Department for Education

RISE Operations Working Group: Terms of Reference (ToR)

1. Background and Context

In February, the Department for Education launched Regional Improvement in Standards and Excellence (RISE), establishing RISE teams that will deliver a targeted service to schools in greatest need and a universal service to all schools. In April, we launched our RISE offer, including a second cohort of RISE schools (following an initial test-and-learn cohort) and a universal service focused around four national priorities. These priorities are attendance; attainment; inclusive mainstream; and reception year quality.

RISE is a manifesto commitment linked to the Opportunity Mission, which aims to improve outcomes for all children. Over the coming years, RISE will need to adapt and change to account for developments to Ofsted's inspection framework, the department's approach to accountability, and future legislation. To help inform the next stages of RISE delivery, the department is establishing an external engagement group with expert school improvement practitioners and executives.

2. Purpose of the group

The overarching aim of the operations group is to inform our operational practice for RISE, including:

- Our approach to delivering a targeted RISE service in schools facing the greatest barriers to improvement.

- Our approach to the universal service for RISE, including delivering the national, regional and local priorities for the service, and determining future priorities.

- Our approach to securing high-quality organisations to support targeted and universal RISE.

For the Targeted service, the group will consider:

- How to help create and realise a collective shared endeavour to enable schools to improve within their existing structure.

- How to understand and grow school improvement capacity in the system, and how to encourage more organisations — locally, regionally and nationally — to support RISE schools.

- How to build sector confidence in RISE, including the matching process and decisions of Regional Directors.

- Our approach to monitoring improvements (in conjunction with Ofsted) and how we can clarify roles and responsibilities for the sector.

For the Universal service, the group will consider:

- Our strategic delivery plan for the Universal Service, including the coherence of our offer.

- How to build a clear framework to assess, strengthen, and sustain sector capacity to support and champion the Universal Service.

- How to design and deliver activity that will improve outcomes with respect to our national priorities.

- How to achieve wider cultural change in the sector through the RISE Universal Service.

- Our approach to creating engaging, accessible and outcome-focused events, conferences and stakeholder engagements that strengthen the Universal Service nationally.

Across each area, we will look to the group to inform and support operational practice and decision-making frameworks; efforts to broker capacity and support from the sector; and work to pivot and scale up the programme at points of transition.

This external engagement group is designed to closely inform our operational practice and stakeholder engagement approach on RISE, ensuring that the RISE service is high-quality and impactful. Alongside this, we will continue to engage the broader sector on key developments in RISE through formal publications, conferences, and the routine engagement co-ordinated by departmental officials. The group will not discuss wider policy relating to the school system, improvement, or accountability reform.

3. Decision making authority

This is not a decision-making board for the RISE programme; however, this board will be used to influence the delivery and strands of the programme.

Members of this board will be able to make recommendations to the RISE Programme Board.

Escalation routes for urgent issues will be via the Chair or Deputy Chair to the RISE Programme Board.

See Governance Section 7 for further information on how the Operations Working Group feeds into wider programme governance and reporting.

4. Roles & Responsibilities

The group will be led by the Chair, Director General of Regions Group, Tim Coulson.

The Deputy Chair will be Jon Howlin, who will provide cover in the Chair's absence and support continuity of leadership.

The Chair and Deputy Chair will:

- Lead and facilitate meetings, ensuring the agenda is followed.

- Represent the group within the wider RISE governance framework.

- Confirm clarity of recommendations and actions before submission.

- Maintain focus on the group's purpose and scope during discussions.

- Escalate significant risks or unresolved issues to the RISE Programme Board.

- Validate outputs and recommendations prior to onward reporting.

Members will consist of expert school-improvement practitioners and executives, with experience across the maintained, academy, SEND and faith sectors. Members will join the group by invite only, and membership will be reviewed biannually to ensure it remains representative of the wider schools sector.

Members are expected to:

- Contribute sector expertise and insights to inform the department's approach to RISE targeted intervention and the universal service.

- Actively participate in discussions and provide constructive challenge.

- Represent perspectives of their organisations and networks.

- Review papers in advance and attend meetings regularly.

A dedicated secretariat from the RISE PMO / Stakeholder Engagement & Events team will:

- Coordinate agendas, papers and minutes.

- Track actions and ensure timely follow-up.

- Maintain version control of Terms of Reference and other governance documents.

- Serve as the primary point of contact for members.

5. Membership

The members of this operations group will be as follows:

- Chair: Tim Coulson, Director General of Regions Group, DfE
- Deputy chair: Jon Howlin, Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) RISE, DfE
- Mark Davis, Director of Education (DDE) for Lichfield Diocese, West Midlands, Church of England
- Lee Wilson, Outwood Grange Academies Trust, North East, Confederation of School Trusts (CST)
- Amanda Corcoran, North West, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)
- Joanne Sanchez-Thompson, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Learning for life Education Trust, East Midlands, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
- John Camp, CEO of the Compass Partnership of Schools, London, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Gail Brown, CEO of the Ebor Academy Trust, Yorkshire and Humber, ASCL
- Stephen Wheatley, CEO, All Saints Catholic Academy Trust, East of England, Catholic Education Service (CES)
- Tony Wilson, Director of Education at the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education, South East, regional
- Rebecca Meredith CBE, CEO of Transform Trust, East Midlands, regional
- Dr Jennifer Blunden, CEO of Truro and Penwith Academy Trust (TPAT), South West, regional

6. Frequency and logistics of meetings

Meetings will be held twice termly via Microsoft Teams, unless otherwise agreed. Frequency will be reviewed after Spring 2026 with an intention to move to termly meetings once appropriate.

Papers will be circulated at least five working days in advance by RISE PMO.

Recommendations will be agreed by consensus and recorded in the minutes.

Additional sessions and working groups may be arranged as necessary.

The group will operate within the RISE governance framework and escalate issues to RISE Programme Board, via the chair or deputy chair as required. The ToR will be reviewed annually or at key programme milestones to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

7. Confidentiality and conflicts of interest

Meeting minutes will be published on gov.uk to ensure transparency. Presentation slides may be shared externally where the PMO has clearly marked them as shareable.

While the group encourages open and constructive discussion, certain topics may require confidentiality due to their sensitive nature. Members are expected to respect these boundaries and handle information responsibly.

All members must declare any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest at the start of each meeting and prior to consideration of any agenda item where such a conflict may arise.

Members also have the option to contact the RISE PMO outside of meetings to raise any concerns or declare conflicts confidentially.

8. Wider RISE Governance

The Operations Working Group sits within the wider RISE governance framework as an external advisory body. It does not hold formal decision-making authority for the RISE programme.

The governance diagram illustrates the relationship between the Operations Working Group, the RISE Programme Board, and other internal and external groups.