

A photograph of two female students in school uniforms sitting at a desk in a classroom. The student on the left is gesturing with her hand while speaking, and the student on the right is listening attentively. Other students are visible in the background.

IMPACT REPORT

2023/24

Photo credit: Rushey Mead Academy

WHO WE ARE

Challenge Partners is a national partnership of schools and trusts who believe the best way to reduce educational inequality and enhance the life chances of children is through collaboration, challenge and leadership development. We work together to ensure every school community can benefit from the combined wisdom of the education system.

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In January 2023, our partner schools and trusts launched an ambitious five-year strategy to enhance and extend our partnership so that by 2027 we reach 500,000 pupils each year. This will help us intensify our impact and meet our collective aims.

AIM 1

Maximise the life chances of all pupils and accelerate the **PROGRESS** of the disadvantaged

AIM 2

SUPPORT leaders at all levels to develop and grow capacity for sustained improvement in schools and trusts

AIM 3

Extend **EXCELLENCE**, shaping a world-class system in which all pupils thrive

A partnership of enduring impact



Chris Davison,
Chair of Trustees

It is with great sadness that I am writing my final Chair's report after nine years of involvement with Challenge Partners. It is testament to what a remarkable place this is that the time has gone by without my noticing. I don't feel ready for a moment to leave it behind.

When I first joined the Trustees in 2016, there were around 320 schools in the partnership. Today we are pushing toward 600. The impact of our various programmes, refined and refocused during that time, has intensified from year to year. The level of engagement from practitioners has grown ever deeper to the benefit of the partnership as a whole. The drive and energy to innovate has remained undimmed.

And all this during a period that can hardly be described as benign and was very often unprecedented. The sector has long since abandoned hopes of balmy tailwinds but no one foresaw the shock of lockdowns or their still unfolding legacies. Compounded by unceasing budgetary pressures and political vagaries, these have been remarkable years by any standards.

But I am delighted that the Challenge Partners' model has survived these tests in good health and that we are making encouraging progress on the five-year strategy we launched last year. Our aim is to ensure that more than half a million children and young people will benefit from the collaboration, challenge and leadership development that lie at the heart of the charity's mission.

Among the highlights of this progress has been the launch this year of our SEND Developmental Peer Review. After a successful trial this year, we have 44 schools participating in 2024/25 and we hope that this will grow over time to provide valuable support in addressing one of the biggest challenges facing the system today. I believe this provides a great example of how Challenge Partners' is hardwired to respond to the needs of its members and keep pace with what schools want and need to support their improvement.

I look forward to watching – from the outside – as Challenge Partners continues to deliver outstanding support to the system over the years ahead. I have every confidence that our enduring relevance will underpin yet further growth and impact to our partners for many years to come.

COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP: Harnessing wisdom from our partnership to influence new government policy



Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE, CEO

The sunset of the 2023/24 partnership year heralded the dawn of a new government, with Labour securing victory in the 4 July 2024 General Election. It marked an important moment to exercise Challenge Partners’ value of courageous leadership - our duty to speak up and work for the benefit of all pupils.

From summer 2023, our school and trust leaders worked together to generate ‘Big Ideas’ to lead the system to excellence and equity. The four ideas they generated, refined and exemplified, shaped our dialogue with politicians and policymakers in the run-up to the election.

We were pleased to see the new government prioritise issues preoccupying our schools and trusts, including tackling child poverty, recruiting more teachers, and enhancing mental health support for pupils.

Pledges in Labour’s manifesto align closely with our mission and expertise, including securing high and rising standards, introducing new Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence teams, and enhancing SEND provision in mainstream settings. As the DfE works through how to realise these commitments, we have been proactive in sharing wisdom from our impactful approaches to upwards convergence, local collaboration and school-to-school support, and our pioneering SEND Developmental Peer Review programme.

September 2024 saw the announcement of a flurry of immediate and planned changes to inspection. We were gratified to see many well-established features of our flagship Quality Assurance Reviews (QARs) being replicated. For example, Ofsted’s sharpening focus on inclusion echoes the change made to our QAR framework in 2019 to introduce a new section on the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or with SEND.

HM Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver’s desire to ensure inspections feel more ‘done with, not done to’ similarly mirrors our QA Review ethos. We were pleased when he and a Senior HMI joined us in November 2024 to observe a QAR and experience our robust and collaborative approach for themselves. As Ofsted and the government look ahead to trust inspections, we offer our established Trust Peer Review as a template.

We will continue to share our expertise and amplify the voices of the courageous leaders in our partnership in service of reducing educational disadvantage and raising pupil prospects.

A record-breaking year of innovation, collaboration, and impact



**Laura Lewis-Williams,
Managing Director**

I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved as a partnership this year. Innovation is one of our core values, and we truly embodied it in 2023/24.

We revolutionised our QAR systems and processes – and yes, we confidently use the word revolutionised! This new automated approach allowed school and trust leaders to choose the reviews they wanted to join across the country, resulting in over 80% of review teams being full and a record-breaking 425 reviews delivered.

Our hubs also showcased innovation and courageous leadership, organically developing hub-to-hub collaborations, further leveraging expertise sharing across regions. For example, Aylesbury Vale, Herts and Bucks, and Thames Valley hubs started working with one another across hub-led initiatives and invited schools and trusts from other hubs to their conferences. Ash Field’s special school-only hub collaborated with the Aspire hub to increase expertise-sharing between special and mainstream school leaders.

Hubs have also been driving best practice days, translating our national initiatives into impactful local action. For instance, the East London hub held events to showcase Areas of Excellence in their schools, demonstrating the power of localised knowledge-sharing. This is just a snapshot of the fantastic work happening across all of our hubs.

Our school improvement programmes also went from strength to strength. There was strong engagement in our Growing the Top and Extending Leading Practice programmes, with record attendance at visit days and cohort events. Our Trust Leaders’ Network received excellent feedback, particularly for trust visits, which fostered meaningful collaboration across trusts. Another highlight was the Jubilee Networks, with participants rating meeting facilitation an impressive 4.9 out of 5.

And we continued to innovate our offering with the launch of the Middle Leader Quality Assurance Review (MLQAR), delivered by eight hubs, as well as the SEND Developmental Peer Review.

These achievements are a testament to the partnership’s unwavering commitment to excellence, collaboration, and the belief that together, we can achieve even more.

THE CHILDREN CANNOT WAIT: Schools in Challenge Partners are acting now



Dame Sue John,
Executive Director

Despite the arrival of the new government, it is unlikely that there will be a plethora of centrally funded educational strategies to address the complex issues facing the sector. Among these is the widening gap in outcomes and regional variations which affect the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in our society, many of whom feel they are being left behind.

There is a growing recognition that the capacity for school improvement lies within the sector. Schools and trusts in Challenge Partners have over many years been able to reconcile their own interests with that of the wider system. Reciprocity and experiential learning are at the heart of all our national school improvement programmes and the hub-led offer. It is probably understated that all our facilitated programmes provide outstanding leadership opportunities, especially for middle and senior leaders.

One of the most pressing issues we are dealing with is an attendance crisis that sees too many children not just absent, but persistently absent. Through our partnership with ImpactEd Group (IEG), Challenge Partners schools have been involved in a research project examining causes and potential solutions to poor attendance.

Challenge Partners schools and trusts are well represented on the Research Commission on Engagement and Lead Indicators, also conceived and funded by IEG. I am pleased to be chairing the commission, with our MD Laura Lewis-Williams serving as a convening commissioner. This will be the first national cohort study on student engagement, with data shared in a way that is actionable as we strive to improve attendance and establish the conditions for ALL students to be engaged in their learning. Challenge Partners schools involved in this research will be keen to share their insights across our network at both a local and national level.

Another issue is often referred to as the 'SEND crisis', the impact of which is compounded by intersectionality with poverty. It will take time and investment to move

towards a greater degree of equity and social justice, with opportunities for all pupils to succeed, and the new Secretary of State has asked for patience as the DfE works this through. It will be no easy task, given that since 2015 the number of young people with Education, Health and Care Plans has doubled, and there are insufficient special school places.

However, to paraphrase the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, the children cannot wait, their name is now.

In response to some of these challenges and the moral imperative to act now, in 2023/24 Challenge Partners piloted an innovative SEND Developmental Peer Review blending digital evaluation and action planning tools with robust peer collaboration and challenge. An essential aspect of the programme involves senior leaders and SENCOs working together.

We can report that schools haven't been waiting for government to solve their challenges. They have focused on developing innovative practice, introducing Additional Resource Provision, forging links with the special school sector, training staff, creatively adapting the timetable and strengthening links with parents.

Our evaluation of the SEND programme showed that 97% of school leaders had taken something away from the review days which will support their school to improve SEND provision. Following this successful pilot we have refined elements of the programme, and a new cohort has been recruited for the 2024/25 academic year, creating more capacity across the system. We intend to share the findings from this programme across our partnership and more widely across the sector.



PARTNERSHIP REACH

The Challenge Partners Network of Excellence continues to grow year-on-year, achieving our most significant reach to date in 2023/24. We are drawing closer to our goal of reaching 500,000 pupils each year by 2027.

Our partnership in 2023/24

Number of pupils

384,977

Total schools and breakdown by partnership level

575 total

529 FULL PARTNERS

45 NETWORK PARTNERS

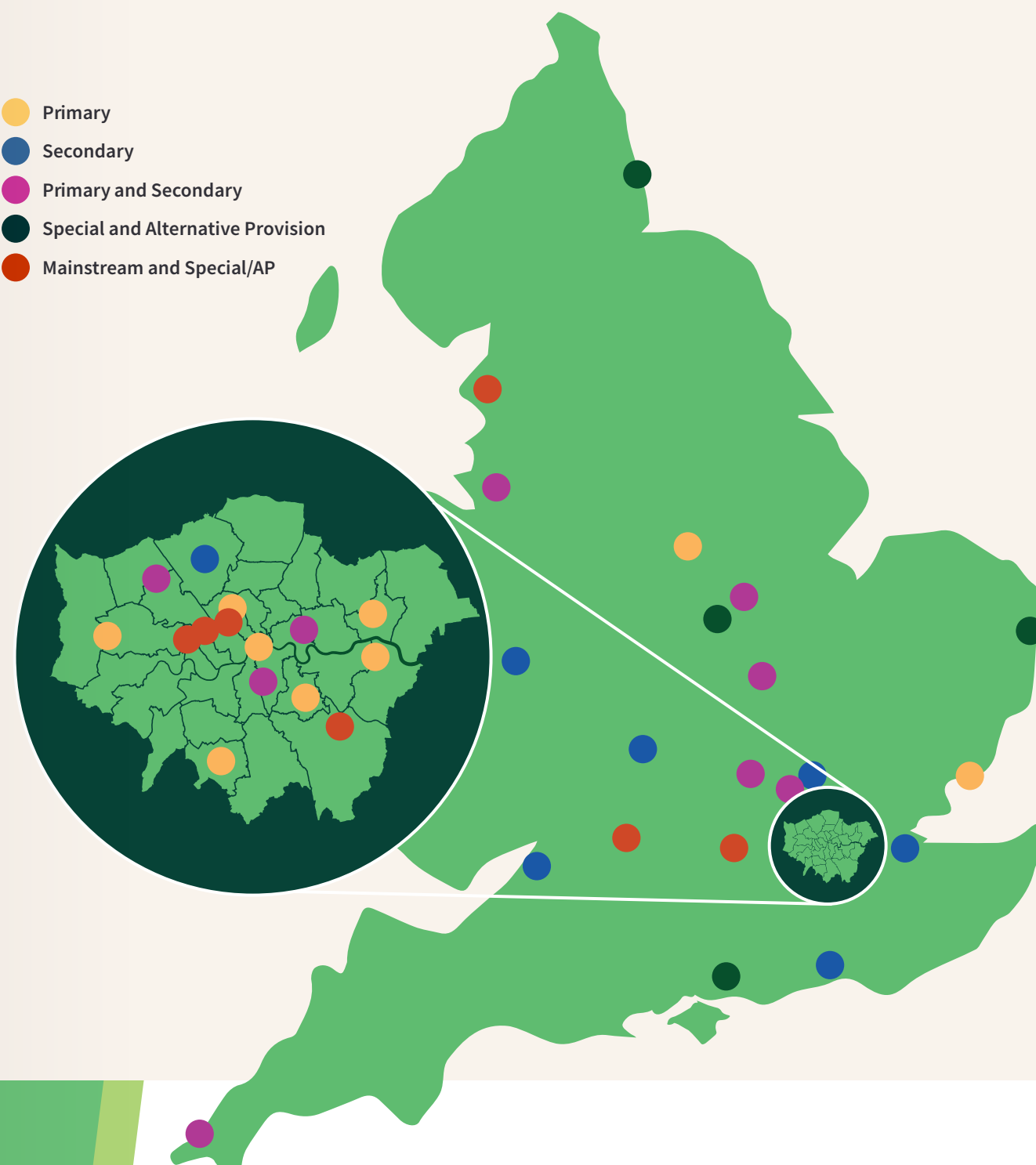
1 GATEWAY TO PARTNERSHIP

Number of trusts

150

Our partnership hubs and schools 2023–24

- Primary
- Secondary
- Primary and Secondary
- Special and Alternative Provision
- Mainstream and Special/AP



Comparing our partnership and the sector

Challenge Partners schools serve a higher and rising proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals when compared to all schools nationally			
	Challenge Partners schools		All schools in England
Free School Meals population (average)	31%	(22/23: 28%)	24% (22/23: 24%)

Our partnership includes a higher proportion of special and secondary schools ¹		
	Challenge Partners schools	All state schools in England
Primary	49%	78%
Secondary	28%	16%
Special	22%	6%

Primary (Key Stage 2) results²

The proportion of 11 year olds meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in our schools is in line with the national average			
Challenge Partners average	National average	Difference	
62%	61%	1%	(22/23: 2%)

The proportion of disadvantaged 11 year olds meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths is 3% higher in our schools			
Challenge Partners average	National average	Difference	
49%	46%	3%	

¹ Excluding nurseries, middle, and 16 plus, source: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk>

² All figures referring to state-funded mainstream schools in England. KS2 data using provisional data released December 2024

Secondary (Key Stage 4) results³

Students in our secondary schools attain Key Stage 4 results in line with the national average			
Attainment 8 - Challenge Partners average	Attainment 8 - national average		
47%	46%	(22/23: 48%)	(22/23: 46%)

Disadvantaged students in our secondary schools attain better than their peers nationally		
Challenge Partners average Attainment 8 score for disadvantaged pupils	National average Attainment 8 score for disadvantaged pupils	Difference
38%	35%	3%

More young people in our secondary schools make progress above the national average		
Progress 8 - Challenge Partners average	Progress 8 - national average	
0.05	-0.19	(22/23: 0.10) (22/23: -0.02)

Disadvantaged students in our secondary schools make better progress than their peers nationally		
Challenge Partners average Progress 8 score for disadvantaged students	National average Progress 8 score for disadvantaged students	Difference
-0.45	-0.55	0.10

28% of Challenge Partners secondary schools achieved 'well above average' progress (P8>0.5). **This means that in 28% of our schools pupils achieved over half a grade higher in each qualification on average, compared to similar pupils across the country.**

Quality Assurance Reviews

Areas of Excellence

In 2023/24, there were 102 new Areas of Excellence accredited, further increasing the excellent practice accessible to schools across the partnership.

Category	Number of schools
Assessment	3
Curriculum	20
Equity and Inclusion	23
Leadership and Ethos	16
Outcomes for pupils	10
Pupil Learning	5
Teaching	5
Subjects	20

Peer Evaluation Estimates

The proportion of schools electing not to have an overall Peer Evaluation Estimate as part of their Quality Assurance Review has increased substantially. Schools that chose to have an Estimate improved or sustained their performance.

All schools evaluated as Effective in 22/23 either improved or sustained their performance in 23/24

Of 67 schools who received an Effective estimate in 22/23 and chose to include estimates as part of their 23/24 QAR:

- 16% improved to be evaluated as Leading; and
- 84% sustained their Effective estimate.

All schools evaluated as Leading in 22/23 sustained their performance in 23/24

Of 32 schools who received a Leading estimate in 22/23 and chose to include estimates as part of their 23/24 QAR, 100% maintained their leading estimate from 22/23.

These figures indicate continuation of an historic trend whereby Challenge Partners schools have been far more likely than other schools to show improvements in their effectiveness by retaining Ofsted outstanding judgements or improving their performance to good or outstanding. We have not presented an analysis of Ofsted performance in this report because of the move away from one-word judgements and their removal from public data sources.

Estimate	Percentage of schools	
Leading	21%	(22/23: 23%)
Effective	33%	(22/23: 47%)
Not Yet Effective	2%	(22/23: 2%)
Chose not to have an estimate	43%	(22/23: 27%)

³ All figures referring to state-funded mainstream schools in England. KS4 data using provisional data released December 2024

PROGRAMMES & NETWORKS

Knowledge Exchange

Knowledge exchange is embedded into the design of every Challenge Partners' programme, network and event.

This way effective practice is transferred between schools and trusts, both locally and nationally, to ensure every leader, teacher and pupil can benefit from the combined wisdom of the system.

We identify current and emerging leading practice, and carefully facilitate forums, thereby establishing the moral and social capital for teachers and leaders to exchange lessons from their successes and jointly address sector challenges.

Areas of Excellence are accredited by peer and Lead Reviewers during Quality Assurance Reviews and programme visits. Once accredited, schools and trusts are expected and enabled to share their expertise with their peers.

The skill of the facilitators we recruit, train and quality assure is also crucial to the success of knowledge exchange, challenge and leadership development at all touch points. This is what differentiates Challenge Partners and makes collaboration in our partnership so impactful for our schools and trusts.

Keynote speakers for in-person events come from within and outside the education sector, and sometimes from beyond the UK. They bring research, experience and business best practice to leaders who may not otherwise access this inspiration and knowledge.

What happened in 2023/24?

In September 2023, we ran our highly rated facilitation training for selected school and trust leaders. From those who successfully completed training, 36 joined programmes as practitioner facilitators:

13

SEND Developmental Peer Review

10

Growing the Top

6

Extending Leading Practice

5

Jubilee Networks

2

Trust Leaders Network

Now in its fourth year, our bespoke training provides excellent preparation for those facilitating collaboration so that best practice is shared throughout our programmes and networks. It also provides powerful CPD, building leadership capacity across the system. Participants rated the training 4.9/5 overall.

“

The whole session gave great structure and understanding of what I have taken on. I am now very excited.

Marianne Enchill-Balogun,
Headteacher, Capel Manor Primary,
London & Jubilee Networks facilitator

All training participants strongly agreed that they would use what they had learned in their own school/trust context.

“

Absolutely inspired with ideas to take back to my own setting and beyond.

Sarah Goosani, Principal, Leigh Academy Milestone,
Kent & SEND Lead Facilitator

Programme and network participants rated the expert facilitation received highly:

4.8/5 SEND Developmental Peer Review

4.6/5 Growing the Top programme

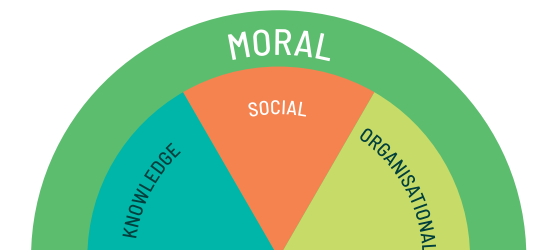
4.6/5 Extending Leading Practice programme

4.8/5 Jubilee Networks

AIM 2



Our approach ensures that Four Capitals of effective knowledge exchange are always present:



MORAL CAPITAL

We create the moral climate for knowledge sharing based on an explicitly articulated, shared moral purpose.

KNOWLEDGE CAPITAL

We are systematic in identifying excellent practice and those that have the knowledge of leading practice to share. We never recycle mediocrity.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

We include activities that build relationships of trust at each event and over time so that teachers and leaders are confident to share their knowledge effectively.

ORGANISATIONAL CAPITAL

We invest in the organisational systems to enable knowledge exchange to take place and for agreed actions to be followed through. By taking care of this for leaders and teachers we enable them to focus on purposeful knowledge exchange.

The Network of Excellence



The Network of Excellence gives our partner schools and trusts access to a rich network of knowledge, and opportunities to connect with colleagues across the country to share best practice and collaborate on shared challenges. This unique national oversight is enhanced by access to a programme of expert speakers from the education sector and beyond, addressing topical and enduring themes.

National Network Conferences

National Network Conferences bring all partners within the Network of Excellence together online. School leaders gain inspiration from keynote speakers, collaborate and learn from each other in breakout groups, and provide input on live issues across the partnership and sector.

What happened in 2023/24?

We held three National Network Conferences, which received an average overall satisfaction rating of 4.6/5. Each conference brought in thought-provoking speakers focused on our theme of human flourishing for all. We covered diverse topics ranging from *Creating a high-performance culture in education* with Matthew Syed,

British Journalist and Author, to *Beyond the Election: The Policy Outlook* with Sam Freedman, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government. We also heard from Claire Cookson, CEO, DFN Project Search, about their supported internship programme transforming the lives of young adults with a learning disability or autism or both, and our partner school Ellesmere College about engaging with this programme, a topic closely aligned with our mission to support the most disadvantaged pupils.

Practitioner conversations on *Leading the system to excellence* were facilitated by our CEO, Dr Kate Chhatwal. These continued the sector themes co-created at our Trust Leaders conference in June 2023, including *A system with children at its heart* and *A new social contract between the profession, politicians and the public*, culminating in a final piece *Courageous leadership: Challenge Partners' messages for the new government*.



Ranging from curriculum design to resources, leadership and culture changes, our school has benefited on multiple fronts from the shared wisdom of the network, inspirational speakers and great leadership of the organisation.

David Coaché, CEO,
Bengeworth Trust, Worcestershire

90% of those who evaluated the National Network Conference saw or learned something they would like to share with senior leaders or others in their school



73% have implemented or changed something in their school to support their ongoing school improvement work after attending a National Network Conference



Sharing Leading Practice

We share strong practice in a number of ways, including helping school staff find the excellence they need through our online School Support Directory (exclusively for partners), and carousels of practice at many of our events. Challenge Partners' schools also present their Areas of Excellence in our dedicated Sharing Leading Practice (SLP) sessions, where they candidly share their approach, difficulties and key decision points so other practitioners can understand how to replicate or adapt the practice in their own schools.

Participants can engage and ask questions, take away resources, and follow up later to collaborate in depth.

What happened in 2023/24?

We delivered five SLP events, both in-person and virtual, with an average satisfaction rating of 96%. Leaders from all phases engaged with specific excellent practice from other schools in the partnership.

- St Clement Danes ran theirs on *Becoming an Extensive Processing Instruction teacher* (secondary)
- Woodfield School discussed *Preparation for adulthood: Career and vocational education* (special)
- Kentish Town Primary School shared expertise on *Including autistic children in the mainstream* (primary)
- The Royal Grammar School looked at *Empowering careers excellence: Leveraging student careers leaders and alumni to elevate your careers programme* (secondary)
- Portland Academy focused on *An outstanding preparation for adulthood* (special)



Very well delivered. Lots of great ideas. Loved the passion and enthusiasm from the trainers.

Baljit Santa, SENDCO,
Cranford Primary School, London

PARTNER STORY

Rushey Mead Academy

A founding member of Challenge Partners, Rushey Mead has been in the partnership for 13 years and was one of the original six schools of East Midlands South Hub. Their school improvement journey highlights how being in the partnership over multiple years is an invaluable source of support and challenge to ensure that all students, particularly those facing additional challenges, receive the best possible education.

Rushey Mead Academy is a large mixed secondary school, located on the outskirts of Leicester in an area with above average deprivation. It has a well above average proportion of students with English as a second language.

This high performing school has achieved an Ofsted rating of Outstanding three times. In 2022, Ofsted reported: “Pupils are proud to attend this exceptional school. They know that staff ‘go above and beyond’ to provide an outstanding education for them.” The academy also featured in Ofsted’s publication *Twelve outstanding secondary schools – excelling against the odds* and was a three-time winner of the International School award.

Rushey Mead has had eight Areas of Excellence identified and peer accredited during its annual QARs, most recently *Excellence in the science curriculum, teaching and learning and student outcomes (2024)* and *Pupil Premium - provision and outcomes for disadvantaged students (2023)*. Consistent with Challenge Partners’ expectation that schools share their excellence to benefit more pupils across the partnership, Rushey Mead leaders shared strength in their maths curriculum with 38 national network peers at a 2022 SLP event.



Photo credit: Rushey Mead Academy

Their 2024 QAR recognised how the academy has successfully implemented improvements in areas identified in the previous year’s report. Leaders were commended for an extensive response to a point made around extracurricular activities for all. Tutors now have specific time to engage with pupils who may be vulnerable or reluctant to take part in extracurricular provision. Leaders also addressed a suggestion to work with other schools to identify suitable alternative provisions to support students with the highest needs, partially through a new role of family support worker. This role includes welfare checks on vulnerable absent students, hardship fund applications for families, and supporting young carers. Importantly, as a result some of these students have already improved their attendance and behaviour.

Rushey Mead has been in the vanguard of CP innovations, contributing over the years to the development of programmes to support disadvantaged pupils and those with English as an additional language. They participated in a pilot and provided feedback to inform our Growing the Top programme, which supports outstanding schools to push the boundaries of exceptional performance.

Rushey Mead has been instrumental in increasing collaboration in its local area, as it has supported the growth of the East Midlands South hub which is now made up of 33 schools, serving almost 24,000 pupils across Leicester, Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Nottingham.

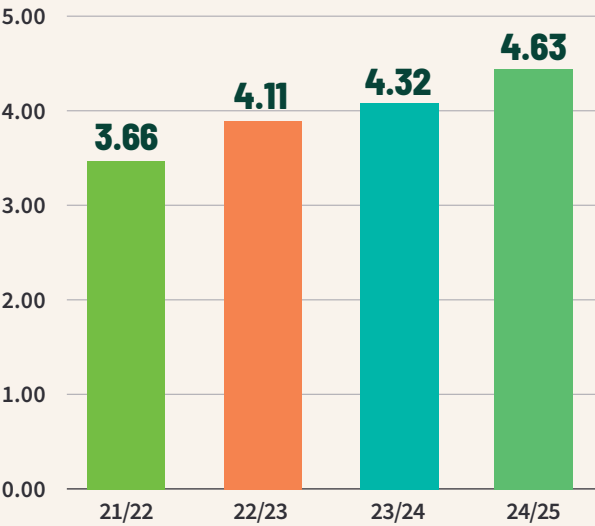
I truly believe that our ongoing partnership with Challenge Partners has been invaluable. The collaborative approach and sharing of expertise continue to enhance our ability to support our diverse student population and ensure that all students, particularly those facing additional challenges, receive the best possible education.

Vicky Barwell, Principal, Rushey Mead Academy

“ Having been engaged for CP for a number of years, I feel that our school has gained enormously. Many layers of the senior leadership team have benefited by being exposed to a range of practice. They also benefit by being part of the wider system. It motivates them. I genuinely feel that it supports teacher retention.

Ann Marie Mulkerins, CEO, The Compton

Average number of years a school is with Challenge Partners



Local Hub collaboration

Local collaboration is an essential element of the work Challenge Partners' schools and trusts do together to improve outcomes. Schools in our Network of Excellence join forces in local hubs to collaborate on collectively agreed school improvement and leadership development initiatives.

In 2023/24, our 42 Local Hubs were spread across the length and breadth of the country, each uniquely reflecting their local educational landscape. Some drew schools from a single phase or sector, like our North East Special Hub. Others, like our Wootton Bassett and Thames Valley hubs, combined primary, secondary, special schools and/or alternative provisions. Some hubs were formed of schools from a single trust, while most included schools from different trusts and local authority maintained schools. What's key is that each works with the grain of local dynamics and needs.

Challenge Partners' hubs are led by locally appointed Senior Partners and Hub Managers, drawn from strong schools or trusts. This ensures our hubs have excellence to share and don't recycle mediocrity. Each hub collectively agrees on an annual Hub Action Plan to address their local priorities. This is funded by a portion of school subscription fees, returned to the hub as 'Hub Funding'.



What happened in 2023/24?

Schools in each hub jointly decided how to allocate their funding, and used it for a wide range of school improvement and professional development activities. Aylesbury Vale Hub hosted a *Secondary School Ready* conference, opening it out to neighbouring hubs. School staff involved in the transition from primary to secondary got the chance to collaborate, sharing ideas and best practice to support students in this area.

Eight hubs used their funding to access training and materials to deliver the newly developed Middle Leadership Quality Assurance Review (MLQAR), helping middle leaders develop their subject or phase provision and leadership.

We continued to support hubs through our Hub Manager Network, ensuring effective collaboration and the sharing of best practice. Hub Managers accessed hub-specific SLP carousels during an in-person session at our summer System Leaders' Conference.

Our established Hub Buddy scheme saw seven new hub managers matched with mentors to support their induction and development into the role. Alongside this, we were delighted to welcome another Accredited Hub Manager, Simon Renshaw of East Midlands South Hub.

PARTNER STORY



Thames Valley Hub

Rob Buck, and Andy Johnson, Hub Manager and Senior Partner of the Thames Valley Hub, on how their inclusion conference helped hub schools enhance their provision for vulnerable pupils

"We started off with 13 schools and have gradually grown now to 22 as of this academic year, including Infant, First, Primary, Secondary, Special and AP. We are based in the Thames Valley corridor, with most of the schools in Berkshire and one in Oxfordshire. We also work with a MAT in Southampton so we are drawing on that outward looking approach, through collaborative work.

One of our fortes and a highlight of the academic year is our hub conference. We trialled the idea last year and put together an inclusion conference including keynotes, practical workshops and networking opportunities for schools to come together for a day to share best practice across the network. Two of our hub colleagues are currently serving Ofsted inspectors. We used their expertise to kickstart the academic year in terms of what is the current Ofsted thinking behind pupil premium and SEND, before moving onto the inclusion conference. We wanted to make it a more holistic offer and provide subscriptions for each school to use the EvaluateMySchool platform. The feedback we received at the end of the academic year was positive, and that the hub schools wanted a similar conference for this academic year. As a result we looked at current national themes, but more importantly where are the areas within education that schools in our hub would like more support. We decided that it would be around behaviour and attendance."



PARTNER STORY

Aspire Hub

Harnessing the power of hub-to-hub collaboration to improve SEND provision in the North West

Aspire Hub stretches across the North West and with 63 schools it is our largest hub. The hub is co-led by Wade Deacon Trust and Forward as One C of E Multi-Academy Trust. The Aspire vision of “looking up, out and beyond” is underpinned by three core values - Culture, Connectedness and Collaboration. This embodies Challenge Partners’ mission and values, but is bespoke to the needs of the hub and the aspirations of its schools.

Improving SEND provision and outcomes has been a recent priority for the hub, and in 2023/24 Aspire continued their partnership with Ash Field hub - a hub of 8 special schools in Leicester - which began in 2022/23. The aim of their collaboration was to build confidence amongst Aspire SENDCos through sharing Ash Field’s specialist expertise through webinars and training on-line.

During 2024/25, this project will provide Aspire SENDCos the chance to visit specialist settings in Leicester, where they are able to explore the best environments, evidence-based strategies and practices for pupils with different SEND needs, and how to apply them in their own contexts. The expert knowledge gained on visits will be impactful in enabling Aspire SENDCos to develop their schools’ capacity to meet increasing SEND demands and deepen the links between the two hubs.



It is a very active, well-managed and well-led hub with many activities designed to allow for collaboration, development activities to support all teachers, and a good level of challenge from the leader.

Kate Moyse, Headteacher,
Coston Primary School, part of Compass Hub



[A benefit of the Hub is] working with schools outside of the trust. Hub Funding subsidises programmes for hub schools like the Brilliant Club and the Leadership Residency Programme and Middle Leaders Quality Assurance Review programmes.

Toby Sutherland, Senior Partner
of Herts and Bucks Hub



Quality Assurance Review

The Quality Assurance Review (QAR) programme is a rigorous three-day peer evaluation that assesses teaching and learning, curriculum and outcomes, as well as leadership at all levels. It places a strong emphasis on how schools are supporting their most disadvantaged learners and those with additional needs.

Through the process, schools and visiting reviewers work collaboratively to identify areas of strength for celebration and areas where improvements can be made. Schools participating in the programme host an annual review and reciprocate by sending their headteachers and senior leaders to review other schools within the partnership, offering continuous professional development for everyone involved.

What happened in 2023/24?

It was another record-breaking year for our flagship programme, with 425 reviews taking place, up from 413 in 2022/23. We achieved our highest-ever satisfaction ratings for both host schools and reviewers.

An impressive 95% of host schools and over 98% of reviewers reported they were satisfied or highly satisfied with their experience.

To tackle the challenge of incomplete review teams, we introduced our Reviewer Selection Tool, allowing school leaders to choose which reviews they wanted to take part in. Reviewers could select dates and schools that suited their availability and CPD needs, ensuring greater commitment and reducing reviewer drop-outs. We significantly expanded our reviewer pool by delivering 32 training sessions preparing a further 807 headteachers and senior leaders for peer reviewer roles.

The headlines:

96.9% of schools said participating in the QAR had left their school in a better place



95% of reviewers brought an idea back to their own schools to discuss as a result of taking part in a QAR in the past year



80% of school leaders agreed that taking part in the QAR allowed them to identify areas for development in their school that they were not necessarily able to identify or articulate before



807 new senior leaders were trained as peer reviewers



58% of schools reported that their all their previously identified EBIs have been fully resolved since their last QAR



41.3% of schools reported that their previously identified EBIs have started to be addressed but need further work since their last QAR



Since 2020, schools have had the option to include or exclude Peer Evaluation Estimates as part of their QAR. Ahead of the 2023/24 academic year, we evolved this approach to provide schools with even greater flexibility in their use of estimates. Schools now have the additional options of having estimates only for the categories of Leadership at all Levels and the Quality of Provision and Outcomes, with no overall estimate, or choosing verbal estimates only.

Another key change was the revision of the Peer Evaluation Estimate descriptors, driven by practitioner feedback. Responding to the insights and experiences of our practitioners, we enhanced the Working Towards Effective estimate with more constructive language to better reflect the efforts of school leadership teams. The updated descriptors now recognise when schools have selected appropriate strategies for achieving impact or when early signs of impact became evident. We also expanded the scope of our evaluations by including statements about the involvement of middle leaders in school improvement work across all estimates, rather than limiting this focus to the Leading one.

We introduced new scheduling tools for host schools and reviewers, enabling schools to select their review dates and allowing reviewers to choose which reviews they wanted to participate in. This digital development significantly reduced administrative work for schools and improved the partner experience. As a result, we achieved an 82% full team attendance on QARs. Given this was the first year of using this tool, we are taking valuable learnings and focusing on further enhancements to improve QAR delivery and ensure a smoother partner experience.



PARTNER STORY



Bretforton Village School

Kevin Riley, Headteacher at Bretforton Village School, on how being a reviewer for the Quality Assurance Review has inspired improvements in his own school

Bretforton Village School is a very small school of 65 pupils in the Cotswolds, one of the smallest mainstream schools in Challenge Partners and a partner for six years.

“We had a fantastic Lead Reviewer who set the tone for the review right from the start, that it was going to be done with and not done to, so it’s not like the Ofsted model. She set out protocols and the expectations on both sides for the reviewers and for the senior leadership team involved. The timetable had been arranged during the pre-review assessment so that meant that we were seeing a really good overview of the school, but with a particular focus on the subject areas that the school itself wanted. When you don’t really know anything about the school you do see things that the school doesn’t always see because they can sometimes be introspective. It gives that very strong insight that, yes, you’re really working hard on this and I can really see the impact.

I’ve actually gone out on review to six QARs now. I’ve managed to bring something back, even from schools in totally different contexts, which I’ve managed to use in my own school. Be it an assessment model, a technique in the classroom, the structure of some of their school improvement planning, I have always managed to bring something back and I think that’s the big bonus of the QAR process. I deliberately try to go as far afield as I can so that I can see something really different. I think the danger if you’re tied only to your local authority and to schools in the nearby area – and particularly schools that have a similar context – you really don’t get to see everything else that’s going on out there. There is fantastic practice going on all over the country, but in isolated bubbles.”



“

The review gave us the opportunity to thoroughly examine the school and validate our evaluation with external input. We have also built connections with other senior leaders and plan to collaborate on future projects.

James Aldred, Headteacher,
The Garibaldi School, Nottinghamshire

PARTNER STORY



Roding Primary School

Adam Robbins, Headteacher of Roding Primary School, on how annual Quality Assurance Reviews sharpened their improvement activity and enabled them to achieve excellence

Located in Barking and Dagenham, Roding Primary School has over 1000 pupils. 30.4% of pupils have been eligible for free school meals within the last six years and the school has an ASD provision for 26 pupils. The school joined Challenge Partners in 2022 and has since taken part in two QARs, as well as the SEND Developmental Peer Review.

“[The QAR is] a very well established model, and it is led by expert reviewers which for us is very transparent. It’s very efficient, clear and concise. All the documentation is there that backs it up. And it is very much a ‘done with’ model rather than ‘done to’, based on the experiences we’ve had with the approaches of Lead Reviewers and the other reviewers in the team.

We were early on in our school improvement journey when we had our first QAR, and the recommendation was: “You need to allow yourself more time to actually achieve all the things that you want to. You’ve presented all this stuff. Now you need the time to keep doing what you are doing and present the impact.” So when they came back for the second QAR, we had evidence, having implemented actions in that time, and could demonstrate the impact. A byproduct of the second review was that we were able to achieve accreditation for an Area of Excellence for high needs and SEND.

We’ve developed some good partnerships with those schools that visited us, building our network and sharing good practice. The whole review model has provided a really stable quality assurance structure for us. While we’ve been going through our journey, reviews really have picked out our strengths and supported us with areas for development. They have given us confidence as a leadership team and as a school that what we’re doing is quality assured by a national network and external professionals.

Trust Peer Review

The Trust Peer Review (TPR) is an expert-led, three-day peer evaluation designed to assess a trust's effectiveness in driving improvement within its schools and enhancing outcomes for the children and young people it serves.

Reviews are led by recently retired CEOs from successful trusts, who are recruited, trained and quality assured by Challenge Partners. They lead a team of trust leaders drawn from different trusts across the national network, collaborating with the host trust to explore its strengths, identify areas for development, and establish actionable next steps for further improvement.

What happened in 2023/24?

Four Trust Peer Reviews (TPRs) took place in this the sixth year of our programme. Twenty-four trust leaders were involved as visiting reviewers, benefiting from unique experiential CPD and gaining ideas to take back to their own trusts.

Satisfaction with the programme was exceptionally high, with 100% of host trust respondents and 100% of visiting reviewers reporting either satisfaction or high satisfaction with their experience of the TPR. All trusts involved expressed that hosting a TPR would now lead to changes and refinements in their approach to school improvement, with a positive impact on pupils' life chances.

The headlines:

100% of TPR reviewers said they had gained experience/knowledge that they'd take back to their own trust



100% of host trust respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the TPR was a rewarding leadership development/CPD experience for leaders from the host trust



100% of host trust respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the alignment to the Confederation of School Trust's (CST) framework was a useful way of structuring evidence gathering, evaluation and discussions throughout the review



Ahead of the 2023/24 academic year, we refined our TPR approach to align with the CST's Strong Trusts Assurance Framework. We contributed to the development of the CST rubric and – alongside other national organisations – felt it would be most helpful to trust leaders if we all adopted it, rather than working to competing frameworks. Our decision was well received by trust leaders. TPR participants particularly appreciated how the structure of the review and report now reflects key questions from the CST framework, while maintaining Challenge Partners' distinctive 'done with, not to' methodology.

A key challenge we identified previously was ensuring consistency across different reviews. In response, we started bringing TPR systems and processes further into line with the established systems and processes that help ensure consistency across school QARs.

As an initial step, we introduced quality assurance readers to enhance consistency, accuracy, and clarity across TPR reports. We are continuing to work towards even greater alignment with QAR systems and processes to further raise standards.

Another challenge is the capacity of the trust leaders who serve as peer reviewers to commit themselves fully to reviews. Our efforts to train more trust leaders as reviewers meant we were able to meet our target of six peer reviewers per team, but we identified that a potential barrier to engagement was the time gap between training and the start of reviews. We will address this in 2024/25 by moving our TPR training to the spring term, closer to when most trusts choose to host their TPRs. This will mean trust peer reviewers can apply the knowledge they have gained soon after training, enhancing their effectiveness as reviewers, and hopefully increasing participation and engagement.



The whole experience has been perfectly timed for our trust's development. We are absolutely buzzing with excitement and ideas on how to move forward in the short, medium, and long term. The team brought a superb balance of expertise, and their challenge was welcomed. Each reviewer offered critical observations alongside supportive ideas and suggestions, all delivered with professionalism. I'm looking forward to acting on the outcomes.

David O'Toole, CEO,
The 3-18 Education Trust, Shropshire



PARTNER STORY

LEO Academy Trust

Phillip Hedger, Chief Executive Officer at the LEO Academy Trust, on the combined benefits of school Quality Assurance Reviews and Trust Peer Review.

Formed in 2015, the LEO Academy Trust is made up of nine primary schools, increasing to 11 schools by Easter 2025. It serves around 5,000 children in Sutton and Surrey. All the trust's schools are part of our Network of Excellence and LEO Academy Trust leads the South West London Hub. It also leads the London EdTech Hub and is an Associate College of the National Institute of Teaching. LEO's second Trust Peer Review in July 2024 noted its values-driven and ethical approach, strong commitment to equity, and innovation in educational delivery.

"I first heard about Challenge Partners when I was a new Headteacher back in 2011. I was doing some work with a colleague Headteacher in another local authority in London, and they had just started a Challenge Partners Hub. So I've been in almost since the start, and I joined because I wanted our school to be very outward looking. I wanted us to benefit from networks, locally, regionally and nationally, and I was really drawn by the collaborative spirit within Challenge Partners to be very open and share practice, but also to push each other on.



As a trust, we use the Quality Assurance Reviews (QARs) to provide us with that annual external validation of the quality of education, to check on what teaching and learning is looking like within our schools, and to get support and challenge around areas such as curriculum.

The QARs are used by our schools to have that external critical friend come in and look at what they're doing on a peer-to-peer basis, and to provide challenge and support.

The other layer to the QARs is the opportunity for staff to get out beyond our own trust and local area, to visit other schools across the country. This allows them both to provide our support and expertise in terms of that challenge element, and to see the best practice that's happening across the country in different contexts.

When our schools have been out on review, where they have seen some really brilliant practice in SEND, or sometimes subject specific areas such as phonics, writing or reading, they bring that back to our own schools and trust, and share it across our hub. We've adopted some of that practice, and now it's embedded trust-wide.

Through Challenge Partners, one class teacher in one school, somewhere in the network can share something, and it can then ripple, not just across one other school, but across multiple schools. And that one idea that they had can then shape the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of children.

Being a trust CEO can be quite a lonely place. The Trust Peer Review (TPR) is that safe space to bring colleague CEOs and trust leaders into your organisation and really share with them over an in-depth three-day process. It's the chance to articulate why you're doing things in the way you are, and then get really good quality feedback. It's an honest review of what an outsider who's got that knowledge thinks, because they're doing the job themselves.

The review is not just 'come in and say nice things about each other'. It is that hard edge to collaboration where people are actually being open and honest with you, and crucial to that is having the Lead Reviewer who will lay the difficult question on the table.

We've had two TPRs and we deliberately left a gap of three years because we felt that trust development and school development are slightly different, and as a result the reviews were different. The two TPRs were both valuable in their own space and time.

Our first review was during Covid in 2021 and it focused on how the trust supported the schools to respond to the pandemic. Our second review in 2024 focused more around what a strong trust is, in line with the CST's Strong Trusts Assurance Framework. It led me to reflect on our leadership structure across the trust, and how prepared it is for growth and for scaling up. And it made me think about what's working successfully for the trust now, and how the model might adapt in 5 years time if we were to grow: What do we need to do in-house to make sure that we continue to support our own schools as well as we do now, while making sure that we have extra capacity ahead of growth.



We were left with a renewed purpose to bring our core offer to more children and schools over the coming years and the external team posed useful questions and reflections which will help us to get there.

Phillip Hedger, CEO, LEO Academy Trust, Sutton and Surrey

Trust Leaders' Network

Our national Trust Leaders' Network (TLN) brings together CEOs and other senior trust leaders from across England to share knowledge and best and developing practice. It is expertly facilitated by recently retired CEOs of successful trusts and provides a supportive space that fosters both individual and trust development, aligned with each trust's priorities and context.

TLN members have access to a range of activities across the academic year, including facilitated trust visit days, interactive business webinars (delivered in partnership with the Social Business Trust), a national Trust Leaders' Conference, and our optional two-day Leadership Residential.



What a wonderful residential, spending time with other trust leaders and learning from them alongside the fantastic facilitators and CP team. All of the learning opportunities teamed with a lovely venue and spending two days in a different physical space left me rejuvenated with fresh thinking to take back to the Trust.

Nav Sanghara, CEO,
Woodland Academy Trust, Kent

What happened in 2023/24?

This was the fourth year of the TLN, and membership grew to 41 trusts, an increase of five from 2022/23. We welcomed more trusts from the Midlands and the North, further enhancing our geographical spread. Most trusts were of small to medium size, with four larger trusts of more than 20 schools.

Across the year there were facilitated trust visits to Olympus Academy Trust, Education for the 21st Century, Lighthouse Partnership, Danes Educational Trust and Preston Hedges Trust. We hosted three business webinars:

- Sharath Jeevan OBE, Executive Director at Intrinsic Labs led a session on navigating inflection moments
- Gail Khan, Managing Director & Project Manager, Gail Khan Associates talked through growth strategy, mergers and due diligence
- Hannah Bush, Associate HR Business Partner at Schroders, spoke about talent management and developing people

We again partnered with BTS Spark on our highly-rated Leadership Residential.

Our seventh annual Trust Leaders' Conference, *Delivering Inclusive Excellence*, took place on election day and was designed and delivered in association with the Confederation of School Trusts (CST). Fifty trust leaders joined this intentionally intimate and interactive event. They were inspired by keynotes from Leora Cruddas, CEO of CST, Jon Yates, Executive Director of the Youth Endowment Foundation, and Ade Adepitan MBE, television presenter, Paralympic basketball player, and disability advocate. Delegates collaborated in 'world cafe' discussions and carousels of best practice. These were hosted by trust leaders and sector experts who brought inclusive excellence to life, offering practical take-away strategies on everything from trust-wide approaches to SEND to harnessing AI.

Trust Leaders Conference

100% of participants heard/learned something that they wanted to share with their trust colleagues



95% of participants felt that something they'd heard will influence how they work with their own trust



90% of trust residential participants gained new insights and tools that will help them



The TLN was highly effective in facilitating knowledge exchange between trusts and encouraging meaningful discussions between trust leaders. This collaboration leads to stronger trusts and schools, ultimately benefiting the young people they serve.

Satisfaction levels were overwhelmingly positive for all aspects of the TLN offer:

- Trust visits received an average overall satisfaction score of 4.9/5. 100% of respondents taking part in a trust visit learned something they would use in their long-term trust development
- Webinars: All participants were satisfied or highly satisfied. 100% of respondents taking part in a business webinar learned something they would be taking back to their own trust in their leadership role
- Conference received an average overall satisfaction score of 4.8/5
- Residential: All participants rated it excellent or good

SEND Developmental Peer Review



Responding to growing requests from school leaders, in January 2024 we launched a pilot review programme for mainstream schools keen to enhance their provision and outcomes for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The SEND Developmental Peer Review is based on our tried-and-tested review and improvement methodologies and was developed with global SEND expert David Bartram OBE. The programme brings schools together to examine their SEND practice, celebrate and share areas of strength, push forward areas for development, and co-create solutions to common challenges. Schools are carefully matched in trios or quads with schools beyond their locality to support, challenge and share expertise. They work through a rigorous self-evaluation, expert facilitated in-school review days, and whole cohort events.

What happened in 2023/24?

Thirty-seven schools – 20 primary and 17 secondary – took part in the pilot, which ran from January to July 2024. The pilot cohort spanned from Kent to Merseyside, ranging from small village schools in rural Shropshire to large diverse schools in East London. Each group of schools was matched with an expert SEND Lead Facilitator, who was recruited, trained and quality assured by Challenge Partners.

Visit days

We received incredibly positive feedback from the pilot and satisfaction levels were high, with both host schools and visiting school leaders rating them 4.8/5.

97% of participants had seen, learned or discussed something that will support their own school to improve their SEND provision



92% had seen, learned or discussed something that they would share with senior leaders back in their own schools



95% said that, following a review day, they had clarity on the next steps of their action plan to enhance SEND provision



Whole cohort events

We launched the pilot at an in-person event and concluded it with a virtual wrap-up event. Feedback from the launch was more positive than the wrap-up, with an average satisfaction rating of 4.7/5 compared to 4.4/5. As a result, in 2024/25 the programme will share an in-person wrap-up event with the Growing the Top and Extending Leading Practice programmes to maximise opportunities for networking and learning.

“

It is a really good opportunity to visit other schools and deepen my understanding around SEND provision. It has been a positive experience whereby you gain ideas and resources whilst having an opportunity to reflect and evaluate your own provision.

Jackie Hilton, Deputy Headteacher,
Riverside School, London



PARTNER STORY



Riverside Secondary School

Kendra Del Rio, Director of SEND at Riverside Secondary School, on the benefits of the SEND Developmental Peer Review, as a participant and facilitator

Riverside Secondary School in Barking has 68 students on the SEND register, 16 of whom have EHCPs. Last year's SEND progress was +1.9, in line with the rest of the school. The school joined Challenge Partners in 2021, participating each year in the Quality Assurance Review, Growing the Top, and recently, the SEND Developmental Peer Review.

“The experience has been an extremely positive one, both as a participant and a facilitator.

The Evaluate My School tool to start off with really prompted deeper thinking from all of us as a department, looking at all strands of SEN, and it enabled us to really focus on where we are as a school and where we want to go next. The whole process has really enabled the sharing of innovative ideas and being creative to face the challenges of a broken system. All of us working together really has strengthened what we can do to give the best that we can to the children that we support.



A great opportunity for professional dialogue between peers. Great sharing of ideas and resources which I am confident we can use and develop for our setting so as to improve provision for our SEND learners.

Catherine Beavis, Assistant Headteacher, St Clement Danes School, Hertfordshire

I really liked something called knowledge scripts which have the key words and the key facts for a unit of work that's coming up. We've tried it in schools since the review, and the student voice has been really good. They've said they like the visuals, the key facts and the vocabulary, and it's all nice and clear and easy to remember. It has also really made me think about how important the links are between primary and secondary, and how that will be crucial for the future.

You get to work with exceptional professionals from across the country and you get a real feel for the hard work that everybody's doing, striving for the best outcomes for students with SEND. You can't learn too much – wherever your school is, whatever stage they're at. You really explore your school, really think about your school's processes and plan next steps. Wherever your school is on the journey, we can't stop reflecting and learning from others. And I think that really sums up Challenge Partners for me as well – whether you're hosting or or you're visiting, you're going to come away with something.

Whoever is thinking of doing it, do it. It's really the best thing I have done.”



It is a really good opportunity to visit other schools and deepen my understanding around SEND provision. It has been a positive experience whereby you gain ideas and resources whilst having an opportunity to reflect and evaluate your own provision.

Jackie Hilton, Deputy Headteacher, Riverside School, London

Growing the Top

The Growing the Top (GTT) programme brings together top-performing schools to collaborate and drive their schools – and the education system – to become world class by exploring systemic excellence and challenge, and drawing on expertise from other sectors.

Schools are carefully matched in trios or quads with schools beyond their locality for facilitated school visit days, led by Challenge Partners-trained practitioner facilitators. Across the academic year there are three whole cohort events for leaders to hear from expert cross-sector speakers and network with peers.

What happened in 2023/24?

Thirty-four schools took part — seven secondary, 20 primary and seven special schools, spanning Cornwall to Bradford. Schools were grouped into trios and quads by phase, and matched with a Challenge Partners-trained practitioner facilitator to lead visit days.

Visit days

The overall satisfaction score was overwhelmingly positive, with host school leaders rating them 4.9/5 and visiting school leaders, 4.8/5.

Following a visit day:

82% of participants said they will use something they have seen, learned or discussed in their own school improvement journey in the short term



90% of participants plan to use something they have seen, learned or discussed in their own school improvement journey in the longer term



88% of participants have seen or learned something they would like to share with other senior leaders in their school



Whole cohort events

Feedback from the in-person whole cohort events was very positive, with an average overall satisfaction score of 4.7/5 for the launch, and 4.5/5 for the wrap-up.

In response to feedback from last year's virtual mid-year event, we merged it this year with one of our online National Network Conferences to reduce the time commitment for school leaders. Attendee satisfaction was slightly stronger than last year at 4.4/5, and we will continue to use feedback and attendance rates to inform adjustments needed for 2024/25 and beyond.



This is the first time we have done this as a school and (we) have found it very helpful in both our areas of excellence and challenge. It has also provided myself and the colleagues taking part with some excellent CPD that really feels bespoke to each one of us.

Sajida Muneer, Headteacher,
Feversham Girls' School, Bradford

PARTNER STORY

Waverley School

Gail Weir, Headteacher of Waverley School, on how Growing the Top (GTT) provided professional nourishment for senior and middle leaders

Located in Enfield, Waverley School is an exceptional complex needs special school for children and young people aged three to 19. The school joined Challenge Partners in 2018 and has since taken part in two QARs and three years of GTT.

"I was really happy with GTT because it allowed me to be grouped with other headteachers who were in a similar position to ourselves. We found we were able to speak freely with each other as we weren't reviewing one another, so to speak. Instead, we were paired up to share. It was an excellent experience and if I have a query I still reach out to the headteachers in our trio to bounce ideas off them.

The heads of departments are very self-reflective and they sometimes lack a bit of confidence in their own abilities. Allowing them to speak and explain what it is they do and how they lead their department enabled them to develop their confidence and to reflect on what they were doing and why they were doing it. The programme built them as leaders and allowed them to be professionally curious and ask questions and then share these with the other staff in their department.

For our school leaders, it allows the deputy heads to be involved in an analytical way as they look at the quality of teaching and learning. They bring the analytical approach back into school and I don't know where I'd get this from if not from Challenge Partners."



Extending Leading Practice

Extending Leading Practice (ELP) is designed for schools driven to make the shift from good to excellent practice. Schools focus on a specific in-school improvement initiative linked to their school development plan, while collaborating with two or three other schools over the course of an academic year.

This structured programme of facilitated school visits allows school leaders to observe excellent practice in other schools and co-create solutions to challenges, while accessing insights from beyond the education sector at whole-cohort events.

What happened in 2023/24?

Seventeen schools took part in the third year of this programme – five secondary, six primary, and six special schools. They spanned from Poole to Bradford, and included the Midlands and southern regions. Schools were grouped into trios and quads by phase and beyond their locality, and matched with a practitioner facilitator to lead the visit days.

Visit days

The overall satisfaction score was overwhelmingly strong, with an average rating of 4.9/5 from host school leaders, and 4.7/5 from visiting school leaders.

Following a visit day:

76% of participants said they will use something they have seen, learned or discussed in their own school improvement journey in the short term



90% plan to use something they have seen, learned or discussed in their own school improvement journey in the longer term



88% said the discussions showed or taught them something that will help move their own in-school project forward



Whole cohort events

ELP events continued to be shared with Growing the Top to enable networking across the programmes, and greater sharing of excellence. Due to reviewing and adjusting the format and content for whole cohort events for 2023/24, the ELP participant satisfaction score from all three events was higher than last year with an overall satisfaction rating of 4.6/5 across all three events.

Jubilee Networks

The Jubilee Networks (JN) are relational networks that enable headteachers to build strong connections with peers across a region, where they share knowledge, experience, and school improvement strategies.

A leadership focus is embedded into the approach and supported through input from coaches provided by BTS Spark. Schools in each regional network take turns to host all-day meetings for eight to 12 headteachers, showcasing areas of strength and areas for development. This provides inspiration for visiting headteachers to stimulate improvement in their own schools, while the host school benefits from feedback and questions to develop their approach further.

What happened in 2023/24?

We launched a new Primary Jubilee Network in the South Central region (seven schools), while our Primary Jubilee Network continued in the Midlands (10 schools). We also have Secondary Jubilee Networks in the Midlands (15 schools) and South Central region (10 schools).

Challenge Partners-trained school leaders continued to facilitate each Jubilee Network, designing meetings, creating social capital and enabling effective collaboration, challenge and knowledge exchange between headteachers. Participant feedback from the meetings was overwhelmingly positive, with an average satisfaction rating of 4.9/5 for the practitioner facilitation of each meeting, and an overall satisfaction rating of 4.7/5 for the meetings overall.

BTS Spark’s coaches delivered tailored leadership inputs during the afternoon of each network meeting. In response to participant feedback, in 2024/25 these leadership inputs will feature in only two out of the four meetings for each Jubilee Network to allow more time for the more highly valued facilitated discussions on live issues and leadership challenges.

100% of respondents stated they had seen or heard something during the visit that they would take back to share with senior leaders in their own school

AIM 2

91% said that meeting as a JN had helped to build new relationships or deepen existing relationships in the group which they will use to support their work as a leader

AIM 2

Board of Trustees

Our trustees ensure that Challenge Partners continues to work towards our aims and that the partnership remains financially and legally compliant. The board meets five times a year and is chaired by Chris Davison, whose term of office concludes in 2024/25. Trustees are generous in sharing their time and expertise outside meetings to enhance the work we do, especially in digital transformation, safeguarding, and legal and organisational development.



Pavandeep Bansal
Microsoft Enterprise Architect, Avanade



Alison Beane OBE (Safeguarding Trustee)
Retired CEO of a special school trust & retired Challenge Partners Senior Partner



Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE (ex officio)



Chris Davison (Chair of Trustees)
Partner, Permira



Susanna Eastham
Global Knowledge Management Services Leader, EY



Janine Harion (Chair of Finance & Audit Committee)
Managing Director, Permira Credit Limited



Luci Ingram
General Counsel for group functions, Johnson Matthey PLC



Arwel Jones
Education Consultant & retired Headteacher



Gary Lewis
CEO, Lighthouse Schools Partnership



Candice Lott
Owner & Founder of The Digital Type



Vijita Patel
Principal, Swiss Cottage School, Development & Research Centre



Gulcin Sesli
Co-CEO, The Spring Partnership Trust (until November 2023)



Louise Wolsey
Group Chief Strategy Officer, London & South East Education Group

Practitioner leadership

Challenge Partners is proudly practitioner-led and our Educational Advisory Group (EAG) acts as our standing practitioner reference group. It plays a critical role in shaping our strategy and partnership offer. This year the EAG provided input on implementing our five-year strategy, improvements to our national knowledge exchange offer, and the successful implementation of our innovations.

Our programmes, networks and local hubs are shaped by practitioner advisory groups to ensure they directly address the needs of schools and trusts. In 2023/24, these advisory groups gave valuable feedback and input into the structure, development and delivery of our programmes and networks, including the design of the Trust Leaders' Conference, and the launch of the SEND Developmental Peer Review and the Middle Leaders Quality Assurance Review. They generously contributed their time and expertise alongside demanding day jobs in schools and trusts.



Elliot Costas-Walker
Director of Learning & Partnerships, Forward As One C of E Multi-Academy Trust



Stephen Deadman
Headteacher, Children's Hospital School Leicester



Fatima el-Meeyuf
Assistant Headteacher Mulberry School for Girls



Nicola Forster
Headteacher, North Primary



Rob Hardcastle
CEO, Hatton Academies Trust



Steve Kneller (EAG chair)
Deputy CEO, Ascend Learning Trust



Ann Marie Mulkerins
CEO, Middlesex Learning Trust & Executive Headteacher of The Compton School



Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE
CEO, Mulberry Schools Trust



Jemima Rhys-Evans
Director, London South, EEF research school



Toby Sutherland
Headteacher, St Clement Danes School



Paul Watson
CEO, Preston Hedges Trust

THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Photo credit: Rushey Mead Academy

We would like to thank

our supporters and partners who contributed to the impact captured in this report. This includes our partner organisations, grant-making bodies, and our practitioner leaders who work with us to ensure we can have the greatest impact on the work of schools, leaders and children across the country.

Partner Organisations:



Funders:



With thanks to our practitioner leaders and supporters:

Our Education Advisory Group (page 43)

The Hub Manager Network facilitators:
Vanessa Beckley and Elliot Costas-Walker

Our Programme and Network Advisory Group members:

Growing the Top and Extending Leading Practice:
Alison Moller, Andy Roberts, Kate Frood OBE, Mel Bignold, Sue Higgins, Tracey Hemming

Quality Assurance Review: Dr Calvin Pike, Nick Butt, Stuart Busby

Trusts Advisory Group: Annie Wiles, Carolyn Robson, Dave Baker, Gary Wilkie, Jan Shadick, Kieran Osborne, Sharon Burt, Sarah Ridley

Jubilee Networks: Andrea Ives, Carey Ayres, John Jones, Marianne Enchill-Balogun, Michelle Ginty

Our practitioner facilitators who support the delivery of our programmes:

Growing the Top: Hayley Potter, Kate Frood OBE, Mary Collins, Natalie Snowdon, Paul Thomas, Steve Whittle, Toby Sutherland, Tom Andrews, Tracey Dinnage, Vijita Patel

Extending Leading Practice: Alison Moller, Ben White, Elizabeth Laws, Linda Matthews, Nicholas Salisbury, Sarah Naylor

Jubilee Networks: Andrea Ives, Carey Ayres, John Jones, Marianne Enchill-Balogun, Michelle Ginty

SEND Developmental Peer Review: Claire Byron, David Williams, John Lamb, Kendra Del Rio, Laura Page, Mel Bignold, Mike Finlay, Nicola Payne, Nicola Smallwood, Sally Franklin, Sarah Goosani, Stephen Deadman, Will Cannock

Senior Partners (SP) and Hub Managers (HM)

Ash Field Hub: Tracey Lawrence (SP) and Ellen Croft (HM)

Aspire Hub: Karen Bramwell OBE and Amanda Ryan (SP), Elliot Costas-Walker (HM)

Aylesbury Vale Hub: Mark Sturgeon (SP) and Vanessa Beckley (HM)

Barking and Dagenham Hub: Matt Murphy (SP), Ben Spinks and Paul Claydon (HM)

Brighton and Hove Hub: Shelley Baker (SP) and John Lamb (HM)

Camden Hub: Rob Earrey (SP) and Ruby Nasser (HM)

Charter School Educational Trust Hub: Cassie Buchanan OBE (SP)

Chiltern Hub: Adrian Rogers (SP), Nicola Hickton and Angie Woodcraft (HM)

Chrysalis Hub: Nikki Hyde-Boughey (SP) and Alice Toft (HM)

Compass Hub: Nicola Forster (SP) and Sarah Wilson (SP)

Compton Hub: Ann Marie Mulkerins (SP) and Stuart Merritt (HM)

Cornwall Hub: Simeon Royle (SP) and Darren Payne (HM)

Cotswold Cornerstone Hub: Gareth Burton (SP), Beth Gregory (HM)

East Coast Hub: Tom Ward (SP)

East London Hub: Ruth Smith (SP) and Lara Boyer (HM)

East Midlands South Hub: Sara McAdam and Mark Oldman (SP), Simon Renshaw (HM)

Empower Hub: Vijita Patel (SP) and Andria Zafirakou (HM)

Haberdashers' Trust South Hub: Jan Shadick (SP), Kafilat Agboola (HM)

Herts and Bucks Hub: Toby Sutherland (SP) and Mike Garvey (HM)

Impact Alliance Hub: Steve Whittle (SP), Michelle Toner (HM)

Learning in Harmony Multi Academy Trust Hub: Gary Wilkie (SP), Emma Gleeson (HM)

Leigh Hub: Tracey Trusler (SP) and Molly Allen (HM)

Lighthouse Hub: Phil Cox and Natalie Wilcox (SP)

Link 2 Learn Hub: Tracey Dinnage (SP) and Faye Blain (HM)

London Special and AP Hub: Penny Barratt OBE (SP) and Gary Morrissey (HM)

London West Hub: Stephen Davis (SP) and Marie-Anne Lerègle (HM)

North East Special Hub: Rachel Hargreaves (SP) and Katie Oliver (HM)

North West Hub: Wendy McCormack (SP)

Northants Hub: Robert Hardcastle (SP) and Nicholas Salisbury (HM)

Nova Educational Trust Hub: Andy Seymour (SP)

Portsmouth Hub: Sharon Burt (SP) and Louise Quaid (HM)

Shared Horizons Hub: Jayne Jardine MBE (SP), Jackie Fitzgerald and Louise Kimber (HM)

Sidney Stringer Multi Academy Trust Hub: Kate Jefferson (SP)

Somerbay Hub: Tim Hughes (SP)

South East London Hub: Mary Collins (SP) and Paul Hooper (HM)

South West London Hub: Phillip Hedger (SP) and Amy Carlile (HM)

Synergy Hub: Alison Tones (SP) and Tara Gilman (HM)

Tendring Hub: Chris Joy (SP) and Philippa Holliday (HM)

Thames Valley Hub: Andy Johnson (SP) and Rob Buck (HM)

Transform Hub: Rebecca Meredith CBE (SP)

West Shires Hub: David Coaché (SP) and Kirsty Shaw (HM)

Wootton Bassett Hub: Steve Kneller and Ian Tucker (SP), Paul Day and Caroline Whittaker (HM)



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A great opportunity for professional dialogue between peers. Great sharing of ideas and resources which I am confident we can use and develop for our setting so as to improve provision for our SEND learners.

Catherine Beavis, Assistant Headteacher,
St Clement Danes School, Hertfordshire

Resource for London
356 Holloway Road
London N7 6PA

www.challengepartners.org
partnershipsteam@challengepartners.org
020 7803 4970

Registered charity number: 1149266
Company number: 8048330

