

National School Trust Report

September 2025



Confederation
of School Trusts

edurio'

National School Trust Report

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of School Trusts**

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Foreword



Leora Cruddas CBE

Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts

School trusts are charities, focused on improving education for the public benefit. Working on behalf of children, and wider society is what we were set up to do, and it is always front of mind. It is the mission that drives us forward.

But that work depends on the technical machinery of any large organisation: funding, people, and our ways of working.

For the second year, financial sustainability has emerged as the top priority for trust leaders in our annual survey. While inflationary pressures have lessened slightly, more than four in five trusts tell us they are looking at reductions in staffing.

Leaders are also looking to reduce costs through joint procurement, spending less externally, and working more closely together within their organisations. They are also innovating. Emerging new technologies are being put to use recording minutes, speeding analysis, and generating reports to save staff time.

This is all change with a purpose: to continue the mission of trusts to build an always-improving, brilliant education system for our children.

Secure finances come out top because they enable us to be serious about improving the quality of education, and particularly inclusion. Our education system must work well for all our children. Every child must flourish in their school environment, feel like they belong and they matter deeply to us.

These remain difficult times for public services, with the multiple cost pressures. We anticipate change to come with reform to special educational needs, curriculum, admissions, and more on the horizon. We will embrace these changes as we build a sustainable and inclusive schooling system in England.

I am proud to be representing trust leaders who are planning for the challenges ahead, and are adapting to the future, on behalf of the children that are all of our futures.

Introduction

For the fourth year, the Confederation of School Trusts and Edurio have partnered to conduct the National School Trust Survey. The design of the survey is informed by CST's Building Strong Trusts framework and explores school trust priorities and challenges across the various elements of trust leadership.

CST Strong Trust Framework

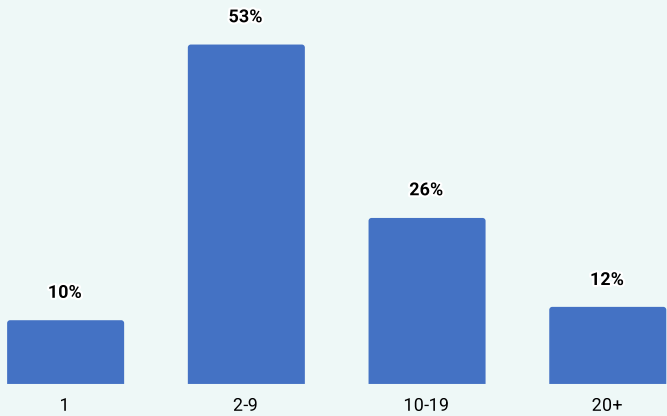


In June and July 2025, 390 trust accounting officers across England participated in the survey; these are the senior leaders directly responsible to Parliament for their trusts, typically the trust chief executive. The survey covered trusts of all sizes, ranging from trusts with a single academy to those managing dozens of schools, making it a representative sample of school trusts across the sector. To ensure reliability, trust accounting officers were invited to respond to the survey via a dedicated link available only to them, allowing for a single response per trust, making this the most extensive and validated set of trust CEO priorities and challenges.

¹ Building Strong Trusts, Confederation of School Trusts, April 2023, <https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/guidance-and-policy/building-strong-trusts/>

Of the 390 CEOs that responded to this year's survey 53% were CEOs of trusts with between two and nine schools. 12% of the CEOs we surveyed were leading trusts with over 20+ schools.

How many schools are in your trust



This summary report highlights responses to key questions in the survey based on priorities highlighted by trust leaders as we begin the academic year 2025/26.

We start with a look at overall trust leadership priorities and challenges and then deep dive into the elements of a strong trust one by one.

Expert, Ethical Leadership

Chapter One

Expert, Ethical Leadership

By getting leadership right, trusts and their schools can cultivate a strong organisational culture. This, in turn, sets the foundation for successful learning environments where pupils and the adults who support them can flourish. Accounting officers and their executive teams are responsible for the overall leadership of their school trust, defining priorities, and navigating daily challenges. They collaborate closely with the trust's board to establish and implement a strategy, which forms the basis for all activities within the trust.

This chapter examines trust and CEO strategic priorities, and the culture, vision, and values that support them. This serves as a vital starting point for our exploration of the findings in this year's report.

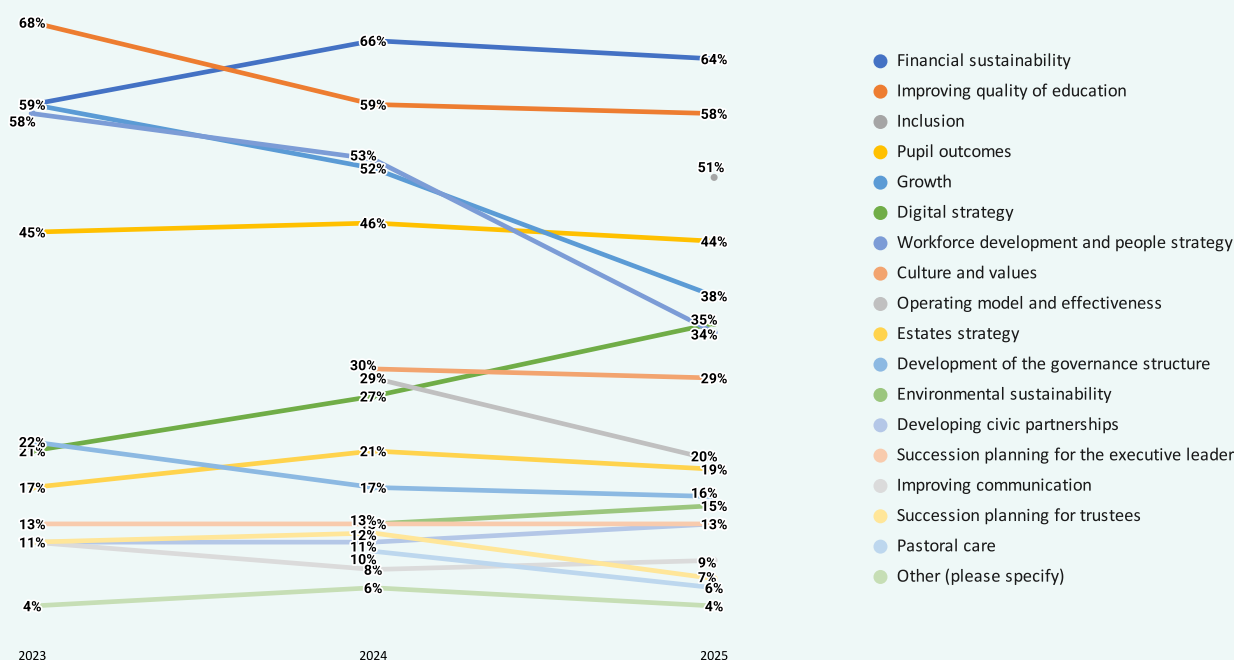
Priorities

What are the top five strategic priorities for your trust in the next academic year?



Financial sustainability is CEOs' number one priority for the 2025/2026 academic year. Three of the top five priorities are explicitly pupil-centred: Improving quality of education (58%), Inclusion (51%), and Pupil outcomes (44%). Growth was the fifth most-cited priority, with 38% of CEOs highlighting it.

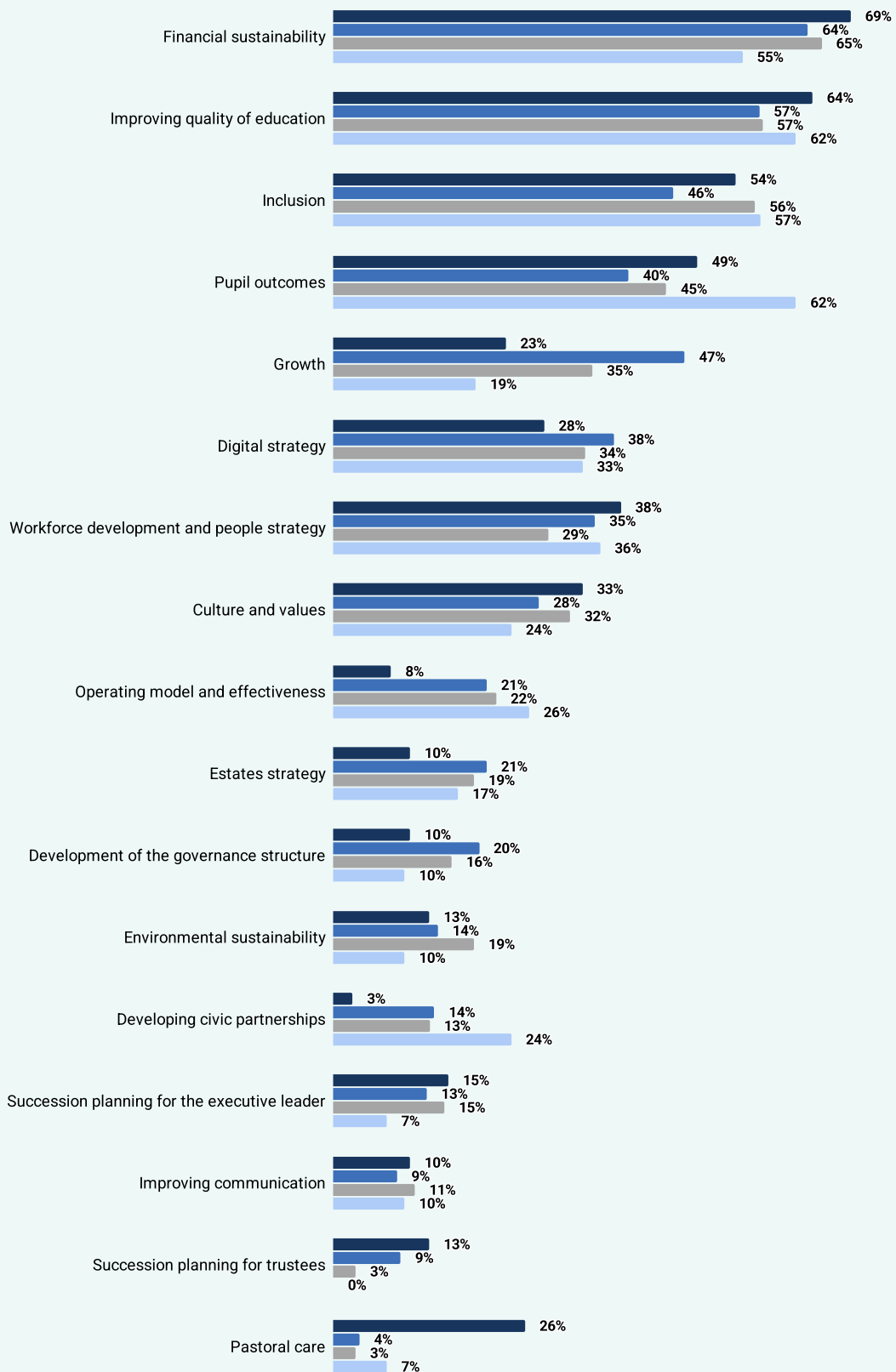
What are the top five strategic priorities for your trust in the next academic year?



Financial sustainability remains the top priority for the second consecutive year, taking over from improving the quality of education in 2024. Digital strategy is emerging as a growing priority for trust CEOs, with 35% of CEOs highlighting it as one of the top five strategic priorities for their trust for 2025, up from 21% in 2023. Inclusion was added into the 2025 survey following feedback from the sector; this was reported as a priority by 51% of CEOs this year.

While we have seen some areas become bigger priorities for trust CEOs, growth and workforce were mentioned less frequently than last year. While growth remains a significant priority overall, it has fallen from 52% last year to 38% in this year's survey. Similarly, workforce was recognised as a top 5 priority by 34% of CEOs in 2025, compared to 53% in 2024.

What are the top five strategic priorities for your trust in the next academic year?



■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

Financial sustainability was the most reported priority for 2025 by trust CEOs. Trusts of different sizes shared this priority, however, it was more likely to be a priority for individual schools (69%) than for trusts of other sizes and less likely for large trusts.

Growth was most likely to be reported as a priority by CEOs of trusts in the 2-9 school group. Pupil outcomes were considerably more likely to be reported by trust CEOs as a priority for the next year if they had 20 or more schools (62%) compared to other-sized trusts.

Developing civic partnerships was also more likely to be reported by trust CEOs as a priority for the next year if they had 20 or more schools (24%) compared to smaller trusts.

For single school trusts, pastoral care was considerably more likely to be reported as a strategic priority for their trust in the next academic year compared to larger trusts. For the first time this year, we asked CEOs an open question on what they would like their trust to get better at next year. The themes mentioned broadly align with the trust priorities covered in this section, but reveal some interesting details.

1) Pupil outcomes and quality of education

This is the dominant theme. Trusts want consistent, high-quality teaching and better outcomes, with a strong focus on disadvantaged pupils and moving schools from “good” to “great”. There is emphasis on consistency across classes and schools, and targeted improvement at weaker schools.

“Focus on consistency of high-quality education delivery across classes in every school.”

“As a trust, we have a significant gap between reading and writing. Our phonics scores are well above national, our reading and maths scores are well above national, but the gap to writing is significantly bigger than the national gap at the end of Key Stage 2.”

“Demonstrating an effective link between professional growth and CPD and quality of teaching in the classroom (and outcomes) for disadvantaged students.”

2) Financial sustainability and resources

Trusts are navigating tight budgets and want to be financially sustainable without compromising educational quality. Priorities include accurate budgeting, balancing the books, and building financial resilience.

“Horizon scanning to seek ways to ensure the current financial challenges the sector faces do not hinder the offer we are able to provide for our young people.”

“Innovation to generate income, use of subsidiaries, including own alternative provision and shared back office services.”

“Financial sustainability, requiring a redesign of the education workforce to allow greater flexibility in the deployment of support staff.”

3) Special educational needs and disabilities

Many comments highlighted the growing challenge of SEND provision, both in meeting complex needs in mainstream schools and ensuring sufficient capacity, staff expertise, and resources.

“Meeting the needs of children with SEND within the mainstream classroom.”

“Managing SEND children with complex needs who are not best placed in mainstream schools.”

“Supporting SEND with less staff, lack of suitably qualified staff and services to support the ever-increasing SEND demands made on three small village schools.”

4) Governance and leadership model

Many trusts want clearer governance boundaries, better local governance capacity, and a healthier balance between central alignment and school autonomy. There’s also attention to leadership development and the board’s strategic focus.

“Governance, specifically the trust board listening to all stakeholders and acting accordingly.”

“Better understanding from trustees that their role is strategic, not operational.”

“Empowering school leaders, moving away from a high oversight model that was needed when many of the schools were less than good.”

5) Inclusion

Many trusts emphasise building an inclusive culture and equitable provision across all pupils. This includes tackling disadvantage and embedding inclusion in community practice.

“Delivering on the equity agenda to ensure all pupils receive equivalent quality of provision and resources.”

“Focus on pupil premium children, strong starts and careful monitoring to improve their life chances throughout.”

“Pupil outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, whilst remaining truly inclusive.”

Challenges

When exploring the challenges reported by CEOs, we also look at them in the context of the priorities they have also reported. This chart shows the proportion of CEOs who selected each priority vs the share of CEOs who also said this priority is a key challenge for their trust.

Most demanding priorities for Trust CEOs in 2025/26

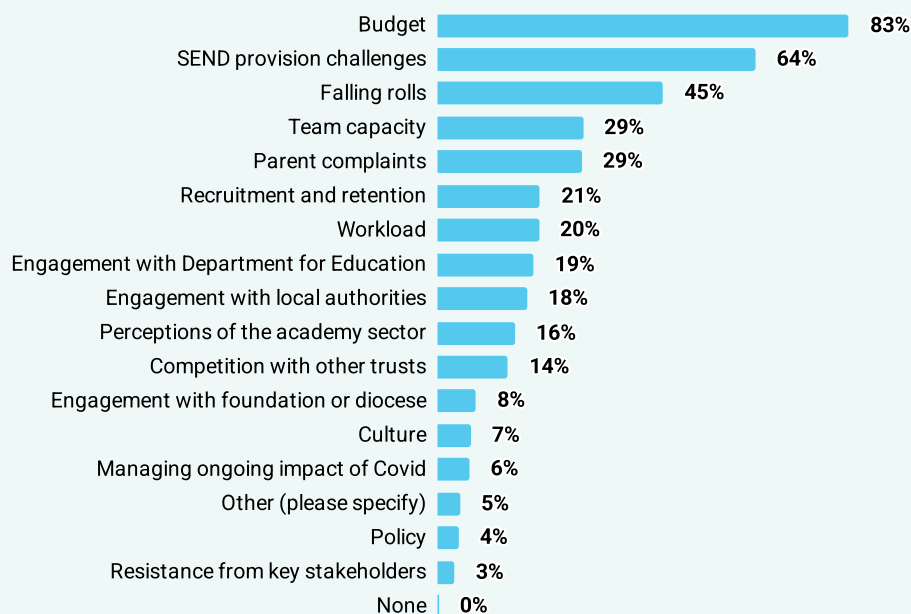


As well as being the most-frequently reported priority, financial sustainability is also seen as the most challenging for trusts. Improving the quality of education was the next most likely area of priority for trust CEOs, but it was not as likely to be reported as challenging for trusts, with less than 10% of CEOs categorising it as a significant challenge.

Growth was also identified as both a priority and a challenge. Succession planning for trustees was rated as a significant challenge, but not an area that many trusts are currently prioritising.

Barriers

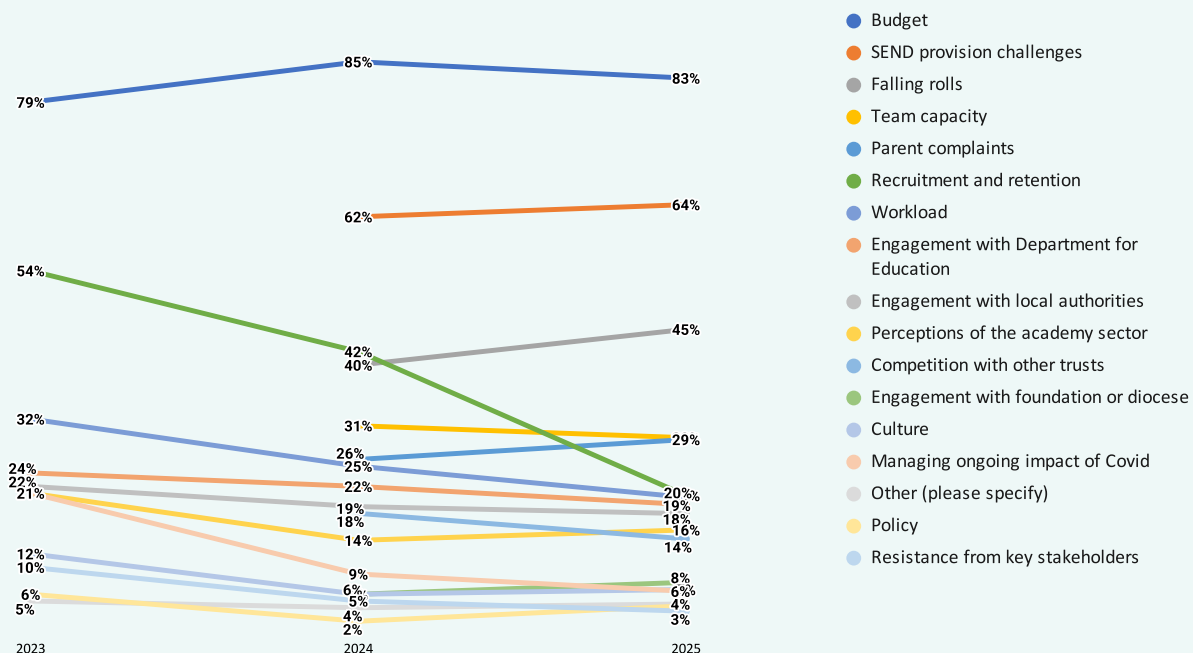
What barriers do you need to address to deliver your priorities for the next academic year?



With trust CEOs highlighting that financial sustainability is a key priority for the 2025/2026 academic year, it is unsurprising that the most significant barrier to addressing their priorities for the next academic year is budget, with 83% of respondents reporting it.

SEND provision challenges were the next most reported barrier, with 64% of CEOs highlighting this as their priority for the next academic year. Falling rolls were reported by 45% of CEOs as a barrier to addressing their priorities for the next academic year.

What barriers do you need to address to deliver your priorities for the next academic year?

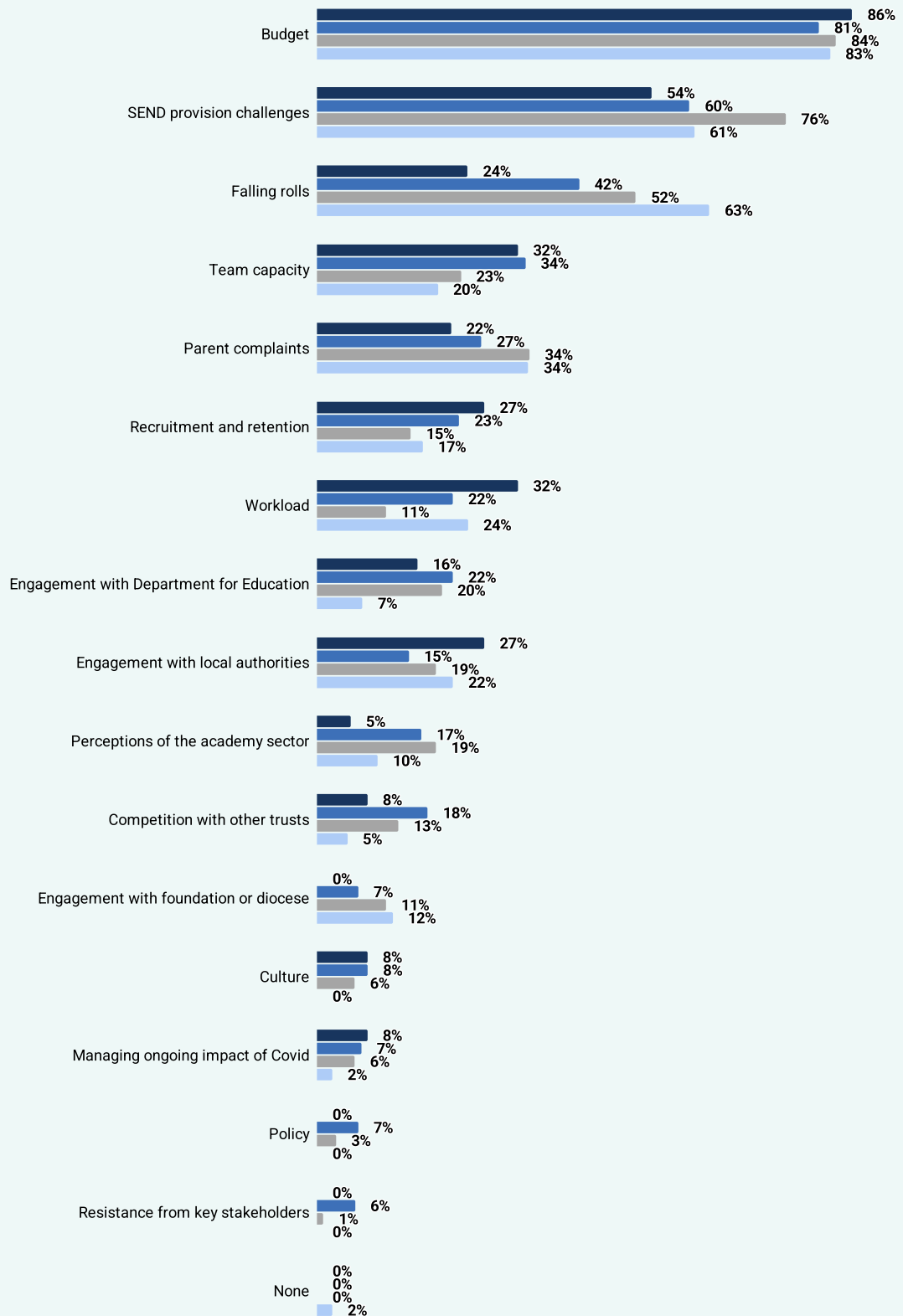


Year on year, budget remains relatively unchanged as the most prominent barrier, followed by SEND provision. Parental complaints have slightly increased as a potential barrier, up to 29% compared to 25% last year.

Recruitment and retention have seen the largest decline over the last two years as a barrier that CEOs need to address to deliver their priorities for the next academic year. In 2023, 54% saw recruitment and retention as a barrier they needed to address to deliver their priorities for the next academic year. In 2024, this was 42%, compared to only 19% in 2025.

Managing the impact of the Covid pandemic has again significantly dropped from previous years, but the effects are still being felt by some trusts.

What barriers do you need to address to deliver your priorities for the next academic year?



■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

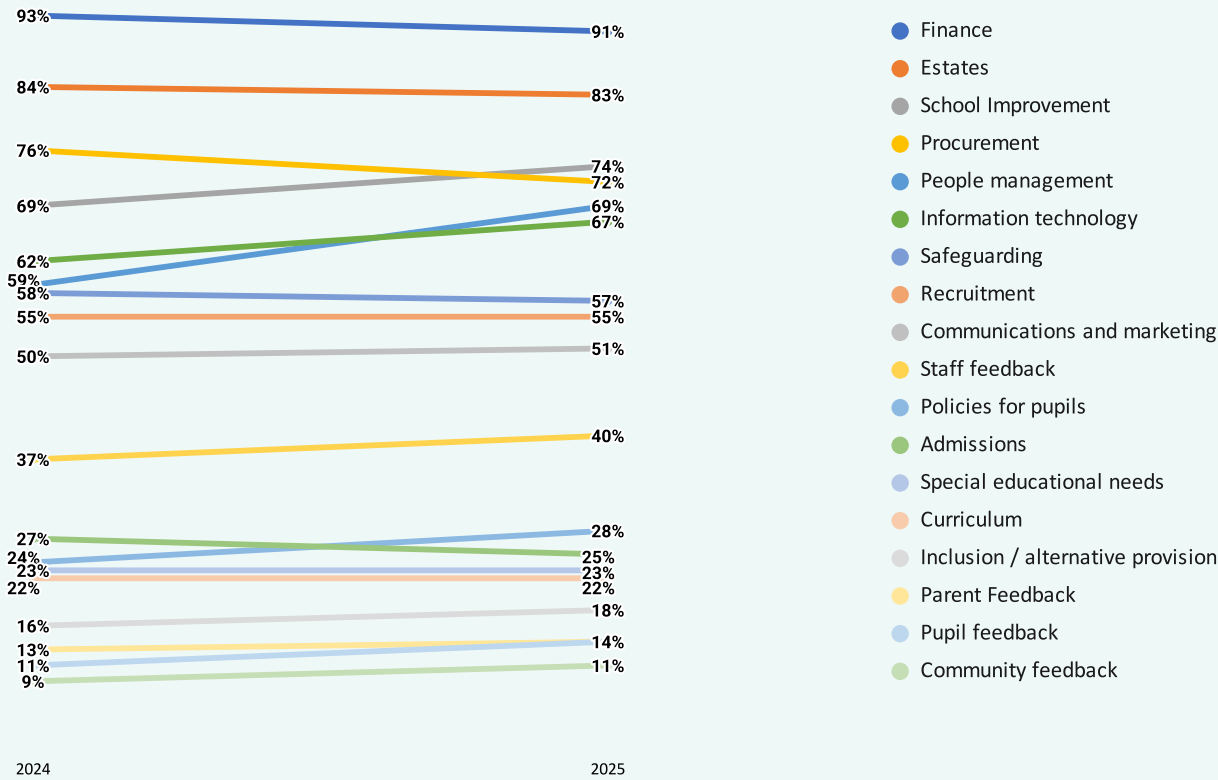
Regardless of trust size, budget was a considerable barrier for trust CEOs that they need to address to deliver their priorities next academic year.

Falling rolls is a barrier that is reported more frequently by CEOs from larger trusts compared to smaller trusts.

Workload is a barrier that CEOs from single school trusts are more likely to report as a barrier, along with engagement with their local authority. This latter area lessens as a barrier for medium-sized trusts, but rises again for the largest perhaps reflecting working across multiple councils.

Responsibilities of trust-wide teams

Which of the following areas does your trust primarily direct centrally?

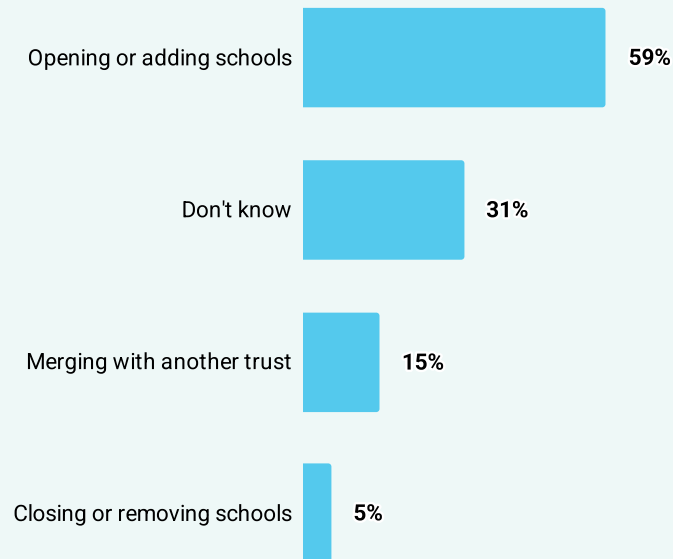


Operational work like finance, estates and procurement remain among the most likely dealt with at trust level, whereas education-related matters are far less combined.

When looking at the division of responsibilities of trust-wide teams, we can see some areas of change. Three areas with the biggest increase in the number of CEOs reporting central coordination are people management (10% increase), school improvement (5% increase) and technology (5% increase).

The changing shape of trusts

What changes do you expect to the number of schools in your trust over the next year?



Executing the trust's strategy is a major part of the CEO's role, and for some trusts growing the trust is a consideration. Respondents were asked to share more insight into how they expect their trust to change over the next year.

59% of CEOs report that they expect to open or add schools to their trust in the next year, with most planning to add up to three schools. One in six trusts (15%) report considering merging with another trust.

Five per cent of trusts expect to close or remove schools, with the vast majority of these expecting the number of schools to reduce by one.

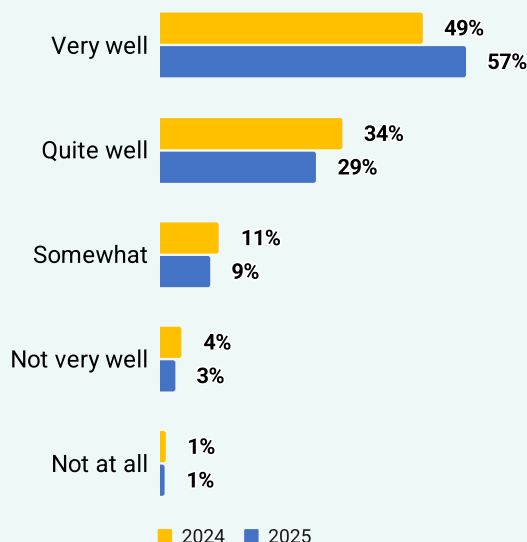
Reasons for schools leaving a trust include:

- school closures: 50%
- school merger: 30%
- rebrokerage: 25%.

Future trends are less clear for single school trusts, with 70% of CEOs saying they don't know what the future shape of their trust might look like.

The CEO's journey

How well supported do you feel as a chief executive by your trust board?



As we highlighted in last year's report, the leadership of a trust is heavily influenced by the CEO and the strength of their relationship with the board and the executive team. This year, we continue to deepen our understanding of the CEOs' experience and their plans for the year ahead.

Former headteachers continue to be the primary pool for the CEO role, with 88% of trust CEOs having previously led a school. Just under a third have worked in a trust team prior to their current CEO role, with a similar share working in education but outside of a school or trust. Only one per cent of CEOs report having not worked in the education sector before their current role.

Overall, we saw an improvement in the percentage of CEOs who report feeling very well supported by their trust board, with 57% feeling very well supported compared to 49% last year.

CEOs are mainly looking to meet their development needs by attending conferences and events (74%) and through professional networks (70%). Around a third plan to act as a mentor to a colleague, with around a fifth seeking a mentor themselves.

16% of chief executives are considering retiring in the next 12 months, with others looking to change roles, either moving to another trust (5%) or outside of the sector (5%).



Chief Executive at CST **Leora Cruddas CBE**

Throughout the year, I speak with chief executives from trusts right across the country, and one thing that always heartens me – and is reflected in these survey results – is their dedication to doing their best for children.

Given economic pressures, we inevitably see a focus on ‘keeping the lights on’ in trust priorities, but there is a real determination not to let the quality of education suffer, and a determination to transcend the systemic issues with our approach to special educational needs and inclusion.

The survey also reveals new insights into the people who lead our trusts. An overwhelming majority of chief executives feel well supported by their trust board.

Almost nine out of ten chief executives are former headteachers, but it is not necessarily a straight step-up, with a third of leaders having worked in another trust-wide role before their current job.

Finance and Operations

Chapter Two

Finance and Operations

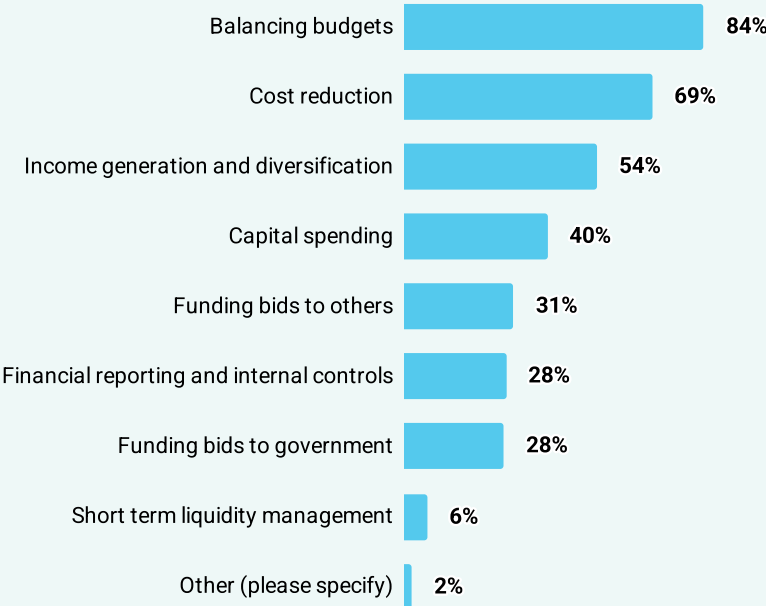
School trusts manage significant amounts of public funding, making strong financial management and effective operations essential. In recent years, this responsibility has been intensified by economic shocks, including rapid inflation and rising wage pressures. These challenges are reflected in the survey findings, with financial sustainability once again identified by CEOs as their top priority for the year ahead.

This chapter explores how trusts are approaching financial and operational priorities. It looks at trusts' plans for the next academic year, including reserves and budget strategies, as well as their wider concerns about trust operations. The chapter is presented in two parts: a review of financial priorities, followed by an examination of operational management.

Finance

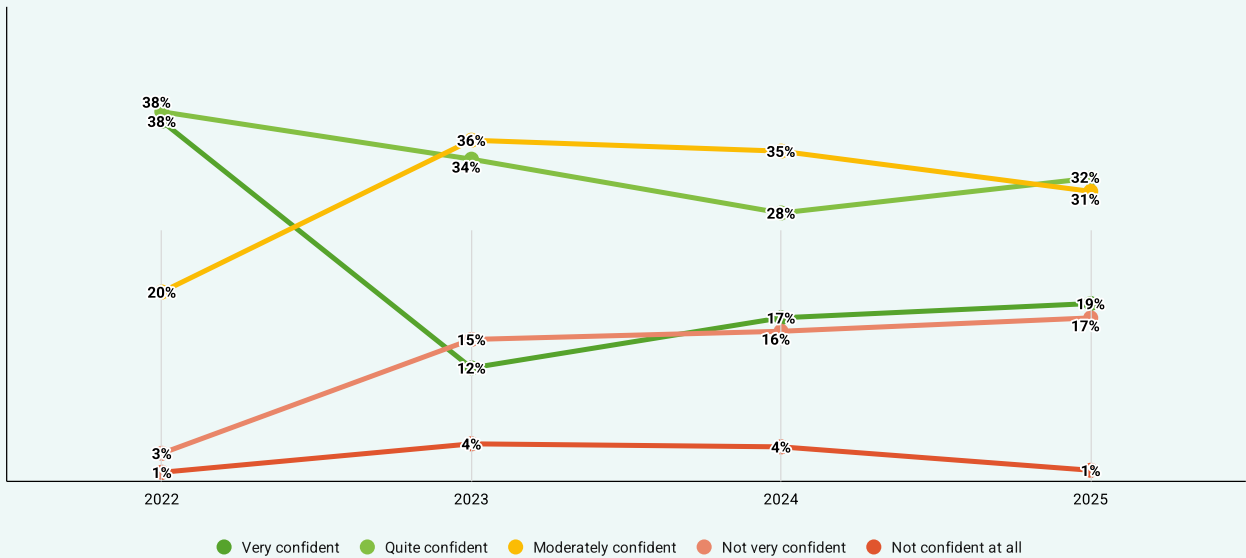
Priorities and challenges

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding finance in the next academic year?



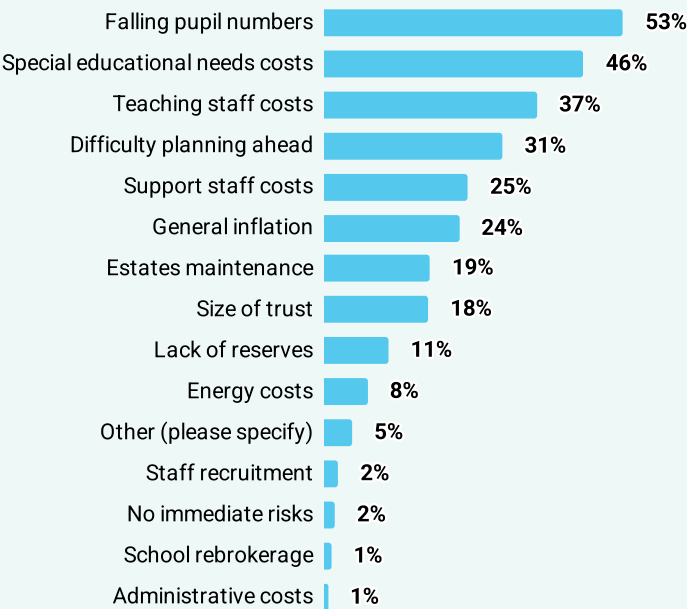
Balancing budgets was the most reported financial area of focus in the next academic year, with 84% of CEOs reporting this. For 69% of trusts this means needing to focus their efforts on cost reduction.

How confident are you about the financial sustainability of your trust?



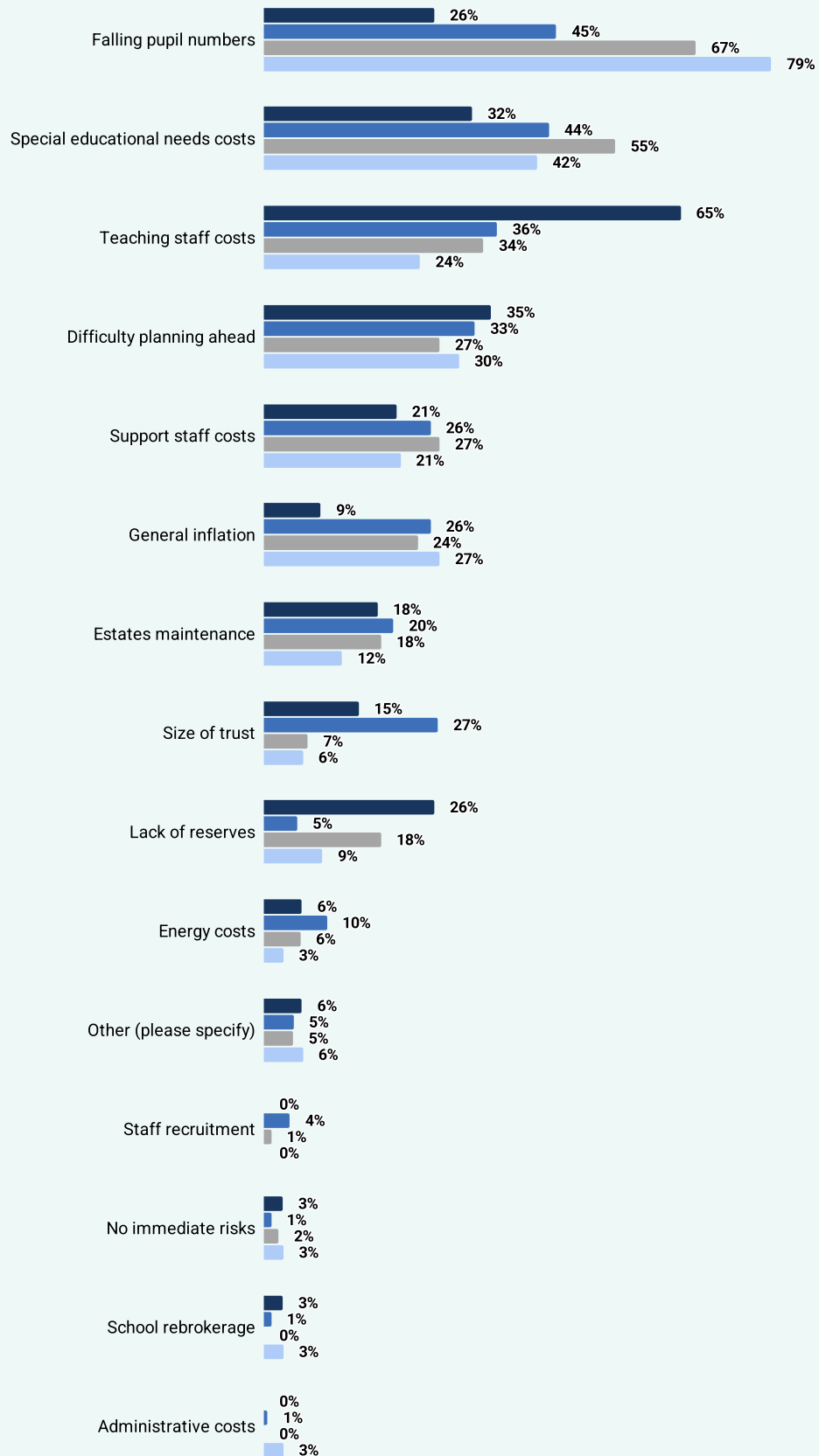
Trust CEOs are slightly more positive about the financial sustainability of their trusts this year compared to 2024 findings. A higher proportion of CEOs said they were very or quite confident in their trust's financial stability, and only 1% of CEOs were not confident at all in the financial sustainability of their trust, compared to 4% in 2023 and 2024.

What are the top three most immediate risks to your trust's financial sustainability?



The top three reported immediate risks to trust financial sustainability, as reported by CEOs, were: falling pupil numbers (53%), special educational needs costs (46%), and teaching staff costs (37%).

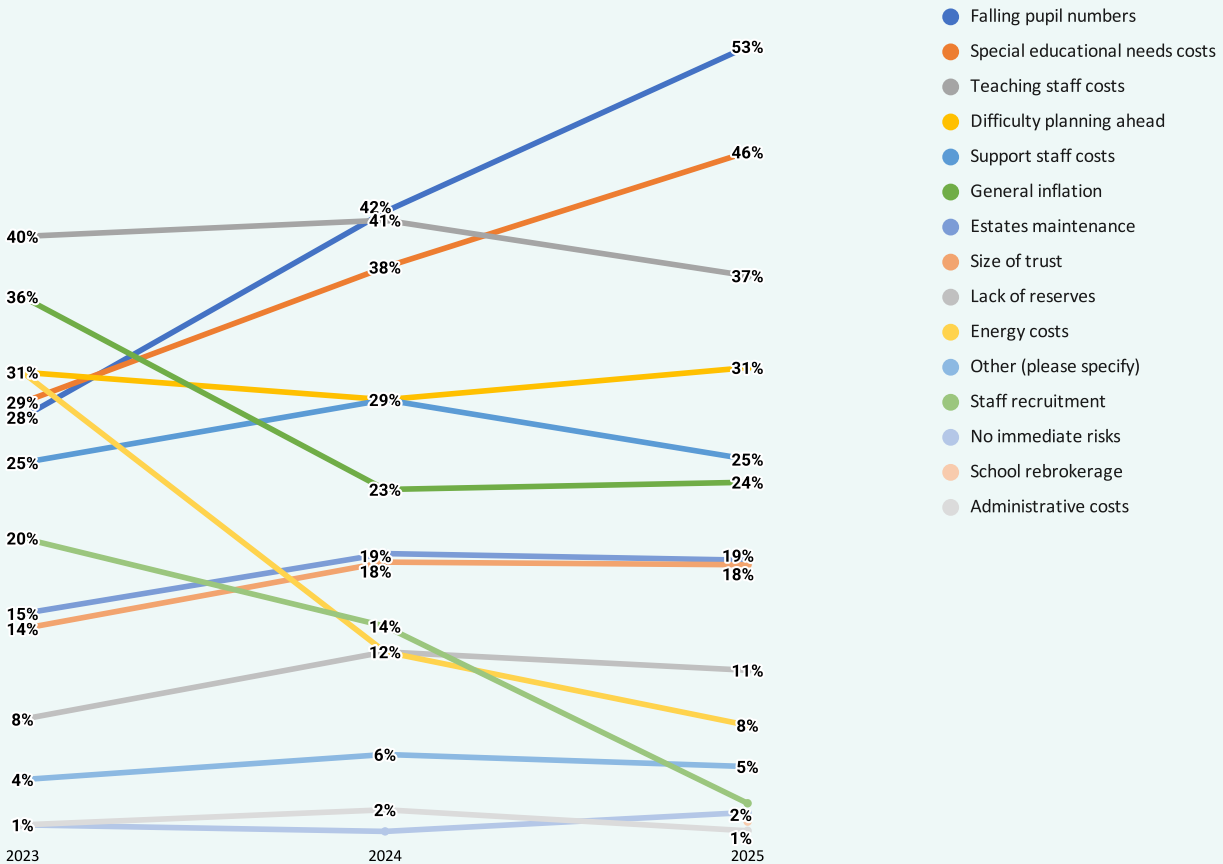
What are the top three most immediate risks to your trust's financial sustainability?



■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

When examining this by trust size, we see that larger trusts more frequently reported the risk of falling pupil numbers as an immediate risk to their trust's financial sustainability. 79% of trusts with 20+ schools report falling pupil numbers as an immediate risk to their trust's financial sustainability, compared to 26% of CEOs of single school trusts. Teaching staff costs were proportionately more likely to be reported as an immediate risk by smaller trusts. Trusts in the 2-9 school size range were most likely to view the size of trust as a risk, which is likely why growth was most frequently a strategic priority for trusts in this size group.

What are the top three most immediate risks to your trust's financial sustainability?

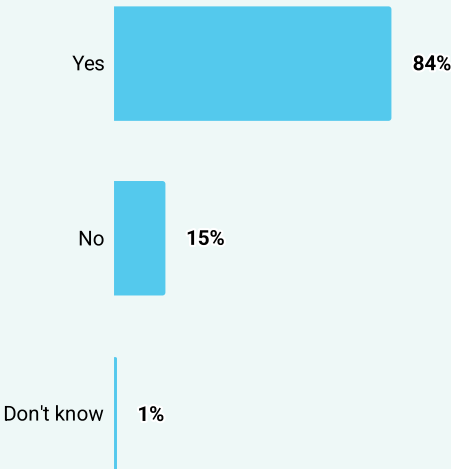


Falling pupil rolls have emerged as a growing concern for trusts' financial sustainability, rising from 28% in 2023 to 42% in 2024 and 53% in 2025. With the UK's birth rate per 1000 people in 2023 dropping to the lowest it has been since 1950, it is likely that overall pupil numbers will continue to fall over the coming years. Special educational needs costs have similarly risen as a risk from 29% in 2023, to 38% in 2024 and 46% in 2025.

Staff recruitment has declined as a concern for the second consecutive year, with fewer CEOs reporting it as an immediate risk. The percentage has fallen from 20% in 2023 to 14% in 2024 and just 2% in 2025.

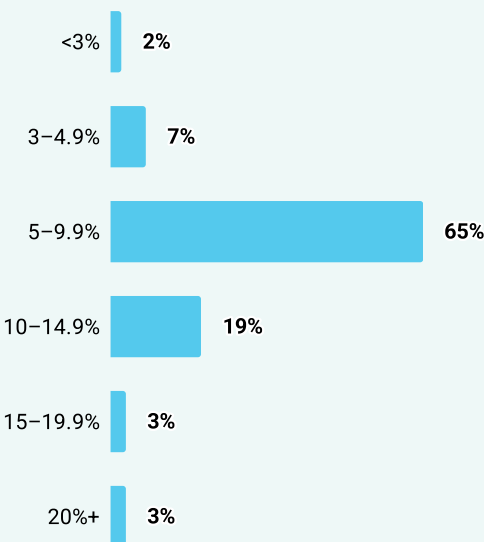
Budget and reserves

Does your trust have sufficient reserves in line with your reserves policy and financial risk assessments?



84% of trusts say they currently have sufficient reserves in line with their reserves policy and financial risk assessments. However, the majority of CEOs expect their reserves to decrease this year, with 14% predicting them to decrease considerably. A small number buck the trend, with 12% of trusts saying they hope to increase reserves in the next 12 months.

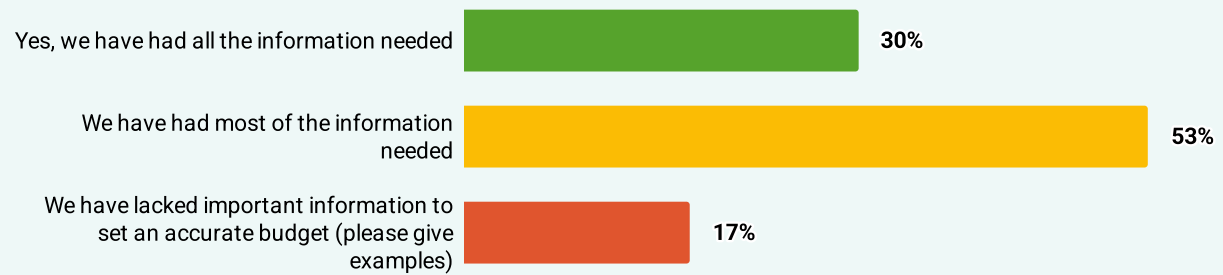
What is your target level of reserves as a percentage of overall income?



When asked about the trust's target reserves, 65% of CEOs report that their target reserves are between 5 and 9.9% of their overall income. 19% report that their reserves are between 10 and 14.9% of their overall income. 2% of CEOs reported that their target reserves were less than 3% of their overall income.

In this year’s survey, CEOs were more positive than last year about having access to the information they needed to set an accurate budget for the year than last year, but still less than a third of CEOs say they had all the information needed.

Have you had access to information needed to set an accurate budget for the next year? (2025)

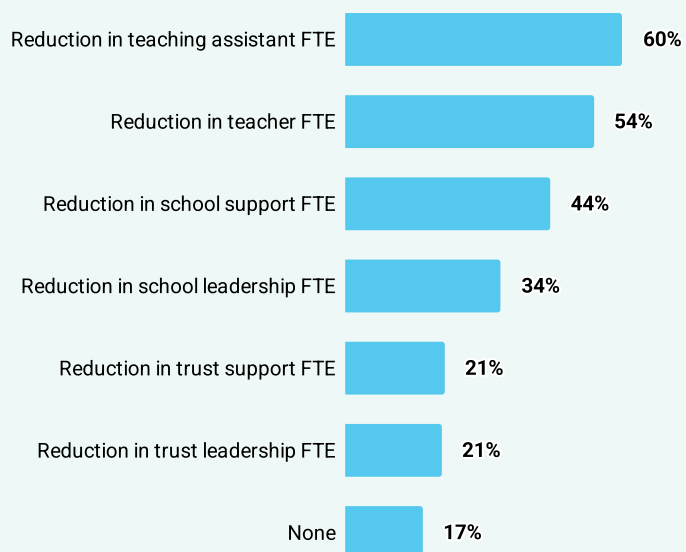


From those who reported lacking important information, the issues raised include:

- “Limited information on rollout of free breakfast clubs/increased FSM.”
- “Delay in government announcements regarding pay awards and any additional 'top-up' funding.”
- “Lack of clarity on 6th form funding.”
- “Grants are always delayed.”

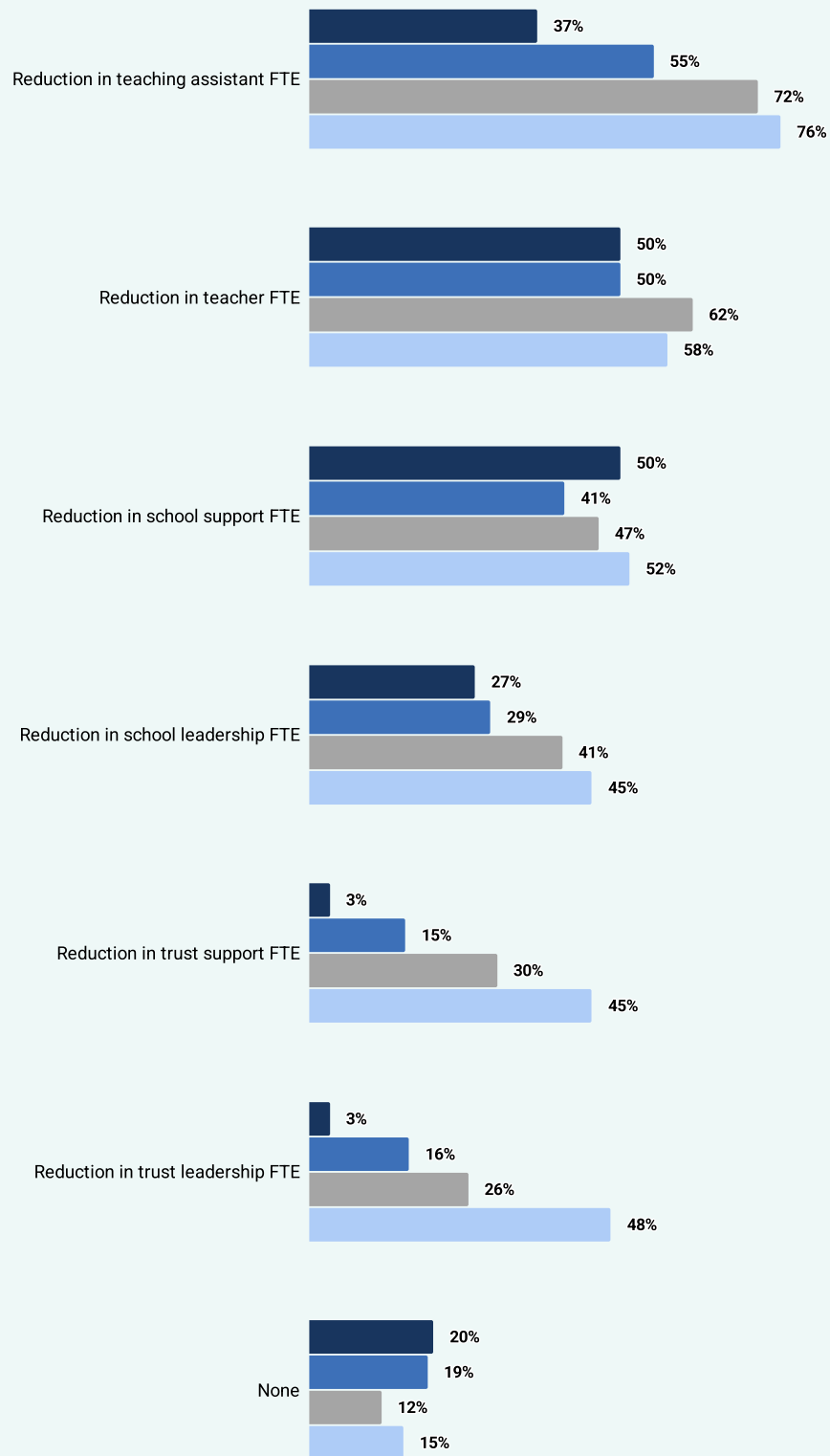
With balancing budgets and cost reduction being two of the main areas that trusts intend to focus on regarding finance in the next academic year, it is unsurprising that trusts are considering cost-cutting measures.

What staffing changes are you planning to mitigate financial pressures next year?



The majority of trusts say they expect to cut classroom staff to save money. A reduction in teaching assistants is the largest reported staffing change, with 60% of trust CEOs reporting this. 54% of trusts say they plan a reduction in teachers. School support staff are under review in 44% of trusts.

What staffing changes are you planning to mitigate financial pressures next year?



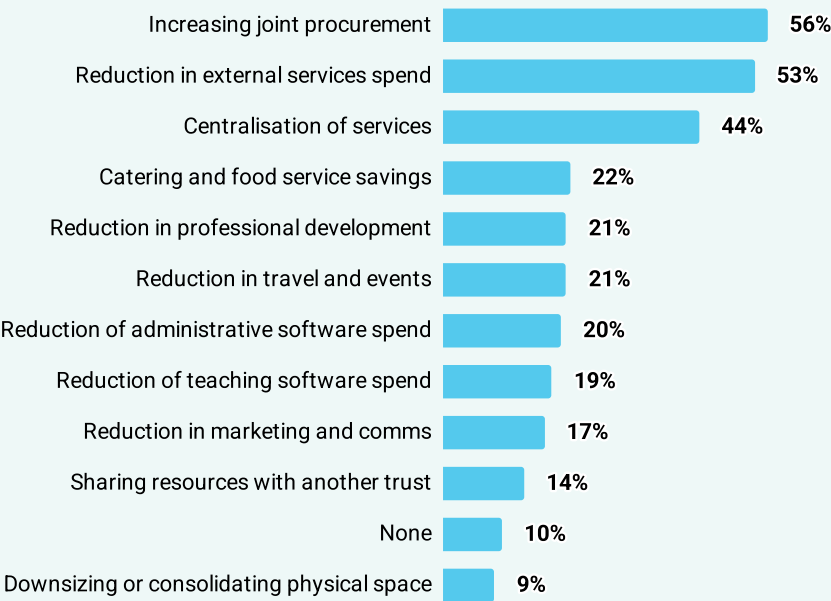
■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

There were significant differences in approaches depending on trust size.

Larger trusts (20+) were most likely to report planning a reduction in teaching assistants to mitigate financial pressures next year, with 76% of CEOs in these trusts reporting this. Only 37% of single school trusts were planning a reduction in teaching assistant hours.

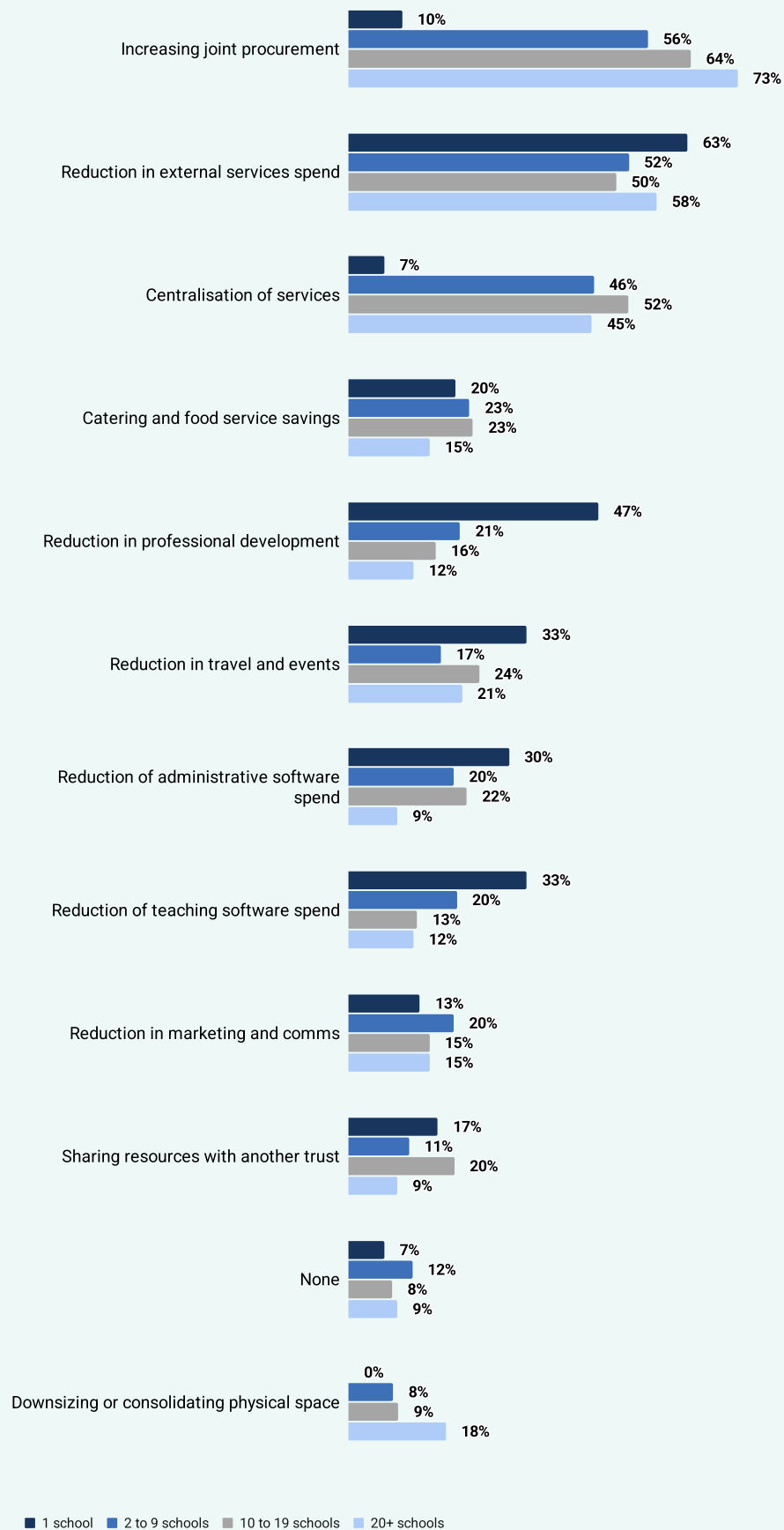
Larger trusts are also more likely to report planning reductions in school leadership, trust support, and trust leadership compared to smaller trusts. Nearly half of trusts over 20 schools are considering cuts to trust and school leadership staffing.

What non-staffing spend reductions are you planning to mitigate financial pressures next year?



Trusts are not only looking at staff costs. When it comes to non-staffing spend reductions, the top three planned activities to mitigate financial pressures next year were increasing joint procurement (56%), reducing external services spend (53%), and centralising services (44%).

What non-staffing spend reductions are you planning to mitigate financial pressures next year?



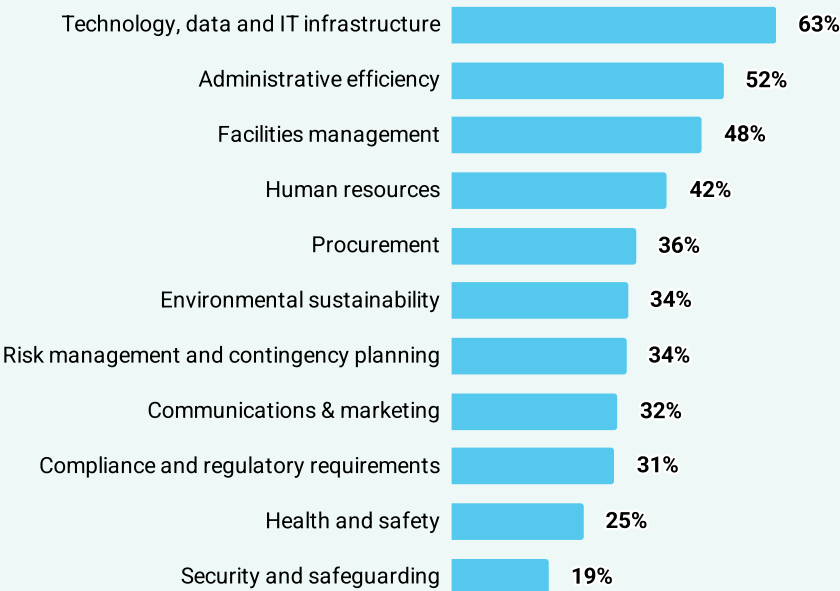
Single school trusts were almost four times as likely to report plans to reduce professional development than the largest trusts. Single school trusts are also more likely to target software spend and travel and events costs over the next year.

More than half of trusts with more than one school are looking at joint procurement, with levels of interest increasing with trust size. Around half of trusts are also looking at further centralisation of services to reduce costs.

Operations

Priorities and challenges

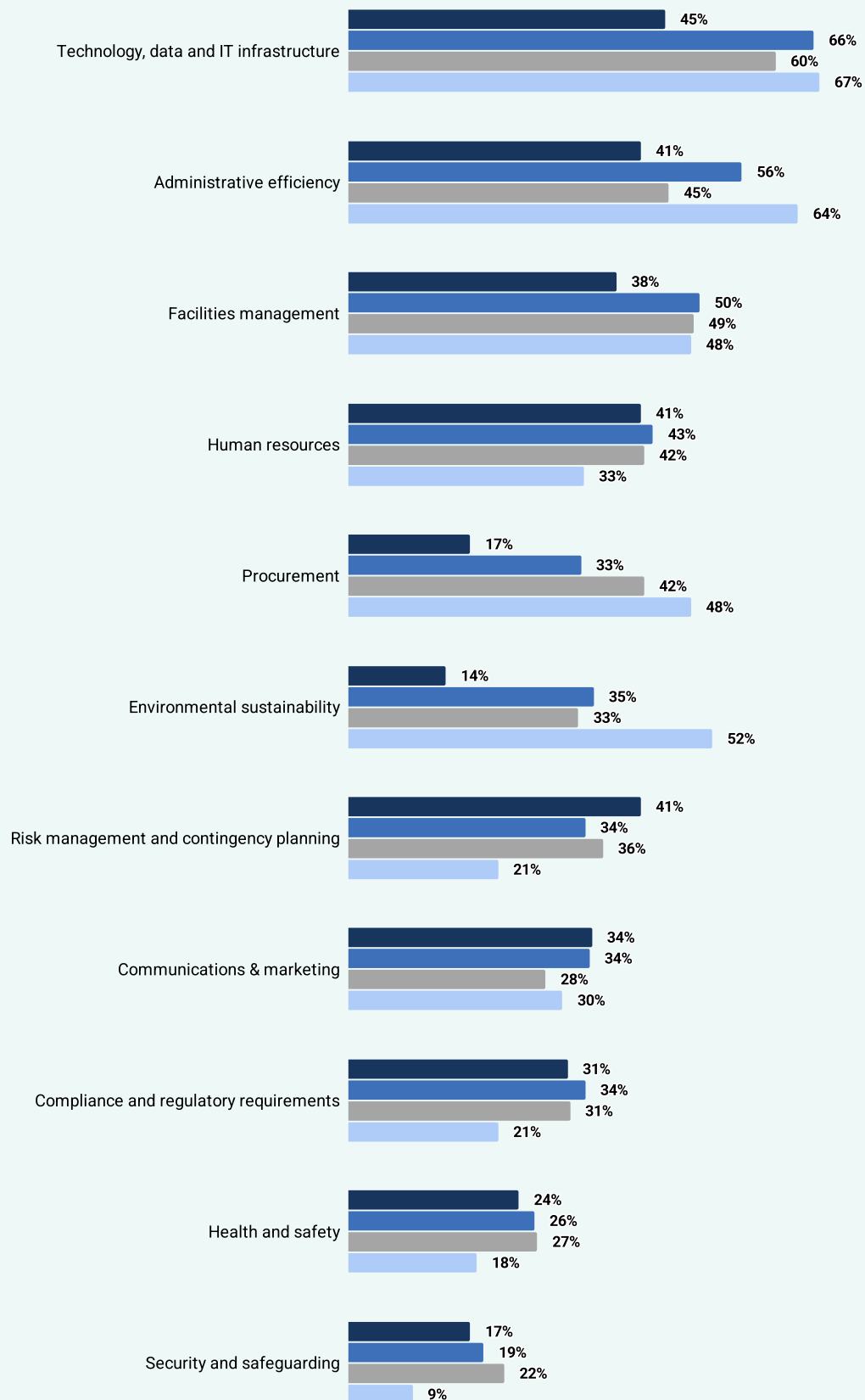
In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding operations in the next academic year?



63% of trust CEOs report that their trusts intend to focus their efforts on technology, data, and IT infrastructure over the next academic year, up from 55% in 2024.

Administrative efficiency was the next highest operational priority, with 52% of CEOs reporting it, followed by facilities management (48%). Human resources remains a key concern (2024: 48%, 2025: 42%) but has been overtaken by other priorities.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding operations in the next academic year?

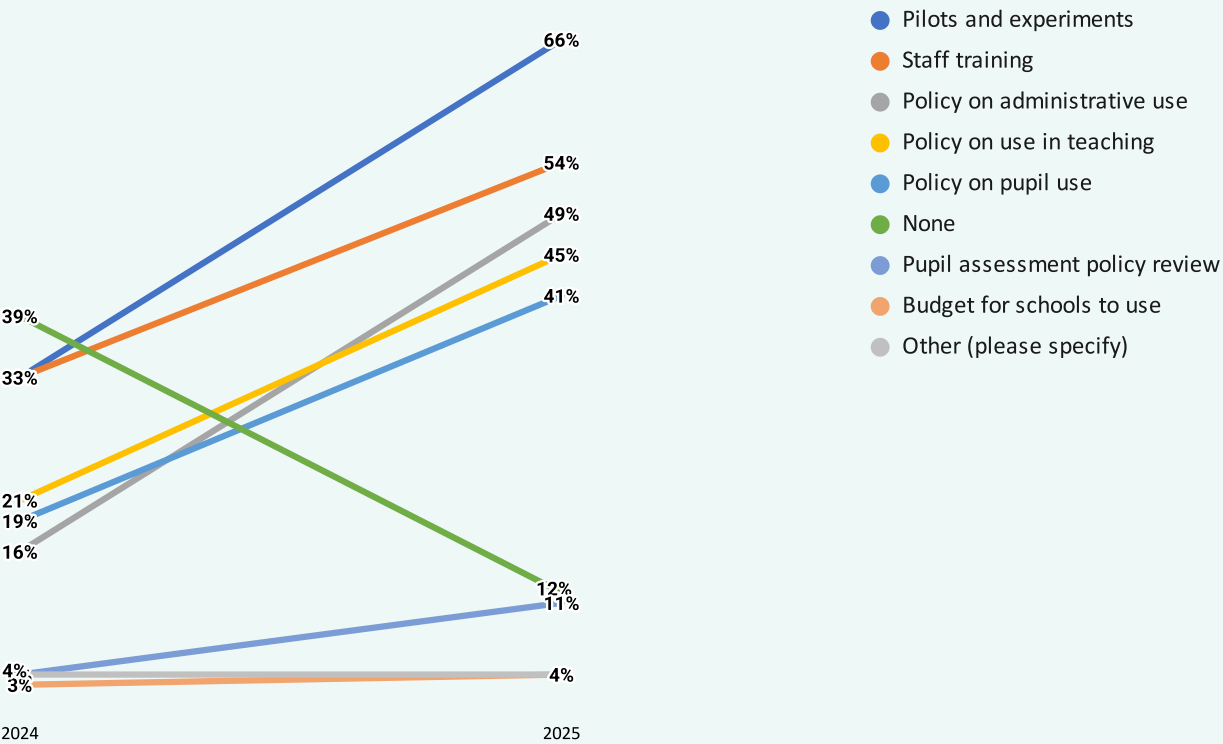


■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

Looking at trust size, CEOs of the largest trusts are almost four times as likely to be focusing on environmental sustainability than single academy trusts. Focus on procurement is also closely linked to trust size, with nearly three times the frequency of prioritisation in the largest trusts compared to the smallest.

Risk management and contingency planning is most likely to be a priority for CEOs of single school trusts.

Which of the following activities has your trust implemented in response to developments in Artificial Intelligence technology?



The capabilities of artificial intelligence continue to advance, with more people looking to use it to reduce workload. We asked CEOs about their approach to using AI: the most reported activities are pilots and experiments, with 66% of CEOs reporting this, and staff training on AI (54%). It is noteworthy that the percentage of CEOs reporting that their trusts implemented the activities has increased for nearly all activities compared to last year.

The CEOs were asked to provide additional detail on their trust's use of AI to date. The top five themes covered:

1) Administrative workload reduction: This was the most frequently mentioned task, with trusts widely using AI for drafting, summarising, and routine paperwork, including minute-taking, drafting policies and letters, and generating reports, saving staff time and providing more detailed records for some potentially contentious meetings.

2) Teaching and learning support: AI is frequently applied in lesson planning and resource creation. Many trusts report experimenting with adaptive learning tools, generating schemes of work, scaffolds, and revision apps for students. One trust reported using video software to help teachers identify points in their lessons to focus on developing their skills and practice.

3) Assessment and feedback: Trusts are trialling AI for marking, feedback, and assessment. Uses range from Key Stage 2 writing to adaptive assessment tools, homework setting, and revision resources.

4) Data analysis and reporting: AI is being used to analyse assessment and operational data, like finance, and to generate reports for governors and leadership teams. Trusts report this enables quicker, even “real-time” analysis.

5) Governance and compliance: Trusts are using AI to support policy writing, equality impact assessments, board reporting, and governance administration.



Director of Public Affairs and Policy at CST **Samuel Skerritt**

Last year we saw a significant rise in concern about trusts' financial positions – thankfully, this has abated slightly in this year's survey results but that doesn't mean there are not difficult decisions to come. More than four in five trusts are considering staffing reductions in the year ahead, and the government has already stated that funding for future pay rise is expected to largely come from existing budgets.

A predicted fall in pupil numbers – initially in primary – is increasingly on the radar of trusts too. Most trusts are meeting their reserves policies right now, but expect to dip into reserves during the year.

Will artificial intelligence be a white knight coming to the rescue? Our results find the use of AI is widespread in trusts, especially in 'backroom' functions – not just in expected areas like data analysis but also in report writing, minute taking, policy drafting and more. Like central government, trusts will be hoping it can save precious time and money, but as an emergent and imperfect technology there are risks attached too.

High-Quality, Inclusive Education

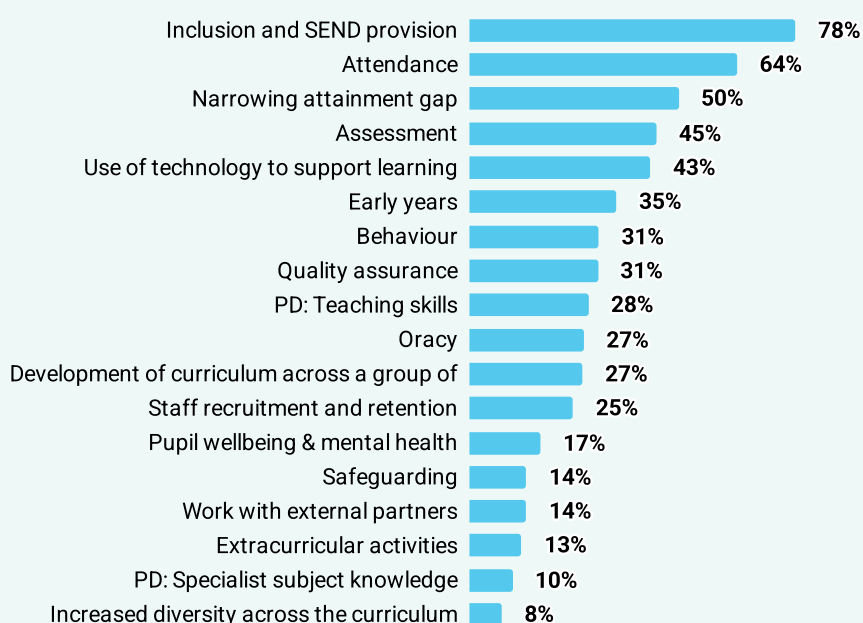
Chapter Three

High-Quality, Inclusive Education

Improving the quality of education was reported by 58% of CEOs as a priority for the next academic year, the second most reported priority for the second year in a row in the trust priority list, after financial sustainability.

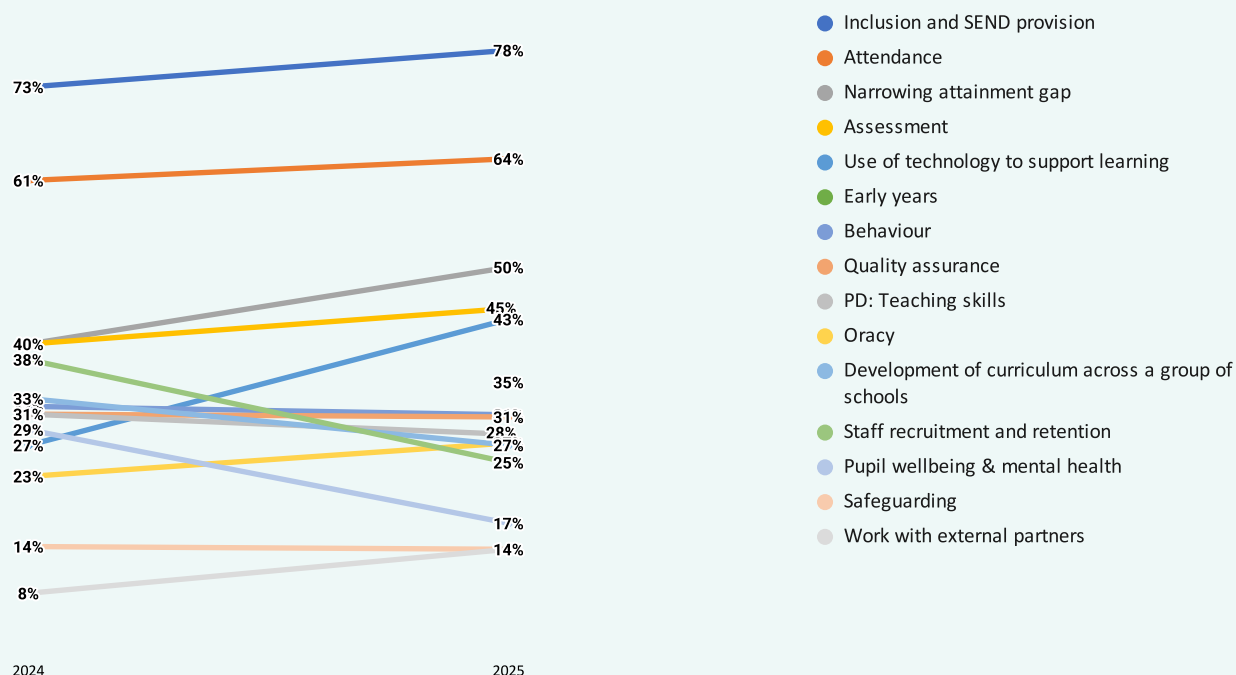
Priorities and challenges

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on quality of education in the next academic year?



The most frequently reported area of focus in quality of education for the next academic year is inclusion and SEND provision. 78% of CEOs highlight this, followed by attendance (64%).

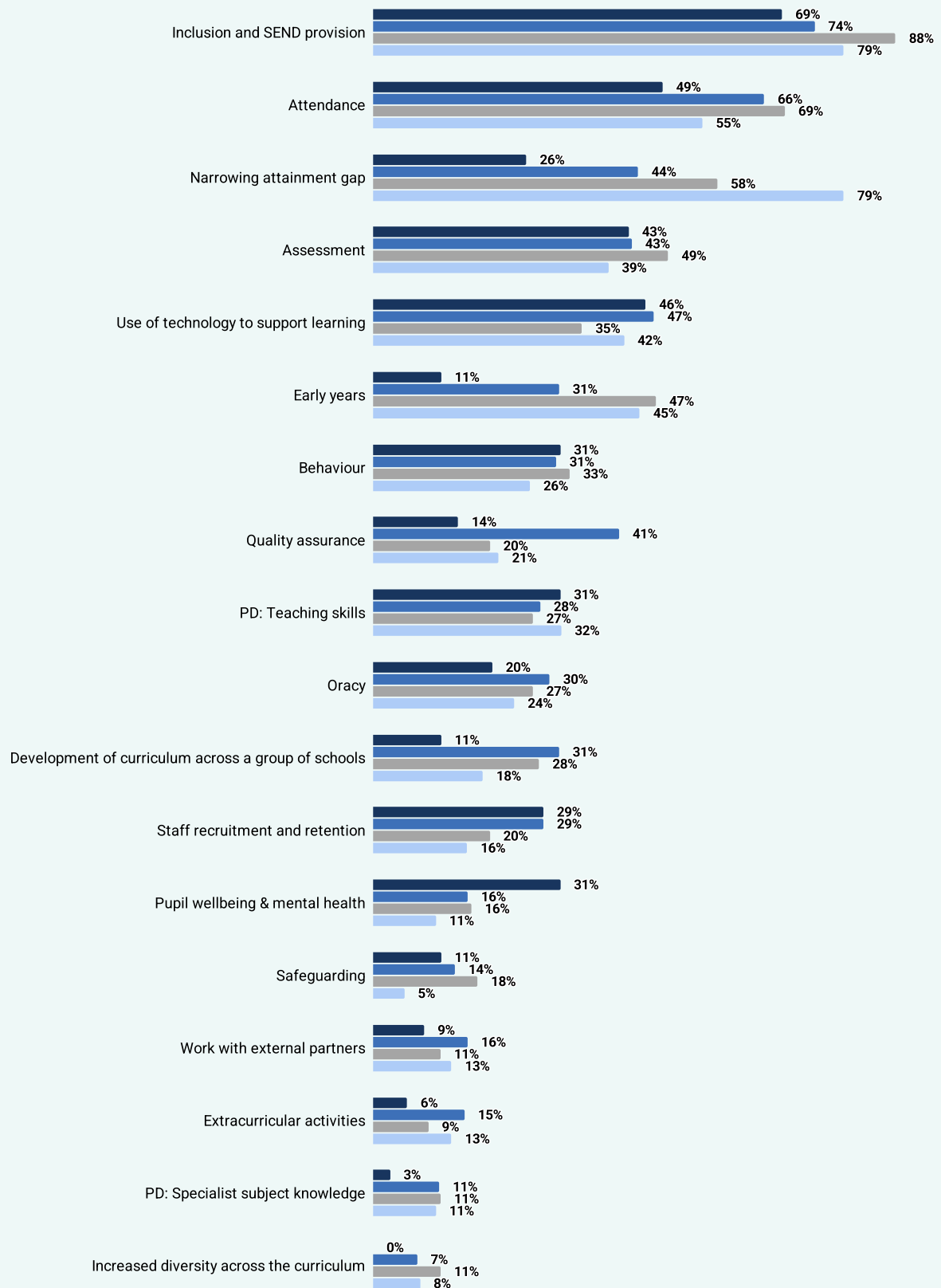
In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on quality of education in the next academic year?



Both top priorities have slightly grown as areas of focus compared to our survey findings in 2024.

There has also been a 10% increase year-on-year in the number of trusts saying they intend to focus on attainment gaps between pupils.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding operations in the next academic year?



■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

Narrowing the attainment gap is one of the areas of focus where we see a large difference when looking through the lens of trust size. Larger trusts with 20+ schools were more than three times as likely to report it as an area of focus compared to single academy trusts, with attention increasing with trust size.

Trusts with multiple schools are more than three times as likely (11%) as single schools (3%) to be looking at professional development for specialist subject knowledge, and also considerably more likely to be looking at developing extracurricular activities.

Pupil wellbeing and mental health was more reported as an area of focus for single school trusts compared to larger trusts.

Most demanding priorities for Quality of Education in 2025/26



When comparing these areas of focus with the most prominent challenges CEOs face within their work, inclusion and SEND provision, as well as attendance, remain as priorities that will be a significant challenge for the trusts focusing on them for the second year in a row.

SEND Provision

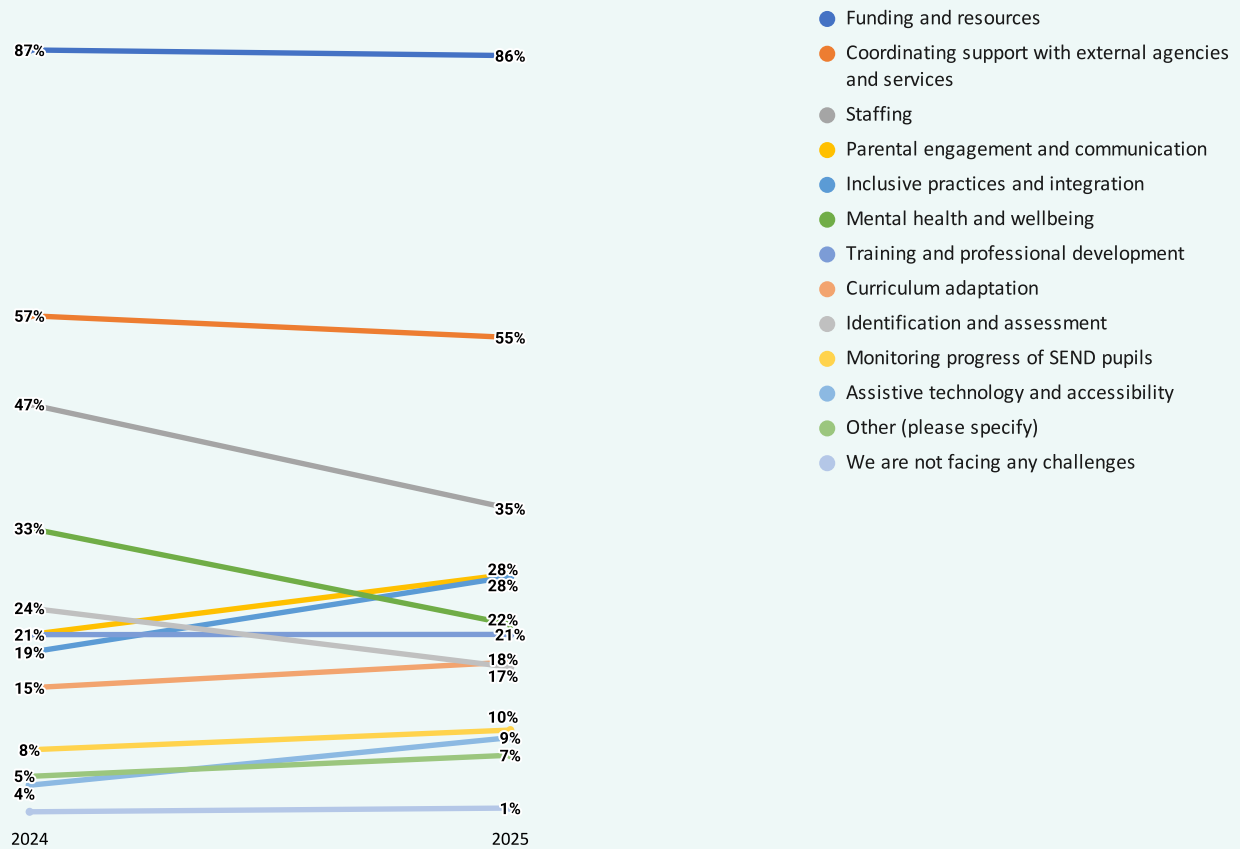
What are the main challenges your trust faces in managing SEND provision?



Inclusion and SEND provision have become increasingly prominent in recent years, with many CEOs highlighting them as significant areas of concern. To better understand these challenges, we asked CEOs to identify the main difficulties their trusts face in managing SEND provision.

Funding and resources emerged as the most common challenge, cited by 86% of CEOs. This was followed by coordinating support with external agencies and services (55%), and staffing, which 35% of CEOs identified as a key issue.

What are the main challenges your trust faces in managing SEND provision?



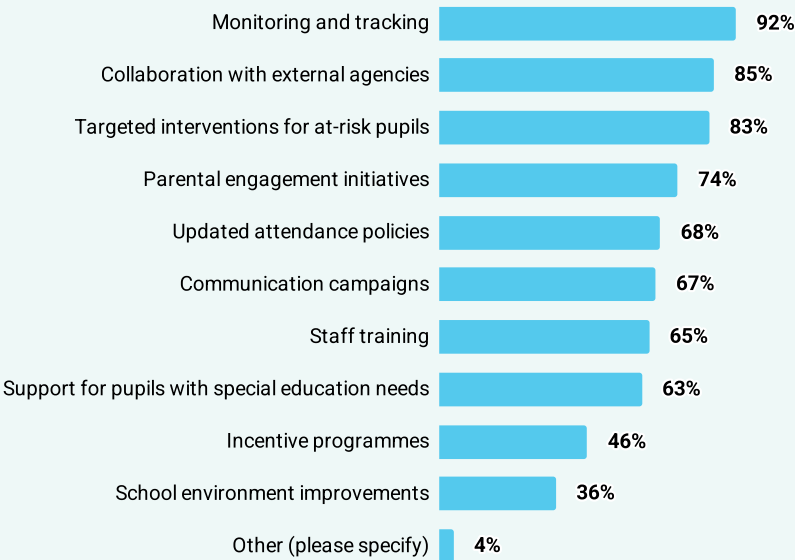
While staffing remains a top three challenge, its prevalence has slightly reduced (2024: 47%, 2025: 35%). A growing challenge is parental engagement and communication, with 28% reporting this in 2025, up from 21% last year.

Trusts appear to be gradually switching to whole trust approaches to SEND, with 60% of CEOs reporting they have a director of SEND or equivalent role, compared to 54% in 2024. A further 16% say they plan to create the role.

Attendance

Attendance was again a top priority as well as an area of challenge for CEOs.

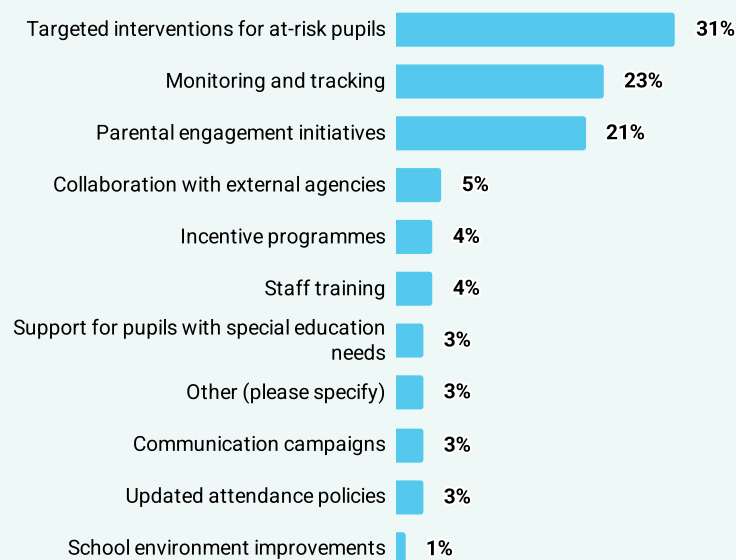
What activities has your trust undertaken last year to improve pupil attendance?



Monitoring and tracking of attendance was the most reported activity undertaken by their trusts last year to improve pupil attendance. However, many other activities were attempted by the majority of the trusts.

68% of CEOs report that they have updated attendance policies, but when asked what changes have been most impactful, only 3% referenced policy changes.

Which of these has been the most impactful on pupil attendance across your trust?

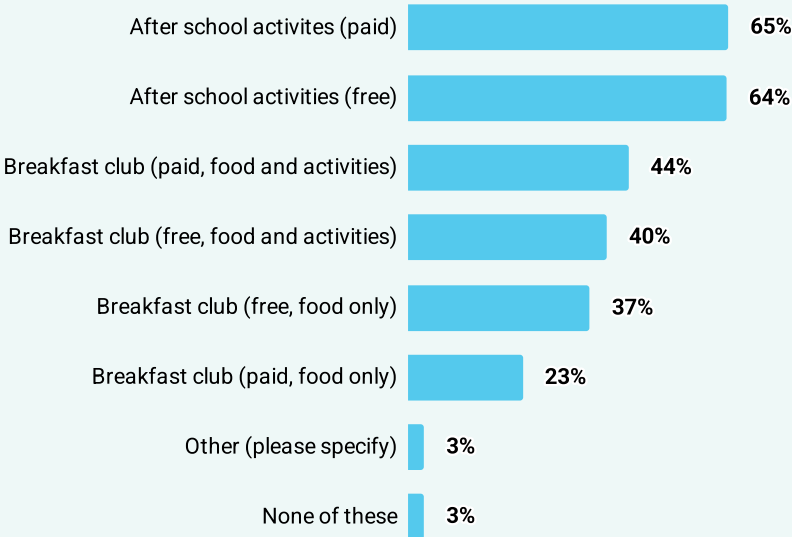


Targeted interventions for at-risk pupils were reported most frequently by CEOs as the most impactful activity, at 31%, followed by monitoring and tracking and parental engagement.

Wrap-around provision

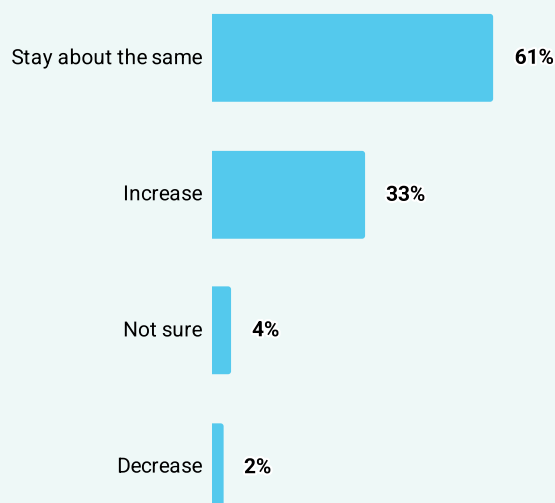
This year, we asked CEOs about the wrap-around provision their schools offer or are planning to offer in the next academic year.

What 'wrap-around' provision do your schools plan to offer in the next academic year?
Costs refer to charges to the majority of parents.

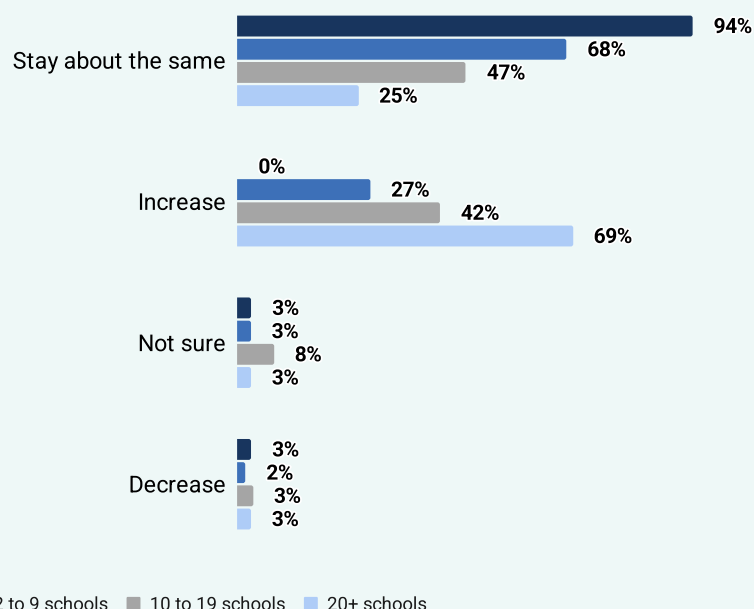


Around two-thirds of schools plan to offer paid after-school activities, with a similar number offering free after-school activities. Just 3% of trusts reported not planning to offer any wrap-around provision.

How will the level of 'wrap-around' provision change compared to the current academic year?



How will the level of 'wrap-around' provision change compared to the current academic year?



Overall, only 2% of trusts expect to offer fewer wrap-around provisions in 2025. The larger the trust, the more likely the CEOs are to report that they plan to increase their wrap-around offer compared to 2024. The vast majority of single school trusts are planning a static offer, while 69% of the largest trusts plan to increase wrap-around provision for pupils.



Deputy Chief Executive at CST

Steve Rollett

The focus in the classroom remains firmly on inclusion and attendance, according to this year's survey results.

The rapid increase in the proportion of pupils identified with special needs in recent years has outgrown the systems intended to support them: trust leaders will be closely watching the anticipated government white paper.

Until then, trusts are acting themselves, increasingly looking at how to foster inclusive teaching in their schools and developing high-quality alternative provision.

Attendance is still a significant challenge, but figures for 2024/5 tentatively suggest the tide may be turning. An interesting finding is that schools are doing a lot of different things around attendance but only three areas – targeted interventions, monitoring and tracking, and parental engagement – really seem to shift the needle.

The government has made much of its plans to introduce breakfast clubs in schools. Our survey found that this sort of wrap-around care – both before and after school – is already widespread in trusts, and likely to extend further in the future.

School Improvement at Scale

Chapter Four

School Improvement at Scale

One of the great benefits of a school trust is its ability to bring professionals together at a fundamentally deeper level than other organisational structures. This means that teachers and leaders can effect change at scale, transforming the experiences of thousands of children. The potential for school improvement at scale is a prime example of this.

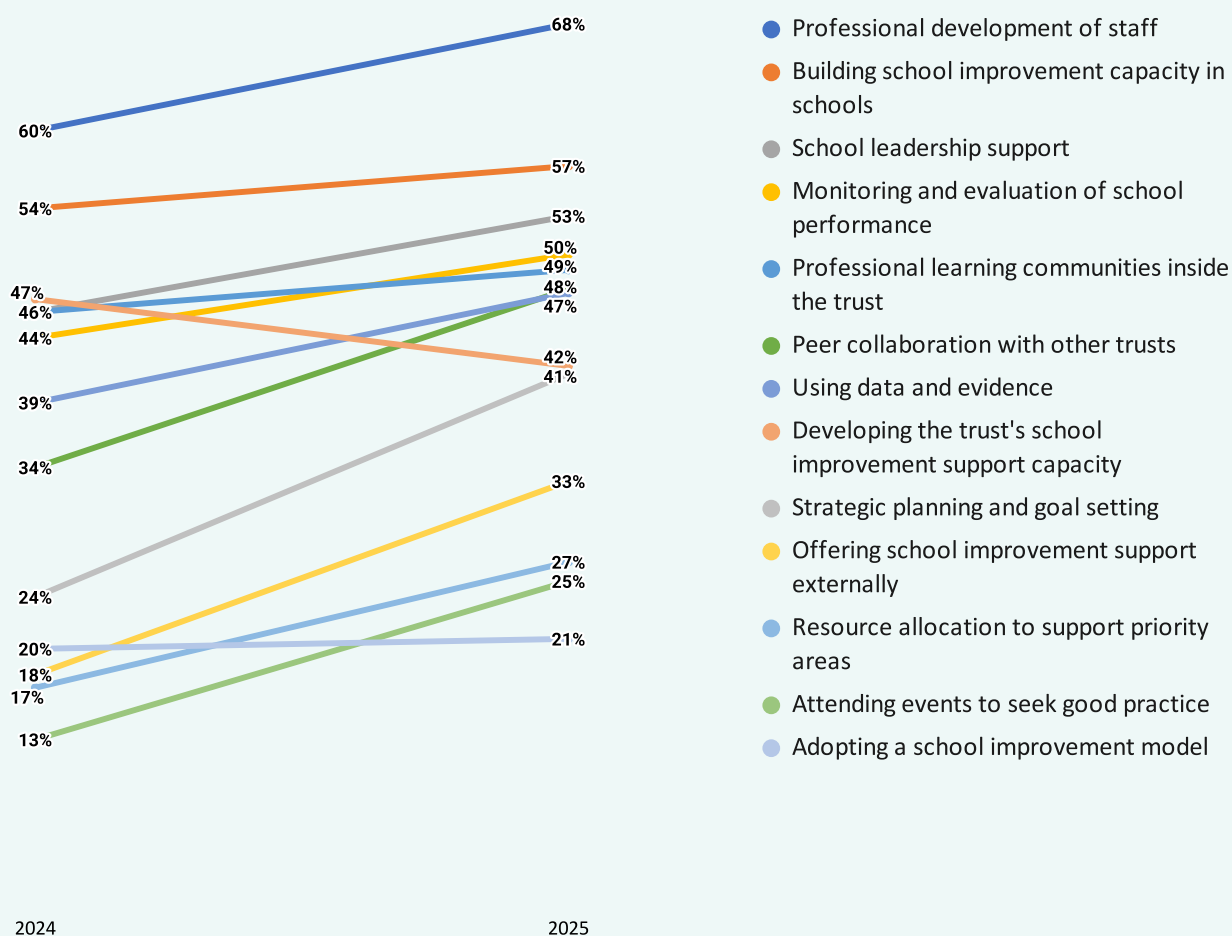
Priorities and challenges

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on school improvement in the next academic year?



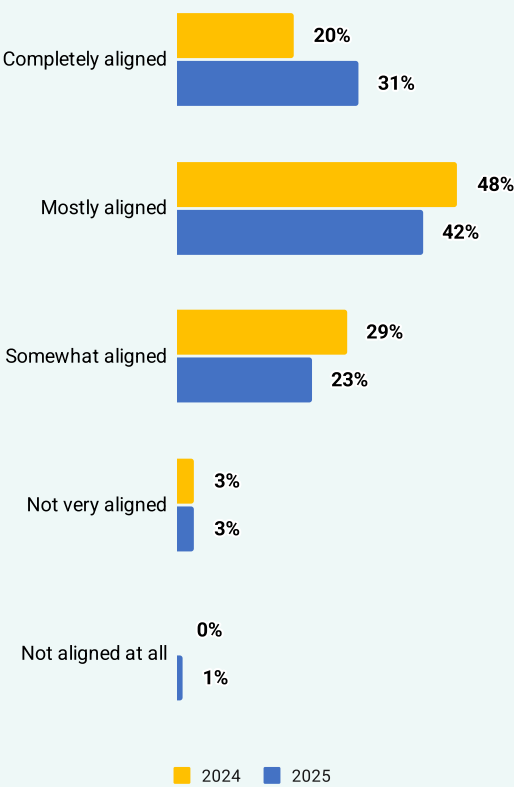
Each year we ask CEOs where their trusts intend to focus their school improvement efforts in the next academic year. Our results found a broad set of activities, with no single standout priority.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts on school improvement in the next academic year?



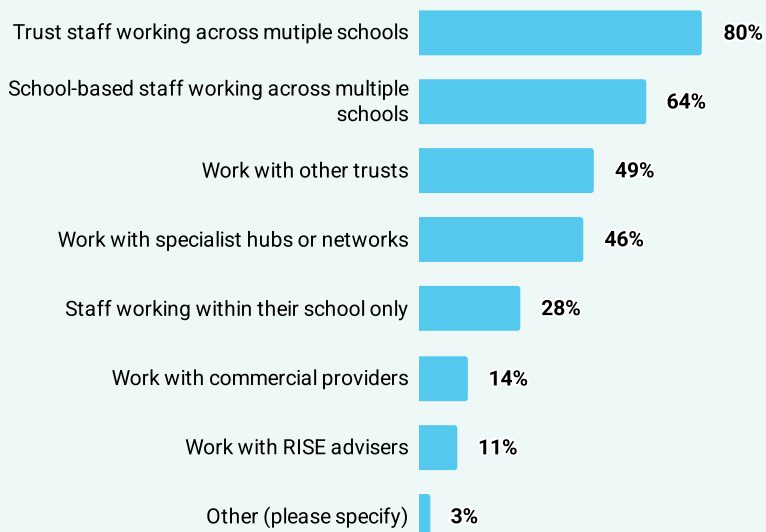
Some notable changes from last year include that 68% of CEOs highlighted the professional development of staff as a key area of focus, up from 60%. 57% highlighted their desire to build school improvement capacity in schools, up from 54%. School leadership support has also become a greater focus for CEOs, increasing from 46% in 2024 to 53%.

How far are your school improvement plans aligned across the trust?



More CEOs reported that their school improvement plans are completely aligned across their trust (31%), compared to 2024 (20%). Overall, CEOs are more likely to report that their plans are aligned across the trust compared to last year.

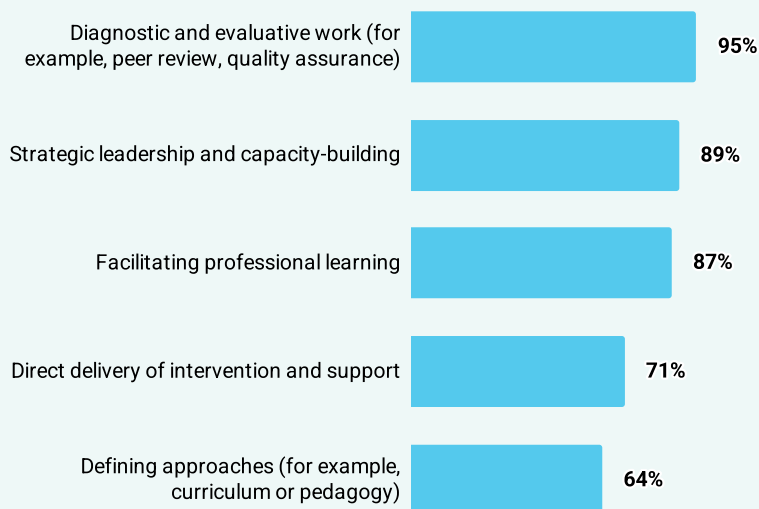
How is school improvement organised in your trust?



Most trusts organise school improvement through staff working across multiple schools, whether employed at trust level (80%) or school-based (64%). Around half collaborate with other trusts (49%) or specialist hubs (46%). The government's new RISE advisers were mentioned by around 1 in 10 trusts.

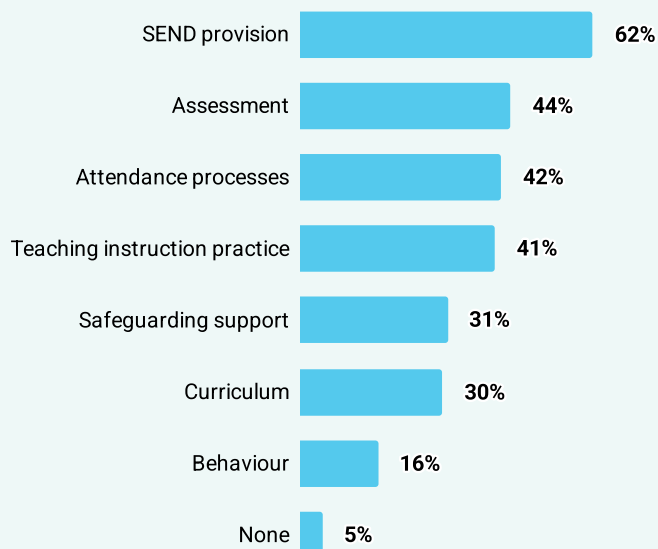
83% of trusts have a trust-wide model of school improvement, with 81% of trusts having a central or shared improvement team that works across the trust.

How do your trust-wide school improvement staff currently support your schools?



Of the trusts that have central school improvement staff, 95% of CEOs reported that their trust-wide school improvement staff currently support their schools with diagnostic and evaluative work (for example, peer review, quality assurance). 89% support their schools with strategic leadership and capacity building.

In which areas of education provision will your trust priorities achieve more trust-wide alignment across the trust next year?



As seen in the High Quality and Inclusive Education section of this report, SEND provision is proving to be a prominent challenge and focus for trusts and their CEOs: trust-wide improvement priorities reflect that, with 62% of CEOs naming SEND as an area for increasing alignment. Attendance, assessment, and teaching practice were identified for alignment by two in five trusts.



Deputy Chief Executive at CST

Steve Rollett

The importance of well-trained staff is difficult to overstate – it helps support people do their jobs, but it can also help them feel valued as colleagues. So it is reassuring to see that professional development not only remains the top priority for trusts in this year survey, but it has increased in popularity.

It makes sense too that it is matched with rises in interest in school leadership support and professional learning communities within the trust, particularly at a time when budgets for external training may be under pressure. Our colleagues can have great expertise, and we should make the most of it.

The model for trust improvement remains dominated by central teams, but many trusts call on school-based staff to lead across their organisation. This year for the first time around one in 10 trusts say they have worked with the government's new RISE advisers – this will be an interesting development to watch in the future, both for scale and effectiveness.

Strategic Governance

Chapter Five

Strategic Governance

Governance encompasses everything surrounding trust and school management and is a fundamental pillar of trust structure and improvement.

The board has collective accountability and strategic responsibility for the trust. It has a focus on ensuring the trust delivers an excellent education to pupils while maintaining effective resource management and ensuring compliance with the trust's charitable objects, regulatory, contractual, and statutory requirements.

This chapter explores some of the challenges for governance in schools and trusts and looks at the priorities of these schools and trusts.

Priorities and challenges

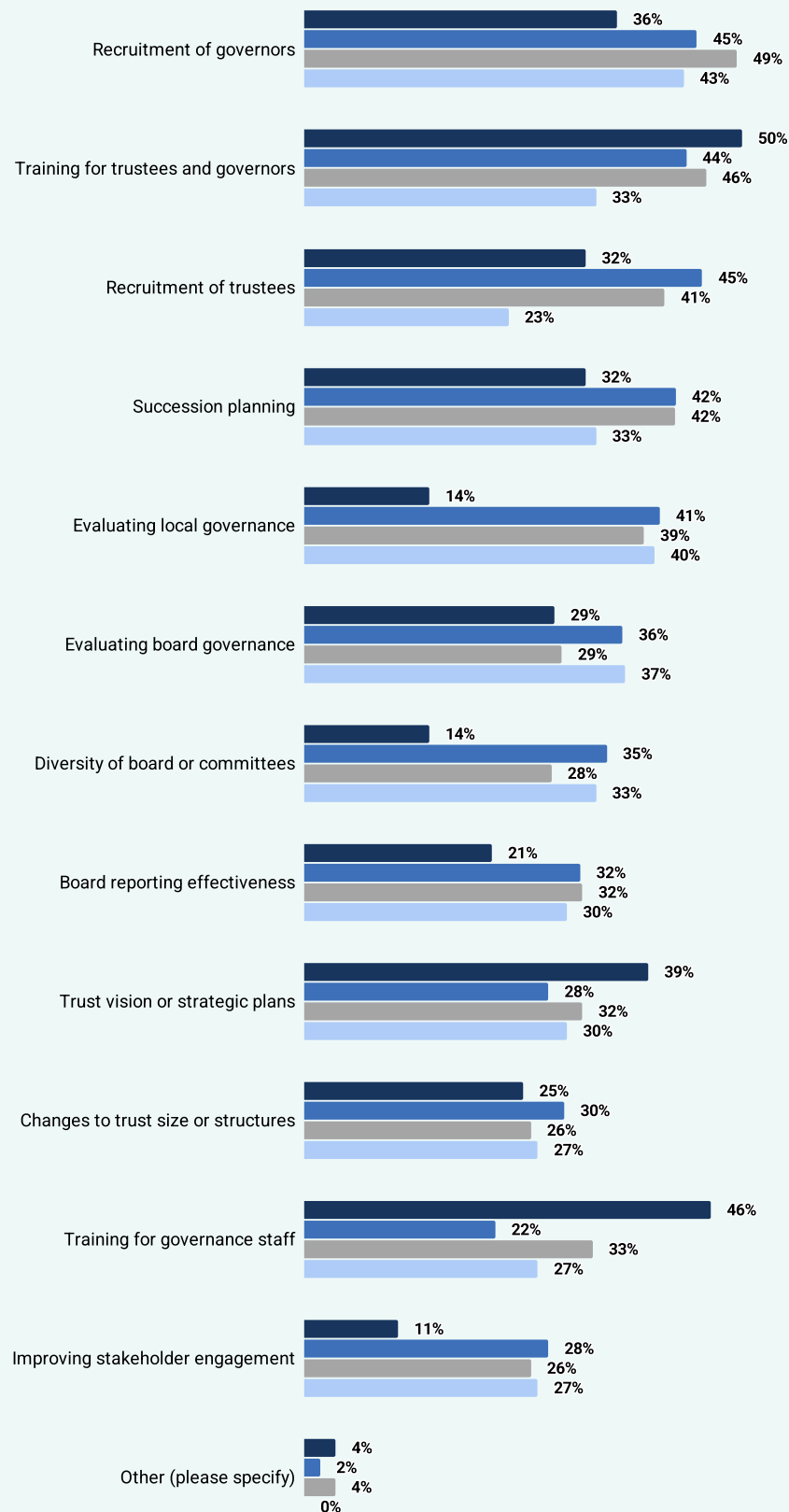
In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding governance in the next academic year?



Starting with trusts' governance priorities, the survey found a wide spread of priorities but recruitment of governors, trustees, and training for them, are at the top. These three priorities have overtaken last year's most reported area of focus (succession planning).

Evaluation of both local and board governance were also named by more than a third of trusts, with diversity of memberships closely following.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding governance in the next academic year?



■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

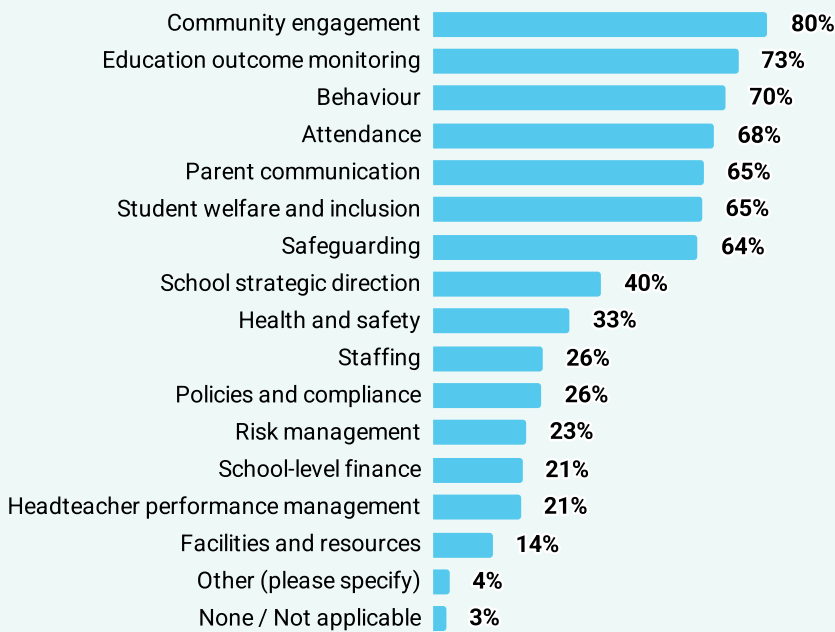
Broken down by trust size, training for both governance volunteers and staff were more strongly identified as a priority for single school trusts.

Trusts in the 2-9 schools category were more likely to say their priority will be recruiting trustees in 2025 compared to other-sized trusts.

CEOs were slightly more likely to report this year that they have a head of governance or a similar dedicated governance role that leads on governance in their trust (2024: 51%, 2025: 55%). Worryingly, a quarter of trusts still report the chief executive leads on governance within the trust, despite the potential for conflicts of interest.

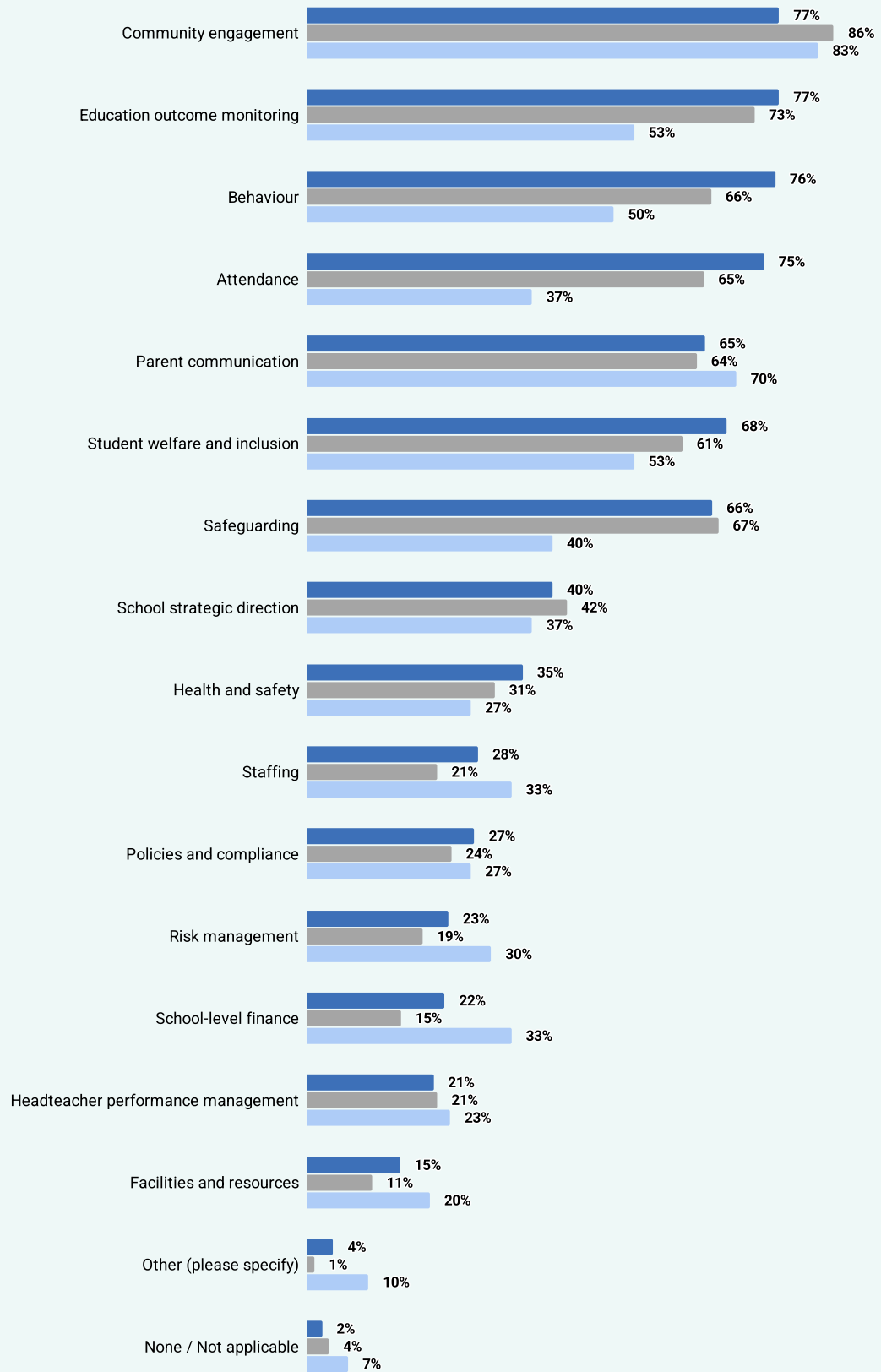
Just under half of trusts (48%) have a governance lead as part of their executive team, but this varies considerably depending on the size of the trust. In single academy trusts, the governance professional is only at the top table in 11% of trusts, compared to 57% of trusts with 20 or more schools.

Which of these responsibilities does your local tier of governance hold?



The role of the local tier of governance can vary between trusts. Community engagement is named as within their responsibilities by 80% of trusts, followed by education outcome monitoring (73%), and behaviour (70%). Most of the top responsibilities saw an increase compared to previous years, suggesting that trusts of all sizes are adopting a general and more consistent approach to governance.

Which of these responsibilities does your local tier of governance hold?



■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

Attendance and behaviour responsibilities differ noticeably between trusts, with three-quarters of those with 2-9 schools reporting these are local tier responsibilities. For schools of 20+ schools, this falls to 50% for behaviour, and just 37% for attendance.

Smaller trusts are also more likely to delegate safeguarding to local governance, at around two-thirds for 2-9 and 10-19 schools, compared to 40% in the largest trusts.

Planned changes to the governance structure

In this section, we explored potential changes to the governance structure in schools and trusts. What we see is that for the majority of schools and trusts, membership and local governance elements are less likely to be changed.

70% of trusts say they planned to make no changes to their member structure this year. A change to the number of members was the most likely change.

Trust board arrangements are also relatively stable, with two in five trusts reporting no planned changes. A third of trusts are considering changing the number of trustees, and a fifth are looking at adding link trustee roles, and updating processes and reporting arrangements.

At the local governance tier, changes to processes and reporting (29%) and changes to remits (18%) were the most reported changes for 2025. 18% of trusts are considering dissolving, combining, or splitting local committees. 56% of CEOs say they plan no structural changes.



Director of Governance at CST

Samira Sadeghi

This year's results suggest that trusts are continuing to make steady incremental changes aimed at developing and improving governance. This is very welcome. As the sector matures, it is perhaps unsurprising that approaches become more regularised and purpose-built.

The impact of artificial intelligence is being felt as keenly in governance as elsewhere with minute taking, reporting writing, and even policy drafting potentially aided by the emerging tech. And it is gratifying to see a good proportion of trusts taking the opportunity to change structures, processes, reporting and remits to eliminate 'fluffload' and streamline governance.

We have seen a further increase in the proportion of trusts with a dedicated head of governance or equivalent (or planning to create the role) and more of them are part of the trust's executive leadership team. This professionalism and independence is to be welcomed, particularly with a quarter still reporting that the chief executive leads on governance despite the Academy Trust Handbook requiring that trusts must appoint a governance professional, someone other than a trustee, principal or chief executive of the trust. Some things change too slowly.

With 15% of trusts considering merging with another trust and 59% planning to add more schools this year, having resilient and scalable governance in place is crucial to making sure that growth is sustainable, well-managed and driven by the right objectives.

Workforce Resilience and Wellbeing

Chapter Six

Workforce Resilience and Wellbeing

School life is about children, but for those children to flourish and leave school prepared for life, the adults who support them must also flourish.

Much has been reported in sector research in recent years about continued challenges to staff retention, recruitment, and wellbeing across England. In our more recent findings, however, we see a shift in these areas.

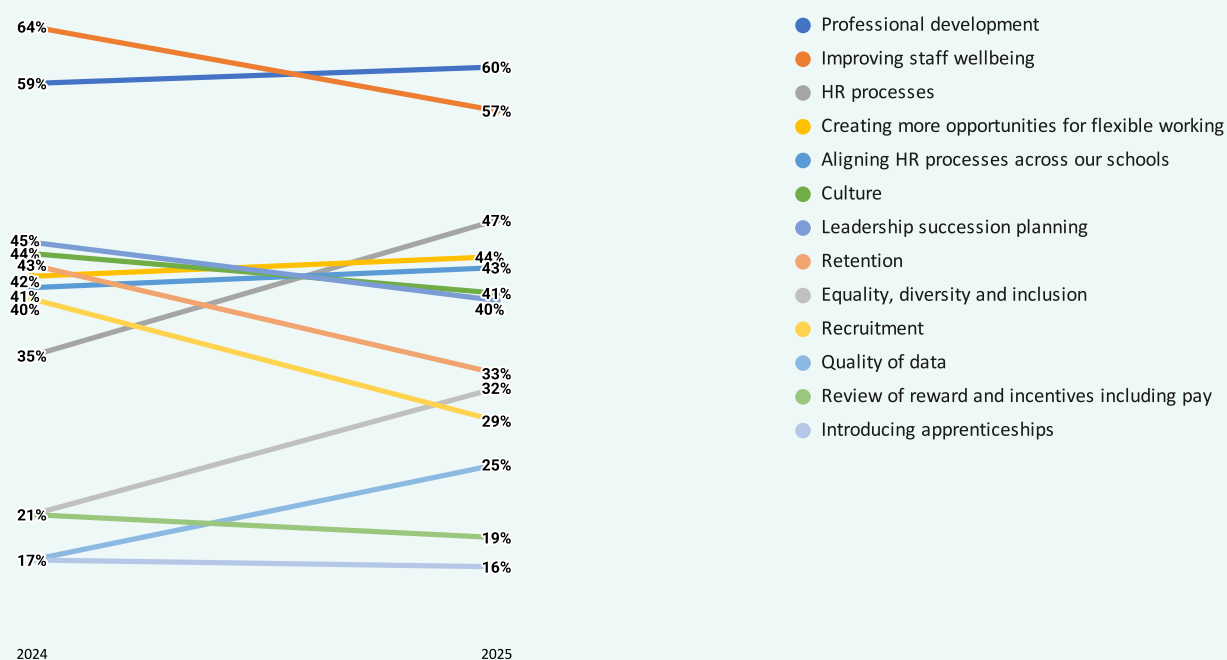
Priorities and challenges

Trusts say they are putting professional development front and centre of workforce resilience and wellbeing, with 60% naming it their top priority, a similar level to last year. Improving staff wellbeing generally also remains a clear overall priority.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding workforce resilience and wellbeing?



In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding workforce resilience and wellbeing?

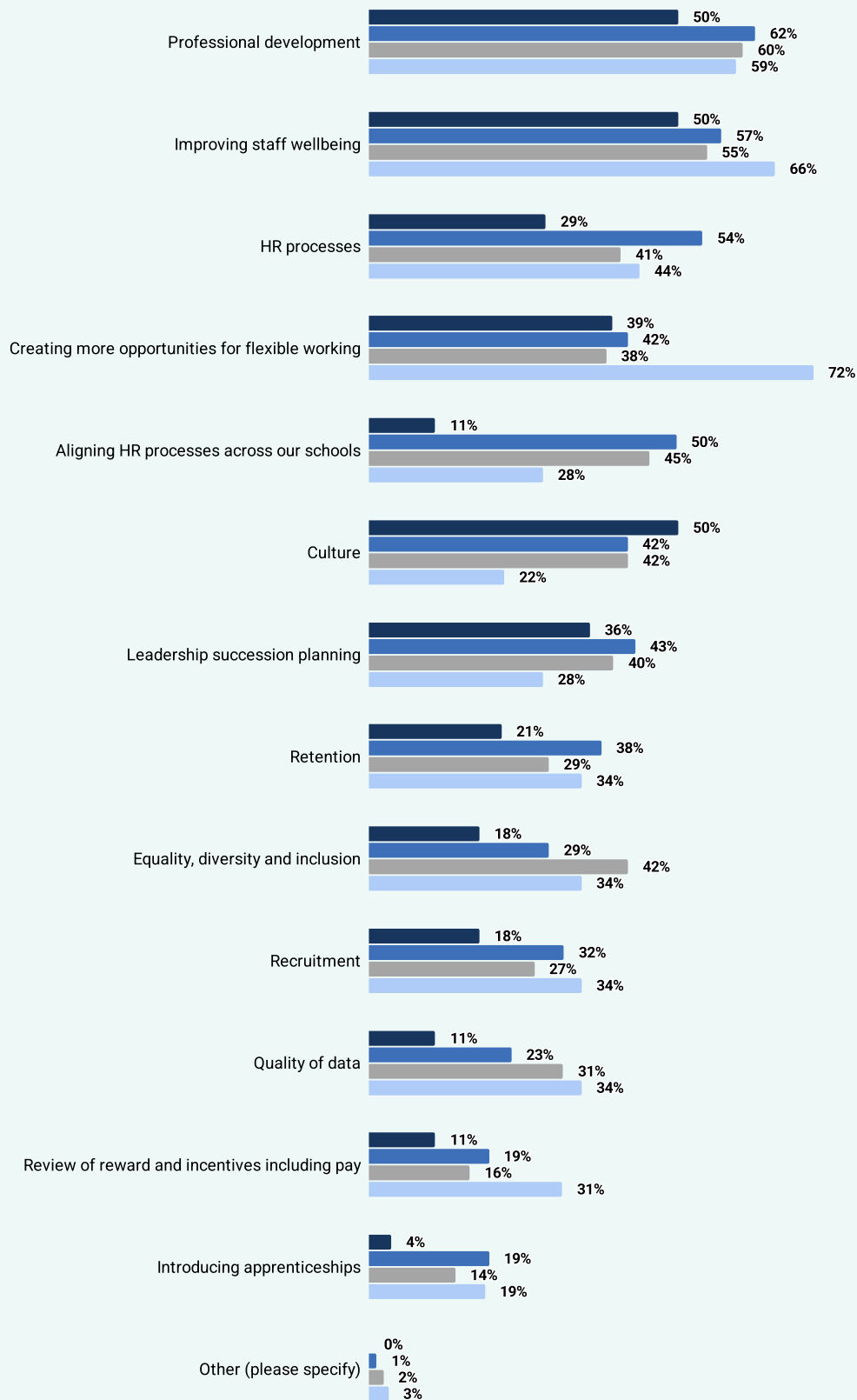


Compared to last year, there is a perhaps surprising drop in recruitment as a priority from 40% of trusts to 29%, given the sector and media attention on the topic. However, given our survey findings around potential reductions in staffing and falling rolls, it may be that new recruitment is less pressing.

There is a shift from last year from aligning HR processes between schools to improving them, perhaps reflecting the next step in that consolidation.

There are also increases in the prioritisation of equality, diversity and inclusion, and the quality of workforce data.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding workforce resilience and wellbeing?



■ 1 school ■ 2 to 9 schools ■ 10 to 19 schools ■ 20+ schools

Professional development and staff wellbeing were consistently reported as priorities irrespective of trust size.

There was a marked difference in replies from trusts with 20+ schools, with 72% of them reporting creating more opportunities for flexible working as a key focus area for 2025/6, compared to smaller-sized trusts which ranged from 38% to 42%. The largest trusts were also nearly three times as likely to be planning reviews of rewards and incentives than single school trusts.

Single school trusts were more than twice as likely to report a focus on culture compared to the largest trusts.

Most demanding priorities for Workforce Resilience and Wellbeing in 2025/26

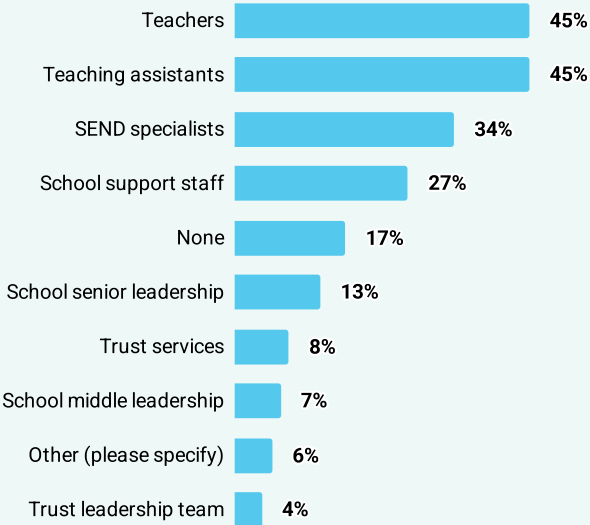


Creating more opportunities for flexible working is a priority for nearly half of CEOs, with (67%) of these CEOs highlighting it as a significant challenge.

Despite recruitment being raised as a priority area much less frequently than in previous years (29%), it remains a challenge, with two-thirds ranking it as one of the most demanding priorities.

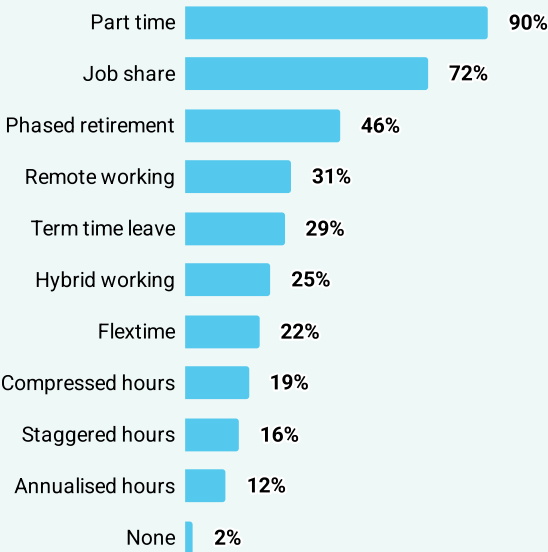
Improving staff wellbeing was the next highest, reported as a challenge by just under a third of trusts.

Which roles has your trust struggled to fill vacancies in this year?



The changing picture on recruitment is also reflected in our breakdown of recruitment by roles. 17% of trusts said they had not struggled to fill any roles in 2024, up from just 5% previously. The two most challenging roles were teachers and teaching assistants, for 45% of trusts, followed by SEND specialists (34%).

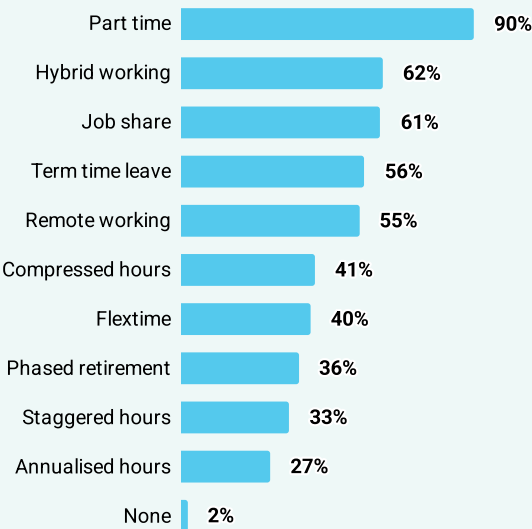
What flexible working options do you offer to classroom and associated staff?



Creating opportunities for flexible working was highlighted as a priority for nearly half of CEOs, and trusts have shifted how they operate significantly in recent years - but there is a clear difference in and out of the classroom.

For classroom and associated staff, the most commonly offered options were part-time roles (90%), job sharing (72%), and phased retirement (42%). Flextime, compressed hours, remote working and term-time leave were much less common across the sector for classroom-based staff.

What flexible working options do you offer to support and office staff?



Outside of the classroom, part-time working is also the most common type of flexible working, followed by hybrid working (62%), job share (61%), term-time leave (56%), and remote working (55%). Except for job shares, these were all reported as available to less than a third of classroom staff.



Director of Public Affairs and Policy at CST **Samuel Skeritt**

The big surprise in this year's survey results is the drop off in recruitment as a priority, after years of discussion of a recruitment crisis in schools. This should be good news, but behind the headlines this seems to be driven by budget pressures forcing reductions in staffing, and future proofing against falling rolls.

Where trusts do have vacancies, getting the right candidate is still tricky, with 45% of trusts reporting they have struggled to fill teacher and teacher assistant posts, and 34% struggling with SEND specialist roles.

Recruitment of non-classroom staff seems slightly easier, perhaps reflecting the differences in flexible working potential, with 62% of trusts offering hybrid working to support and office staff, versus just a quarter of trusts for classroom staff. There are similar contrasts for remote working and term time leave.

Whether the government's planned changes to pay and conditions arrangements for academy staff will help or hinder trusts in the future remains to be seen, with legislation still working its way through Parliament.

Public Benefit and Civic Duty

Chapter Seven

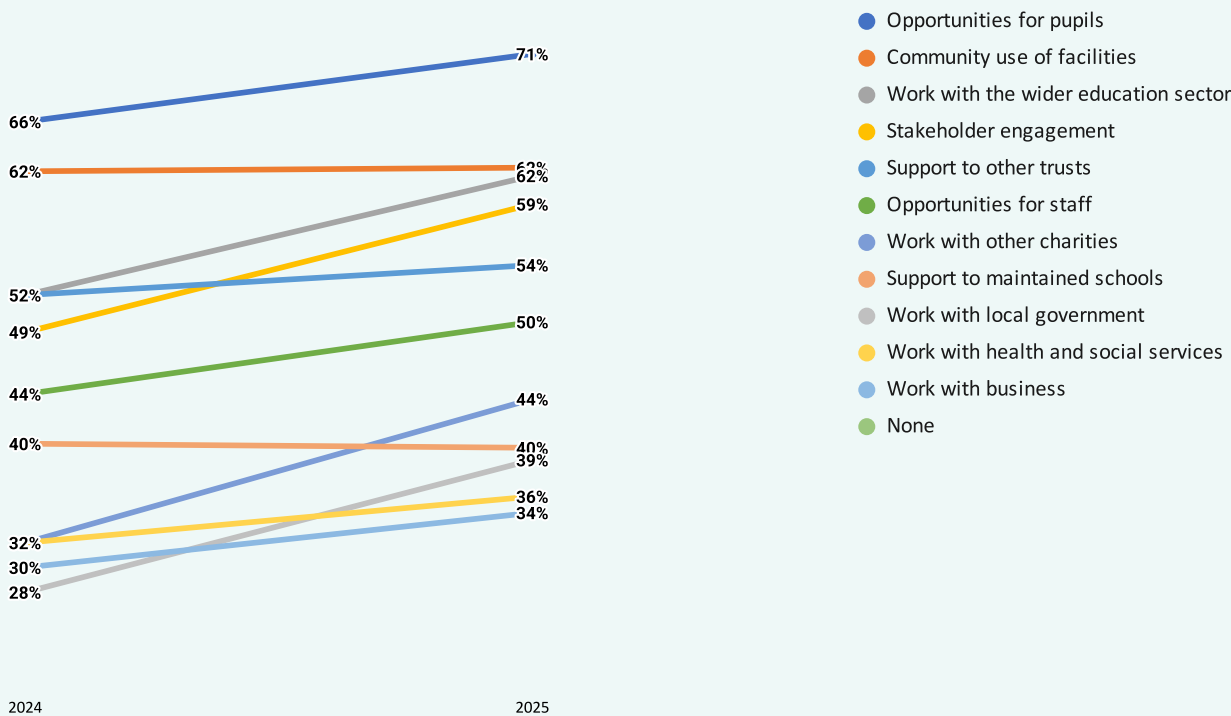
Public Benefit and Civic Duty

Schools have always played a part in their communities, but being part of trusts offers the chance to engage at greater scale and in more strategic ways than in the past. For trustees and CEOs, this brings both responsibility and opportunity. It demands outward-facing leadership that builds strong relationships with local partners to support the wider ecosystem around pupils and families. When these partnerships thrive, so do communities, creating a lasting, positive impact beyond the school gates.

In this chapter, we examine the perspectives of CEOs regarding public benefit and civic duty, and explore trust priorities and challenges in this area over the next academic year.

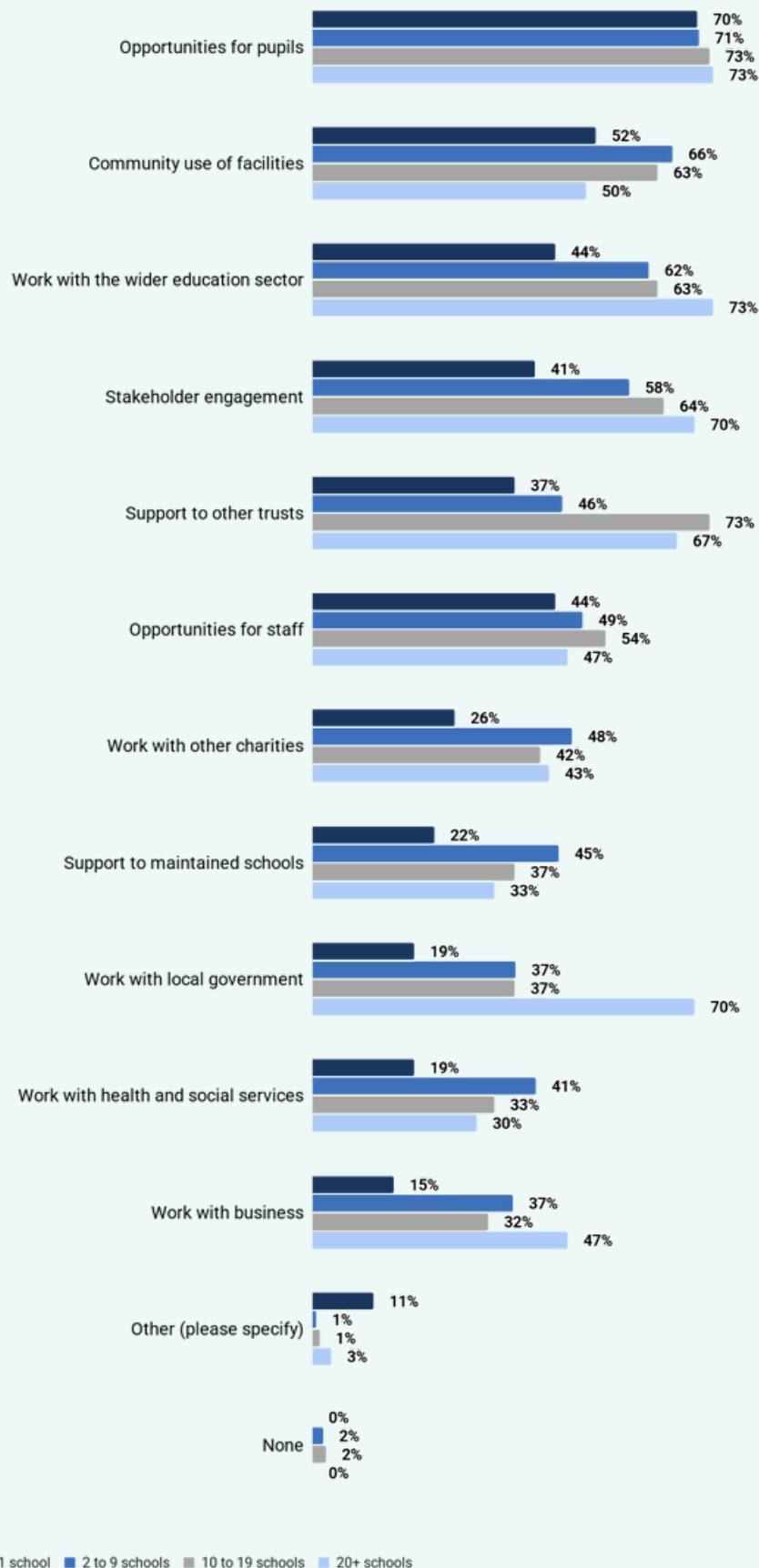
Priorities and challenges

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding public benefit and civic duty in the next academic year?



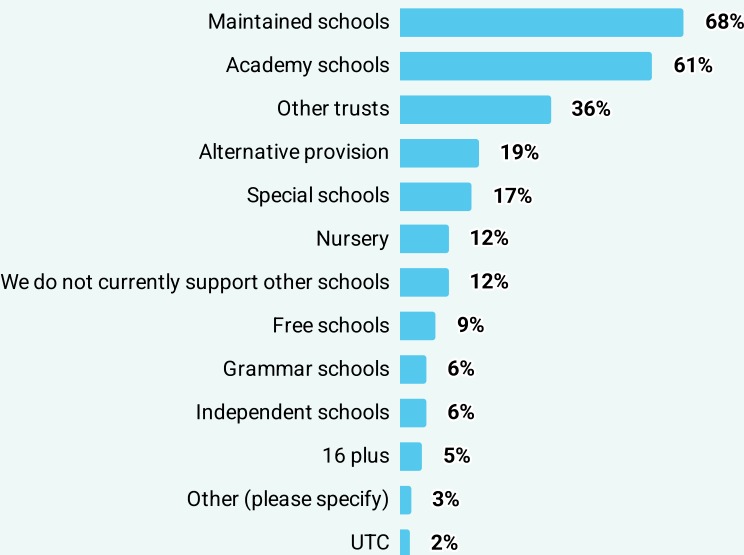
Compared to last year's survey, the top three priorities for public benefit have not changed: opportunities for pupils (71%), community use of facilities (62%), and work with the broader education sector (62%). The main difference is that all of the options are more likely to be an area of focus, suggesting even greater community engagement from trusts.

In which areas does your trust intend to focus its efforts regarding public benefit and civic duty in the next academic year?



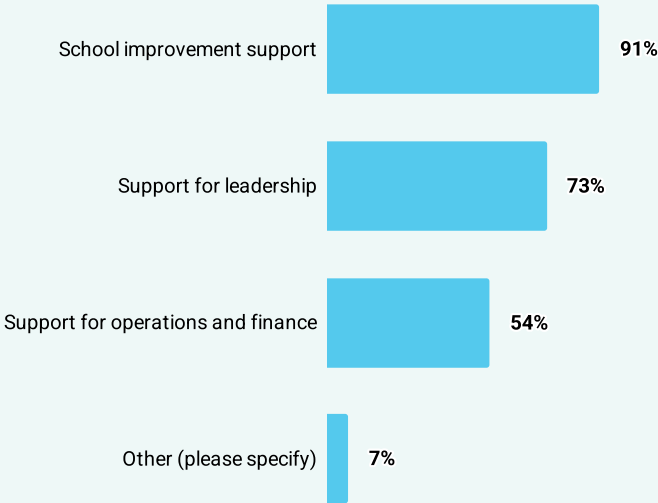
CEOs from larger trusts were more likely to report intending to focus on working with the broader education sector, stakeholder management, and collaboration with local government, compared to CEOs from smaller trusts. Opportunities for pupils were a similar priority for trusts of all sizes, indicating a sector-wide consensus that this is a fundamental priority for many schools and trusts for the next academic year.

What education organisations outside of your trust do you currently support?



Outside of their trusts, CEOs were most likely to report supporting maintained schools (68%), academy schools (61%) and other trusts (36%). This hasn't changed considerably since last year's findings.

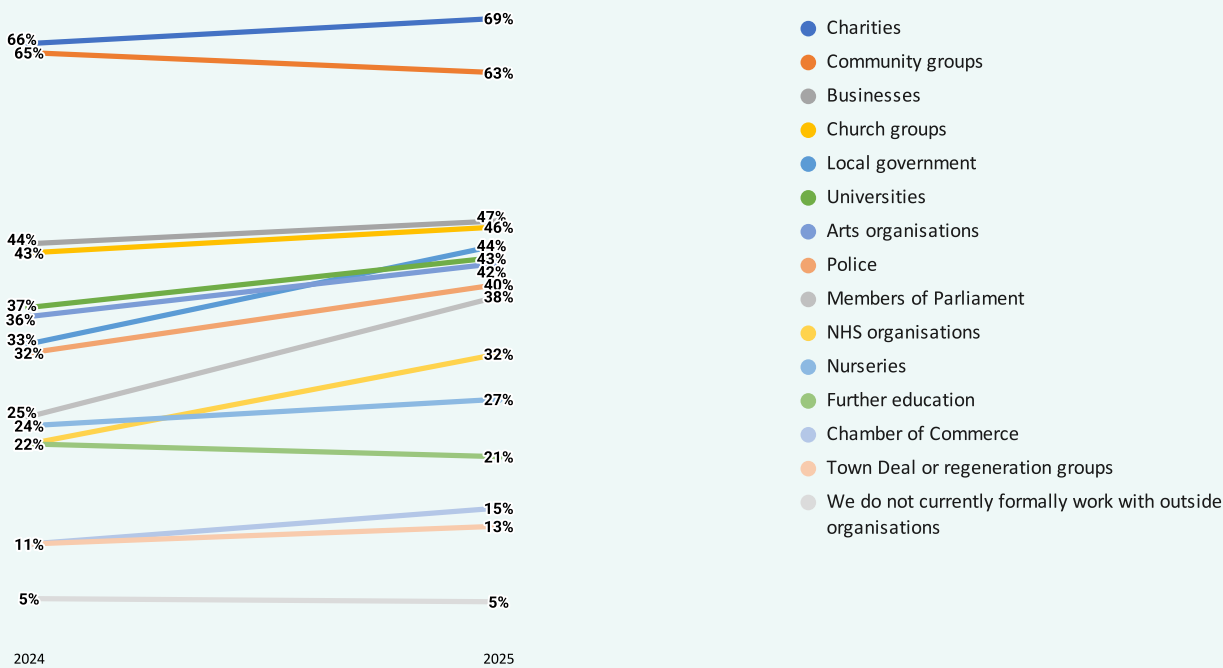
What types of support do you offer?



The most common type of education support offered externally is school improvement (91%), followed by leadership support. Larger trusts are more likely to offer support for operations and finance to other educational organisations.

When it comes to external organisations, charities (69%) were the most reported partners. This is followed by community groups (63%) and businesses (63%). There have been increases in work with several types of partners, including members of Parliament (2024: 25%, 2025: 38%), NHS organisations (2024: 22%, 2025: 32%), and local government (2024: 33%, 2025: 44%).

What types of external organisations do you work with for civic impact?



What types of work do you do with these external organisations?



The top five most popular types of collaboration with external organisations are: attending meetings (76%), joint activities and events (69%), intelligence sharing (64%), and use of trusts' facilities (59%), and sharing information with parents and pupils (58%).



Chief Executive at CST **Leora Cruddas CBE**

At a time of financial pressure it can be tempting to turn inward, but this year's survey has found a renewed vigour for trusts reaching out to their communities, with nine out of 11 areas increasing in activity, and the remaining two static.

Our schools are places that welcome, places where children and the adults that care for them should be encouraged to flourish. Our trusts are generous with their time and expertise, with more than two thirds working with maintained schools, and a similar proportion working with academies outside of their organisation.

Much of the policy discussion in education in recent months has been about cooperation and collaboration, crystallised in the government's Improving Education Together initiative. Trusts have long led the way on this, and continue to do so.

About Edurio

Edurio is a leading provider of staff, pupil and parent feedback surveys for schools and multi-academy trusts. Currently serving over 150 trusts and 2,500 schools, Edurio empowers education leaders with the insights needed to improve educational outcomes and strengthen stakeholder engagement.

Through its platform, Edurio enables trusts to benchmark performance on critical areas such as staff wellbeing, work satisfaction, parental engagement and pupil experience. By clarifying these often overlooked aspects of school life, Edurio helps leaders implement data-informed strategies that positively impact their communities.

Surveys can be run as frequently as needed and are backed by an advanced management and data visualisation platform, allowing trusts and schools to gather and act on key insights with minimal effort.

With the Strategic Feedback Survey Cycle, Edurio guides integrating feedback into the school improvement journey, helping schools and trusts to:

- ✓ Strengthen relationships between leadership, staff and parents
- ✓ Simplify data analysis and boost response rates
- ✓ Identify areas for professional development and growth
- ✓ Celebrate achievements and highlight best practices
- ✓ Improve staff wellbeing and pupil outcomes

As a leader in education research, Edurio leverages one of the largest datasets in England to produce national insights and analysis, shaping key discussions in education policy. These insights can be explored here: [Edurio Resources](#).

To learn more about how Edurio can support your trust or school, visit our homepage home.edurio.com or contact us at contact@edurio.com.

About the Confederation of School Trusts

The Confederation of School Trusts is the sector body and national membership organisation for school trusts in England, which now educate more than half of the nation's children.

CST helps shape the education policy agenda by speaking on their behalf, bringing together frontline education experts from across the country.

CST works to drive real, strategic change for education on the big issues that matter most.

Our unique focus on school trusts allows us to meet the needs of the sector through advice and guidance, events and conferences, professional development, and consultancy.



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of School Trusts**

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