



School  
Improvement  
Hub

## Case study

# Hatton Academies Trust



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CST and ImpactEd Group are working together to collate examples of school improvement practices used by trusts, freely shared to help schools across the country. If your trust has work that aligns with our conceptual framework for trust-led improvement, please visit the website: [schoolimprovementhub.org](https://schoolimprovementhub.org) for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.



# Trust-led school improvement model

The CST conceptual model for trust improvement is structured as a triple helix, consisting of three strands:

## Curate clear goals

Defining clear purposes, strategies and goals, so that the trust knows what it's aiming for and how to get there

## Build capability and capacity

Shaping the people, culture and capacity within the organisation, in order to create the conditions for sustainable improvement

## Implement improvement initiatives

The ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted

The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands. The model is intended to help trusts trace a pathway from the areas their improvement strategy

intends to address towards a broader consideration of how they achieve their improvement goals.

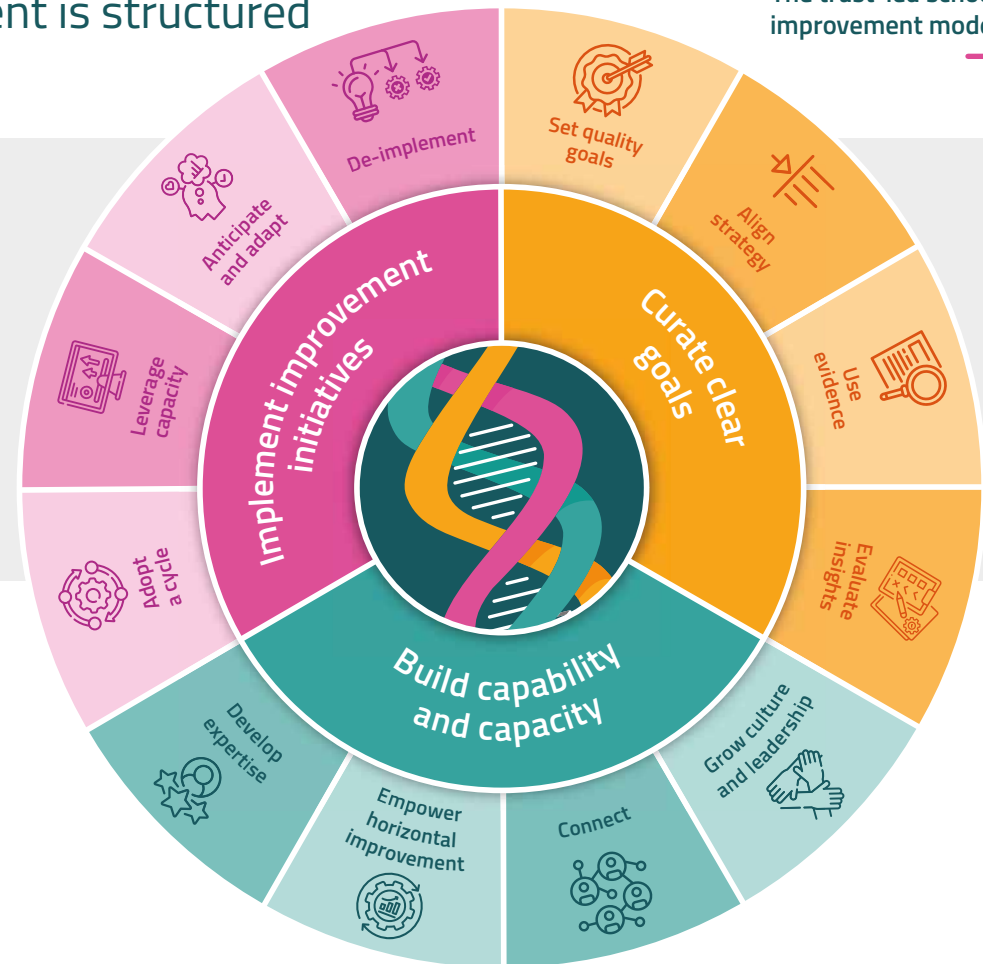
Each of the strands then breaks down into further components. The "Curate clear goals" strand, therefore, breaks down into these components:

- Set quality goals
- Align strategy
- Use evidence
- Evaluate insights

And the "Implementing improvement initiatives" strand breaks down into the following components:

- Adopt a cycle
- Leverage capacity
- Anticipate and adapt
- De-implement

The trust-led school improvement model



# Case study: Hatton Academies Trust

This case study highlights the following components in the conceptual model:



## Align strategy

Ensure alignment between school improvement objectives and wider trust strategy



## Adopt a cycle

Adopt the behaviours that drive implementation (engage, unite, reflect). Do this while tending to contextual factors and using a structured but flexible implementation process: explore, prepare, deliver, sustain)



## TRUST OVERVIEW

**Trust:** Hatton Academies Trust

**CEO:** Rob Hardcastle

**Founded:** 2013

**Schools:** One secondary school and three primaries, all in or around Wellingborough, in Northamptonshire

**School sizes:** The largest school in the trust, Sir Christopher Hatton Academy, has 1,427 students. The smallest, Ecton Village Primary Academy, has 64 pupils on roll.

**Percentage of disadvantaged students:** 26% of pupils are eligible for pupil premium

**Percentage of students receiving free school meals:** 24.5%

**Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language:** 48%

**Key stage 2:** 62% of pupils achieved the expected standard in all three of reading, writing and maths

**Key stage 4:** Three-year Progress 8 average: +0.6. Three-year Attainment 8 average: 53.1

A child's profile is visible on the left side of the page, looking at a worksheet. The worksheet has a grid for writing, with prompts like 'Dear mum', 'How are you?', 'What have you been doing?', 'Do you miss me?', 'Strangers to mum', 'Jobs', 'Playing games', 'nervous', 'excited', 'anxious', 'crying', 'other children', 'Dear mum', 'How are you?', 'What have you been doing?', 'Do you miss me?', 'Strangers to mum', 'Jobs', 'Playing games', 'nervous', 'excited', 'anxious', 'crying', 'other children'. The child is wearing a blue shirt. The background is a blurred image of a desk with a pink folder and a yellow notepad.

## BACKGROUND

**Hatton Academies Trust (HAT) was established in 2013 by Wellingborough secondary Sir Christopher Hatton Academy. Victoria Bishop, who had been headteacher of Sir Christopher Hatton, became trust executive principal and CEO.**

In 2014, the trust took on a second school, Victoria Primary, judged by Ofsted as inadequate. Later that year, it was followed by another primary: Oakway Primary, also rated inadequate by Ofsted. And, in 2019, the 64-pupil Ecton Village Primary School – rated good – joined the trust. By 2023, all three primaries had been judged good by Ofsted.

In 2017, Rob Hardcastle was appointed as head of primary education for the trust. He had previously held a range of leadership positions in local primary schools. Then, when Ms Bishop announced her departure in 2019, he took over as acting CEO – and was eventually appointed permanently to the role.

The trust's aims have shifted over the years – initially out of necessity, when its very successful secondary was joined by three sponsored primaries. As of this year, its goals – outlined in its five-year strategy for 2025-29 – are:

1. To raise aspirations and educational outcomes for all young people.
2. To provide all pupils with a high-quality and inclusive education.
3. To develop a thirst for learning in all who work and study with the trust.
4. To secure continual improvement in the quality of education.
5. To produce confident, caring individuals and responsible citizens.
6. To celebrate the richness that diversity brings to all its academies.
7. To provide equality of opportunity in every aspect of its work.
8. To be financially efficient, in order to achieve maximum school effectiveness.
9. To be a progressive, forward-thinking employer that puts its people first, recognising their significant contribution to the trust's successful outcomes.

"We always aim for our academies to have a calm learning atmosphere, with the adult as expert and pupils showing a positive attitude to learning," says Mr Hardcastle.

"It's been quite a journey to get here, but it's the journey that's the important thing. We don't know if we've reached the end point yet – and we don't know if we ever will."



## WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT HATTON ACADEMIES TRUST?

**The trust prioritises a calm learning environment (“Which wasn’t always the case,” says Mr Hardcastle), as well as a positive, respectful attitude.**

It aims for all staff – including teachers, support staff and trust leaders – to be “knowledgeable, impactful and confident in their role,” Mr Hardcastle adds. “The adults are empowered to understand, which helps their teaching – they’re able to motivate pupils and ensure that learning takes place.”

Like many trusts, HAT aims to be research-led and evidence-informed in its approach to curriculum and education. Having used single-subject rubrics to help with trust-wide improvement (on which more below), trust leaders are currently building a cross-curricular teaching and learning rubric, against which they will measure all areas of educational provision.

But the trust is also deliberately outward-looking, and its leaders visit other schools around the country for ideas and inspiration. “We’ve always been an organisation that wants to learn from others doing something well,” says Mr Hardcastle. “But we’re also very careful with our reflections. We don’t take things on wholesale, but adapt

them and reimplement them with our own nuances. And we enlist external additional expertise.”

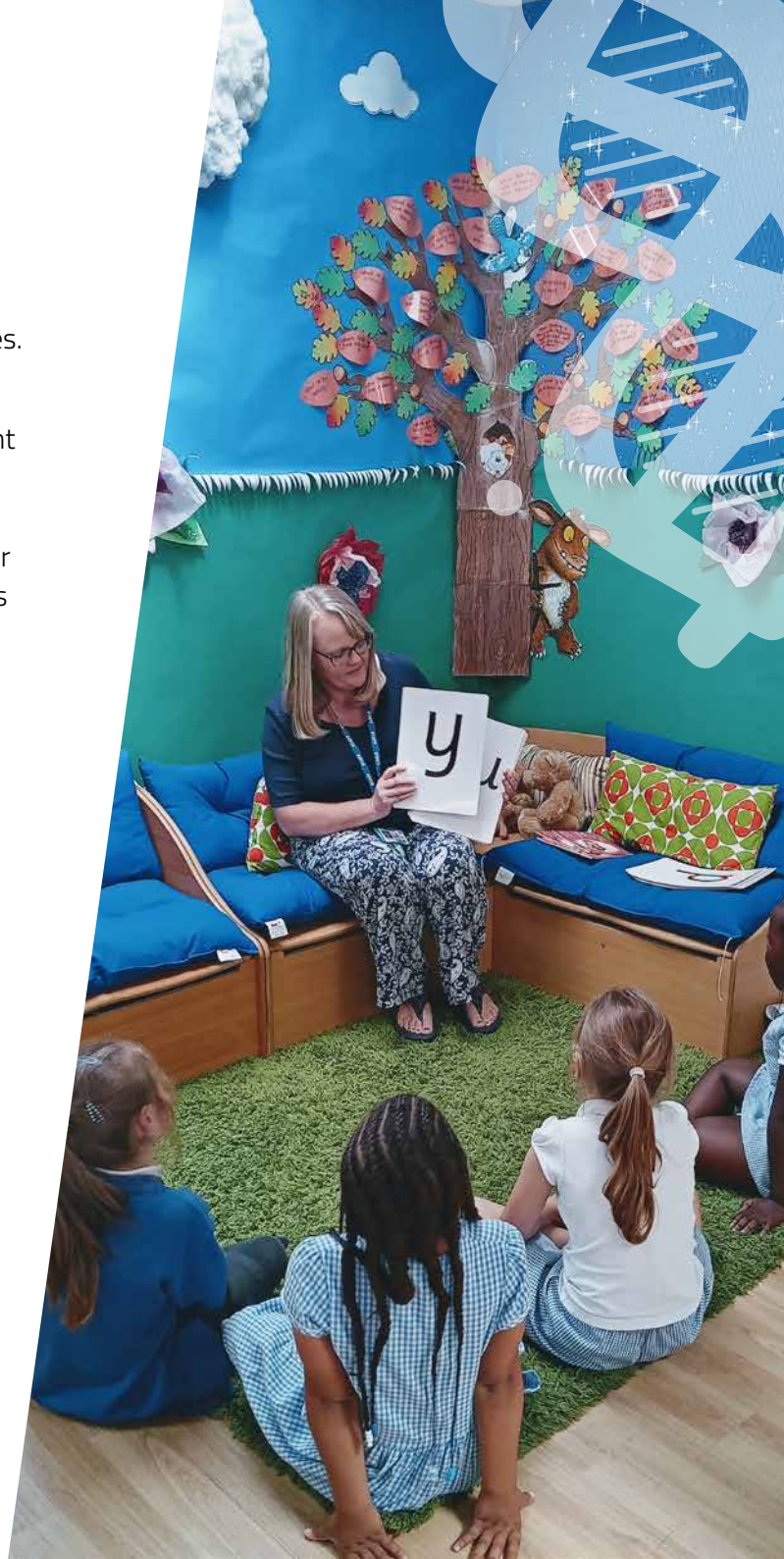
Not wanting to be overburdened with improvement goals, the trust instead chooses to focus on a limited number. “We have to have clear, regularly curated goals that we’re working towards,” says Mr Hardcastle. “I’d rather get a small number of things right than lots of things not quite right.”

“There needs to be a seamless understanding across the trust about which areas we are all focusing on.”



***“We have to have clear, regularly curated goals that we’re working towards. I’d rather get a small number of things right than lots of things not quite right.”***

***Rob Hardcastle, CEO,  
Hatton Academies Trust***





## How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of aligning strategy and adopting a cycle

### Align strategy: Foundational maths

**Looking at primary maths scores across the trust, the executive team realised that pupils were not reaching the required standard at the end of key stage 2. When they started to examine why this was so, they found that not enough children had a secure understanding of foundational mathematics.**

The children lacked the knowledge and skills to perform well in their first SATs paper, which tests arithmetic. As a result, they were unable to put these maths skills into practice in papers two and three, which test problem-solving and reasoning.

“We knew that, if we didn’t address these foundational pillars, we wouldn’t secure the improvement we needed in standards,” says Mr Hardcastle.

Considering how to do this, the trust executive drew on primary phonics teaching. Phonics are taught through memorisation, overlearning and a lot of repetition. If this could be replicated in maths, they reasoned – reinforcing and building on existing knowledge – then it could have the same impact on mathematical ability as phonics does on reading.

And so HAT introduced foundational maths lessons from Year 1 to Year 6, across all its primaries. Every day, HAT primary pupils receive a standalone foundational-maths lesson, as well as a separate maths-strategy lesson.

“When you teach them as one session, the foundational part tends to get a bit lost,” says Mr Hardcastle. “People tend to make time for the other elements of the maths programme, instead of making sure that pupils are absolutely secure in the foundational aspects.”





## Align strategy: Foundational maths (continued)

The content is different for each year group, but the structure of the lessons is always the same. This structure – as well as the techniques used during the lessons – were decided upon by the trust maths coordinator network.

In the first five minutes of the lesson, teachers activate prior knowledge using a recall programme called Rolling Numbers. This part of the session uses songs and rhymes, complete with hand actions. “The children absolutely love it – even up to the Year 6s,” says Claire Byron, principal of Oakway Academy. “They’re personalised to each school. For example, we have: ‘Oakway, Oakway, good as gold, let me hear your fingers roll!’ You can hear the children doing it in the corridors and outside in the playground – they’ve definitely bought into that.”

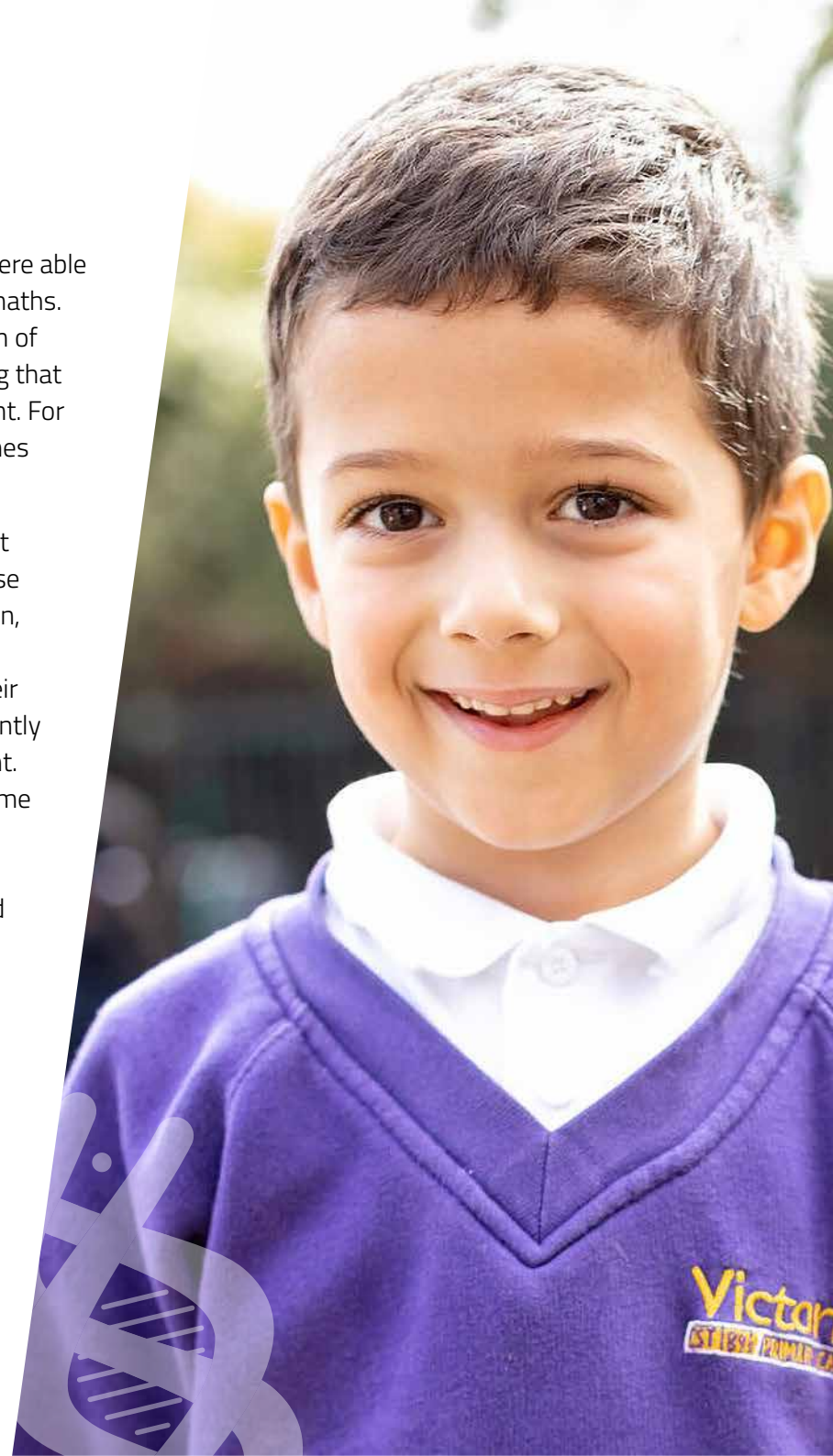
For Year 4, for example, teachers use the rhymes to reinforce pupils’ knowledge of multiplication tables. Each rhyme takes between 30 seconds and one minute, so teachers are able to work through quite a few of them in five minutes.

This is then followed by a 15-minute taught programme. This is teacher-led, using books or a whiteboard. Where the school was already using a maths programme – such as Mastering

Number or Number Sense Maths – staff were able to continue using it to teach foundational maths. Around five to 10 minutes of middle section of the lesson will include pupils demonstrating that they have understood the topic being taught. For example, Year 4 might learn their seven times table, repeating it over a number of days.

At the end of the lesson, 10 minutes are set aside for individual pupil work. Pupils will use this for individual memorisation and revision, overlearning topics they already know. For example, for a few weeks after learning their seven times table, Year 4 will be independently revising and overlearning that same content. The teacher will also use this time to do some small-group or one-on-one work with any children who have not yet fully understood the material covered during the teacher-led section of the lesson.

For key stage 1, foundational-maths lessons will last around 30 minutes. For key stage 2, they will be 35 minutes in total. (One of the primaries also trialed a 15-minute foundational-maths lesson – but, as with the combined foundational and strategy lessons – the foundational lesson often ended up squeezed out if a previous lesson overran.)



A man in a dark suit and tie is standing in a classroom, pointing towards a whiteboard. He is smiling and appears to be presenting. In the foreground, the backs of several people's heads are visible, showing they are seated and listening. The classroom has colorful decorations on the walls, including a blue banner with the word 'SCARVES' and various small items pinned to it. A whiteboard with a colorful chart is also visible.

## Align strategy: Foundational maths (continued)

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*“It was quite a rigorous journey... They can see it’s drawn in other aspects of maths. They can see that those pupils are enjoying maths, doing it in a confident way. And they know in time that this will impact on their achievement.”*

*Rob Hardcastle, CEO, Hatton Academies Trust*

“Making it fill a 30-minute lesson really highlights the importance of it,” says Ms Byron. “It’s unusual and it takes some careful timetabling. But it’s become a non-negotiable part of the timetable now.”

Trust leaders recognised that the lessons would be uncharted territory for teachers. So they recorded a video in which maths leaders modelled the lessons in action. This gave staff across the trust a sense of what the 30–35 minutes of the lesson could look like, as well as highlighting relevant resources for each part of the lesson.

Maths coordinators worked alongside staff, supporting teachers with their planning and helping to implement sessions in the classroom. Senior leaders also visited classrooms on a regular basis, giving feedback to

maths coordinators and to the trust executive. In addition, an independent external expert conducted a cross-trust development day, looking at the lessons and verifying their effectiveness: were they having the impact the trust was hoping for?

And the maths coordinators from the three primaries worked as a team, visiting one another’s schools at regular intervals and looking at what they could learn from each other’s practice. HAT created a single, trust-wide rubric outlining what a good foundational-maths lesson should look like, with examples ranging from strong practice to limited practice. When two maths coordinators observe a lesson at the third’s school, all three have a clear and shared understanding of what good practice looks like. The two observers then provide no more than three “even better if” recommendations between them, so that feedback remains at a manageable level.



## Align strategy: Foundational maths (continued)

In 2021-22, pupils at Hatton Academies Trust scored an average of 22 out of 40 in paper one of their maths key stage 2 tests. The trust set a target of more than 30 out of 40 after 18 months of foundational-maths lessons. It almost achieved this: in the 2022-23 academic year, the trust-wide score was 28 out of 40. The following academic year, the trust achieved its target, and early data for the 2024-25 academic year suggests that this score will rise again.

Similarly, in 2022, 24 per cent of pupils at Hatton Academies Trust scored 25 out of 25 in their Year 4 multiplication test check. In 2023, 34 per cent of pupils reached the same level. By June 2024, this had risen to 48 per cent. Nationally, the average is 34 per cent.

"It was quite a rigorous journey," says Mr Hardcastle. "Not everyone's going to get that right away. We had to take a bit of a leap of faith.

"But they can see the difference it's made in terms of the confidence of the pupils. They can see it's drawn in other aspects of maths. They can see that those pupils are enjoying maths, doing it in a confident way. And they know in time that this will impact on their achievement."





## Adopt a cycle: Curriculum improvement

**Maths is not the only subject area where HAT leaders want to ensure trust-wide improvement. Recognising that they would need an effective and consistent approach to curriculum improvement across the trust, the executive team decided to introduce a cycle of reflection, coaching, implementation and further reflection.**

This process is undertaken on an academy-by-academy basis, working closely with individual subject leaders. Initially, the trust brings in an external consultant – HAT prefers to use the same consultant every time – to work with leaders in a given subject. She facilitates a conversation with the relevant subject leader, discussing strengths, areas of challenge and any updates or improvements planned. She will also speak to pupils and senior leaders.

At the end of this process, the consultant will produce a report that outlines agreed strengths and areas for development. Trust leaders share this report with the principal or senior leader of the academy, as well as more broadly within the trust and among trustees.

The report is also given to a professional coach – again, someone with whom the trust works regularly. The coach comes in and works with the subject leader, and together they set out key actions that the subject leader agrees to undertake, usually over a three-month period.

After a period of four to six weeks, the subject leader then has a follow-up meeting with a school senior leader. The trust refers to this as “fufting”: an acronym for “follow up, follow through”.

“That’s there so the senior leader understands the journey that person is on and can see their progress towards achieving their original points for development,” says Mr Hardcastle. In addition, the subject leader is able to go back to the coach for additional sessions at any stage in the process.

Around 12 to 15 weeks after the initial conversation, the subject leader revisits the report and its findings, in conversation with the first consultant. This is the subject leader’s opportunity to think about what difference the process has made to their subject and to them as a leader, and to consider any areas where they may need further support.

The subject leader, along with senior leaders, also thinks about schools – within or beyond the trust – that they may want to visit, or other subject leads they may want to speak to. “The consultant might say, ‘I’m going to put your art lead in touch with an art lead in Nottingham. Your curriculums are really aligned and I think you’ll get a lot out of this meeting,’” says Ms Byron. “So our art leader had a half-day out in Nottingham. It’s networking, encouraging, providing them with tools to develop.”





## Adopt a cycle: Curriculum improvement (continued)

Three or four subjects – and subject leaders – will go through this improvement cycle each academic year. Some have now been through this process twice. “Everyone is aware this is taking place,” says Mr Hardcastle. “We all see the evidence – from subject leaders through to trustees. Everyone knows where strengths and weaknesses in particular subjects in particular schools lie. So we’re able to discuss how we’re moving forwards. We’re really open and transparent.”

The trust also holds thematic cross-trust development days. Central leaders choose a subject or a theme, and senior leaders examine the effectiveness of the current provision.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the trust held a thematic development day in April, looking

at oracy across the trust. Oracy leaders worked with an agreed rubric, against which they compared oracy provision in each academy.

So, for example, the rubric lays out different levels of practice for explicit vocabulary instruction. Strong practice is described as: “Vocabulary teaching is well prepared carefully and taught within the lesson using a structured approach.”

Practice described as “Developing+” is identified as: “Key vocabulary is evident on lesson slides. The teacher uses direct instruction to teach the vocabulary.”



***“Our mindset now is collaboration. We have real collaboration across primary and secondary – they looked at oracy together. Secondary came and helped primary with foundational maths. And we’re looking at behaviours for learning and humanities across primary and secondary in July.”***

***Rob Hardcastle, CEO, Hatton Academies Trust***





## Adopt a cycle: Curriculum improvement (continued)

Where practice is developing, the rubric states: "Some vocabulary is evident in the lesson slides but not always taught explicitly." And limited practice would involve: "No evidence of vocabulary being carefully planned for in scripts or on lesson resources".

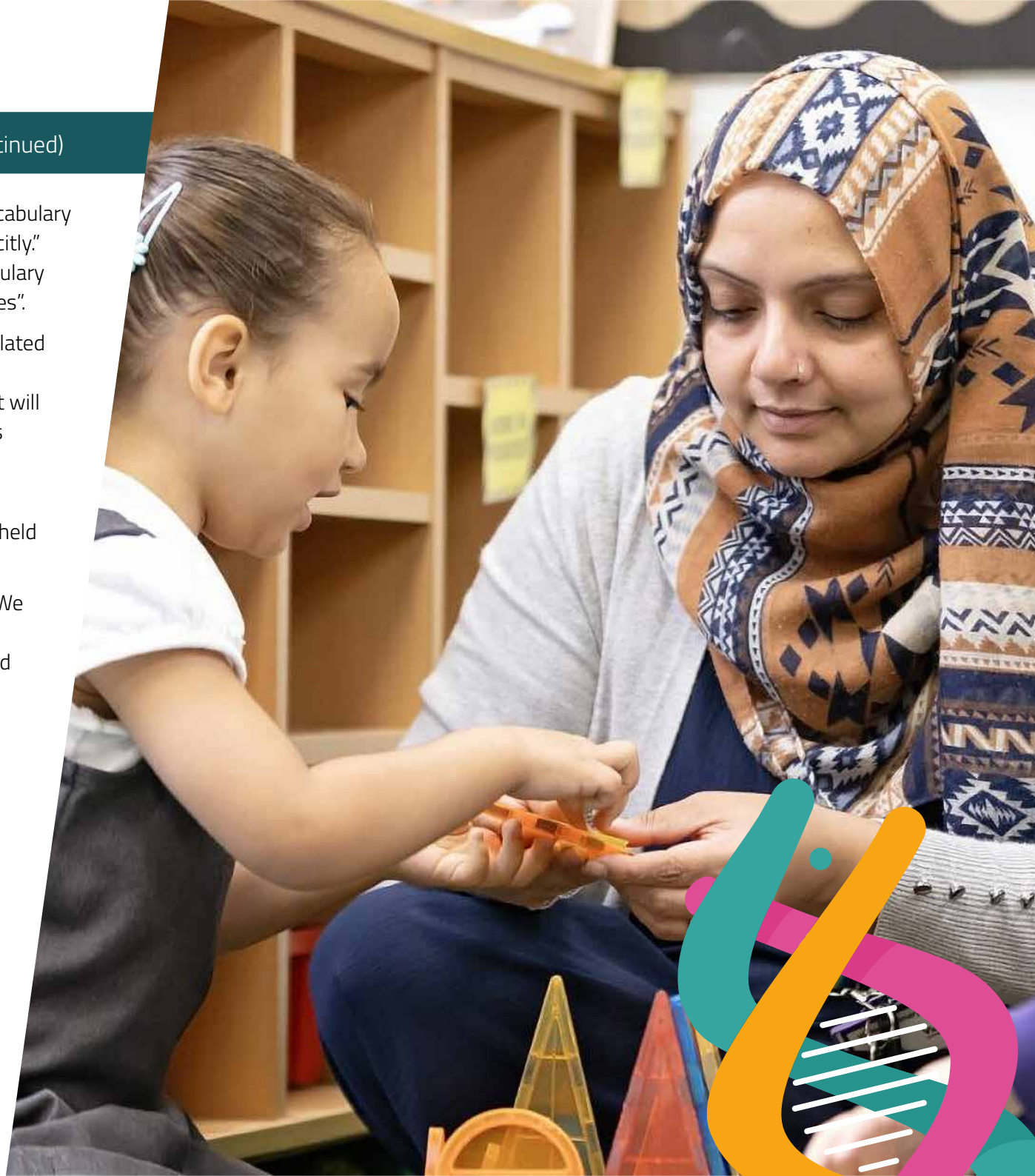
The findings from these classroom observations were collated in a report, and then used as a springboard for coaching conversations. After 12 to 16 months, the first consultant will return to revisit the report and observe how provision has changed across the trust since.

And the trust has recently begun to use this review-and-report cycle for areas beyond the curriculum – it recently held a development day focusing on behaviour for learning.

"Our mindset now is collaboration," says Mr Hardcastle. "We have real collaboration across primary and secondary – they looked at oracy together. Secondary came and helped primary with foundational maths. And we're looking at behaviours for learning and humanities across primary and secondary in July.

"It's really helping us to make those links: more people have ideas of where our strengths and our weaknesses are. And that helps us to secure improvement across our trust.

"People have connected and developed an understanding of one another's roles. Now we have a network. The nature of working this way has added benefits."



## Key points

- In order to improve maths results across the trust, executive leaders introduced daily trust-wide foundational maths lessons
- These 30–35-minute lessons do for maths what phonics does for reading, reinforcing knowledge through memorisation, overlearning and a lot of repetition
- By separating foundational maths out from the rest of maths teaching, the trust emphasises its importance and ensures that it is not squeezed out of the timetable by other priorities
- Trust maths coordinators observe one another's lessons regularly, working with a rubric so they have a shared understanding of what good practice looks like
- In other subjects, an external consultant and coach work with subject leaders on a cycle of observation, reflection, coaching, implementation and further reflection
- While originally developed as an improvement process for subject leaders, the trust has begun applying this cycle to cross-trust work on specific subject areas – and even for areas beyond the curriculum

## Resources

- [Foundational maths rubric](#)
- [Oracy monitoring rubric](#)
- [Thematic oracy monitoring schedule](#)

