I've got a problem, there's nowhere to go to, so you know that part of it has been fine (C5).*

*I think it is very beneficial from a sort of mutually supportive perspective and also when you are called upon to make big decisions. So, for example, closure of bubbles and so on and so forth, you have individuals that would just be that one step removed and were able to sit in just to advise or make suggestions, so I felt that was very useful. It's quite interesting looking at the responses of some standalone academies locally, whose closure regimes were fairly dramatic and fairly drastic (A2).*

*And what I've seen from those schools that aren't part of the Trust, they've been left to flounder a lot on their own, so the security in that support that we've had as a Trust from the*

*central services team, and we did a lot of work on online learning that became an expectation later on. And the collaboration that existed across the Trust, it's absolutely phenomenal (B2).*

*Understanding how horrific it is to be isolated and having to seek all your own solutions to every problem, because you know, everybody's looking at this slow easement. But actually for schools it's an unknown quantity (B3).*

*One of the best things of being part of a Trust is that you do have that support from somebody to go to, you know we are in teams, and have principal meetings as a group. So there is that support network which is really helpful and has been really supportive when other principals are having the same problems. And you know, I know that if I was having any problem with anything, I could go to various Directorates or speak to (CEO). And I know that if I contacted (CEO), he would listen to me because, even if there were other people to go to, I know that if I needed to because I wasn't getting any help from anywhere else, then I would go there and there is that Trust there that I know (C3).*

## **Momentum**

*There's been an ongoing focus on curriculum and having to be adaptable and flexible and look at needs and how to ensure progress still happens, so I think that's going to be carried forward (C6).*

*I think that a couple of other things that are positive is that it's really enabled me to draw back to my curriculum intent and look at what's in my curriculum intent and almost identify where the need is according to what's in there, and almost be able to prioritise which elements of*



*our curriculum intent we really need to hone in on and that's made me reflect on the intent and actually be quite confident that we've got it right and then the other being, you're quite right in terms of the Trust have been working in the background to enable us at this point to look forward (B4).*

*The plan that the Trustees are pushing for terms five and six, is ..... to teach everything in the curriculum as much as possible through those skills that children can find outdoors that they've been denied for quite a long time. A lot of our children have been very restricted. So for us this is the perfect antidote to the home learning offer that we had and I'm really looking forward to that. And I know my teachers are excited to deliver that and I think if we're excited the children are going to be excited by it as well (C5).*

*The Trust had got had a tech strategy using Microsoft Teams which they had in place the year before lockdown, but we weren't using it to its full potential. We can really use this now, because from day one of the pandemic, we were delivering virtually on teams. It has moved forward hugely in terms of children's skills and staff skills, so you know that will never be gone. That's a huge leap forward, which we will always continue to use in terms of teaching in the classroom, but also home learning, catch up learning, groups, booster groups, intervention groups, et cetera (C6).*

*The fundamentals behind my teaching and learning on a day-to-day basis will not change. Because of this. I think if we have children who can't get into school, if there's medical needs, I think we've now got this amazing bank of lessons and learning that they can access from home. And I think we've inadvertently built up some unbelievable sorts of lessons and things that can be used. But I think that in terms of the day-to-day teaching and learning, I think I and I would speak for myself as well, just want to get back to normal learning (C4).*

*I believe the Trust as a whole has a very holistic approach to education and that we're talking about joy and engagement, the arts and sport and those things that really bring meaning as much as about passing tests..... We've got to sort of restore some hope (B2).*

## 4.0 Reflections

This ‘pathfinder’ research project has provided new knowledge of the development and enactment of policymaking in School Trusts, gathered from multiple sources of system leadership and management in small, medium and large Trusts in a variety of configurations and geographies across the Midlands and in exceptionally challenging, changing times. This final section identifies key features of Trust CEOs’ leadership and their decisions which led to the making of robust policies, and their rigorous enactment during a period of unprecedented challenges to pupils’ welfare and opportunities for learning, headteachers’ and teachers’ health, wellbeing, and capacities to sustain their work with pupils and parents. Rather than making recommendations, the report concludes that Trusts are now experiencing what some have characterised as a ‘recovery’ period, but which according to the findings in our research, may be more accurately characterised as a continuing journey of ‘transition’ from the pre-pandemic ways of being and acting, to a ‘new normal’, as yet to be defined.

### 4.1 Reassessing the future

For all CEOs, the previous twelve months, during which they had experienced leadership from the ‘balcony’ and in the ‘stalls’, had not only tested their leadership capabilities and capacities, but in doing so had afforded them opportunities for extensive reflection on educational values, beliefs, purposes and practices, especially in terms of ensuring that their priorities and relationships aligned with these. Examples of the results of reflection are expressed in one Trust’s intention to revisit their application of their civic responsibilities, in another’s intention to extend its commitment to outdoor education; and other Trusts’ intentions to incorporate the classroom lessons recorded during the previous period into the curriculum offerings to their pupils, and all Trusts’ intentions to sustain close relationships built with pupils’ parents and families, and to maintain and extend the enhanced uses of digital technologies in classrooms.

### 4.2 ‘Learning loss’ and ‘catch-up’: a health warning

Research commissioned by the DfE and carried out by the Renaissance Learning and Education Policy Institute, through ‘rapid evidence assessment’ tests in the reading and maths of pupils in the autumn term 2020, found that there had been an academic ‘learning loss’ during the pandemic, especially in those pupils drawn from disadvantaged communities (DfE, 2021). The report concluded that there is now a need for pupils to ‘catch-up’ and ‘close the gap.’

However, recent research on educational priorities for primary schools, after one year of disruptions and discontinuities caused by Covid-19 (Moss et al;2020; Harmey & Moss, 2020), found that, rather than plan on the basis of academic learning loss only, it may be more effective to plan for a ‘period of recovery’ based on disruptions to the academic, social, psychological and physical lives experienced by most pupils. The researchers concluded that:

- i) Pressure to meet nationally-set targets would distract schools from responding



appropriately to the diversity of pupils' needs; ii) Testing and accountability arrangements would not deliver fair judgements during a disrupted year; and that iii) Teachers did not want a return to 'business as usual' in testing and accountability. Based on their evidence, they suggested: a settling in period that would allow schools to better identify children's needs; priorities for learning in the light of these; and locally responsive planning.

### 4.3 Leadership as an expression of principled pragmatism

System leaders had all been values-led in their actions and had demonstrated, in what they had reported in their responses, that they did not adhere to any single leadership 'model'. They had been, for example, 'transformational' in their direction-setting, motivations of colleagues' provision of CPD, and culture-building; 'instructional' in their parallel and unwavering focus upon teaching and learning; 'adaptive' to changes in external environments; and 'agile' in responding to these. They had all, however, been driven by strongly held principles of 'social justice', 'moral' and 'development' purposes. These underpinning principles which permeated their leadership actions are indicators of their strong sense of agency. Far from simply being compliant in 'implementing' external policy initiatives, they 'enacted' them, engaging in what others have described as contextualised sense-making (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002).

### 4.4 Resilience and Agency

Traditionally, resilience has been associated with 'bouncing back' from the trauma of adverse physical and psychologically threatening experiences, actions or events. It is more than the ability to 'cope', more than a means of surviving. A capacity for resilience suggests possessing the ability to manage challenging events and situations in a positive way. In this sense, it means 'bouncing back,' overcoming all obstacles. However, research on resilient teachers and resilient schools (Day & Gu, 2014) found that the capacity for resilience is not stable, but may fluctuate according to the individual's willingness, commitment and ability to manage potentially conflicting forces of different magnitudes successfully. Stability is either helped or hindered in this both by the nature of the interactions with colleagues within and outside the workplace, the relative degree of strength of their inner commitment to teaching, often referred to as 'moral purpose' (Goodlad, 1992), and their sense of efficacy and agency, an enduring belief that they can make a difference to their schools and classrooms by 'pursuing the goals that they value, taking account of, but not being dictated to by circumstance' (Day, 2017:36).

**Evidence in Sections 2 and 3 of this Report has provided substantive empirical confirmation of Rollett's (2020) assertion that robustness and resilience, combined with responsive rather than reactive measures, are needed by leaders of School Trusts, especially in adverse contexts. This research adds to this by revealing the important role played by core values and agency in the planning, enactment and adaptation of an effective range of inter-connected policies. Moreover, it confirms the notion of successful leaders as needing to exercise 'everyday resilience' (Day and Gu, 2014).**

## 4.5 Robust, rigorous policy making and enactment

**Robustness** is “a property that allows a system to maintain its functions against internal and external perturbations,” (Kitano, 2007).

Much has been written about ‘robustness and rigour’. As Section 3 of this Report demonstrates, these School Trusts had not only maintained their basic functions but also extended them over the period of unprecedented disruptions and discontinuities to school-based teaching and learning, and continuing threats to health and safety. CEOs and their teams, by being overwhelmingly responsive rather than reactive, had ‘buffered’ the Headteachers of their academies by centralising responsibilities for the development and implementation of policies relating to, for example, health and safety, HR and finance, and building and personally supporting relationships and networks of intensive interactivity. This had brought a degree of stability to the leadership of individual academies, which were then able to focus on the welfare of pupils and their families more easily, and the wellbeing and capacities of teachers to provide and enhance their teaching.

This recognition that a sense of stability and educational progress were necessary conditions for optimising continuing engagement with learning was a key contributor to leadership successes. Examples of strategic interventions across the Trusts were:

- Early re-distribution of roles and responsibilities between the centre and the schools, through which they had enabled their academies to focus primarily, and with a degree of confidence, upon fulfilling their core tasks of teaching, learning and care for their pupils.
- Health and safety, pupil welfare, the development of technology-supported academic learning opportunities for all pupils, and teachers’ wellbeing and professional development.
- Special and unwavering attention which focussed on the most vulnerable and their families.

**All participants in this research were seeking to build upon and embed changes made during the previous year in their longer-term planning intentions. Most did not express a short-term 'recovery' stance to the work of their Trusts as they are emerging from the uncertainties of the previous period. As one CEO stated:**

*We are just at that stage now, deciding which of the new ways of working we want to leave in the past and which we want to take forward, because we have found better ways of doing it (T5, interview).*



## Endnote

School Trusts have become major stakeholders in the national educational landscape. They, and their leadership, occupy a unique position, by virtue of their ability to influence directly the consistency, quality, and robustness of their pupils' education over a range of schools in the Trust. This research, though small-scale, suggests that during the last twelve month period of uncertainties, fears and discontinuities, the strength of their core values, individual and collective efficacy and agency in exercising influence has become more apparent. The system leaders in this research have been able to take account of contextual variables in schools in their Trusts, whilst at the same time responding quickly and knowledgeably on their behalf to anticipated and unanticipated changes at national level. Their knowledge, experience and growing expertise in leading and managing systems may well make an important contribution more widely to policymaking across the national policy space.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Key Policy Areas

| Policy Document Analysis: Key Policy Areas |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Policy                                     | Description   | Example  |
| Safeguarding                               | Ensuring the safety of students at home and in school. Ensuring proper safeguarding procedures continued to be followed despite disruption to routines, staffing and location. Ensuring communication channels remained open and staff continued to act as key points of contact and reporting. | <p>“Safeguarding Responsibilities: This document recognises that staff will be working with children that they do not normally support in their normal duties and that children may attend the provision from several GAT settings from across the region or cluster.” (T11, policy documents)</p> <p>“There is an expectation that vulnerable children who have a social worker will attend an education setting during the lockdown period, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that put them at risk.” (T14, policy documents)</p> |
| Remote curriculum                          | Developing remote learning and integrating this with the curriculum. This includes online learning and provision for students without access to online resources.   | <p>"schools have a duty to provide remote education for state-funded, school-age children whose attendance would be contrary to government guidance or law around coronavirus (COVID-19)." (T11, policy documents)</p> <p>“recognise that younger pupils and some pupils with SEND may not be able to access remote education without adult support and so schools should work with families to deliver a broad and ambitious curriculum” (T11, policy documents)</p>  |
| Risk assessment and planning               | Managing risk assessment and planning during Covid-19. Risks include staff and students working onsite during Covid restrictions, and whole school return to site.  | <p>“Leaders have been given the tools to risk assess individual pupils and the ability to educate them safely under COVID guidelines. Where pupils are not able to be managed through classroom-based provision, we have been creative and flexible in our thinking.” (T15, policy documents)</p>  |





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| <p>Interpreting Covid 19 guidelines</p> | <p>Interpreting changing Covid-19 government guidance and policy in the context of MAT and school settings.</p>   | <p>"Face coverings should be worn at all times in common areas &amp; classrooms – this includes the canteen &amp; canteen kitchen area. Unfortunately, visors do not provide the same level of protection and so they cannot be worn. Guidance on face coverings is continually being updated &amp; we will advise you whenever we have any new information." (T5, policy documents)</p> <p>"Shielding advice is currently being re-issued and so all children still deemed clinically extremely vulnerable should receive further guidance from their GP, to shield and not attend school currently." (T14, policy documents)</p> |
| <p>Curriculum Changes (In School)</p>   | <p>Policies outlining changes to the curriculum when students are attending school.</p>   | <p>"Learning outdoors and beyond the classroom can provide a range of opportunities to hook young people into learning while supporting their mental and physical health and wellbeing." (T11, policy documents)</p> <p>"For those who require additional help smaller groups led by our safeguarding team will be run, this will include lunchtimes sessions to catch up on the support time missed during lockdown. It is anticipated that a small minority of students will have an individual blended timetable where a phased return to school alongside remote learning is in place." (T13, policy documents)</p>            |
| <p>Staff Wellbeing</p>                  | <p>Supporting staff throughout changing circumstances. Policies focusing on remote teaching workload, staff physical safety and mental wellbeing. Trying to maintain staff moral by providing points of contact and support services for staff.</p> | <p>"Email: Lots of staff have used email 'groups' on a wider basis to share developments on a weekly basis." (T10, policy documents)</p> <p>"Helping staff to enjoy healthier lives by raising awareness of healthy choices and lifestyle messages, promoting positive mental health and to help create positive networks." (T10, policy documents)</p>  |
| <p>Student Wellbeing</p>                | <p>Policies to support students during the pandemic, both at home and in school. Also help with transitioning</p>   | <p>"Children returning to school after a long period of absence could be anxious and have been negatively impacted by the lockdown. Consistent and familiar</p>  |



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|                             | <p>back into attending school when schools reopened to all pupils. Encouraging and helping parents to support their children with remote learning and with their mental health.</p> | <p>routines are therefore even more important to reassure them and make them feel safe.” (T2, policy documents)</p> <p>“Our safeguarding team are already undertaking window visits and these will continue over the holidays so our most vulnerable are prepared well in advance of their school return. Our Early Help Worker and DDSL are providing parenting advice and support for those families who are struggling the most.” (T13, policy documents)</p> |
| <p>Community Engagement</p> | <p>Policies and initiatives to stay connected to and to contribute to local communities.</p>  | <p>“More than 3000 items of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were donated by X academies to the NHS during the coronavirus pandemic.” (T10, policy documents)</p> <p>“Students worked together to create a Community Garden with help [from teachers] and our Primary School children have been busy planting hanging baskets for their schools.” (T5, policy documents)</p>  |