



Department  
for Education

# **Trust and school improvement offer 2021/22 – participant feedback**

**Research report**

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Government  
Social Research

# Contents

List of figures	3
Background	4
Research approach	5
Research aims	6
Research findings	9
Support provided – number of days	9
Support provided – focus	11
Data from end of deployment forms	11
Interviews and open feedback on the focus of support provided	12
Trust partnerships	13
Interviews and open feedback on trust partnerships	14
Survey data on trust partnerships	15
Programme design - what worked well, and less well	20
Aspects of the programme which worked well	20
Aspects of the programme that could be improved	23
Understanding benefits and impacts	26
Survey data on reported benefits	26
Interview and open feedback on reported benefits	28

## List of figures

Figure 1: Views on appropriateness of number of days support provided – system leaders .....	9
Figure 2: Views on appropriateness of number of days support provided – school and trust leaders .....	10
Figure 3: Whether trust partnerships were discussed – number of school leaders.....	15
Figure 4: Whether a formal trust partnership (including a service level agreement) was discussed – number of school leaders.....	16
Figure 5: Whether a formal trust partnership was agreed – number of school leaders....	16
Figure 6: Whether had previously taken steps to join a trust (prior to engaging in the TSI Offer) – number of school leaders .....	17
Figure 7: Whether more likely to join a trust now than prior to engaging in the TSI Offer – number of schools .....	18
Figure 8: Levels of satisfaction with aspects of the programme – system leaders.....	21
Figure 9: Levels of satisfaction with aspects of the programme – school leaders.....	21
Figure 10: Levels of satisfaction with aspects of the programme – trust leaders .....	22
Figure 11: Views on benefits of the programme – system leaders .....	27
Figure 12: Views on benefits of the programme – school leaders .....	27
Figure 13: Views on benefits of the programme – trust leaders.....	28
 <b>Table 1:</b> Verbatim responses: Why not currently considering or planning to join a trust partnership arrangement, by local authority ( maintained schools and SATs .....	18

## Background

The Trust and School Improvement programme (TSI) provides dedicated support through a system leader - a National Leader of Education (NLE) or trust CEO - who is assigned to a setting to establish a quality evidence-based improvement strategy, and where appropriate, to anchor them to a strong trust. The policy signals a focus on multi-academy trusts (MATs) to provide support and a longer-term school improvement capacity.

Trusts/schools in the programme can access 3 or 5 days of review and guidance from a system leader (up to 3 days for standalone schools; up to 5 days for MATs). The review will help the trust/school to identify and/or complement other programme of support for improvement. For example, system leaders may also suggest curriculum/behaviour hubs, National Leader of Governance (NLG) support for governors, and/or professional qualifications (NPQEL) for leaders. Further, system leaders are also expected to have a conversation about the potential for standalone schools to partner up with a strong established MAT, or for trust to anchor themselves to a stronger MAT to help build capacity for sustainable improvement. Where this takes place, MATs taking on supported trusts/schools can access up to £10,000 to cover costs of a “try before you buy” arrangement.

The TSI programme in 2021/22 was open specifically to:

“The stock” – position at the start of 2021/22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A standalone school with 2 or more ‘Requires Improvement’ (RI) Ofsted judgements for overall effectiveness.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A trust which contains at least one school with 2 or more RI judgements for overall effectiveness.</li></ul>
“The flow” – position during 2021/22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schools (and their trust, if applicable) that receive an RI judgement for overall effectiveness during the academic year.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By exception, trusts or schools with RSC- or self-referral.</li></ul>

The programme began in September 2021 and entrants can join until July 2022 (with all support completed by July 2023). As of February 2022, management data showed that 425 MATs and 454 standalone schools were identified as eligible for support. Of these, around two-thirds (270 MATs and 280 schools) had accepted the offer. The vast majority

of these had been matched to a system leader (i.e. 90% schools and 96% MATs that have accepted the offer).

This research sought to provide evidence needed to ensure that through the TSI programme ('The TSI Offer'), the department is offering schools/trusts timely and relevant support in order to improve. The ultimate objective of TSI is to improve schools in such a way that they are no longer judged by Ofsted to be in 'requires improvement' (RI). Whilst timing precludes this piece of analysis from being able to assess success on that measure, here we assess the extent to which the support was focused in a timely, relevant and useful way. The specific aims and outputs of the support are dependent on the individual tailored action plan agreed between the system leader and trust/school, but could include:

- underperforming schools to join the trusts with whom they have been matched;
- professional qualifications for school leaders;
- headteachers receiving mentor support;
- schools receiving integrated curriculum and/or financial planning;
- revised governance structures; and
- revised leadership structures through MATs which aim to be high-quality and sustainable

## Research approach

This report is based on interviews and a survey carried out by analysts in the department's Infrastructure and Funding Analysis Division in April 2022 consisting of:

- a) **Focus groups and one-to-one interviews with 20 'system leaders'** - NLEs (or equivalent) providing support to trusts and schools - **plus 9 school leaders and 9 trust leaders receiving support**. Some participants were involved in multiple roles and may have been a provider of a support as well as leading a trust or school who also accessed the Offer.
- b) **An online survey** – 279 valid responses were received: 159 respondents indicated they were a system leader providing support; 73 leaders of a supported school; and 59 leaders of a supported trust. (A few respondents were system leaders as well as a leader of a trust or school receiving support).

Charts and open-text feedback from the survey is presented alongside interview feedback throughout the report.

## Research aims

The research aimed to establish:

- i. **What the support looks like:** To provide an overview of the core content, focus, intensity and length of support provided and the extent to which MAT-partnership arrangements were explored. Examples of how the support interacted with other improvement initiatives.
- ii. **Levels of satisfaction with the processes involved** – including the timing, focus and intensity of support, the match between system leader and trust/school, and the processes of initial engagement and guidance.
- iii. **Views on the benefits of participation and areas/processes which could be improved** – what worked well and not so well?
- iv. **Perceptions of impact** – what do they think has changed as a result of TSI support? What evidence is there of improvement on leadership, governance, teaching/learning, pupil outcomes, or other expected outputs.

## Summary of findings

**Overall, there were high levels of satisfaction (amongst both system leaders and trusts/schools receiving support) with many aspects of the TSI programme.** Survey data shows that respondents were most satisfied with the relevance and focus of the support, and with the match between the trust/school and system leader - in each case school leaders were more satisfied than trust leaders:

- Relevance of support: 95% of schools, 90% of system leaders and 86% of trusts were satisfied/very satisfied.
- Focus of support: 94% of schools, 90% of system leaders and 88% of trusts were satisfied/very satisfied.
- Suitability of the match between system leader and trust/school: 93% of schools compared to 90% of system leaders and 86% of trusts were satisfied/very satisfied.

More than three-quarters of each of the respondent groups also indicated they were satisfied/very satisfied with the timing of support; the initial process of engaging trusts/schools; and/or with guidance provided about what the programme entailed (though proportionally fewer were 'very' satisfied with the latter compared to other aspects).

Amongst system leaders the lowest levels of satisfaction were with the training element which was affected by disruption during the pandemic – just half (50%) were satisfied/very satisfied; and with the length and intensity of the programme – 63% satisfied/very satisfied. Amongst supported trusts and schools, the lowest levels of satisfaction were with the clarity of guidance about what the Offer entailed (77% schools/76% trusts satisfied or very satisfied).

**Respondents were split in terms of the extent to which they thought that 3 or 5 days of support was appropriate.** Over three-fifths (61%) of system leaders thought that more than 3 days was needed to support schools, and around two-fifths (38%) thought more than 5 days was needed for trusts. However, supported schools and trusts themselves were less likely than system leaders to think they needed more days of support: two-fifths (40%) of schools thought more was needed, and just over one in eight trusts (14%).

Some system leaders also spoke about providing (at times significantly) more staff resource and/or days allocated in order to make a difference. Both system leaders and recipients of support also often mentioned that it took time to build relationships and get a good view of the improvement needs – where this relationship was not already in place then they this relationship building and diagnostic phase could use up most of the allocation.

**Some system leaders and trust leaders did not always feel that the support was effectively targeted** citing that in some cases (e.g. in legacy 2RI schools) there was already a comprehensive system of support in place and evidence that it was effective; whereas other schools with a current 'Good' rating had been identified locally as likely to move into RI or Inadequate at next inspection but are ineligible for much support on offer (one person described this group as the 'wobbly Goods').

**Trust partnering discussions appeared to be happening in most cases and the process appeared to be persuading some schools to consider joining a trust.** Two thirds of SATs and local authority-maintained schools responding to the survey reported that they had a discussion about partnering. In interviews, system leaders explained that in the cases where partnerships were not discussed, it was because they felt a relationship needed building first or that it wasn't the core priority at that point in time.

Amongst local authority-maintained (LAM) schools, just under half (46%, or 21 of the 46) responding to this question felt they are more likely to now join a trust now than they were before the support was provided. A further third (n=15) were unsure.

Amongst schools that were not thinking about joining a trust some revealed that they felt well supported by the local authority (LA) and/or through less formal partnership arrangements with other schools and did not think they had much to gain from joining a

MAT. Others felt that although they may be thinking about joining a trust, they hadn't found the 'right' one; that currently they wanted to prioritise improvement; and/or they felt they would be seen as a weak partner in any endeavour until they were out of RI.

**Even though it was still relatively early days, almost everyone we spoke to could describe specific benefits gained from the TSI Offer related to school or trust improvement.** This was endorsed by the high levels of agreement in the survey responses that the support contributed to a number of improvements. Most commonly, survey responses indicated that the support had contributed to improved curriculum/teacher development, improved leadership and governance, and a more effective school/trust improvement strategy:

- improved curriculum/teacher development: 82% of system leaders, 84% of schools and 67% of trusts agreed or strongly agreed that the support contributed to this.
- improved leadership and governance: 79% of system leaders, 63% of schools and 63% of trusts agreed or strongly agreed.
- a more effective school/trust improvement strategy: 83% of system leaders, 73% of schools and 56% of trusts agreed or strongly agreed.

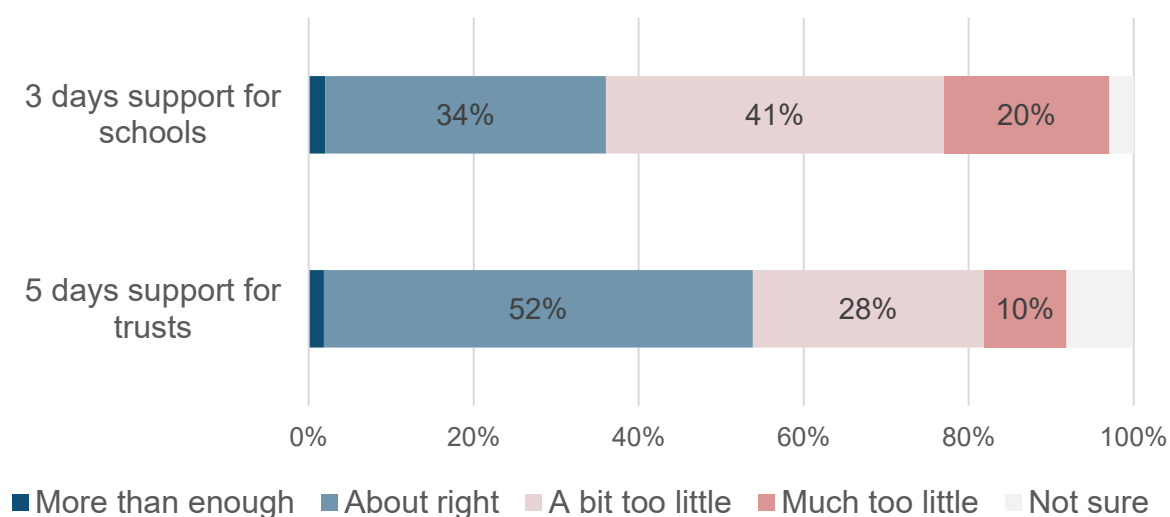


## Research findings

### Support provided – number of days

Respondents were split in terms of whether they considered 3 days of support for schools / 5 days of support for trusts was enough for their improvement needs. Survey data shows that over three-fifths (61%) of system leaders thought that more than 3 days was needed to support schools, and around two-fifths (38%) of them thought more than 5 days was needed for trusts (Figure 1).

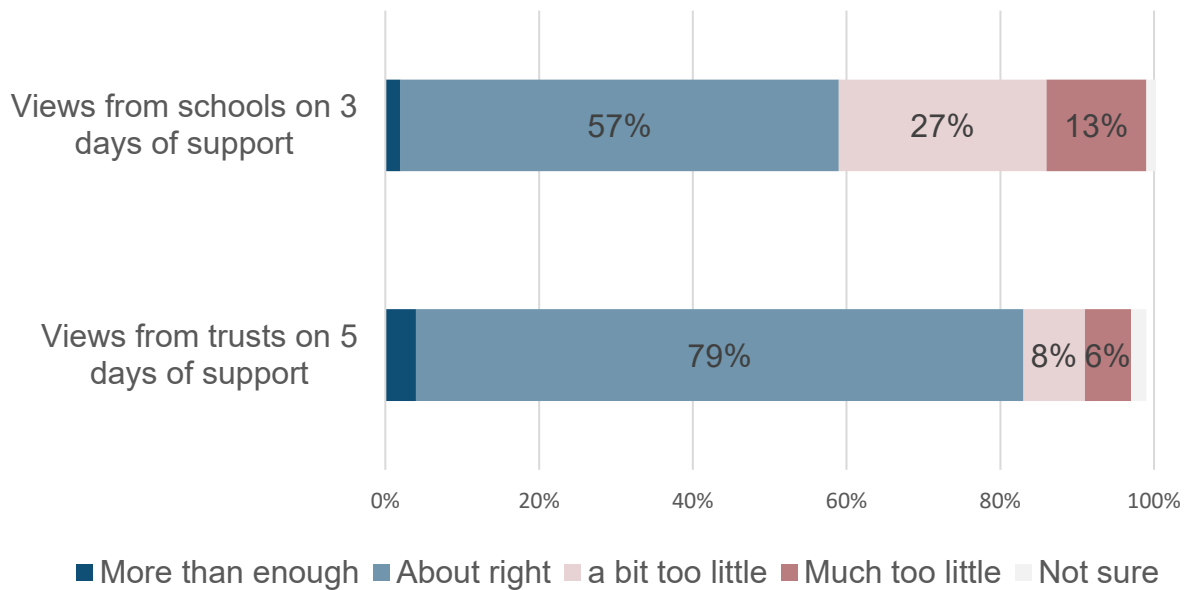
**Figure 1: Views on appropriateness of number of days support provided – system leaders**



Base: 132 system leaders

**Supported schools and trusts themselves were less likely than system leaders to think they needed more days of support:** Most thought the number of days were 'about right', but two-fifths (40%) of schools thought more days of support was needed and just over one in eight trusts (14%) (Figure 2). The reasons for this disparity were not clear. Potential explanations might be that the schools and trusts felt they were already receiving sufficient support elsewhere, that they had evidence of internal capability to improve, or that they associated the system leader support with suspicions of there being an agenda for them to be 'taken-over'. (There was some evidence of such views amongst school and trusts being supported, described later in the report).

**Figure 2: Views on appropriateness of number of days support provided – school and trust leaders**



Base: 63 school leaders, 48 trust leaders

**Some system leaders also spoke about providing more, and at times significantly more staff resource and/or days allocated in order to make a difference.** Examples included system leaders taking teams with them to provide dedicated support (usually for middle managers) or continued to provide support after the formal arrangement ended.

The school had just been given an RI judgement in a recent inspection and had been given 34 priorities for improvement. The support I could offer was just too little. *System leader*

When you enter this process you discover other areas not [initially] apparent. These areas also need support but we are limited by the 3/5 days and we need more to bring in other experts to support the school/MAT with the issues they face. *System leader*

**It was often mentioned (both by those providing and those receiving support) that it took time to build relationships and get a good view of the improvement needs.** Good relationships often set things off on a positive footing and led to joint efforts and better outcomes. Where a solid relationship and understanding of the local context was not initially in place, then this phase could use up most of the time allocated and limited the value of the support. A few system leaders mentioned that they did not include that initial ‘relationship-building’ stage in the allocated days of support.

Having identified what needs to be done is not always sufficient for a school to then carry this out - by the very nature of the schools needing support this is often part of the problem. *System leader*

Most of the real work happens outside of the 3 days support. *System leader*

[there was] Not enough time to deliver sustainable improvements. *System leader*

It ended up being a lot of work and preparation for us, for just another review. *Trust leader.*

Respondents (both system leaders and trusts/schools) were more likely to think the time allocated was enough when:

- an existing relationship between partners was in place
- support was already in place from elsewhere
- the key value of the review was seen as providing an external validation of the school/trusts' existing strategy for improvement.

Some of these respondents explained that they were keen to avoid adding too much, or unnecessary, advice and risk moving away from an already agreed strategic plan which could confuse priorities and reduce impact in the short to medium term.

## Support provided – focus

**Widespread feedback welcomed the fact that the focus of support was tailored to the specific needs of the trust/school.** Where there wasn't an existing relationship between partners, the focus was more likely to be on diagnosis and suggested next steps.

## Data from end of deployment forms

Policy colleagues provided information from end of deployment forms (completed by system leaders up to 29 April 2022) which indicated that the main areas of focus of the support provided overall was on strategic direction, teacher/curriculum development and leadership and governance:

- Reviewing SI strategy and supported school to put in place roadmap for improvement (reported by 89% of system leaders)

- Curriculum and teacher development (88%)
- Leadership and governance (86%)
- Education recovery and support to overcome issues related to/exacerbated by the pandemic (53%)
- Teacher workload / recruitment & retention (32%) and pupil premium (31%)

Responses from the survey on reported *benefits* of the support broadly aligns with these reported areas of focus (see page 26).

## Interviews and open feedback on the focus of support provided

Interviews and open feedback in the survey provided more detail about what the support focused on, and selected quotes and messages are set out below.

### Overall improvement strategy:

System leaders commonly mentioned undertaking a review of their partners' improvement strategy, and where necessary helping to implement some structural changes. For example, by ensuring that headteachers step up more consistently to take a clear strategic role, bringing senior leaders together (sometimes with those in other schools) to take a more active role in strategic implementation and making sure the plans are embedded and monitored.

[the support for the trust] was about the MAT assurance framework, school improvement model and governance. *System leader*

[the support for the school provided] a very clear strategy for school improvement. *School leader*

### Curriculum and teacher development:

The support we received focused solely on curriculum development and leadership for middle leaders. This was highly effective. *School leader*

In both the school and the trust model, the key driver has been curriculum development and aspects of teacher development. *System leader*

### **Leadership and governance capacity:**

The support has focused on Middle leadership and given more capacity to ensure all middle leaders had access to high quality coaching and support. *School leader*

Having an NLE that is from an Outstanding school and is able to offer bespoke support has really helped our school and the leadership capacity further. *School leader*

[The system leader brought...] Trust Governors (who) presented to our school governing board to explain how governance works within a MAT (within this one at least). Very positive and useful. *School leader.*

Other comments related to, for example:

### **External validation:**

Verification and validation of our own improvement actions. The NLE was able to broker key external reviews which were 'critically friendly' and allowed us to refine and move forward. *School leader*

### **Mixture of support:**

We have focused on Pupil Premium strategy and systems. Moving into Language and Communication in EYFS and deep dives with subject leads. *School leader*

## **Trust partnerships**

**Opportunity to 'try before you buy':** Only a few leaders we spoke to had entered a 'try before you buy' arrangement in partnering up with a trust on a trial basis, which reflects the generally low take up of this part of the Offer. Amongst those that had, the experience was viewed positively and they appeared to have learnt a lot from the process about the potential benefits of the closer working with other schools and sharing good practices and having opportunities for wider resources. One system leader described it as a simple mechanism to what can be a complex and daunting process. Although not all of them said they would continue with the same MAT on a permanent basis, it did warm them to joining 'the right' MAT in the future (with more closely aligned culture and values). The arrangement;

... was felt to have gone really well. The primaries which took it up were pleasantly surprised – they might not join this Trust but they will join one. *System leader*

... will make deliberations (about conversion) more thoughtful and informed. *System leader*

One faith school entered a ‘try before you buy’ arrangement with a partner MAT which the diocese had not previously identified but with whom they had found a good partner-relationship. The headteacher reported that she felt there were mutual benefits for both her school and the partner MAT from the shared experience, and they picked up lessons from each other in the process. She thought they would continue to work closely in future – even though it might not be the MAT they eventually join.

We also explored views on the trust partnership (“try before you buy”) offer with those that had not taken it up. Some felt it wasn’t appropriate because they were already in a trust or had an informal arrangement with other schools which they wanted to maintain. Some mentioned that they felt their time and effort was currently better placed on school improvement priorities. On a related note, a few trust/school leaders mentioned that the £10k support should be shared with the school joining to help cover leadership time for the additional meetings and processes involved.

**Discussions about partnering with a trust appeared to be happening in most cases** as shown by both qualitative feedback and survey data (see below).

## **Interviews and open feedback on trust partnerships**

In interviews, system leaders explained that in the few cases where partnerships were not discussed, it was because they felt a relationship needed building first or that it wasn’t the core priority at that point in time. System leaders often mentioned that it’s important to make this a natural part of the initial conversation to help build trust and maintain focus. As one put it, “It’s all about relationships”. Another explained “you have to read the meter on schools’ intentions”... a discussion about conversion can be a distraction from implementing an existing improvement plan, built on priority areas which could for example have been identified in a recent RI judgement.

A number of schools also revealed that they felt well supported by the LA and/or through less formal partnership arrangements with other schools and did not think they had much to gain from joining a MAT. Others fed back that although they may be thinking about joining a trust, they hadn’t found the ‘right’ one; that they wanted to prioritise improvement; and/or they felt they would be seen as a weak partner in any endeavour until they were out of RI.

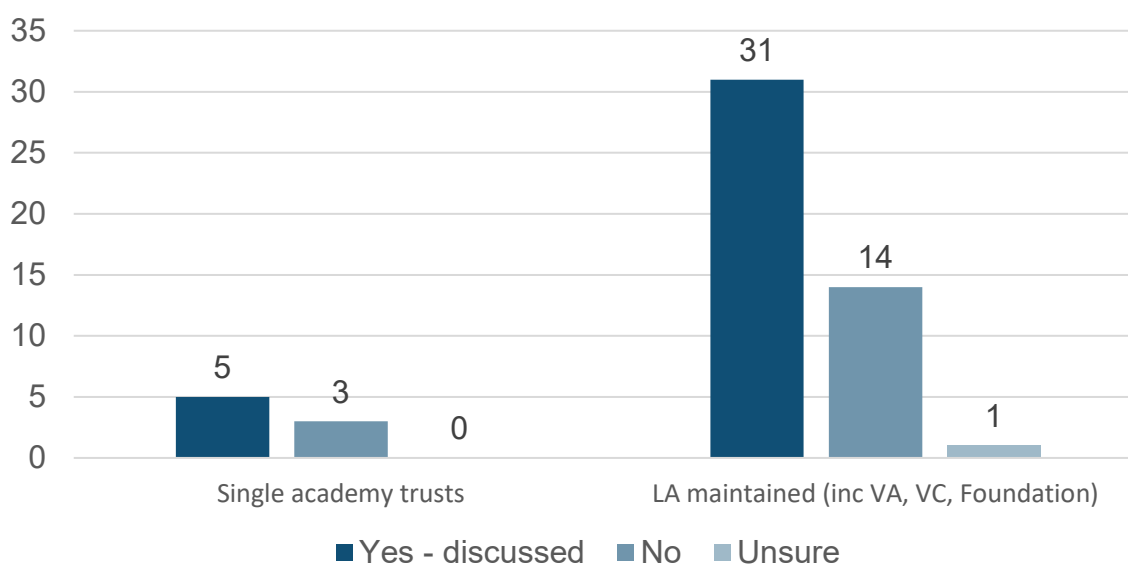
## Survey data on trust partnerships

Three quarters (75%) of the 61 schools responding to these questions about trust partnerships discussions were local authority (LA) maintained schools - including Voluntary Aided (VA), Voluntary Controlled (VC) and Foundation schools. Just 8 of them were SATs (13%) and 8 (11%) described themselves as 'Other'. Within the 'Other' category, 7 described themselves as being a school within a MAT and 1 as a school within a diocese.

**Please note:** numbers of responses are provided in this section alongside the percentages, given that some of the bases are very low.

**The survey showed that around two-thirds of SATs and LA maintained schools responding discussed the possibility of a trust partnership** with their system leader. (5 of 8 SATs and 31 of 46 LA maintained). (Figure 3)

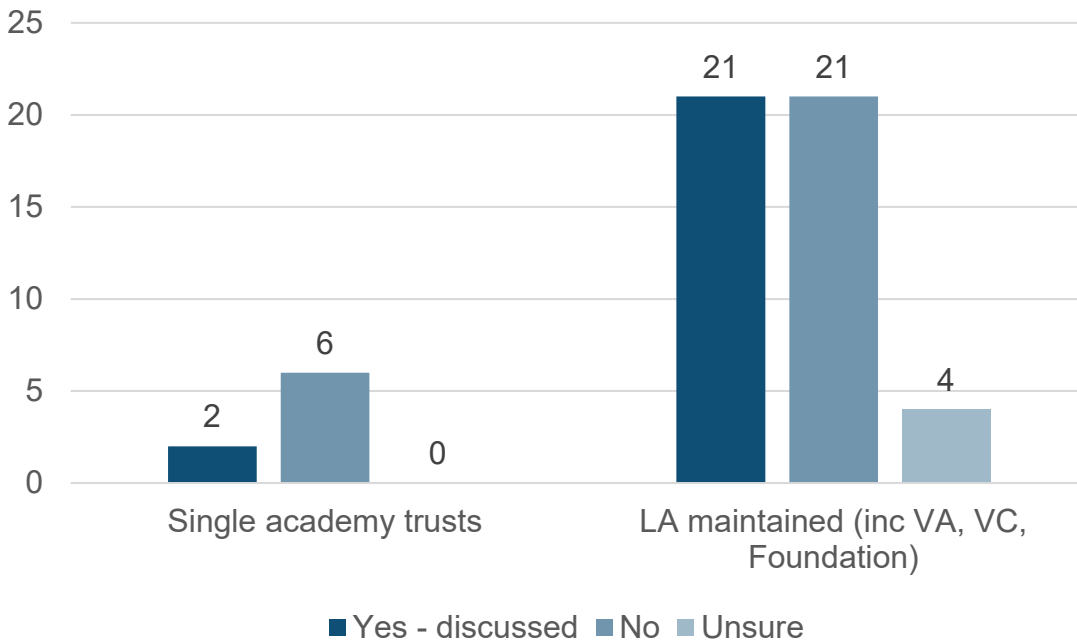
**Figure 3: Whether trust partnerships were discussed – number of school leaders**



Base: 8 SATs, 46 LA maintained

Just under half of LA maintained schools (21 of 46, or 46%) responding indicated that they discussed the possibility of a formal trust partnership with a service level agreement (SLA). Two of the 8 SATs responding reported the same (Figure 4).

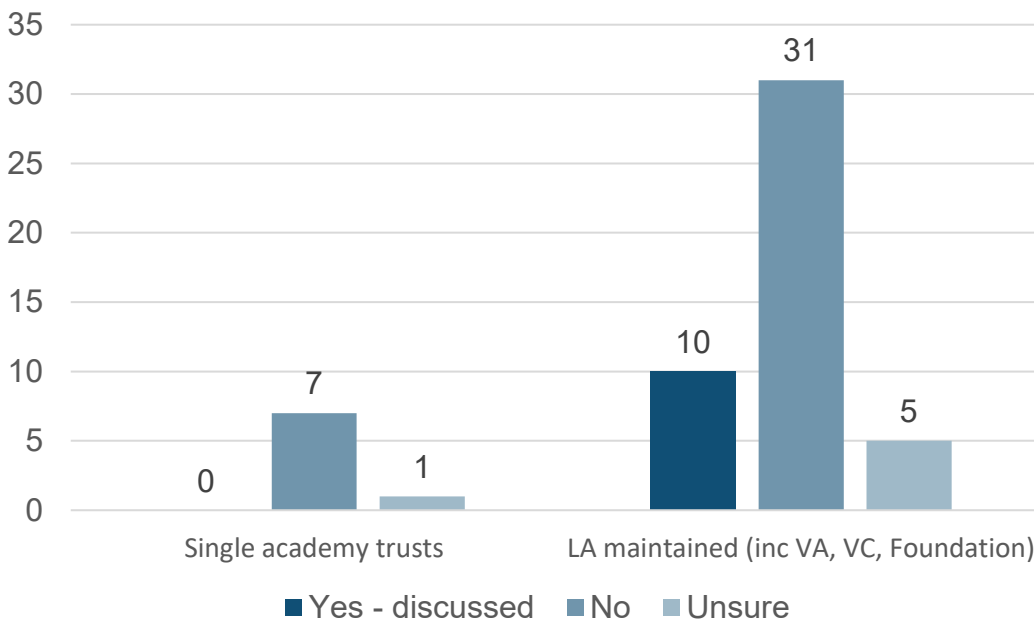
**Figure 4: Whether a formal trust partnership (including a service level agreement) was discussed – number of school leaders**



Base: 8 SATs, 46 LA maintained

Around 1 in 5 LA maintained schools (10 of 46, 22%) responding to the survey indicated that they had agreed an SLA to form a formal trust partnership (5 LA maintained schools were unsure). None of the 8 SATs responding reported that they had agreed an SLA but 1 was unsure (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Whether a formal trust partnership was agreed – number of school leaders**

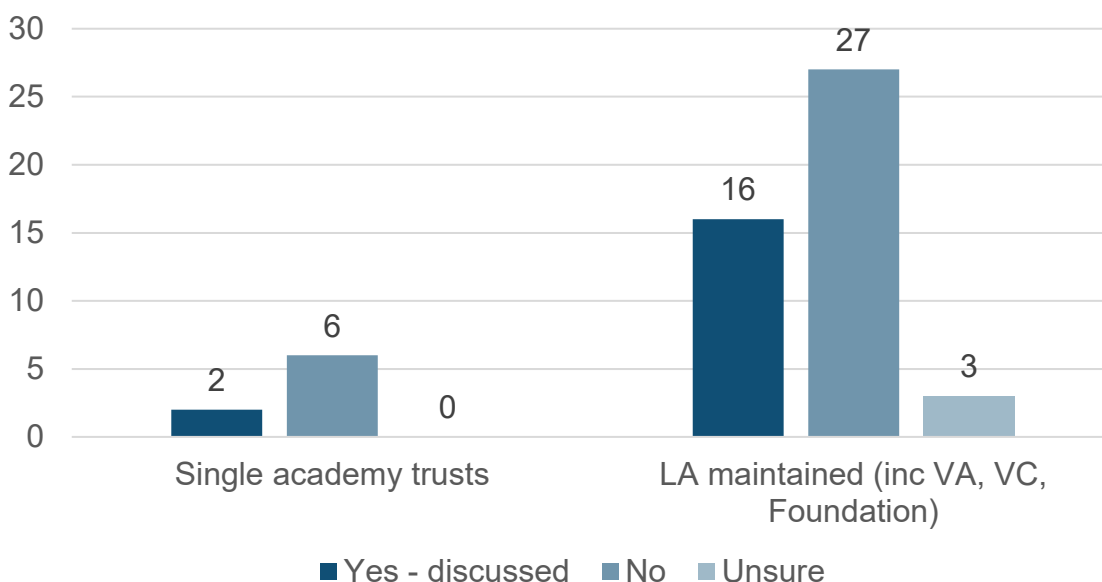


Base: 8 SATs, 46 LA maintained



Just over a third of LA maintained schools (16 of 46, 35%) responding reported that they had previously taken steps to join a trust prior to the programme, over half had not (27 of 46, 59%) and 3 were unsure. A quarter (or 2 of the 8) of SATs responding said they'd previously taken steps to join a trust (Figure 6).

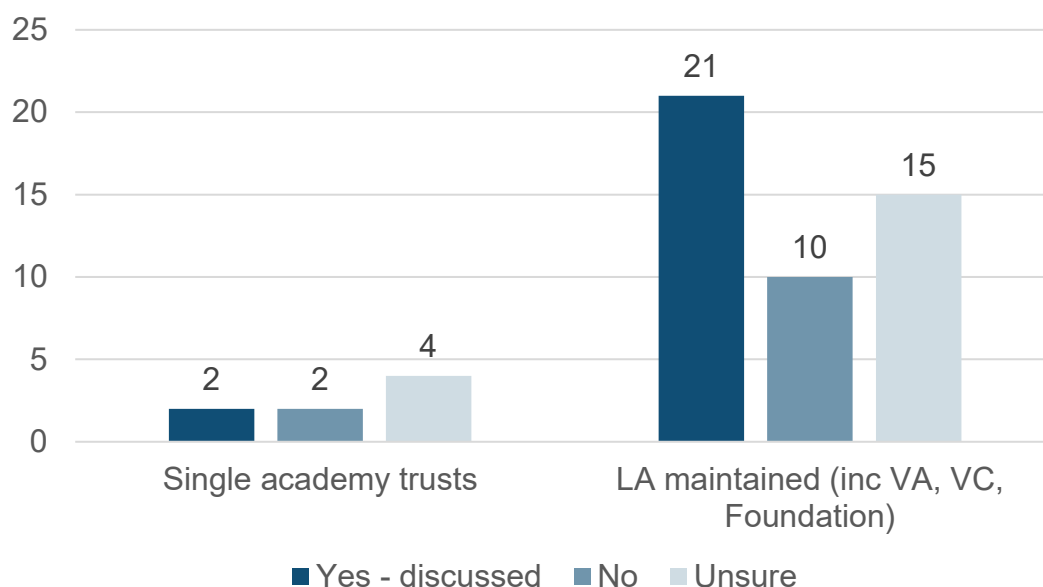
**Figure 6: Whether had previously taken steps to join a trust (prior to engaging in the TSI Offer) – number of school leaders**



Base: 8 SATs, 46 LA maintained

Just under half of LA maintained schools (21 of 46, 46%) responding to the survey indicated that they felt they were more likely to join a trust now compared to before they joined the TSI programme. The rest of this group were split between those that thought there was no change (10 of 46, 21%) and those who were unsure (15 of 46, 33%) (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Whether more likely to join a trust now than prior to engaging in the TSI Offer – number of schools**



Base: 8 SATs, 46 LA maintained schools

Those not currently considering or planning to join a trust were asked why that was. Verbatim responses are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Verbatim responses – reasons for not currently considering or planning to join a trust partnership arrangement**

<b>Views from local authority-maintained schools (inc. VA, VC, Foundation)</b>
We cannot academise as we have a building that needs several millions of pounds worth of work (see DFE conditions survey) and we have an ongoing (albeit reducing) deficit - if schools are to become academies, there will have to be more financial support.
We like to be an independent primary school. We are unique and want to remain that way. A few years ago we federated with another primary and it was a disaster after just over a year in the partnership- we are still on the road to recovery from the experience. We are now a much better school being on our own.
As a Voluntary Aided Catholic school under the Trusteeship of a Religious Order, we (college leaders, governors and Trustees) are currently awaiting consultation on the imminent archdiocesan academisation programme.
As a Catholic school we are joining a MAC.

<p>Through this process, our links with the Trust are developing organically. In the meantime, our PFI contract is under review meaning that once the review is complete, we should be in a good position to enter into more formal discussions with the Trust.</p>
<p>We are part of a federation with another maintained school therefore de-federation would be required first.</p>
<p>We have enough support from our local authority.</p>
<p>At the moment we are getting the best of both worlds. Strong support and networks from our Local Authority (e.g. we are currently working on a project between the Local Authority and Evidence Based Education to provide the Great Teaching Toolkit as CPD for all staff, this was not available through the trust we have a relationship with) We get some great bespoke support from our NLE and CPD from the research school in that trust.</p>
<p>We are a Local Authority school in a Local Authority that still maintains a strong school improvement offer. It is inevitable that we will join a trust partnership in the future and working with a trust has given us some insight into what this can offer.</p>
<p>We are happy with our current arrangement as an LA school with support through our local Education Partnership.</p>
<p>We are going to join a large group of schools as part of a partnership and which collaboratively together without the formality of a trust.</p>
<p>We will only consider this after our imminent Ofsted inspection. We took this view at the outset when new leadership took hold of the school as we did not wish to be distracted by academization</p>
<p>Governors considering all options of our current federation before moving forward</p>
<p>Governors undertaking due diligence and exploring MAT options</p>
<p>None suitable found</p>
<p>I need further time to consider this</p>
<p>The trust we are engaged with appear to be the perfect match for our vision</p>
<p>We are looking at other Trusts that we could join but we are reluctant to rush into a long term decision. The offer felt very rushed with not enough time to make a decision on which Trust we want to work more closely with.</p>
<p>I would like to explore establishing our own Trust before considering joining another Trust.</p>

it is not clear how academy status creates school improvement
These partnerships are a good way of securing school improvement as we move forward.
<b>Views from single academy trusts</b>
This is strategic work which is ongoing from our trust with decisions to be made in due course.
Focusing on preparing for Ofsted inspection. Financial commitment - haven't met anyone in the Trust who thought they were receiving in terms of value what they were paying in. We are considering the possibility of joining a Trust but want to prioritise our forthcoming inspection.
The Trust we are in is strong and supportive in the journey we are on as academies.
We are looking at working with local school and are already part of the local secondary schools group and have a clear SLA with a large group of primary schools

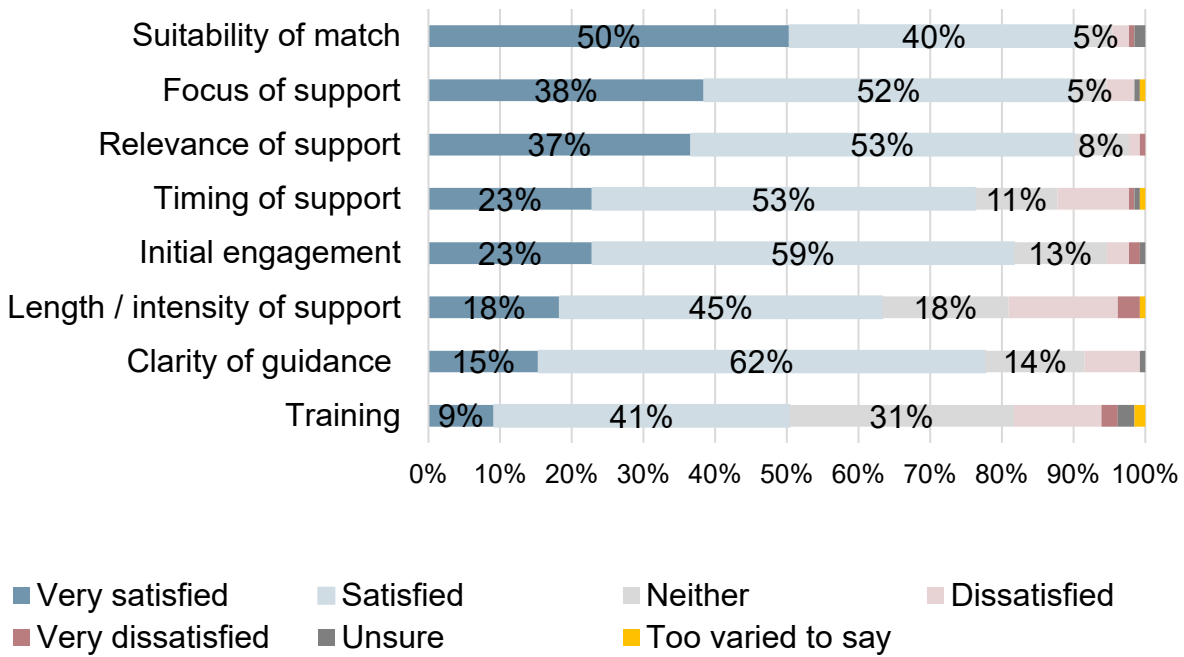
## Programme design - what worked well, and less well

### Aspects of the programme which worked well

Figures 8, 9 and 10 show that participants were most satisfied with the following aspects (in each case school leaders were more satisfied than trust leaders):

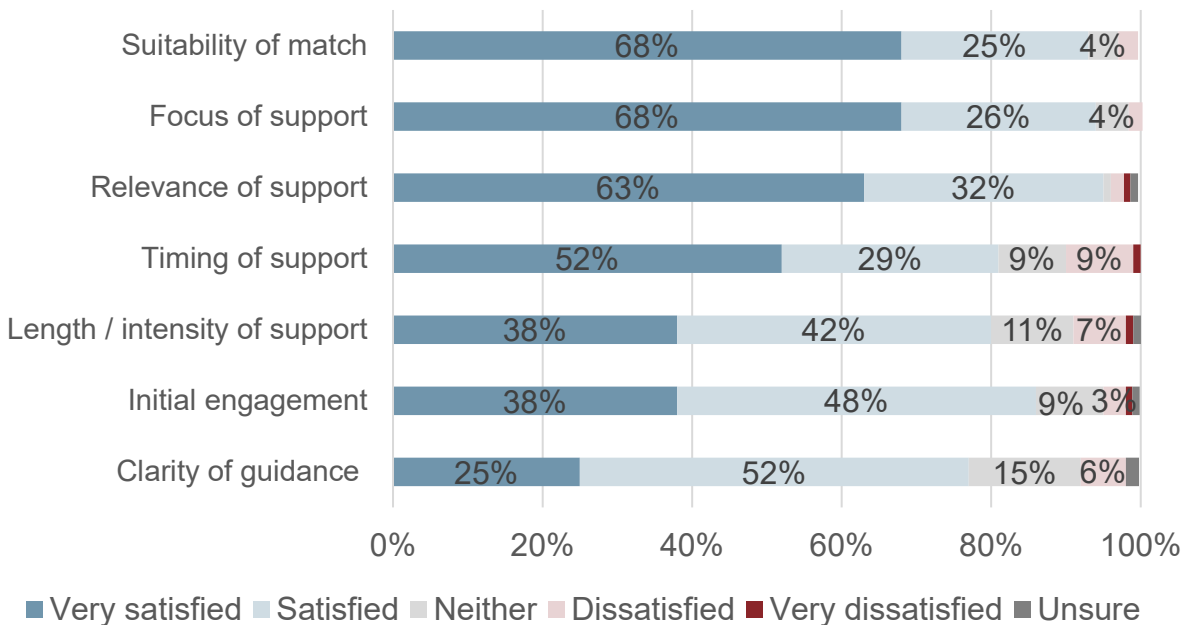
- Suitability of the match between partners: Schools had the highest levels of satisfaction here - 90% of system leaders were satisfied/very satisfied with their match, as were 93% of schools and 86% of trusts.
- Focus of support: 90% of system leaders were satisfied/very satisfied, as were 94% of schools and 88% of trusts.
- Relevance of support: 90% of system leaders were satisfied/very satisfied, as were 95% of schools and 86% of trusts.

**Figure 8: Levels of satisfaction with aspects of the programme – system leaders**



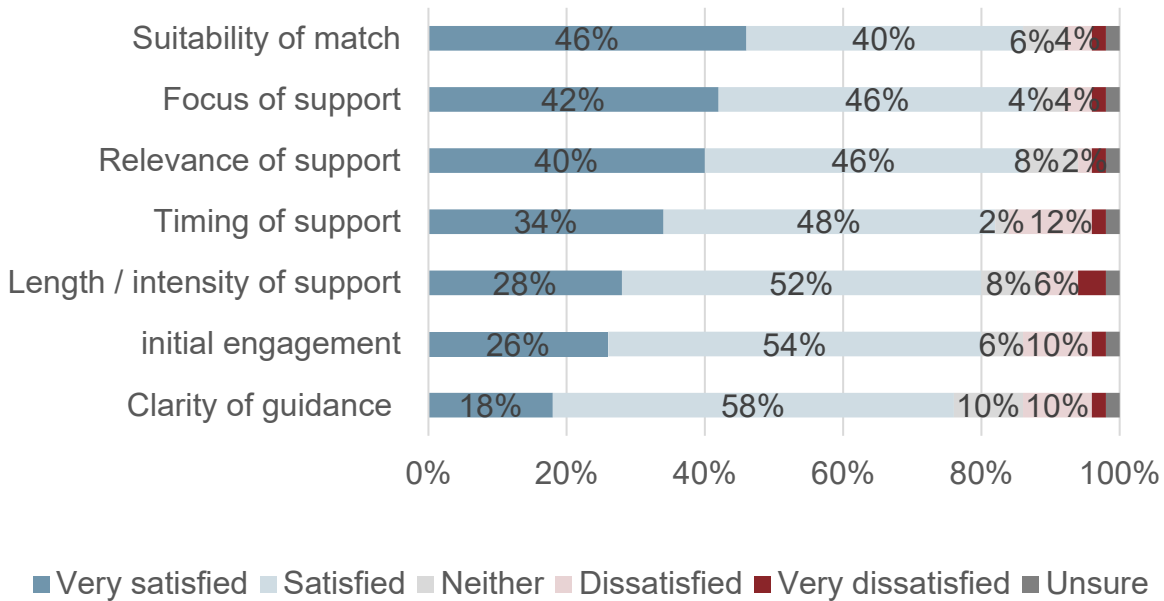
Base: 131 system leaders

**Figure 9: Levels of satisfaction with aspects of the programme – school leaders**



Base: 65 school leaders

**Figure 10: Levels of satisfaction with aspects of the programme – trust leaders**



Base: 50 trust leaders

**There was close alignment between high levels of satisfaction with the match and high levels of satisfaction with the focus and relevance of support**, which seems to indicate that a good match was linked to the provision of the right kinds of support. The qualitative feedback aligned with this, particularly in comments connected to a level of dissatisfaction with one of these elements (see overleaf).

**Most participants we spoke to were happy with their match, and particularly so where the supported school/trust felt they had a degree of control over who their partner would be** and system leaders tended to support this. Some schools/trusts said they made a specific request for a person which whom they had an established relationship or they felt had a reputation to understand and support settings like theirs.

*We wanted a trusted person. Trust leader*

*I am very glad that I was able to choose the NLE that I felt would best be placed to support our school. Trust leader*

*One of the significant success factors for us was that the trust we were asked to support was one that we had previously provided 5 days of support for. This meant we had a good understanding of the needs at the outset and were able to get started quickly. System leader*

**In cases where a school or trust was less satisfied with their match, this was connected the support not being tailored or extensive enough to meet their needs and circumstance.** One school leader reported that although the support was helpful, it was not necessarily focused on what they needed most help with but was limited by what their (NLE) partner could offer, which they explained felt less useful than what they were able to access from their local authority. A system leader thought their match was not ideal for the following reason:

[the match] ... did not take account that the school were already talking to another MAT about joining. The process would have been more beneficial to that MAT to undertake as I was left in a situation where none of the support plan could be implemented by me.

*System leader*

**Flexibility over the focus of the support and the flexibility to respond to the needs of the trust/school (within a broad framework) was a popular and much-valued feature of the Offer,** especially as it was not always immediately apparent where priority needs lay. The ability to adapt and “not be straight-jacketed” (as one system leader put it) was crucial. Each designation was considered to be individual and the support packages different. Flexibility is also crucial to prioritise the ‘easy wins’ when there is not enough time to do everything.

## **Aspects of the programme that could be improved**

**Number of days of support:** As detailed above (paragraphs 19-24) views were split on the extent to which system leaders and supported schools/trust felt that 3/5 days of support was enough. It was commonly mentioned that there needed to be flexibility for more days dependent upon the designated school/trust needs as each case could be very different. Some advocated for a ‘tiered’ system dependent on need.

**Eligibility criteria:** Some system leaders and trust leaders did not always feel that the support was effectively targeted citing that in some cases (e.g. in legacy 2RI schools) there was already a comprehensive system of support in place and evidence that it was effective; whereas other schools with a current ‘Good’ rating had been identified locally as likely to move into RI or Inadequate at next inspection but are ineligible for much support on offer (one person described this group as the ‘wobbly Goods’).

**Timing of support:** Although most were happy with the timing of support there were some comments about the length of time taken for the support to happen.

It took a long while before the NLE was allowed to start. *Trust leader*

We were initially contacted in May 2021, yet the work only started in January 2022 and had to be completed by the end of March 2022.

How can this bring about lasting change? *School leader*

Other comments about timing referred to the constraints of (what they considered to be) alignment with the financial year which for some was felt to be a recurring frustration with departmental initiatives, which they felt formed a barrier to getting the right support at the right time. It can exacerbate a feeling that it is something that is quickly 'done to' rather than 'done with' those being supported. Alignment to the academic year, with flexibility to pan-out support (and/or monitoring) across terms, where deemed appropriate, was preferential.

**Training for system leaders:** As shown in Figure 3, training was the area where system leaders were least satisfied - only half (50%) were satisfied or very satisfied. Open feedback and discussions suggested that training was limited and in many cases delayed or disrupted as a result of the pandemic. Many relied on the guidance documents rather than any formal training. A couple of system leaders who were CEOs also said that they felt at a disadvantage as they did not get the general training which NLEs received (and similarly they said they were not entitled to obtain the NPQEL qualification).

**Guidance documents:** System leaders were generally positive about the guidance, said it provided a useful framework from which to operate and they felt well informed about the purpose of the programme. However, this was not universal; a few mentioned they would have liked greater clarity on what they (and their partner) should expect to achieve within the allotted time-frame and a few mentioned that the support felt like a 'tick-box' exercise (referencing the end of deployment forms).

**Some system leaders may have also misinterpreted the guidance,** for example there was evidence that some focused their support at schools within MATs, rather than at the MAT level. This was corroborated by discussions with some system leaders who confirmed they were focusing on schools within MATs. Similarly, seven survey responses indicated that they had received TSI support as a school within a MAT.

In terms of the support my trust has received, the NLE has not seemed to understand it is MAT support and has focussed on the individual school. *Both system leader and leader of a supported MAT*

**There was a call for better guidance for trusts/school being supported.** System leaders sometimes felt that clear and transparent guidance for their partners would have set them off on a sounder footing and helped allay any suspicions that they were coming in with a hidden agenda for a 'takeover'. One system leader explained that there was a concern about 'predatory MATs' and early discussions about trust partnership could lead



some to conflate the Offer as one of MAT conversion. Transparent communications and good relationship could help allay this. Similarly, discussions indicated that school and trust leaders did not always discern between this particular TSI Offer and similar incarnations of system-leader or NLE provided support, and dedicated guidance for them could help with this.

**Process of initial engagement:** Along with the point noted about a lengthy lead-in time for some schools and trusts to get the support in place, some system leaders also highlighted challenges in getting their partners to engage; schools were usually given as examples as being hard to engage rather than trusts, and particularly standalone schools that appeared to need support the most. One system leader described how it had been difficult to engage the headteacher an alternative provider which they described as ‘really struggling’. They held initial meetings with other senior leaders but this limited the type and frankness of conversations and consequently the focus of the support offered. Although the headteacher came on board to an extent later (an extension was agreed with the department) the system leader felt valuable time and impact had been lost.

Another system leader wanted to really stress the ability for some schools to ‘wriggle out’ of accepting the support, and felt there was a real risk that these are more likely to be the schools with the biggest problems. She pointed to a case where only after much perseverance she was able secure engagement with a school, and subsequently found serious safeguarding concerns.

At least a couple of supported schools/trusts indicated that the originally turned down or ignored the offer of support, either because they didn’t think it was relevant or it duplicated support already in place. One school mentioned that they had overlooked the email in her inbox. Amongst each of these, a phone call from their regional contact was the thing that tended to persuade them to take up the Offer.

**Focus of support:** As noted above, the flexibility to tailor the support to the improvement needs of the trust/school was widely well-received. Nevertheless, some improvements were suggested where the scope of support wasn’t tightly focused on the priority need. Some system leaders (perhaps mistakenly) felt constrained by the list of areas presented in the guidance or the end of deployment forms. They were aware of other (national/regional) activities which may have been of value but not considered to be in scope. A few people also mentioned that although curriculum or behaviour hubs had been identified as being necessary, the hubs didn’t always have the capacity to accept them.

**End-of-deployment process:** It wasn’t always clear, especially to supported schools/trust, what the end process should look like or what happened with the information once the support ended. This could lead some supported trusts/schools to feel a bit suspicious about whether there was a hidden report that went somewhere that

they were not party to. They called for more transparency and a clearer sense of accountability.

I think there is a lack of transparency around certain aspects e.g. the support for governance has become a review of governance.

Following the support, who receives feedback? *School leader*

## Understanding benefits and impacts

Even though it was still relatively early days, almost everyone we spoke to could describe specific benefits gained from the TSI Offer related to school or trust improvement. This was endorsed by the high levels of agreement in the survey responses that the support contributed to a number of improvements.

### Survey data on reported benefits

Survey responses show that most commonly, participants reported that the support had contributed to improved curriculum/teacher development, improved leadership and governance, and a more effective school/trust improvement strategy. (Figures 11, 12 and 13):

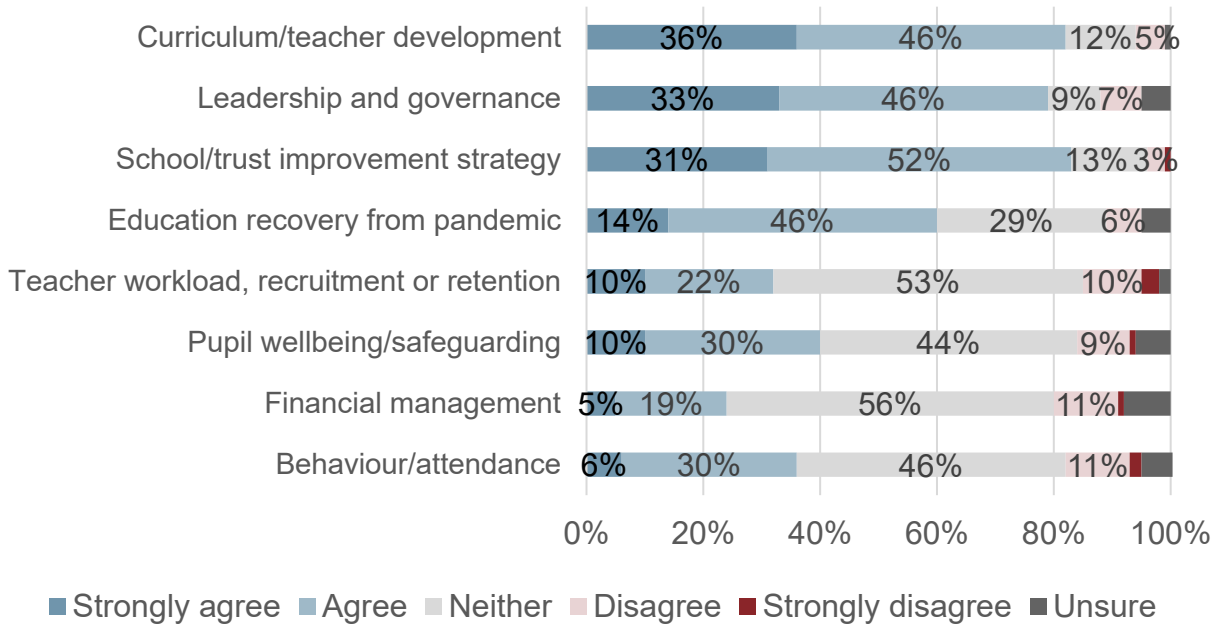
- **improved curriculum/teacher development:** 82% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed, as did 84% of schools and 67% of trusts.
- **improved leadership and governance:** 79% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed, as did 63% of schools and 63% of trusts
- **a more effective school/trust improvement strategy:** 83% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed, as did 73% of schools and 56% of trusts.

Areas where only a minority of respondents agreed that the support had made a difference were as follows (open comments explained that these usually reflected the fact that the areas were not the main focus of support):

- **Pupil wellbeing/safeguarding:** 40% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed, as did 22% of schools and 20% of trusts.
- **Teacher workload, recruitment or retention:** 32% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed, as did 23% of schools and 16% of trusts.
- **Pupil behaviour/ attendance:** 36% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed, as did 22% of schools and 16% of trusts.
- **Better financial management:** 24% of system leaders agreed or strongly agreed,

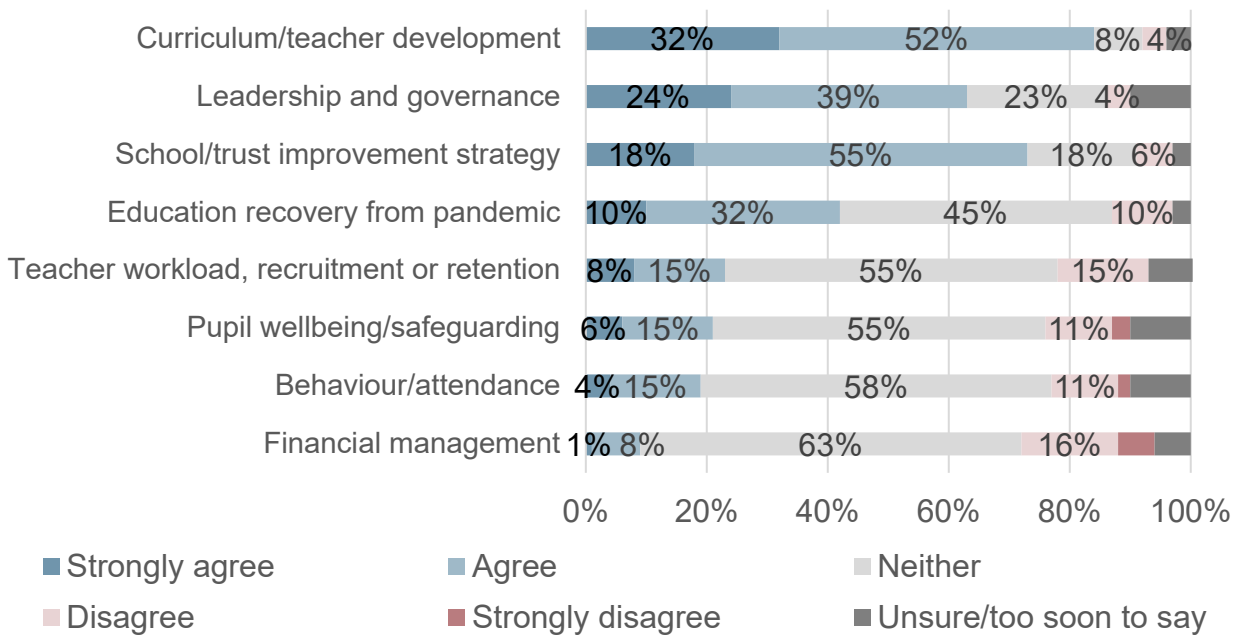
as did 9% of schools. However over half (56%) of trusts agreed that the support contributed to better financial management (which may have been a by-product of better leadership).

**Figure 11: Views on benefits of the programme – system leaders**



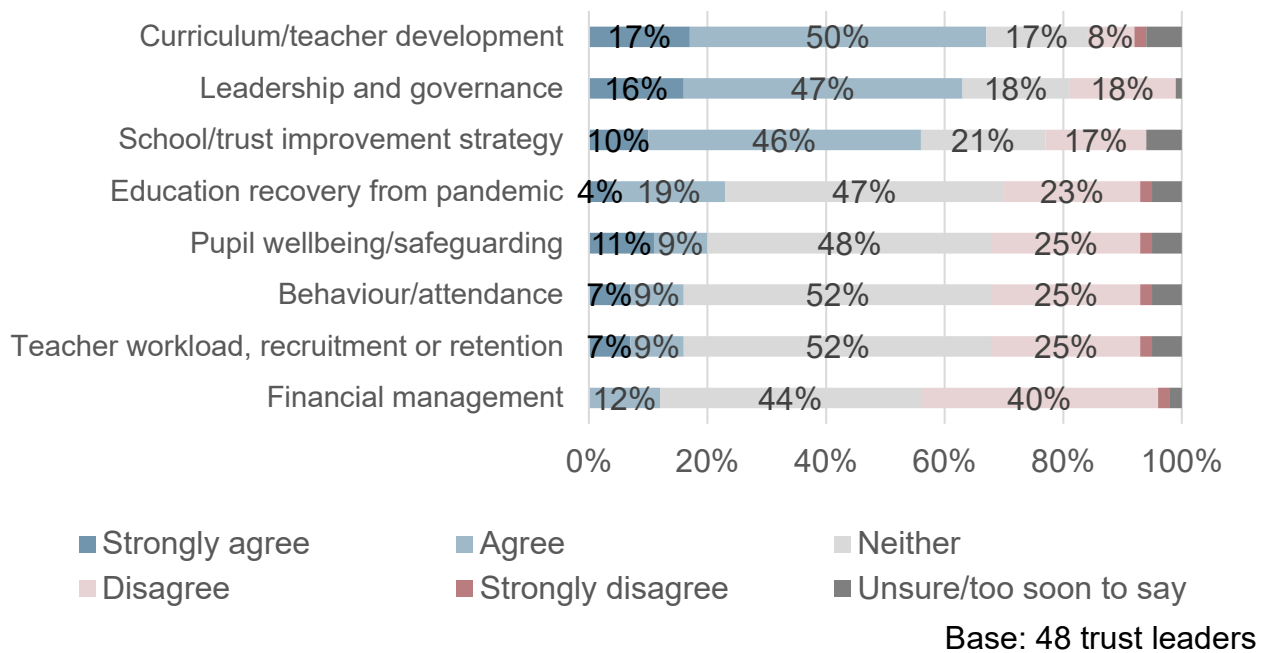
Base: 129 system leaders

**Figure 12: Views on benefits of the programme – school leaders**



Base: 62 school leaders

**Figure 13: Views on benefits of the programme – trust leaders**



Survey respondents were invited to elaborate on what they considered to be the key benefits of the programme. Most system leaders and schools/trusts we spoke to also viewed the support positively and could describe specific benefits. The specific benefits described in the open text and interview feedback are themed below.

### Interview and open feedback on reported benefits

**Leadership and capacity:** System leaders noted particular benefits in helping new trust and school leaders to establish effective plans for improvement, and help lower-performing (established) leaders review the effectiveness of existing plans, providing dedicated support for middle leaders and governors. Others described that where schools/trusts fully engage with the support provided benefits are far reaching.

[The key benefits] have been access to a system leader with a wide range of experience to sound things out with who has also been excellent at sharing resources and pointing us to other people who can help us with our priorities. *School leader.*

As a new head I was supported in identifying priorities than had been agreed with the previous head. I was able to ask questions from

someone who had first-hand experience and could give practical and realistic advice. *School leader.*

The NLE was able to focus upon a few key areas of the school's development plan with the SLT. She identified areas of strength and was supportive in developing these. Her clarity and experience meant that the school made significant progress in the intent and implementation of the core subjects. *Trust leader.*

... for the schools in my Trust that have received TSI support, it has been transformational. It has meant we have been able to commission timely additional support that has led to improvement in leadership, behaviour and in Maths. *Trust leader.*

**External review/validation:** A number of schools and trusts indicated that the system leader provided valuable external validation of their improvement plan, and provided confidence for them to focus on the areas for development already highlighted in their self-evaluation and /or that developed with other support networks.

**Partnerships:** System leaders welcomed how the programme helped foster a culture of collaboration through a system-led approach. "We are dovetailing local authority (maintained) schools into wider networks" reported a system leader. Some spoke about how they were pleased the department had confidence that schools and trust leaders were being trusted to support each other to improve. MAT and school leaders also spoke about feeling 'better connected' and generally appreciated exposure to the processes, procedures, and culture in place in (other) MATs, which was noted by some to be extremely beneficial in developing their understanding.

Learning from another trusts experience has been and continues to be key for us. *Trust leader.*

**Ofsted judgments:** One or two system leaders felt the support directly contributed to school moving from RI to Good. One described how the focus of support provided was built around the Ofsted framework as they reported the key priority was to get the school from RI to Good. School and trust leaders more commonly mentioned that the support helped get them "Ofsted-ready".

The trust gave leaders confidence in OFSTED readiness. Our judgements were validated. Opportunities to network with others with similar responsibilities and share expertise also gave confidence and increased expertise. *School leader*

The support offered has been excellent and has given a great deal of confidence and external validation to the Headteacher and our Executive Headteacher for Primary that our curriculum and processes and procedures are effective. As a result we feel in a very strong position to face the forthcoming Ofsted inspection. *Trust leader.*



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