



Department
for Education

RISE targeted intervention: interim process evaluation report

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**Philip Wilson, Georgina Cowen and
Rose Suddaby (York Consulting LLP);
Kathryn Crowther and Louise Starks
(KMC Research); Dr David Greatbatch
and Sue Tate**



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Executive summary

Introduction

Introduced in spring 2025, the design and implementation of Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) is central to the goal of raising standards for all children in all schools across the country as part of the government's Opportunity Mission.

The bespoke RISE targeted intervention focuses on 'stuck' schools that haven't improved, or improved enough, within their current structure but are believed to have the capacity to do so. The 9 RISE regional teams have the option to match an eligible school, via its responsible body (RB), to a high-quality supporting organisation to drive forward improvements.

Evaluation aim

The evaluation aims to gather regular, real-time views from a range of experiences and perspectives amongst those involved in the RISE targeted intervention to:

- understand delivery and implementation experiences
- identify what's working well and areas for improvement
- inform ongoing design and delivery

Over time, it will also gather participants' perceptions of impact on school improvement.

Method

The formative process evaluation methodology involves interviews with individuals from a sample of all the organisations engaged with delivering or receiving the RISE targeted intervention. The evaluation started in April 2025 and is planned to run to November 2027.

Wave 1 fieldwork took place in June, July and September 2025, and covered interviews with 36 summer 2025 cohort schools (4 in each region), 18 advisers, 18 RBs, 18 supporting organisations, and consultation with the regional delivery teams. The focus of those interviews, reported here, was to assess views and experiences of the initial processes and expectations of the programme in their early stages of engagement. This includes views on the suitability of matches made, relevance of support being agreed, and confidence to support school improvement. The evaluation will revisit this cohort at roughly 6-month intervals in 4 waves of interview.

The method will also include a wave of interviews with the autumn 2025 cohort to continue to monitor the early stages of delivery and 3 waves of interviews with the summer 2026 cohort to help assess delivery and implementation for those joining one year on.

Emerging findings

The findings are structured around initial expectations of stakeholders and their perspectives relating to each of the following chronological steps in delivery.

Expectations

Overall, the majority of RISE advisers, headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations were positive in their expectations of the RISE targeted intervention. The majority of headteachers and RBs saw potential benefits for school improvement of the RISE targeted intervention. A few headteachers and RBs were less positive about the reasoning for their involvement in the RISE targeted intervention.

Almost all RISE advisers were positive about the RISE targeted intervention and had the sense that this is a different, more collaborative approach to school improvement. All supporting organisations were clear about their purpose.

Initial contact

The process of informal initial contact from the Department for Education (DfE) regional team to the RB, followed by an email making the communication formal, generally worked well to effectively engage the RB and the school in the programme. Almost all RBs and headteachers recalled the initial contact received from DfE, although in some cases this was described as “clunky” with slow formal communication, short timescales for responses and mixed understandings between the headteacher and the RB. A few headteachers and RBs expressed disappointment about being publicly labelled a ‘stuck school’, which they felt impacted morale.

Matching RISE advisers with schools

Overall, the matching of RISE advisers to schools was considered successful by the majority of schools and RBs, with good relationships established. The majority of headteachers and RBs felt their RISE adviser had a good understanding of the school’s context and needs. Supporting organisations also recognised these positive relationships between the RISE adviser and the school. Regional DfE staff said they tried to match schools with their pool of RISE advisers based on known characteristics, although it was more challenging for a few regions that had fewer RISE advisers.

Initial diagnosis

Overall, the initial diagnosis process worked effectively in terms of establishing schools' needs and eligibility for a support package. By the 2025 summer break, all headteachers had met with their RISE adviser to undertake the initial diagnosis. Almost all had been paired with a supporting organisation.

Almost all RISE advisers referenced timescales, IT set-up and communications as the main operational challenges. For example, the communications infrastructure which requires advisers to use a departmental laptop, when they also used their own and possibly one from the trust, made it harder for advisers to respond promptly at times. However, they worked around most of these challenges while undertaking the initial diagnosis.

The majority of headteachers and RBs agreed with the RISE adviser's assessment of their schools, although a few did not.

Matching supporting organisations

Selecting a supporting organisation was a smooth process in around half the matches in the respondent group. Challenges were experienced in the other half of the matches - such as school and RB preferences not being satisfied, general resistance by schools and RBs to being matched and a few RISE advisers frustrated with the process of supporting organisation selection - although these were mostly resolved. A few matches were still to be agreed at the time of interview.

There were a few cases where the school was outside of the geographic patch of the RISE adviser and/or supporting organisation. This made timing, travel and aspects of contextual knowledge more difficult.

Developing a school improvement plan

Supporting organisations generally led on developing the school improvement plan. Plan development was largely collaborative, with supporting organisations working effectively with the RISE adviser, RB, headteacher and DfE, to ensure priorities were clear, outcomes measurable, and that the plan was deliverable. In a few cases, RISE advisers were much more actively involved in the development of the plan. In the majority of cases, the alignment with existing school plans was considered. The majority of supporting organisations, RBs and headteachers were critical of the short timescales to develop a school improvement plan. This was recognised by regional DfE teams, who said they planned to improve on this for the next cohort.

Approving a school improvement plan

As plans were being approved, all supporting organisations we spoke to were positive about how they could support the school, and many had agreed initial arrangements for time to be spent in the school. In a few cases, there was some confusion around what could be funded. Further guidance could help align plans with eligible activity, speed up decision-making and make the process smoother.

DfE approval was considered by the majority of stakeholders to be slowing the process down. Regional DfE staff and RISE advisers should manage expectations around the timing and requirements involved in the approval process, which would help to reduce uncertainty and frustrations among headteachers and RBs. Some supporting organisations raised questions about flexibility of plans to changing needs.

Ongoing relationships

Open and transparent communication amongst partners has been vital to building strong relationships. The majority of headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations felt the RISE advisers established good relationships which would support the ongoing delivery of the RISE targeted intervention.

In the majority of cases, dialogue between RBs, schools and supporting organisations was effective from the start. There were a few concerns about differences in ethos of the supporting organisation, though any trust takeover fears were mostly allayed.

A minority of headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations were unsure of the RISE advisers' monitoring role during later stages of the programme.

Supporting organisations felt the profile and awareness of RISE support across the sector (those who were not directly involved) was generally low.

Conclusion

This early evidence suggests that the RISE targeted intervention was broadly successful in terms of engaging schools and partners in developing and agreeing a plan for school improvement against challenging timescales. A range of lessons have been learnt from the first full academic term of programme implementation described in this report, which inform the set of considerations below for policy development and delivery.

There was a strong desire among those implementing the programme (regional DfE staff, RISE advisers and supporting organisations) to make it successful. Those receiving the support (schools and RBs) were generally open to this and saw the benefits of working with a supporting organisation to support school improvement.

There was a range of stakeholder perspectives. The majority of RISE advisers felt that as they became more familiar with the programme and developed approaches to engagement, delivery was broadly working effectively.

The majority of headteachers and their RBs were broadly happy with the support proposed through RISE, although some were - and a few continue to be - sceptical of their school's involvement. There is clear evidence that the professional judgement of RISE advisers and regional DfE staff is leading to objective decisions which are changing the nature of existing support in individual schools. A few headteachers felt excluded from early dialogue between the regional DfE team, RISE adviser and RB, and understanding of the initial diagnosis findings.

All supporting organisations were confident that they could support the RISE schools. They were frustrated about timescales for establishing initial relationships and developing the school improvement plan, the process for approving a plan and had concerns about the flexibility of the plan.

All regional DfE teams recognised many of these issues highlighted by partner organisations via interim findings workshops, some of which they hope will be resolved as the programme moves into a steady state. They have started sharing practices and solutions between regions but recognise they could do more here. However, they felt constrained by national policy timescale decisions that shaped the early stages of the programme. There were some examples of how practices varied across the regions, which may risk affecting the reputation of the programme as it expands.

Factors that contributed to the successful implementation of the RISE targeted intervention, evident at this early stage, include the:

- role and experience of RISE advisers - they were generally considered supportive, collaborative and credible experts by schools, supporting organisations and RBs
- openness of the majority of RBs and headteachers to receiving the support through from RISE advisers and supporting organisations
- credibility of supporting organisations that were perceived, by the majority of schools and RBs, to have the capability to deliver school improvement
- funded resource to provide sustained support
- role of regional teams to support RISE advisers with initial RB and school meetings and their role in refining and signing off plans developed by supporting organisations

The overall challenges can be summarised as:

- timescales resulting in short deadlines for delivery of key initial stages - these affected all stakeholders involved in delivering the RISE targeted intervention
- communications, which all stakeholder groups felt were rushed, led to confusion and extra workload
- guidance, sometimes provided late or with last minute changes and considered limited by some supporting organisations - improving detailed examples in the guidance in response to questions from supporting organisations would help avoid future misunderstandings
- uncertainty among many schools, RBs and supporting organisations about the monitoring role of the RISE adviser going forward

Considerations for policy development and delivery

The policy and delivery considerations resulting from this first wave of research include:

Communications:

- clarifying communications around the role of the RISE adviser (at introduction and ongoing).
- reviewing and further promoting guidance around roles and ownership of the school improvement plan, including monitoring its effectiveness for school improvement.
- supporting organisations felt the profile and awareness of RISE support across the sector (those who are not directly involved) could be improved through more effective communication.
- matched supporting organisations thought clarity on how the matching of supporting organisations was undertaken might be important across the sector – they said some potential supporting organisations reported to the matched supporting organisations that they had not yet been approached.

Further guidance:

- clarifying what can be funded. There were requests from some supporting organisations for clarity about what can be funded - some said a template school improvement plan would help. The regional DfE teams should ensure supporting organisations receive effective communication about the template school improvement plan to help guide them.

- emphasising in the guidance the importance of RBs promptly informing headteachers about their school's selection for the RISE targeted intervention, to help them prepare.
- timescale pressures – for example, getting plans submitted by the end of the summer term risked compromising the quality of plans and relationships, as well as supporting organisations' medium-term planning and 'good will' to the programme which may influence sustainability. Future cohorts need to be given sufficient time for the different processes to avoid this risk.
- sector-level capacity of supporting organisations – DfE should carefully monitor the capacity of the system to ensure supporting organisations can support increasing numbers of schools in future rounds of RISE support.

Introduction

The RISE support

The design and implementation of Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (or RISE) is central to the goal of raising standards for all children in all schools across the country as part of the government's Opportunity Mission. The Opportunity Mission focuses on breaking down the barriers to opportunity and ending the link between background and success.

RISE aims to drive high and rising standards across all schools and for all children and young people, particularly the most disadvantaged, ensuring they have the knowledge, skills and support to thrive. The specific objectives of RISE support will be to ensure that:

- every school can self-navigate a path to improvement, drawing on all necessary support within and beyond their school or responsible body (RB) such as a local authority or trust
- every area of the country has a coherent set of local priorities enabling local partners to work collaboratively across their area, supported by regional RISE teams
- schools facing challenges improve rapidly, with sharply targeted support for 12 to 24 months from a supporting organisation with a strong track record of improvement, such as a local authority partnership or a multi-academy trust (MAT)

RISE teams provide support at two levels¹. These are:

- universal support to help all schools improve - RISE teams work across schools to signpost effective practice, encourage peer-to-peer support, and bring schools together to share knowledge and innovation
- targeted interventions for eligible schools - RISE advisers engage with the eligible school and its responsible body to agree an improvement plan (improvement is expected over 12 to 24 months and is monitored by regular Ofsted inspections)

This formative process evaluation is focussed on the 'targeted' intervention offer. After a small-scale lead-in of around 30 schools from January 2025, RISE support was introduced from April 2025 with a summer cohort of 223 schools. Subsequent cohorts will be initiated during each school term.

¹ [Regional improvement for standards and excellence \(RISE\):school support](#) [accessed on 11/11/25]

The RISE targeted intervention

The bespoke RISE targeted intervention focuses on 'stuck' schools that haven't improved, or improved enough, within their current structure but are believed to have the capacity to do so. The 9 RISE regional teams have the option to match an eligible school, via its RB, to a high-quality supporting organisation to drive forward improvements.

[Eligibility for RISE support](#) for the 2024 to 2025 academic year included schools where they were:

- previously due to receive structural intervention after 1 January 2025 but had that intervention revoked; and/or
- a 'stuck' school - defined as a school that was graded Requires Improvement (or equivalent) at its most recent Ofsted inspection and was also graded below Good at its previous inspection and is still within the same structure
- in a category of concern which had not had, or were not due to have, a change of RB since their last inspection

RISE advisers (who are often CEOs of a MAT) won't deliver the specialist support directly; however, together with regional RISE teams, they will regularly review implementation, progress and engagement with the targeted intervention. There were 65 RISE advisers recruited through 2 cohorts by October 2025.

The RB for each school (the trust board for an academy or the governing body and local authority for a maintained school) will continue to be accountable for the schools they run, including driving school improvement. RISE teams will work with schools, via their RB, in delivering the RISE targeted intervention.

Any funding as part of the RISE targeted intervention will consider views from the RISE adviser, improvement organisation, and the school through its RB. This funding will go directly to the RB of the school unless otherwise agreed.

A set of guidance documents were developed for RISE teams, school, RB and supporting organisation. These describe the detailed steps involved in the RISE targeted intervention.

RISE targeted intervention is delivered over 5 phases:

- phase 1: identify eligible schools and inform them and their RB they are entering a targeted intervention
- phase 2: initial diagnosis followed by either matching with a high-quality supporting organisation or recommending reviewing progress only
- phase 3: a supporting organisation works with the RISE school and RB to diagnose and plan, co-constructing a costed school improvement plan

- phase 4: implement the agreed improvement plan using delivery partners
- phase 5: monitor the school and supporting organisation to review progress

The funding bands that could be allocated for RISE targeted intervention were²:

- Band 1: up to £40,000
- Band 2: up to £80,000
- Band 3: up to £100,000³

Evaluation aims

The evaluation aims to gather insights from various perspectives to understand how well the policy is operating and identify areas for improvement to maximise potential impact. The evaluation will be formative, developing real-time insight to inform policy developments and improvements.

In Wave 1, views were gathered from a range of stakeholders to help answer the following top-line questions, which will be revisited in further interviews over the course of the full evaluation.

- effectiveness of RISE implementation: how well are the initial processes and implementation of the RISE targeted intervention functioning, from all perspectives (especially schools). Are there aspects that could be improved?
- expectations and alignment: what are the initial expectations of schools and RBs regarding the role of the RISE adviser, regional staff and overall support package? How does RISE align with existing improvement frameworks implemented by the RB?
- quality of relationships: how good is the relationship between schools and advisers, and others involved in support?
- shared vision and responsibility: does the agreed improvement plan reflect a shared vision between the school, adviser, RB and supporting organisation, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for implementing improvement actions?
- credibility and relevance of advice and support: does the diagnostic advice lead to plans that are seen as credible, timely and focused on the right issues? What are schools' opinions on the quality, depth and relevance of the diagnostic and targeted intervention?

² From RISE Assessment Tool 3

³ Reduced from £120,000 prior to 1 September 2025

- overall effectiveness and barriers: to what extent is RISE overall seen as a helpful and effective support offer and are there obstacles or barriers which limit that effectiveness?

Over time, the process evaluation will also examine the range of perspectives on whether effective support is being sustained, obstacles being effectively addressed, and whether it is having a positive impact on measures of school improvement.

Methodology

Design

The formative process evaluation methodology involves interviews with individuals from a sample of all the organisations engaged with delivering or receiving the RISE targeted intervention. The evaluation started in April 2025 and is planned to run to November 2027.

Wave 1 fieldwork took place in June, July and September 2025. The method involved interviews:

- with 18 RISE advisers (2 in each region)
- with 36 headteachers (4 in each region) from the summer 2025 cohort ⁴
- with 18 RBs (2 in each region)⁵
- with 18 supporting organisations (2 in each region)

and workshops:

- with 9 DfE regional teams (in 2 groups to manage numbers)

Participants from wave 1 will be contacted for follow-up interviews, along with a sample of schools joining RISE in summer 2026 (and their RBs, advisers, and supporting organisations). Interviews with these groups will take place at intervals of between 6 and 12 months until autumn 2027. In addition, one set of interviews with stakeholders from the autumn 2025 cohort will help monitor any early changes in delivery since summer 2025.

An evaluation framework was drafted and agreed with DfE to address the research questions (Appendix A). The evaluation framework and methodology were presented to a DfE steering group in May 2025.

Sample

The initial sample of 36 schools was created from the department's Managing School Improvement (MSI) database which holds detailed information about all participating schools. The key criteria for the selection of the 36 schools from the 223 available were:

⁴ One school was being monitored as part of the RISE targeted intervention, all others were being matched to a supporting organisation. One RB asked researchers not to speak to the headteacher until wave 2.

⁵ Including 5 local authorities

- initially only schools that had received a RISE adviser visit before the end of June 2025 (some replacements were selected with visits in July)
- 4 from each region
- roughly 2 primaries and 2 secondaries per region, including a few others such as a special, middle and all-through schools

Initial contact was made with an email to the headteacher, copying in the RB. In a few cases, there was not a named email address, but a general one (head@ or office@). The DfE research team helped find named email addresses in most cases, although this delayed some contacts. Replacements were made for 8 sample schools because:

- there was no response to emails or phone calls (5)
- they declined to participate (3)

There was no evidence of systematic non-participation, with a mixture of attitudes - both positive and negative - to aspects of the RISE targeted intervention.

The selection of RISE advisers, RBs and supporting organisations followed a similar spread by region and phase, and where possible they were linked to schools also being interviewed to aid triangulation of findings.

Scheduling of interviews

The wave 1 interviews were undertaken with:

- most RISE advisers being interviewed in June and July 2025 (1 interview was in September 2025)
- most headteachers being interviewed in June and July 2025 (4 were interviewed between September and October 2025)
- most RBs and supporting organisations being interviewed in September and October 2025
- regional workshops being held in June 2025 to discuss the design and in October 2025 to discuss emerging findings

As a result of the scheduling, interviews with headteachers and RISE advisers occurred just after a RISE adviser visit, and generally before a matched supporting organisation had been introduced. The RBs and supporting organisations were generally interviewed after a school improvement plan had been submitted or approved.

Individual topic guides were drafted in line with the evaluation framework and signed off with DfE prior to interviews taking place. Topic guides were designed to ensure consistency and to provide a framework for discussion, whilst still allowing for flexibility as interviews unfolded naturally.

This is the first of 4 waves of interviews over a 2 year evaluation. Issues will be revisited and further evidence gathered as future waves are undertaken.

Characteristics of the sample of schools

The school phases in the achieved sample consisted of:

- 20 secondary schools
- 13 primary schools
- 1 middle school
- 1 all-through school
- 1 special school

The school types in the sample consisted of:

- 13 sponsor-led academies
- 12 academy converters
- 6 community schools (local authority maintained)
- 2 free schools
- 2 voluntary-aided schools
- 1 university technical college (UTC)

Approach to analysis

Interview scripts were coded based on the topic guide question structure with some open coding to capture unanticipated themes. This was undertaken in NVivo qualitative analysis software to support thematic analysis of views across different respondent groups.

Triangulation at the school level was undertaken through researcher analysis sessions.

Relational quantification was made challenging due to variations in numbers of respondents answering the different questions and from different stakeholder groups.

Some respondents did not answer certain questions or gave unclear responses that could not be assigned to a theme or view linked to the question.

To provide a feel for scale, the following relational quantifiers have been used (they are intentionally non-specific to avoid spurious accuracy):

- a few – 2 to 4 respondents, dependent on the sample size
- some/minority – up to around half the sample
- majority – over half the sample
- all/almost all – everyone in the sample or very close to that amount

Emerging findings

The initial wave of fieldwork took place as the first full cohort of schools were becoming involved in the RISE targeted intervention. Headteachers and RISE advisers were mostly interviewed in June and July 2025, while RBs and supporting organisations were mainly interviewed in September 2025. Therefore, interviewees responded at different stages of the RISE targeted intervention.

Expectations and school context

Summary

Overall, the majority of RISE advisers, headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations were positive in their expectations of the RISE targeted intervention.

The majority of headteachers and RBs saw potential benefits for school improvement of the RISE targeted intervention. A few headteachers and RBs were less positive about the reasoning for their involvement in the RISE targeted intervention.

Almost all RISE advisers were positive about the RISE targeted intervention and had the sense that this is a different, more collaborative approach to school improvement. All RISE advisers were committed to the success of the programme, and almost all said they understood their role.

RISE schools are varied and experience a range of challenges, however, there were some common challenges mentioned by RISE advisers, headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations, including pupil-related factors (such as low attendance or poor behaviour) and school-related aspects (such as quality of teaching and curriculum design).

All supporting organisations were clear about their purpose.

This first section covers the motivations of schools and RBs to participate in RISE, the challenges schools face and initial perceptions of RISE from schools, their RBs, RISE advisers and supporting organisations.

Motivations

Headteachers and RBs

The majority of headteachers and RBs were optimistic that RISE would support school improvement. Some headteachers and their RBs welcomed the opportunity to work with RISE advisers, to receive additional funding and to receive peer-led guidance from a supporting organisation.

“The potential value is huge, we are a small trust without any real capacity to call upon a literacy expert or a maths expert, who can work across the schools. The support we can potentially get is huge.” – *Headteacher*

“The trust and school are very open to improvement and embrace any support that’s on offer.” – *Responsible body*

Some headteachers and RBs found it hard to comment, being in the early stages of the programme at the time of interview, but they were generally confident it would impact their schools’ performance positively. A few RBs commented that it would depend on the development of an effective relationship with the supporting organisation.

A few headteachers and RBs were less positive about the reason for their involvement in the RISE targeted intervention. Such headteachers and RBs felt that they were on an upward trajectory towards being “graded good” (based on the old Ofsted grades) and so were not sure why they required support through the RISE targeted intervention.

“I think that I understand the process, and I absolutely agree that on paper this school needs some additional support, but I think we have the capacity within the trust to be able to do that. So, I think that that’s hard, isn’t it? I don’t want to be micromanaged if I’m completely honest with you.” – *Headteacher*

In a few cases, headteachers and RBs felt RISE might be counterproductive by disturbing their existing school improvement arrangements.

Case example:

A headteacher of a special school and their RB felt the “intrusion”, as they saw it, of a ‘new’ supporting organisation would be destabilising for the staff and pupils. This was after the recommendation of their RISE adviser for support, but before engagement with a supporting organisation. The headteacher felt the school had in place arrangements to reach a ‘good’ grade and had experienced some major recent staffing disruptions which they felt would be compounded by the RISE targeted intervention.

Such headteachers and RBs were therefore sceptical of what the RISE targeted intervention would bring to their school. Although, RISE advisers felt their visit changed headteachers’ and RBs’ views:

“Views of headteachers are largely positive, but there can be some initial hesitancy. It’s important that they see that the adviser has experienced similar issues and is not there to ‘lord it over them’ but to share experiences, which can include the adviser saying that they will take some ideas from the supported school to use in their own school, stressing that they are there to learn from each other.” – *RISE adviser*

Similarly, in a few cases, supporting organisations questioned why a particular school was identified for RISE targeted intervention. In such cases, supporting organisations felt the schools they had been partnered with were well on their way to improving without the need for further support, or had adequate support within their own trust to make improvements.

A few RBs said their school did not require support through the RISE targeted intervention, particularly because of their own experience of turning around other schools. However, they accepted that their school had met the criteria for RISE targeted intervention. A few supporting organisations also questioned the need for targeted intervention for their designated school, which they felt had adequate support and/or new leadership in place for improvement to get to a ‘good’ grade.

DfE should consider whether some schools that have met the eligibility criteria and have been identified by the RISE adviser as requiring RISE targeted intervention, have seen so much change in their circumstances that them being in the programme may not be the best use of resource.

RISE advisers

RISE advisers tended to be positive about the RISE targeted intervention and had the sense that this is a different, more collaborative approach to school improvement. The majority of RISE advisers felt the intervention was a step in the right direction and was an example of more intensive peer support (compared to previous school improvement interventions) for schools that are struggling. The majority of RISE advisers felt that their role, working closely with DfE, and alongside a supporting organisation represented a new approach:

“This is sector led. This is the sector supporting the sector and that’s what I think is working well. That’s why I have bought in as a leader of a trust.”
– *RISE adviser*

“This is a real narrative change, it isn’t punitive and that you’ve failed, the narrative is recognising where you are at and being eligible for support to get you out of this pickle. It’s being done with you in a collaborative way.”
– *RISE adviser*

Challenges facing targeted RISE schools

The challenges facing RISE schools are wide-ranging and typically, schools are experiencing multiple challenges reflecting higher than average rates of disadvantage, absence, and exclusion. The most common challenges mentioned by RISE advisers, headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations include pupil-related (such as low attendance or poor behaviour) and school-related aspects (such as quality of teaching and curriculum design).

Other contextual issues mentioned in relation to a few schools included:

- a drop in pupil numbers on school rolls was creating challenges as schools struggled to fill classes and had to deal with the consequences of in-year admissions and had reduced funding as a result
- being small and/or geographically isolated, was making recruitment of teachers a challenge, as well as affecting school rolls

Understanding of RISE roles

RISE advisers

All RISE advisers were committed to the success of the programme, and almost all said they understood their role. All RISE advisers said they thought the RISE targeted intervention would have an impact on the schools they were working with. RISE advisers described their high level of commitment to making RISE successful and were positive about the potential for RISE to support school improvement:

“I wouldn’t be involved in it if I didn’t think it has legs...too often we’re a profession that complains rather than engages.” – *RISE adviser*

The majority of RISE advisers recognised that they were putting their personal and organisational reputations on the line. Advisers believed that the schools they had engaged with were open to their suggestions and were ready to make the changes needed to improve, even where initially there had been some reluctance.

Almost all RISE advisers felt they understood their role. The majority of RISE advisers described their role as being to act as a conduit for communication between key partners (for example, the school, RB, DfE and the supporting organisation) and to act as a trusted partner for the school.

“I think my main role is a relationships manager. I think my job initially is to make great relationships with both the responsible body and the schools. In my 3 schools, it’s been very much about being the person that they can talk to. This is a collaboration. This is not about being ‘done to’.” – *RISE adviser*

Almost all RISE advisers had a general sense that people became more familiar with their role as time went on, particularly once they started meeting with schools.

The RISE adviser training and briefing was considered to be effective by RISE advisers and as a result, they felt appropriately prepared to go into schools and assess their needs following DfE guidance. The advisers also noted how they were able to learn from each other and develop their practice.

“The induction was brilliant, absolutely cracking. I think, as a team we’re very tight, the other RISE advisers are great.” – *RISE adviser*

The understanding of the RISE adviser role by headteachers and RBs was clear in relation to the initial diagnosis of schools (RISE advisers had to overcome some perceptions they would act like inspectors). However, there was some uncertainty among headteachers and RBs about the RISE adviser’s monitoring role in the future (see the '[RISE adviser relationships](#)' section).

Supporting organisations

All supporting organisations were clear that the expectation was for them to develop and support implementation of the school improvement plan together with the school and RB. There were some variations around how supporting organisations undertook the development of the school improvement plan (see the '[Developing a school improvement plan](#)' section).

All headteachers and RBs were clear about the role of the supporting organisations to work with them on their school improvement priorities.

The remainder of this section considers the broad chronological steps involved in delivering the RISE targeted intervention.

Initial contact from DfE regional teams

Summary

The process of informal initial contact from the DfE regional team to the RB followed by an email making the communication formal generally worked well to effectively engage the RB and the school in the programme.

Almost all RBs and headteachers recalled the initial contact received from DfE, although in some cases this was described as “clunky”, with slow formal communication, short timescales for responses and mixed understandings between the headteacher and the RB.

A few headteachers and RBs expressed disappointment about being publicly labelled a ‘stuck school’, which they felt impacted morale.

The process of informal initial contact from the DfE regional team followed by an email making the communication formal appears to have generally worked. There were some regional variations around primary communication method and speed of starting the intervention. On initial communication, a few regions relied more on formal communication of participation in the RISE targeted intervention, without the informal advanced signalling. Some regions prioritised the start of the intervention, while others spent longer on establishing strong relationships between stakeholders with multiple meetings, before the RISE adviser started the initial diagnosis.

Almost all RBs and headteachers recalled the initial contact received from DfE, although in some cases this was described as “clunky”, with slow formal communication, short timescales for responses and mixed understandings between the headteacher and the RB. For example, in a few cases, RBs did not inform the headteacher straight away and this led to these headteachers feeling ‘out of the loop’ initially.

The situation described by the majority of RBs and headteachers was that the process felt rushed, creating greater pressure for headteachers and RBs to understand what RISE was all about.

“I think it was designed at incredible pace, which didn’t give us an opportunity to assess and evaluate all the information.” – *Headteacher*

In addition, some headteachers felt there was insufficient information at this initial contact point for them to understand what the RISE targeted intervention would involve. This may have been because that information was shared with the RB. A few headteachers reported receiving the communication on a Friday before the end of term, which they described as creating added anxiety.

Headteachers and RBs, in a few cases, expressed disappointment about being publicly labelled a ‘stuck school’ and being listed on the DfE website. A few headteachers and RBs felt this was stigmatising and had an impact on school staff morale. This was particularly apparent where a school or RB felt they had been making improvements and were close to a ‘good’ grade.

“...When you read it’s because you’re ‘a stuck school’, that’s really demoralising and heartbreak...To just see the words ‘stuck school’ was just awful, especially as a fairly new head so I hadn’t been there for the whole journey.” – *Headteacher*

Matching RISE advisers with schools

Summary

Overall, the matching of RISE advisers to schools was considered successful by the majority of schools and RBs, with good relationships established.

The majority of headteachers and RBs felt their RISE adviser had a good understanding of the school’s context and needs.

The majority of schools and RBs considered the matching of RISE advisers to be successful. The majority of headteachers and RBs felt their RISE adviser had a good understanding of the school’s context and needs. They described a variety of attributes of RISE advisers who were matched to their schools, including:

- understanding the schools’ context and/or having experience with similar types of schools
- understanding the locality
- being prepared to listen and open to discussion

“...the RISE adviser understood the school, I had a look at the schools they represented ... they were similar to ours, and there was certainly an understanding of our school’s context.” – *Headteacher*

Regional DfE staff said they tried to match schools with their pool of RISE advisers based on known characteristics, although it was more challenging for a few regions that had fewer RISE advisers. Supporting organisations also recognised these positive relationships between the RISE adviser and the school.

RISE advisers themselves noted that they were a “diverse group”. By this they were referring to the fact that some of them had not been involved in previous DfE school

improvement interventions, and that they represented different sizes of trusts with different areas of expertise.

There were a few isolated cases where relationships did not work out initially, but these were resolved. In a couple of these cases, alternative RISE advisers were chosen due to changes in the original adviser's personal circumstances.

Initial diagnosis

Summary

Overall, the initial diagnosis process worked effectively in terms of establishing schools' needs and eligibility for a support package.

By the 2025 summer break, all headteachers had met with their RISE adviser to undertake the initial diagnosis. Almost all had been paired with a supporting organisation.

Almost all RISE advisers referenced timescales, IT set-up and communications as the main operational challenges in the initial set-up phase. However, they worked around most of these challenges while undertaking the initial diagnosis.

Many headteachers and RBs agreed with the RISE adviser's assessment of their schools, although a few did not. A few headteachers expressed concerns about too many people visiting the school and the quality of subsequent communications.

Perceptions of the initial diagnosis

Overall, the initial diagnosis process worked effectively in terms of establishing schools' needs and eligibility for a support package. However, RISE advisers, schools and RBs felt under pressure due to restrictive and challenging timescales.

A variety of meetings often took place prior to the initial diagnosis to inform the different stakeholders about the RISE targeted intervention. These variously involved DfE regional staff, the RISE adviser, the RB and sometimes the headteacher. Some headteachers felt excluded from these initial meetings, which gave them a feeling of disempowerment. RBs explained that this was necessary due to circumstances prevailing at the school.

*“So, the RISE [adviser] and the DfE are having a meeting [with the RB] about the school's future without me, it doesn't feel right at all.” –
Headteacher*

This was also noted by RISE advisers. In one case, a RISE adviser discussed how the initial meetings about 2 of their schools were held with the CEO and the headteachers

were not present. She said that she would have preferred the headteacher to be involved in these meetings.

For some schools, the RISE adviser had been instrumental in easing the headteacher's and RB's concerns about the RISE targeted intervention and helping them to understand what to expect.

An example provided by a RISE adviser was typical of a few interactions. In this instance the RISE adviser used their skills and experience to explain their role.

“The headteacher said ‘I don’t know why you’re here, we’re making progress’. To which I [the RISE adviser] responded that if that was the case, then my recommendation would be that they were not in need of additional support. After a learning walk and a focussed discussion, the headteacher acknowledged that support was needed.” – *RISE adviser*

RISE advisers stressed the importance of in-person meetings to build trust and pick up on the nuance of communication with school staff. They were clear that remote engagement would have been less effective for establishing rapport.

Outcomes of the initial diagnosis

By the 2025 summer break, all headteachers had met with their RISE adviser. This was the case for all schools in the evaluation sample. In most cases, the sample schools were recommended for a match with a supporting organisation, with one recommended for progress reviews.

For those matched, by September, most headteachers and RBs had been informed of their supporting organisation and in most cases, a plan had been developed.

“By summer we had an identified supporting organisation [identified for the school] and had the diagnostic report which has been shared with SLT and trustees, we took it to the last full board meeting where it was discussed.” – *Headteacher*

A few RISE advisers mentioned that they were reflecting on their practice as they have been supporting schools, and identified alternative approaches to improve transparency which they felt were working better, as illustrated in the following case example.

Case example:

One RISE adviser described how they developed their approach by reflecting on their first school. When the adviser completed the report for her first school, she didn't share or discuss the report. She had made notes and independently completed the report to be shared with the RB. Subsequently, she has been more transparent with schools. The first school asked for what she had written, but she was unsure if this could be shared.

Since then, she has been sharing the questions she's asking and completing the form in front of the school during the meeting, so that they know what is being written. She also meets with CEOs separately to ensure they are fully informed if they weren't present. She explained that this ensures all parties are aware of the contents of the report that has been written up for DfE in terms of matching. She believes that ensuring all parties are equally informed is the most effective way to approach the schools.

RISE adviser challenges in delivering the initial diagnosis

Almost all RISE advisers referenced timescales, IT set-up and communications as the main challenges. However, they worked around most of these challenges while undertaking the initial diagnosis.

RISE advisers felt that the timescales available for the initial diagnosis were unnecessarily tight and this was compounded by their own ability to respond in a timely manner (due to their part-time role and proximity to end of term). However, almost all RISE advisers felt they had responded well to organise the initial visit in this context.

RISE advisers found that their role was complicated by the communications infrastructure, which made it harder to respond promptly at times.

“I wasn't anticipating communication issues and I would say that has been the biggest challenge really. You've got multiple ICT infrastructures, I'm talking about my [MAT] laptop and my DfE one. There was such an issue trying to get that sorted out. It just wasn't well coordinated.” – *RISE adviser*

“...diary planning when it's not your main job is quite hard and the DfE technology such as having to use the DfE laptop does not help with that.”
– *RISE adviser*

Headteacher and RB views

The majority of headteachers agreed with the RISE adviser's assessment of what the school needed to do to improve.

“We are in agreement with the plan. The adviser could see that I know my school and what needs to happen, but the capacity and support needed to make it happen is the issue.” – *Headteacher*

However, a few headteachers were unaware of what had been written in the assessment (Assessment Tool 1). Some RISE advisers shared the report with the headteacher, but in some cases it only went (as per DfE guidance) to the RB. It could be argued to be an issue for the RB, but it was clear some headteachers felt uninformed. DfE should consider sharing the Assessment Tool 1 with the headteacher, unless there are exceptional circumstances that should be noted.

In the early stages, some headteachers had concerns that too many people were visiting the school as part of RISE targeted intervention. In some cases, multiple people visited at once. Some headteachers said felt as if they were “on trial” and other headteachers and RBs noted how the number of visitors could be intimidating and hard to explain to staff. Such visits could include DfE staff, RISE advisers, RB staff and then, down the line, supporting organisation staff.

“Potentially we have the RISE adviser, the support from the MAT and the broader central improvement team from the MAT and this is a lot of people coming into the school and it could get overwhelming.” – *Responsible body*

Although this is challenging for headteachers, it is a necessary part of the RISE targeted intervention. RISE advisers should manage headteacher and RB expectations by explaining clearly what steps would take place and why (covering both the RISE adviser visit to the school and, depending on the assessment outcome, the supporting organisation visit).

After the initial diagnosis, a few headteachers felt subsequent communications were mixed. A few headteachers did not feel they had been kept informed and had a lack of clarity on the next steps. They felt in limbo without knowing what actions they could start to take to support their school improvement.

For example, in one of these schools, an Initial Diagnosis Assessment Tool 1 had been produced, but at the time of the interview, the school had not yet received confirmation of funding or approval to proceed with their proposed interventions.

Regional DfE staff recognised such delays but felt they had learnt from the first cohort and would reduce the delays in communication.

Matching supporting organisations

Summary

Selecting a supporting organisation was a smooth process in around half the matches.

Challenges were experienced in the other half of the matches, such as school and RB preferences not being satisfied, general resistance by schools and RBs to being matched and a few RISE advisers frustrated with the process of supporting organisation selection, although these were mostly resolved. A few matches were still to be agreed at the time of interview.

There were a few cases where the school was outside of the geographic patch of the RISE adviser and/or supporting organisation. This made timing, travel, and aspects of contextual knowledge more difficult.

Mechanism for matching

Selecting a supporting organisation was a smooth process in around half of the matches in the respondent group. RISE advisers reported that the process of identifying a shortlist of potential supporting organisations and refining it to select the most appropriate one worked well in around half the instances. Sometimes, RISE advisers made suggestions to add to the shortlist and in other cases, the regional team drew up the list.

A few headteachers mentioned that the matching process was “straight forward”, with some noting how they had been paired with a supporting organisation and now felt “very excited” about the RISE targeted intervention.

In a few cases, schools and RBs felt their preference was considered by the RISE adviser and acted upon.

“It wasn't a case of, no, you can't use the people who, you know do a good job ... He was so open to us using people who obviously we've got a good working relationship with, and we know will have an impact.” – *Headteacher*

Challenges

Selecting a supporting organisation was more challenging in around half of matches in the respondent group, although these were mostly resolved, with a few still to be agreed at the time of interview. The range of challenges encountered in the selection of a supporting organisation included:

- school and RB preferences not being satisfied with the suggested supporting organisation (some RBs still felt they could fulfil this role)
- general resistance by schools and RBs to being matched
- a few RISE advisers feeling frustrated with the supporting organisation selection process and the timescales required for RISE advisers to thoroughly consider the options

A few schools felt that their needs were ignored when supporting organisations were selected. For example, one of these schools said they clearly requested targeted SEND and nurture provision support. However, the plan focused on areas like pedagogy and initial teacher training (ITT). The school perceived that this reflected the supporting organisation's own specialisms rather than the school's priorities. This led to frustration, as recommendations were thought to have been made without sufficient evidence or classroom observation. A headteacher said this was "creating confusion among staff and undermining existing plans". However, this is not to say that a schools' own diagnosis of their support needs will always be accurate.

A few schools had initially hoped that their RISE adviser's trust would be their supporting organisation, but because the RISE adviser was the CEO, this was not permitted. RISE advisers agreed that this was the right approach due to the risk of conflict of interest, but some RBs felt that it was getting in the way of a more convenient match.

A few RISE advisers expressed frustrations with the matching process, feeling that the supporting organisations were chosen in a disorganised way, rather than being planned and selected in accordance with a clear set of criteria. An example from a RISE adviser illustrates this:

"The regional teams will come up with a few names, but it feels very arbitrary. Sometimes they don't know the MATs particularly well. I don't think we've got that bit right. I haven't even started matching yet and at the moment, we're all just throwing names into the ring, you know, oh, 'what about this one, what about that one?'" – *RISE adviser*

A few RISE advisers found the process of identifying a good match challenging due to their perception of potential supporting organisation's motives:

"I had to interview 5 MATs and wasn't impressed with most – they wanted to know how it would benefit them, 'what's in it for us – they are never going to join our MAT'. But I finally found an amazing Trust who are putting so much in, spending more than they will ever recoup from DfE. That is what people need to see, [RBs] working together for the benefit of children." – *RISE adviser*

Familiarity with schools and supporting organisations

There were a few cases where the school was outside of the geographic patch of the RISE adviser and/or supporting organisation. It could be difficult if schools asked to be matched with supporting organisations that the RISE adviser was not familiar with:

“It’s hard because a school the other day named two people they’d like to be matched with, and I don’t know anything about the two trusts they asked to be matched with. I’m hoping the DfE and their regional teams know that a little bit better and whether they’re the right matches. But again, it’s hard, I could advise if it was [in my locality]. But it’s not, it’s [in a different county]. And so, it’s really hard for me to know whether it’s right.”

– *RISE adviser*

A few supporting organisations raised the issue of distance. In one of these cases, this was discussed by a supporting organisation CEO who said that they had been asked to support a school that was more than a two hours' drive away. In this case, they felt that they would not be able to adequately support this school once they had accounted for the time taken to visit them. A few supporting organisations said a one-hour distance was the maximum.

Another RISE adviser explained how one school they were supporting was based across a regional boundary, where there was a complex, competitive relationship between trusts, precluding the selection of the ideal match:

“Unfortunately, we cannot select that trust to support them as other MATs will kick off.” – *RISE adviser*

Developing a school improvement plan

Summary

Supporting organisations generally led on developing the school improvement plan. In a few cases, RISE advisers were more actively involved.

In the majority of cases, the alignment with existing school plans was considered.

The majority of supporting organisations, RBs and headteachers were critical of the short timescales to develop a school improvement plan. This was recognised by regional DfE teams, who say they plan to improve on this for the next cohort.

Improvement plan development

Supporting organisations generally led on developing the school improvement plan, with RISE advisers performing different roles. Feedback tended to be that plan development was largely collaborative. Generally, supporting organisations were leading on the school improvement plan, working effectively with the RISE adviser, RB, headteacher and DfE, ensuring priorities were clear, outcomes measurable, and that the plan was deliverable.

“The plan has been co-created and submitted by the school, responsible body and the supporting organisation … the miraculous bit was managing to get the school and the responsible body in a place where they were in agreement and aligned.” – *Supporting organisation*

A few RISE advisers were much more actively involved, creating the first draft, whereas in the majority of cases, the RISE adviser was in dialogue with the supporting organisation and reviewing drafts prior to submission.

In other cases, the process of agreeing a school improvement plan was not straightforward as schools had recently created a new school improvement plan. A few RBs were resistant to changing their existing plans.

“My understanding is that the [headteacher] will draw up the plan with whatever support of the supporting organisation, the trust will then own that as the accountable body for the approval of the plan. So, this is where we need to get into line with the existing plans. So, I’m OK that … we should be able to align that with other plans if we believe that’s the right thing that’s going to add value.” – *Responsible body*

Accounting for existing school plans

Generally, RISE advisers, headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations said that existing school support was considered during the development of the RISE school improvement plan. However, in some cases there were conflicting priorities that needed to be resolved.

“We meet everybody individually the head, SLT, LA/MAT, chair of governors and merge those views together to see where they all think their school development plan is at and where implementation is starting to have an impact and where it is not. I will then do a learning walk with the Head and look at the needs and identify any gaps in the school development plan. For example, last week, the school development plan had no focus on curriculum, but the learning walk discovered that they were unhappy with the reading scheme and were not adhering to it so that needed addressing.” – *RISE adviser*

The majority of supporting organisations and RISE advisers were aware of existing arrangements for school improvement. However, in a few cases their professional judgement was that a different form of support was required. In such cases, agreeing this with the headteacher or RB required multiple discussions to reach final agreement.

There was evidence of a few headteachers and RBs who considered the RISE improvement plan as separate to their existing school improvement plan. From what researchers could determine, RISE advisers and supporting organisations may have convinced schools that there should only be one plan for school improvement.

Case example:

A supporting organisation explained that one RISE school had a lot of existing school improvement work going on, so the supporting organisation worked in partnership with the school and RB to try to accommodate these existing initiatives. This was felt to have worked so far, but the supporting organisation anticipated potential overlap in the future, so its school improvement officer will aim to make this clear through diplomatic, but robust, dialogue.

Timescales

The majority of supporting organisations, RBs and headteachers were critical of timescales to develop a school improvement plan. The majority of supporting organisation CEOs felt this rushed process constrained the due diligence activity that they would normally undertake before agreeing to support a school. Despite this, they all said that they were confident that the school improvement plan would support school improvement.

Regional DFE staff recognised this situation and had to challenge supporting organisations to meet the agreed deadlines. Regional teams were all hopeful that future cohorts would not be similarly time-constrained by working to build in longer lead-times.

Case example:

A support plan had been co-produced, but “it was a very tight timeframe to write the plan and there was a lot of backwards and forwards with DfE”. The supporting organisation felt there was an expectation from DfE that they would be available to do the work over the summer holidays to be ready for September. “A lot of frontloaded work was undertaken at a time when the capacity wasn’t there. It needs to start sooner. Ideally before the May half term holiday to allow for recruitment”.

The majority of headteachers and RBs had strong feelings about the impact of timescales on their participation in the RISE targeted intervention. Some mentioned that

communications always seemed to come at the end of a week or just before a holiday. In a few cases, they were working during the summer to agree or refine a school improvement plan.

Approving a school improvement plan

Summary

As plans were being approved, all supporting organisations we spoke to were positive about how they can support the school, and many had agreed initial arrangements for time to be spent in the school.

In a few cases, there was some confusion around what could be funded. Further guidance could help align plans with eligible activity, speed up decision-making and make the process smoother.

DfE approval was considered by the majority of stakeholders to be slowing the process down. Regional DfE staff and RISE advisers could manage expectations around the timing and requirements involved in the approval process, which would help to reduce uncertainty and frustrations among headteachers and RBs.

Some supporting organisations raised questions about flexibility of plans to changing needs.

Potential to improve

The majority of supporting organisations were positive about how they can support the school and the majority had agreed initial arrangements for time to be spent in the school. At the time of interviews around September 2025, the majority of supporting organisations were planning to spend (or had already spent) time within the schools they were supporting.

For example, one supporting organisation CEO had been visiting fortnightly and spending one day a week at the school to understand the issues it was facing, the headteacher's perspective and the context. Others had started organising reviews as part of the early stages of support.

“Support began in the second week of September. Our Deputy CEO has visited twice and is leading the implementation. The team is conducting a teaching and learning review and planning weekly visits to build trust and gather deeper insights.” – *Supporting organisation*

Case example:

The supporting organisation described a targeted RISE school with reading and writing in the bottom 5% of the country. They explained that when results are significantly below average, the narrative in the community is impacted. The organisation felt that RISE gives the school an opportunity to create tangible goals, encourage positivity and change momentum: “It’s really simple; you just need very few initiatives but make sure that those work and everyone knows exactly what they have to do”. Dialogue with school staff had revealed around 90 initiatives in the local authority school improvement plan. The school’s situation was leading to experienced staff leaving and many new starters, with limited ownership of the school improvement plan. The supporting organisation felt that RISE was different, with a straightforward, costed improvement plan, with success criteria and the supporting organisation being accountable for delivering it.

Use of funding

When designing the plans, there were differing views of how the funding should be spent. In the majority of cases, the funding was being used to enable supporting organisation staff to provide support into the RISE school. There were a few examples where third-party providers were engaged by the supporting organisation around specialist aspects such as SEND or alternative provision.

However, a few supporting organisations were keen to ensure the majority of the funding was spent on resources directly in the RISE school.

“DfE wanted us, as the supporting organisation to deliver the plan. They were subtly asking the question why are you not putting any of your people in? If that was the line in the sand, I wouldn't be prepared to be a supporting organisation because I don't think that's the right approach. There has to be some ownership at the RB/school level.” – *Supporting organisation*

There was also some confusion around what could be funded. For example, phonics resources were rejected as fundable. Supporting organisations felt this was due to a lack of clarity in the guidance from DfE.

Some supporting organisations were unsure about how invoicing would work, as the RB has to sign off activity, which supporting organisations felt was unusual:

“The funding is the responsibility of the RB/school not the supporting organisation which feels a bit unusual, submitting invoices to them.” - *Supporting organisation*

DfE approval

A challenge described by the majority of stakeholders related to DfE due diligence, which was perceived to be slowing the process and threatening timescales.

Some of these issues, each affecting a few cases, include:

- Uncertain delays – a few headteachers felt they were on hold, waiting to start moving forwards (due to the pace of their improvement plan's sign-off, one school found the process too slow and misaligned with their own planned pace of improvement; they were already implementing changes, and felt held back by waiting for RISE processes to catch up)
- Confusion about the DfE lead (some supporting organisations were confused by having contact from several DfE regional team members and the RISE adviser – they were not clear about who was the decision maker and had anticipated that the RISE adviser would be the single point of contact)
- DfE changes to school improvement plans. In a few cases, supporting organisations questioned the changes made by regional DfE teams to the school improvement plans and in one case, they queried if this was in the best interests of the intended school, with less resources going directly to the school
- Risks of disempowering teaching professionals - a few supporting organisations questioned the efficiency of the process, which they felt was disempowering for teaching professionals with experience of school improvement

While many of the above are necessary roles for DfE in protecting public expenditure, improved guidance and understanding may help with adherence to the guidance and speed up the process. Regional DfE staff and RISE advisers could also manage expectations of the approval process, which would help to reduce uncertainty and frustrations among headteachers and RBs.

Flexibility of agreed plans

Some supporting organisations raised questions about the flexibility of plans to changing needs. They were concerned that a small budget variation may not enable sufficient change if evidence from further detailed assessments indicated a different balance of needs.

“A big part of the plan was anticipating how long things would take to do. Now we're doing that with no knowledge of the people really and how they work and what they can adapt to and how many things they can cope with. (...) So, it feels a bit like we've based deadlines on predictions of ‘this will take a term to do, this will take two terms’, but really, I mean it's nonsense. It's based on our experience typically working with people we know.” – *Supporting organisation*

“(Given) it's a two-year project, as we know more about the school or things just change, (...) how much ability do we have to adapt and evolve that plan over time?” – *Supporting organisation*

A few felt that a 50/50 split between the 2 financial years was not the most effective use of resources, as in some cases, more expenditure was required earlier to achieve effective results.

“You can't frontload it all because you only get so much funding... the actual funding is driving the school improvement and it should be the other way around.” – *Supporting organisation*

Ongoing relationships

Summary

Open and transparent communication amongst partners has been vital to building strong relationships.

The majority of headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations felt the RISE advisers established good relationships which would support the ongoing delivery of the RISE targeted intervention.

In the majority of cases, dialogue between RBs, schools and supporting organisations was effective from the start. There were a few concerns about differences in ethos of the supporting organisation, though any trust takeover fears were mostly relieved.

A minority of headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations were unsure of the RISE advisers' monitoring role during later stages of the programme.

Supporting organisations felt the profile and awareness of RISE support across the sector (those who were not directly involved) was generally low.

Open and transparent communication has supported building strong relationships

The majority of RISE advisers, headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations said that open and clear communications were essential to ensuring the success and longevity of the RISE programme. There was evidence of robust conversations and discussions between the headteacher, RISE adviser, RB and supporting organisation, suggesting that strong relationships were being established.

“A strong working relationship with the RISE adviser will be built on honest, open communication, listening and empowering the senior leadership team through the process. The school values constructive challenge, accountability, and celebrating progress, with RISE seen as a partner investing in improvement.” – *Headteacher*

“The conversation with the RISE adviser went fine, he asked me to outline our journey with the impact that we felt we have had so far, for which I used a recent inspection. There were a few quite robust questions asked.”
– *Headteacher*

RISE advisers described how their relationship with their regional DfE team had been effective. Likewise, regional DfE team staff references flexibilities shown by RISE advisers in making themselves available, sometimes adjusting their planned 2 days per week to accommodate key meetings.

Regional DfE teams are starting to share insights, having held one meeting by 15 October 2025. One region indicated that they had allocated some time for a member of staff to cover coordination of cross-border supporting organisations, but they felt it may need to be a full-time role. Other regions said they were considering similar moves.

RISE adviser relationships

The majority of headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations felt the RISE advisers established good relationships and their role in conducting the initial diagnosis was effective. A few disagreed with this (as described previously) and a few thought the RISE advisers were learning as they went along, in the early stages.

A minority of headteachers, RBs and supporting organisations were unsure of the RISE advisers’ monitoring role during later stages of the programme, wondering how involved and proactive they would be, as illustrated in the following quote and case example:

“As far as I understood it, the RISE adviser would just be checking every now and again that everything was on track, but I don’t understand why the supporting organisation couldn’t just do that.” – *Supporting organisation*

Case example:

The supporting organisation perceived that the RISE adviser had stepped back quite considerably after the initial diagnosis. The supporting organisation expected to require a termly review meeting with the headteacher but was unsure about what the RISE adviser's next steps would be. The supporting organisation CEO was not sure if he was supposed to prompt the school for this review or whether that would be done by the RISE adviser. He said he was going to see what happens.

Dialogue between RBs, schools and supporting organisations

Some RBs felt they were able to communicate effectively with their supporting organisation and collaborate on school improvement, with some schools highlighting how their supporting organisation was working closely with the school on developing an analysis of need and the school improvement plan.

“The expertise and capacity that the supporting organisation will bring will be very helpful. It's not doing new things but enhancing what the school is already trying to do, so it's perfectly aligned.” – *Responsible body*

Reputation was an important influence in some cases. School leaders (RBs and headteachers) typically had respect for the supporting organisations' CEOs. In one example, the RB described the supporting organisation CEO as someone with strong expertise, particularly in school behaviour, and they valued his experience in leading his trust, which further facilitated the positive communication between the organisations.

Concerns about a different culture in the supporting organisation

Some RBs were concerned that there may be conflicts between the cultures of the RB and the supporting organisation. The clearest example was in a case of an RB that was concerned about what a 'zero tolerance' approach to behaviour of a proposed supporting organisation might have upon their school and wider trust, which they felt had a more supportive environment for pupils.

In another case, the RB was confident that the support would be beneficial, although they felt this would require the supporting organisation to adapt their approach to the support and policies of the RB's trust.

This concern was heightened where school leaders felt they were not being properly listened to and consulted. For example, one RB mentioned how, during the meeting with the supporting organisation, she did not feel that she and the trust's Director of Schools were being listened to by the supporting organisation:

“I didn't want to make a scene in front of so many people, but I felt that it was almost, 'we do it like this, and this is how we're doing it, and we'll come in and do this'. I wanted to say 'stop', actually [this school] is part of the [RB name] trust and ... at the end of two years, it's still got to be a [RB name] trust school”. – *Responsible body*

Initial concerns about trust takeovers were largely addressed

Concerns and fears of trust takeovers were mostly addressed by RISE advisers and supporting organisations. One RB talked directly about how they had no immediate concern that the supporting organisation (MAT) was trying to supplant the local authority in their case. As a result, the local authority was comfortable with the plan that was developed.

In other examples, some headteachers and RBs said they had initially been concerned that RISE might result in “academisation through the back door”. In all cases, these concerns appeared to dissipate once the supporting organisation was engaged.

Capacity for delivery

Supporting organisations were generally positive about how they can help the RISE schools to improve. They were motivated to support fellow educational institutions and professionals. They also recognised the opportunity to develop their own school improvement staff, which may benefit their organisation and the wider sector in the longer term.

Schools and RBs were perceived by supporting organisations as being receptive to the idea of support through the delivery of the school improvement plan.

A few supporting organisations said the sector needed to understand the RISE programme better. They felt some potential supporting organisations did not know what was happening, as they had not yet been involved. They also felt the wider school sector's understanding of the programme could help to promote the message of a positive, resourced approach to school improvement support. A few supporting organisations thought that if they had more certainty of the RISE programme's likely longevity, then they could make recruitment decisions to develop capacity for further support.

Conclusions and considerations for policy development and delivery

Conclusions

The early evidence suggests that engagement with the first cohort of schools in the RISE targeted intervention was successful, in terms of engaging schools and partners in developing and agreeing a plan for school improvement against challenging timescales. A range of lessons have been learnt from the first full academic term of programme implementation, which inform the set of considerations for policy development and delivery.

There is a strong desire among those implementing the programme (regional DfE staff, RISE advisers and supporting organisations) to make it successful. Those receiving the support (schools and RBs) were generally open to this and saw the benefits of working with a supporting organisation.

Stakeholder perspectives

The majority of RISE advisers felt that as they became more familiar with the programme and developed approaches to engagement, that delivery was broadly working effectively. They hoped that in subsequent cohorts, timescales for delivery and methods of communication would improve. Clarity in guidance and communications for RISE advisers and for other stakeholders about the ongoing monitoring role of RISE advisers will support successful future engagement with the intervention.

The majority of headteachers and their RBs were broadly happy with the support proposed through RISE, although some were, and a few continue to be, sceptical of their school's involvement. There have been frustrations with timescales and the resulting pressure of developing school improvement plans so quickly. A few headteachers and RBs were frustrated about the matched supporting organisation where they had a different preferred organisation in mind. However, this is clear evidence that the professional judgement of RISE advisers and regional DfE staff is leading to objective decisions which are changing the nature of existing support in individual schools. A few headteachers felt excluded from early dialogue between the regional DfE team, RISE adviser and RB, and understanding of the initial diagnosis findings. There is a risk of headteachers feeling disempowered, although RISE advisers must be guided by RB preferences. Additional points in guidance may help to encourage RBs to inform headteachers more promptly, where this is practical.

All supporting organisations were confident that they could support the RISE schools. They were frustrated about timescales for establishing initial relationships and developing the school improvement plan, the process for approving a plan and had concerns about the flexibility of the plan to changing circumstances (or newly revealed school performance issues). Evidence to date from this research has only covered the development and

approval of plans, as it was too early for any activity against plans to be discussed in interviews.

All regional DfE teams recognised many of these issues highlighted by partner organisations via interim findings workshops, some of which they hope will be resolved as the programme moves into a steady state. They have started sharing practices and solutions between regions, but recognise they could do more here. However, they felt constrained by national policy timescale decisions that shaped the early stages of the programme. There were some examples of how practices varied across the regions, which may risk affecting the reputation of the programme as it expands.

Factors contributing to the successful implementation

Factors that contributed to the successful implementation of RISE, evident at this early stage, included the:

- role and experience of RISE advisers – their role was generally considered supportive and collaborative and they were recognised by schools and RBs as credible experts and by supporting organisations, schools and RBs as valued contributors to agreeing school improvement plans, in short timeframes
- openness of the majority of RBs and headteachers to receiving the support through the RISE targeted intervention – while some were initially unsure, they worked with RISE advisers and supporting organisations to agree plans against challenging timescales
- credibility of supporting organisations that are perceived, by the majority of schools and RBs, to have the capability to deliver school improvement – this sits alongside their commitment to collaboratively creating school improvement plans in short timeframes
- funded resource to provide sustained support.
- role of regional teams to support RISE advisers with initial RB and school meetings and their role in refining and signing off plans developed by supporting organisations

Challenges

A summary of the overall challenges described in the above analysis include:

- timescales resulting in short deadlines for delivery of key initial stages – these affected all stakeholders involved in delivering the RISE targeted intervention
- communications, which all stakeholder groups felt were rushed, leading to confusion and extra workload

- guidance sometimes being provided late or with last minute changes and considered limited by some supporting organisations – improving detailed examples in the guidance in response to questions from supporting organisations would help avoid future misunderstandings
- uncertainty among many schools, RBs and supporting organisations about the monitoring role of the RISE adviser role going forward

Considerations for policy development and delivery

The policy and delivery considerations resulting from this first wave of research include:

- **Communications:**
 - clarifying communications around the role of RISE adviser (at introduction and ongoing)
 - reviewing and further promoting guidance around roles and ownership of the school improvement plan, including monitoring its effectiveness for school improvement
 - supporting organisations felt the profile and awareness of RISE support across the sector (those who are not directly involved) could be improved through more effective communication
 - matched supporting organisations thought clarity on how the matching of supporting organisations was undertaken might be important across the sector – they said some potential supporting organisations reported to the matched supporting organisations that they had not yet, been approached
- **Further guidance:**
 - clarifying what can be funded - some said a template school improvement plan would help – the regional DfE teams should ensure supporting organisations receive effective communication about the template school improvement plan to help guide them
 - emphasising in guidance the importance of RBs promptly informing headteachers about their school's selection for the RISE targeted intervention to help them prepare
- **timescale pressures** - for example, getting plans submitted by end of summer term risked compromising quality of plans and relationships, as well as supporting organisations' medium-term planning and 'good will' to the programme which may influence sustainability – future cohorts need to provide sufficient time for the different processes to avoid this risk

- **sector-level capacity of supporting organisations** – DfE should carefully monitor the capacity of the system to ensure supporting organisations can support increasing numbers of schools in future rounds of RISE support.

Appendices

Appendix A – research questions

Expectations and alignment of support received

What are the initial motivations/barriers for school signing up to Targeted RISE, given it's non-compulsory. Does it align to their improvement priorities?

What are the initial expectations of schools and responsible bodies regarding the role of the adviser, regional staff, and overall support package?

How clear are the expectations and responsibilities among stakeholders?

How are these expectations being communicated to key stakeholders from the inception?

What specific roles do schools and responsible bodies expect advisers and regional staff to fulfil in the set-up phase?

Is there a difference between the expectations of SLTs, regional advisers, RBs, RISE teams and support organisations?

How does RISE align with existing frameworks, LA/Trust improvement agenda and any other support the school is accessing?

Effectiveness of RISE implementation

How well are the initial processes and implementation of RISE targeted support functioning from the perspective of all stakeholders?

How satisfied are stakeholders with the diagnostic process, the bespoke support offer, the implementation plan and monitoring?

What challenges have there been for schools and the RBs in the onboarding process?

How could processes and implementation be improved?

What criteria are used to identify and refer targeted schools for RISE support?

How effective are the processes for recruiting and matching advisers to schools?

Quality of relationships

How good is the relationship between schools and advisers, and others involved in support (e.g. supporting organisations)?

What factors contribute to strong partnerships between schools, advisers and supporting organisations

Overall effectiveness/ success factors

How satisfied are stakeholders with the diagnostic processes, bespoke support offers, and implementation plans?

To what extent is RISE overall seen as a helpful and effective support offer and are there obstacles or barriers which limit that effectiveness?

What factors contribute to the successful implementation of RISE?

What specific changes have been achieved that would not have happened without RISE?

How do regional and local contexts influence the implementation and effectiveness of RISE?

How do the characteristics of MATs, LA partnerships, and dioceses affect the implementation of RISE?

How do school type, size, and pupil intake characteristics impact the effectiveness of RISE support?

To what extent have advisers and supporting organisations had capacity to deliver support?

How are advisers developing their skill sets?

Overall barriers

What barriers and challenges have been faced?

What specific challenges do rural, urban, and inner-city schools face in implementing RISE?

How have barriers been overcome? What strategies have been implemented on A) a national and B) a local level

How effective have these been?

What lessons can be learned to improve future implementation for new cohorts?

What challenges exist in sharing information within the RISE programme?



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