



Leading within and beyond the trust

Insights from the School Trust CEO programme

How professional learning shapes executive leadership, redefines success, and strengthens system stewardship across England's school trust sector.

Contents

Section	Page
<u>Authorship team</u>	3
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	3
<u>Glossary</u>	5
<u>Limitations</u>	8
<u>Executive summary</u>	8
<u>Background & programme overview</u>	22
<u>Rationale for six research questions</u>	35
<u>Section 1: How Fellows developed through the programme</u>	38
<u>Section 2: How Fellows redefined effective trust leadership</u>	46
<u>Section 3: Programme features that most supported Fellows' learning</u>	51
<u>Section 4: Experiences of inclusion and progression for underrepresented leaders</u>	61
<u>Section 5: Personal, organisational and system-level changes reported by Fellows</u>	66
<u>Section 6: What this might mean for future executive leadership development</u>	75
<u>Conclusion</u>	79
<u>Methods summary</u>	82
<u>Appendices</u>	87

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Glossary

Civic leadership: This describes the actions and behaviours that flow from civic purpose. It is leadership that extends beyond an individual trust to contribute to the wider education system and local communities. This includes working in partnership with other trusts, local authorities and agencies, contributing to public benefit, and acting as a steward of the system rather than focusing solely on organisational performance.

Civic purpose: Refers to the underlying orientation that shapes why and how a school trust operates within the education system and its communities. In this report, it describes the commitment to balance trust-level accountability and organisational coherence with responsiveness to local context, community need and system-wide responsibility, particularly within a regulatory environment that remains largely school-focused.

Executive coaching: In the context of this programme, executive coaching was a series of confidential, one-to-one conversations between a Fellow and an experienced external coach, focused primarily on the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of leadership. Coaching aimed to support Fellows to reflect on leadership style, confidence, resilience, decision-making, influence and relationships with peers, trustees and senior colleagues. It aimed to provide a space to talk through challenges with someone independent of the trust, to help Fellows build self-awareness, confidence and judgement as they navigated senior leadership roles and transitions.

Expert contributor: An expert contributor is an experienced system leader or practitioner who contributes to the programme through activities such as hosting immersions, appearing on podcasts, speaking at conferences, supporting design sprints, or providing case studies and artefacts for learning materials.

Fellow: A Fellow is a senior school trust leader participating in the STCEOP. Fellows include serving CEOs, deputy or aspiring CEOs, and other executive leaders preparing for large-scale trust CEO responsibility.

Global majority: Those who self-identify as non-White or indigenous to the Global South or who have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'.

High-leverage (practice or activity): This refers to aspects of leadership practice that have a disproportionate positive impact on trust effectiveness, sustainability and system contribution. These are areas where small shifts in judgement, behaviour or decision-making can lead to significant improvements, such as strategic governance, executive decision-making, workforce development and system-facing leadership.

Host trust: A host trust is a school trust that volunteers to support the programme by hosting Fellows for immersion visits. Host trusts provide access to their senior leadership teams, governance arrangements and operational practice, contributing directly to sector learning and system leadership.

Identity-aware support: Approaches to leadership development that recognise how factors such as race, gender and background shape leaders' experiences and access to opportunity.

Immersion: A structured sequence of leadership shadowing placements within host school trusts. Fellows complete three placements across the programme, working with two different trust CEOs and returning to their initial host trust to enable continuity, feedback and deeper reflection (referred to as an ABA model). Immersions aim to provide access to executive routines, decision-making processes, governance relationships and system-facing work, to allow Fellows to observe leadership in real time, compare different contexts and scales, and evaluate practice through sustained, relational learning rather than abstract case studies.

Large trusts: For the purposes of this report, large school trusts refers to trusts operating at significant scale across multiple schools and communities. Sector benchmarking suggests that trusts educating around 7,500 or more pupils and/or operating twelve or more schools may reasonably be considered large within the current system¹. However, trust size and complexity vary considerably depending on context. For example, trusts made up of small rural primary schools may include many schools while serving fewer pupils overall. The programme therefore interprets large trust leadership primarily in terms of the scale and complexity of executive responsibility, rather than relying solely on a fixed numerical threshold.

Public benefit: This refers to the outcomes and obligations associated with a trust's charitable status. It is concerned with the social value created through leadership and governance decisions, including educational equity, community impact and system improvement.

Relational support: Ongoing professional relationships that provide trust, challenge and reassurance, helping leaders make sense of complex decisions and reduce isolation. In the STCEOP, this included coaching, peer networks and sustained relationships with host CEOs.

¹ Kreston UK (2025). *Academies Benchmark Report*. <https://duncantoplis.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Kreston-UK-Academies-Benchmark-Report-2025.pdf>

School Trust CEO Programme (STCEOP): A national executive development programme designed to support current and aspiring CEOs of multi academy trusts prepare for large-scale trust leadership.

Structured reflection: Deliberate, supported opportunities designed to allow leaders to think critically about their practice, observations and decisions, using prompts, coaching conversations or facilitated discussion rather than informal or ad-hoc reflection.

System architect: A school trust CEO or senior leader who looks beyond the performance of their own organisation to help shape how the wider education system functions. This includes designing and influencing structures, relationships and ways of working across trusts, local authorities and partners so that the system is more coherent, sustainable and focused on public benefit.

System generosity: The willingness of leaders and organisations to share insight, capacity and learning with others across the system. This includes opening up practice through immersions, contributing to peer learning and supporting collective improvement rather than operating competitively.

System leadership: Leadership activity aimed at improving outcomes beyond one organisation. In the context of school trusts, this includes collaboration across trusts, sharing practice, supporting system capacity, and engaging constructively with policy, regulation and place-based partnerships.

Limitations

The findings in this report relate to a single, small-scale programme. The evidence base is modest, relies on self-reported perceptions and includes participants who self-selected into a Department for Education funded national programme.

When considering the findings it must be noted that participants were selected who had an aptitude to absorb and apply the learnings from the programme.

There was no baseline or control group. Findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of the wider sector.

Executive summary

Purpose, scope and audience

England's school trust system now sits at the centre of the education landscape, with over 10,000 academy schools organised into more than 1,200 multi academy trusts nationwide². Trusts educate the majority of secondary children and a growing proportion of primary children, including a substantial share of children eligible for free school meals and those with Education, Health and Care plans³. As trusts expand and take on responsibility for improving outcomes across groups of schools, the role of the CEO has become increasingly complex. CEOs are now expected to shape strategy, lead organisational growth, steward public resources and contribute to wider system activity while working closely with children, families and local partners⁴. In this context, professional development for multi academy trust Chief Executive Officers is recognised as an important lever for strengthening leadership across England's trust system and improving outcomes for children. This report presents findings from the evaluation of the School Trust Chief Executive Officer Programme (STCEOP), a national programme commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) as part of its 2022 Schools White Paper⁵ commitment to strengthen capacity and leadership quality across England's multi academy trust system. The programme was deliberately designed as a single, national offer, delivered by one provider, in order to create a coherent, evidence-informed development pathway for both serving and aspiring trust CEOs operating in an increasingly complex system. It was aimed at leaders of large trusts and those leading across boundaries.

² Data drawn from <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

³ Confederation of School Trusts (2025). *From good to great: The positive impact of school trusts in education*. https://cstuk.org.uk/system/files/paragraphs/cw_file/2025-04/Briefing_note_-_From_Good_to_Great_2025-02-10.pdf

⁴ Department for Education (2023). *Multi Academy Trust leadership development: Chief Executive Officer content framework*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ff30a657278000142518db/MAT_leadership_development_-_CEO_content_framework.pdf

⁵ Department for Education (2022). *Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62416cb5d3bf7f32add7819f/Opportunity_for_all_strong_schools_with_great_teachers_for_your_child_print_version_.pdf

The STCEOP was designed using the DfE’s evidence-based Multi Academy Trust (MAT) CEO Content Framework⁶, developed in conjunction with a DfE Expert Advisory Group and aligned to the strong trust principles that define effective trust performance. These frameworks informed the programme’s core domains and design features, including sustained cohort-based learning, immersive visits to established trusts, structured engagement with expert contributors, and opportunities for reflection on governance, system leadership and executive decision-making. The programme sought not only to build technical knowledge, but also to strengthen judgement, confidence and relational capability across trust, board and system-facing contexts, aligning with the Confederation of School Trusts’ articulation of the core responsibilities of a school trust CEO⁷.

This evaluation explores how participation in the STCEOP appears to support executive leadership development, and how different elements of the programme were experienced and used by participants in practice. The research draws on survey data, longitudinal interviews, reflective accounts and immersion documentation from 73 Fellows across two programme cohorts. The programme ran from February 2024 to February 2025 for Cohort 1 and from September 2024 to September 2025 for Cohort 2. Participants included both serving and aspiring CEOs, for the most part leading, or preparing to lead, trusts that were growing in scale, complexity or organisational maturity. As the cohort was self-selecting and drawn from a specific national programme, findings are indicative rather than representative of the wider trust system and should be interpreted accordingly. The report does not offer a summative judgement of delivery alone. Instead, it uses the STCEOP as a lens through which to explore patterns in executive learning across personal, organisational, governance and system leadership domains.

The report is written for multiple audiences with distinct but interconnected responsibilities:

- **For serving and aspiring large trust CEOs:** It offers insight into forms of professional learning that appear to support strategic judgement, governance confidence, and system leadership in practice.
- **For Chairs and trust boards:** It highlights the role of governance relationships and board-level support in enabling effective executive leadership, particularly at points of appointment, transition or organisational change.

⁶ Department for Education (2023). *Multi Academy Trust leadership development: Chief Executive Officer content framework*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ff30a657278000142518db/MAT_leadership_development_-_CEO_content_framework.pdf

⁷ Confederation of School Trusts (2021) *The Core Responsibilities of a School Trust Chief Executive Officer*. https://cstuk.org.uk/system/files/paragraphs/cw_file/2025-04/CEO-Core-Responsibilities-November-2021.pdf

- **For providers of executive professional development:** It contributes evidence about programme design features that appear to support learning in complex, real-world contexts.
- **For policymakers and system leaders:** It presents implications for how executive development may function as part of the wider infrastructure that underpins trust sustainability, governance quality and public value. The report is situated within a period of sector change, marked by increasing trust size and complexity. In this context, the development of CEOs represents a significant leverage point for system stability and improvement. Small shifts in executive capability, confidence and judgement can have disproportionate effects, both positive and negative, across organisations and communities.

The findings that follow should therefore be read not as universal prescriptions, but as evidence-informed insights from a particular moment in the sector's development, intended to support more deliberate, coherent and sustainable approaches to executive leadership development at scale.

Scene setting

England's school trust system now educates the majority of children nationally. As of January 2025, while 46.1% of state-funded schools were academies or free schools, these schools educated 58.4% of all children. Over the past decade, the number of academies has more than doubled, increasing from around 5,400 to over 11,000, alongside continued growth in trust scale⁸, with the average multi academy trust now comprising just under 12 schools⁹. As this landscape continues to grow in scale and complexity, CEOs are expected to lead organisations that are educational, civic and strategic in equal measure. The STCEOP was developed to strengthen this leadership pipeline by supporting leaders to move beyond school-level and small-trust leadership into the distinct demands of leading large and complex trusts. Building on the foundations established through National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), the programme offers structured opportunities to deepen understanding of the education system, observe executive practice in real trust environments, reflect with experienced coaches, and form national networks that support confident decision-making at scale. Together, these experiences were designed to help leaders run successful, sustainable trusts while developing the judgement and civic orientation needed to contribute beyond their own organisations and support the wider system.

The evidence presented is derived from a small evaluation of the programme.

⁸ Department for Education (2025). *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/2025*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>

⁹ Kreston UK (2025). *Academies Benchmark Report*. <https://duncantoplis.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Kreston-UK-Academies-Benchmark-Report-2025.pdf>

How participation in the STCEOP supported leadership development

Key insights

- Seeing leadership in real trusts helped Fellows understand what effective CEO practice looks like day to day.
- Time to step back and reflect helped Fellows make clearer decisions about delegation, strategy and their wider role.
- Fellows developed greater confidence and capability in working with Chairs and boards, recognising governance as an active leadership responsibility that requires disciplined relationships, shared understanding and deliberate practice, particularly at points of appointment or transition.

Evidence from written reflections and immersion surveys suggests that participation in the STCEOP was associated with reported changes in how Fellows thought about their leadership across operational practice, strategic planning, governance and civic contribution. Post programme survey responses indicated that Fellows were able to find a balance between operational involvement with delegation and longer-term strategic thinking.

Fellows attributed this learning to different programme elements in distinct ways:

- **Immersion**s were described in written reflections as enabling Fellows to observe how experienced CEOs balanced strategic priorities with operational realities in practice. This exposure appeared to support more grounded reflection on operating models, governance arrangements and the practical constraints shaping executive decision-making.
- **Coaching** was cited in longitudinal interviews as providing structured space to process these observations, test assumptions and think through how strategic intentions might translate into action within their own trust context.

These elements appeared to support more deliberate reflection on the relationship between strategy and implementation, without implying uniform or directly observable changes in practice.

Importantly, several Fellows also described increased confidence and capability in working with Chairs and boards in conference surveys. Exposure to governance practice during immersions, alongside joint learning opportunities and structured reflection, were framed in Fellow written reflections as supporting more disciplined approaches to board relationships, including greater clarity about roles, expectations and decision-making cadence. For some, this reframed governance as an active leadership responsibility rather than a compliance function, particularly at points of appointment, organisational change or trust growth.

Exposure to system generosity and civic partnership work further encouraged a broader, outward-facing understanding of leadership, with many Fellows reporting an increased sense of public duty and system contribution in written reflections and longitudinal interviews. These self-reported shifts appeared to shape how Fellows began to reconsider effective and successful trust leadership, connecting organisational performance, governance quality and civic responsibility more explicitly.

How Fellows redefined effective trust leadership

Key insights

- Fellows increasingly defined success through people, culture and governance that support strong outcomes and opportunities for children and young people, rather than performance data alone.
- Visiting other trusts broadened their view of leadership so that success included contribution beyond their own organisation.
- Fellows increasingly came to define effective trust leadership as inseparable from effective governance, reframing boards as strategic partners in sustaining purpose, public benefit and system-facing leadership rather than as compliance-focused oversight bodies.

Evidence from interviews, surveys and final reflections indicates that participation in the STCEOP supported Fellows to reconsider how they define effective and successful trust leadership. In line with the programme's underlying framework, Fellows increasingly described effective and successful trust leadership in terms of people, culture and strategic governance, rather than performance data or organisational growth alone. Personal success was framed around reflective judgement, values-led communication, and growing confidence in strategic decision-making. Organisational success was more often associated with clarity of purpose, deliberate workforce and talent development, and governance arrangements that support long-term sustainability, accountability and public benefit. Importantly, Fellows frequently connected these leadership dimensions to the core purpose of school trusts: improving educational outcomes and life chances for children and young people across all schools in the trust. This shift closely reflects the programme's design intent, which positioned trust culture, governance, workforce development and civic responsibility as core dimensions of CEO effectiveness. This shift closely reflects the programme's design intent, which positioned trust culture, governance, workforce development and civic responsibility as core dimensions of CEO effectiveness.

Importantly, written reflections and survey responses indicate that many Fellows came to view effective governance as a key component of effective trust leadership.

While this relationship is not unique to school trusts, Fellows' reflections suggest it is particularly consequential in a system where scale, public accountability and charitable purpose intersect. Boards were frequently described not just as compliance-focused oversight bodies, but as strategic partners in sustaining organisational purpose, enabling public benefit, and ensuring that trust strategy remained focused on improving the education and well-being of children and young people across the trust. Several Fellows also pointed to specific mechanisms through which this shift was enacted, including clearer role delineation between boards and executives, disciplined communication routines with Chairs, shared engagement in strategic learning, and more explicit use of governance structures to support long-term decision-making. Taken together, these accounts suggest a recognition that effective trust leadership does not rest on individual action alone, but also depends on governance arrangements that are aligned, intentional and actively shaped over time.

Written reflections indicated that visiting other trusts broadened Fellows' perspectives on leadership success, extending it beyond their own organisations to include collaboration, shared learning, and contribution to the wider system. These perspectives reflected varied individual starting points, but also differences in trust context, scale, and stage of organisational maturity. Many Fellows were leading trusts within a sector that continues to evolve its operating models and system roles. This is consistent with wider sector evidence. For example, the Kreston UK Academies Benchmark Report¹⁰ notes a continued increase in average trust size, bringing greater organisational complexity and demand for mature central capacity. Similarly, research by the National Governance Association¹¹ highlights that trusts which have survived and prospered have often done so by learning from early growth challenges and by developing more integrated, collaborative operating models, while acknowledging persistent variation in practice across the sector.

Against this backdrop, many Fellows described a broader, multi-level understanding of leadership success in their written reflections. They highlighted the challenge of balancing centralised trust strategy with responsiveness to the needs of individual schools and communities. Fellows also reflected on the responsibility of exercising trust-level accountability within a regulatory framework that often focuses on individual schools. Many linked this to the need to lead with civic purpose in an increasingly complex system, while maintaining a clear focus on improving outcomes and opportunities for children and young people.

¹⁰ Kreston UK (2025). *Academies Benchmark Report*. <https://duncantoplis.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Kreston-UK-Academies-Benchmark-Report-2025.pdf>

¹¹ National Governance Association (2024). *The Mature MAT Model*. <https://www.nga.org.uk/media/cj3hjcuc/mature-mat-model-full-report-20241017.pdf>

Programme features that most supported Fellows' learning

Key insights

- Immersions had the biggest impact. Fellows valued seeing real practice, not case studies. Immersions supported some Fellows to reflect on wider responsibilities including civic partnerships, community engagement and provision for children and young people with additional needs.
- Learning worked best when ideas were introduced first, explored in context and then applied with support.

The programme's most valued mechanisms were those that brought together structured input, opportunities to see practice in context, and protected space for reflection. In surveys, immersions were chosen by the majority of Fellows as the most helpful element for leadership development, and were frequently perceived to lead directly to personal and trust-level benefits in written reflections and longitudinal interviews. Deliberate matching helped ensure that learning felt relevant and transferable, while still exposing Fellows to different geographical contexts and local challenges. Almost all Fellows reported gaining deep access to host trusts, including insight into operating models, aspects of trust culture, and the practical realities of leadership at scale, which supported grounded comparison rather than abstract benchmarking.

Coaching, though not universally valued, supported reflection on leaders' sense of themselves in the role, helping them build confidence and manage the emotional demands of leadership, especially when connected to immersion experiences. Views shared in Fellow longitudinal interviews indicated that peer dialogue and host trust openness created a relational environment that supported learning over time.

This was reinforced by the deliberate 'sandwich' design of the immersion model, in which Fellows visited an initial host trust in the autumn term, spent time in a second trust, often operating in a contrasting context or at a different scale, before completing a final immersion in the summer term. This sequence was intentionally aligned with the programme's structured learning components. Prior to immersions, Fellows completed asynchronous units and core content on areas such as governance, organisational design, culture and system leadership. Fellow written reflections and survey responses indicated that, due to this sequencing, immersion visits were not experienced as observational placements alone, but as opportunities to test and interrogate research-informed concepts in live settings.

Conferences and coaching then provided structured moments to surface questions arising from immersion experiences, compare interpretations with peers, and refine emerging thinking before subsequent visits. Longitudinal interview evidence

indicates that this interplay between structured learning, immersion and reflection supported more informed critical engagement, enabling Fellows to move beyond description towards interpretation and application. Sequencing and relational continuity contributed to more durable learning, supporting both trust-level decision-making and a more confident understanding of what it means to lead within and beyond one's own trust.

Experiences of inclusion and progression for underrepresented leaders

Key insights

- For global majority and women leaders, seeing CEOs in action and having coaching support boosted confidence and belonging.
- These experiences underline that representation and safe spaces are essential in executive learning, not optional extras.

Many global majority and women leaders entered the STCEOP with long-standing experiences of racism, structural exclusion and limited representation in the wider system, as documented in national data and research on trust leadership. Within this context, Fellows reported that direct exposure to executive and board-level practice during immersions, alongside coaching and peer networks, were among the most confidence-building aspects of the programme. These elements provided space for reflection, access to visible role models, and first-hand insight into senior leadership work that is often less accessible to underrepresented leaders. For some Fellows, this contributed to clearer views about progression and a stronger sense of belonging, while recognising that persistent systemic inequities extend beyond the influence of any single programme.

Personal, organisational and system-level changes reported by Fellows

Key insights

- Fellows described growing confidence, clearer organisational focus and stronger engagement beyond their trust. In some cases, this led to partnerships on issues such as food security and youth engagement, and multi agency work which could have an impact on children and young people's outcomes.
- Fellows reported increased confidence to shape governance structures and relationships, including clarifying roles between trust boards and local governance, and repositioning local governance as a source of partnership and community insight that supports civic and system leadership.

In written reflections and longitudinal interviews, Fellows reported perceived change across three interconnected levels: personal, organisational, and system-facing. At a

personal level, Fellows described not only increased confidence and clearer strategic focus, but also stronger affirmation of their existing competencies and values. For some, exposure through immersions and coaching supported more searching reflection about fit and vocation, helping them make more informed judgements about whether to continue in, step towards, or step away from the CEO role. Learning was shaped both by observing effective executive leadership and, in some cases, by encountering less effective practice, which appeared to clarify boundaries, sharpen judgement, and strengthen Fellows' sense of the leadership they did, and did not, wish to enact.

At an organisational level, Fellows reported increased confidence to shape governance structures and relationships. This included clarifying roles between trust boards and local governance bodies, revisiting schemes of delegation, and strengthening board-facing communication. Several Fellows described repositioning local governance from a source of friction to a form of partnership, recognising local governors not only as facilitators of action but also as contributors of insight into community priorities. These changes were closely linked to broader developments in strategic planning, communication and workforce structures, often informed by practices observed in host trusts.

Beyond their own organisations, Fellows described strengthened cross-trust collaboration, emerging civic partnerships, and growing system-level awareness in written reflections. In several cases, increased confidence in governance arrangements appeared to support greater engagement beyond the trust, enabling civic and system-facing leadership that was grounded in clearer accountability, community insight, and shared responsibility.

What this might mean for future executive leadership development

Evidence across the STCEOP suggests that leaders appeared to benefit from development that offered structured opportunities to observe executive practice in context, reflect on their role, and engage in sustained dialogue with peers and coaches. Survey responses indicate that immersions enabled leaders to examine operating models, governance and decision-making as lived practice, while views shared in longitudinal interviews suggest that coaching provided a confidential space for sense-making, affirmation, and identity development, particularly for those without access to comparable support elsewhere. Peer networks and exposure to diverse trusts supported outward-facing thinking and a broader appreciation of leadership across the trust system. Analysis of interview responses additionally suggests that for underrepresented leaders, identity-aware coaching and visible role models were especially valued.

However, these forms of development carry implications for time, capacity and resource at a point when many trusts are operating under increasing financial constraint¹². In this context, the evidence raises wider questions about how executive development for trust leaders is prioritised and funded. Beyond considerations of public or protected funding, there may be scope to explore more innovative approaches, including shared or co-funded models across trusts, system-led provision, or explicit investment by trustee boards as part of CEO appointment and succession planning. For boards, this reframes executive development not as discretionary personal enrichment, but as a governance responsibility linked to organisational stability, leadership sustainability and system stewardship at moments of heightened risk, particularly during CEO transition. Seen in this way, structured professional development at appointment may represent a preventative investment rather than an additional cost.

The evidence suggests ten interrelated design principles for future executive leadership development. These principles reflect how professional learning can strengthen leadership across school trusts and support collaboration that ultimately improves opportunities and outcomes for children and young people.

1. Deliberately cultivate civic and system leadership

Exposure to civic partnership, cross-trust collaboration and system-wide responsibility helped Fellows develop a stronger orientation beyond their own organisation. Fellows described contributing to regional networks, safeguarding partnerships and collaborative work across schools and trusts that support children, families and communities. The evidence suggests that system leadership does not emerge automatically with seniority but requires intentional development through increased visibility of system work, opportunities to practise contribution and permission to prioritise public benefit alongside organisational performance.

2. Prioritise learning in real trust settings

CEOs learn most when professional learning includes opportunities to observe leadership in real trust settings and then use those insights to inform practical action and decision-making in their own contexts. Immersions helped Fellows see how operating models, organisational culture, workforce approaches and governance arrangements functioned in day-to-day practice. This enabled leaders to translate what they observed into concrete leadership decisions within their own trusts, rather than treating learning as abstract or theoretical.

¹² Kreston UK (2025). *Academies Benchmark Report*. <https://duncantoplis.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Kreston-UK-Academies-Benchmark-Report-2025.pdf>

3. Strengthen peer networks

Well-designed peer networks reduced executive isolation and supported judgement by enabling leaders to compare practice, test thinking and learn alongside others who understood the scale and complexity of the CEO role. Fellows described how dialogue with peers at similar levels of responsibility helped normalise challenge and reduce loneliness, particularly for CEOs leading large or geographically dispersed trusts, while providing a credible reference point beyond idealised leadership models.

4. Design learning environments where leadership is visible and safe to discuss

Learning environments that offer visible role models, supportive relationships and permission to speak openly supported participation and progression, particularly for global majority and women leaders. Relationally supportive conditions helped some Fellows build confidence, challenge assumptions about who belongs in senior roles and engage more fully with the realities of executive leadership, even where wider systemic barriers remained beyond the programme itself.

5. Treat governance development as a core component of CEO professional learning

Effective executive leadership requires confidence in shaping disciplined, trusting relationships with Chairs and trustees. Fellows' experiences suggest that when CEOs were clearer about roles, decision rights and ways of working with boards, they were better positioned to translate strategy into action, manage risk and sustain trust-wide improvement, rather than becoming constrained by unclear or overly cautious governance dynamics.

6. Expose leaders to executive decision-making under real conditions

Confidence developed when Fellows could observe how experienced CEOs handled ambiguity, competing demands and imperfect information. Seeing executive decision-making unfold in real time helped normalise the complexity of the role and challenged the idea that leadership follows linear or purely technical solutions. Programmes should therefore expose leaders to real dilemmas and tensions rather than presenting leadership as a series of tidy best practices.

7. Position workforce development as a core component of executive learning

Fellows consistently highlighted people development, organisational culture and leadership pipelines as central levers of trust effectiveness. Many described

strengthening staff development and leadership capacity as essential to sustaining improvement for pupils and supporting schools within their trusts. These reflections suggest that workforce strategy is widely understood by CEOs as a core leadership responsibility rather than something that can be delegated entirely to HR or central teams. Executive leadership development programmes may therefore benefit from recognising the importance leaders place on workforce development, including how trusts identify, develop and support talent in ways that are transparent and equitable.

8. Enable CEOs to develop confidence with ambiguity and principled decision-making

Senior leadership involves navigating complexity, uncertainty and pressure without clear solutions. Programmes should therefore help CEOs build both personal and organisational resilience alongside principled decision-making. Fellows' accounts suggest that confidence grew not from having definitive answers but from repeated exposure to real dilemmas, supported reflection and the reassurance that uncertainty is a normal feature of executive work.

9. Sequence learning deliberately

Learning was strongest when conceptual input, real-world observation and reflection were deliberately sequenced to build on one another. Fellows found it particularly helpful when self-study and conferences prepared them for what they would see in practice, and when immersion learning was followed by structured opportunities to reflect and apply insights rather than these elements operating as disconnected activities.

10. Build structured time for reflection

Executive learning was strengthened when reflection was structured, disciplined and accurate. Coaching and facilitated conversations helped Fellows interpret what they had observed during immersions, test assumptions and connect experience to decision-making. This form of reflection went beyond simply making time to think; it involved guided dialogue and challenge that enabled leaders to move from observation to well-judged action in their own trusts.

Methodological context and limitations

These findings draw on a cohort of 73 Fellows selected across two programme cycles. Participation was self-selecting in the sense that individuals chose to apply to the programme, signalling motivation and readiness for executive development. However, entry was also competitive, with Fellows selected through a structured national process against published criteria.

The evidence draws on reflections, interviews, surveys and immersion documentation and should therefore be interpreted as indicative of the experiences and perceptions of those who took part in the programme, rather than representative of the wider school trust system. They reflect the experiences of leaders who chose to participate in a fully funded national development programme and are therefore likely to represent those who actively seek structured professional learning at executive level. These constraints should be considered when interpreting the extent to which the reported developments represent wider trends in executive learning across the sector.

Viewed as a whole, this synthesis illuminates how structured professional learning can support leaders to look beyond the immediate priorities of their own trusts and develop a wider orientation towards civic contribution and system stewardship. The evidence suggests that seeing leadership in real trust settings, combined with structured reflection (deliberate, facilitated opportunities to analyse experience, test assumptions and consider application) and relational support (trusted professional relationships that enable challenge, reassurance and sense-making), helped Fellows connect their organisational responsibilities with a broader sense of public purpose. While indicative rather than representative, these patterns offer considerations for those shaping future executive learning across England's school trust system.

Who took part in the programme?

Of the 73 Fellows who took part in the programme, 53 were serving CEOs and 20 were aspiring to the role. They were predominantly leading or preparing to lead trusts operating in what might be described as a second-generation phase of large-scale trust development. Many had taken on leadership following earlier periods of trust formation, merger or brokering, often inheriting more complex organisational and system conditions than those faced by first-generation founders. This cohort was therefore distinct from several of the host trusts visited during immersions, which were typically established during the first wave of trust formation and had longer histories, greater scale and more settled reputations. Fellows frequently interpreted this contrast as illuminating differences in maturity, operating confidence and perceived status within the system, shaped by longevity, results and public profile.

The gender balance across both cohorts was evenly split, with 49% of Fellows identifying as women. This stands in contrast to national patterns in trust leadership where women remain underrepresented at CEO level. In terms of gender equity, 34.5% of trust CEO positions were occupied by females in 2024, a slight rise from 31.7% in 2023¹³. Across combined cohorts, 8% of Fellows identified as being from global majority backgrounds. However, according to a diversity audit of the 171 trusts

¹³ Dyson, J. (2024, October 18). 'Diversity gap in academy trust top jobs fails to narrow'. Schools Week. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/diversity-gap-in-academy-trust-top-jobs-fails-to-narrow/>

with 15 or more schools, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) leaders only account for 2.3% of large trust CEOs¹⁴. All of them are men, and only one of them is leading one of the 50 largest trusts. Although the numbers are small, representation of global majority leaders in the programme cohorts was slightly higher than in the national teaching workforce¹⁵ and notably higher than the 2023–24 statistics presented above. These patterns do not indicate representativeness, but they suggest that the programme was able to attract a somewhat more diverse group of senior and aspiring leaders than is typical within the wider trust system. Marketing for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 used a diverse range of images in website and social media posting. In recruiting for Cohort 2, case studies and blogs featured a diverse range of candidates from Cohort 1. The majority of recruitment for the programme came through stakeholder networks and working with the DfE’s Regional Education Directors to encourage suitable applicants.

¹⁴ Dyson, J. (2023, June 23). 'Diversity progress stalls among large trust CEO roles'. Schools Week <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/diversity-progress-stalls-among-largest-trust-ceo-roles/>

¹⁵ Department for Education (2025). *School teacher workforce: Ethnicity facts and figures (2024–2025)*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest/>

Background and programme overview

The Department for Education's 2002 Schools White Paper¹⁶ set out a national ambition to increase the number of leaders prepared to take on trust leadership responsibilities and committed to establishing a development programme to help build this pipeline.

The accompanying MAT CEO Content Framework¹⁷, aligned to the trust quality pillars¹⁸, set out the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to lead a group of schools effectively at trust scale. Drawing on evidence from the Confederation of School Trusts and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation for its Quality of Education and Workforce and Talent Development domains, the framework codifies school trust CEO leadership expectations across six interconnected domains, with trust culture operating as a cross-cutting influence that shapes how each domain is enacted in practice. Importantly, the framework was designed to build on the established 'golden thread' of leadership development articulated through the National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), particularly the NPQ for Executive Leadership. In doing so, it positions the STCEOP as a progression point, supporting leaders to move from leading improvement within schools or groups of schools to leading improvement at scale across complex trust systems.

The six leadership expectations set out in the MAT CEO Content Framework:

- **Leadership and organisational development:** Focusing on how CEOs build a cohesive organisational culture and create the conditions in which staff and children and young people can thrive.
- **Quality of education:** Outlining the CEO's role in securing strong curriculum, teaching and outcomes across all schools.
- **Strategic governance:** Describing how CEOs work within and through robust governance structures to integrate governance into growth and sustainability planning, and to maintain productive, challenging relationships with Chairs and boards who have the strength and expertise to hold executive leaders to account and support high-quality decision-making.
- **Finance and operations:** Detailing the financial planning, literacy and risk management responsibilities required to sustain and grow a trust, including

¹⁶ Department for Education (2002). *Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62416cb5d3bf7f32add7819f/Opportunity_for_all_strong_schools_with_great_teachers_for_your_child_print_version.pdf

¹⁷ Department for Education (2023). *Multi Academy Trust leadership development: Chief Executive Officer content framework*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ff30a657278000142518db/MAT_leadership_development_-_CEO_content_framework.pdf

¹⁸ Department for Education (2023). *Annex A - Trust Quality Descriptions*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ff30a657278000142518db/MAT_leadership_development_-_CEO_content_framework.pdf https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a68ab94dd8b3000f7fa566/Annex_A_-_Trust_Quality_Descriptions_July_2023.pdf

decisions about staff deployment, the design of common systems that enable scale, and compliance with regulatory and operational requirements.

- **Workforce and talent development:** Emphasising how CEOs support staff development, leadership pipelines and organisational capability.
- **Public benefit and civic duty:** Highlighting the legal and moral responsibilities of trusts as education charities and the CEO's role in contributing to wider community and system priorities.

These domains informed the design of the STCEOP, funded by the DfE and delivered by the National Institute of Teaching (NioT). The programme was shaped around five underpinning objectives, which aimed to:

- Build the next generation of CEOs and system architects
- Provide the knowledge, insight and practice needed to run successful and sustainable trusts that act as anchor institutions in their communities
- Develop a network that leaders can use to support their own trusts and contribute to wider system activity
- Nurture senior leadership talent in areas where additional capacity is most needed
- Strengthen national confidence in the growth of the trust system through a diverse and well-prepared CEO pipeline.

The initial intention was to pilot the programme in 24 priority areas, with a focus on strengthening leadership capacity in communities experiencing significant socioeconomic disadvantage. Recruitment activity was undertaken in these areas, although the limited number of available places meant that full geographic coverage was not possible. The final coverage of the programme was balanced nationally. The programme was subsequently envisaged as a first stage of a wider rollout, including to the remaining Education Investment Areas.

In developing the curriculum, the NioT consulted a wide range of sector experts, including serving and former CEOs, members of the DfE Expert Advisory Group, faith-based trust leaders, religious authorities and specialists from business and other sectors. These perspectives helped ensure that the curriculum reflected the diversity of trusts and the available evidence base for leadership at scale.

The programme comprised four core elements:

- **Self-study:** Introducing key frameworks and evidence-informed concepts through written materials and podcasts
- **Residential conferences:** Offering structured opportunities for dialogue, reflection and engagement with sector leaders

- **Trust based immersions:** These provided hosted visits to other schools trusts to examine operating models, governance and decision-making in context
- **Executive coaching:** This created protected space for reflection, discussion of leadership challenges and exploration of personal leadership identity.

Immersion methodology

A defining feature of the STCEOP is its use of extended trust immersions as a core mechanism for executive learning. The immersion model was deliberately designed to provide Fellows with sustained, relational exposure to executive leadership as it is enacted in practice, rather than represented through abstract frameworks or curated case studies alone. Each Fellow completed three week-long immersion placements across the programme year, working with two different trust CEOs and returning to their initial host trust for continuity and feedback. This sequencing enabled Fellows to observe executive decision-making, governance relationships and organisational routines over time, to contrast leadership approaches across contexts and scales, and to revisit earlier insights with greater critical understanding. In doing so, the immersion design supported deeper evaluation of practice and more durable learning than short or one-off visits.

The immersion methodology reflects a deliberate design choice to treat serving CEOs of established and effective trusts as expert contributors to executive development. Host CEOs were not positioned as exemplars to be replicated, but as practitioners whose lived experience, judgement and reflective insight constituted a legitimate source of professional knowledge. Many of these leaders contributed to the programme in multiple ways, hosting immersions, appearing at residential conferences, participating in podcast episodes, and providing case material for self-study modules. This approach sought to value practice-based expertise alongside research and policy perspectives, and to surface how executive leadership is shaped by context, history and system conditions.

Immersion focused on aspects of trust leadership that Fellows and experienced CEOs consistently described as important but which were rarely visible through standard professional development. Interview evidence suggests that spending time on these areas was especially valuable, as it allowed Fellows to see how executive decisions are made in practice, including how leaders balance competing priorities, respond to pressure and work with boards and senior teams, rather than learning about these challenges only in theory.

The three immersions focused on the following themes:

Immersion 1: Operating models for system improvement

- Trust journeys of growth, structure, scale and iteration
- Centralisation, portfolio management and resource allocation
- Codifying culture to support coherence and staff alignment
- Long-term strategic direction (typically three to five years)
- Risk management, business continuity, disaster recovery and regulatory compliance.

Immersion 2: Strategic communication

- Two-way, proactive and responsive communication across boards, executive teams and schools
- Communicating culture, expectations and change at scale
- Assurance of communication quality and enactment
- Crisis management, media relations and learning from organisational change
- Information governance and safeguarding, including GDPR in complex trusts.

Immersion 3: Quality assurance of education

- Balancing consistency and autonomy across schools
- Quality assurance systems
- Supporting inclusive cultures and targeted improvement
- Sharing effective practice and professional development strategy within and beyond the trust
- Minimising workload while maintaining trust-wide coherence.

The intention was not to present finished solutions, but to make visible the trade-offs, constraints and adaptive decisions involved in leading complex organisations over time.

The immersions were embedded within wider learning activity rather than operating as standalone placements. Fellows completed core self-study modules prior to immersion, attended residential conferences that exposed them to wider system thinking, and engaged in coaching and peer dialogue alongside and between immersion periods. This sequencing was designed to support applied learning, enabling Fellows to test ideas, refine judgement and connect conceptual material with lived organisational experience.

Immersion structure and continuity

Immersions were designed to be delivered using an ABA model. Where immersions were delivered as planned, Fellows first visited an initial host trust and developed a

sustained mentoring relationship with the CEO. They then undertook a second immersion in a different trust, often contrasting in geography or context. Fellows then returned to the original host trust for the final immersion, enabling comparison, continuity, and deeper reflection. This delivery model was designed to allow Fellows to test insights across contexts and bring learning back into an ongoing professional relationship, supporting more sustained sense-making and learning on both sides.

However, for 14 of the Cohort 2 Fellows, a return visit to the initial host trust was not possible for logistical reasons. Instead, immersions for these Fellows followed an ABC model where they visited three different trusts. Views shared by Fellows who experienced this delivery model indicate that this variation was positively received, and was perceived as an opportunity to visit a wider variety of settings and establish further connections with sector colleagues¹⁹. This suggests that a delivery model that prioritises breadth of experience is also likely to hold value for CEO professional development.

Enabling openness and mitigating system competition

The immersion design also reflected an explicit awareness of system dynamics, particularly the potential for competition between trusts to inhibit openness and learning. Given that many trusts operate in overlapping geographies and competitive environments, the programme established clear expectations and safeguards to create conditions for trust, candour and reciprocal learning.

Fellows committed to clear standards of professional conduct, including full engagement with host trusts, respect for the effort involved in hosting, and a commitment to confidentiality. Immersion access was framed as a professional privilege rather than an entitlement, with Fellows recognising their responsibility not to disclose or externalise sensitive information encountered during visits. Where appropriate, this commitment was reinforced through formal confidentiality agreements.

Expectations for host trusts were similarly explicit. Hosts were asked to:

- Provide meaningful, sustained access to the CEO as well as executive leaders
- Respect the varied starting points and professional experience of Fellows
- Maintain the immersion as a learning space rather than a conduit for consultancy, inspection or organisational support
- Identify and discuss principles of practice that are adaptable to a smaller scale or different context
- Align immersion activity to agreed curriculum themes so that there was equity of experience across the cohort, regardless of placement.

¹⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

Wherever possible, immersion placements were arranged outside Fellows' immediate geographic areas, reducing perceived conflicts of interest and supporting more open dialogue on both sides.

Together, these design features aimed to foster a learning environment characterised by system generosity rather than competition. Fellows' feedback suggests that this intentional boundary-setting was critical in enabling honest discussion of challenge, uncertainty, and organisational risk, and in supporting learning that extended beyond surface observation.

Fellow-trust matching process

The matching of participants with trusts for the immersion experience was a carefully considered process, designed to ensure a mutually beneficial learning experience for all parties involved. Several criteria were considered during this process:

- Geographic location: Proximity to the Fellow's residence or current work location was considered, to ease logistics.
- Scale of the trust: the size and number of schools across the different host trusts offered a range of learning opportunities, from smaller, more focused settings to larger, more complex systems.
- Socio-economic context: Trusts serving communities with varying socio-economic statuses provided diverse experiences, equipping Fellows to understand different challenges and opportunities.
- Religious denomination: For those interested or experienced in faith-based education, matching was used to identify trusts of a specific religious denomination.
- Current state of expansion: Trusts that were actively expanding offered unique opportunities to understand growth strategies, mergers and acquisitions.
- Phase or specialism of schools: The educational phases (e.g., primary, secondary) and specialisms (e.g., STEM, arts) within the host trust offered targeted learning experiences.
- Identified needs of the Fellow: Personal career goals, skill gaps, or other specific needs were considered to ensure that the immersion would be as beneficial as possible for the Fellow.
- Nature of pairings: Fellows were placed in pairs at each host trust to foster peer learning and reflection. Compatibility of these pairs in terms of learning objectives and career stages was considered.

By considering these and other relevant factors, the pairings were more likely to enrich the Fellow's programme journey, fulfil the trust's expectations, and ultimately support a high-quality immersion experience.

The immersion element of the programme was designed to prompt Fellows to reflect on how system leadership priorities are shaped by trust size, phase composition and financial vulnerability. By enabling comparative exposure to different trust contexts, particularly for Fellows leading smaller or predominantly primary trusts, the design aimed to support reflection on when and how wider system needs might reasonably influence leadership priorities alongside internal capacity constraints. Immersions intentionally included trusts operating in a range of settings, including geographically dispersed, rural and primary-heavy contexts, in order to surface practical considerations such as workforce deployment, shared estates, financial resilience and growth dependency.

Through this design, the programme sought to support more nuanced professional judgement about when collaboration, merger or system contribution may be necessary to sustain provision, and when inward focus is unavoidable, within a system that is uneven, evolving and, for some trusts, under increasing structural pressure.

Selection of immersion host trusts

Selection involved dialogue between the programme team, delivery partners and relevant DfE regional colleagues. These conversations considered a range of factors, including the experience and readiness of the host CEO, the trust's overall stability and capacity to support senior leaders for learning purposes, and the trust's ability to engage openly with questions of leadership, governance and improvement. Judgements were informed by multiple indicators rather than any single measure, including overall outcomes for children and young people, evidence of sustained performance over time (such as positive Progress 8 outcomes where applicable), and wider sector reputation.

The DfE Trust Quality Descriptions were used as a shared reference point in discussions with prospective host CEOs, supporting professional dialogue about governance, culture, educational quality and system contribution. They were not applied as a checklist or pass-fail threshold. This approach recognised that trusts operate in varied contexts, at different stages of development, and that meaningful executive learning does not depend on perfection across all domains.

Securing the full engagement of host trust CEOs was a critical part of the process. CEOs were expected to understand the objectives of the programme and to be willing to offer transparent, reflective insight into their leadership practice, including challenges, inflection points and lessons learned. This openness was essential to

ensuring that immersions functioned as authentic learning experiences rather than curated showcases.

As a national programme, attention was also given to achieving a balanced spread of host trusts across geography, phase, size and context, including primary-heavy, mixed-phase, rural and urban trusts. Where possible, consideration was given to gender balance among host CEOs, enabling women Fellows to observe and learn from female CEOs during at least one immersion, in recognition of ongoing underrepresentation at this level.

The intention was not to designate exemplar trusts, but to provide Fellows with credible, relevant and varied exposure to executive leadership in practice. The selection process aimed to support learning from organisations that were demonstrably engaged in thoughtful leadership, continuous improvement and system contribution, while avoiding over-reliance on narrow or static indicators of performance.

A learning ecosystem with reciprocal system benefit

While the immersions formed a signature element of the programme, their impact was amplified by their integration with other learning components and by the reciprocal contribution of host trusts. Hosting an immersion enabled trusts to articulate and reflect on their own practice, receive informed challenge from Fellows, and contribute to a wider national evidence base on executive leadership. Participation also positioned host trusts as system contributors and civic actors, reinforcing the idea that effective trusts play a role in developing leadership capacity beyond their own organisational boundaries.

From a design perspective, the immersion model illustrates an approach to executive development that treats the system itself as a learning resource. By combining sustained observation, ethical safeguards, structured reflection and reciprocal contribution, the STCEOP sought to bridge the gap between knowing and doing, and to support the development of executive judgement, confidence and system awareness.

Insights generated through the immersion methodology also informed several of the programme's wider conclusions and recommendations, particularly in relation to governance, funding for executive development, and the conditions required for system generosity to flourish. As such, the immersion design offers transferable lessons for providers seeking to design executive leadership programmes that are grounded in practice, attentive to system dynamics, and capable of operating at scale within constrained environments.

Assessment approach and selection of Fellows

To ensure that places on the STCEOP were awarded to leaders with the capacity to benefit from (and contribute to) a national executive learning cohort, the programme used a two-stage selection process and a structured assessment model aligned to the MAT CEO Content Framework.

Selection of Fellows

In total, 179 applications were received. Cohort 1 received 42 applications for 25 places and Cohort 2 received 137 applications for 50 places. The assessment centres were managed centrally by the recruitment team and led by the Executive Director of Partnerships. The rotating assessment centre panels consisted of senior staff from the executive team and external assessors who were previous multi academy trust CEOs. Applicants first completed a written submission demonstrating their experience against key leadership domains, including organisational culture and quality of education. Shortlisted candidates then attended an in-person selection centre, where they analysed a trust case study, presented a strategic response, and engaged in a professionally rigorous interview. This process tested their ability to interpret financial, governance and cultural challenges, articulate decisions clearly and consider the wider public benefit of their leadership. The assessment model sought to identify leaders with strong reflective capacity, sound strategic judgement and readiness to engage with system-level work.

Understanding starting points and development across the programme

The programme incorporated multiple mechanisms that together supported understanding of Fellows' starting points and development across the year. Early programme activities, including structured interviews and the first immersion reflection, captured Fellows' initial leadership context, confidence and practice across the MAT CEO Content Framework domains. These early artefacts were reviewed and responded to using the same domain structure later applied in final reflections, enabling continuity of focus across the programme.

Throughout the programme, Fellows also contributed survey data and reflective material relating to confidence, capability and perceived development. Confidence measures were collected within early surveys, and further evidence was gathered through end-of-programme surveys and comparative survey instruments aligned to framework domains. Final reflections and interviews provided an endpoint perspective on leadership judgement, readiness and areas of strength.

These sources provided a structured and triangulated view of Fellows' development over time. While the evidence was not designed as a single standardised pre- and post-programme measure, it enabled analysis of perceived progression, confidence

at exit and alignment with intended leadership domains, supporting a proportionate and credible account of programme impact.

Assessment within the programme

Once on the programme, Fellows engaged in a coherent assessment strategy designed to track their learning, enhance self-awareness and support the application of theory to practice. This included:

- **Immersion assessment:** At the end of each immersion week, Fellows delivered a short presentation to the host trust's CEO and senior team, analysing high-leverage practice observed and outlining how these might translate to their own trust. The process tested judgement, contextual adaptation and understanding of governance, culture and improvement at scale.
- **Leadership presentation assessment:** Later in the programme, Fellows presented a strategic proposal to their own leadership team and Chair of Trustees. This assessed their ability to draw on programme learning to refine trust strategy, adapt high-leverage practice and articulate expected benefits for children and young people .
- **Quizzes and knowledge checks:** Low-stakes online tests helped Fellows consolidate their understanding of the MAT CEO Content Framework, financial management, and the wider research base. These were designed to strengthen retention and support evidence-informed decision-making.
- **Written reflection:** Fellows completed a structured reflective review at the end of the programme drawing on programme learning, trust-level developments and their personal leadership growth. A rubric-based assessment and tailored feedback helped identify future development priorities and informed the final coaching sessions.
- **Financial assessment:** Following units on funding, financial oversight and interpreting trust financial statements, Fellows completed a task designed to build confidence in working with Chief Financial Officers and engaging in strategic financial dialogue.

Purpose of the assessment approach

Taken together, these assessments were designed not as high-stakes hurdles but as structured prompts to help Fellows integrate conceptual knowledge, grounded observation and reflective insight. They also enabled the NIoT to understand each Fellow's progression in relation to the programme's objectives: strengthening executive capability, deepening organisational stewardship, and building a confident and diverse pipeline of future system architects.

Deliberate involvement of Chairs of Trustees

A distinctive feature of the STCEOP was the deliberate inclusion of Chairs of Trustees within the programme's design, recognising the central role of the Chair–CEO relationship in effective trust leadership. Chairs were asked to endorse applications, signalling trust-level support for participation, and were invited to engage with governance-focused elements of the programme. This included attendance at the Strategic Governance Conference, where joint sessions, panel discussions and scenario-based activities created opportunities for shared exploration of strategic alignment, governance models and Chair–CEO dynamics. Host trusts were also encouraged, where feasible, to involve their Chairs during immersion visits, and Chairs were invited to attend Fellows' final leadership presentations and engage with governance-related self-study materials.

However, Chair participation was voluntary and uneven across the programme. As an unpaid role, Chair engagement was shaped by practical constraints, including time availability, distance to travel for national events, and varying levels of relevance for Fellows who were not yet serving CEOs. These factors meant that not all Chairs were able to participate consistently or at the same depth.

Where sustained engagement did occur, Fellows described benefits in terms of shared language, clearer expectations and increased confidence in using the MAT CEO Content Framework as a reference point for appraisal, dialogue and support. The variation in Chair involvement nonetheless highlights an important limitation in relying on voluntary governance participation and points to a wider system challenge: how executive development programmes can meaningfully engage board leaders alongside CEOs, particularly given the demands and constraints of trustee roles.

Theory of change

Alongside the programme design, a theory of change set out how the different elements of the STCEOP were expected to support leadership development and contribute to wider system health. It recognised that participation does not happen in isolation but within conditions that shape how leaders engage, including the national policy environment, trust stability, Ofsted activity, CEO transitions, travel demands, and the availability of high-quality host trusts. Fellows' prior experience, confidence with reflective practice and group dynamics were further influences on how they interpreted and applied what they learned.

Within this context, the theory of change explained how the core programme components were intended to work together. Self-study provided conceptual grounding, conferences offered structured dialogue, immersions enabled leaders to observe governance, culture and executive practice in real settings, and coaching

supported reflection and forward planning. Combined, these mechanisms were designed to strengthen strategic judgement, deepen reflective leadership, build networks and help Fellows connect the MAT CEO Content Framework to the practical and civic responsibilities of leading a trust.

The anticipated outcomes included:

- Stronger understanding of trust leadership at all scales
- Greater confidence in acting as a system architect
- The ability to apply frameworks in live organisational contexts
- Deeper peer networks that extend beyond the programme
- A clearer sense of how CEOs contribute to public benefit.

These outcomes were positioned as precursors to longer-term shifts such as improved trust strategies, more stable and sustainable operating models, and more confident civic engagement. Ultimately, the theory of change reflected the programme's central purpose: to strengthen the national pipeline of CEOs able to run successful, values-led trusts and to support a school system where improvement is driven by collaboration, maturity and a sustained focus on outcomes for children and young people.

The model also acknowledged risks that could disrupt progress. These included Fellows feeling overwhelmed, the possibility of uncritical replication of host trust practice, or the challenge of navigating imposter syndrome. The diversity of Fellows' backgrounds, career routes and lived experiences was identified as an important moderating factor, shaping the extent to which individuals could access opportunities equitably. Despite these risks, the overarching intent remained consistent: to support learning that shapes leaders' confidence, capability and commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people, in line with the programme's aspiration of 'learning that changes lives thousands at a time'.

In this way, the School Trust CEO Programme provided a national opportunity to explore how an integrated set of learning experiences might equip executive leaders whose roles continue to evolve as trusts grow in scale and complexity.

Figure 1

Theory of change model for the STCEOP

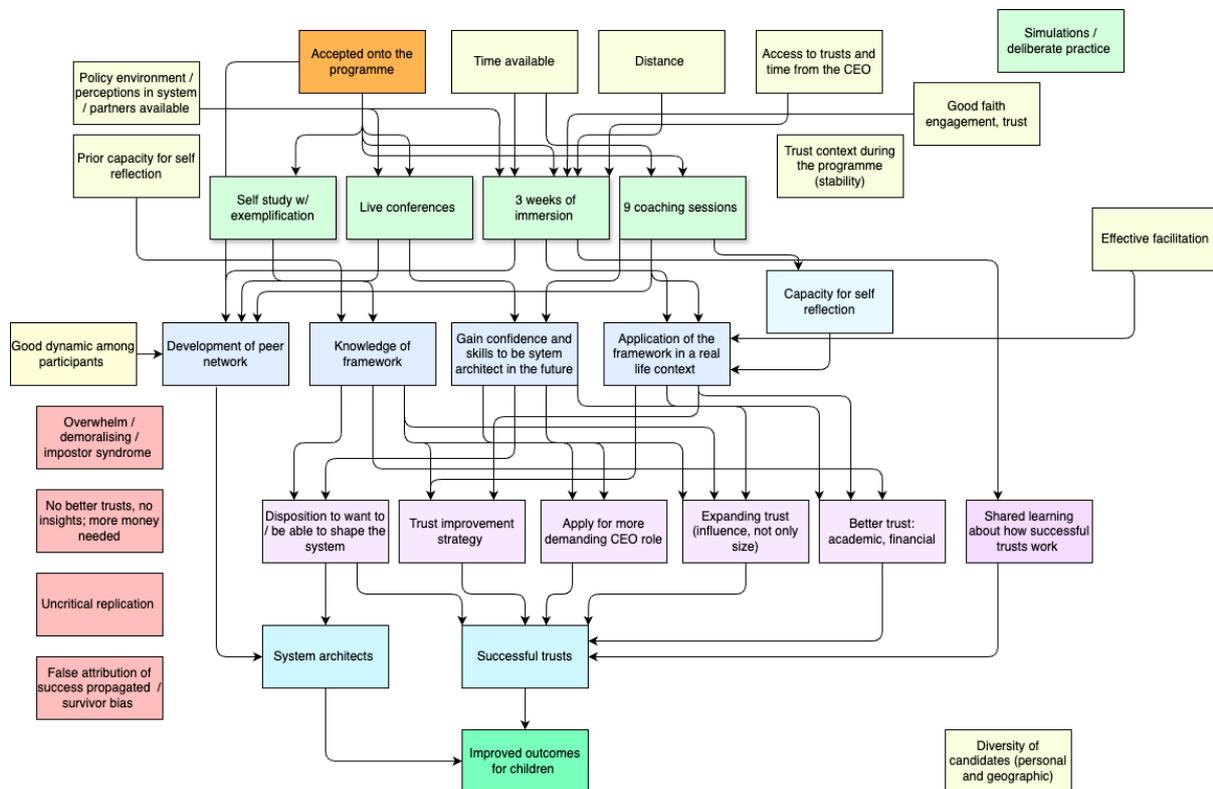


Figure 1: Diagrammatic theory of change model created before the programme delivery began. Yellow boxes indicate inputs, light green boxes are programme elements, pale blue boxes are intermediate outputs, purple boxes are outcomes, leading to the impacts in dark blue and, ultimately, bright green. Potential risks to the programme are in red. This diagram should be interpreted as a description of some of the intended mechanisms and pathways by which the many elements of the programme were expected to work together to have an impact on outcomes for children and young people.

Rationale for the six research questions

The six research questions were designed to examine how participants experienced the STCEOP and to explore whether, and in what ways, the programme's intended mechanisms appeared to support leadership development. Rather than assuming impact, the questions were framed to invite Fellows to reflect on change, continuity and limitation in their practice, judgement and confidence, and to surface variation in experience across roles, trust contexts and stages of development.

The inquiry draws on a mixed-methods evidence base, including surveys, longitudinal interviews, final reflections and programme documentation. Together, these sources enabled the research to explore perceived change over time, compare reported experiences across cohorts, and identify which elements of the programme Fellows associated with learning, challenge or limited relevance. The questions therefore focus on how participants interpreted their development, what they attributed to programme participation, and where evidence of impact was partial, uneven or constrained by context.

Within this framing, the research questions were selected to align with the programme's aims while remaining exploratory rather than confirmatory.

1. How did taking part in the STCEOP help Fellows develop their leadership across operational, strategic and civic areas?

Understanding how CEOs develop practice across these areas aligns with the programme's aim to develop and strengthen Fellows' confidence to run thriving trusts that act as anchor institutions in their communities. This question also reflects growing expectations that CEOs contribute to the wider trust system as system architects.

2. How did the STCEOP influence Fellows' views about what effective and successful trust leadership looks like?

This question helps illuminate how professional learning influences leaders' judgement and how success is understood in a maturing trust landscape. It also connects directly to the objective of ensuring a strong, thoughtful pipeline of future CEOs.

3. Which parts of the STCEOP most helped Fellows strengthen their leadership, reflect on their practice and think beyond their own trust?

This question was chosen to understand how learning occurred and which elements helped Fellows apply knowledge in their own contexts. This links closely to the programme's objective of providing the knowledge, insight and practice needed to run successful, sustainable trusts.

4. How did global majority and women Fellows experience inclusion, confidence and progression in the STCEOP, and what does this mean for designing equitable learning for trust leaders?

Given the programme's commitment to developing a strong and diverse CEO pipeline, this question examines whether and how the programme supported equitable participation, and what conditions matter for progression across the system.

5. What personal, organisational and wider system changes (if any) did Fellows associate with their experience of the STCEOP?

This question reflects the programme's ambition to nurture aspirant and current CEOs who can grow trusts where they are needed most and play their part in the wider system. It also enables a more complete understanding of how leaders interpret their development.

6. What does the evidence from the STCEOP suggest about how future executive leadership programmes should be designed and delivered?

This final question draws together learning across the inquiry to inform the future design of executive programmes. It speaks directly to the programme's objective of giving the system confidence in trust growth by supporting a strong, well-prepared and diverse CEO workforce. The question avoids prescriptive recommendations; instead, it offers considerations for those designing and delivering professional learning across the sector.

Why these questions and not others?

The selection reflects the boundaries of the programme's evidence base and its purpose. The questions focus on leadership development, equity, organisational practice and system contribution; areas where Fellows could credibly comment based on their experience. Topics such as outcomes for children and young people or financial performance were deliberately excluded, as the programme was not designed or evidenced to assess impact at those levels. The chosen questions therefore align with the programme's objectives; the available data and the wider sector need to understand how executive learning can support leaders to run successful trusts and lead beyond them.

How the evidence was interpreted

This report is intended to illuminate how structured professional learning can support leaders to look beyond the immediate priorities of their own trusts and develop a wider orientation towards civic contribution and system stewardship. The approach taken prioritised understanding how and why programme elements were

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experienced as effective, drawing on multiple sources of evidence rather than seeking to attribute causal impact. While indicative rather than representative, the findings offer proportionate insights into executive development within a complex and evolving system.

This synthesis was informed by:

- Evidence drawn from multiple sources (surveys, interviews, reflections and immersion documentation) to triangulate perspectives.
- Attention to variation across trust size, context, role and identity, rather than assuming uniform experience or impact.
- Exploration of perceived mechanisms and conditions for change, not just reported outcomes.
- Clear boundary-setting about what the evidence can and cannot claim at this stage.

Section 1: How Fellows developed through the programme

Research question: How did taking part in the STCEOP help Fellows develop their leadership across operational, strategic and civic areas?

Participation in the School Trust CEO Programme (STCEOP) appears to have supported Fellows to deepen, strengthen and, in some cases, reframe their leadership across operational, strategic and civic dimensions. The programme's design, which combined structured reflection, coaching and immersion in other trusts, enabled Fellows to examine leadership within real organisational contexts. Exposure to the practice of other CEOs, particularly where system generosity and civic partnership were modelled, helped Fellows to view leadership as relational and values led as well as technical²⁰. This exposure also appeared to prompt more deliberate reflection on their own leadership and that of colleagues within their trusts, supporting clearer identification of values, skills, knowledge and competencies within executive teams and informing more intentional approaches to leadership development. These experiences contributed to a more outward-facing understanding of trust leadership and offered indications about how executive learning programmes can support leaders to connect organisational priorities within their trust to wider system contribution.

Operational leadership: Deepening alignment and delegation

Across both cohorts, many Fellows reported moving from hands-on operational oversight toward a more strategic role. This shift often involved stepping back from day-to-day activity, delegating responsibilities and strengthening senior teams²¹. For example, one Fellow reflected that, 'I feel that I have made a shift to working on a more strategic level'. Immersions played an important part in this change. Fellows agreed that they were able to observe daily operations and contextual challenges in host trusts²², which appeared to help them evaluate their own operational approach.

Fellows also highlighted the importance of clearer role definitions and improved governance. For example, one Fellow noted, 'We have altered completely the board's understanding of their role'²³. These developments were informed by a combination of self-study materials, immersion experiences, and a residential conference on strategic governance and executive coaching. Feedback from CEO mentors during immersions was particularly valued, with almost all agreeing that these interactions supported reflection on operational effectiveness and the development of trust-wide models.

²⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

²¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

²² Evidence drawn from Fellow immersion survey responses (see Table 10).

²³ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

Table 1*Responses to immersion survey items concerning feedback*

Survey item	Cohort	Count of agree or strongly agree responses / total <i>n</i>		
		Immersion 1	Immersion 2	Immersion 3
The feedback received from the host CEO and leadership team was both constructive and helpful.	1	22/23	29/21	9/10
	2	32/32	20/22	21/22
I had a supportive environment in which to present key reflections to the CEO and relevant trust leaders at the end of the immersion and receive constructive feedback.	1	23/23	19/21	10/10
	2	32/32	22/22	22/22

These patterns point to questions for the sector about how executive leadership programmes can help CEOs build operational alignment while stepping back from direct management. Structured exposure to other trusts, combined with protected reflective time, may be especially important for supporting this shift.

Intentions for future leadership practice

Alongside reported changes in current practice, survey data indicate that participation in the programme was associated with clear intentions regarding future leadership activity. Post programme survey responses suggest that Fellows were not only reflecting on their role within their own trusts but also considering how they might exercise influence beyond it. Over half of Cohort 1 Fellows (13 out of 23) reported plans to mentor or coach others, and the same proportion (13 out of 23) indicated intentions to seek further mentoring or coaching themselves. This pattern suggests an emerging orientation towards leadership as a reciprocal and developmental practice, rather than a solely individual endeavour.

Fellows also expressed strong intentions to engage at system level. A large majority (19 out of 23) reported plans to advocate on behalf of their trust to policymakers, government officials or industry representatives, and almost all (22 out of 23) indicated an intention to work with colleagues from other trusts to share practice and learning. These findings align with qualitative evidence that the programme supported a more outward-facing conception of leadership, in which civic engagement, system contribution, and professional collaboration were understood as integral to the CEO role²⁴.

²⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections and longitudinal interviews.

At the same time, a small group of Fellows (6 out of 23), comprising both current and aspiring CEOs, indicated that they were considering applying for a new role. This suggests that, for some, participation in the programme may also have supported reflection on career direction and readiness for progression. These stated intentions point to leadership development that extends beyond immediate role performance to include questions of influence, contribution and longer-term professional trajectory.

Strategic leadership: Strengthening focus and coherence

Fellows described developing a clearer and more deliberate approach to strategic leadership as they engaged with the programme. They reported refining their strategic vision and improving their ability to translate it into coherent operational plans²⁵. Immersions appeared particularly influential, giving Fellows opportunities to observe how other trusts approached planning, financial management and trust-wide goal setting. One Fellow reflected, 'The learning I've gained through this programme has had a direct and meaningful impact on the strategic direction and culture of our trust'²⁶.

Survey data (see Table 2) indicate that the programme strengthened Fellows' understanding of high-leverage practices and helped them apply conceptual frameworks to their own priorities. Some used this learning to create more robust school improvement frameworks or introduce clearer, data-informed strategies²⁷. Many Fellows also described taking a more collaborative approach to strategy development. The programme's emphasis on reflection and peer dialogue supported closer engagement with senior leaders and stakeholders. As one Fellow noted, 'Now, we have a completely altered strategic plan, and it is co-created'²⁸.

These accounts suggest that the programme's combination of self-study, immersion in real trust practice, and structured reflection through coaching and peer dialogue helped CEOs develop strategic plans that were clearer, more coherent and more firmly rooted in shared purpose and priorities, rather than owned by the CEO alone.

²⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

²⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

²⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

²⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

Table 2*Responses to immersion survey items concerning strategic leadership development*

Survey item	Cohort	Count of agree or strongly agree responses / total <i>n</i>		
		Immersion 1	Immersion 2	Immersion 3
I identified and articulated high-leverage practices observed during the immersion.	1	23/23	20/21	9/10
	2	32/32	22/22	21/22
I critically reflected on the high-leverage practices observed and considered their adaptive application to fit the unique needs and context of my trusts.	1	23/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	22/22
The immersion acted as a bridge between the theoretical underpinnings of the MAT CEO Content Framework and its real-world application, facilitating actionable planning for my trust.	1	22/23	20/21	10/10
	2	32/32	20/22	22/22
The visit encouraged critical reflection on practices and systems within my own trust, supporting future improvements.	1	23/23	20/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	22/22

Strengthening the CEO–Chair relationship

Many Fellows described learning to work differently with Chairs and boards over the course of the programme. Exposure through the Strategic Governance Conference and immersion experiences created practical insight into relationship disciplines such as transparency, cadence and role clarity, particularly in how executive leaders frame expectations, surface challenge and maintain disciplined ways of working with governance.

Qualitative reflections suggest that observing Chairs in different trust contexts was influential. One aspiring CEO described learning from Chairs encountered during immersions and applying this to their own practice: ‘They both talked about the importance of transparency, weekly conversations and a “no surprises” relationship... I have begun to tackle improved trustee relationships by developing a programme of hosted school visits...’²⁹. Another described a specific turning point involving joint attendance with their Chair, followed by concrete action: ‘A key turning point... came

²⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

after attending the Strategic Governance Conference... with our Chair... As a result, we commissioned an external governance review and are currently reviewing our Scheme of Delegation³⁰.

Survey evidence provides partial corroboration of these accounts. In the post programme survey, responding Fellows (23 out of 23) rated their confidence in developing and maintaining effective working relationships with trustees and the executive leadership team as particularly high compared to their confidence in other aspects of the CEO role. While this measure does not isolate the CEO–Chair relationship specifically, it suggests a strong overall sense of confidence in board-facing leadership capability by the end of the programme.

Table 3

Cohort 1 Fellow post programme mean confidence ratings for specific aspects of the CEO role

How confident do you feel doing the following?	Mean score (95% confidence intervals) / 5
Developing and maintaining effective working relationships with trustees and the executive leadership team	4.70 (4.49, 4.90)
Building a strong, unified culture centred around a clear strategic vision	4.52 (4.30, 4.74)
Driving continuous improvement by systematically identifying weaknesses, implementing strategies and monitoring progress	4.48 (4.22, 4.73)
Collaborating with others outside of the trust for the wider public benefit	4.26 (3.99, 4.53)
Ensuring all pupils (including SEND) have equal access to learning and educational opportunities and achieve to the best of their ability	4.04 (3.77, 4.32)
Assuring long-term operational sustainability by recruiting, developing and retaining a high-quality workforce	4.13 (3.86, 4.40)
Ensuring long-term financial sustainability through fiscal assessment and planning	4.00 (3.71, 4.29)

At the same time, experiences were not uniform. A small number of Fellows noted that direct Chair involvement could feel intimidating, particularly where participants were not yet serving CEOs, and some reported that governance-focused sessions felt less immediately relevant to their current role³¹. These reflections highlight the

³⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

³¹ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys.

importance of pacing, role-sensitivity and optionality in board-facing development, especially for aspiring CEOs or those earlier in their executive journey.

The evidence suggests that governance-focused elements were most impactful when they supported confidence, clarity and shared language for working with boards, while also pointing to the need for flexible design that recognises differing levels of readiness and authority among participants.

Furthermore, effective CEO development cannot treat governance as a technical or compliance-focused domain alone. Rather, the evidence indicates that strategic leadership capability is closely tied to a CEO's confidence and skill in shaping board relationships, establishing disciplined ways of working, and engaging Chairs as active partners in sense-making and decision-making.

Where development activity created shared learning between CEOs and Chairs, Fellows appeared better able to translate insight into concrete governance action³². This points to the value of executive development models that explicitly include board-facing leadership, particularly at points of appointment or transition, where expectations, roles, and relational habits are still being formed.

Civic leadership: Reframing and extending system contributions

Fellows also reported changes in how they understood their civic responsibilities. Many described moving from a predominantly inward focus on organisational performance towards a wider orientation to system contribution. Immersions exposed Fellows to collaborative practice across trusts and illustrated the role CEOs can play in the broader educational landscape. As one Fellow observed, 'I now view leadership as a civic duty – one that extends beyond the boundaries of my own trust and into the wider educational landscape'³³. For some, immersion experiences also led directly to system-facing initiatives. One Fellow explained, 'Inspired by [name of trust]'s relational approach, we are formalising civic partnerships that address food insecurity, digital exclusion and youth engagement'³⁴.

Fellows also reflected on the idea of system generosity, which they explored through peer networks and mentoring relationships. As one shared, 'System generosity... is something I now have more understanding of. The programme has enabled me to see how my trust can be an important part of a bigger infrastructure to support young people'³⁵. These accounts suggest that structured exposure to diverse practice, combined with reflective space, may help CEOs develop a clearer sense of

³² Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys and written reflections.

³³ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

³⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

³⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

their civic responsibilities and the role their trusts can play in contributing to public good.

Differentiated leadership growth across cohorts

The STCEOP appears to have supported Fellows to deepen and, in some cases, reframe their leadership across operational, strategic and civic dimensions. Operationally, Fellows reported stepping back from direct management and adopting more deliberate approaches to delegation and empowerment. This was accompanied by a clearer understanding of accountability, including who holds responsibility for which decisions, how assurance is provided, and where CEO oversight remains essential.

Fellows described growing confidence in relying on specialist expertise within central trust teams, such as finance, estates and operations, while maintaining clear lines of accountability through agreed decision rights, reporting routines and governance structures. They also reported being more explicit about which decisions should be taken centrally, which could be devolved to schools, and how autonomy operates within an agreed trust-wide framework.

In parallel, Fellows described involving governors and senior leaders more actively in shaping vision and priorities, strengthening shared understanding of roles and responsibilities rather than dispersing accountability. Over time, this more intentional approach to leadership distribution appeared to support stronger central capacity, clearer accountability, and more sustainable trust-wide decision-making.

Strategically, Fellows reported closer alignment between vision and delivery, using programme learning to connect conceptual frameworks with context-specific action. Through the programme's focus on civic leadership, many also developed a broader view of their role, describing a stronger commitment to contributing to the wider education system.

These developments reflect refinement rather than wholesale change. Fellows' accounts point to a more balanced leadership approach that links vision with implementation and connects internal improvement with a longer-term view of strategic direction. Programme elements such as immersions, coaching and structured reflection provided opportunities to interpret and apply learning within their own contexts, supporting growth at individual, organisational and system levels.

Participation in the STCEOP appeared to strengthen many Fellows' sense of leadership as a reflective professional role with responsibilities that extend beyond their own trust. As they aligned their organisational priorities with wider system activity, their understanding of effective leadership continued to develop. The next

section considers how these experiences are shaping Fellows' views of what constitutes success in trust leadership and what this may mean for judging impact across the wider system.

1. Considerations for those designing executive leadership professional learning

- 1.1. How can programmes give CEOs regular opportunities to see leadership in real trusts, so they can understand how strategy, culture and operations work in practice?
- 1.2. What structured time for reflection is needed so CEOs can make sense of what they see, test their thinking and decide what should change in their own trusts?
- 1.3. How can programmes build leaders' confidence and sense of identity, especially for those who may not see themselves reflected in current executive roles?
- 1.4. How should programme elements be sequenced so that ideas learned early on are reinforced by later observation and reflection, rather than standing alone?
- 1.5. How can programmes encourage CEOs to think about their civic role and understand how their decisions affect children and young people, and communities beyond their own trust?

Section 2: How Fellows redefined effective trust leadership

Research question: How did the STCEOP influence Fellows' views about what effective and successful trust leadership looks like?

Fellows' reflections indicate that participation in the STCEOP helped them reassess and broaden their understanding of what effective and successful trust leadership involves. Building on the leadership developments described previously, Fellows used the programme's structured learning to reconsider how they defined success across personal, organisational and civic dimensions. Their accounts suggest a move away from narrow performance indicators towards a view of success grounded in strategic clarity, people development, cultural alignment and contribution to the wider system. These reflections remain self-reported and are shaped by the contexts in which the two cohorts were working.

Evolving perception of personal success

Across both cohorts, Fellows described changes in how they understood personal success in the CEO role. Many reported moving away from defining success primarily as efficient operational control, towards seeing it as the ability to exercise sound judgement, act consistently with the trust's purpose, and lead in ways that build confidence and capability in others. For Cohort 1 Fellows in particular, success was increasingly associated with clarity of direction, the ability to influence through relationships, and creating the conditions in which senior leaders, governors and teams could contribute meaningfully to shaping the trust's future³⁶.

Fellows also described increased confidence and greater comfort with ambiguity, often linked to observing experienced CEOs during immersions and hearing from sector leaders at conferences. One reflected, 'I now feel more comfortable with some of the ambiguity the role entails'³⁷. Fellows in Cohort 2 reported related but distinct developments. They highlighted becoming more intentional in their communication and more assured in their strategic decisions, noting that immersion learning helped them approach uncertainty with clearer judgement³⁸. These perceptions provide indications about how executive learning programmes may support CEOs in navigating the personal demands of the role.

³⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

³⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

³⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

Table 4

Thematically coded responses to the survey item 'What three things do you think define success for a MAT CEO?'

Theme	n / 96 total codes
Leadership and organisational development	36
Quality of education	19
Workforce and talent development	18
Personal quality	11
Finance and operations	5
Strategic governance	5
Public benefit and civic duty	3

Note: The 96 coded items are derived from responses shared by 31 programme Fellows. This survey was completed by Cohort 1 during the programme. This analysis is also presented in Liu & Davey³⁹.

Wider conception of organisational success and coherence

Fellows also described a broader view of organisational success, with particular emphasis on strategy, people, culture and governance. Workforce and talent development emerged repeatedly as a defining marker of long-term trust health. Fellows referred to developing leadership pipelines⁴⁰. These reflections align with survey responses indicating that that 'leadership and organisational development' and 'workforce and talent development' were among the most frequently cited indicators of success. This also connects with the Confederation of School Trusts' articulation of workforce resilience and professional development as core domains of trust strength, central to sustained improvement rather than peripheral operational concerns⁴¹.

Alongside this, Fellows emphasised organisational coherence through strategic alignment and culture building. Cohort 1 Fellows described revisiting mission and values and embedding these across their trusts⁴². Cohort 2 Fellows highlighted improvements in communication, stronger alignment between values and messaging, and more deliberate organisational rituals reinforcing trust identity⁴³. Fellows often attributed these developments to immersion experiences, where

³⁹ Liu, Q., & Davey, C. (2024). 'Beyond school leadership: What makes success for CEOs of multi-academy trusts in England?' British Educational Research Association blog, 27 November. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/beyond-school-leadership-what-makes-success-for-ceos-of-multi-academy-trusts-in-england>

⁴⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁴¹ Cruddas, L. (2024). *Building strong trusts*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts. <https://cstuk.org.uk/resources/building-strong-trusts>

⁴² Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁴³ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

seeing how mature trusts created coherence and maintained strategic discipline influenced their own thinking. These reflections point to how executive learning that integrates theory with contextual observation may help leaders understand organisational success as something built through clarity, alignment and consistent behaviour rather than isolated performance outcomes.

Governance as a strategic lever, not only a compliance requirement

Fellows increasingly described effective trust leadership as inseparable from effective governance, not as a technical 'board matter', but as a core condition for trust sustainability and educational purpose⁴⁴. These reflections align with the DfE MAT CEO Content Framework's focus on governance, finance and operations and suggest that Fellows came to view success as combining organisational stability with educational purpose.

Several reflections show governance being reframed as the mechanism through which a trust clarifies ethos, makes strategic choices, and sustains legitimacy. One Fellow described how governance conversations moved them beyond a narrow emphasis on growth and towards public benefit and charitable purpose: 'This struck at the heart of the meaning of trusts, and the charitable objects, rather than a sole focus on growth...I have been able to reconcile my own beliefs with those of the board, and thus we are stronger and more cohesive as an organisation'⁴⁵. Another captured governance's place in a broader definition of trust effectiveness: 'My understanding of what makes a highly effective trust has grown significantly...This has included...estates, finance, and governance'⁴⁶. This aligns with CST's articulation of strategic governance and expert, ethical leadership as defining features of strong trusts⁴⁷.

Civic and system leadership

A notable development in Fellows' thinking concerned the civic and system dimensions of leadership. Fellows across Cohort 1 described a shift towards wider system awareness, emphasising the need to 'look up and out' and to 'act on and not simply within the system'⁴⁸. Cohort 2 Fellows provided examples of contributing to local and national priorities, forming partnerships addressing social issues and collaborating with other trusts on shared challenges⁴⁹. For some, this strengthened the view that leadership carries a moral and civic dimension: 'I now view leadership

⁴⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁴⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁴⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁴⁷ Cruddas, L. (2024). *Building strong trusts*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts.

<https://cstuk.org.uk/resources/building-strong-trusts>

⁴⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁴⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

as a civic duty⁵⁰. Others, from smaller or developing trusts, noted increased confidence to contribute⁵¹.

Importantly, several Fellows' reflections suggested that the ability to lead beyond the trust was increasingly understood as dependent on governance alignment and support. Rather than viewing civic or system-facing work as an individual leadership preference, Fellows described a growing recognition that boards play a critical role in legitimising and enabling this aspect of executive leadership. One Fellow reflected that, following joint engagement in programme activity, 'my chair developed an awareness of how much the board had not supported our system development'⁵². This shift appeared to reframe system leadership as a collective responsibility, shaped through shared understanding between CEOs and Chairs about the trust's charitable purpose, public benefit and outward-facing role.

These reflections echo the views of Cohort 2 Fellows, who frequently described system leadership as interdependent and collaborative, with an emphasis on shared or mutual benefit across the system rather than leadership framed primarily as helping others⁵³. They also contrast with the views shared by Cohort 1 Fellows, which were captured earlier in the life of the programme and at a different point in how trust leadership was being interpreted and discussed across the sector⁵⁴.

While the MAT CEO Content Framework and the Trust Quality Descriptors⁵⁵ had already been published and informed the design of the programme for both cohorts, Cohort 1 Fellows were among the first to engage with professional learning explicitly structured around these frameworks. Their reflections therefore reflect an earlier phase of sense-making, as leaders began to interpret and apply emerging expectations about system responsibility, public benefit and governance in practice, rather than a period before those frameworks existed. It is therefore plausible that the stronger emphasis on 'public benefit and civic duty' evident in Cohort 2 reflects not only programme learning over time, but also the wider maturation of the trust sector and the growing influence of shared frameworks that have helped to codify and legitimise this dimension of executive leadership.

Fellows' reflections across both cohorts suggest a broader conception of success, in which effective trust leadership is defined not only by internal performance and organisational stability, but by the capacity to exercise civic and system stewardship

⁵⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁵¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁵² Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁵³ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁵⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁵⁵ Department for Education (2023). *Annex A: Trust Quality Descriptions*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a68ab94dd8b3000f7fa566/Annex_A_Trust_Quality_Descriptions_July_2023_.pdf

with the active understanding and support of governance. The next section explores which features of the programme supported these shifts.

2. Considerations for those designing executive leadership professional learning

- 2.1. How can programmes give CEOs practical chances to watch experienced leaders handle real dilemmas so they build stronger judgement and confidence?
- 2.2. What protected time do CEOs need to reflect on their values, identity and communication, including how these support confident leadership for those from underrepresented backgrounds?
- 2.3. How can programmes help CEOs link clear strategy with people development and culture building, drawing directly on what they see in effective trusts?
- 2.4. How can executive learning support CEOs to strengthen workforce pipelines and governance routines as central markers of successful trust leadership?
- 2.5. How can comparative or immersion-based learning help CEOs understand when wider system needs should influence their priorities, particularly in smaller or developing trusts?

Section 3: Programme features that most supported Fellows' learning

Research question: Which parts of the STCEOP most helped Fellows strengthen their leadership, reflect on their practice and think beyond their own trust?

This section examines which features of the STCEOP Fellows viewed as most helpful for strengthening their leadership and, crucially, for supporting the reflective habits the programme deliberately set out to build. It also explores how specific components encouraged leaders to think beyond their own organisational boundaries and develop a wider, system-focused perspective.

How Fellows judged the contribution of each programme component

Survey data show that Fellows regarded all four programme components as contributing to their development, though with different strengths. Self-study, conferences and immersions were consistently reported as helpful or very helpful, with immersions most often rated very helpful by respondents. Coaching was also positively received, although it was less frequently chosen as the single most useful programme element.

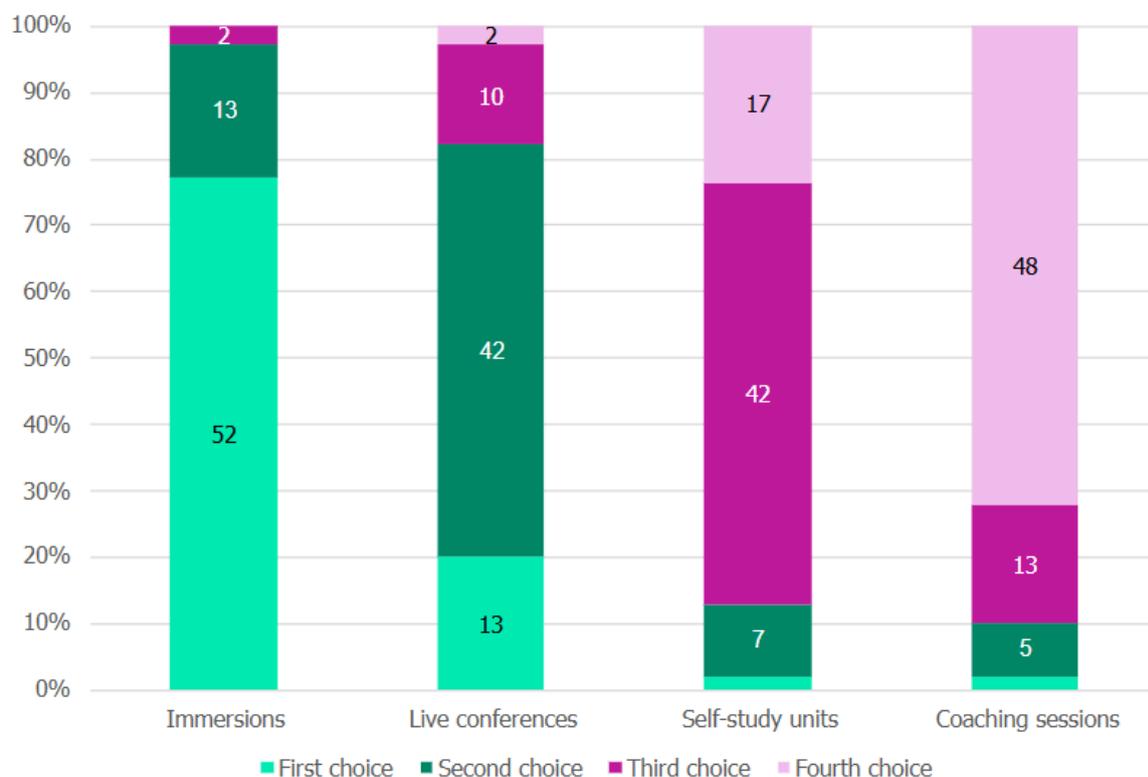
Table 5

Responses to end point survey items concerning programme satisfaction

Survey item	Cohort	Count of responses / total <i>n</i>	
		Satisfied/ helpful	Very satisfied/ very helpful
How satisfied are you with the coaching you received?	1	9/24	10/24
	2	12/43	27/43
How helpful have you found the self-study units in meeting your professional development goals?	1	6/24	18/24
	2	17/43	26/43
How helpful have you found the conferences in meeting your professional development goals?	1	3/24	21/24
	2	8/43	35/43
How helpful have you found the immersions in meeting your professional development goals?	1	2/24	22/24
	2	1/43	42/43

Figure 2

Number of Fellows selecting each programme component as their first, second, third and fourth ranked choice in response to the question 'Please rank the following elements of the programme in order of how helpful they were to you, with 1 being the most helpful and 4 being the least helpful.'



Note: Self-study units and coaching sessions were each chosen by one person as their most helpful programme component

A structured sequence that supported sense-making

Across interviews, survey responses and provider reports, Fellows described a pattern in how they engaged with programme components. Self-study materials and conferences helped establish core ideas in governance, culture, communication and talent strategy. Several Fellows noted that this early input made it easier to make sense of what they later observed during immersions⁵⁶. Immersions then provided opportunities to see how other trusts addressed operational and strategic challenges. The visits were designed to give Fellows access to the unfiltered reality of trust-level leadership so that conceptual learning from self-study and conferences could be interpreted in context. Survey responses indicate strong alignment between this design intention and the way immersions were implemented, with Fellows broadly agreeing they were able to observe daily operations⁵⁷. Qualitative accounts reinforced this, with Fellows emphasising that they were able to see practice as it is

⁵⁶ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁵⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow survey responses (see Table 6).

lived rather than curated for visitors⁵⁸. This authenticity was central to the intended learning mechanism, since the ability to compare their own trusts with real, unscripted practice elsewhere appeared to deepen judgement and support more confident application of ideas on their return.

Coaching and peer dialogue gave Fellows space to reflect on these experiences and consider how learning might apply in their own trusts. Some Fellows valued protected time with an independent coach and reported increased confidence in delegation, communication and holding others to account⁵⁹. Conference groups and immersion cohorts provided further opportunities to test interpretations with peers.

Immersion as a central source of applied learning

Immersion survey responses indicate Fellows felt that immersions were purposefully and structurally organised, and provided applied activities aligned with the intended immersion theme alongside opportunities to explore areas of individual need or interest. Responses also indicate that Fellows perceived placements to be well matched to their individual needs and that host trusts provided supportive environments.

Views shared in longitudinal interviews suggest that Fellows frequently perceived a 'good match' to be a trust that was in some way similar to their own. This could relate to less tangible aspects of trust functioning such as cultural ethos or strategic approach as well as more concrete contextual features such as size or school type, which sometimes resulted in Fellows finding points of similarity across diverse trust pairings. For example, a CEO of a relatively new trust shared that it was comforting to see that 'even a trust of over 30 schools, that's 14 years old, is still re-examining... some of its fundamentals and reshaping some structures 14 years in'⁶⁰. Some interviewees also highlighted that shared reflection with peers or coaches helped to unpack learning from trusts that were less similar to their own, and consider how policies and procedures observed might be meaningfully applied within their own contexts, though others shared a preference for reflecting on experiences alone or with colleagues in their home trust.

⁵⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

⁵⁹ Evidence drawn from report by coaching provider.

⁶⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

Table 6*Responses to immersion survey items concerning overall experiences*

Survey item	Cohort	Count of agree or strongly agree responses / total <i>n</i>		
		Immersion 1	Immersion 2	Immersion 3
I am pleased with the outcome of the immersion matching.	1	23/23	20/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	21/22
I found the environment at the host trust to be welcoming, comfortable and supportive.	1	23/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	22/22	22/22
The five-day visit was purposefully and structurally organised and implemented.	1	22/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	20/22	21/22
The host trust provided activities, conversations and materials that aligned with the specific focus of the immersion visit.	1	22/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	20/22	22/22
The immersion experience was tailored and responsive to my needs and interests.	1	22/23	19/21	10/10
	2	32/32	20/22	22/22

Across data sources, immersions were also the component Fellows most frequently identified as shaping their leadership thinking and system awareness. For example, many Fellows reported that observing practice in different settings helped them reconsider aspects of their own operating models, accountability structures and organisational culture⁶¹. For some, this process reinforced confidence that existing approaches were well aligned with their context, while for others it prompted adaptation or change, highlighting affirmation as an important element of professional judgement alongside development.

Qualitative reflections show how comparison across trusts informed judgement. Some Fellows noted that learning how host trusts balanced accountability with school autonomy prompted them to review similar arrangements in their own organisations⁶². Others described how seeing multi-layered improvement structures supported thinking about changes to policy and practice. For instance, one Fellow shared that the opportunity to observe and discuss 'healthcheck' systems across multiple visits supported them to select an appropriate assessment mechanism for use within their own trust⁶³. These examples illustrate how immersions allowed

⁶¹ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁶² Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁶³ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

Fellows to reflect on their own approaches alongside those of differently configured or more mature trusts.

Immersion also appeared to support Fellows in linking the MAT CEO Content Framework to practice. Many Fellows reported strengthened understanding of the framework and agreed that immersions helped them translate principles into strategies they could apply⁶⁴. Fellows also described observing how strategy influenced school routines and how communication structures embedded trust values⁶⁵. Some applied this directly; for example, one Fellow used learning from an immersion to shape a trust relaunch⁶⁶. Several Fellows also reflected on wider responsibilities, including civic partnerships, community engagement and provision for children with additional needs⁶⁷.

Executive coaching focused on identity and judgement

Executive coaching in the STCEOP gave Fellows structured space to think, reflect and make sense of their experiences, aligning with wider research that highlights the benefits of coaching for motivation, relationship management and communication⁶⁸. Studies also show that coaching supports personal well-being, resilience and adaptability, which are critical for CEOs working under sustained pressure⁶⁹. Several Fellows described coaching as helping them manage impostor syndrome, reduce isolation and build confidence, reflecting evidence that coaching can lessen executive loneliness⁷⁰.

Coach reports and Fellows' qualitative reflections indicate that executive coaching offered space to reflect and they used coaching to rehearse complex decisions, explore their leadership identity and clarify next steps. Many spoke about preparing for difficult conversations and refining boundaries. It was noted that conversations typically centred on interpersonal and intrapersonal matters, including resilience, delegation and work with founder CEOs or strong Chairs⁷¹. Coaching reports highlight that this programme element enabled Fellows to discuss areas less frequently addressed through other programme components.

⁶⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow immersion survey responses (see Table 2).

⁶⁵ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁶⁶ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁶⁷ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁶⁸ Plotkina, L., & Sri Ramalu, S. (2024). Determinants and trends of executive coaching effectiveness in post-pandemic era: A critical systematic literature review analysis. *Management Review Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-024-00428-x>

⁶⁹ Athanasopoulou, A., & Dopson, S. (2018). A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 70–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.11.004>;

Jackson, E., & Berkeley, A. (2020). Executive coaching for the hidden realities of life as a school leader. In E. Jackson & A. Berkeley (Eds.), *Sustaining Depth and Meaning in School Leadership* (pp. 97–115). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003015901>

⁷⁰ Kuna, S. (2019). All by Myself? Executives' Impostor Phenomenon and Loneliness as Catalysts for Executive Coaching With Management Consultants. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 55(3), 306–326.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886319832009>

⁷¹ Evidence drawn from report by coaching provider.

Coaches reported that immersion experiences were 'almost universally' discussed, suggesting that coaching helped Fellows integrate what they observed in real trusts into their own leadership practice.

Although survey data indicated that coaching was ranked below immersions, conferences and self-study when Fellows compared components (see Figure 2) the lower ranking in comparison to other programme components may reflect how Fellows experienced coaching rather than its inherent value. Interview responses suggest that coaching was most helpful when Fellows valued having an impartial and confidential space to process immersion experiences and when they did not already have access to a professional coach⁷². Where either of these conditions was absent, Fellows appeared less certain about how coaching connected to the rest of the programme⁷³.

The research outcomes from this programme suggest a central insight that structured reflective time is not an add-on but a core mechanism for strengthening judgement. Feedback highlighted the value of having access to an independent perspective that could support reflection without judgement. At the same time, a small number of Fellows noted that the impact of coaching developed more gradually and, in some cases, felt less pronounced than that of immersion experiences. This was occasionally linked to the short duration of the coaching relationship within the programme, or to the fact that coaches were allocated rather than selected by Fellows, with some suggesting that longer-term relationships may deepen impact over time.

How relationships helped Fellows make sense of their learning

Across surveys and qualitative accounts, relational aspects of the programme were frequently cited as important for sustaining learning. In immersion surveys, fellows reported opportunities to interact with trust stakeholders, with many agreeing that trust visits supported the formation of new connections. Fellows often referred to the openness of host trusts and the willingness of CEOs and teams to discuss both strengths and challenges, which encouraged similar openness about their own contexts⁷⁴.

⁷² Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

⁷³ Evidence drawn from report by coaching provider.

⁷⁴ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

Table 7*Responses to immersion survey items concerning network expansion*

Survey item	Cohort	Count of agree or strongly agree responses / total <i>n</i>		
		Immersion 1	Immersion 2	Immersion 3
I had the freedom, time and opportunity to interact with, and ask questions of, a wide range of trust stakeholders at all levels in the organisation.	1	22/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	22/22
The immersion experience expanded my networks and enabled me to form meaningful connections with trust leaders beyond my own context.	1	23/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	21/22

Conference and immersion groupings also enabled shared discussion. Fellows valued speaking with peers who ‘understood the role’ and could explore leadership dilemmas with insight⁷⁵, and several referenced a desire for further opportunities for collaborative group work during conferences to help unpack learning⁷⁶. Similarly, many Fellows commented that they appreciated completing immersions in pairs alongside another Fellow, though one or two indicated a preference for solo immersions to allow for more time and personal attention from trust stakeholders⁷⁷.

Host trusts’ representatives echoed this emphasis on connection, noting that preparing for and engaging with Fellows helped refine organisational narratives and prompted internal discussion⁷⁸. These relationships and conversations supported Fellows to interpret what they had seen and consider how it might inform their own practice and that of their teams.

Variations in how the programme was experienced

While feedback was largely positive, the data show variation linked to *when* Fellows participated (i.e., whether they were a part of Cohort 1 or Cohort 2), their trust contexts and personal preferences. For example, survey responses indicate that several Cohort 1 fellows did not agree that information about immersions was provided in a clear and timely manner, with some suggesting increased notice of future immersions as an opportunity for programme improvement⁷⁹. However, Cohort 2 responses imply more positive experiences with preparation and organisation, which may partly reflect the programme’s second year of operation and increased familiarity with requirements and expectations over time.

⁷⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

⁷⁶ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys.

⁷⁷ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁷⁸ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in host trust immersion surveys.

⁷⁹ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

Table 8*Responses to immersion survey items concerning overall experiences*

Survey item	Cohort	Count of agree or strongly agree responses / total <i>n</i>		
		Immersion 1	Immersion 2	Immersion 3
The plan for my immersion visit was provided in a timely and clear manner.	1	17/23	18/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	22/22
The details provided on immersion and partner trusts were both accessible and clear.	1	19/23	20/21	10/10
	2	32/32	22/22	22/22
Guidance on the logistics of the immersion visit to the host trust was provided both timely and clearly.	1	18/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	22/22	22/22
I had access to a range of trust settings and schools.	1	20/23	17/21	10/10
	2	17/32	18/22	22/22
I had meaningful, sustained access to the CEO throughout the immersion.	1	21/23	18/21	10/10
	2	30/32	17/22	21/22

Access to schools during immersions also differed. Although most agreed they visited a range of settings, some Fellows noted limited time in schools, which they felt reduced their ability to connect central strategy with practice⁸⁰. Survey responses similarly suggest some variation in the quality and quantity of contact Fellows had with trust leaders across immersions, as a handful of Fellows did not agree that they had received meaningful and sustained access to CEOs during trust visits. One of the interviewees expressed disappointment that limited time was spent with the CEO in her second immersion, 'What I would have liked with the second one is if we had spent more time actually shadowing the CEO'⁸¹. She explained that observing the CEO interacting with staff, asking questions and holding people accountable was beneficial for her professional development.

Although immersions were widely valued, some Fellows indicated in longitudinal interviews that taking so much time away from their trusts was challenging. The need to review documents and prepare for assessments during evenings was also reported to exacerbate difficulties managing home trust workload during visits. Others shared challenges related to spending multiple days away from their homes

⁸⁰ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

⁸¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

and families where host trusts where faraway immersion locations required overnight stays.

In these contexts, hybrid visits were perceived as beneficial, allowing Fellows to more easily balance commitments. This delivery format was also valued where host trusts were spread over wide geographical areas. For example, one Fellow shared that they, 'had the opportunity to meet lots and lots of different leaders... and that is probably easier because it was facilitated online'⁸².

A small group of Fellows were less positive about coaching, particularly where gaps between sessions disrupted momentum⁸³. Several Fellows also noted in interviews that they were already working with an executive coach, and so did not feel that the provision of additional coaching opportunities within the programme was necessary or beneficial. Others mentioned a preference for a mentoring approach over coaching, where context-specific support, advice and guidance could be shared⁸⁴. These variations highlight how design detail, workload pressures and context shape perceptions of value and raise questions about equity of experience, which are explored in the next section.

Reflections for leadership development design

Survey and qualitative evidence both point to several features that Fellows described as most helpful for their leadership development, reflective practice and wider system awareness.

- **Learning rooted in real trust environments:** Immersions offered Fellows the clearest opportunity to understand how strategy, culture and governance function in practice. Fellows repeatedly described this contextual comparison as the point where abstract ideas became usable.
- **Structured reflection that turns observation into judgement:** Coaching and peer conversations helped Fellows process what they had seen and consider how it applied to their own leadership. This reflective space strengthened confidence and clarified next steps.
- **Relational networks that support sustained learning:** Informal dialogue across conferences, immersion pairings and host interactions helped Fellows test interpretations and build a sense of belonging within the system. These relationships often outlasted formal programme delivery.
- **Identity-aware support that enables participation for all leaders:** Some Fellows, especially those from underrepresented groups, highlighted the importance of relational safety and visible executive practice in building

⁸² Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

⁸³ Evidence drawn from report by coaching provider.

⁸⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

confidence. Programme design that attends to these conditions can strengthen equitable engagement.

- **Consistent programme logistics that allow leaders to participate fully:** Variation in documentation, scheduling and access to schools shaped Fellows' experience. Clearer preparation and predictable processes helped ensure that CEOs from trusts that were different sizes or at different stages of maturity could benefit equally.

3. Considerations for those designing executive leadership professional learning

- 3.1. How can programmes introduce key concepts early so that CEOs know what to look for when they observe leadership practice in other trusts?
- 3.2. What preparation helps CEOs make meaningful comparisons during immersions, including how operating models, culture and governance work in practice?
- 3.3. How can programmes secure consistent, high-quality access to CEOs, schools and central teams, regardless of trust size, geography or complexity?
- 3.4. How might coaching be linked more intentionally to immersion learning while still giving CEOs a confidential space for personal reflection?
- 3.5. How can peer dialogue and host trust interactions be designed to encourage reciprocal learning, helping both visitors and hosts sharpen their strategy and leadership narrative?

Section 4: Experiences of inclusion and progression for underrepresented leaders

Research question: How did global majority and women Fellows experience inclusion, confidence and progression in the STCEOP, and what does this mean for designing equitable learning for trust leaders?

This section draws on a relatively small sub-sample of Fellows and should therefore be read as indicative rather than representative. The evidence presented focuses specifically on the experiences of global majority and women Fellows, rather than the cohort as a whole, and reflects how these leaders interpreted inclusion, confidence and progression within the programme. Where findings overlap with wider leadership development themes, they are reported here only insofar as Fellows explicitly linked them to identity, representation, or differential access to executive practice. Intersectionality, conceptualised by Crenshaw⁸⁵, was important in this research. It offers a structural and political framework for examining how gender, race, class and other aspects of inequality intersect to shape differentiated experiences of leadership. It emphasises how multiple inequalities interact to shape women's leadership experiences, especially for global majority leaders.

National evidence highlights persistent inequalities in trust leadership. Only 2.3% of CEOs leading larger trusts are from global majority backgrounds, and women remain underrepresented in senior executive roles⁸⁶. Fellows entered the STCEOP within this landscape, and many described longstanding experiences of racism, structural exclusion and limited representation that predated the programme⁸⁷. Across the two cohorts, women made up 49% of Fellows, which is proportionally higher than the national picture for trust and system leaders, where women remain underrepresented despite forming 75.6% of the teaching workforce. Ethnic diversity within the programme, at 8% global majority, was broadly in line with or slightly ahead of national leadership patterns and comparable to the wider school workforce, where 11.4% of teachers are from global majority backgrounds⁸⁸.

Pre-existing barriers shaping programme experience

Interviews with leaders from underrepresented groups show how earlier experiences influenced their confidence and sense of professional legitimacy. Some described racism encountered in schools or local communities, including one Fellow who reported abusive behaviour from students early in his career. One female leader

⁸⁵ Crenshaw K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), Article 8. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/>

⁸⁶ Dyson, J. (2024, October 18). 'Diversity gap in academy trust top jobs fails to narrow'. Schools Week. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/diversity-gap-in-academy-trust-top-jobs-fails-to-narrow/>

⁸⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁸⁸ Department for Education (2025). *School teacher workforce: Ethnicity facts and figures (2024–2025)*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest/>

recounted receiving death threats, noting a persistent 'sense of being unsafe' that affected her confidence. Others spoke about being the only global majority leader within their trust's senior team or feeling they had to adapt their behaviour to match expectations of how CEOs should present⁸⁹.

Structural issues were also raised. Several Fellows referred to the lack of diversity on trust boards and interview panels, which contributed to a perception that they would need to be 'exceptional' to progress⁹⁰. Representational gaps were a recurring theme, with global majority women leaders questioning why senior leaders 'look the same' and describing moments where they were viewed as outsiders within their communities. These accounts provide important context for understanding how Fellows experienced inclusion and confidence during the STCEOP.

Perceived enabling conditions within the STCEOP

Although long-standing inequities shaped how many Fellows approached the programme, several aspects were described as helping them reflect on identity, confidence and progression. These accounts represent individual perceptions rather than evidence of programme impact.

Visibility of senior leadership practice

Global majority and women leaders emphasised the value of observing executive practice directly during immersions. One Fellow described the experience as offering 'real quality' exposure to senior decision-making and access to 'really good solid content' that differed meaningfully from their own context⁹¹. Others highlighted the generosity of host trusts, noting the benefit of being welcomed into strategy discussions and trustee meetings, which provided unusual visibility into how CEOs work at scale: 'There was definitely a massive generosity... allowing us to be part of the trustee meeting'⁹².

Fellows reported that this level of access helped validate their own leadership approaches and strengthened confidence in their readiness for executive roles. As one explained, the immersion 'reaffirmed...that I'm doing the right things'⁹³, while another described it as 'the most phenomenal experience of just being in the space of people who are working at a high level'⁹⁴. For some, the impact was also relational and motivational. Exposure to senior leaders' lived experiences, including discussion of career barriers and professional journeys, was described as inspiring and confidence building.

⁸⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹² Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹³ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

Seeing different leadership styles also broadened Fellows' views of what credible CEO practice can look like, including 'quiet, consistent leadership' that operates behind the scenes⁹⁵. Many stressed that the in-person nature of the visits was essential to this learning: You've got to live it, breathe it⁹⁶.

Coaching as a space for reflection

Coaching was widely described by Fellows as providing protected time to think through questions of confidence, decision-making and leadership development with someone outside their organisation. Across the cohort, Fellows valued the opportunity to speak openly, test thinking and clarify next steps. One leader commented that coaching, 'helped me to build my confidence... and clarify what I need to do next'⁹⁷.

For global majority Fellows in particular, reflective coaching conversations were sometimes described as offering additional value by providing space to process experiences linked to underrepresentation or bias that were less easily explored within their organisational context. While coaching within the STCEOP was not identity-matched, these Fellows reported that having a confidential, external reflective space supported them to examine how identity, confidence and authority intersected in their executive role⁹⁸. Importantly, the evidence does not suggest there was any difference in how coaching was applied across the groups. Rather, it indicates that the same coaching conditions were experienced and interpreted differently depending on Fellows' prior experiences and positional context.

The role of mentoring and visible role models

The wider evidence base highlights the importance of mentors who act as 'role models', 'supportive allies', 'dialogic partners' and sources of practical insight, especially for leaders with shared professional or lived experiences⁹⁹. Several Fellows noted that seeing CEOs from underrepresented groups is uncommon nationally, and it can feel that senior roles are 'not for people from an ethnic minority group'¹⁰⁰.

Within the STCEOP, mentoring operated differently from executive coaching. While coaching provided a confidential space for structured reflection, sense-making and personal development, mentoring was experienced more informally through exposure to experienced CEOs and opportunities to learn from their practice, judgement and career trajectories.

⁹⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

⁹⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

¹⁰⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

Immersion provided extended opportunities to observe executive leaders, and some Fellows described this visibility as reinforcing that progression into senior roles was attainable. Although identity matching was not a primary design criterion, programme teams did, where possible, seek to give women Fellows at least one opportunity to shadow a female CEO. More broadly, the immersion placements offered narrative insight and visibility into executive practice that Fellows often associated with effective mentoring, even when mentors did not share similar backgrounds or identities. Immersion placements provided sustained visibility of executive practice and access to lived leadership narratives that Fellows often associated with mentoring, even where there was no formal mentor relationship or shared identity. This form of mentoring-through-observation appeared to complement coaching by grounding reflection in real-world leadership experience and widening Fellows' sense of what effective executive leadership can look like.

Peer networks and belonging

Networks played a notable role in how Fellows understood inclusion within the programme. Prior research indicates that global majority leaders often rely on supportive allies and peer groups to counter isolation and navigate structural barriers¹⁰¹. Several Fellows described forming close relationships during immersions, particularly with those they were paired with. These relationships sometimes continued beyond the programme, providing opportunities for reciprocal learning and collaboration on shared issues. Some Fellows also noted that the network made leadership progression feel less closed or inaccessible, especially for those from underrepresented groups. One Fellow highlighted the value of 'constantly reflecting' alongside another Fellow attending the same immersion placement¹⁰². Others described maintaining contact with host trusts or local CEOs, suggesting that participation created access to professional spaces that might otherwise have been harder to enter¹⁰³.

Fellows reported using informal communication channels, including a cohort-wide messaging group, to stay in touch, share resources, and seek advice. This ongoing peer dialogue enabled participants to exchange updates, test ideas, and offer practical support as they navigated complex leadership challenges in real time¹⁰⁴. For some, this sustained network contributed to a stronger sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation associated with senior leadership roles.

¹⁰¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

¹⁰² Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

¹⁰³ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹⁰⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

Constraints and continuing barriers

Fellows also discussed factors that limited their experience of inclusion. Some Fellows who were not yet CEOs reported difficulties applying learning immediately as they held reduced levels of responsibility in their current roles. Caring responsibilities and travel requirements made immersion attendance more complex for some women leaders; one Fellow noted the need to secure childcare during immersion weeks¹⁰⁵. These experiences align with wider sector evidence that global majority and women leaders often face restricted access to development opportunities because of organisational structures and expectations¹⁰⁶.

Implications

Across the accounts, global majority and women Fellows described the relational and immersive aspects of the programme as helpful for building confidence, connection and clarity about progression. At the same time, their experiences point to persistent structural inequalities in recruitment, representation and organisational culture that professional learning alone cannot address. The next section considers how Fellows perceived personal, organisational and system-level developments during the programme.

4. Considerations for those designing executive leadership professional learning

- 4.1. How can programmes create protected time for leaders to talk openly about identity, confidence and past experiences of exclusion, so these do not limit their participation or progression?
- 4.2. What information about participants' backgrounds and contexts should be gathered early so programme teams can spot barriers linked to race, gender or role, and respond before these affect learning?
- 4.3. How can programmes guarantee that underrepresented leaders have close, meaningful access to real executive practice during immersions rather than only high-level or curated examples?
- 4.4. How should peer groups and networks be formed so that leaders from different backgrounds feel a strong sense of belonging and have supportive partners to think with, challenge with and learn with?
- 4.5. What practical adjustments to travel, timing or immersion design would make involvement more feasible for leaders with caring responsibilities or those working in smaller or geographically dispersed trusts?

¹⁰⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹⁰⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

Section 5: Personal, organisational and system-level changes reported by Fellows

Research question: What personal, organisational and wider system changes did Fellows associate with their experience of the STCEOP?

Fellows described a range of perceived changes linked to their participation in the programme. These accounts draw on longitudinal interviews, evaluation survey data and final reflections from both cohorts. As self-reported experiences, they represent developmental impressions rather than verified outcomes. Reported changes varied according to each Fellow's starting point, trust context and prior leadership experience; they should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than causal.

Perceived personal developments

Leadership confidence

Across the two cohorts, many Fellows reported greater confidence in their own leadership. Several linked this to observing experienced CEOs during immersion visits and to having structured opportunities to think through their own approach. Some described immersion observations as reinforcing their sense of readiness, noting that shadowing other CEOs helped them judge how their behaviours aligned with expectations of senior leadership¹⁰⁷.

A small number reported applying for CEO or deputy CEO roles as their confidence grew¹⁰⁸. In Cohort 1, just over a quarter of Fellows (6 out of 23) indicated that they were planning to apply for a new role after finishing the programme. This group included both aspiring and serving CEOs, suggesting that increased confidence did not uniformly translate into immediate progression but often prompted more deliberate consideration of career trajectory. Those who did not intend to apply for new roles frequently shared career aims related to improving or applying new skills and knowledge for the benefit of their current trust. For example, one Fellow planned to 'rebuild a robust organisational culture and ethos' while another shared an aim to 'further enhance recent learning on the financial management of trusts'. Several Fellows also indicated an intention to focus on trust growth by adding new schools to their organisation¹⁰⁹.

Open-text responses indicate that, where Fellows did articulate specific progression plans, these were most commonly expressed by aspiring CEOs seeking more senior roles¹¹⁰. Several also explicitly linked their aspirations to the learning and confidence gained through the programme. For example, one aspiring CEO noted an aim 'To

¹⁰⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹⁰⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹⁰⁹ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow post programme surveys.

¹¹⁰ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow post programme surveys.

find and secure a CEO role within a multi academy trust, in which I can put to work the learning and skills that I have developed through participation in the NIoT CEO programme¹¹¹. Another described preparing for progression through targeted development, including inspection experience, in anticipation of a forthcoming CEO transition within their trust¹¹².

These findings are consistent with the programme's intended focus on developing executive judgement rather than promoting progression as a uniform outcome. The STCEOP did not seek to accelerate career movement per se, but to support Fellows to develop the confidence, insight and self-awareness needed to make informed decisions about their leadership trajectory. For some, this resulted in increased readiness to pursue senior roles. For others, particularly serving CEOs, it supported affirmation, consolidation or recalibration of their current role. In this sense, confidence building through immersion and structured reflection appeared to strengthen discernment about professional direction, as much as ambition or progression itself.

Leadership identity

Fellows also discussed changes in how they viewed their leadership identity. Some noted a shift toward more strategic, values-informed practice, occasionally describing this in contrast to earlier operational habits¹¹³. These reflections were often associated with immersion learning and coaching discussions that prompted reconsideration of leadership behaviours. A number highlighted increased comfort with ambiguity and greater adaptability¹¹⁴.

Peer interaction also supported personal development. Fellows noted that working alongside others provided reassurance and helped them address challenges such as imposter syndrome¹¹⁵.

Leadership of governance structures

Fellows described positive impacts on their confidence to influence governance architecture, especially clarifying roles between the Trust Board and local governance. One Fellow articulated the challenge as a persistent ambiguity of remit and used conference learning to reframe how they interpret local governor behaviour: 'I recognised the need to better articulate the distinct roles... Despite having a clear scheme of delegation, some Local Governing Board Committee (LGBC) members still need reminders to stay in their "lane"... any deviation... stems

¹¹¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹¹² Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹¹³ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹¹⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹¹⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

from passion, not interference¹¹⁶. Some Fellows reported redefining the purpose of local governance as a form of community voice rather than interference. This shift appeared to move relationships from friction towards more functional partnership, with local governors seen not only as facilitators of action but also as contributors of insight into community priorities that can help shape what effective civic and system-facing leadership looks like in practice. Following the fourth conference, one of the Fellows described holding a local governance consultation. They planned to streamline and simplify areas of focus and try to establish more diverse intergenerational committees¹¹⁷.

Strategic leadership

At a personal level, Fellows frequently described a shift away from operational and reactive leadership towards a more strategic, reflective, and values-led stance. This pattern was evident across both cohorts and reported in longitudinal interviews. Several Fellows articulated this as a conscious repositioning of themselves within the organisation. One noted, 'I feel that I have made a significant shift to working on a more strategic level'¹¹⁸, while another described a broader change in posture: 'However, the programme helped me pivot from being primarily operational and reactive to becoming far more strategic, adaptive, and a system-aware leader'¹¹⁹.

Fellows commonly linked this shift to increased self-awareness and clarity about their role. Through reflection and coaching, they reported becoming more intentional about priorities, values and impact. As one Fellow reflected, 'I have cultivated a leadership stance that is values-driven, inquiry-oriented, and impact-focused'¹²⁰. Another described gaining greater clarity about their strengths and approach: 'Through reflection and coaching, I have gained clarity on my leadership style. I excel at building cohesive teams, communicating effectively, and setting priorities'¹²¹.

Observation of executive practice during immersions appeared to play a significant role in shaping this development. Fellows described learning from both effective and less effective leadership, using contrast to refine their own judgement. One reflected, 'My leadership style has become significantly more relational, strategic, and introspective'¹²², while another emphasised that this was not only a mindset shift but a change in daily practice: 'Over the course of the programme, I have

¹¹⁶ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys.

¹¹⁷ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys.

¹¹⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹¹⁹ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys.

¹²⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹²¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹²² Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

become significantly more confident, strategic, and curious in my approach. This evolution isn't just a shift in mindset; it's a tangible change in how I operate daily¹²³.

For some, the programme also provided affirmation. Exposure to other CEOs helped confirm existing instincts about leadership, offering reassurance alongside development. However, rather than replacing operational focus with long-term strategy, the post programme survey findings suggest that Cohort 1 Fellows were able to find a balance between the two. In this context, Fellows' reflections point less to a substitution of one mode of leadership for another, and more to a recalibration of control and oversight. As one Fellow noted, 'This behavioural change, moving from control to strategic oversight, has been transformative, both for me and for those I lead'¹²⁴.

Table 9

Responses to the survey item 'How able are you to balance immediate operational priorities with your long-term strategic vision when making important decisions in your role?'

Response	Count / total <i>n</i>
Able to balance both equally	8/23
Mostly able to do this, but prioritise immediate operational priorities	14/23
Mostly able to do this, but prioritise long-term strategic vision	1/23
I often find it difficult to achieve a balance	0/23
I always find it difficult to achieve a balance	0/23

Communication

Communication featured prominently in personal reflections. Interviewees described communicating with more clarity and consistency, drawing on examples observed in other trusts¹²⁵ and being more deliberate in planning communication across different stakeholder groups¹²⁶. Some Fellows reported that this supported clearer explanation of trust operating models, governance arrangements and financial strategy¹²⁷, and highlighted a clearer grasp of how to identify, and quality assure high-leverage practice¹²⁸.

¹²³ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹²⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹²⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹²⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹²⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews and written reflections.

¹²⁸ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

Perceived organisational developments

Fellows described a range of trust-level adjustments that they linked to what they had observed and discussed during the programme. These accounts reflect individual interpretation and vary considerably depending on trust size, maturity and role. They should be understood as self-reported developments rather than verified organisational outcomes.

Strategic direction and operating models

Several Fellows reported revising strategic plans or reconsidering long-term growth and organisational structures after observing alternative approaches during immersions¹²⁹. Others spoke about working with staff to refine strategic plans so that educational priorities were more clearly articulated¹³⁰. A number described adapting aspects of their operating model, including shifting emphasis toward the people and cultural dimensions of leadership¹³¹.

Several reported deliberately stepping back from direct management and delegating greater responsibility to executive team members, alongside developing others' capacity to lead strategically. This redistribution of leadership was often described as enabling a stronger culture of shared leadership¹³².

In addition, longitudinal interviews illustrated how these changes were shaped by trust growth and increasing complexity. One CEO reflected, 'I think I have a little bit more clarity about what my role needs to be now, especially now we've grown. We're a bigger trust and therefore I need to be less operational and more strategic'¹³³. Others described applying learning from immersions to specific organisational practices, particularly governance and accountability. As one Fellow explained, 'I think it's enabled me to be more strategic because I've been able to take examples of, for example reporting to governors, reporting data, how you do that strategically'¹³⁴.

Fellows also linked these organisational shifts to improved coherence and sustainability. Moving towards strategic oversight was described as creating space for others to lead, strengthening executive capacity and enabling the trust to operate more effectively as a system rather than as a collection of operational tasks. While these changes were often incremental, Fellows associated them with clearer alignment between strategy, values and organisational practice.

¹²⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹³⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹³¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹³² Evidence drawn from longitudinal interviews.

¹³³ Evidence drawn from longitudinal interviews.

¹³⁴ Evidence drawn from longitudinal interviews.

The evidence suggests that the STCEOP supported the development of strategic leadership not only as an individual capability, but as an organising principle that shaped relationships, governance and decision-making across trusts.

Governance as a capacity-building system

Fellows described reviewing governance arrangements as their understanding of effective board practice developed across the programme. Some clarified board responsibilities, commissioned external reviews or refined how they engaged with governors¹³⁵. Conference feedback also showed how exposure to alternative governance models influenced decision-making. One Fellow noted that the governance conference was 'incredibly useful and timely' as their trust prepared for a local governance consultation, prompting plans to streamline committee structures and improve diversity. Another commented that attending with their Chair 'enabled us to have conversations about moving forward as a trust and team'¹³⁶.

Some Fellows went 'beyond the board' to system building activity, for example developing governor capacity and consistency across the schools. This is where immersions appear to have catalysed concrete design thinking. One Fellow described being influenced by a host governance development approach and adapting it locally: 'Their CEO had led a cross-trust initiative to train and deploy skilled governors...This prompted me to review our own governance structures...developing a centralised development programme with the aim of building capacity and resilience'¹³⁷. Another described planned work to reshape local governance to strengthen community impact, supported by CEO networks built through the programme: 'Focusing next year on... local governance structures... leveraging the wide network of CEOs I have cultivated as a direct result of this programme'¹³⁸.

Board-facing strategic reporting and assurance

Fellows also reported strengthening assurance processes, risk registers and data systems, often linking these developments to structures observed in host trusts¹³⁹.

A smaller but high-value set of reflections shows changes in governance through redesigned strategic reporting and trustee information flows, suggesting a shift from performance reporting to strategic assurance. One Fellow captured this explicitly: 'Drawing on the... board dashboard concept, we redesigned how we report to trustees. We now lead with 'Strategic Health Indicators' that triangulate data, culture, and voice, making the invisible visible... trustees report higher confidence in

¹³⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews and written reflections.

¹³⁶ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow conference surveys.

¹³⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹³⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹³⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews and written reflections.

our trajectory¹⁴⁰. Another Fellow described strategic reset work with the board, explicitly linking it to multiple programme inputs: 'Setting the strategy with the board has been greatly influenced by the reading, the immersions and the sharing with Fellows...collaborating intensively and intentionally, to redesign our strategic intents and KPIs¹⁴¹.

Deliberate involvement of Chairs of Trustees

Fellows reported that structured involvement of their Chairs added value to their learning and strengthened shared governance understanding. Several described attending the governance conference together as 'invaluable', noting that it opened conversations about strategic direction that had previously felt out of reach¹⁴². One Fellow said their Chair 'recognised that he had been unintentionally preventing us from taking steps forward', while another reported that attending together led to establishing regular, scheduled meetings rather than ad-hoc contact¹⁴³. Interviews with Fellows also showed Chairs forming informal support networks, with one cohort's Chairs creating a WhatsApp group following the conference¹⁴⁴. These accounts suggest that involving Chairs supported clearer strategic alignment, improved communication and deeper joint reflection on how governance can enable CEO development and trust improvement.

Culture, communication and organisational coherence

Several Fellows highlighted shifts in how they approached culture and communication. Reflections included clearer articulation of mission and values, more deliberate communication with staff and stakeholders, and a stronger focus on coherence across schools¹⁴⁵. Cohort 1 immersion feedback emphasised the pivotal role of communication in shaping trust practice¹⁴⁶.

Workforce development

Workforce-related changes were described frequently. Fellows referred to developing leadership pathways, designing 'people strategies', revising appraisal approaches and establishing in-house programmes for continuing professional development (CPD)¹⁴⁷. Some adopted professional development practices observed during immersions, including cross-trust leadership development and the use of CPD platforms¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁴¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁴² Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

¹⁴³ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

¹⁴⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

¹⁴⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁴⁶ Evidence drawn from open-text responses in Fellow immersion surveys.

¹⁴⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews and written reflections.

¹⁴⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

School improvement and children and young peoples' needs

Fellows also described revisiting school improvement frameworks after seeing how other trusts approached improvement at scale¹⁴⁹. Others referred to changes in provision for disadvantaged children and those with SEND needs¹⁵⁰. Exposure to multi-phase trusts prompted some to consider different models of inclusion¹⁵¹.

Beyond-the-trust developments: collaboration and wider contribution

Fellows reported that programme experiences encouraged them to pay greater attention to how their trusts engaged with the wider system. Several described adopting a broader perspective on responsibility and public benefit, reflected in comments about the need to engage beyond organisational boundaries¹⁵².

Fellows highlighted new or deepened relationships with other trusts, including reciprocal visits, safeguarding reviews, curriculum projects and CPD activity¹⁵³. Others described contributing to external boards or DfE regional work and forming partnerships focused on issues such as food security, digital access and youth engagement¹⁵⁴. Multi agency work was also discussed. Fellows mentioned collaboration with local authorities, NHS teams, youth services and charities focused on attendance, SEND and wider community priorities¹⁵⁵. Some reported establishing charities or civic partnerships in response to local needs¹⁵⁶.

Connections across levels of perceived change

Fellows often linked developments across personal, organisational and wider-system areas. Increased confidence or clarity was described as helping leaders strengthen aspects of trust strategy, communication or workforce development. These organisational adjustments were then connected, in their accounts, to greater comfort engaging with external partners. Although these relationships are self-reported, they offer insight into how leaders made sense of their development across these levels.

¹⁴⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁵⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews and written reflections.

¹⁵¹ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁵² Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁵³ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews and written reflections.

¹⁵⁴ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

¹⁵⁵ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹⁵⁶ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

5. Considerations for those designing executive leadership professional learning

- 5.1. How can programmes give CEOs structured time to examine their assumptions about senior leadership and build confidence in handling uncertainty and complex decisions?
- 5.2. How might applied observations and peer comparison be designed so CEOs can explore different strategic choices, governance models and operating structures without implying that one model is best?
- 5.3. What programme features best help leaders explore workforce development, culture and communication as core drivers of trust performance?
- 5.4. How can programmes support CEOs to judge when engagement beyond their trust is appropriate for their scale, maturity and capacity, and what forms of system participation add the most value?
- 5.5. What evaluation approaches could help distinguish shifts in mindset, organisational practice and early steps towards system contribution, so programme effects are better understood over time?

Section 6: What this might mean for future executive leadership development

Research question: What does the evidence from the STCEOP suggest about how future executive leadership programmes should be designed and delivered?

The evidence across earlier questions indicates that executive leaders appear to learn most effectively when professional development combines clear concepts with structured opportunities to observe practice and consider application. Immersion survey data and cohort reflections show that learning situated in real trust environments enabled Fellows to examine operating models, governance approaches and system-facing behaviours in concrete terms.

Table 10

Responses to immersion survey items concerning system observation

Survey item	Cohort	Count of agree or strongly agree responses / total <i>n</i>		
		Immersion 1	Immersion 2	Immersion 3
I had the opportunity to observe and understand the daily operations of the host trust, including the contextual challenges encountered by the CEO, leadership team and staff.	1	22/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	21/22	22/22
The host trust demonstrated and explained innovative strategies they developed to tackle systemic challenges.	1	23/23	20/21	10/10
	2	32/32	22/22	21/22
The host trust shared concrete examples of success, illustrating the iterative development of their operating models and approaches.	1	23/23	21/21	10/10
	2	32/32	22/22	22/22

Coaching provided some Fellows with a confidential space for reflecting on and critically comparing immersion experiences. Several Fellows linked this combination to a more outward-facing understanding of leadership, aligned with public benefit and wider system contribution. Analysis of survey responses highlights similar themes, emphasising reflective discipline and system-focused capability as central to effective CEO development.

Reflection strengthened this further and appeared to increase in depth, sophistication and quality as Fellows progressed through the programme. Final reflections describe the value of building strategic confidence through guided opportunities to analyse personal, organisational and civic dimensions of success¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁷ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

Coaching provided some Fellows a confidential space to work through complex issues, test emerging thinking and rehearse intended changes, particularly when grounded in learning that emerged during immersions. Several Fellows linked this combination to a more outward-facing interpretation of leadership that aligned with public benefit and wider system contribution¹⁵⁸.

Design considerations for future executive learning

The research also points to the value of integrated programme design. Immersions helped Fellows understand how operating models, cultural expectations and communication routines worked in practice, while coaching supported deeper exploration of leadership identity and strategic intent. Peer networks and open host-trust interactions offered ongoing opportunities for calibration and mutual challenge. Variations in experience across cohorts underline the need for clear logistics, transparent expectations and explicit attention to equity to ensure consistent access to learning mechanisms across diverse trust contexts.

Governance

A further implication concerns governance. Across the evidence, effective executive development was closely tied to Fellows' growing confidence and capability in working with Chairs and boards. Where learning involved joint engagement or explicit focus on governance practice, Fellows appeared better able to translate insight into organisational action, including changes to schemes of delegation, strategic reporting, and board relationships. This suggests that future executive programmes may need to treat governance-facing leadership as a core executive capability rather than a peripheral or technical domain, and to consider when and how Chairs might be meaningfully involved in learning activity, particularly at points of CEO appointment or transition.

Funding, capacity and system responsibility

The evidence also raises questions about how executive leadership development of this kind can be sustained within a constrained funding environment. Immersions, coaching and protected time for reflection all carry resource and capacity implications for trusts, particularly smaller or less mature organisations. At the same time, Fellows' accounts suggest that these investments supported leadership capability in ways that have implications for governance stability, strategic coherence, and system stewardship. This points to a potential reframing of executive development as a form of preventative investment, rather than discretionary professional enrichment.

¹⁵⁸ Evidence drawn from Fellow written reflections.

In this context, there may be a case for exploring more structured or targeted funding approaches for CEO development, analogous to existing public investment in National Professional Qualifications. This could include models that prioritise access for leaders serving trusts with higher levels of disadvantage, or that recognise executive development as a critical support at moments of transition into the CEO role.

In interviews, several Fellows expressed explicit appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the programme, with some noting that they hoped funding for this form of development would continue, reflecting its perceived value relative to other forms of professional learning¹⁵⁹.

Alongside this, the evidence suggests an important role for trust boards. Boards may need to consider how CEO development is prioritised as part of governance assurance, succession planning, and long-term leadership sustainability, including the use of one-off or reserved resources where appropriate. More broadly, the findings invite further exploration of innovative funding and partnership models that could support executive development at scale in a system under increasing financial pressure.

Equity, identity and access to leadership practice

Research on diversity highlights the importance of relational support that recognises how identity shapes leaders' experiences. For global majority and women Fellows, the immersions offered close-up access to executive routines that is not always available in their day-to-day roles. This visibility helped build confidence and gave a clearer sense of what progression into senior executive roles might involve¹⁶⁰. Coaching offered a psychologically safe space for external challenge and reflection, which global majority and women leaders described as valuable when navigating racialised and gendered barriers¹⁶¹. Fellow interviews underscored the need for visible role models, multi-layered networks and culturally attuned support structures to address representational and structural barriers¹⁶².

Opportunity to see effective executive leadership in action

Across the evidence, executive learning appeared most effective when conceptual material was reinforced through opportunities to see leadership enacted in real settings and then explored through structured reflection. These experiences helped Fellows link theoretical ideas with the practical realities of trust leadership and consider how this might translate into personal and organisational action. Inclusion also played an important role. For leaders from underrepresented groups, confidence

¹⁵⁹ Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews and written reflections.

¹⁶⁰ Evidence drawn from Fellow longitudinal interviews.

¹⁶¹ Evidence drawn from report by coaching provider.

¹⁶² Evidence drawn from Fellow interviews.

and progression were closely connected to identity-aware support and access to leadership practice that is not routinely visible in the sector. The findings in this report suggest ten design principles that may inform future executive leadership development for school trust leaders.

1. Deliberately cultivate civic and system leadership
2. Prioritise learning in real trust settings
3. Strengthen peer networks
4. Design learning environments where leadership is visible and safe to discuss
5. Treat governance development as a core component of CEO professional learning
6. Expose leaders to executive decision-making under real conditions
7. Position workforce development as a core component of executive learning
8. Enable CEOs to develop confidence with ambiguity and principled decision-making
9. Sequence learning deliberately
10. Build structured time for reflection

These principles highlight the programme features that appeared most likely to strengthen executive judgement, leadership confidence and collaborative practice across school trusts serving children and young people.

6. Considerations for those designing executive leadership professional learning

- 6.1. How can programmes give CEOs regular, purposeful access to real trust environments so that conceptual learning is grounded in lived practice?
- 6.2. What protected structures can be built in, so CEOs have time to reflect, make sense of what they observe and plan how to apply it in their own trust?
- 6.3. How might identity-aware coaching, peer networks and visible role models be embedded so that leaders from underrepresented groups experience genuine confidence and progression?
- 6.4. What sequencing of learning activities would help CEOs move smoothly between theory, observation and applied decision-making?
- 6.5. How can programmes structure collaboration across trusts so it strengthens system leadership and civic contribution while remaining manageable for busy CEOs?

Conclusion

This report has explored how participation in the School Trust CEO Programme supported leaders to develop their practice and extend their understanding of trust leadership across operational, strategic and civic domains. Drawing on surveys, interviews, and final reflections from two cohorts, the synthesis sheds light on the experiences that appeared to strengthen CEOs' confidence, judgement and contribution to the wider system.

The evidence base is modest and consists largely of self-reported perceptions from those who chose to participate in a national programme that was fully funded by the Department for Education and free to participants. The findings should therefore be read as indicative rather than representative of the sector as a whole.

A clear pattern in the evidence is that **leaders learned most powerfully when they were able to work in real trust environments**, rather than through theoretical materials alone. Survey data (Figure 2) indicated that immersions were most likely to be ranked as the most helpful programme component. Across the data sources, immersions were identified as shaping leadership thinking and system awareness. Access to the lived practice of host CEOs allowed Fellows to see how strategy, culture, workforce development and governance functioned in practice.

Just as important was the **structured time to think**. Coaching, peer dialogue and guided reflection helped Fellows examine what they had observed, test assumptions and consider how their actions might shift as their responsibilities grew. As reported in Section 1, although this **reflective space** can be rare in their working lives, Fellows' final reflections indicated that it is important for developing the judgement required to work productively within and beyond their trust with boards, senior teams and external partners.

Across both cohorts, Fellows' definitions of success became more rounded as they engaged with the programme. Their final written reflections indicated that success was increasingly framed in terms of people development, coherent strategy, cultural alignment and effective governance, rather than performance data or growth alone. **Workforce development** was frequently described as the most important lever for long-term improvement. **Governance was increasingly understood** not as a technical or compliance-focused function, but **as a strategic enabler of trust sustainability, public benefit and system-facing leadership**.

The evidence also shows that leadership confidence grows when **CEOs can see their own context reflected back to them**. As outlined in Section 3, findings from longitudinal interviews indicate that immersions that aligned with Fellows' trust size, phase or growth trajectory helped normalise uncertainty and supported more assured decision-making. However, coaching and peer dialogue supported Fellows to

reflect on how strategies observed in different contexts could be adapted to suit their own trusts.

Fellows also reported that the programme helped them **navigate complexity more effectively**. Fellows' qualitative reflections reported in Section 3 indicated that observing senior teams deliberate during challenging moments, and rehearsing difficult decisions through coaching, helped them understand that CEO work often involves balancing tensions rather than identifying single right answers. This capacity to hold ambiguity, including in governance, accountability, and system-facing work, emerged as an important element of readiness for leading beyond the trust.

For global majority and women leaders, the programme's **identity-aware conditions mattered**. As outlined in Section 4, evidence from the interviews with women and global majority leaders indicated that visibility into executive practice, relational safety and access to role models supported confidence and sense of legitimacy. These experiences sit alongside, rather than replace, the wider structural reforms needed to address long-standing inequities in the sector. Even so, they highlight the conditions that help underrepresented leaders participate fully and progress.

The programme also demonstrated that executive development **shapes learning on both sides of the immersion relationship**. Host trusts described reflecting on their own practice and sharpening their articulation of purpose as a direct result of preparing to host Fellows. This reciprocal benefit suggests that well-designed executive development can contribute to system learning and governance maturity, not only individual capability.

Across personal, organisational and system levels, **Fellows described developments that often reinforced one another**. Increased confidence and clearer leadership identity supported more coherent strategy and communication, which in turn enabled more **purposeful engagement with local authorities, regional partners and other trusts**. As reported in Section 1, Fellows expressed a strong intention to engage at system level. While these patterns varied by trust scale, maturity and starting point, they offer insight into how leadership, governance and civic contribution become increasingly interdependent as trusts grow and the sector matures.

The **findings raise important questions about sustainability and system responsibility**. The forms of development that Fellows valued most, which were reported in Section 3, including immersive learning, coaching, and protected time for reflection, carry real capacity and funding implications, particularly for smaller or less mature trusts. Fellows' accounts nevertheless suggest that these investments supported leadership capability in ways that matter for governance stability, strategic coherence and system stewardship. This **invites consideration of**

executive leadership development not as discretionary enrichment, but as a form of preventative investment in trust resilience. It also points to shared responsibility across the system, including continued public investment, thoughtful prioritisation by trust boards, and exploration of innovative funding and partnership models that support leadership development at scale in a financially constrained environment.

Looking forward, further research could examine how these developments are sustained over time, how governance and organisational conditions shape the use of learning in practice, and how civic contribution evolves as leaders gain experience. Continued collaboration between policy, research and practice will be central to building a confident, diverse and system-minded generation of CEOs, equipped not only to run effective organisations, but to shape governance and leadership in ways that strengthen the trust sector for children and young people and communities across England. In this sense, the programme's ambition is not limited to individual leadership development, but to **leading learning that transforms lives, thousands at a time.**

Methods summary

The synthesis presented in this report draws on a mixed methods evidence base generated across two cohorts of School Trust CEO Programme Fellows (Cohort 1= 25 Fellows and Cohort 2=48 Fellows). The data were collected through several research strands and were interpreted cautiously in line with NIoT research standards. The research aimed to:

- Understand success for a CEO of a multi academy trust in relation to a professional development programme.
- Understand the experiences of aspiring and serving CEOs from underrepresented groups in leading trusts, and to explore the barriers and challenges they face and their professional development needs.
- Evaluate the Fellows' experiences of the immersions and how they contributed to their professional development.

Quantitative data

The report draws on data collected by four separate surveys. Survey links were distributed via email and responses were collected using Microsoft Forms. Copies of these surveys are in Appendix 4. All surveys contained a mixture of multiple choice and open-text items.

End point survey

End point surveys were distributed to Fellows shortly after the end of their participation in the programme, resulting in a maximum of one response per Fellow. This survey aimed to capture views concerning the relative value of programme components, and programme strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Immersion surveys

Immersion surveys were distributed to Fellows after their participation in each of the three immersions they completed during the programme, resulting in a maximum of three responses per Fellow. These surveys were designed to capture immediate perceptions of immersion experiences.

Conference surveys

Conference surveys were distributed to Fellows after their participation in each of the four conferences they completed during the programme, resulting in a maximum of four responses per Fellow. These surveys were designed to capture immediate perceptions of conference experiences.

Post programme survey

The post programme survey was completed once by Fellows from Cohort 1 in the two months after they had completed the programme. Responses were also sought from Cohort 2 Fellows, but these are not included in our analysis due to poor response rates. This survey aimed to capture information concerning Fellow confidence levels, professional values and future career intentions.

Table 11

Survey response rates

Survey	Cohort	<i>n</i> responses/ total possible <i>n</i>	Response rate
End point survey	1	24/25	96%
	2	43/48	90%
Immersion 1 evaluation survey	1	23/25	92%
	2	32/48	67%
Immersion 2 evaluation survey	1	21/25	84%
	2	22/48	46%
Immersion 3 evaluation survey	1	10/25	40%
	2	22/48	46%
Conference 1 evaluation survey	1	22/25	88%
	2	43/48	90%
Conference 2 evaluation survey	1	20/25	80%
	2	26/48	54%
Conference 3 evaluation survey	1	10/25	40%
	2	33/48	69%
Conference 4 evaluation survey	1	0/25	0%
	2	31/48	65%
Post programme survey	1	23/25	92%

High response rates for the end point and post programme surveys indicate that findings from these surveys are likely to be representative of the full combined/Cohort 1 sample. Varied response rates for the immersion and conference surveys suggest findings from these surveys should be interpreted with caution.

However, responses to items relating to conferences and immersions in end point surveys do not suggest that Fellows who did not respond to all immersion or conference surveys were likely to have experiences that were substantially more negative overall than those who did. Analysis of missing data showed that all programme Fellows responded to at least one survey and that patterns of non-response were not strongly associated with any particular demographic characteristics.

Quantitative analysis

Closed-text survey responses were analysed descriptively due to small sample sizes. Findings are presented separately for cohorts 1 and 2, and per conference/immersion for studies conducted at multiple timepoints. Open-text responses were treated as qualitative data and analysed using the approach outlined in the qualitative analysis section below.

Qualitative data

Longitudinal interviews

Semi-structured longitudinal interviews were conducted with 16 Fellows who were selected using stratified random sampling from Cohort 2 of the STCEOP to ensure those involved in interviews accurately reflected the demographic characteristics of the full cohort. This was a small sample that included CEOs and aspiring CEOs.

Table 12

Longitudinal interview sample

<i>Type of participant</i>	<i>Number in the sample</i>	<i>Number in the programme</i>
Female CEOs	7	19
Female non-CEOs	2	7
Male CEOs	5	16
Male non-CEOs	2	7

The participants were interviewed at three points during the STCEOP shortly after each immersion visit:

- Interview 1: January/February 2025
- Interview 2: April/May 2025
- Interview 3: July/August 2025

The interviews ($n=45$) explored their perceptions of the experience and impact of immersions. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix 3. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes. Researchers prompted the interviewees to reflect on their development by referring to the content of their previous interviews. Due to scheduling difficulties, two Fellows completed a combined interview addressing both their first and second immersion experiences, and one additional Fellow did not complete the final interview as they withdrew from the programme. Because the longitudinal interviews were conducted at three points during the programme, the team examined how each individual participants' perceptions appeared to shift over time, including changes in strategic confidence, communication emphasis and system-level awareness.

Interviews with global majority and women leaders

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten global majority leaders (two men and eight women) and eight women leaders. This sample included Fellows from cohorts 1 and 2 ($n=11$) and participants who had expressed an interest in the programme but did not participate ($n=7$). These participants were selected based on their characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender) and invited to participate in the research. Individual online, semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2024 and February 2025. Each interview lasted around one hour. The interview questions explored the participants' career journeys, including their leadership experience and the barriers and challenges they faced. The participants were also asked about their professional development needs. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix 3. Evidence from the interviews with global majority and women trust leaders was used to inform wider contextual understanding rather than to describe programme effects.

Final written reflections and programme documentation

Final written reflections from both cohorts (Cohort 1 $n=25$ and Cohort 2 $n = 48$) were analysed. Data from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 were reviewed separately to understand how perceptions may have changed as programme delivery matured. The final reflections dataset represented Fellows from a wide range of trust sizes and contexts. These differences shaped how Fellows interpreted and described perceived change. Programme documentation describing immersion design, intended outcomes and component structures was also reviewed.

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data included the Fellows' final reflections, open-text survey responses, coaching feedback and longitudinal interview data. With informed consent from individual participants, the longitudinal interviews were video recorded, and an automatic transcript was generated via Microsoft Teams. To ensure data privacy and

protect the participants' identities, all transcripts were anonymised and checked by the researchers. Participants received copies of the transcripts for verification.

The qualitative data was analysed using an iterative process of thematic analysis. Three researchers became familiar with the data by reading the final reflections and making notes on key themes. These themes were developed into initial codes (e.g., personal leadership) which were agreed within the research team. Codes were further refined through team discussion. Each researcher coded a set of final reflections. A similar approach was used to analyse the interview data. Quotes used in this report are illustrative of the themes identified.

Bringing together evidence from different sources

Patterns identified in interviews, surveys, reflections and programme documentation were compared across sources to strengthen interpretation, using a form of data triangulation to check whether similar themes appeared in different parts of the evidence base. For example, participant reports of enhanced communication were considered alongside immersion feedback, while descriptions of organisational developments were reviewed in relation to practices observed during hosted visits. These comparisons helped refine the themes but were not used to draw causal conclusions.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Key insights

How participation in the STCEOP supported leadership development

- Seeing leadership in real trusts helped Fellows understand what effective CEO practice looks like day to day.
- Time to step back and reflect helped Fellows make clearer decisions about delegation, strategy and their wider role.
- Fellows developed greater confidence and capability in working with Chairs and boards, recognising governance as an active leadership responsibility that requires disciplined relationships, shared understanding and deliberate practice, particularly at points of appointment or transition.

How Fellows redefined effective trust leadership

- Fellows increasingly defined success through people, culture and governance that support strong outcomes and opportunities for children and young people, rather than performance data alone.
- Visiting other trusts broadened their view of leadership so that success included contribution beyond their own organisation.
- Fellows increasingly came to define effective trust leadership as inseparable from effective governance, reframing boards as strategic partners in sustaining purpose, public benefit and system-facing leadership rather than as compliance-focused oversight bodies.

Which programme features most supported Fellows' learning?

- Immersions had the biggest impact. Fellows valued seeing real practice, not case studies. Immersions supported some Fellows to reflect on wider responsibilities including civic partnerships, community engagement and provision for children and young people with additional needs.
- Learning worked best when ideas were introduced first, explored in context and then applied with support.

Experiences of inclusion and progression for underrepresented leaders

- For global majority and women leaders, seeing CEOs in action and receiving coaching support boosted confidence and belonging.
- These experiences underline that representation and safe spaces are essential in executive learning, not optional extras.

Personal, organisational and system-level changes reported by Fellows

- Fellows described growing confidence, clearer organisational focus and stronger engagement beyond their trust. In some cases, this led to partnerships on issues such as food security and youth engagement, and multi agency work which could have an impact on children and young people's outcomes.
- Fellows reported increased confidence to shape governance structures and relationships, including clarifying roles between trust boards and local governance, and repositioning local governance as a source of partnership and community insight that supports civic and system leadership.

Appendix 2: Considerations for executive leadership design

Research question 1: How did taking part in the STCEOP help Fellows develop their leadership across operational, strategic and civic areas?

1. How can programmes give CEOs regular opportunities to see leadership in real trusts, so they can understand how strategy, culture and operations work in practice?
2. What structured time for reflection is needed so CEOs can make sense of what they see, test their thinking and decide what should change in their own trusts?
3. How can programmes build leaders' confidence and sense of identity, especially for those who may not see themselves reflected in current executive roles?
4. How should programme elements be sequenced so that ideas learned early on are reinforced by later observation and reflection, rather than standing alone?
5. How can programmes encourage CEOs to think about their civic role and understand how their decisions affect children and young people and communities beyond their own trust?

Research question 2: How did the STCEOP influence Fellows' views about what effective and successful trust leadership looks like?

1. How can programmes give CEOs practical chances to watch experienced leaders handle real dilemmas so they build stronger judgement and confidence?
2. What protected time do CEOs need to reflect on their values, identity and communication, including how these support confident leadership for those from underrepresented backgrounds?
3. How can programmes help CEOs link clear strategy with people development and culture building, drawing directly on what they see in effective trusts?
4. How can executive learning support CEOs to strengthen workforce pipelines and governance routines as central markers of successful trust leadership?
5. How can comparative or immersion-based learning help CEOs understand when wider system needs should influence their priorities, particularly in smaller or developing trusts?

Research question 3: Which parts of the STCEOP most helped Fellows strengthen their leadership, reflect on their practice and think beyond their own trust?

1. How can programmes introduce key concepts early so that CEOs know what to look for when they observe leadership practice in other trusts?
2. What preparation helps CEOs make meaningful comparisons during immersions, including how operating models, culture and governance work in practice?
3. How can programmes secure consistent, high-quality access to CEOs, schools and central teams, regardless of trust size, geography or complexity?
4. How might coaching be linked more intentionally to immersion learning while still giving CEOs a confidential space for personal reflection?
5. How can peer dialogue and host trust interactions be designed to encourage reciprocal learning, helping both visitors and hosts sharpen their strategy and leadership narrative?

Research question 4: How did global majority and women Fellows experience inclusion, confidence and progression in the STCEOP, and what does this mean for designing equitable learning for trust leaders?

1. How can programmes create protected time for leaders to talk openly about identity, confidence and past experiences of exclusion, so these do not limit their participation or progression?
2. What information about participants' backgrounds and contexts should be gathered early so programme teams can spot barriers linked to race, gender or role, and respond before these affect learning?
3. How can programmes guarantee that underrepresented leaders have close, meaningful access to real executive practice during immersions rather than only high-level or curated examples?
4. How should peer groups and networks be formed so that leaders from different backgrounds feel a strong sense of belonging and have supportive partners to think with, challenge with and learn with?
5. What practical adjustments to travel, timing or immersion design would make involvement more feasible for leaders with caring responsibilities or those working in smaller or geographically dispersed trusts?

Research question 5: What personal, organisational and wider system changes did Fellows associate with their experience of the STCEOP?

1. How can programmes give CEOs structured time to examine their assumptions about senior leadership and build confidence in handling uncertainty and complex decisions?
2. How might applied observations and peer comparison be designed so CEOs can explore different strategic choices, governance models and operating structures without implying that one model is best?
3. What programme features best help leaders explore workforce development, culture and communication as core drivers of trust performance?
4. How can programmes support CEOs to judge when engagement beyond their trust is appropriate for their scale, maturity and capacity, and what forms of system participation add the most value?
5. What evaluation approaches could help distinguish shifts in mindset, organisational practice and early steps towards system contribution, so programme effects are better understood over time?

Research question 6: What does the evidence from the STCEOP suggest about how future executive leadership programmes should be designed and delivered?

1. How can programmes give CEOs regular, purposeful access to real trust environments so that conceptual learning is grounded in lived practice?
2. What protected structures can be built in, so CEOs have time to reflect, make sense of what they observe and plan how to apply it in their own trust?
3. How might identity-aware coaching, peer networks and visible role models be embedded so that leaders from underrepresented groups experience genuine confidence and progression?
4. What sequencing of learning activities would help CEOs move smoothly between theory, observation and applied decision-making?
5. How can programmes structure collaboration across trusts so it strengthens system leadership and civic contribution while remaining manageable for busy CEOs?

Appendix 3: Interview protocols

Interview protocol

This interview protocol is for the longitudinal interviews with the 16 Cohort 2 programme participants.

Interview date: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview. As stated in the information sheet, you will take part in **three individual interviews** over the course of the STCEO programme. Each interview will happen around one month after your immersion visit. Overall, the three longitudinal interviews aim to understand:

- your lived experience of immersion visits and executive coaching over time;
- your perception of the feasibility and acceptability of immersion;
- your views on the impact of immersion and executive coaching on your professional growth and trust development over time.

Each interview will last approximately **30 minutes** and will be conducted **online** via Microsoft Teams. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without any judgement.

You will remain completely anonymous, and no records of the interview will be kept with your real name on them. This interview will be video-recorded only if you give your permission to do so. The recording will only be used for research purposes, and all data will be handled confidentially in compliance with data protection regulations. The key findings from the interviews will be reported in an academic article.

Your perspective is invaluable, and we sincerely appreciate your time and insights. Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns about the interview process?

First interview

Background

The first interview will be conducted after participants' initial immersion visits and two coaching sessions, scheduled to take place between January and February 2025. Fellows (i.e., programme participants) will visit trusts like their own in terms of size and type. These partner trusts are more established, allowing Fellows to envision what their own trusts could look like in the future. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, questions below might be adapted based on responses of interviewees. The observation notes by the NIoT colleagues during the immersion visit will also inform interview questions.

Questions

An interviewer will first briefly describe the immersion visit, such as partner trust name and major activities, and check that with the interviewee. The interviewer will also encourage the participant to give more details.

1. How would you describe your overall feelings about your first immersion experience?

- *What aspects did you find most and/or least helpful, and why?*
- *Did you encounter any challenges or have any concerns during your immersion visit?*

2. To what extent was the five-day immersion visit feasible and acceptable to you (in relation to workload, usefulness, logistics, assessment and feedback etc)?

- *How do you feel about the trust you were matched with for your visit?*
- *How manageable was it considering your workload and time commitment?*
- *Does it align with your expectation? If not, which part is different?*

3. What were key outcomes of this immersion visit for you and your trust?

- *Did it help you better understand and apply the DfE's Content Framework within your own trust?*
- *How do you perceive its role in developing your networks?*
- *Are there any other positive or negative effects you have observed?*

4. Have you noticed any changes in your understanding of leadership, your leadership approach, or your trust's improvement strategy since this immersion?

- *Are there any specific initiatives or changes you are planning to implement as a result of this immersion experience?*

5. How would you describe your experience in the coaching sessions so far (in terms of your coach, topics, structure, and communication between you etc)?

- *In what ways do you think executive coaching can support you in specific areas?*
- *Based on your experience in the first two coaching sessions, how effective has the executive coaching been in building your confidence and supporting reflection?*
- *Is there anything you think could be changed or improved in the coaching to better meet your needs and support you throughout the programme?*

6. Are there any other issues you would like to share about your experiences on the programme or its impact?

Second interview

Background

The second interview will be conducted after participants' second immersion visits and four coaching sessions, scheduled to take place between April and May 2025. During the second visit, they will visit trusts that are quite different from their own. For example, a CEO leading a faith multi academy trust (MAT) will have the opportunity to visit a non-faith MAT, and a CEO of a mixed MAT or a MAT with only secondary schools will visit a primary-school-only MAT. Please note the questions below might be adapted based on the findings from the first interviews.

Questions

An interviewer will first briefly describe the immersion visit, such as partner trust name and major activities, and check that with the interviewee.

1. How did this immersion experience compare to your first immersion visit?

- *How do you feel about visiting this very different trust?*
- *Did these differences provide new insights or ideas for your leadership and/or your own trust?*

2. To what extent was the second immersion visit feasible and acceptable to you (considering workload, usefulness of a contrasting type of trust, logistics, assessment and feedback etc.)?

- *How do you feel about the trust you visited this time?*
- *Did anything about the logistics or workload management change for better or worse?*

3. What were key outcomes of this second immersion visit for you and your trust?

- *[You mentioned that the first immersion visit helped you... last time]. Did this immersion strengthen these effects? Were there any different outcomes compared to the first immersion?*
- *Have you found any new or different ways to apply the framework within your context since our last interview? [You mentioned...].*
- *Is there anything you expected to learn during the immersions that you have not yet had the opportunity to explore?*

4. Have you noticed any changes in your understanding of leadership, your leadership approach, or your trust improvement strategy since the second immersion?

- *[In our first interview, you mentioned...] Has your understanding of school trust leadership related to the CEO role changed after this immersion visit? Are there specific areas where you feel you have developed?*
- *[You mentioned you planned to... in your trust during our last interview.] Have you implemented that plan? Following this immersion visit, is there any aspect you might consider adapting, and why?*
- *Are there new approaches or strategies you are considering as a result of this immersion?*

5. How has your experience with the coaching sessions evolved since your first immersion?

- *[You felt coaching... last time.] Now that you have completed four coaching sessions, do you feel the same or differently about the executive coaching?*
- *How effective has the coaching been in continuing to build your confidence and support your development as a system leader?*
- *Are there any additional benefits or effects that the coaching has provided?*
- *[You mentioned that coaching could be improved in...] Have you noticed any improvements in that area?*

6. Are there any other issues you would like to share about your experiences on the programme or its impact?

Final interview

Background

The third and final interview will be conducted after participants' final immersion visits and six coaching sessions, scheduled to take place between July and August 2025. In this final visit, they will return to the trusts where they completed their first immersion visit.

Interviewer will first briefly describe the immersion visit in terms of place and partner trust name and check that with the interviewee.

- *What were the key activities you engaged in this time?*
- *How did this visit differ from your first experience at this trust?*

1. Reflecting on all three immersion visits, how would you describe your overall experience?

- *How have your views changed over the course of the three immersion visits?*
- *Have you been in contact with people you met here in the first visit? How have they been supporting you?*
- *What were the benefits and drawbacks of the immersion experience?*

2. To what extent do you think the three immersion visits, overall, are acceptable and feasible (in terms of the ABA model, workload, time commitment, logistical considerations, assessment)?

3. How have the immersion visits influenced your understanding of leadership, your leadership approach, and the development of your trust over time?

- *How has your perspective on system leadership evolved?*
- *What role do you think the immersions have played in developing you as a system architect?*
- *What specific changes or initiatives have you implemented as a result of these immersions?*
- *Have you noticed any long-term impacts?*

4. How effective has the executive coaching been throughout the entire programme?

- *Are there specific moments or insights from the coaching that stand out to you?*
- *In what ways has coaching supported your personal qualities (e.g., confidence, reflection, decision-making, well-being) as a CEO?*

5. What are your future plans or ambitions as a trust leader following this programme?

- *How do you plan to continue applying the lessons from the immersions and coaching sessions?*
- *How do you see your role evolving in the broader educational landscape?*

6. Looking back, is there anything you think could be improved in the STCEO programme to better meet your needs and support your growth?

- *Were there any aspects of the immersions or coaching that could have been more effective?*
- *How could the programme be refined to support future participants?*

6. Are there any other issues you would like to share about your experiences on the programme or its impact?

Interview protocol for women and global majority leaders

This interview protocol was used to interview the global majority and women leaders. The sample included STCEO programme participants (Group 1) and people who expressed an interest in the programme but did not participate (Group 2).

Section 1: Professional and demographic background

- 1) Can you tell me about yourself and your current role?
- 2) How long have you been in this role?
- 3) Could you please briefly describe your career journey?
- 4) What motivated you to pursue a leadership role in education, specifically within a MAT? [this question will be adapted based on their responses to the previous question in terms of their trust types]?

Section 2: Leadership experience and challenges

- 1) Can you describe any specific challenges you have faced in your role that you feel are related to being [e.g. a female or leading a SEND trust] Have you encountered barriers to career progression in your journey? If so, could you share an example?
- 2) How have you navigated those challenges or barriers? And what resources or support have been helpful?
- 3) What plays a key role in your career development as a system leader [such as professional networks, coaching, personal ambition and resilience]?

Section 3: Professional development needs

- 1) What kinds of support or professional development do you feel are most valuable for someone from a minoritised background aiming for a MAT CEO role?

Only for participants in Group 2:

- 2) Have you heard of the School Trust CEO programme?

If yes, did you consider applying?

What influenced your decision to apply or not apply? [Any barriers to applying for the STCEO programme?]

If not, have you participated in any other professional development programmes to support your current role?

Could you describe your experience with those programmes? What worked well, and what could have been improved?

Section 4: STCEO programme participation and suggestion

Only for participants in Group 1 (Fellows):

- 1) What motivated you to apply for and participate in the STCEO programme?
- 2) Were there any factors that made it difficult for you to access or engage in the programme? If so, what were they?
- 3) How do you think the programme could be more inclusive or better tailored to the needs of serving or aspiring CEOs from minoritised backgrounds?
- 4) What specific changes do you think would help improve outreach and recruitment for the programme to attract more leaders from underrepresented backgrounds?

Section 5: EDI-related recommendation

- 1) What suggestions do you have for fostering a more diverse and equitable pipeline of MAT CEOs?
- 2) Are there any final thoughts or insights you would like to share regarding your experiences or the future development of professional support for minority trust leaders?

Appendix 4: Surveys

STCEO programme evaluation surveys

Immersion evaluation survey – Fellows

1. What is your name? [Open text]
2. What is your email address? [Open text]
3. Please select which immersion you attended today: [multiple choice]
 - Immersion 1: Operating models for system improvement
 - Immersion 2: Effective communication
 - Immersion 3: Education and standards
4. How would you rate your overall experience with the programme? [multiple choice]
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Average
 - Poor
 - Very poor
5. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below: [multiple choice]

5a) I am pleased with the outcome of the immersion matching, particularly with how well the characteristics of the matched trust align with my personal and trust development needs.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5b) The details provided on immersion and partner trusts were both accessible and clear.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5c) Guidance on the logistics of the immersion visit to the host trust was provided both timely and clearly.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5d) The communication with my host trust was smooth and effective.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5e) Suggestions from the NIoT prior to my visit were instrumental in guiding my immersion preparation and framing my observations.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below:
[multiple choice]

6a) I found the environment at the host trust to be welcoming, comfortable, and supportive.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6b) The five-day visit was purposefully and structurally organised and implemented.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6c) I had the opportunity to observe and understand the daily operations of the host trust, including the contextual challenges encountered by the CEO, leadership team, and staff.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6d) The host trust provided activities, conversations, and materials that aligned with the specified focus of the immersion visit.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6e) The host trust demonstrated and explained innovative strategies they developed to tackle systemic challenges.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree

- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6f) The host trust shared concrete examples of success, illustrating the iterative development of their operating models and approaches.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6g) I had the opportunity to interact with trust stakeholders and ask questions during and beyond my visit.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6h) The feedback received from the host CEO and leadership team was both constructive and helpful.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6i) The visit encouraged critical reflection on practices and systems within my own trust, supporting future improvements.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below:
[multiple choice]

7a) The Immersion Assessment Booklet provided clear guidance on the assessment timeline, methods, rubrics, and the necessary preparation.

- Strongly agree

- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7b) The Immersion Assessment Booklet offered useful tips that helped me better prepare for the two presentations.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7c) The instructions for uploading videos and written reflections to the platform were clear, enabling its easy use.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7d) The assessments conducted during and after the immersion visit fostered a coherent and reflective learning experience, supporting both my professional development and the improvement of my trust.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7e) The assessments required a reasonable time commitment and investment of effort.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7f) The anonymous feedback surveys from my executive leadership team were useful for fostering my self-awareness and encouraging reflective practice.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below:
[multiple choice]

8a) I identified and articulated high-leverage practices observed during the immersion.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8b) I understood methods to assess, monitor, and quality assure high-leverage practices within the trust.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8c) My understanding of the MAT CEO Content Framework was enriched, and I gained insights into translating abstract principles into actionable strategies.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8d) I critically reflected on the high-leverage practices observed and considered their adaptive application to fit the unique needs and context of my trusts.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8e) My communication skills were enhanced, and I learned how to engage effectively with diverse audiences.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8f) I engaged in self-reflection throughout the immersion, assessing the strengths of the host trust, areas for improvement, and the alignment between my personal leadership approach and the practices observed.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8g) The immersion experience was tailored and responsive to my needs and interests.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8h) The immersion experience expanded my networks and enabled me to form meaningful connections with trust leaders beyond my own context.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. Briefly outline the key learnings this immersion will enable you to have on your leadership, your team and your organisation. [open text]

10. What three things do you think define success for a MAT CEO? [open text]

11. What are the strengths of the immersion so far? [open text]

12. What could we improve or change to best support your immersion experience and facilitate your learning outcomes? [open text]

13. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below:

I had... [multiple choice]

13a) Meaningful, sustained access to the CEO throughout the immersion.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13b) The freedom, time and opportunity to interact with, and ask questions of, a wide range of trust stakeholders at all levels in the organisation.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13c) Access to a range of the trust's settings and schools.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13d) Provision of activities, conversations and exemplification materials which aligned with the specified focus of the trust visit.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13e) A supportive environment in which to present key reflections to the CEO and relevant trust leaders at the end of the immersion and receive constructive feedback.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Conferences evaluation survey – Fellows

1. What is your name? [Open text]
2. What is your email address? [Open text]
3. Which cohort are you a part of? [multiple choice]
 - Cohort 1: Starting February 2024
 - Cohort 2: Starting September 2024
4. Please select which conference you attended today: [multiple choice]
 - Conference 1
 - Conference 2
 - Conference 3
 - Conference 4
5. What is your role at the conference? [multiple choice]
 - Fellow
 - Fellow's Chair or CEO
6. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below:
[multiple choice]
 - 6a) Pre-conference communication was clear and provided me with the information I needed prior to the event.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - 6b) The conference venue was suitable.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below:
[multiple choice]
 - 7a) Conference: The content was relevant to my development, effectively consolidated prior learning and provided an opportunity to consider application in my context.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7b) Facilitation: Facilitators delivered the session(s) with good pace, ensuring understanding and engagement throughout.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7c) Environment: Facilitators established a culture of high expectations with challenge as a professional entitlement. [multiple choice]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. Application: This conference has provided me with knowledge, skills and strategies that I will apply in my context. [multiple choice]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. Networking: The structure of the day enabled me to build meaningful relationships. [multiple choice]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below. [multiple choice]

10a) Digital: The Great Teaching Toolkit is user-friendly and enables me to manage my own learning.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree

- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

10b) Communication: Communications are timely and help me to stay on track, and administration is effective.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

10c) Enrolment: The induction and initial communications supported me to understand the programme structure and expected commitment.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

11. If you chose 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' for any of the questions above, please outline what could be better. [open text]

12. Briefly outline the impact this conference will enable you to have on your leadership, your team and your organisation. [open text]

13. How would you rate your overall experience with the programme? [multiple choice]

- Excellent
- Good
- Average
- Poor
- Very poor

14. What are the strengths of the programme so far? [open text]

15. What could improve the programme? [open text]

End point evaluation survey – Fellows

1. What is your name? [Open text]

2. Which cohort are you a part of? [multiple choice]

- Cohort 1: Starting February 2024
- Cohort 2: Starting September 2024

3. How satisfied are you with the coaching you received? [multiple choice]
 - Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied
4. If you answered either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, please outline why below. [open text]
5. How helpful have you found the self-study units in meeting your professional development goals? [multiple choice]
 - Very helpful
 - Helpful
 - Neither helpful nor unhelpful
 - Somewhat unhelpful
 - Not helpful at all
6. If you answered either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, please outline why below. [open text]
7. How helpful have you found the conferences in meeting your professional development goals? [multiple choice]
 - Very helpful
 - Helpful
 - Neither helpful nor unhelpful
 - Somewhat unhelpful
 - Not helpful at all
8. If you answered either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, please outline why below. [open text]
9. How helpful have you found the immersions in meeting your professional development goals? [multiple choice]
 - Very helpful
 - Helpful
 - Neither helpful nor unhelpful
 - Somewhat unhelpful
 - Not helpful at all
10. If you answered either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, please outline why below. [open text]

11. How satisfied are you so far with the School Trust CEO programme being provided by the NIoT? [multiple choice]

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

12. Please rank the following elements of the programme in order of how helpful they were to you, with 1 being the most helpful and 4 being the least helpful. [rank in order]

- Self-study units
- Coaching sessions
- Live conferences
- Immersions

13. If we were to deliver this programme again, what changes would you like to see implemented? [open text]

Post programme survey

1. Overall, how confident do you feel in your ability to perform your current role? [1–5 slider – Not confident at all to Very confident]

2. More specifically, how confident do you feel doing the following? [all 1–5 sliders – Not confident at all to Very confident]

2.1) Building a strong, unified culture centred around a clear strategic vision

2.2) Ensuring all pupils (including SEND) have equal access to learning and educational opportunities and achieve to the best of their ability

2.3) Driving continuous improvement by systematically identifying weaknesses, implementing strategies, and monitoring progress

2.4) Developing and maintaining effective working relationships with trustees and the executive leadership team

2.5) Ensuring long-term financial sustainability through fiscal assessment and planning

2.6) Assuring long-term operational sustainability by recruiting, developing and retaining a high-quality workforce

2.7) Collaborating with others outside of the trust for the wider public benefit, such as: community leaders, charities, policymakers, government officials and other trusts

3. Which of the three of the seven key executive-level responsibilities listed above do you consider the most important for achieving success in your current role? [Choose top three]

4. How able are you to balance immediate operational priorities with your long-term strategic vision when making important decisions in your role?

- a) Able to balance both equally
- b) Mostly able to do this, but prioritise immediate operational priorities
- c) Mostly able to do this, but prioritise long-term strategic vision
- d) I often find it difficult to achieve a balance
- e) I always find difficult to achieve a balance

5. To what extent are you able to reach out for support and advice from colleagues in other trusts to overcome professional challenges?

- a) Very able – I have a well-established external professional support network
- b) Somewhat able – I have a few external connections I can contact for support and advice if needed
- c) Not able at all – I currently have no support network outside my trust

6a. How confident do you feel about taking the next steps in your career? E.g., seeking a more senior/challenging role, expanding your current responsibilities, or acquiring new skills. [1–5 slider – Not confident at all to Very confident]

6b. [For those answering 1–3 for question 6a] Is there anything that would make you feel more confident about moving forward? [Open text]

7. Over the past 3 months have you done any of the following? [Select multiple]

- a) Applied for a new role
- b) Received formal mentoring/ coaching
- c) Mentored/ coached others
- d) Worked with colleagues from other trusts to share best practice
- e) Advocated on behalf of your school or trust to e.g., policymakers, government officials or industry representatives

8. Over the next 12 months, do you plan to do any of the following? [Select multiple]

- a) Apply for a new role
- b) Receive formal mentoring/coaching

- c) Mentor/coach others
- d) Work with colleagues from other trusts to share best practice
- e) Advocate on behalf of your school or trust to e.g., policymakers, government officials or industry representatives

9. What is your most important professional aim for the next academic year? This aim could relate to a personal or organisational outcome. [Open text]