



IMPACT REPORT

2024/25

Published January 2026

WHO WE ARE

Challenge Partners is a charity and national partnership of schools and trusts united by the belief that the best way to reduce educational inequality and enhance the life chances of all children is through collaboration, challenge and leadership development that improves school and pupil performance and spreads excellent practice around the system. We work together to ensure every school and trust community can benefit from the combined wisdom of the education system.

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OUR COLLECTIVE AIMS

At Challenge Partners, we believe every child deserves an excellent education which enables them to flourish, and their communities to thrive. Across England, we support schools and trusts to evaluate, improve, and share leading practice, so that excellence becomes the norm. Our national programmes and network of local Hubs drive upwards convergence in performance, reduce regional disparities, and build leadership and improvement capacity at scale. This transforms the life chances of all pupils, with the greatest benefits for those facing the biggest challenges, whether arising from disadvantage or special educational needs.

We aim to benefit half a million pupils each year and are already on track to make this ambitious goal a reality, while advancing the shared aims of the teachers and leaders in our partnership:

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

Intentional and bold ambition to shape futures



Susanna Eastham,
Chair of Trustees

It's a privilege to introduce this year's Impact Report as the new Chair of Trustees. My journey with Challenge Partners began in 2019, volunteering through the Social Business Trust, and continued when I joined the Board as a Trustee in 2020.

What drew me to Challenge Partners then still inspires me now: a practitioner-led model that systematically identifies and shares excellence and develops leaders through experiential learning and peer review. This unique blend of values-led collaboration, purposeful knowledge exchange, and operational excellence is at the heart of improving life chances - especially for disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

This year, our partnership reached over 410,000 pupils across 540 schools and 135 trusts, with a growing presence in deprived regions. More than 110,000 pupils eligible for Free School Meals and over 53,000 pupils with SEND benefited from our collective effort. Notably, 54% of 123 new and rejoining schools came from economically deprived localities, reflecting our intent to deepen impact where it matters most.

These numbers are not just milestones; they represent the children, families, and communities whose futures we are working together to strengthen.

Our flagship Quality Assurance Review continues to set the standard for peer-led improvement that is "done with, not done to". We delivered 408 reviews and achieved record satisfaction scores. The programme's sharp focus on disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND - alongside accreditation of Areas of Excellence - translates insight into practical next steps in classrooms and trusts.

Innovation continues to flourish across all our programmes. The SEND Developmental Peer Review empowered mainstream schools to strengthen their SEND provision, with participants gaining practical insights to improve outcomes for pupils with additional needs. The Middle Leaders Quality Assurance Review delivered focused professional development, equipping middle leaders to enhance teaching and leadership in participating schools. Our local Hubs show how cross-Hub collaboration on shared priorities can deliver sustained improvement.

Looking ahead, our ambition is intentional and bold: to reach half a million pupils annually and extend excellence with a particular focus on deprived areas.

As I reflect on this year's achievements, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to our school and trust leaders, trustees, and the businesses and donors who stand alongside us. Your support and collaboration are critical as we work together to shape a school system that gives every child the opportunity to flourish.

Our 2030 Strategy: Every child flourishing, every community thriving



Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE, CEO

While the main focus of this report is our impact and activity in 2024/25, I'd like to take the longer view, introducing the strategy we developed in 2025 in collaboration with our practitioners, partners, funders and supporters. It highlights the enduring and systemic challenges we collectively face - and celebrates our progress and plans for tackling them.

Our **Strategy to 2030** describes our vision for a future where every child can flourish and every community can thrive. It reaffirms our commitment to benefit at least half a million pupils each year, and extends our ambitions to reach more disadvantaged children and learners with special educational needs; strengthen our influence across the system; and sustain innovation and excellence in everything we do. It describes the actions we will take to achieve this.

Our mission has always been to provide systemic solutions to systemic problems. The barriers that limit children's life chances - disadvantage, inconsistency in school quality, and the slow spread of effective practice - cannot be solved by isolated interventions. They require a strong, connected system where knowledge flows freely and schools support one another to improve. That is exactly what Challenge Partners creates through our programmes, networks, and peer review models, which uncover and spread excellence across schools so that all children benefit.

Educational inequality remains one of the most persistent challenges facing our country, yet recent independent analysis shows how our schools buck trends. It reveals that schools in Challenge Partners for four or more years increased the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving a crucial grade 4+ in GCSE English and maths by 4.1 percentage points over five years to 2024, compared to a national decline of 1.3 points. While this cannot be attributed solely to our approach, it aligns with other evidence - including the impact described in this report - which indicates a strong correlation between our rigorous, collaborative, practitioner-led model and improved outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. It also highlights the excellent practice found in our schools which others can learn from.

Our 2030 Strategy responds to an environment where school budgets are under strain, local services are shrinking, and many families face rising poverty, poor health, and social challenges that spill into the classroom. It ensures no school leader or teacher has to face these challenges alone. It aims to create a school system where every child has an equal chance to succeed. I look forward to working with the schools, trusts, supporters and partners who helped shape the strategy to make it a reality in the years ahead.

Courageous leadership: Sharing our expertise to influence policy



Dame Sue John, Co-founder and Executive Director

Since the July 2024 election, our Education Advisory Group has challenged us to do more to share expertise from Challenge Partners to influence policy. In line with our value of courageous leadership and our proven expertise in these areas, we have sought to contribute our knowledge on area-based improvement, inspection reform, and SEND.

Following the 2025 exam results, the Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson expressed an ambition to "take the best of the renowned London Challenge and apply it to areas like the North East". As Secondary Director in the London Challenge and co-founder of Challenge Partners, I have been involved in this work for over two decades. While the educational landscape has evolved, I am confident that the core principles underpinning the London Challenge and Challenge Partners still stand. We shared these with the Department for Education (DfE), drawing also on our roles in government-funded initiatives in Knowsley and Liverpool, and the place-based improvements driven through our nationwide networks of local Hubs.

We highlighted that successful area-based school improvement depends on leadership that builds moral capital and unites all stakeholders around a shared vision. Aligning government, trusts, schools, and improvement partners to instil pride and a sense of place was central to the London Challenge.

On Ofsted reform, we recognise that the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) has drawn mixed responses regarding capacity, consistency, and pressure on schools. We were pleased, however, that Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver attended one of our Quality Assurance Reviews at North Primary School in November 2024 and praised both the peer review model and the quality of professional dialogue.

The EIF's greater emphasis on collaboration, inclusion, and meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND mirrors our longstanding review approach. Our schools welcome external scrutiny and continuous improvement, and it is encouraging to see Ofsted's plans to identify and share exceptional practice as we have long done through accreditation of schools' Areas of Excellence.

As the government considers SEND reforms, our SEND Developmental Peer Review programme enters its third year. In our submission to the Select Committee, we stressed the urgency of systemic self-improvement - because, as I noted last year quoting Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, "the children cannot wait". Helen Hayes MP, Chair of the Select Committee, joined us at this year's programme launch, and reinforced the importance of our approach to capturing innovative practice and fostering agency among teachers and leaders. We share the hope that government reforms will promote collaboration, experimentation, and research-based practice to improve outcomes for every child.

PARTNERSHIP REACH



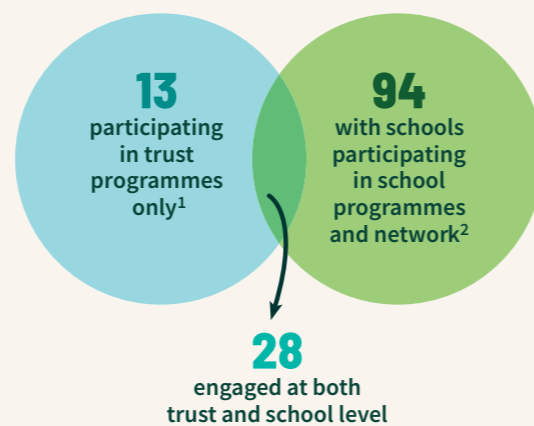
Partnership growth

In 2024/25, Challenge Partners encompassed:

410,000 pupils (up from 385,000 in 2023/24)

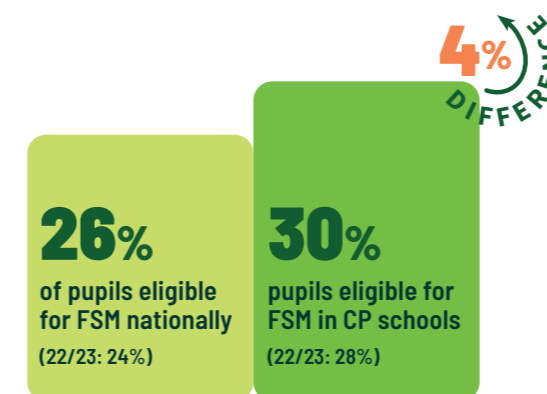
540 schools
513 Full Partners
27 Network Partners

135 trusts



Making a difference to deprived pupils and regions

Challenge Partners schools serve a higher and rising proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) compared to schools nationally.³



40% of our schools in high-deprivation target regions (up from 31% in 2022/23)

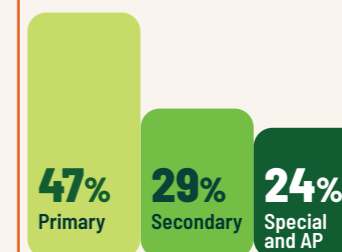
110,000 pupils eligible for Free School Meals

Schools mix

In Challenge Partners we have higher-than-national proportions of secondary and special schools, which bring rich subject and SEND expertise to our partnership.⁴

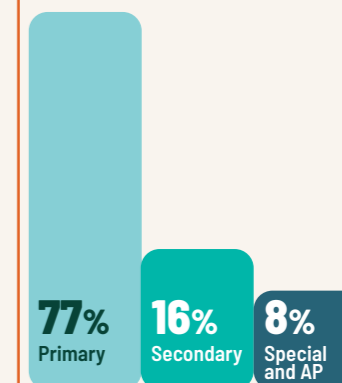
Challenge Partners

Proportion of Challenge Partners schools in 2024/25 that were:



National

Proportion of state schools nationally that are:



¹ Trust programmes are Trust Leaders Network and Trust Peer Review

² One or more of QA Review, Growing the Top, SEND Developmental Peer Review, local Hub

³ We have changed how we calculate FSM pupils in Challenge Partners to bring it into line with DfE methodology. This means the CP FSM figure is not directly comparable to previous years. The figure of 30% relates to pupils eligible for FSM in Full Partner and Network Partner schools. It does not include pupils in trusts that are only part of our trust programmes. If we include these pupils, the overall percentage of FSM pupils is 28.5%.

⁴ Excluding nurseries, middle, and 16 plus, source: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk>



Building momentum in our target regions of higher deprivation

Challenge Partners' mission is to reduce educational inequality and increase the life chances of all children, particularly those hindered by socio-economic circumstances or other disadvantage, and pupils with special educational needs. Every year, our systemic approach to school improvement, experiential leadership development, and knowledge exchange enhances the education of hundreds of thousands of children from Cornwall to Northumberland.

Since 2023, we have redoubled our focus on reaching more schools in our target regions of higher deprivation across the North and Midlands and we are excited to celebrate our progress. In 2024/25, 54% of new schools and trusts were located in these regions. Schools in these regions now represent 40% of all schools across our nationwide partnership.

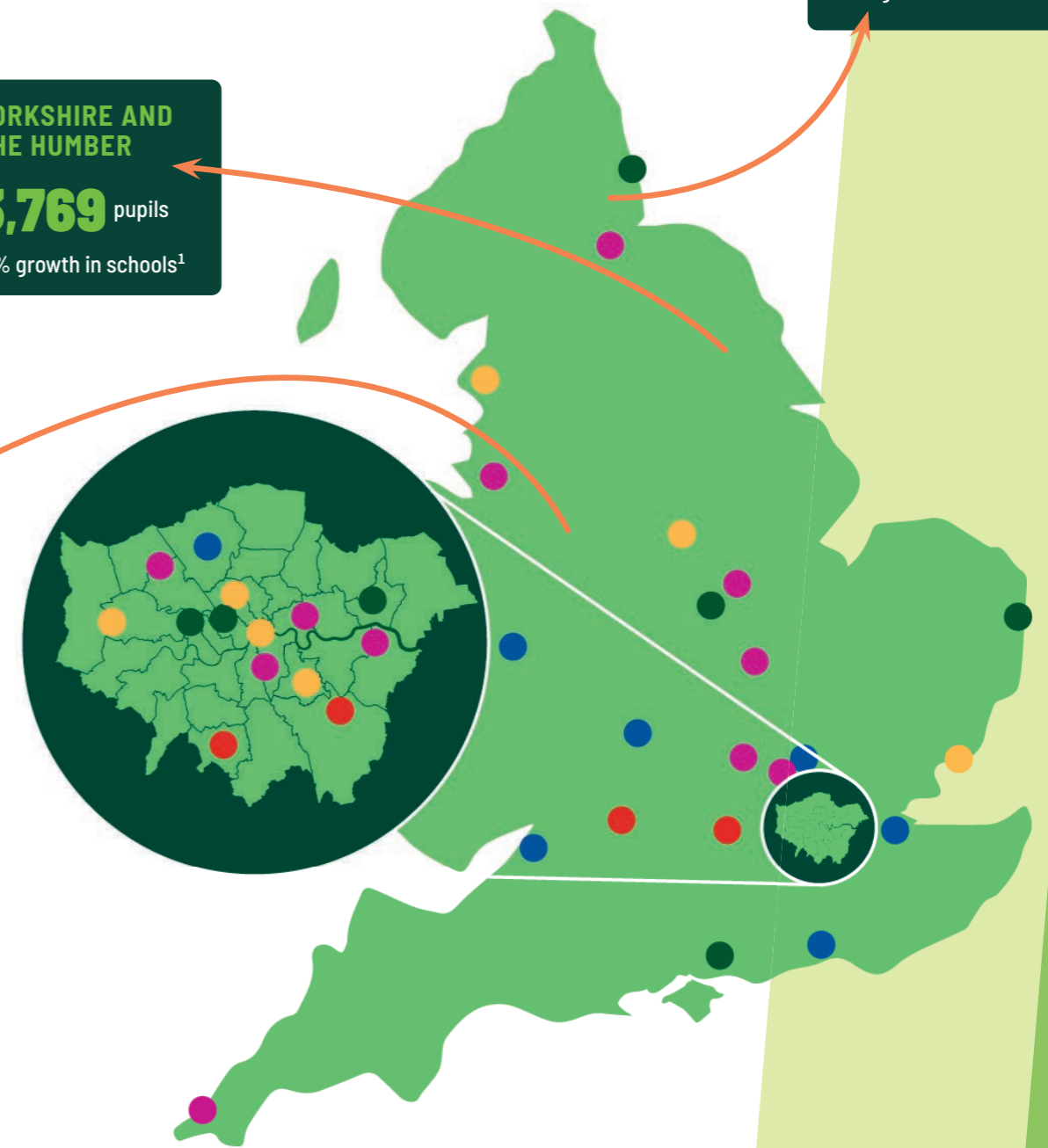
NORTH WEST
38,391 pupils
 82% growth in schools¹

Our 24/25 Hubs

- 6 Primary school only Hubs
- 6 Secondary school only Hubs
- 11 mixed Primary and Secondary school Hubs
- 7 Special and Alternative Provision only Hubs
- 4 mixed mainstream and special/AP Hubs

YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
3,769 pupils
 17% growth in schools¹

NORTH EAST
6,030 pupils
 188% growth in schools¹



¹ Increase in all schools reached via our school and trust programmes since 2023/24.

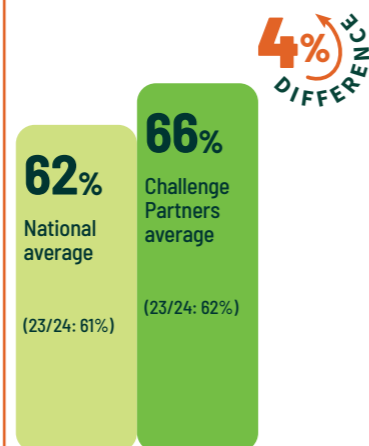
Beating the odds: Disadvantaged pupils in our schools do better

Consistent with previous years, in 2024/25 Challenge Partners schools outperformed national averages in statutory tests at age 11 and public examinations at age 16. This means thousands more pupils gaining the qualifications that will unlock their future life chances.

2024/25 Primary (Key Stage 2) results¹

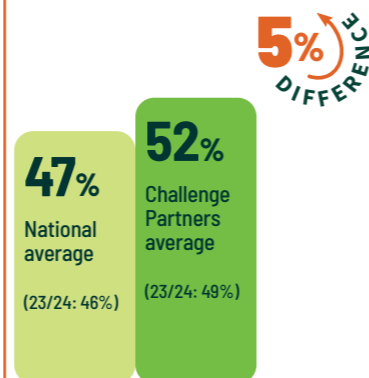
All pupils

The proportion of 11 year olds in our schools achieving expected standards in reading, writing and maths is above national average.



Disadvantaged pupils

The proportion of disadvantaged 11 year olds meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths is 5% higher in our schools.

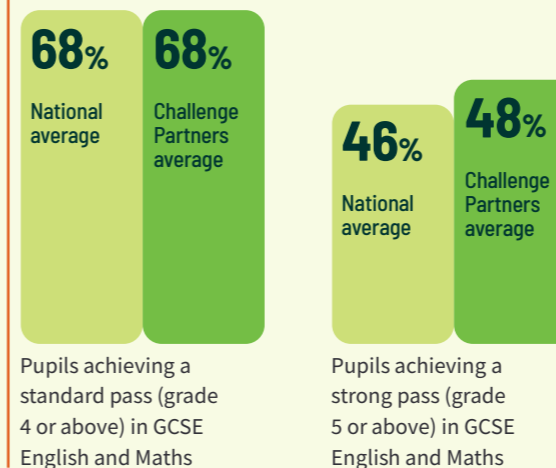


If all primary schools performed at the level of our schools, around 8,000 more disadvantaged 11 year olds would meet the expected standard.

2024/25 Secondary (Key Stage 4) results²

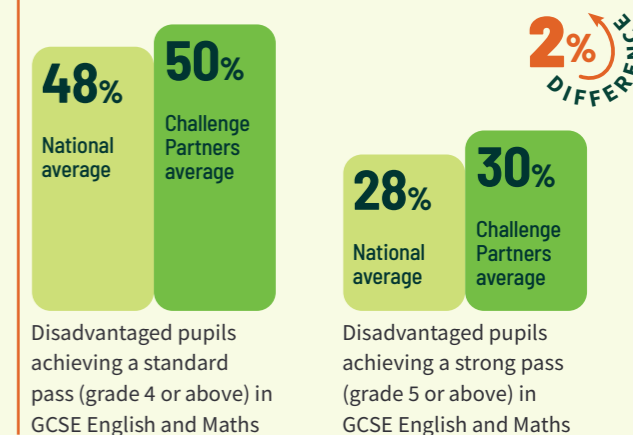
All pupils

More students in our secondary schools achieved strong GCSE passes (grade 5+) in English and Maths.



Disadvantaged pupils

More disadvantaged students in our secondary schools attain standard and strong passes in GCSE English and Maths. This is crucial in unlocking future progression and earnings.



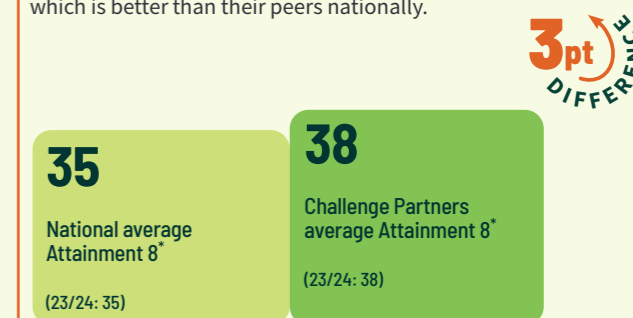
All pupils

Students in our secondary schools attain an average point score across their best 8 GCSE subjects which is above the national average.



Disadvantaged pupils

Disadvantaged pupils in our secondary schools attain an average point score across their best 8 GCSE subjects which is better than their peers nationally.



¹ All figures refer to state-funded mainstream schools in England. KS2 data using provisional data released December 2025.

² All figures refer to state-funded mainstream schools in England. KS4 data using provisional data released October 2025.

* Attainment 8 is a measure showing a student's average score across their best 8 GCSEs, including double-weighted English and Maths, with a maximum 90 points.

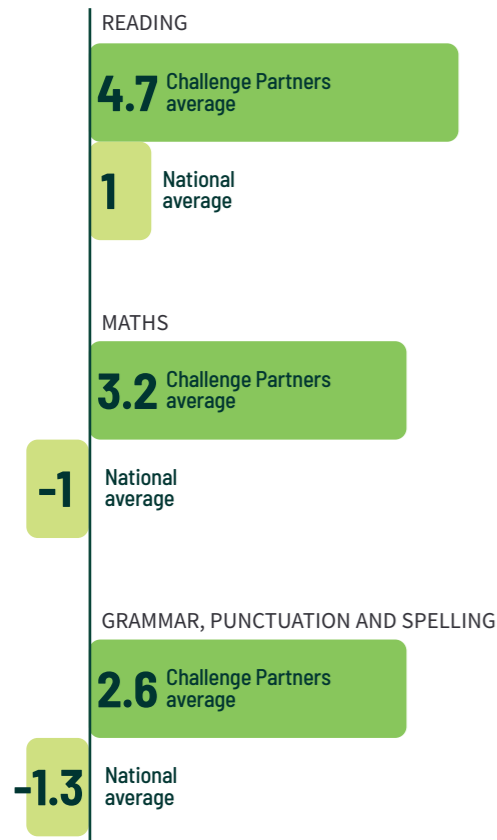
Our long-term impact

Challenge Partners has never been about quick fixes. Rather it is about the long-game of driving continuous, sustainable improvement over time and building capacity within the system.

We are proud that our schools and trusts gain so much from being in Challenge Partners that many return year after year, despite other calls on their budgets. This indicates the impact and excellent value for money our programmes and networks provide. The average length of time our 2024/25 schools had been in Challenge Partners was almost five years, and nearly 200 had been with us for six or more years. For school trusts the average tenure was three years.

For the first time we are able to share independent longitudinal analysis by one of our funders. Their calculations highlight how schools in Challenge Partners have bucked national trends when it comes to securing improvements in attainment for pupils eligible for Free School Meals over five years (2019-2024) despite the challenges of the Covid period.

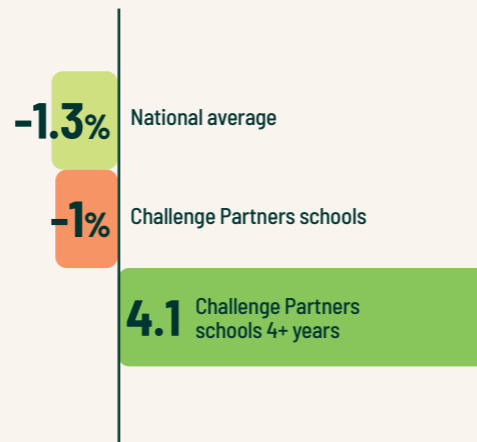
5 year change in Key Stage 2 scaled scores for disadvantaged primary pupils (2019-24)



Against a backdrop of national decline over the five-year period, Challenge Partners schools secured remarkable improvements.

We recognise that education is a complex system with multiple interconnected drivers, and the performance we measure is impacted by a range of factors. However, this analysis aligns with other indicators of impact - including independent evaluation, inspection data, school feedback, and our school and trust retention rates - and we are proud of the scale of impact we have in and beyond our partnership.

5 year change in proportion of disadvantaged secondary students passing GCSE (with a grade 4+) in English and Maths (2019-24)



Longstanding Challenge Partners secondary schools strongly outperformed the national average for disadvantaged secondary school pupils.

Quality Assurance Reviews

Our Quality Assurance Review drives continuous and sustained improvement in our schools, while enabling us to identify, accredit and share excellence, spreading strong and innovative practice quickly across the country.

Areas of Excellence

In 2024/25, 82 new Areas of Excellence were accredited to celebrate exceptional practice and share it more widely. This ensures effective support reaches the students in greatest need. In a resource-starved system, it means leaders neither face common challenges alone nor waste time looking for answers to problems others have already solved.

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF AREAS OF EXCELLENCE ACCREDITED
Curriculum	12
Equality and Inclusion	24
Leadership and Ethos	23
Outcomes for Pupils	2
Pupil Learning	5
School Improvement	1
Subjects	11
Teaching	4

Peer Evaluation Estimates

Schools can decide whether they wish to have an overall Peer Evaluation Estimate, which benchmarks and tracks where they are in their school improvement journey. In 2024/25, the majority of schools (200) opted to not receive written estimates for their QA Review reports, a slight increase from 2023/24.

Of 50 schools who received an Effective estimate in 23/24 and chose to include estimates as part of their 24/25 QAR:

20%
improved to be evaluated as Leading

80%
sustained their Effective estimate

Of 32 schools who received a Leading estimate in 23/24 and chose to include estimates as part of their 24/25 QAR:

97%
sustained their Leading estimate

3%
were estimated to be Effective

These figures indicate continuation of an historic trend seen in Ofsted inspection data whereby Challenge Partners schools have been far more likely than other schools to retain Ofsted Outstanding judgements or improve their performance to Good or Outstanding. We have not presented an analysis of Ofsted performance in this report because of ongoing changes to the inspection system, which make meaningful comparisons impossible.

ESTIMATE	PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOLS
Leading	20% (23/24: 21%)
Effective	22% (23/24: 33%)
Working Towards Effective	1% (23/24: 2%)
Not applicable/chose not to have an estimate	57% (23/24: 43%)



Knowledge Exchange and the National Network of Excellence

Too often in education best practice is trapped within individual schools, meaning pupils lose out, and leaders and teachers waste precious time and resources figuring out for themselves answers to problems that others have already solved. That is why identifying and sharing strong practice (and never mediocrity) is at the heart of everything we do.

Knowledge exchange is woven through every Challenge Partners programme, network, and event. Through this design, leading practice is shared between schools and trusts across the country, ensuring that every leader, teacher, and pupil benefits from the collective expertise of the system.

Areas of Excellence are accredited by peer and Lead Reviewers during Quality Assurance Reviews. Once accredited, schools and trusts are supported and encouraged to share their expertise with peers nationwide.

We intentionally foster knowledge exchange, building the moral and social capital that allows teachers and leaders to share lessons from their successes and work together to tackle sector-wide challenges.

Our Lead Reviewers and Facilitators play a vital role in this process. Their recruitment, training, and quality assurance underpin effective knowledge exchange, professional challenge, and leadership development at every level. Alongside the accreditation of Areas of Excellence, this is what distinguishes Challenge Partners and makes collaboration within our partnership so powerful.

Keynote speakers at our in-person events come from both inside and outside the education sector, and sometimes from beyond the UK. They bring research insights, lived experience, and business best practice, providing leaders with fresh inspiration and knowledge they might not otherwise access.

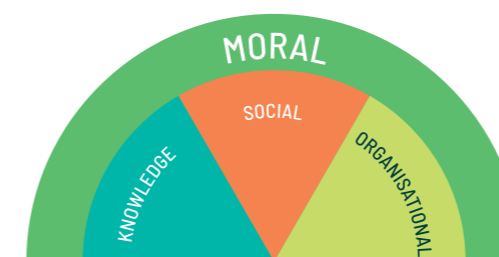
What happened in 2024/25?

Facilitator Training

In September 2024, we delivered our highly rated facilitation training for selected school and trust leaders. Now in its fifth year, this bespoke training provides outstanding preparation for those leading collaboration across our programmes and networks, ensuring that best practice is shared widely and the level of challenge is appropriate. It also serves as powerful professional development, building leadership capacity across the education system. Participants rated the training 4.7 out of 5 overall.



Lots of activities and opportunities to discuss. Even as a stand alone event this was incredibly useful Ben White, Head of School, Ibstock School, LiFE Multi Academy Trust



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.

National Network Conferences

Our National Network Conferences bring together school and trust leaders from across our national Network of Excellence in a collaborative online environment. They gain inspiration from keynote speakers, share insights and experiences in breakout sessions, and contribute their perspectives on current challenges and opportunities across the partnership and wider sector.

Our two National Network Conferences centred on our 2024/25 theme of Change and Resilience, inviting exploration of policy and accountability changes following the July 2024 election, and the resilience leaders would need to lead their teams through it. They featured thought-provoking speakers and received an impressive average satisfaction rating of 4.7 out of 5.

Attendees were able to interact with leading policy makers and thinkers, including Sir Kevan Collins, Non Executive Director at the DfE and Standards Advisor to the new government, speaking on **removing barriers to opportunity**; Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, who provided an **update on the review's work** and invited feedback; and **an educational policy perspective** was provided by our Honorary President Sir Jon Coles, Chief Executive of United Learning and former Director General for Schools at the DfE. Breakout rooms enabled leaders to collaborate on collective ideas, build resilience and discuss responses to the inputs.



It was good to know we were working with people who are shaping the work with government and current educational reviews. It was very interesting to hear the wide range of ideas from others. It is great to get some perspective! Julian Catterly, Deputy Headteacher, The Henslow and Evolution School

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



77% have implemented or changed something in their school to support their ongoing school improvement work after attending a previous National Network Conference



IMPACT STORY

Every step of the way: Growing as a leader and improving schools with over a decade of Challenge Partners' support

For more than twelve years, Louise Quaid has woven Challenge Partners into the fabric of her leadership and school improvement work. Now Executive Principal at Little Green Academy and Redwood Park Academy - both serving pupils with significant, complex and diverse needs in Portsmouth - she has used support from Challenge Partners to regrow a school, develop emerging leaders, strengthen professional culture and connect her staff to expertise far beyond their trust. Her journey demonstrates how hard-edged collaboration, sharing of excellent practice and national peer support can drive long-term improvement in different school settings, while nurturing confidence, wellbeing and professional curiosity along the way.



My relationship with Challenge Partners began early in my leadership career. My first Quality Assurance Review was a baptism of fire, sitting alongside experienced leaders from completely different schools and articulating my thinking out loud. It stretched me, but it was transformational. That early challenge shaped the leader I am today, which is why we continue to work with Challenge Partners. Schools evolve, and so must we. The reviews are now a core part of our annual cycle, helping us test our self-evaluation, develop new leaders and keep asking the right questions.



Challenge Partners has played a major role during some of the most difficult moments in my career. When Little Green Academy joined the trust, it had been judged inadequate by Ofsted and had seen seven headteachers in twelve years. Staff were exhausted by instability. Signing up to Challenge Partners was one of our first decisions. The network offered colleagues space to pause, reflect and talk professionally without feeling judged. For a struggling school, that was powerful.

A visit to a Challenge Partners special school serving pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs was particularly influential. Their approach to behaviour and wellbeing gave us the language, clarity and confidence we needed to move forward. That visit helped kick-start Little Green's turnaround. Today, it is a good school.

Over time, the fear of reviews has been replaced by pride. Staff now see them as support and celebration rather than judgement. The impact has extended beyond my own schools too. Reviewing elsewhere and taking part in the Leadership Residency Programme¹ has broadened my understanding of the system, and I've seen colleagues grow in confidence and strategic insight.

Our local Beacon Hub has strengthened collaboration between special schools across five local authorities, including much-needed attention to leadership wellbeing. And Challenge Partners provides something else I value deeply: advocacy. As a special school leader, I don't have a direct route into policy conversations. Challenge Partners does, and at a time of SEND reform, that matters.

If asked whether the partnership is worth it, I would say absolutely - but only if you engage fully. Visit schools, host reviews, send leaders out, join your Hub. It is some of the best professional development available.

Most importantly, Challenge Partners models the culture I want in my schools: collaborative, respectful and rooted in the belief that people want to do well. My journey would have been very different without it. It has shaped me, strengthened my schools and improved pupils' experiences. This is why we keep coming back.

¹ The Leadership Residency Programme is a Challenge Partners programme available to and run by our Hubs, which drives focused leadership development through purposeful immersion in another school.

Local Hub collaboration

Local collaboration is a crucial ingredient in Challenge Partners' impact. It allows schools to come together to address local priorities by harnessing their collective expertise and resources. By working together, schools in our Hubs achieve what no single school can do alone: sharing expertise, co-creating initiatives, and strengthening leadership. Their collaborative efforts improve teaching, develop leadership at all levels, and maximise outcomes for all pupils. By connecting Hubs to each other in our national Network of Excellence we ensure excellence flows between localities, combating the longstanding regional disparities that blight our system and country.

Hubs are led by Senior Partners and Hub Managers from high-performing schools or trusts, equipping them to model excellent practice, develop leadership within the Hub, and amplify impact across their Hub and beyond. Each Hub co-creates a Hub Action Plan each year, identifying local priorities and opportunities for impact. Hub Funding from Challenge Partners brings the plan to life, enabling schools to collaborate, innovate, and drive sustained improvement across their area.

What happened in 2024/25?

In 2024/25, our 34 Local Hubs demonstrated the power of sustained collaboration and shared purpose across our network. Each Hub reflected the character and priorities of its local area, which in turn shaped each Hub Action Plan. Despite regional differences, many Hubs converged around shared focus areas, the most prominent of which being Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), with nearly all Hubs working to improve outcomes, provision models, and leadership structures for pupils with additional needs. There was also a strong cross-Hub focus on leadership development at all levels, curriculum development, and improving outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils.

Together, our Hubs continued to evolve as strong local partnerships, building capacity and driving improvement across the wider Challenge Partners network. In the North West, Aspire Hub doubled in size in response to growing engagement across the region. This expansion brought together 64 schools of mixed phases, spanning from Greater Manchester to Merseyside, committed to collective improvement; their focus areas were curriculum design and development, leadership at all levels, and SEND.

Recognising middle-leadership development as a key priority, Inspire Hub, comprising nine primary schools located in Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Waltham Forest, launched a three-part series, Managing Difficult Conversations for Middle Leaders. In their end-of-year Hub Impact Report, Inspire Hub evidenced the value of this activity, sharing participants' reflections on how beneficial it was to have dedicated time for self-reflection, open dialogue, and practical, evidence-based strategies.

Hub quality became a focus for the central team in 2024/25, with the ambition to consistently support all Hubs in providing excellent value to schools whilst enabling each Hub to maintain their individuality. We established a Hub Advisory Board (HAB) to strengthen and support this work, ensuring our commitment to being practitioner-led. The HAB brought together representatives from eight different Hubs spanning Cornwall to the North East and included Senior Partners, Hub Managers, trust CEOs, Headteachers and Executive Headteachers. The group met three times across the year and provided critical input to distill our 'Big Bets' which will provide the greatest impact for Hub quality, consultation on the Hub trio initiative, and challenge to support our thinking in this space. They will continue to steer our Hub quality work in 2025/26.



“
When you are new to headship, engaging with other schools within the Hub provides invaluable opportunities to observe new approaches and reflect on your own systems Fawzia Govender, Headteacher, Little Heath School, part of Empower Hub

“
Our Hub Manager... is fantastic at leading, organising, and communicating with all of our schools. She is constantly in touch, supporting and promoting opportunities. The success of the Hub is down to who is leading it, and she does an excellent job Heather Mahony, Head of Sixth Form, Riverside School, part of East London Hub



Quality Assurance Review

Our flagship Quality Assurance Review (QA Review) drives school- and system-level improvements to benefit all pupils. It catalyses school improvement, equipping schools with collegiate insights and actionable next steps, while providing unrivalled experiential leadership development for the leadership team of the host school and the visiting reviewers from other schools in the network. The programme identifies excellent practice to be systematically shared so more pupils can benefit, while incidental connections and peer learning opportunities are exponential.

Over three days, the QA Review rigorously 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, providing a dedicated assessment of how well schools do this. From 2025/26, the QA Review also evaluates how well schools promote engagement and inclusion.

Through the process, schools and visiting reviewers work collaboratively under the guidance of an expert Lead Reviewer 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 headteacher and senior leaders to review other schools within the partnership, offering continuous professional development for everyone involved.

What happened in 2024/25?

We delivered 408 QA Reviews: 182 primary, 127 secondary, six all-through, 89 special, three alternative provision and one post-16. Satisfaction rates matched last year's record levels from both host schools and reviewers.

To address the long-standing challenge of securing full review teams, this year marked the first time all reviewers selected the review they wished to attend using our reviewer selection tool. Alongside this, we introduced the Reviewer Commitment Agreement, which ensures that reviewers fully commit to the reviews they choose, helping to secure a strong and reliable team for every school. This added an extra layer of accountability, resulting in 91% of schools having a full review team – a substantial increase from 74% in 2022/23.

The headlines:

97% of host schools and 99% of reviewers reported they were satisfied or highly satisfied with their experience



99% 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



90% of schools said participating in the QA Review had left their school in a better place



81% of school leaders agreed that taking part in the QA Review allowed them to identify areas for development in their school that they were not necessarily able to identify or articulate before



1200 senior leaders attended reviews



In November 2024, we launched our practitioner-led Task and Finish Group to oversee the next refinements to the QA Review and our other school improvement programmes. The Group brings together Lead Reviewers, behavioural insight experts, and school leaders from across the country, including a member of the Department for Education Headteacher Reference Group. The inclusion of representatives from outside Challenge Partners added diversity of perspective, enabling rigorous challenge and ensuring decisions reflected broader, big-picture thinking. The group met termly to consider how the QA Review should continue to evolve alongside changes in the educational landscape, so that it remains impactful, relevant, and delivers the best possible experience for schools.

Through these meetings, we identified key updates for 2025/26, which we then worked up with our Operational Working Group of Lead Reviewers. By September 2025 we were able to implement changes to the QA Review including:

- introducing descriptors for the 'Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and/or pupils with additional needs' section of the QA Review report to provide increased consistency and focus;
- a new section on engagement and inclusion which enables hosts schools to explore a target group of vulnerable pupils according to their specific context; and
- updating our Area of Excellence criteria to provide clarity for schools.



This is my first year as Executive Headteacher, and as such, I used the review to empower my emerging senior leaders, practising my skills of delegation! It provided me with an opportunity at times to sit back and observe the process and to watch my leaders in action. This in turn has provided me with useful insights for the next development steps. It always feels like a privilege being part of a QA Review! It is a joy to see our school through the eyes of others, and to have dedicated time and space to engage in deep professional conversations and reflections
 Claire Purcell, Executive Headteacher, Dulwich Hamlet Junior School

IMPACT STORY

How Hope Academy gained new connections and implemented golden nuggets in their first year with Challenge Partners

Marie Adams, Principal of Hope Academy in St Helens, leads a joint denominational academy serving the Archdiocese and Diocese of Liverpool. The academy opened in 2011 and currently educates around 1,350 young people aged 11-16. Around 32% of their students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, 22% have special educational needs and 56 students have EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plans to support their special needs). Hope Academy joined Challenge Partners in 2024 alongside all other schools in All Saints Multi-Academy Trust. They hosted their first Quality Assurance Review in summer 2025.



The QA Review was genuinely developmental for staff at every level. The coaching style mattered. There were no judgments, only professional dialogue that affirmed strengths, probed thinking and clarified next steps. Crucially, it strengthened our existing plans rather than adding new initiatives, and we now have clear actions for next year.



One tangible change was from discussing assessment for pupils with higher needs. We have since introduced learning ladders for SEND students with higher needs from a model shared on the review. It means we can report and celebrate incremental progress more meaningfully. It is now part of our assessment approach from September 2025.

Serving as a reviewer elsewhere has been powerful CPD (continuing professional development). Working with a team of professionals you have not met before, allocating responsibilities, agreeing areas of focus and holding high-quality conversations builds a different set of leadership muscles.

The benefits have spread well beyond the senior team. Through QA Reviews and Aspire Hub activity, colleagues have brought back ideas that are already improving practice. A standout was Feversham High School in Bradford, whose annotated seating plans we have adopted trust-wide, strengthening inclusive pedagogy and student progress. We often say we have been magpies, spotting golden nuggets and adapting them to our context.

Our engagement with the Aspire Hub has also been valuable. We have broadened our networks, arranging several follow-up visits after Hub meetings. We visited Hillside High in Bootle, a best practice school for reading, which gave us a clear sense of what excellent looks like and how to accelerate our own journey.

Challenge Partners has even shaped our internal systems. We have aligned our QA model with theirs because it is robust, humane and improvement-focused.

In short, Challenge Partners has given us clarity, confidence and pace. It has affirmed where we are strong, sharpened our focus on SEND, improved classroom practice and broadened professional learning across the academy. I am very glad we joined.

SEND Developmental Peer Review

Our pioneering SEND Developmental Peer Review was developed and successfully piloted in 2023/24 in response to demand from school leaders. It supports mainstream schools to improve practice and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). At the systemic level it is giving us unique insight into what works for learners with SEND in mainstream schools, innovative approaches, and how the system can be improved - insight we have shared with the Education Select Committee and DfE as they consider SEND policy reforms.

The programme is based on our tried-and-tested review and improvement methodologies and was developed with global SEND expert David Bartram OBE. It brings mainstream 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 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 2024/25?

Forty-three schools – 28 primary and 15 secondary – took part in the first full year of the programme. The cohort spanned from Southampton to Manchester, encompassing schools from small village settings in Wiltshire and Buckinghamshire to large, diverse urban schools in London and Liverpool. Each group of schools was supported by an expert SEND Lead Facilitator, who was recruited, trained and quality assured by Challenge Partners.

Visit days

Immersive school visit days enabled visiting SENCOs and school leaders to observe examples of high-quality provision for SEND pupils, inspiring improvements in their own settings, and leaving the host school with valuable external perspective and actionable next steps. We received incredibly positive feedback and satisfaction levels were high, with both host schools and visiting school leaders rating visit days 4.8/5.

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



91% had seen, learned or discussed something that will support their own school to improve SEND provision in the short term



Whole cohort events

Our whole cohort events were an opportunity for school leaders and SENCOs to connect and learn from one another, gain expertise, and take new ideas back to their schools. They featured inspiration and provocation from speakers such as Amar Latif OBE, who discussed his lived experience as a blind person. School leaders shared examples of strong practice from holistic early years intervention to building an aspirational post-16 culture for SEND learners. We launched the programme with an in-person event in October and concluded it with a joint wrap-up event bringing together participants from our three non-QA Review school improvement programmes in June. Feedback for both events was strong - with an average satisfaction rating of 4.7/5 for the launch and 4.6/5 for the wrap-up.

“
The review totally blew us away and we were both grateful for and humbled by the comments made by our visitors. It was such a positive and reaffirming experience for us all. This day will sustain us for months to come! Where there were gaps identified, these we were already aware of and therefore this showed our self evaluation was accurate too”
Matt White, Executive Head, St Marie's Catholic Primary School

IMPACT STORY

Challenge Partners breaks professional isolation and drives meaningful, practical improvements in inclusive SEND practice

When you speak with Catrin Eyers, you immediately meet a headteacher who refuses to let isolation limit ambition. Leading West Earham Junior School, a standalone local authority-maintained primary in rural Norfolk, she serves a community where half of pupils are eligible for pupil premium, 22 pupils have Education Health and Care Plans to support their special needs, and a third are on the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) register. Catrin has built improvement in her school through curiosity, collaboration and intentional professional learning. Discovering Challenge Partners has given her a national network to learn from, contribute to and grow alongside.

“

Last year we undertook the SEND Developmental Peer Review for the first time, working as a trio with two very different schools in Barking and Dagenham and Ealing. On paper we had little in common, but that diversity became our greatest strength. The protected time for heads and SENCOs to visit each other's schools was genuinely invaluable, with even the train journeys becoming space to think.

We began with a tough, honest self-evaluation, but the real transformation happened in the triad conversations. With seven leaders in the room (two from each school and the Lead Facilitator), we were challenged, supported and often encouraged to recognise strengths we had overlooked. It was a safe space without ever being soft.



Seeing each other's schools gave us detailed and strategic insights: leadership structures, inclusion models, Teaching Assistant deployment and approaches to commissioning Educational Psychology and Occupational Therapy. We magpied ideas shamelessly, from highly strategic Occupational Therapy use to superbly embedded colourful semantics. We shared our own Daily Inclusion Plans, compared books as an internal moderation exercise, and picked up tiny but brilliant practicalities, such as keeping an Ofsted “where-are-they-up-to” tracker.

The process created a true professional community. We left each visit buzzing, and even when Dame Sue John (Executive Director of Challenge Partners) attended, it still felt like a place where you could openly say, “We are not there yet” and get honest, useful answers.

We made immediate changes. We invested in InPrint (software for creating accessible learning and communication materials) to help teachers adapt materials quickly, and we reshaped our Educational Psychology contract to include more Occupational Therapist time. This has led to targeted sensory diets and sharper routines for pupils with additional needs.

The whole-cohort event also shifted something fundamental in my thinking: moving beyond the old binary of mainstream versus special. More children with complex needs are in mainstream, and our job is to be truly inclusive. This has filtered through staff practice, with more neurodiversity-friendly environments, from wobble cushions and fiddle tools, to flexible timetables and a low-stimulation room.

Although new to Challenge Partners, the impact has been significant. I have taken part in Quality Assurance Reviews in Liverpool and Nottingham, and the combination of protected time, open challenge, and the freedom to magpie good ideas has already made our provision stronger. I genuinely cannot think of a single negative.



Growing the Top

Growing the Top was founded on the belief that no school remains excellent by standing still. It is carefully designed to support upwards convergence: stretching and harnessing practice in high-performing schools, building insight and capacity to lift the whole system. By paying attention to performance at the top end, the programme makes a distinctive contribution within a system where most resources are rightly directed towards tackling underperformance rather than extending excellence.

The Growing the Top programme brings together strong schools to collaborate and drive improvement within their own settings and across the wider education system. Through facilitated in-school visit days, headteachers and senior leaders explore and learn from each other's systemic leading practice, providing support and constructive challenge to stimulate further improvement. At whole cohort events, participants connect with the wider group and draw on expertise from other sectors.

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

What happened in 2024/25?

Twenty-six schools took part: six primary, nine secondary and 11 special schools, spanning locations from Bradford to Portsmouth and Suffolk. Schools were carefully matched using a range of factors, forming trios or quads across different localities. Care was taken to ensure that every school had something to share and something to learn, with strengths in one school aligned to challenges in another wherever possible.

Visit days

Experiential visit days enabled host and visiting leaders to explore areas of systemic leading practice and address shared school improvement challenges. Facilitated discussions encouraged leaders to reflect, challenge each other's thinking, and build sustained professional relationships. Overall satisfaction was overwhelmingly positive, with host school leaders rating visit days at 4.7/5 and visiting school leaders at 4.9/5.

Following a visit day:

86% of participants said they would use something they had seen, learned or discussed in their school improvement journey in the short term



94% planned to use something they had seen, learned or discussed in the longer term



96% had seen or learned something they wanted to share with other senior leaders in their school



Whole cohort events

Whole cohort events provided opportunities for participants to connect and hear from expert speakers, including Lee Elliot Major OBE, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, as well as to learn from strong practice through carousel sessions. The in-person launch event, held alongside the Extending Leading Practice programme, received positive feedback with an average satisfaction score of 4.4/5.

In response to feedback from the previous year, we did not hold a mid-year whole cohort event in 2024/25. Further innovation included merging the in-person wrap-up event with the SEND Developmental Peer Review programme to encourage greater cross-programme collaboration and celebration. We were delighted that this contributed to an increased overall satisfaction score of 4.6/5.



I found the day to be a great opportunity to take time to learn from and think about the excellence of other schools and how some of this could be translated into my own setting. This is quite a unique time given the very hectic world of education where this kind of high level professional reflection is rarely possible Laura Shaw, Assistant Headteacher, Glebe School

IMPACT STORY

Developing leaders at every level through Growing the Top and Hub activity

Kamini Mistry is the Headteacher of Sudbury Primary School in Wembley, a large, inclusive and multicultural four-form-entry primary with 930 pupils. With 42 languages spoken, 85% of pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL) and a high number of Education Health and Care Plans (for high-need pupils with special educational needs), Sudbury is known for its strong commitment to meeting diverse needs. Kamini joined the school as Deputy Head in 2012 and became Headteacher in 2019. Since joining Challenge Partners in 2018/19, she and her team have benefited from learning from practice in other settings, most recently through the Growing the Top programme.



This year we joined the Growing the Top programme for the first time, and it was outstanding professional development for both me and my Deputy Head. The best part was visiting schools outside our local area. Seeing high-quality early years practice, well-embedded forest school provision and strong approaches to phonics and writing helped us think differently about our own work. Another school's focus on consistency and oracy was also hugely relevant given our high EAL population.



Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is our biggest systemic challenge, and Growing the Top gave us space to reflect on our provision with partners who understood the pressures. As a result, we have expanded our Rainbow Room offer for high-needs autistic pupils, creating separate spaces for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. We've improved our sensory room, made better use of our sensory garden and soft play, and strengthened the overall wraparound support for our most vulnerable children.

We also picked up smaller but powerful ideas. Our early years team refined their indoor-outdoor continuous provision, ensuring consistency across all four reception classes. And we've introduced bespoke reading corners based on a single class text, an idea we loved from another school. Pupils are noticeably more engaged with reading because of it.

The whole-cohort conferences were equally inspiring. Bennie Kara's session on diversity in the curriculum really resonated with me and with our school context, while Amar Latif's keynote on resilience was unforgettable. Through the Chrysalis Hub, our staff have accessed excellent training in SEND, EAL and middle leadership, and hosting a Middle Leaders' Quality Assurance Review (MLQAR) here at Sudbury was a fantastic development opportunity for our English and phonics leads. Two of my deputy heads also trained as facilitators and led an MLQAR elsewhere, which has strengthened their leadership significantly.

Challenge Partners continues to bring real value to Sudbury. Growing the Top helped us sharpen our SEND provision, refresh our early years practice and strengthen our leadership at every level. It has opened doors, built confidence and given us ideas we can implement straight away. I'm genuinely glad we joined the programme.

Extending Leading Practice

Extending Leading Practice (ELP) was launched in 2021 to provide support for schools aiming to move from good to great in line with our upwards convergence model. After three years of delivery as a dedicated programme, participants and practitioners on our Advisory Group recommended merging it with Growing the Top. From September 2025, Growing the Top and Extending Leading Practice were merged into one programme - under the name of 'Growing the Top'. The merger was designed to increase opportunities for schools previously rated as Ofsted Good or Outstanding to work together, while intelligent matching would ensure the schools in each trio or quad feel like genuine peers.

What happened in 2024/25?

Twenty-eight schools took part in the third year of this programme - four secondary, eight special, and 16 primary schools. They spanned from Middlesbrough to Bournemouth, 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

Experiential visit days enabled host and peer leaders to explore areas of good practice and address school improvement challenges. The host school also gained input and support on their chosen school improvement initiative. The overall satisfaction score was strong, with an average rating of 4.7/5 from host school leaders, and 4.8/5 from visiting school leaders.

Following a visit day:

85% of participants said they will use something they have seen, learned or discussed in their own school's school improvement journey in the short term



91% plan to use something they have seen, learned or discussed in their own school's school improvement journey in the longer term



97% said they feel confident in how to move their School Improvement Initiative forwards to ensure success



Whole cohort events

The Extending Leading Practice programme shared its in-person launch event with the Growing the Top cohort and its in-person wrap-up event with both the Growing the Top and SEND Developmental Peer Review cohorts to promote networking and collaboration across programmes. Despite positive narrative feedback from participants, the ELP cohort recorded the lowest overall satisfaction score across the programmes, with 4.3/5 for both events.



Today's visit was valuable as it allowed me to reflect on my own setting, the current curriculum, and the pathways in place. I was also able to consider how some of the approaches used in this setting could be adapted to enhance my own practice. Additionally, the visit sparked new questions for further reflection on our curriculum journey so far. Visiting was a wonderful experience and I felt I could be open with the group

Laura Parker, Quality of Education Lead, Charlton Park Academy

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.



In Autumn 2024, after four years of delivery as Jubilee Networks, a practitioner-led decision was made to increase our local collaboration opportunities through integrating the three existing Jubilee Networks into Challenge Partners Hubs, or allowing them to re-organise as a new Hub. This was based on feedback from JN schools on what they value most highly from their local network and discussion with JN facilitators.

We are pleased that from 2025/26 onwards, all schools will have all the benefits of local collaboration through Hub activities. Within a Hub, schools have the opportunity to collaborate within or across phases, hear from guest speakers, discuss live issues, share leading practice, and deepen their local network, thereby increasing support for leaders at all levels.

What happened in 2024/25?

In 2024/25, three Jubilee Networks were in operation: Midlands Primary (13 schools), Midlands Secondary (17 schools) and South Central Secondary (7 schools). After a virtual launch event, schools in each group took it in turns to host four meetings across the year, showcasing areas of strength and areas for development. This provided inspiration for visiting headteachers to stimulate improvement in their own schools, while the host school benefited from feedback and questions to develop their approach further. BTS Spark coaches delivered tailored leadership inputs during the afternoon of two of the four network meetings.

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 positive, with an average satisfaction rating of 4.8/5 for the practitioner facilitation of each meeting, and an overall satisfaction rating of 4.7/5 for the meetings overall.

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



97% agreed 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



Trust Peer Review

Our trust programmes inspire improvements that will make a difference to thousands of pupils served by each trust, driving impact at scale. They provide support to trust leaders and capture examples of strong practice in a sector which is still evolving and has a relatively small evidence bank of what works.

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 2024/25?

Five TPRs took place in this seventh year of our programme. Thirty-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.

The headlines:

95% of TPR Reviewers reported gaining experience and knowledge that they could take back to their own trust



100% of host trust respondents felt that participating in the Trust Peer Review will improve the life chances of pupils, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with SEND



100% of TPR Reviewers agreed that participating in the Trust Peer Review process contributed to their leadership development and CPD



In 2024/25 we held Trust Peer Review training in the spring term for the first time. The switch from the autumn term boosted attendance - with 38 trust leaders taking part - and ensured training happened closer to scheduled reviews, giving participants the opportunity to apply their knowledge while it was still fresh. The training was also redesigned to be less theoretical and more experiential, giving attendees greater opportunity to develop the key skills required.

During the training, participants experienced a host trust presentation and practised formulating questions as they would on an actual review. They also took part in sessions on how to deliver the appropriate level of challenge, as well as practical techniques for collecting evidence. This practical approach helped participants build confidence, hone their review skills, and take away insights they could apply both in their reviews and within their own trusts, strengthening the overall quality of the Trust Peer Review process and building systemic leadership capacity.

Building balanced and complete review teams has historically proved a challenge. In 2024/25, we adopted a new process aligned with our QA Review approach, which enabled us to assemble more balanced teams, ensuring diversity across roles, trusts, specialisms, and regions. This improvement was highlighted as a real strength, particularly by Lead Reviewers, who praised the impact and importance of this development.



It is always beneficial to go and see and learn from other Trusts. It is also invaluable to meet reviewers from all parts of the country often with similar issues and different perspectives and insights Catherine Lester, Executive Director, LEO Academy Trust



IMPACT STORY

Accelerating improvement thanks to challenge and new insight gained through Trust Peer Review

Jill Messham is the CEO of Vantage Multi Academy Trust, a Church of England mixed phase trust spanning ten schools across Bolton, Salford, Trafford, Manchester and Knowsley. Founded in 2012, the trust has a strong record of turning around inspection-graded 'Inadequate' and 'Requires Improvement' schools, a legacy Jill is proud to sustain and build on.



I joined Vantage in September 2023, and my first weeks were extraordinary. Days before I started, one of our primary schools burned down. The entire site was lost, yet within 48 hours we had all 550 pupils back in face-to-face education in community spaces we pulled together at speed. Seventeen weeks later, we opened a full Education Village on the original site. My first year was dominated by crisis management, and only recently have I had space to look ahead.

The Trust Peer Review came at exactly the right time. It clarified what needed to happen next, validated some priorities and challenged others. It brought real confidence and focus.



My relationship with Challenge Partners goes back to my time at Knowsley Council, where we funded schools to join the network. I saw the impact first-hand. It lifted schools out of their immediate context and gave them a national, practice-based benchmark. That experience stayed with me, and when I joined Vantage I knew our leaders needed the same outward-facing perspective.

Hosting the review was exceptionally positive. Our lead reviewer set a collaborative tone, and the process felt purposeful rather than burdensome. The team understood our fire context without letting it become an excuse. They balanced empathy with high expectations and challenged our thinking in constructive, energising ways. Their insights confirmed our self-evaluation while pushing us to move faster.

One major shift came from reconsidering how our nine primaries and stand-alone secondary work together. We realised we had been overthinking it. Instead of seeing the secondary as separate, the review helped us see the expertise it could offer all our primaries. That mindset shift is already shaping next year's plans, from transition support to joint curriculum work.

Professional development has been powerful too. One senior leader who joined a review elsewhere described it as incredibly insightful, and our principals' visits have broadened thinking across the trust. Relationships formed through the process have continued, sparking further collaboration.

Looking back, the review brought energy, clarity and momentum. It accelerated our shift towards a more outward-looking, collaborative and ambitious culture. Most importantly, it reminded us that real improvement happens through professional dialogue, shared expertise and honest, reflective challenge. That is exactly what Challenge Partners offers, and it is why this work matters.

Trust Leaders' Network



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

TLN members benefit from a carefully-crafted programme of activities, each focusing on a different aspect of trust development or practice. Facilitated trust visit days give visiting trust leaders practical takeaways, space for meaningful discussion and collaboration, and insights into new and innovative practice, while challenging the host trust to articulate and extend their thinking. Interactive webinars are a chance to learn from experts outside the sector. There is space to discuss big picture ideas around policy and practice at our national Trust Leaders' Conference, and to strengthen leadership and personal impact on our two-day Trust Leaders' Residential.

What happened in 2024/25?

In the fifth year of the TLN, our membership remained at 41 trusts. While the majority were based in London and the South of England, we also had a strong presence in the North West and Midlands, further enhancing our geographical spread. Most trusts were small to medium in size, with four larger trusts comprising more than 20 schools.

We carefully selected four trusts across the country to host visits throughout the year to explore a broad range of topics in diverse settings. Many thanks to Futura Learning Partnership, LEO Academy Trust, United Learning and Solent Academies Trust for hosting. In 2024/25 we introduced key themes for our trust visits, which were identified by network members and revisited at each event. These included SEND and inclusion, trust growth and mergers, organisational strategy and curriculum, and navigating policy change. Each visit presented specific expertise while collectively addressing broader themes in trust leadership, encouraging discussions that support both immediate and long-term development.

We also hosted two webinars, which had a significant increase in participant satisfaction. This was due to us acting on feedback around how to structure the webinars to maximise value for participants - including by allowing more time for them to reflect together and learn from each other - as well as the high quality of the speakers:

- **Questions every trust leader should be asking about AI, with Lucien Bowater, CEO, Olex.AI**
- **What can we learn from the private sector about mergers, acquisitions and growth? with Anna Grotberg, Partner, EY-Parthenon**

Our annual Trust Leaders' Residential is typically a high point in the TLN calendar, creating a unique space for trust leaders to connect, gain perspective on challenges and explore personal leadership. This year's residential again garnered praise from participants for the high-quality networking, reconnection with TLN peers, and the open dialogue and shared vulnerability that characterise Challenge Partners. Given the high standards we set ourselves, the average satisfaction score of 3.8/5 was disappointing. In response, we immediately sought deeper feedback with a follow-up survey and convened a steering group of participants, chaired by our CEO, to shape the 2026 Residential. Their input has prompted a new approach to structure and facilitation for 2026, including the introduction of provocation from an external speaker. As a result, we anticipate a return to previously-high satisfaction scores at our Residential in February 2026.

Our eighth annual Trust Leaders' Conference explored our 2024/25 theme of Change and Resilience. Feedback was excellent, with an overall satisfaction score of over 4.9/5. Both satisfaction and attendance were our highest ever for a Trust Leaders' Conference, with a record 70 trust and education leaders joining us for this interactive event. They heard an update from Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, and provocation from Sir Jon Coles, Chief Executive of United Learning and Challenge Partners' Honorary President, around why we should avoid 'governmentality'. Jaz Ampaw-Farr, author, resilience ninja, positive disruptor and Co-Founder of Be Human First Ltd, rounded out the day brilliantly with her input on 'ambitious resilience'.

As ever, the interaction was as important as the input and delegates were able to reflect together on what they heard before questioning and challenging Becky and Jon through a panel discussion. There was plenty of opportunity to learn from each other during our carousels of leading and innovative practice. These were hosted by trust leaders and sector experts who brought the theme of Change and Resilience to life, offering practical take-away strategies on everything from people development and culture, to AI, and supporting vulnerable pupils.

Trust Leaders' Conference

100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they heard/learnt something that will influence how they work within their own trust



96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Attending the Trust Leaders' Conference will lead to improvements in the trust, positively impacting pupils' life chances"



87% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Attending the Trust Leaders' Conference will support our trust to improve the life chances of our pupils, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with SEND"



- The overall satisfaction score for the trust visits was 4.9/5. 97% of trust leaders planned to use something they had learned/discussed in their own trust in the longer term.
- The overall satisfaction score for the webinars was 4.8/5, which is a notable increase from 4.4/5 in 2023/24. 100% of respondents learned something that they plan to take back to their own trust.

“The day was truly inspirational and allowed me some clarity over how I would like to proceed within our trust in the more effective use of digital technology and the implementation of AI. I have already started to implement the use of AI to simplify guided reading texts

Trust leader about the LEO Academy Trust Visit

Change and resilience: Highlights from the 2024/25 partnership year



Laura Lewis-Williams, Managing Director

Since joining Challenge Partners seven years ago, I have seen its remarkable potential to drive lasting change across the education system. At its heart lies a simple yet powerful idea: connecting school and trust leaders, locally and nationally, in meaningful ways so that all children can thrive.

Last year, that vision came to life every day through the dedication and commitment of our schools, trusts and Hubs. Our theme, Change and Resilience, was particularly resonant in 2024/25 as leaders navigated increasing complexity, from new government priorities to evolving Ofsted frameworks to ongoing budget pressures. Across the country, from Cornwall to Doncaster, Hubs flourished as engines of local and regional collaboration.

Highlights included the establishment of the practitioner-led Hub Advisory Board, providing guidance and support to ensure the continued quality and impact of Hubs. Our North East event, Collaborating for SEND Excellence in Mainstream Schools, brought together 138 school and trust leaders from across the region to share practical strategies for addressing increasingly complex SEND needs. Nine Hubs delivered the Middle Leader QA Review, giving middle leaders the distinctive development opportunity to strengthen peer review and evaluation skills.

Reflecting our value of innovation, we also trialled AI-enabled approaches to extract and synthesise key information on school effectiveness from QA Review reports. This culminated in our State of the Nation Report, offering a national view of strengths and challenges across the partnership, alongside 10 pilot Hub-level analyses to support area-based collaboration.

We embedded what we call 'everyday excellence' to ensure a high-quality experience for our schools and trusts, resulting in our best-ever feedback scores across all activities (4.8+/5) and 99% of schools reported that taking part in a QA Review left their school in a better place.

Staying true to our commitment to continuous improvement, we also innovated and simplified our suite of programmes and networks to maximise their impact. The QA Review was refined to place greater emphasis on disadvantage, pupil engagement and inclusion, while better recognising and sharing examples of excellence across the partnership. We prepared to merge Growing the Top and Extending Leading Practice from September 2025 to broaden opportunities for strong schools to collaborate. Meanwhile, our plans to integrate Jubilee Networks into Hubs from autumn 2025 aimed to deepen local collaboration.

After more than seven years at CP and over two decades in education, I've never been more optimistic in the power of peer-to-peer collaboration. When we share, support and innovate together, we create lasting improvement - and, most importantly, better life chances for every child.



Board of Trustees

Our trustees ensure that Challenge Partners continues to work towards our aims and that the charity remains financially and legally compliant. The board meets five times a year and has been chaired by Susanna Eastham since April 2025. 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.



Susanna Eastham (Chair of Trustees since April 2025) Global Knowledge Management Services Leader, EY



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



Luci Ingram (Senior Independent Director 2024/25) General Counsel for group functions, Johnson Matthey PLC



Arwel Jones (third & final trustee term ended April 2025; remains as Independent Member of Finance and Audit Committee) Education Consultant & retired Headteacher



Gary Lewis CEO, Lighthouse Schools Partnership



Candice Lott Owner & Founder of The Digital Type



Vijita Patel (trustee link to EAG) Principal, Swiss Cottage School, Development & Research Centre



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



Pavandeep Bansal Microsoft Enterprise Architect, Avanade



Alison Beane OBE (Lead Trustee for Safeguarding, Chair of Nominations Committee) Retired CEO of a special school trust & retired Challenge Partners Senior Partner



Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE (ex officio)



Chris Davison (Chair until April 2025; third & final trustee term ended April 2025; remains as Fundraising Adviser)

Practitioner leadership

Challenge Partners is proudly practitioner-led, with our Educational Advisory Group (EAG), pictured on this page, providing a consistent practitioner voice at the heart of our work. The group plays a critical role in shaping our strategy and the range and quality of support we provide to schools and trusts. In 2024/25, the EAG helped inform new innovations, strengthen our Hub improvement work, and guide our strategy refresh.

Our programmes, networks and local Hubs are shaped by practitioners to ensure they directly address the needs of schools and trusts. In 2024/25, our practitioner advisory groups gave valuable feedback and input into the structure, development and delivery of our programmes and networks, including the newly created Task and Finish Group steering our Quality Assurance Review, Growing the Top and Extending Leading Practice, the SEND Advisory Group providing expert guidance to the development of our SEND Developmental Peer Review, and the Hub Advisory Board shaping our Hub quality work. We are grateful and pleased to celebrate on the following pages all those practitioners who generously contributed their time and expertise alongside demanding day jobs in schools and trusts, as well as our QA Review and Trust Peer Review Lead Reviewers, funders and partner organisations.



Lisa Bond, Headteacher, Treloar School



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



Jayne Jardine MBE, CEO, The Rise Partnership Trust



Gulbanu Kader Director of Education, The Mead Educational Trust



Ann Marie Mulkerins CEO, Middlesex Learning Trust



Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE, CEO, Mulberry Schools Trust



Marie Orton Headteacher, Kings Heath Secondary School



Toby Sutherland Headteacher, St Clement Danes School



Paul Watson CEO, Preston Hedges Trust



Andrew Wilson CEO, OAK Multi Academy Trust

Thanks & acknowledgments

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



Private donors who wish to remain anonymous

Our Education Advisory Group (page 45)

Our Programme and Network Advisory Group members

Task and Finish Group: Fiona Abankwah, Nick Butt, Lal Chadeesingh, Mary Collins, Simon Corner, Antony Edkins, Rachel Hargreaves, Gee Kader, Gary Phillips

Trusts Advisory Group: Dave Baker, Sharon Burt, Michele Marr, Kieran Osborne OBE, Sarah Ridley, Carolyn Robson CBE, Nav Sanghara, Jan Shadick, Paul Watson, Annie Wiles

SEND Advisory Group: David Bartram OBE, Sharon Burt, Claire Byron, Mike Finlay, Margaret Mulholland, Laura Page, Ruth Sturdy, Jonny Uttley, David Williams

Hub Advisory Board: Emma Ford, Rachel Hargreaves, David Morley, Sam Newton, Simeon Royle, Andy Wilson, Sarah Wilson

Our Lead Reviewers and practitioner facilitators who support the delivery of our programmes

Extending Leading Practice: Tom Andrews, Alan Campbell, Clare Cross, Ed Hillyard, Andrea Ives, Sarah Kinnaird, Alison Moller, Sarah Naylor, Sally Newing, Paul Thomas

Growing the Top: Mel Bignold, Isabell Fisher, Kevin Flanagan, Andy Roberts, Samantha Saville, Elizabeth Smith, Ben White, Andria Zafirakou

SEND Developmental Peer Review: Claire Byron, Jayne Clarke, Kendra Del Rio, Tamara Dexter, Niall Fallon, Jayne Franklin, Jonathan Gibson, Sarah Goosani, John Lamb, Adam Lowing, Kate Moyse, Laura Page, Nicola Smallwood, David Williams

Trust Leaders Network: Kieran Osborne OBE and Carolyn Robson CBE

Trust Peer Review: Mary Davies OBE, Kieran Osborne OBE, Carolyn Robson CBE, Tim Withers

Quality Assurance Review

Gerlinde Achenbach, Wendy Adeniji, Georgina Atkinson, Mark Bagust, Martin Bertulis, Ray Biglin, Tony Birch, Jeremy Bird, Richard Blackmore, David Boyle, Glyn Bradley-Peat, Carol Brammer, Emma Breckenridge, Julie Bourdon-Pierre, Rob Bourdon-Pierre, Gill Burrows, Stuart Busby, Nick Butt, Melanie Clapton, Lindsay Clark, David Cox, Rob Crompton, Anne Cullum, Jo Curd, Karen Draper, Antony Edkins, David Evans, Andrew Foster, Sally Garrett, Daniel Gee, Jamie Hallums, Christine Horrocks, Fyfe Johnston, Lynton Karmock Golds, Catherine Kickham, Catherine Lester, Mike Loveridge, Adam Lowing, Pauline MacMillan, Bogusia Matusiak-Varley, Helena McVeigh, Peggy Murphy, Marie Neave, David New, Cathy Parkinson, Imtiaz Patel, Jo Peach, Adrian Percival, Jason Philips, Calvin Pike, John Sanderson, Paula Sargent, Bernard Senier, Tim Sherriff, Paul Topping, Sean Trimble, Yvonne Watts, John Weeds, Susan Willman, Deborah Wring

Senior Partners (SP) and Hub Managers (HM)

Ambition South Hub (South West): Sara Spivey (SP), Lucy Wilby (SP) and Laura Peterkin-Aldred (HM)

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

Aspire Hub (North West): Karen Bramwell (SP), Amanda Ryan (SP), Elliot Costas-Walker (SP), Simon Corner (SP), Emma Ford (HM) and Simon Goodwin (HM)

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

Beacon Hub (South of England): Sharon Burt (SP) and Louise Quaid (HM)

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

Camden Hub: Rob Earrey (SP) and Samuel Drake (HM)

Charter School Educational Trust Hub (London): Cassie Buchanan OBE (SP), Gary Phillips (HM) and Lucy Ellis (HM)

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

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

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

Cornwall Hub: Simeon Royle (SP) and Robert Finch (HM)

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

East Coast Hub: Anna Mears (SP)

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

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

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

Haberdashers' Trust South Hub (London):

Jan Shadick (SP) and Kafilat Agboola (HM)

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

Impact Alliance Hub (London): Stephen Whittle (SP) and Michelle Toner (HM)

Inspire Hub (London): Paul Claydon (SP) and Shahnaz Ali (HM)

Leigh Hub (South East): Tracey Trusler (SP) and Rebecca Roberts (HM)

Lighthouse Hub (South West): Phil Cocks (SP) and Natalie Wilcox (SP)

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

North East Mainstream Hub: Kate Reid (SP) and Philip Sanderson (SP)

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

North West Hub: David Nightingale (SP) and David Nightingale (HM)

Shared Horizons Hub (London): Jayne Jardine MBE (former LR) (SP) and Louise Kimber (HM)

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

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

Tendring Hub (East Coast): Chris Joy (SP) and Stephen Chynoweth (HM)

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

The Heart of England Hub (East Midlands): Rob Hardcastle (SP) and Nicholas Salisbury (HM)

Transform Hub (East Midlands): Rebecca Meredith (SP) and Lindsay Clark (HM)



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