



Leading within and beyond the trust: A summary of insights from the School Trust CEO programme

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Background

England's school trust landscape has expanded rapidly, with more than 10,000 academies now operating within over 1,200 multi academy trusts. Trusts educate the majority of disadvantaged children and young people and employ most of the school system's workforce, making their leadership nationally significant.

As trusts grow in scale and complexity, CEOs are expected to steward educational quality, organisational sustainability and civic contribution across diverse communities. These demands

require leaders who can move confidently between operational detail and long-term system thinking. Executive development therefore matters not only for individual leaders but for the health of the wider education system. This aligns with the government's renewed emphasis on collaboration between schools and the role of trusts as anchors within their communities, as set out in Every Child Achieving and Thriving (DfE, 2026).

The School Trust CEO Programme was commissioned and funded by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2023, building on an evidence-informed content framework developed by the department to articulate the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for effective large-scale trust leadership. The National Institute of Teaching (NlOT) designed and delivered the pilot programme for an initial cohort of approximately 75 participants (known as Fellows). The programme translated this framework into structured learning intended to strengthen strategic judgement, leadership confidence and the ability to work effectively with boards, executive teams and system partners. This focus aligns with the Confederation of School Trusts' articulation of the core responsibilities of a school trust CEO, which identifies governance, people strategy and system leadership as core executive functions (CST, 2021).

Delivery relied on substantial system contribution. Thirty-two trusts hosted immersion visits, enabling Fellows to observe executive practice at scale. Fifty-seven speakers, including CEOs, Chairs of Trustees and governance experts, contributed to residential conferences, alongside nineteen podcast contributors and an expert panel that reviewed programme materials.

This collective involvement reflects the collaborative approach to system improvement emphasised in Every Child Achieving and Thriving (DfE, 2026), where partnership, shared learning and openness between schools, trusts and wider partners are seen as essential to strengthening practice. In this way, the programme brought together leaders across the sector, underpinned by a shared commitment to improving opportunities for all children.

What the evidence we collected suggests matters most for CEO development

1. Deliberately cultivating civic and system leadership through collaboration, partnership and public-benefit thinking.
2. Prioritising learning in real trust settings so leaders can observe executive practice and apply insights to decisions in their own schools and trusts.
3. Strengthening peer networks to reduce executive isolation and support learning through shared experience with leaders who understand the role.
4. Designing learning environments where leadership is visible and safe to discuss, supporting participation and progression for underrepresented leaders.
5. Treating governance development as a core component of CEO professional learning, strengthening partnerships between CEOs, boards and Chairs.
6. Exposing leaders to executive decision-making under real conditions, showing how CEOs navigate ambiguity, trade-offs and competing demands.
7. Positioning workforce development as a core component of executive learning, strengthening leadership pipelines and professional development across schools.
8. Enabling CEOs to build confidence with ambiguity and resilience in leadership, supporting sound judgement under pressure.
9. Sequencing learning deliberately so conceptual input leads into observation and practical application in real trust contexts.
10. Building structured time for reflection so leaders can turn observation and experience into well-judged action.



Programme overview

The School Trust CEO Programme was designed by the National Institute of Teaching to strengthen the national pipeline of CEOs by building the confidence, knowledge and strategic capability required to run successful large-scale trusts and improve outcomes for children and young people.

The wider curriculum was informed by serving and former CEOs, governance specialists, faith leaders and experts from business and public services, ensuring it reflected the diversity and complexity of the evolving trust landscape. The programme brought together:

- **Self-study**, introducing evidence-informed frameworks and sector exemplars
- **Residential conferences**, enabling structured dialogue and comparison across professional networks
- **Executive coaching**, offering protected space to reflect on identity, confidence and leadership challenges.
- **Immersion**, research that was conducted alongside the programme to learn about and share the experience of delivery highlights the trust-based immersions as a key context for learning. They gave Fellows rare access to executive practice, operating models, governance routines and decision making as they unfolded in real time. This emphasis on learning in lived contexts distinguished the programme from traditional executive development and shaped many of the outcomes reported by participants.

Together, these mechanisms were intended to build strategic judgement, reflective discipline, peer networks and a clearer sense of public purpose, supporting Fellows to act as system architects¹ focused on outcomes for children and families within and beyond their trusts.

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 who had an aptitude to absorb and apply the learnings from the programme were selected. There was no baseline or control group.

Findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of the wider sector.

¹A leader who acts both within their own organisation and across the wider system, influencing how relationships and practices work together for collective public benefit

What the research questions explored

The research examined how the programme influenced CEOs' leadership across five broad areas.

1. How participation shaped leaders' practice across operational, strategic and civic dimensions.
2. How Fellows' definitions of effective trust leadership shifted as they engaged with different learning experiences.
3. Which programme mechanisms were most useful for strengthening reflective practice and system-level thinking, particularly the interactions between self-study, conferences, immersions and coaching.
4. How global-majority and women participants experienced inclusion, confidence and progression, and what this suggests for equitable programme design.
5. What kinds of personal, organisational and system-level changes Fellows attributed to their participation.

These strands, taken together, generated a set of implications for the future design of executive professional learning, presented here as ten recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Deliberately cultivate civic and system leadership

Survey responses and reflections showed that Fellows increasingly viewed leadership as extending beyond their own trust.

Many described contributing to cross-trust networks, safeguarding work, curriculum collaboration and community partnerships that support children, families and schools. Immersions exposed leaders to examples of system generosity, while conferences and coaching prompted them to reflect on the public-benefit dimensions of the CEO role.

For several participants, especially those from smaller or regional trusts, this shifted their understanding of what system-facing leadership could look like in practice.

Evidence also indicated that these outward-oriented shifts were often preceded by strengthened personal confidence and clearer organisational strategy.

Programmes aiming to develop system architects should therefore treat civic contribution as a deliberate learning goal, offering leaders opportunities to engage in regional or thematic collaboration and to examine how organisational decisions affect the wider school system.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise learning in real trust settings

Across the evidence, immersions were the most consistently valued part of the programme. Survey data from both cohorts placed immersions as the component that most strengthened leadership development, and interviews repeatedly described them as the point at which conceptual learning "made sense" in practice.

Fellows explained that observing how operating models, governance routines and organisational culture, values and shared priorities played out in day-to-day practice helped them calibrate their own leadership approaches and apply learning directly to decisions within their own trusts, building confidence in handling complexity. Several Fellows reported that seeing decision making up close clarified what effective CEO practice looks like at scale and informed subsequent strategic and operational choices.

Host-trust feedback reinforced this, noting that immersion activity enabled genuine, authentic observation. For aspiring CEOs in particular, these experiences demystified expectations and supported readiness for transition.

Programmes aiming to build strategic judgement should therefore prioritise structured exposure to leadership practice, ensuring leaders encounter authentic executive work rather than designed or staged examples.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen peer networks

Fellows consistently described peer dialogue as central to how they processed learning and developed leadership confidence, particularly in roles where senior leaders can experience professional isolation. Conference groupings, immersion pairings and informal peer connections enabled participants to test interpretations, share dilemmas and compare practice across different trusts and school contexts with others who understood the scale and pressures of the role.

Survey responses showed strong agreement that networks formed during immersions were valuable, while interviews indicated that several Fellows continued to collaborate after the programme ended. Host trusts also noted that engaging with Fellows created reciprocal clarity, prompting reflection and refinement of their own strategic narratives when explaining practice to visiting CEOs.

For global majority and women Fellows, peer relationships offered reassurance that challenges were not unique and helped counter feelings of isolation.

The evidence suggests that peer networks are not an incidental benefit but a core mechanism through which leaders develop judgement, broaden perspective and build confidence. Executive programmes should therefore design intentionally for relational continuity rather than assume networks will form organically.

Recommendation 4: Design learning environments that make leadership visible and safe to talk about

Evidence from interviews and written reflections indicates that many global majority and women leaders entered the programme with prior experiences of exclusion, limited representation and fewer opportunities to observe executive leadership up close. These experiences shaped how Fellows approached confidence, visibility and progression, rather than being created by the programme itself.

Immersion were valued because they allowed Fellows to see CEOs carrying out the role in ordinary, day-to-day conditions. Observing how senior leaders handled uncertainty, pressure and routine decision-making helped challenge assumptions about who holds executive roles and what credible leadership looks like in practice. Coaching offered a supportive relationship in which Fellows could speak openly about confidence, self-doubt and professional identity, even where coaches did not share the same background.

Although the evidence base does not support claims of differential impact at scale, the patterns observed suggest that visible role models, supportive relationships and permission to speak honestly are particularly important conditions for leaders who are underrepresented in senior roles. Leadership development programmes seeking to widen participation should therefore attend deliberately to representation, relational support and openness, rather than treating these features as optional or peripheral.



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

Evidence from interviews, surveys, and reflections shows that Fellows increasingly understood effective trust leadership as inseparable from effective governance. Rather than viewing governance as a technical or compliance function, many Fellows described growing confidence in shaping relationships with Chairs and boards, clarifying roles, and establishing disciplined ways of working that support strategic judgement and public benefit.

Immersions and governance-focused learning opportunities provided Fellows with rare visibility into how experienced CEOs work in partnership with Chairs and trustees. Joint learning experiences, including conferences attended alongside Chairs, appeared to help translate insight into concrete governance action, such as revisiting schemes of delegation, commissioning external reviews, or resetting CEO – board relationships.

Several Fellows also described repositioning local governance from a source of friction to a form of partnership, recognising the contribution governors can make as community voices and local knowledge sources and as enablers of civic and system-facing leadership. Survey and reflection data suggest that this shift was particularly important for leaders navigating trust growth, organisational transition, or increasing system accountability.

For the sector, this indicates that executive development programmes should not treat governance as a peripheral or specialist topic. Instead, they should deliberately build CEOs' confidence and capability in board-facing leadership, particularly at points of appointment or transition, and consider the value of shared learning with Chairs to strengthen trust governance, sustainability, and system contribution.

Recommendation 6: Expose leaders to executive decision-making under real conditions

Interview and immersion evidence suggests that Fellows developed stronger judgement when they had direct, sustained access to executive work as it unfolded, rather than only hearing retrospective accounts or curated examples.

Fellows valued being present for executive conversations, observing how experienced CEOs weighed trade-offs, navigated ambiguity, balanced competing priorities and responded to both routine pressures and unexpected challenges. This included exposure to decision-making processes, stakeholder interactions, governance discussions and moments of uncertainty, not just visible outcomes.

Seeing executive leadership enacted in this way helped demystify the role and challenged assumptions that effective leadership follows linear or technical solutions. For aspiring CEOs and leaders from underrepresented groups, this exposure helped to normalise the complexity of the role and support more confident, realistic self-judgement.

For programme design, the evidence points to the importance of creating structured opportunities for leaders to observe executive decision-making in real time, where uncertainty, compromise and professional judgement are visible. Such proximity supports learning about how leadership actually operates, rather than how it is described in theory.

Recommendation 7: Make workforce development a central pillar of executive learning

Final reflections and interviews identified workforce strategy as one of the most frequently cited domains of organisational change.

Fellows reported revising appraisal systems, leadership pipelines, CPD structures and people strategies after observing mature models during immersions. Many described realising that trust improvement was inseparable from staff development and cultural conditions, with several calling this their most significant shift in leadership focus.



Survey data indicated that Fellows increasingly saw people development as the key determinant of sustainable improvement, outweighing structural or process-focused levers. In interviews, many Fellows also reported a commitment to ensuring that new knowledge and connections were shared with others in their leadership team to further support their own development.

This aligns with wider sector research in showing that professional development for leaders can also benefit the development of those they lead, and reinforces the need for CEO programmes to position workforce strategy as a core competency rather than a specialised HR topic. Executive learning that strengthens leaders' ability to grow and retain talent, model values-driven communication and build coherent cultures is likely to have longer-lasting impact than content focused solely on governance or operations.

Recommendation 8: Enable CEOs to develop confidence with ambiguity and principled decision making

Interviews and written reflections showed that many Fellows arrived feeling uncertain about how to navigate ambiguous or high-stakes decisions.

Immersion offered insight into how experienced CEOs held tensions, balanced competing priorities and made judgements with incomplete information. Several Fellows reported increased comfort with ambiguity as a result, noting that seeing other leaders manage uncertainty normalised the complexity of the role.

Coaching sessions provided additional space to rehearse decisions, explore emotional responses and consider the implications of different strategic paths.

These experiences strengthened leaders' ability to make principled decisions grounded in values under pressure. For developing executives, building comfort with ambiguity is essential: the evidence suggests that confidence at this level grows not from definitive answers but from deliberate exposure to real dilemmas paired with structured reflection.

Programmes should therefore consider incorporating repeated opportunities to practise judgement, not simply learn frameworks.

Recommendation 9: Sequence learning deliberately

Across surveys and qualitative data, Fellows described the programme working best when self-study frameworks were reinforced through immersion experiences and then explored more deeply in coaching or peer dialogue.

Many reported that concepts introduced early (such as strategic governance, communication, or talent development) were more meaningful once revisited as focus points for their visits to real trust settings.

Immersion feedback highlighted that arriving with conceptual framing helped Fellows identify relevant structures, routines and leadership behaviours.

Coaching reports showed that immersion experiences were “almost universally” discussed, acting as the hinge between theoretical learning and practical judgement.

This pattern was clearest for aspiring CEOs, who relied on structured sequencing to interpret the complexity of trust-wide leadership.

Programmes aiming to strengthen collaboration and system leadership should therefore avoid treating components as standalone offers: learning gains were strongest when activities were intentionally connected, cumulative and paced to support sense-making.

Recommendation 10: Build structured time for reflection

Evidence from coaching reports, qualitative interviews and final reflections shows that structured reflection played an important role in helping Fellows interpret what they observed and apply it accurately within their own trusts.

In this programme, reflection was not informal or unplanned. It was typically facilitated by a trained executive coach, anchored in leadership frameworks, and focused on specific questions such as decision trade-offs, role clarity, governance dynamics and system pressures. Leaders described coaching as protected time where they could examine their leadership identity, rehearse decisions, test assumptions, and work through ambiguity arising from immersion experiences that were often complex or emotionally demanding.

Survey responses indicated that, while coaching was not always ranked as highly as immersions, it was valued for enabling deeper and more disciplined sense-making, particularly for CEOs and aspiring CEOs navigating uncertainty, accountability and new strategic responsibilities. This aligns with wider research suggesting that reflective dialogue supports sound judgement, resilience and effective executive decision-making when it is purposeful rather than purely introspective.

Programmes should therefore treat reflection not as a supplementary activity, but as a core learning mechanism, deliberately designed and professionally facilitated. It is this structured reflection that allows leaders to move from observation to well-judged action, ensuring experience translates into improved leadership practice rather than untested insight.





Conclusion

What helps CEOs lead successful large school trusts at scale? Evidence from two cohorts of 73 Fellows suggests that the conditions created through the programme's ten recommendations supported participants to strengthen their leadership confidence, judgement and sense of responsibility within the wider education system. Fellows consistently described learning most when they could see leadership enacted in real trust contexts, observing executive work up close and comparing how different trusts approached culture, governance and improvement. This direct exposure strengthened strategic judgement, helped normalise uncertainty and enabled leaders to assess their own readiness for executive responsibility.

The evidence also highlights the importance of structured time to think. Coaching and peer dialogue gave Fellows space to process what they had observed, rehearse decisions and reflect on their leadership identity. For global majority and women leaders, visible role models and opportunities to discuss challenges openly were described as particularly important for confidence and progression.

Across both cohorts, Fellows reported broader definitions of leadership success. Many placed increased emphasis on people development, cultural alignment and coherent strategy, and several described revisiting their governance relationships or operating models because of programme participation. These accounts reflect shifts in thinking and intention rather than independently observed changes in practice, but they nonetheless offer insight into how executive leaders interpret their responsibilities in a complex and evolving trust landscape.

Host trusts also reported benefits from participation, suggesting that well-designed executive development can generate learning on both sides of the immersion relationship. These collaborative arrangements reflect the wider direction of travel in England's school system, where partnership between trusts, schools and communities is increasingly seen as essential to improving outcomes for children and young people. While indicative rather than representative, the findings offer a grounded view of the conditions that support CEOs' confidence, judgement, governance capability and civic leadership.

They also raise important questions about how such development can be sustained within a constrained funding environment. If executive leadership development is understood as an investment in trust capacity and system resilience, then supporting CEOs to learn together, share practice and strengthen collaboration across trusts becomes increasingly important. In this way, the programme's ambition extends beyond individual leaders, contributing to leadership learning that strengthens organisations and, over time, helps transform lives, thousands at a time.

System contribution and collective leadership

The STCEOP was only possible because of the sustained commitment of system leaders across England. Host trusts welcomed Fellows into their organisations with unusual openness, giving access to board discussions, school visits, strategic documentation and senior leadership routines. Speakers and facilitators at the conferences offered deep insight into culture, growth, governance and communication. Podcast contributors and the expert advisory panel strengthened the conceptual and practical grounding of the curriculum.

Fellows consistently recognised this system generosity as central to their development. As one reflected, “There was definitely a massive generosity from that executive team... they shared their strategy documents with us and involved us in trustee meetings”. Another described immersion week as “the most phenomenal experience of being in the space of people working at such a high level”.

These accounts reflect a model of system leadership where leaders act not only for their own organisations but for the wider public good. By making their practice visible, offering honest challenge and modelling civic responsibility, system leaders demonstrated the behaviours that the programme sought to cultivate in Fellows. Their contribution shaped both the depth of learning and the programme’s wider system impact.

The programme involved **73 individual Fellows**, whose leadership spans **over 1,200 schools** and **nearly 500,000 children**. The evidence collected therefore speaks to executive development not as a personal endeavour, but as a system-facing intervention with implications far beyond individual trusts.

Learning that changes lives, thousands at a time.

Methods summary

This synthesis draws on mixed-methods evidence from two cohorts of School Trust CEO Programme Fellows. Data sources included longitudinal interviews with 16 participants completed at three time points during the programme and final written reflections from 71 Fellows. Data was also collected through four separate surveys. These included surveys administered after each immersion ($n = 130$) and conference ($n = 185$), at the end of the programme ($n = 67$) and a post programme survey exploring future professional aims and development needs ($n = 23$).

Programme documentation describing design intentions and component structures was also reviewed. Interviews with 10 global majority and 8 women trust leaders informed contextual understanding but was not used to assess programme effects.

Survey data were summarised descriptively, and qualitative materials were analysed thematically. Insights from interviews, surveys and reflections were brought together to build a rounded picture of Fellows’ experiences.

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These are serving system leaders and sector experts who contributed professional expertise to the design and delivery of the School Trust CEO Programme.

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